

Marriage Guidelines

Faith Mennonite Church
(to be added to the FMC Handbook)

Introduction

The purpose of these guidelines is to translate the congregation's position, clarified in more detail in our 2012 "Unifying Statement," into a form that offers practical guidance to our pastor and church leadership. This document also seeks to clarify some procedural questions surrounding how the church will respond to requests for marriage ceremonies.

Guidelines

1. To have an FMC marriage ceremony, at least one person in the couple must be an active participant at FMC.
2. Persons who are not affiliated with FMC may rent the FMC facility for a wedding.
3. Individuals who are active participants at FMC who wish to marry at FMC should go through a marriage preparation process.
4. Grounded in our efforts to humbly follow Jesus Christ, whom the Bible describes as offering his love and salvation to all, regardless of the religious and cultural barriers of his day, FMC will offer the ceremony of marriage to all couples who decide to enter into a faith-filled covenanted relationship.

January 2012 Statement on Family, Singleness, and Marriage

The following statement, along with the Faith Mennonite Church (FMC) “Marriage Guidelines,”¹ is the product of an extended congregational discernment process that involved a series of sermons and group discussion of the themes of Article 19, “Family, Singleness, and Marriage” of the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective (COF)*.² In various ways FMC has been engaged with these themes throughout its history.³ This statement, while not intended to be comprehensive, seeks to articulate a positive vision of family, singleness and marriage, and to clarify how such a vision relates to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer (LGBTQ)⁴ persons and their relationships in our congregation. This statement and the “Marriage Guidelines” want to take seriously the *COF* and to be faithful to the witness of scripture.

We affirm, with the *COF*, that God “intends human life to begin and to be blessed through families” and, even more, that God desires that humans become part of the church family. To speak of the church as family is not merely a metaphor but points to the genuine newness of our identities and relationships in Christ. For it is by the Spirit that we become sons and daughters of God, brothers and sisters, one to another (Luke 8:19-21; Eph 2:19; Rom 8:12-17). Within the church family, voluntary singleness is honored and even encouraged (Matt 19:12; Luke 14:20; 1 Cor 7:25-35). We recognize the diversity of biological families, including single persons with children, couples without children, families who have welcomed children through birth, adoption, or the blending of families in marriage, and adult siblings or adult children and parents living together.

We affirm, with the *COF*, that marriage is “a covenant between two persons made within the context of the church,” and that it is intended for “sexual intimacy,⁵ companionship, and the birth and nurture of children.”⁶ Through much of Judeo-Christian history, marriage has been defined as a relationship between a man and a woman (Gen 2:18-24). However, because of the testimony and witness of LGBTQ Christians and the expanding body of knowledge from the social and biological sciences that recognizes sexual orientation as something that is not chosen,⁷ we

¹ See “Marriage Guidelines” document.

² *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*, 1995.

³ See “A History of How Faith Mennonite Church came to recognize and welcome gay and lesbian persons into membership,” compiled by Richard Westby, February 2011.

⁴ Just as the label ‘Anabaptist’ was once perceived as a demeaning term, ‘queer’ is now being reclaimed by gay men and lesbians to indicate a healthy pride and gratitude in what and who they are. This reclamation has upset some, but in the main it is seen as a positive step forward in ridding the world of unnecessary prejudice against people who, for the most part, like anybody else, just want to live their lives in a loving relationship.

⁵ Ideally sexual intimacy is reserved for such covenanted relationships because of the deep level of vulnerability and communication involved in sexual relationships; Jesus taught that sexual union creates a spiritual bond of “one flesh” (Matthew 19:5).

⁶ We recognize that not all couples who intend to have children are able to do so, that couples are able to nurture children they have not given birth to (through adoption or foster arrangements), and that marital relationships can be “fruitful” in ways beyond bearing children.

⁷ Since the 1970s the consensus of the behavioral and social sciences and the health and mental health professions has moved to the belief that homosexuality is a normal variation of human sexual orientation. In 1973, the American Psychiatric Association declassified homosexuality as a mental disorder.

believe that Paul's declaration that, in Christ, we are "neither male nor female" (Gal 3:27-28) breaks down the traditional gendered exclusivity of marriage.

With the *COF* we affirm that children are of "great importance," that children are examples of how to receive the kingdom of God. Children are to honor their parents, to be loved, disciplined, taught, and respected in the home and in the church.

With the *COF* we affirm the importance of the church's role in seeking reconciliation in times of conflict, particularly during difficult family and marriage relationships. We affirm and uphold the permanency of marriage. We also recognize that the church, empowered through the resurrection of the crucified Christ, offers healing and new beginnings for those who experience tragedies that make marriage and family life "burdensome or even impossible."

Jesus often found himself in conflict with long-standing religious traditions. He met and reached out to people on the margins, offering healing and wholeness, even when that violated Sabbath or purity regulations. In our fifteen years of being a congregation that publicly welcomes sexual minorities, we have been blessed by the gifts of faith, service, and spiritual commitment of our LGBTQ participants. LGBTQ couples have been examples of covenant fidelity and the Christian nurture of children, even though their commitments have not been blessed by the broader church or recognized by the state. They have expressed gratitude for a spiritual family that offers support, safety and encouragement in their walk with Christ. As we strive to faithfully follow Jesus, we feel called to clarify that our welcome to LGBTQ members includes the blessing of marriage for those who seek it.

In the introduction to the *COF*, six purposes for such a confession are described. One of these is "to build a foundation for unity within and among churches." Another is to "give an updated interpretation of belief and practice in the midst of changing times." Recognizing that interpretations and practice do change over time, we do not believe the unity of the church lies in full agreement with each article of a confession, but in our shared commitment to Jesus Christ. As Menno Simons often quoted, "no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 3:11). Our foundation and unity is God's work in Christ, who breaks down the walls of division (Eph 2:14).

Drafted by the Marriage Guidelines Taskforce (Kathleen Harder, Matthew Hendricks, Katie Hochstedler, Matthew Blackwell Kinney, Donna Minter, Joetta Schlabach, Ry Siggelkow, Richard Westby)