

**The Scottish Government:
The Registration of Civil Partnerships
Same Sex Marriage**

A Consultation

A general statement to accompany the response submitted on behalf of
The Religious Society of Friends (Quakers)
General Meeting for Scotland

Quakers are a non-hierarchical and radical Christian body which emerged from the turmoil of mid 17th century Britain. Our faith is living and experiential and we resist defining it in terms of creed or the external authority of holy book or church. Our authority is the light of truth, which many of us call 'God', within each one of us, tempered by the discipline of corporate discernment.

The principles of integrity, equality and religious liberty have always been at the heart of our faith, the latter reinforced by our historic experience of being a persecuted minority. These principles now lead us to welcome the Scottish Government's consultation on same sex marriage and civil partnership and to support strongly the mooted changes to the law.

We believe that a just and stable civil society is built upon stable and committed relationships between individuals, relationships anchored in love and respect. We believe, furthermore, that such deep relationships reflect the love of God as we understand this.

We have for centuries held religious ceremonies to ask for God's blessing on couples who seek to commit themselves to each other in marriage and have had the right to register such marriages within the context of worship. Our recent corporate experience is that lesbian and gay couples can demonstrate in their relationships the same committed and often life-long love for each other as can opposite sex couples. Within the past twenty years we have agreed to celebrate such committed same-sex partnerships in the context of our meetings for worship and to regret that current law prevents such partnerships being recognised in the same way as opposite sex marriage. Same sex couples do not have equality or religious freedom in this important respect.

Quakers have been strongly supportive of civil partnership legislation, appreciating the valuable contribution that this has made in implanting the recognition of the equal rights of all throughout our society. However, we are also aware that this legislation itself, however welcome, implies a form of discrimination against same sex couples. We have become aware of how such couples feel about the separateness of the "civil partner" description that is applied to them, and about the discrimination that is implied in legislation that permits faith groups to hold religious ceremonies of registration for those embarking on marriage, but not for those entering same sex partnerships. This is a matter not only of equality but, just as importantly, of religious liberty.

In consequence of this the annual gathering of British Quakers (Quakers in Scotland, Wales and England) agreed two years ago that henceforth (though without breaking the law) we should treat all couples equally when they are seeking marriage, and when they seek God's blessing for their union within their Quaker worshipping communities. We recognise that this implies a redefinition of the historical concept of marriage but believe society should not shrink from this.

It is fundamental to Friends' understanding of the solemnisation of marriage that those who are marrying should make their marriage promises in the presence of God and in front of their worshipping group, seeking God's blessing on their union. Marriage is a celebration of the committed relationship of two people who have found love for each other. Our testimony to equality demands that it should be available for all committed couples who seek it. Religious freedom, which society values so highly, demands that we cannot deny faith groups the right to celebrate it in the context of their worship.

We do not wish to see our own discernment of what is right imposed on those of other religious faiths. We seek a permissive law which allows religious freedom, which allows the possibility of same sex couples marrying within a religious context if that is what both they and their religious communities wish, while not putting anyone in a position where they have to act against their conscience.

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On behalf of
General Meeting for Scotland
Religious Society of Friends (Quakers)

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