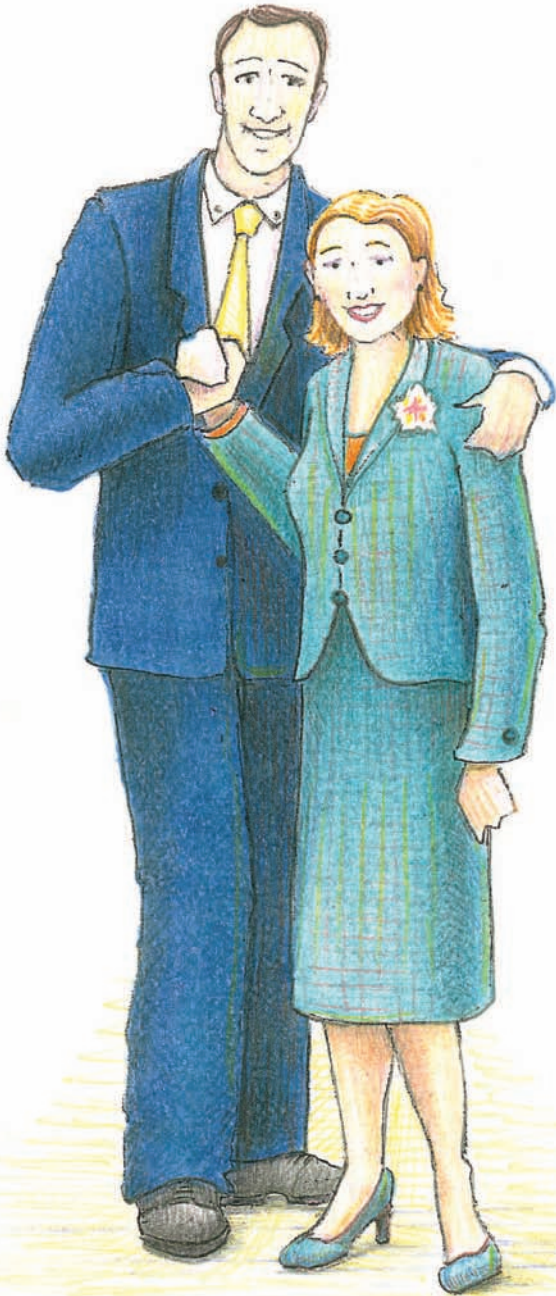


# A Simple Union

By Charlotte Johnstone



Both Nicole Richter and Peter Lynch had deep ties to Forbearance Church.

Nicole had grown up there, her parents had served on the session, members of her extended family were faithful attendees and, after an ill-fated marriage and a contentious divorce elsewhere, Nicole had returned about 10 years ago to Forbearance and its community with her two young boys. She became the manager of one of the bookstores in town, and her sons, now teenagers, flourished in the presence of cousins, aunts, uncles and attentive grandparents. She and her boys had come home, and home had not disappointed them.

Peter had never left. A child of Forbearance, he had started work in his father's auto body shop after high school and, following his father's death some years ago, had become its sole owner. He married his high school sweetheart at Forbearance and his two daughters were baptized there. Then, about fifteen years ago, his girls and his wife were involved in a dreadful car accident. The girls survived, but his wife did not. In those terrible days, Forbearance Church was his lifeline—meals arrived, babysitters volunteered, household chores were assumed by others, friends sat up late with him when he couldn't sleep. Gradually, the rhythms of life returned and, with the warm embrace of Forbearance's members, Peter's girls, now away at college, grew in resilience and grace.

And so it was at Forbearance that Nicole and Peter, acquaintances as children, rediscovered each other. Life stories were exchanged, smiles became beams of anticipation, separate pews became side-by-side, important questions were asked and answered, children bonded, and then, to everyone's delight, a wedding was being planned.

As it turned out, neither Peter nor Nicole wished to duplicate the traditional customs of their first wedding ceremonies. They were different people now and matching bridesmaids' dresses, tuxedos, ring bearers, elaborate flowers and an expensive reception seemed somehow beside the point of this particular union. Their maturity had been hard won and they both had a keen sense of what was important and what was not.

And when they compiled a guest list and discovered that, with the exception of a few out-of-town relatives and a small number of non-Forbearance friends, the list virtually duplicated Forbearance's directory, a mutual wish was born—a wish to include them all.

“Would it be possible,” they asked Rev. Hustisford, “for us to get married during a Sunday service?”

“What a splendid idea!” Rev. Hustisford replied. “Not only is it possible, but the *Book of Common Worship* already contains a marriage service to be included within the regular Sunday worship service. Now, tell me, what led you to this decision?”

“This is the church of our childhood, our families,” they told him, “and it is where we came to love each other. Forbearance has seen us through joys and sorrows, and it is a place where someone brought to their knees can learn to stand again. This congregation of faith has sustained and nurtured not only generations before us, but also our own children when they were wounded. These are the people with whom we gather every week, and it is with gratitude to God and to them that we wish to marry simply and quietly within the traditional rhythms of this worshipping community. It is within this congregation that we marry and it is within our shared faith that we begin our new life together. Do you really think you could arrange to have that happen?”

Indeed I can, thought Rev. Hustisford, anticipating with considerable relief the idea of a wedding without frenzied bridal parties, convoluted arrangements, intrusive photographers, amateur musicians, mumbling poetry readers and stage managers in the guise of helpful relatives. This would be a first, he mused, and maybe, just maybe, some others might follow.

And so it came to pass that on a bright Sunday morning at Forbearance Church not so long ago, during the hymn following the sermon, Nicole and Peter, in their Sunday best, made their way down the center aisle to stand before Rev. Hustisford with their children beside them and their extended

families filling the front pews. Prayers of thanksgiving were offered, declarations of intent were confirmed, affirmations of blessing and support were declared by family members and congregation, a charge urging compassion and trust was rendered, vows and rings were exchanged and, after the announcement of marriage was given and a joyful kiss witnessed, Peter and Nicole and the children recessed while the congregation concluded with the offering, closing prayers, benediction and final hymn.

It was, everyone agreed afterward, lovely and simple, inclusive and heartfelt. It was a timeless moment in a regular service of worship that, much like baptism, served as communal witness to the beginning of a covenant relationship in a life of faith.

And the usual coffee hour following the service that day was particularly joyful—special flowers, a wedding cake instead of the customary Danish pastries, toasts given and received, and the laughter and exuberance of family and friends embracing Nicole and Peter with love and warm wishes.

How utterly marvelous, thought Rev. Hustisford, as he looked over the scene. This was a communion of graceful intention, he mused, as he wondered if others might be inspired to follow Nicole and Peter’s example. New life, consecrated and celebrated within a worshipping community—a commencement, a promise and a blessing for all of Forbearance’s people. Yes, indeed, he concluded, really quite marvelous.

Charlotte Johnstone is a member of Immanuel Presbyterian Church in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. She wrote many “Dispatches from Forbearance Presbyterian Church” for *Horizons*, the magazine for Presbyterian Women.