

Clearness and Support Committees

Adopted 2018 for an indefinite period

The clearness committee is, at its heart, about the mystery of personhood and of God's call in our lives. These are intertwined dynamics by which we become more fully human.

Valerie Brown, 2017

Clearness Committees

Clearness committees are intended to serve Friends who seek assistance in reaching clarity about a personal concern or decision. Such committees help Friends determine what God would have them do based on the Quaker belief in the Inner Light in each person (see *The Light Within and Its Religious Implications*, pages xx–xx). The task of clearness committees is to provide spiritual support in helping Friends attend to, and be guided by, the Inner Light.

Any Friend is welcome to seek the assistance of a clearness committee to clarify an issue and seek a way forward, or to discern the truth of a leading. More specifically, Friends may seek clarity about a proposed marriage (see *Marriage*, pp. xx–xx), membership in a monthly meeting (see *Membership* pp. xx–xx), a change in family circumstances, a move to another region, a change in vocation or job, a contemplated divorce, taking a stand or witness on a public issue, traveling in the ministry, or any other personal concern for which a decision is needed.

The process generally begins when a Friend brings a personal concern to a member of Care and Counsel or an equivalent committee. The committee inquires into the nature of the concern in order to determine whether it is best taken up by a clearness committee or in some other way, such as a support committee (see below) or a professional from outside of the meeting community. In the latter case, the care and counsel committee may provide resources to the Friend with the concern (See *Pastoral Care*, pp xx–xx).

Once a decision is made that a clearness committee is to be formed, the care and counsel committee, often in consultation with the individual Friend, establishes that committee. The clearness committee is typically composed of three to six Friends who represent a diversity of gifts and backgrounds. Friends who can deeply center, who are open to others and their situations, and who listen well and demonstrate empathy are good candidates for clearness committees. Before making a commitment to be part of a clearness committee, a Friend who has been asked to serve should understand why they have been asked, as well as the nature of the issue and the likely time commitment.

Since the clearness committee is designed to address a concern or decision, it can be helpful for committee members to be given some relevant background information before meeting with the Friend in question. It is therefore advisable for that individual to provide written information to the committee about the situation in advance.

It is important that members of the clearness committee commit to maintaining confidentiality and respecting the privacy of the Friend with the concern. However, if the concern raises issues of child abuse, committee members cannot ensure confidentiality, as they are legally regarded as mandated reporters. Confidentiality can also not be ensured if issues involving domestic violence, elder abuse, suicidal ideation or behaviors of a criminal nature are made known to the committee.

Once a clearness committee has been formed, a clerk or convener is chosen, as is a recorder. The clerk ensures that a suitable meeting space is secured, convenes the meeting(s), sets time

parameters, and articulates the process to be followed. The recorder takes notes on whatever is deemed relevant and helpful for the Friend seeking clarity.

Once the agreed-upon time for a meeting arrives, the clerk of the clearness committee facilitates the meeting and helps ensure a worshipful atmosphere. The clerk begins the meeting by inviting those present to enter into a period of waiting worship. As arranged in advance, the clerk or the person who has requested the clearness committee speaks out of silence and shares the question(s) to be answered and the issues involved. The members of the committee then engage with the Friend (or Friends, in the case of a clearness committee for marriage) to clarify the concern under consideration and seek a path forward with the help of Divine guidance. Drawing on the spirit that unites Friends in meeting for worship, they ask clarifying questions to help the individual seek clarity as to God's will for them.

The discipline of asking honest, open questions is at the heart of the clearness committee.
Parker Palmer, 2004

Questions that are clear and brief facilitate the clearness process by enabling the Friend with the concern to focus and gain insight. The individual may choose not to respond to particular questions, or may ask for the group to return to waiting worship at any time. In some cases, failure to answer questions can inhibit insight; in others, the individual may not know the answer or may feel the information is too private to be shared in that setting.

Clearness committee members are expected to refrain from expressing judgments and imparting advice, much less attempting to solve the situation or make decisions for the seeker. All parties seek clearness in a corporate endeavor to find the way forward. It is the spirit with which the committee members approach their task that facilitates this outcome.

Toward the end of the meeting, the clerk may ask each person present to share a sense of what has emerged. A determination is then made as to next steps. These might include the scheduling of another meeting and/or defining other ways that the committee can support the Friend in moving forward. Committee members are advised that they should not discuss with anyone, the matters for which the Clearness Committee has been assembled, except in a formal committee meeting. The clerk ends the meeting as it began, with a period of waiting worship.

Clearness committees for membership or marriage report to the care and counsel committee. That committee then makes a recommendation to the monthly meeting, which subsequently decides whether to approve the individual for membership or the couple for marriage under the care of the meeting. Clearness committees that are convened to discern whether the meeting should take a leading or ministry under its care report directly to the monthly meeting or to the care and counsel committee, according to the practice of that meeting (see "Recognizing Spiritual Gifts and Leadings," pp. xx–xx.) Clearness committees established for other matters do not ordinarily bring business to the care and counsel committee or the monthly meeting. Such committees therefore do not normally give reports or recommendations to anyone other than the Friend who raised the concern.

Support Committees

There are times when an individual Friend may feel the need for ongoing support that does not necessarily involve reaching clearness about a personal concern. This may happen for Friends who are facing hardship or other personal challenges or taking on new responsibilities. A newly-appointed presiding clerk, for example, may seek a support committee to provide guidance in

carrying out the responsibilities of that position. This support may come from the monthly meeting, the yearly meeting, or members of wider Quaker organizations, particularly those who are familiar with the individual who is seeking support. Alternatively, a Friend serving in an important position on wider Quaker organizations may seek support from other Friends at the local or yearly meeting level.

In any of these cases, a Friend may request that the care and counsel committee form a support (or guidance) committee for them. Alternatively, Friends who sense that someone in their meeting is struggling may offer to form a support committee on that person's behalf.

Meetings of support (or guidance) committees tend to follow a similar process to meetings of clearness committees. Members of support committees are expected to ask questions, listen, and offer supportive feedback rather than expressing judgements and imparting advice. If a Friend needs a support (or guidance) committee over an extended period of time, the meeting replaces members of the committee as needed. Support committees may continue until the individual's concern is resolved.

It is advisable for support committees to be time-bound, although the need for ongoing support from the meeting may continue for a longer period than the tenure of the committee itself.

Queries

1. Am I willing to ask for a clearness or support committee for help in dealing with significant issues in my life?
2. Is the meeting willing and able to provide clearness and support committees for those who request them?
3. Are the meeting's processes for the formation and performance of clearness committees clear and readily available?

Sources for Quotes

p. 1, "The clearness committee is, at its heart, about the mystery of personhood...": Valerie Brown, *Coming to Light: Cultivating Spiritual Discernment through the Quaker Clearness Committee*, p. xx. Pendle Hill Pamphlet 446.

p. 2, "The discipline of asking honest, open questions is at the heart of the clearness committee.": Parker Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward and Undivided Life*, p. xx. Wiley, 2004.