

# 13

---

---

## Clearness Committees for Personal Discernment

**T**he spiritual strength of a meeting finds important expression through the loving community of its members. Out of awareness and responsiveness of its members to each other grow the bonds of trust and love that allow the meeting to find coherence in its spiritual life and unity in its actions.

It is appropriate to the development of this spiritual life that members of the meeting should feel free to approach the meeting for assistance in dealing with major turning points in life, including such matters as career decisions, lack of funds to live on, terminal illness, withholding of taxes, difficulties in relationships. One way that meetings could respond to this desire for help is through clearness committees, which offer support during difficult times, and discernment committees, which assist in making a decision. Both types of committee can be appointed by Ministry and Counsel of the monthly, quarterly or yearly meeting in conjunction with, and at the request of, the individual or individuals seeking help.

A discernment committee to consider marriage under the care of the meeting or a request for membership in the meeting is established for a particular reason, and has the goal of joint discernment between the couple or individual and the meeting; the meeting chooses the members of such discernment committees. In contrast, the

individual(s) requesting a clearness committee for personal discernment can choose or suggest members of the committee.

A clearness committee for personal discernment meets with the individual or family, not as professional counselors nor as friends discussing a problem and giving advice, but rather as caring Friends, drawing on the resources that bind us together in our meeting for worship. Maintaining a spirit of openness and prayerful waiting, the committee seeks to help the individual become clear about an impending decision by serving as a channel for Divine guidance. The members of the committee are there to listen without prejudice, to help clarify alternatives and their implications, to facilitate communication if necessary, and to provide emotional support as an individual or family seeks to find God's will. The size of such a committee and the number of times it meets with those seeking to make a decision depend on the circumstances. However, care should be taken that a clearness committee does not turn into an ongoing support committee with an indefinite term. The committee is normally made up of people from within a monthly meeting, but there may be times when members of the monthly meeting find themselves to be too close to the decision to be helpful, or when special resources available at the quarterly or yearly meeting levels would make a committee drawn from a larger body more appropriate.

### **Forming a Committee**

Committees may come into being in different ways depending on the situation. Those seeking clearness should feel free to use whatever method seems easiest and most comfortable. Examples of possible methods that could be used include the following:

- a. *Through the meeting as a whole.* Those seeking clearness may initiate a committee while the meeting is gathered for worship or business. The nature of the problem or decision should be described to the group and a request made that those willing to serve on a committee meet briefly afterwards.
- b. *Through the clerk or any other member of Ministry and Counsel.* The individual or individuals seeking clearness may ask the clerk or another member of Ministry and Counsel to arrange a committee for them. In these cases, an informal conversation between those seeking clearness and the person asked to form

a committee can serve to clarify the reasons for asking for a committee and suggest potential members. The clerk or another designated person would contact the suggested members and arrange for a first meeting. When this method is used, more potential members should be suggested than will be needed, since some may not be available. The person asked to form the committee need not be asked to be a member of it, and those who are asked to serve should not feel compelled to do so.

### **Conducting a Committee**

1. At the first meeting a clerk will be appointed to facilitate the meeting and do any follow-up that may be necessary. It is also important at this meeting for the committee to come to common agreement with those seeking clearness on the approach to be used and the approximate time period before evaluating the usefulness of continuing to meet.
2. Members of the committee should respect the needs for confidentiality of the individual or individuals seeking clearness. The degree to which confidentiality is desired should be agreed upon at the initial meeting.
3. Members of the committee may choose to meet without the person, couple, or family seeking clearness in order to clarify among themselves what has been said and what issues need to be addressed.
4. After one, two, or three meetings, the committee, together with the person or persons seeking clearness, should determine whether continuing would be useful or whether a support committee or an oversight committee should be appointed to aid the person in keeping clear and/or in being accountable to the clarity reached. In contrast to clearness committees, which are short-term, support or oversight committees meet on some ongoing basis. Members of the clearness committee are free to release themselves from further commitment or to offer to serve on such committees. A third question might be whether professional counseling should be recommended. It is important to recognize when the problem or the need is beyond the

resources of the committee so that other approaches may be initiated.

5. It should be understood by all concerned that the decision finally reached with the help of a clearness committee for personal discernment is neither sanctioned nor condemned by Ministry and Counsel or by the meeting. The clearness committee may help with the process, but the final decision is the responsibility of the individual or family concerned.

### **Queries to Consider in Forming a Committee**

1. Does the committee have a good range of age and experience?
2. Is the committee too large or too small to be effective?
3. Can members of the committee work well together and put aside personal biases?
4. If it is a family decision, do all the members involved feel comfortable with the committee? It is not always necessary that all members of the family be in accord with seeking the help of a committee in reaching a decision, but the committee must keep all members of the family in mind and be careful not to take sides, or even to appear to take sides, against a family member who refuses to participate in the process of seeking clarity through a committee of this nature.
5. If there are children involved, is there someone on the committee especially concerned with their needs? Is it appropriate for some or all of the children to meet with the committee?

Consider asking persons outside the meeting community, such as members of yearly or quarterly meeting Ministry and Counsel or others with special resources, to serve on such committees. This may be the best procedure when a meeting is too emotionally involved in the problem to be helpful to those seeking clarity. If part of a couple or family is not a part of the meeting, consider asking some non-Friends to serve on the committee.

### **Queries for Those Asked to Serve on a Committee**

1. Do you feel sufficiently at ease with the other members of the committee to work with them? Can you labor with them to truly provide an atmosphere in which Divine guidance can be sought?

2. If it is a family decision, can you listen without prejudice or bias to each member who is involved?
3. Can you devote sufficient time and energy to this committee, knowing that clarifying the problem and providing support while the decision is made and carried out may take several meetings and many weeks or months?
4. Can you keep the committee discussions confidential and avoid gossiping or referring to them outside the committee unless those requesting the help of the committee are comfortable with wider sharing of their problem?
5. What questions can you ask, or issues can you raise, that a non-religious counselor could not appropriately raise?

#### **Advices for Those Asked to Serve on a Committee**

1. Consider that persons are capable of changing and growing. Do not become absorbed with reasons for present problems. Focus on what is happening now to maintain the situation and explore what could be done to change it.
2. Notice the concept of blame, whether it is directed at self or others. Point it out when it occurs and discuss its consequences.
3. Do not give advice; do not present solutions to others. Do not create dependency by taking over responsibility. Remember that it is your task to help clarify the problem, not to make the decision.
4. Do not take sides if it is a family problem. Each person contributes to the problem, its continuation, and its solution.
5. Truly listen to the other persons present, not just wait until it is your turn to talk. Watch for verbal and non-verbal expression.

Committee members should be sensitive to the issues but not personally involved. All share responsibility, but the primary responsibility is the clerk's, who should:

1. Convene the meetings at mutually agreeable times and places.
2. Surround each meeting with a waiting silence; begin and end with worship.
3. Give equal attention to each person present, whether adult or child.