

CLEARNESS COMMITTEES

Friends may be most familiar with clearness as the process a meeting uses to decide whether to take a marriage under its care or to accept someone into membership. More and more, however, Friends are rediscovering the power of committees for clearness to guide and support members facing a crisis in their lives, sensing a leading towards a personal witness, or considering a change in life's direction.

Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, 1997

One of the special joys of a Friends meeting is the recurring reminder that each person contributes to the spiritual strength of the loving community and that the community is a guiding and sustaining force in the life of each individual. This mutual relationship strengthens the meeting and produces a bond of love and trust among its members, helping the meeting to find unity in its spiritual life and harmony in its actions. An important evidence of such spiritual unity in a meeting is that members feel free to ask for help in clarifying personal problems and in making decisions. These may relate to such matters as family adjustments, marriage difficulties, separation, divorce, stands to be taken on public issues, a new job, a required move to a distant area, a concern for personal witness, traveling in the ministry, and other personal decisions. Meetings usually respond to such requests for help by appointing committees on clearness.

Committees on Clearness for Personal Concerns

The forming of a clearness committee may be initiated by making a request to the meeting or by asking any member of the monthly meeting committee on care and counsel (oversight). It then becomes the responsibility of that committee to see that a clearness process is held. It is the duty of the committee on care and counsel to have intentional talks with the person seeking clearness (the seeker) on the nature of the problem. Such talks may convince

the committee that the seeker needs professional counseling, rather than the help of a meeting committee, and it will advise the seeker accordingly. Alternatively, it may be clear to the committee that the seeker is already clear as to the course of action to be taken but needs counsel from appropriate Friends on how to carry out the action or decision (the “how,” rather than the “whether”). In such a case, the committee on care and counsel should itself counsel with the seeker.

If, however, in the judgment of the committee on care and counsel, a clearness committee is appropriate, it appoints such a committee, in consultation with the seeker, possibly designating a clerk or convener from among its members. A clearness committee should be composed of persons who, because of gifts and background, seem particularly suitable to help with the problem. It is essential that a committee on clearness include only people who are acceptable both to the committee on care and counsel and to the seeker. A committee on clearness may include people of varied ages and experience and will normally include from three to five members unless the committee on care and counsel feels that special circumstances require a different number. Members of a clearness committee are charged to remain mindful of preserving the confidentiality of the process.

A committee on clearness meets with the seeker neither as professional counselors nor as friends discussing a problem and giving advice, but rather as caring Friends who share a spiritual community, drawing on the same resources that bind us together in meeting for worship. Maintaining a spirit of openness and prayerful waiting, the committee members seek to help the individual become clear about a problem or impending decision by joining with the individual to seek divine guidance. Their purpose is not to criticize, to elder, nor to offer their collective wisdom; they are there to listen without prejudice or judgment, to help clarify alternatives, to help communication if necessary, and to provide emotional support as an individual, or a small group such as a family, seeks to find God’s will. As in a meeting for business, all parties seek clearness, hoping to find “truth and the right course of action.” In

meetings of a committee on clearness, however, there is no need to find unity; the seeker's clearness is being served, and the committee must finally stand aside, trusting that it may have been used to help the seeker see a problem or understand a customary Friends practice more clearly or to make his or her own decision in the Light. In no case does a committee on clearness make the decision or seek to force a decision to be made.

When the problem is one in which, in the judgment of the committee on care and counsel, the meeting is too emotionally involved to be helpful, members of the committee on clearness may be selected from outside the meeting community. The committee on worship and ministry of the yearly meeting or another monthly meeting may be consulted for advice about outside members. It is worth repeating that Friends seek clearness in the Light; partisanship and emotional involvement are to be avoided, in favor of openness and a desire to be used as a channel for the Light, so that the person or persons seeking help may reach clearness.

Finally, it is important that all members of a committee on clearness feel a responsibility to help the clerk or convener establish and maintain a right spirit in all meetings of the committee. The convener has the primary responsibility, but all members should cooperate in surrounding each meeting with a waiting silence, in beginning and ending with worship, in recalling Friends to worship during a meeting, and in remembering that a meeting of a committee on clearness is not an occasion for professional or amateur counseling but a spiritual exercise. Friends hope to be channels whereby one or more seeking individuals may receive light on a problem and divine guidance for a decision which they—with God alone—must make.

Committees on Clearness for Issues Requiring Meeting Action

The term "clearness" referred originally to clearness before marriage from other entangling engagements or obligations. Today, if the problem or decision involves a possible meeting action (such

as a marriage, membership, release of a member, or the like), then both the meeting and the seeker must arrive at clearness before the action may be taken. In such cases, the clearness committee must be able to offer a decision or recommendation to the individual and the meeting. A meeting needs to be careful not to offer solutions entailing aid beyond its powers. See the Chapter 7 on membership and Chapter 8 on marriage for further guidance.

Queries for Those Asked to Serve on a Committee on Clearness

- Do you feel sufficiently at ease with the seeker and with the other members of the committee to work with them? Can you labor with them truly to provide an atmosphere in which divine guidance can be sought?
- If it is a family decision, can you listen without prejudice or bias to each member who is involved?
- Can you devote sufficient time and energy to this committee, knowing that it may take several meetings and many weeks or months to clarify the problem and provide support while the decision is made and carried out?
- Can you keep the committee discussions confidential and avoid gossiping or referring to them outside the committee?

Advices for Members of a Committee on Clearness

- Remember that your task is to serve as a channel for the Light to help the seeker deal with the problem or make a decision; neither you nor the committee deals directly with the problem or makes the decision.

- Try truly to listen to the other persons present, rather than just waiting for your turn to talk. Give equal attention to each person present, whether adult or child.
- Remember that people are capable of change and growth. Do not become absorbed with historical excuses or reasons for present problems. Focus on what is happening now to perpetuate the situation or to require a decision.
- Do not take sides if it is a family problem. Each person contributes to the problem, its continuation, and its solution.
- Try to avoid all suggestion of blame. It destroys openness and makes clearness difficult or impossible to reach.
- Refrain from giving advice or presenting solutions to others. Advice can either create resistance or dependency by taking over responsibility.
- Remember that your task is to allow the Light to help the seeker deal with the problem or make a decision; neither you nor the committee deals directly with the problem or makes the decision.
- Consider creating queries and advices for those seeking clearness, to be given to the inquirer before the clearness committee meets.

