

Clearness Committees for Personal Discernment

For centuries, Quaker Meetings used clearness processes before taking a person into membership, approving a marriage, recording a member as a minister or elder, or issuing a certificate to travel in the ministry. In our time, individuals have used clearness committees to help discern about important personal decisions, such as taking a new job, moving to a distant location, or following a leading of the Spirit. The role of the committee is to help the focus person discern divine guidance in the decision they are making.

For a clearness committee, three to seven people come together to help the focus person look at the relevant issues from different perspectives. During a time of worshipful attention, committee members ask questions to help the focus person pay attention to the deeper knowing within themselves. As they respond to the questions, everyone listens with prayerful attention. If the atmosphere is worshipful, the focus person may find themselves remembering important inner events or speaking truths they have not fully admitted before. They may also become aware that some inner motivations come from fear, ego, or familial or cultural conditioning. The gentle questions of the committee may help them notice how these voices differ from the inner promptings of the "still, small voice" of God. During a clearness process, it is important to remember that each person has direct, inward access to divine guidance and that the role of committee members is to help the focus person sense that guidance for themselves.

Leadings of the Spirit often require us to be and do things that are different from the status quo. Because this can be challenging, resistance is a normal response when we first begin to sense a leading. A clearness committee can help clear hearts and minds of whatever impedes awareness of divine instruction or willingness to follow it. The clarity that comes is sometimes surprising, but the truth of it is affirmed in the heart.

A clearness committee meeting usually lasts about two hours, sometimes two and a half.

Clearness Committee: Atmosphere and Intention

Sessions are conducted with a reverent, loving attitude of listening for the truth. We assume that each person has an Inner Teacher or Guide. With prayerful attention to the presence of the Spirit, committee members can assist a focus person in becoming clearer about their deep inward knowing related to the question or concern brought to the group. Ideally, committees are composed of a group of people with gifts for listening and discernment, as well as diverse perspectives and experience. They gather with the intention of raising questions that may present new ways for the focus person to explore or consider their interior landscape and outward situation in relation to the matter at hand. What is shared in the clearness committee session is sacred and confidential. Each committee member practices self-control, putting aside their personal curiosity, suggestions, ideas, or stories to be as fully present as possible to facilitate the focus person's attention to the movement of the Spirit and greater awareness of the dimensions of their situation.

Clearness Committee Basic Format

The focus person writes a brief paper stating the matter for discernment, giving background information, telling about guidance received, steps taken, prayer. This paper is sent to the Clerk of Care and Counsel. Pastoral Care, a small subcommittee of Care and Counsel and Worship and Ministry Committees, will form the Clearness Committee. If indicated such as for a social or environmental concern, another appropriate committee may be consulted. Committee members can be selected from the entire meeting. The Background paper is read in advance by committee members.

The clerk convenes the committee by reminding the group of the desired atmosphere, focus, and guidelines. A recorder is appointed to record questions and key phrases.

There is a period of opening worship or silent prayer.

The focus person briefly summarizes the question or concern. The committee members are quietly attentive to what is most alive in what the focus person is saying.

Committee members ask caring, open questions to evoke the focus person's exploration of their experience, intuition, and heart-felt awareness of the guidance or promptings of the Spirit within them and in their situation. They listen deeply, leaving silence between an answer and the next question, attending to the inward process taking place in the focus person and to the movement of the Spirit in the group. The focus person attempts to answer concisely, to leave time for more questions.

After at least an hour of questions, the clerk calls for a pause and asks the focus person to choose how to spend the next period of time. Options include: **a)** worship and possibly vocal ministry; **b)** silence out of which committee members share images that come as they pray for or hold the focus person in the Light; **c)** more questions for the focus person; **d)** the committee mirroring what they have heard and seen; **e)** the committee reflecting on what has been said; **f)** the committee affirming the focus person's gifts; **g)** the focus person asking questions of the committee.

About fifteen minutes before the end of the meeting, the focus person is invited to share any clarity that has come to them, or which questions are especially alive for them.

The group agrees on next steps, if any are needed. (Another clearness committee meeting? Formation of an ongoing support/oversight/anchor committee? Asking the spiritual community to support the focus person's call or leading, witness, or ministry?)

There is a period of closing worship or prayer.

* * * * *

Here are some **useful resources for additional guidance about clearness committees**:

1. An two-and-a-half page [document on Clearness Committees by Jan Hoffman](#).
2. The Pendle Hill pamphlet by Patricia Loring, [Spiritual Discernment: The Context and Goal of Clearness Committees](#).

3. The Pendle Hill pamphlet by Valerie Brown, [*Coming to Light: Cultivating Spiritual Discernment through the Quaker Clearness Committee.*](#)
4. A 8 1/2 minute video on Using Evoking Questions for Deeper Listening (see below):
5. QuakerSpeak video "How to Have a Clearness Committee":
6. QuakerSpeak video "How to Serve on a Clearness Committee":

Support Committee

A Support Committee functions very much like a Clearness for Personal Discernment Committee, following its Atmosphere and Intention and Basic Format. Please read the Clearness Committee for Personal Discernment information above.

The purpose of the Support Committee is to provide safe, loving, and spirit-led support around a specific concern or ongoing calling or leading, spiritual direction, life changes, an illness, a personal relationship, a personal crisis, or a work-related or parenting issue. This is often an ongoing committee that may either meet regularly or at the discretion of the focus person requesting support.

Used with permission from Marcelle Martin <https://awholeheart.com/clearness-committees/>