

# Clearness Committees, Committees of Care, and Committees of Oversight

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## Introduction

Faced with difficult decisions or imperative concerns, Friends have often asked others to help them to discern the will of God and the leading of the Spirit in their lives. Friends in difficult situations have also asked others for help and encouragement to enable them to carry out their tasks rightly. Sometimes these arrangements are informal; sometimes the Meeting itself takes the initiative. Friends are then found who will meet those in need and offer their presence, prayer, love and support.

There are three types of committees on which Friends may draw. These are: Clearness Committees, Committees of Care, and Oversight Committees. In the work of all of these committees, the qualities of clearness and discernment are paramount.

Historically, Friends come to Meeting for help in discerning whether their concerns were spiritually based leadings or based on their own will. The following paragraphs stem from such a background. They are relevant to the work of today's committees, which often must struggle through the more profane world of day-to-day life and its personal problems, which Friends still seek to illumine with a spark of the Divine.

. . . Concerns and the process of discernment require further scrutiny to understand their central place in Quaker practice. The Book of Acts in the New Testament sparkles with vivid concerns and the following of divine guidance, no matter at what cost. Believing that we are still in the Apostolic age and that we do not work alone, Quakers have experienced in their corporate Meetings for Worship and in their private devotions leadings to which they have sought to be attentive. The small inner nudges . . . may be swiftly cared for, but concerns that may involve changes of career or that involve others in their unfolding call for more deliberate care. How such guidance is to be regarded and how it is to be followed raises the whole question of discernment. In what ways may individual Friends be helped to test the authenticity of a concern and how may they be assisted in what this may demand of them? Here again the strong corporate side of Quakerism...has been able to furnish spiritual assistance. . . . The traditional procedure is to call together a small committee of clearness.

- Steere, Douglas, Introduction to Quaker Spirituality, pp. 42-43, Paulist Press, 1984

## Discernment and Clearness

Some individuals are blessed with a gift for discernment-they seem to know what to do. Others must come to this skill with more effort. The key to this in the religious area is prayer. In doing this we bring ourselves into the Light; we also bring our understandings and our confusions; we bring our hopes and fears, our ambitions and desires. With divine help we may lay them all down and be left with clarity and thanksgiving. Getting from here to there requires testing our thought and our feelings by the Light. We may be granted a vision of clarity directly; but more often we must look for examples of discernment reflected in the lives and decisions of others. The Bible being a record of the work of the Spirit through history is a most valuable source for such vicarious experiences. Friends may also make use of the Journals kept by the great ministers of our Society-George Fox, John Woolman, Elizabeth Fry, Stephen Grellet, Elias Hicks, et al. We may also look to more recent records and the experience of those we know, and should not neglect our own journals. It is all too easy to forget an experience of divine guidance that we may have been blessed with in the past when we are overwhelmed with a dilemma in the present. The practice of thanksgiving helps to banish forgetfulness and allows us to grow throughout our lives. Prayer and study usefully undergird the work of committees as well as individuals if they are to discern way forward. Where individuals feel too inexperienced to feel that they can rightly discern God's will alone in prayer, they may consult more experienced Friends-not to make their decision for them but to help them with the process of discerning it. The most commonly used consultative process, and often the best, is for the perplexed individual to go to a number of people informally and hear what they have to say on the matter-to personal friends, colleagues, professionals and members of the Meeting-then to meditate over what they have learned and act as the way opens.

Clearness is a deep inner certainty based on spiritual discernment. Clearness takes time. It cannot be achieved for a Meeting or an individual while there is an impediment or stop in the mind. Friends' testimony is that with Divine assistance and others' help, the liberation and assurance of true clearness will come.

### **General Guidelines for all Three Committees**

a. These committees are under the care of Monthly, Half-Yearly, or Yearly Meetings, or their Meetings of Ministry and Counsel. Their initiation, however, differs.

Clearness Committees are initiated by the individual, who approaches the relevant Meeting with a concern/problem that necessitates a decision. When the decision is reached, the work of the Committee ceases.

Committees of Oversight are initiated by Meetings, which feel that right ordering in carrying out something must be safeguarded.

Committees of Care may be initiated by either the individual or the Meeting to give continuing support to the person in an undertaking, or because the person needs help.

The latter two kinds of Committees last much longer than a Clearness Committee.

b. Committees of Care and Clearness Committees are concerned primarily with people; Committees of Oversight are concerned primarily with tasks. Thus, those Friend serving

Meetings may have both an Oversight Committee to which they are accountable and a Committee of Care which supports them personally.

c. Committees should not change their functions without reference to the authorizing body. For example, Committees of Clearness should not allow themselves to become ongoing Committees of Care, and Oversight Committees should not allow themselves to become Committees of Care while still functioning as Oversight Committees.

d. Membership: A membership of 2 to 4 persons is recommended. In the case of Clearness Committees, and Committees of Care, the person concerned is consulted about the choice of members. In the case of Committees of Oversight, the person is not consulted.

Service on these committees can be very demanding; Meetings should be mindful that they cannot always supply the right members for such committees. If that is so, they should be prepared to reach out to other Meetings or refer to appropriate resources in the community.

It is essential that members work as a team, and do not work as individuals with the Friend concerned, without the knowledge and approval of the other members.

e. Clerk: The first choice for Clerk would be a Committee member who is also a member of the Meeting's Ministry and Counsel. The Clerk is responsible to see that all members are clear as to their duties, their terms of reference, and the length of service expected of them. The Clerk should oversee the sharing of expectations of one another on the part of all participants, including the Friend(s) asking assistance.

The Clerk either is, or appoints, a recorder. It is the Clerk's responsibility to see that any notes are disposed of properly, according to the type of Committee. This is particularly important because documents may, on occasion, be subpoenaed by a court of law.

The Clerk should consult with the Friend concerned as to how the Committee can best work with the Friend. For example, does the Friend function best in a structured, or informal situation?

f. Resources: Committee members will find it useful to know of helpful agencies and support services, groups and individuals outside the Meeting community.

Time given to reading and prayerful preparation in advance will help to generate an atmosphere of trust and care. Only rarely will a committee have only one meeting. A reasonable interval between meetings allow for reflection, prayer, and growth for all concerned.

g. Meetings Conducted in the Manner of Friends: The location of meetings is important; there needs to be an atmosphere of privacy, comfort, and concern for the reputations of others. In all cases, the committees will maintain careful sensitivity to the privacy of the

Friend(s) concerned.

In an atmosphere of support and caring, the person(s) will be free to say what they think and feel. To listen creatively involves faith in Friends' patience, a desire to understand, and help to clarify problems and needs. During meetings, the committee will raise questions, suggest options and share experiences where appropriate. Time should be allowed for prayer.

An immediate solution is not always possible in the situations which come before us, and the seeking for Divine guidance may bear fruit much later in the lives of all concerned. These committees are one way of providing friendship and assistance within the Meeting family. In all exchanges based on love we are both givers and receivers of Divine blessings. The use/operation of these committees helps not only the Friends involved, but greatly strengthens the Meeting as a whole.

h. Notes: The recorder may make notes of the discussion and decisions. These confidential notes should be read back and copies given to the concerned Friend(s) and Clerk of the committee. Because notes could be evidence in a court of law, when the committee is laid down, all notes and minutes should be handed over to the concerned Friend(s), to be kept or destroyed as desired. No copies should be retained by the Meeting. The committee should report to the Meeting that it has met, and, if appropriate, its decisions.

## **Special Guidelines for Clearness Committees, Committees of Care, and Committees of Oversight**

### 1. Clearness Committees

#### Purpose and Function

- a. To help Friend(s) discern the will of God as well as herself/himself in making a difficult decision.
- b. To help Friend(s) test the genuineness and ramifications of a concern that involves the Meeting.

The Friends with whom they consult will not make their decisions for them, but will help them in the process of discerning God's will.

Clearness Committees are set up for a limited time only, until the purpose is completed. They report to their appointing Meeting at least the dates of their meetings, and when their task is completed, so that the committee can be laid down.

#### Appointment

Suitability of committee members should be considered with care by the Meeting concerned, as often sensitive issues are being considered. The acceptability of suggested members should first be cleared with the Friend(s) concerned, before final appointment.

## 2. Committees of Care

### Purpose and Function

- a. To provide help, both practical and spiritual, during times of stress in the lives of members of the Meeting, e.g. bereavement, separation, illness, career changes, etc.
- b. To sustain Friend(s) engaged in demanding Meeting work over a long period.

Care must be taken not to create a dependency, but to enable Friends to be independent, and to make their own choices.

### Appointment

A wider choice of people is needed for Committees of Care than for Clearness Committees, as the life of the Committee is so much longer and the people may need to be rotated. The choice of members should be approved by the Friend(s) in need. The need for the Committee should be reviewed periodically by the Meeting and the Committee should be laid down when its job is done.

## 3. Oversight Committees

### Purpose and Function

An Oversight Committee is accountable to its appointing Meeting for the execution of the responsibilities of the Friend being overseen; the oversight is of the proper fulfillment of the task, and not of the person concerned. Care for the person, if necessary, is the responsibility of a Committee of Care. Membership in the two, if needed, should not overlap.

The Oversight Committee and the designated Friend(s) should meet with the Clerk of the appointing Meeting to clarify expectations, including terms of reference, responsibilities, and a clear job description, at the outset. The terms of reference should be reviewed periodically, as well as the need for the programme, task, or office itself.

It is essential that an Oversight Committee function as a whole, and that its members not work independently. The Oversight Committee serves the Meeting as a two way channel for messages and comments on the programme, task or office being supervised. This procedure avoids the creation of tensions in the Meeting. Otherwise, a hardworking Friend serves too many masters.

## Appointment

The person overseen need not be consulted on membership of the Committee. The members should have skills appropriate to what is overseen. Membership may be changed periodically by the appointing Meeting, because this committee's duration tends to be long.

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