

# Clearness Committees

There are many reasons for using a clearness committee. The most common and well-known are clearness committees for membership and marriage. Clearness committees can also be used to discern clearness on any question or decision facing a member/attender, or to discern clearness for the Meeting itself.

For each clearness committee, there should be clarity beforehand on:

1. What is the question for which we need clearness? For membership and marriage, it is relatively clear. For a decision or struggle facing a member, some time should be spent determining what the question is. It should be a question for which clearness is genuinely sought - not a question that the person has already decided the answer to (and is seeking validation for), or a question too ambiguous to answer. It may be, if the question is sufficiently unclear that a clearness committee should be convened to seek clarity on what the question is before convening a clearness committee to try to answer it!
2. Who is seeking the clearness? For example, in questions of marriage and membership, both the applicant(s) and Meeting are seeking clearness - the applicant that s/he is clear to join/marry, and the Meeting that they are clear to take the membership/marriage under their care. In other cases it may be a matter that concerns only the member and the Meeting is trying to help the member attain clearness on the question.
3. Who is convening the committee? Normally, Care and Concern will choose a convener. The convener is responsible for all preparations for the meeting(s), clerking the meeting(s), and notifying Care and Concern of the results of the meeting(s).
4. Who are the members of the committee? Normally, Care and Concern will choose the members of the committee. The applicant(s) are certainly invited to indicate who they would like to be on the committee. It is best to get a mix of perspectives and backgrounds. It is also best to choose members who don't already have a strong opinion on the question being considered. The members should be people that the applicant(s) can trust and be comfortable sharing openly with. The members should also be comfortable sharing their experience freely and openly with the committee and the applicant(s).

The following are responsibilities (except as noted) of the convener of the clearness committee.

1. Schedules initial meeting with applicant(s), preferably in their home.
2. Clarifies with applicant(s) the purpose and function of the committee prior to the initial meeting (see above).
3. Distributes appropriate pamphlets, queries or other information to committee members and ask the committee members to read these materials to prepare for the meeting. This helps to prepare them for the committee process, as well as think about questions to ask the applicant(s).

4. Schedules a pre-meeting for the committee (without the applicant(s)) for the committee to discuss and agree on the roles, queries, and format of the clearness committee meeting.
5. Schedules the clearness committee meeting with the applicant(s) and committee - with agreement on time, location.
6. Opens and closes meeting for clearness with applicant(s).
7. Schedules timely follow-up meeting with committee members to discern clearness.
8. Reports findings of the committee to the applicant(s) and the Care and Concern Committee Clerk.
9. Coordinates any subsequent meetings with applicant(s) as well as any subsequent meetings (or any other necessary actions) of the committee in order to achieve clearness.

**Membership** (More details about membership can be found in membership chapter)

The applicant writes a letter to the Clerk asking to be considered for membership. The Clerk will ask Care and Concern to assign a convener and committee members for a clearness committee. The convener will then make the necessary arrangements with the applicant and the clearness committee. Prior to the clearness committee meeting itself, the applicant should be provided with a copy of Faith and Practice and asked to read it thoughtfully in the Light of the commitment he is contemplating.

The applicant should understand that this is a process for determining clearness for both the applicant and the Meeting - whether the applicant is truly clear to join, and whether the Meeting is clear to accept him/her into membership. Applicants may normally be nervous at the prospect of being "rejected" but ideally both the applicant and the committee will seek clearness together and arrive at the same conclusion, whatever it may be.

Suggestions to committees interviewing applicants for membership (adapted from Philadelphia Yearly Meeting Faith and Practice):

1. Does s/he believe that God endows every human being with a measure of His own divine spirit, which, if followed, will lead into all Truth?
2. Does s/he understand that Quakerism is rooted in Christianity?
3. To what extent is s/he familiar with and sympathetic to the historic testimonies of Friends, such as non-participation in war, simplicity of living, and human brotherhood?
4. Has s/he any reservation regarding testimonies or other matters included in the queries?
5. Does s/he impress you as a person of integrity?
6. To what extent does s/he feel himself already a part of the Meeting fellowship distinct from formal membership?

7. To what extent do members acquainted with the applicant feel that s/he is in spirit a member?
8. Does s/he feel that the Meeting for Worship strengthens his/her spiritual life?
9. Does s/he understand his/her responsibilities for regular attendance at Meeting for Worship, for supporting the concerns of the Meeting, and for sharing in its work, as well as supporting it financially? Does s/he realize his/her responsibilities for attending Meetings for Worship with Attention to Business, including the sessions of quarterly and yearly meetings?
10. Is s/he familiar with and understanding of the method of the Meeting for Business?
11. To what extent is s/he familiar with the wider family of Friends beyond the local Meeting?
12. If s/he has up to this time been a church member, why does s/he wish to change? If s/he previously has had no membership in any church, why does s/he wish to join Friends?
13. What is the attitude of the other members of his/her family toward his/her joining?
14. Does s/he realize that s/he is asking to join a group that does not accept the final authority of any person or creed, but which individually and collectively trusts to the continuing revelation of Light and Truth?

Additional questions:

1. How would s/he handle a disagreement with the Meeting? How has s/he handled discord and conflict in other communities?
2. What is it about Friends that attracts him/her?

Traditionally, Care and Concern arranges for a small gift to each new member (a copy of Faith and Practice, or other Quakerly book, or a subscription to Friends Journal).

### **Marriage Under the Care of the Meeting**

The applicants should understand that this is a process for determining clearness for both the applicants and the Meeting - whether the applicants are truly clear to marry and whether the Meeting is clear to take their marriage under their care. Applicants may normally be nervous at the prospect of being "rejected" but ideally both the applicants and the committee will seek clearness together and arrive at the same conclusion, whatever it may be.

(From Jan Hoffman, Pastoral Care Newsletter, May 1995) *The call to commitment is not limited to two individuals. The question for the couple is: "Are we called to a covenant relationship with each other?" The question for the meeting is: "Are we clear to take this marriage - this whole relationship - under our care?" The question is not, "Are we clear to take the wedding or ceremony under our care?"*

The couple should write a letter to the clerk requesting marriage or other commitment under the care of the Meeting. Care and Concern will then assign the convener and members for the clearness committee. The convener will then make the necessary arrangements with the couple and the committee.

Consider whether children and other family members should be included in the clearness process. It is often a good idea to meet separately with each applicant prior to meeting with the couple. Normally, at least one of the couple should be a member of the Meeting.

Questions to consider in the clearness process:

1. Are we aware that the Care and Concern of our marriage by the Meeting involves the continuing concern for our life together and the values established in our home?
2. Will we welcome the continuing concern of the Meeting?
3. Is the couple compatible regarding spiritual and religious beliefs.
4. Has the couple addressed any financial issues?
5. Has the couple discussed their jobs and how their marriage might impact them and their working.
6. Are there any previous marriages or relationships and has the couple sought clearness concerning them.
7. Has the couple considered children and other family issues?
8. How will the couple handle conflict and do they have plans for conflict resolution.

**In December of 1995, Live Oak Friends minuted their appreciation for diversity in our community and recognized the Light in all sincere, loving, supportive relationships in which faith, hope, love and truth abide. Upon request, Live Oak Friends Meeting will recognize same-gender marriages through the same careful process we customarily use to arrive at clearness for marriage for any couple who wish to unite under our care.**

## **Personal Discernment**

*(The following is adapted from Jan Hoffman, twelfth month press, "Clearness Committees and their Use in Personal Discernment")*

When a person is unclear on how to proceed in a concern or dilemma, s/he can request a clearness committee to help reach clarity. The committee in this case is not making a decision or dealing directly with the problem. The person seeking clearness writes up a question in advance and provides it to the committee members. (It is helpful to include any relevant background information as well).

The convener will arrange the time and location of the first meeting. (It may be necessary for the committee to hold a pre-meeting in preparation for the meeting with the focus person.) The meeting should open with a period of silent worship. The focus person will then provide a brief summary of the question or concern.

During the next period, the committee members will ask the focus person questions for clarity. The clearness committee is not there to provide advice, judgment, criticism or wisdom. The committee should ask honest, probing, caring, challenging, unloaded questions to help the person reach clearness. The focus person is always entitled not to answer any of the questions.

At the end of the question period, well before the end of the session, the convener should ask the focus person how s/he wishes to proceed. The possibilities are:

1. Meeting for Worship, during which anyone may speak out of the silence
2. Asking more questions
3. The committee is asked to give advice

Through this process, the focus person may reach clarity. S/he should agree with the committee on the next steps if any. Sometimes another meeting may be needed. In some cases, several meetings may be necessary in order to reach clearness. Some actions may have been agreed to and need to be carried out before the next meeting or perhaps some more information is needed before further action can be taken. Any actions agreed upon should be recorded in writing for clarification. It may be that only one meeting is necessary.