

The Clearness Committee Process

Adapted by David Williams, from an article by Scott Pierce Coleman of Guilford College

Why Would I Want to Call a Clearness Committee (“Meeting for Clearness”)?

Many people resist thinking seriously about decisions they feel unprepared to make. Perhaps unknowns prevent the decision from being framed clearly. Perhaps poor past decisions make a person reluctant to commit one way or another now. Sometimes people feel they don't know themselves well enough to make a good decision. Some people simply don't like giving up their options until the last possible minute.

When used with care, a clearness committee results in a state of inner rest that Friends call "clarity." To be "clear" means to have reached a profoundly satisfying resolution to some difficult question. Three important qualities of well being typically accompany clarity: 1) a deep sense of assurance that the decision will not lead to regret; 2) a feeling of release from emotional burdens associated with the decision; 3) an increased sense of strength to persevere through challenges in carrying out a decision.

Obviously, people make major decisions all the time without relying on a clearness process, and good, clear decisions can certainly be reached without one. But difficult decisions can be seen from surprising and refreshing new angles when one gathers one's community together to face them. Corporate wisdom and insight often reveal dimensions of a decision not visible when contemplated in isolation.

How Do I Set Up a Clearness Committee, Once I've Decided to do One?

A sound clearness process involves three major steps.

Step One: Self-Reflection (Done by the Focus Person): Frame the question on which you seek clearness as fully as you can. For some people, it can be useful to write a few paragraphs, tracing the threads of your life leading to your clearness question. For others, it may be sufficient to make some notes about relevant facts and background information so other members of the clearness committee have a context in which to help you consider your question. Once you have selected a clerk, it is helpful to discuss the question with him or her to further sharpen its focus.

Step Two: Selecting Committee Members (Done by the Focus Person): A clearness committee is usually composed of three to five discerners and the focus person. You may find it useful to call together a slightly larger group, but beyond a certain size, the group loses its sense of intimacy and focus. As you think about whom to invite, keep in mind several key characteristics to look for:

1. Personal knowledge of you
2. Wisdom and groundedness about life
3. A sense of trust between you
4. Openness to all possible outcomes of your discernment process
5. A capacity to listen deeply

It is important to invite people of diverse ages, backgrounds and relationships to you. This leads to deeper listening in almost all cases. Sometimes people who don't know you well, but who are able to listen deeply may be more effective than close friends who know what you "should" do or whose fears keep them from being fully present to you. Sometimes the most "obvious" people—the names coming to mind first—aren't necessarily the ones who will be the most helpful. Some people make a list of all who come to mind as possibilities (allowing for some who *don't* seem so obvious). They then make time to sit quietly with the list to see which names "rise to the top." Be open to names that keep coming to mind, but seem like a stretch.

Step Three: Calling the Committee Together (Done by the Clerk): Once you have settled on several discerners, you'll need to ask one to be clerk. That person then takes responsibility for finding a mutually comfortable time and place for the committee members to meet with the focus person. If you've done some writing to provide your discerners with context for your question, the clerk should distribute your notes to the other members of the group in advance of the meeting. It might also be a good idea to give a copy of these guidelines to any of your discerners who have never participated in a clearness committee before.

The following sequence provides a suggested pattern for a typical meeting for clearness:

1. An opening period of silence, providing space to clear away distractions and become attentive to the voice of God, followed by centering prayer.
2. The offering of the clearness question and its context.
3. An opportunity for discerners to ask clarifying questions about the clearness question and its context.
4. A period of silent reflection in which the members of the committee consider what the focus person has said, including what they hear *behind* the focus person's words.
5. Asking any additional, clarifying questions, following the guidelines provided below.

Commonly, a fair amount of time will pass between questions, allowing the focus person to consider each one with care. Allowing space between questions also gives discerners a chance to make potential connections between their own reflections and a particular question that's just been asked. It's amazing how often a single question in a clearness process can focus the entire group's discernment and open up an important area of consideration.

It is important for discerners to ask questions rather than make statements. The group is gathered to help the focus person make his or her own clear decision, not to persuade him or her to make a decision that feels clear to a particular discerner. When a discerner has a clear statement emerge within him or herself, silent waiting will almost always reveal a way in which the statement can be phrased as a question.

The focus person is free to respond to any question asked, or not, as he or she feels comfortable. When the focus person does decide to respond, keeping those responses brief but informative is helpful. If the focus person begins to ramble, the clerk should gently call him or her back to the question just asked. Likewise, if a discerner goes off on a tangent, the clerk is responsible to call the group gently back to center.

How Do I Know When Clearness Has Been Reached?

While it is hard to describe exactly, a group generally feels a shift in energy as resolution settles within them. Questions fall away and a group will often become silent and more deeply quiet. There will be a sense of relief or release or peace, even if the "answer" is "it isn't time to know yet." It is the clerk's job to say something like, "I have a sense we've come to some clarity about this issue. Does it seem that way to you?" Sometimes a group has a sense of being done for the time being, whether or not clarity can be articulated. Sometimes a group has the sense the focus person has everything needed to make the decision and merely needs to sit with the options a little while longer, or will know when the time comes to make the decision. Whatever the "results," the focus person generally has a sense of being able to let go of the worry of indecision and live more freely in whatever answer arises.

How Might I Think of a Clearness Process as Explicitly Spiritual?

For Quakers, a clearness process is simply an attempt to discern the call of God in the context of community. An underlying assumption of the process is that we often hear God better as a group than in isolation, as each of us listen attentively for the still, small voice of the Holy Spirit (cf. Acts 15:28). An intentional decision to make Christ the center of such gatherings anchors the process in the One who is the very source and substance of Truth itself (cf. John 14:6). As George Fox, the founder of the Friends movement has testified, "There is one, even Christ Jesus, who can speak to thy condition."