

Pastoral Care *Newsletter*

*For Overseers, Ministry and Counsel,
and others who provide pastoral care
in unprogrammed Friends meetings*

Vol. 7, No. 4 • June 2000

Use of Clearness Committees in Pastoral Care

by Patricia McBee

Does your meeting use clearness committees other than for membership or marriage? Many meetings are only beginning to discover the clearness process as a rich resource for the pastoral care role of helping our members discern how to order their lives more in keeping with the movements of the Spirit.

The members of our meetings are constantly engaging in processes of discernment – large and small. Sometimes there is obvious spiritual significance such as “do I have a leading to undertake a special concern?” or “how can I bring my way of living more into line with the testimonies and practices of Friends and the movements of the Spirit?” At other times members are discerning leadings about more everyday matters such as “what can I do about this job in which I feel increasingly uneasy?” or “should we add another child to our family?” Sometimes members bring to the meeting questions of clearness for divorce or separation.

Meetings often have hesitated to get involved at this level of members’ lives, feeling that it is not the meeting’s business – and it is not our business to tell people what job to hold or how many children to have. The object of clearness committees is not to tell someone what to do, but to lovingly support a person in opening to the guidance of the Inward Teacher.

The Meeting’s Role

Discernment of one’s life course is ultimately between an individual and that person’s experience of the Inward Guide. However, for many it is not always easy to hear clearly what the Inward Guide may be saying. A person may wonder, “Is this a leading or am I being self-serving?” “Am I projecting my desires or my fears into this situation?” There are often conflicting voices – the voice of habit, the voice of prudence, the voice of social acceptability. Where in all this is harmony with the Divine?

A clearness committee can help a Friend sort out the different voices and enter into a prayerful space that helps the voice of the Inward Teacher to come

through. As a person becomes clear about a leading, the clearness committee give support in addressing fears and the obstacles that may stand in the way of responding to the leading. A clearness committee may also help a member refrain from acting precipitously, instead giving time for seasoning a perceived leading. In the end, it remains the responsibility of the individual to discern the next step. But the meeting can play a major role in helping that person take the step with confidence and peacefulness and an unconflicted sense of right ordering.

Photo by Sharon Gunther



Patricia McBee

If the matter at hand is one on which action of the meeting is being requested, a further process is required after the individual has achieved a sense of clearness. Just because the individual feels clear, it does not mean that the other members of the meeting are called to take the action being requested. Jan Hoffman of Mt. Toby Meeting in New England refers to it as "double clarity" when the meeting is called on to discern its clarity about accepting a person's application for membership or about taking a marriage under its care.¹ Double clarity is also needed when the member is exploring clearness about undertaking action and desires a minute of religious service or other support from the meeting.

¹ "Seeking Clarity Both Personally and Corporately" in *Companions Along the Way*, ed. Florence Ruth Kline, PYM, 2000.

The Benefits to the Meeting

When a meeting assists a member in the process of discernment, the meeting is enriched as well. Direct results may come from deepening the relationship of the meeting with the person who was seeking clearness. As a result of a clearness process that person may participate in the meeting in a more spiritually grounded way. Or the clearness process may have helped the person avoid an error that would have negative ramifications for the community.

More broadly the meeting is deepened by the increased sense of connection and caring among members. Prayerful support for one another binds members to one another. When future issues of pastoral care arise, a connection is already established from having worked together in a clearness process.

Two Clearness Committees at Work

To Graduate School or Not?

A few years ago, I felt a leading to enroll in the Earlham School of Religion and asked Friends in my meeting (Newtown Square, PA) to meet with me and help me to explore this leading.

Each member of the Clearness Committee had a unique gift to bring: one is an ESR graduate and very widely experienced among Friends and in Friends' processes, another is a deeply spiritual person and a deep listener to God's movement in our lives, a third is a practical person and who could bring balance if any of the rest of us got too far off the ground.

I expected that the answer would be "yes, you're led to go," or "no, you're not led to go." Instead, the clearness seemed to be: maybe you're led to go, but this fall doesn't seem the right time, and you should investigate some possibilities and test the leading first. This "maybe" was a surprise to me, especially since ESR grad on the committee had promoted it enthusiastically. She was the first to say "this is not a clear leading." Coming from her, this held great weight for me. The suggestion that it might be the right course but the wrong time and to wait and test it further was a relief. Particularly helpful were the specific suggestions that came from the gathering as to how to test it – as it turned out, they were just right. By the time the next spring came the obstacles to my leaving the area fell away and it was clear that I was to go to ESR in the fall.

Beth Lawn Martin
Newtown Square (PA) Meeting

Looking Out for the Children in a Divorce

In the 1970s, Newark (Delaware) Meeting found two of its stalwart founders, with children aged 9 and 11, anticipating divorce. The meeting took the initiative, announcing to each spouse that a Clearness Committee was prepared to meet as often as necessary to listen and help shape practical plans.

I was as broken-hearted and bewildered by this mid-life split as my husband was angry and sure he was making the right decision. Although we could not be together without tears and bitter words, each of us welcomed the meeting's focus on our children and their future security. Members of the committee appealed to each of us parents to prepare carefully for the children's welfare before we took on lawyers. Their assumption was that lawyers would emphasize each spouse's rights and claims, and the children would fall through the cracks.

After much sweat by the Committee and spouses, we forged a written plan for support and visitation and long-in-the-future educational costs which went beyond what the law required. Those basic guidelines outlasted in usefulness and spiritual weight the ensuing legal separation agreement.

What a gift to receive the caring attention of a meeting committee in a time so emotionally charged! Each family member maintains warm associations with members of Newark Meeting although our life paths have taken us far from that original home.

Suzanne Day
Westfield Monthly Meeting
Cinnaminson NJ

The meeting for business can also benefit from Friends feeling a deeper understanding of one another.

History of Clearness Committees

Contrary to popular assumption, the clearness committee for discernment of personal gifts and leadings is a relatively new procedure among Friends. Prior to this century, Friends had the office of "elder" whose role it was to help with the discernment of leadings to public ministry. In the nineteenth century elders tended take on the role of assuring conformity to external standards from how many horses one could hitch to one's buggy to the appropriate length of bonnet strings. "Clearance" committees for marriage were concerned with ascertaining that there were no legal or other obstructions to the marriage, not so much the spiritual or emotional right-ordering of the proposed marriage.

The current form of the clearness committee for discerning leadings and other questions of spiritual import evolved within Young Friends of North America during the 1960s and has gained increasing currency.² Concurrently, clearness committees for membership and marriage have taken on a deeper, more personal dimension. They now explore more fully the individual's sense of leading to commit to membership or marriage and the meeting's clarity in taking the applicant under its care.³

Creating an Atmosphere of Acceptance of Clearness Committees

When my meeting began talking about clearness processes several years ago, a member stated bluntly that she certainly wouldn't lay any important personal decisions before the meeting. For some, there is the legitimate fear that the meeting will want to take over and direct what members regard as their personal lives. Some may fear a lack of confidentiality if they were to share about deeply personal matters. For others, there may be a lack of understanding or trust as to how such a process could be useful.

The best way for a meeting to overcome such hesitations is to have a successful clearness process or two and have others hear how helpful they were. My

² Patricia Loring, *Spiritual Discernment*, p. 19.

³ See, Helene Pollock & Arlene Kelly, "Membership and the Clearness Process," *PCN*, Vol. I, No. 4, May 1994; and Jan Hoffman, "Clearness Committees for Marriage or Commitment," *PCN*, Vol. II, No. 4, May 1995.

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meeting's experience was that after a few successful clearness committees had taken place, many Friends came forward with requests for such support.

To jump-start interest in clearness for pastoral care, the meeting might have a forum to discuss some of the information in the books and pamphlets listed in the resources section of this issue of *PCN*. Or you may choose to have an article about clearness in the meeting's newsletter. A testimonial in the newsletter from a member who has experienced a clearness process in the meeting or elsewhere would be a good place to start.

When to Set Up a Clearness Committee

A clearness committee is most often set up at the request of an individual. However, the pastoral care committee could suggest a clearness process to someone who is wrestling with a decision. It can be a formal process established by the meeting or an informal one set up entirely by the person who is seeking help with discernment.

When an individual becomes aware of a need or desire for help in coming to clarity on a personal decision she or he may simply ask a few friends to listen and accompany the process of sorting through the factors in the decision. This can happen without

the meeting's ever officially knowing that it has taken place. In many instances such a clearness committee is sufficient for helping the person come to clarity.

The meeting as a body becomes involved when a member approaches the meeting for business seeking the meeting's formal involvement. It is helpful to approach the meeting when the individual wants or needs a broader perspective than can be provided by her/his personal contacts or when the outcome may require the support of the meeting.

The pastoral care committee may also take the initiative in suggesting a clearness process in response to concern about a member of the meeting. For example, the committee may be aware of a member who is overwhelmed by responsibilities and may suggest a clearness committee to help sort through what can be laid aside. A family dealing with the needs of an aging parent may welcome a clearness committee to look at how they can best respond. A clearness committee may be a helpful way for the meeting to be present to a young man considering whether to register for the draft at his eighteenth birthday.

Who Should Serve on a Clearness Committee?

The best persons to serve on a clearness committee are those with the ability to listen well, to feed back clearly without adding their own point of view, to assist in deeply seeking the guidance of the Spirit, and to hold the process in confidence. It is helpful if at least one member of the clearness committee has served previously on a clearness committee or has studied what has been written about clearness processes. Obviously, the more members of the committee who are gifted, experienced, and knowledgeable, the deeper and richer the process will be.

It is usually helpful to have one or two persons on the clearness committee who are well known to the person seeking clearness (sometimes called the "focus person" or "seeker") and who enjoy that person's trust and confidence. A good clearness committee asks hard questions, and it is useful to be reassured that one is in the presence of loving friends.

On the other hand, it is also important to have participants who are not close friends of the focus person and who may, therefore, be able to take a more objective point of view. It is very important

that none of the clearness committee members have a personal interest in the outcome that may color their objectivity in helping the focus person come to her or his own clarity.

Persons knowledgeable about the subject at hand can also be an asset. If the focus person is dealing with how to care for an aging parent, it would be helpful to have someone present who knows what the options may be. For a young man considering whether to register for the draft, it would help to have people present who understand the legal, practical, and spiritual consequences of non-registration.

The usual number of persons on a clearness committee is three to five. It is generally possible to combine all of the above criteria in those three to five persons. Not all of the members of the clearness committee have to be members of Overseers, though if it is a concern raised by the committee, it is helpful to have at least one member who can report back to the larger committee.

Readings on Clearness Committees

Basic guidance on conduct of clearness committees:

Clearness Committees and Their Use in Personal Discernment by Jan Hoffman. twelfth month press, 1996.*#
Spiritual Discernment: The Context and Goal of Clearness Committees, by Patricia Loring. Pendle Hill Pamphlet #305. 1992.*#

Additional Resources:

"Clearness Committees, Committees of Care, and Oversight Committees," Chapter X in *Organization and Procedure of Canadian Yearly Meeting (1990)**#
"Clearness and Committees on Clearness," in *Faith and Practice of Pacific Yearly Meeting*, 1985.*#
Friends Consultation on Discernment, Quaker Hill Conference Center. 1985.#
Listening Hearts: Discerning Call in Community, by Suzanne Farnham, et. al., Harrisburg: Morehouse Publishing, 1991.*#
"Meetings for Clearness" by Mary Lou Leavitt, Helen Steven, and Mary Synott, in *Meeting Needs: A Handbook for Quaker Groups and Meetings*. Quaker Home Service 1992.#
"Seeking Clarity Both Personally and Corporately" by Jan Hoffman in *Companions Along the Way*, Florence Ruth Kline, ed., Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, 2000.*#

*Available from the FGC Bookstore, 800-966-4556.

#Available from Philadelphia Yearly Meeting Library, 215-241-7220. Friends outside PYM can subscribe to the library.

Of Interest...

HOW ONE MEETING HAS USED PCN

To the Editor:

Overseers discussed the Pastoral Care Newsletter entitled "Ministry to Older People Experiencing Disabilities" (Sept. '99) at their October meeting. We brainstormed places that hand holds would be useful in helping to get up on the porch, and how the problem of hearing people speak during worship is experienced by more of our older members.

We referred these ideas to the Property Committee for their research and action. At their next meeting someone suggested that instead of investing in some expensive technology to improve being heard, we try moving the benches so fewer people would be in back of others. Copies of a diagram of proposed bench locations, well designed and actually using one more bench, were brought for everyone's consideration. The December Monthly Meeting approved this arrangement.

On December 31 when we arrived for our annual Meeting for Worship for Peace we found the benches had been moved. The choice of where to sit made us look afresh at what each person needed, and it was most pleasing to realize that we all liked the new arrangement. And, best of all, several Friends have reported that they can hear the vocal messages more easily than in the past.

From the Overseers of Valley Meeting
Wayne, PA

REMEMBER TO RENEW

This is the final issue of Volume 7 of PCN. Make sure to get your renewal in so that you can receive the September 2000 issue and all of the issues of Volume 8.

NEW NAME FOR PCN'S PARENT

Family Relations Committee of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting is now **Care and Counsel for Meetings and Members**. The new name more fully reflects the range of projects and services that come under the group's oversight: resources for meetings and members (consultations, workshops, booklets); Friends Counseling Service; the new Deepening and Strengthening Our Meetings as Faith Communities (see announcement below); Pastoral Care Newsletter. For more information phone Care and Counsel staff person, Steve Gulick, at 215-241-7068 or 1-800-2200-PYM extension 7068 or e-mail <steveg@pym.org>.

DEEPENING AND STRENGTHENING OUR MEETINGS AS FAITH COMMUNITIES

This new project offers meetings in Philadelphia Yearly Meeting assistance in reflecting on and deepening their spiritual and community life. Its goal is to help meetings become more grounded in Friends processes, more skilled in dealing with issues and concerns of community life, and better able to recognize and claim the gifts and wisdom of their members. This service will be available beginning in the fall of 2000. Information will be mailed to meetings in PYM during the summer. For information call Deborah Cooper or Arlene Kelly at 215-241-7018.

FRIENDS COUNSELING SERVICE

We want to remind meetings in Philadelphia Yearly Meeting of the Friends Counseling service. A complete list of counselors appeared in the January 2000 issue of PCN. For information or a referral, contact Deborah Cooper, Counseling Service Consultant, at (215)248-0489.

Effectively and faithfully assisting a member in achieving clearness is an exacting discipline. There are wonderful resources available giving step-by-step guidance for clearness committees; several of them are listed in the resource section of this issue of PCN. (see page 4). I strongly recommend that members of a clearness committee read from those resources before undertaking this service. Jan Hoffman's "Clearness Committees and Their Use in Personal Discernment" which is only four pages long and may be photocopied, can provide a basic grounding for all committee members. Even Friends who have previously served on a clearness committee can benefit from refreshing themselves on the depth and subtleties of an effective clearness process.

A Need for Openness

Great discipline is required when the individual already feels clear and seeks a clearness committee to gain support or endorsement for a proposed action. I have participated in clearness processes in which the individual, feeling clear in him or her self, resists entering openly into a process of discernment. Some committee members may be reluctant to raise any serious questions about whether the meeting should accede to what the focus person is requesting. I have seen conflict arise among committee members about how thoroughgoing a clearness process is required, as though they felt they had to choose sides. When action of the meeting is requested, it is often helpful for the members of the clearness committee to meet

first without the focus person to arrive at a common sense of their purpose and their responsibility to the meeting.

Clearness committees can also be hindered by committee members who come with a preconceived idea of what the outcome should be and mistake the clearness committee for an occasion to express their opinion or to guide the individual in a particular direction.

A clearness process works when all participants are willing to question assumptions and open themselves to new light. John Woolman waited three years for Mt. Holly Meeting to support his travel among slaveholding Friends. This kind of deep seeking, when carried out with faith and trust in the guidance of the Spirit, has the potential of leading to deeper clarity and understanding both on the part of the meeting and on the part of the person seeking the meeting's support.

What Clearness Committees Are Not

Clearness committees are not a substitute for professional counseling. Great caution is needed when an individual, couple, or family is in distress. Pacific Yearly Meeting's *Faith and Practice* advises that overseers have preliminary talks with the seeker on the nature of the problem. If the committee believes that professional counseling is called for they are to advise the seeker accordingly rather than to institute a clearness process. If a clearness process is instituted its focus should be on where and how to seek professional assistance.⁴

Clearness committees are not the same as "support committees" or "oversight committees." Clearness committees are a short-term process for seeking clarity on a question. If the clearness process indicates a need for an ongoing support committee this can be recommended to the meeting and a support committee appointed. A support committee may assist an individual in carrying out a project or may be a liaison for the meeting when a person needs ongoing care. An oversight committee may be appointed when an individual is carrying out an

⁴ See *PCN*, Vol. V, #1, "Helping Friends Seek Professional Help."

action with the meeting's endorsement. The oversight committee's charge is to help the individual stay true to their Guide as they carry forward. Canadian Yearly Meeting's *Organization and Procedure* illuminates the distinction among the functions of clearness, support, and oversight committees.

Summary

Clearness committees can be powerful tools of pastoral care of members who are facing important decisions in their lives. But these powerful outcomes are not automatic. They require trust and a sense of expectancy on the part of the seeker; and they require faithfulness and discipline on the part of the committee. That faithfulness and discipline includes educating oneself through study of the literature on clearness, remaining focused on the purpose for which the clearness committee is called together, and opening in trust to the guidance of the Spirit.

At its richest, the clearness process is a meeting for worship, deeply gathered in openness to new light and surprising outcomes.

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Patricia McBee has served as an overseer and as clerk of Central Philadelphia Meeting where she has been a member since 1971. She is the editor of Pastoral Care Newsletter.

Questions for Reflection

1. In what recent pastoral care matters in our meeting might we have beneficially used a clearness process? How can we be attentive to possibilities in the future?
2. Are Friends in our meeting well acquainted with the clearness process and receptive to its use? What can we do to help the meeting become better acquainted with this form of service to one another?
3. How can we help one another to more fully develop the knowledge, skills, and spiritual discipline required to carry out an effective clearness process?

Pastoral Care Newsletter is published quarterly by the Family Relations Concerns Group of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting. Annette Bennert, clerk. Patricia McBee, editor. We are located at 1515 Cherry St., Philadelphia, PA 19102. Comments are welcome. **Please do not duplicate without permission.** To obtain additional copies or to subscribe, contact Steve Gulick, at 215-241-7068 or steveg@pym.org.