

Clearness

Quaker faith & practice 12.24

By focusing on a particular issue, a meeting for clearness enables everyone present to become 'clear' about possible options and ways forward. Such a meeting may be a matter of private arrangement but if a local meeting is to be involved, elders or overseers will normally be consulted. The suggestion for a meeting may come from them or from those seeking clearness...



Clearness

What a meeting for clearness is for

“Are all minds clear?” is a question asked by clerks of meetings in many parts of the world. It is a term which goes back to George Fox, who wrote in his journal (1657) “I cleared myself of what services the Lord had at that time laid upon me there”. A few years later, he wrote: “I cleared myself of Cornwall”. Clearness in this context obviously refers to the laying down of responsibilities. Clearness itself was defined by Canadian Yearly Meeting (1990) as “a deep inner certainty based on spiritual discernment” (see endnote 1, inside back cover).

A meeting for clearness has long been used by those considering marriage. The origin of these meetings was to ensure that the persons contemplating marriage were clear of any encumbrance. It is also used for sounding out requests for membership (see *Quaker faith & practice* 16.19–16.21).

In recent years, it has developed a wider application which came through Young Friends of North America, who developed clearness committees for discerning leadings and other questions of spiritual significance in an individual’s life.

Quaker faith & practice 12.22–12.25 gives an introduction and an indication of the variety of purposes for which a meeting for clearness might be appropriate. It may be helpful to an individual who wants to lay down a past matter, to explore new leadings, or to examine some uncertainties.

Though another person might suggest it, a request for a meeting for clearness is usually initiated by the person seeking the way forward in some aspect of their life. This is the focus person.

The purpose of the meeting is above all to listen to the focus person and by listening to enable the person to discern the way forward. It is not to give advice or solve a problem or provide therapy, nor is it a support group. Though some of the tools (such as open-ended questions) may also be used in conflict resolution, a clearness group cannot arbitrate or mediate in a conflict between two people or groups, neither can a clearness meeting be imposed on someone. The clearness process is not appropriate for every choice that has to be made, and the temptation to lay decision making on the meeting must be resisted.

Quaker faith & practice stresses the need for listening with undivided attention and for “tact, affirmation and love”. Those appointed to take part are there to help the focus person to express and understand feelings and to encourage and empower the person to make their own decisions.

Convening a meeting

It will probably be a Friend responsible for eldership or oversight who will convene a group of five to six chosen in consultation with the focus person. A variety of personalities, possibly with particular experience or expertise, may be helpful, but the essential quality of every participant is a gift for discernment and the capability “of restraining the very human impulse to give advice” (see endnote 2). As is stressed by Jan Hoffman, “the answers sought are within the person seeking clearness, though they may not be revealed until some time after the meeting” (see endnote 3). If a member of the group has particularly strong feelings about the situation of the focus person, it is better if she or he declares these feelings at the outset: “If this open stating of bias is not done, then it will creep in, be picked up, and tension could well develop, making the process of clearness much harder” (see endnote 4).

Preparation by the focus person

It can be helpful to put in writing what the issues are. This can act as an aide-memoire during the meeting. If there is a lot of detail, it may be helpful if the participants have a copy in advance of the meeting.

Procedure

Those taking part are invited to meet in a suitable place. This will be private, quiet and with comfortable seating. The meeting may need about two hours, and there should be time afterwards for some relaxation with the person. When inviting participants, the convener explains the nature of the meeting and how it is conducted and its confidential nature; all of the participants should understand and accept this.

At the meeting, the convener will introduce people and explain again the purpose and process and confirm the ground rules. Trust is based on the understanding of openness and confidentiality. Throughout the meeting, the convener’s main responsibility is to look after the focus person by ensuring there is an atmosphere of caring and trust. A note-taker may be appointed to make some notes to be given to the focus person at the end of the meeting. But this may be considered unnecessary – what is forgotten is not required for right discernment.

The meeting begins with silence in which mind and heart are prepared to be truly sensitive in drawing out the inner spiritual wisdom of the focus person. Each person holds the undertaking in the Light. The focus person is invited to speak out of this silence when she or he is ready. The entire meeting is

conducted in a reverent spirit of prayerful listening, listening with complete attentiveness. Many meetings for clearness include plenty of silence: “There is silence for reflection, for recollection, the comfortable silence that flows gracefully round questions and answers – when we give ourselves to hearing them and considering them before responding” (see endnote 5).

Listening and responding

A questions-only rule can be a useful discipline for the participants. There should be no advice: phrases such as “from my experience...”, “why don’t you...?” or “have you tried...?” should be avoided.

Questions should come not out of curiosity but to bring clarity for the focus person. Questions can be probing and challenging, but they must be gentle, caring, open, unloaded and put as simply and briefly as possible. Questions may be about matters of fact (“Can you tell us more about...?”) or feeling (“How do you feel about...?”). Questions about feelings have to be treated with particular sensitivity.

The focus person will try to respond to each question, but may be unable or unwilling to give a spoken answer to a particular question if it is too painful or private, or if the answer is not yet known. He or she may, however, find it worth making a note of these questions for thinking over later. Privacy should be respected.

As well as questioning, it is helpful to try to summarise and express the group’s understanding of the focus person’s feelings, using phrases like:

- It sounds/looks to me as if...
- So what you’re saying is...
- I get the feeling that...

Empathy with the focus person is crucial to the point where ideally a participant could help express something for the focus person if she or he were suddenly lost for words.

Closure

After a time, perhaps half an hour before the end, it can be helpful to allow the focus person and the participants to say something of what they have experienced and how they have been enriched by the meeting for clearness.

A meeting for clearness normally ends with a period of silence, “when the most important thing of all may be happening” (see endnote 6).

Sometimes further sessions may be called for, but most meetings for clearness are single meetings. Much depends on the needs of the focus person. Individual participants are serving merely as “a channel of the light” (see endnote 7), and yet the prayerful listening they provide to support the focus person “may be almost the greatest service that any human being ever performs for another” (see endnote 8).

Resources

A full, annotated list of publications on clearness and discernment, to borrow, buy or download can be found on the website of Britain Yearly Meeting: go to <http://www.quaker.org.uk/resources-eldership-and-oversight>.

Also on our website, you can browse the catalogues of the Quaker Centre Bookshop (tel. 020 7663 1030/1031), which sells by post and to visitors, and also contains the Quaker Centre Resources Room (tel. 020 7663 1030).

You can contact the Support for Meetings Officer in Quaker Life by telephone on 020 7663 1023 or by email on michaelsb@quaker.org.uk.

Our address is:

Friends House, 173 Euston Road, London NW1 2BJ

Courses on ‘Practising Discernment’ (or similar titles) are offered by:

Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre, 1046 Bristol Road, Birmingham B29 6LJ

www.woodbrooke.org.uk

Email: enquiries@woodbrooke.org.uk

Telephone: 0121 472 5171

Fax: 0121 472 5173

A sample agenda of a clearness meeting for an individual

(all timings are very rough guidelines – 1 hour 45 minutes) (see endnote 9)

Introductions (5 mins)

It is sometimes helpful for the group to know each person's connection to the focus person, especially if not all are Friends.

Facilitator's introduction (10 mins)

A reminder of the purpose and guidelines for the session. This may need to be set in a Quaker context if any members of the group are not Friends.

Opening worship (10 mins)

Statement of bias (5 mins)

This can be dispensed with, but for most people it is easier to set aside biases once they have been admitted, and reminds us that it is all right to have mixed feelings.

Focus person's introduction (10 mins)

This can be as long and as detailed as the person feels is necessary. Written notes may have been circulated by the focus person beforehand.

Clarifying questions (10 mins)

This is a chance to make sure that everyone has understood the details and the focus; at this point these are not major questions.

Period of quiet, out of which come questions that occur to the group (20 mins)

The questions should be written down by the note-taker, with details of any answer that the focus person might give. The focus person can choose not to answer any question there and then, but may prefer to think about it later.

Period of discussion (20 mins)

This should happen naturally as the questions move into a more relaxed form of discussion. The facilitator should watch for the right time for this to happen, and ensure that the discipline of seeking clearness does not slip into conversation or advice-giving.

Period of quiet (5 mins)

Out of this time the focus person may choose to say where he or she feels the clearness has led them, or the time may not be right. There should be no pressure to make a decision.

Next steps (5 mins)

A reminder of any steps to be taken by the focus person or members of the group. Is the group to meet again?

Closing worship (5 mins)

Endnotes

1. 'Clearness Committees, Committees of Care, and Committees of Oversight' from *Organization and procedure*, Canadian Yearly Meeting, 1990
<http://www.fgcquaker.org/library/fosteringmeetings/fosvi2.pdf>
2. *Spiritual discernment: The context and goal of clearness committees*, by Patricia Loring (Pendle Hill Pamphlet 305)
3. 'Clearness Committees and their use in Personal Discernment', by Jan Hoffman (New England Yearly Meeting), can be downloaded from:
<http://www.fgcquaker.org/library/fosteringmeetings/fosvi2.pdf>
4. *Meetings for clearness*, Witney Monthly Meeting Overseers
5. Patricia Loring, *Spiritual discernment*, see note 2
6. Jan Hoffman, 'Clearness Committees', see note 3
7. See note 3
8. Douglas Steere, *On listening to another, Part III: Gleanings* (Nashville: The Upper Room) 1986, p. 83
9. Marion McNaughton

About clearness

“When decisions have to be made, are you ready to join with others in seeking clearness, asking for God’s guidance and offering counsel to one another?”

This Quaker advice implies that, in turn, fellow worshippers should be prepared to help a Friend in the search for clearness. Quakers in Britain are rediscovering how useful meetings for clearness can be to the focus person. Experience shows there is a joy in offering such a service to a fellow worshipper: the work is a privilege, seldom a burden.

This leaflet describes what such a meeting might be like and offers simple guidelines to someone wanting, and those offering, a meeting for clearness. Those responsible for oversight or eldership are likely to be asked to help, but everyone in a meeting committed to Quaker ways will find this guidance useful.

This is one of a series of leaflets and books offering information, support and guidance to all those responsible for eldership and oversight – for spiritual and pastoral care – based on the experience and insights of Quakers in Britain. It has been compiled in the light of Friends’ comments, and includes a list of publications and other resources.

This leaflet was originally produced by the Committee on Eldership and Oversight, Quaker Life, May 2006. You can make as many copies as needed for your meeting: just download the leaflet from <http://www.quaker.org.uk/resources-eldership-and-oversight>. Alternatively, the Support for Meetings Officer in Quaker Life can supply paper copies, or copies in other formats – contact details can be found under ‘Resources’ inside this leaflet.

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please contact the publications team on 020 7663 1162,
or email publications@quaker.org.uk

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