

An excerpt from: Sacred Compass The Way of Spiritual Discernment

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Clearness Committees

Besides personal discernment, Quakers have another method of helping people follow their sacred compass. We form a group and call it a clearness committee. Clearness committees have assisted seeking Friends in finding clearness in everything from confirming marriage partners to making career choices. These committees can be used to make any decision that calls for spiritual discernment.

Listening to Christ

The concept behind a clearness committee is simple: it is a gathering of a group of spiritual friends with the holy aspiration to help a person reach a sense of sacred clearness. The committee's work has some similarity to one-on-one spiritual friendship, in that it is nondirective and attentive. Clearness committees operate with the belief that Christ is our guide, so *we* don't need to offer advice. Christ does the advising.

The committee's function is to create a space where Christ's voice can be heard. The clearness committee listens with open hearts and minds and affirms the person's desire for clearness, facilitating the drawing out of the person's Inner Teacher. Such "space-making" and listening affirms that we are all Spirit led, but that there are times when we need the assistance of others to clarifying our leadings.

Discernment groups have a long ecumenical history of carrying out vital spiritual work. As St. John of the Cross writes:

Thus God announces that he does not want the soul to believe only by itself the communications it thinks are of divine origin, or for anyone to be assured or confirmed in them without the Church or her ministers. God will not bring clarification and confirmation of the truth to the heart of one who is alone. Such a person would remain weak and cold in regard to truth.

Listening to the Gathered Friends

In addition to encouraging a seeking friend to listen to Christ the Inner Teacher, a clearness committee also encourages the seeker to listen to his or her spiritual friends, not as advice givers, but as Christ pointers. The clearness committee is a sort of Christ the Outer Teacher. This is equally true if the committee's words confirm Christ's or if their questions point out things that had not been considered.

As a friend of mine noted, this last part—a person's willingness to heed the wisdom of others—is crucial to successfully following a leading. She told me of a time when someone requested a clearness committee regarding whether to continue in a responsible position. My friend said the committee couldn't do its work because this person came to the gathering with his mind made up. He would not hear what his spiritual friends were asking, and so he missed the wisdom coming from God through his friends. However, when the person is open to the voice of God through others, the Holy Spirit works to bring unity.

Bathed in Prayer

A clearness committee works best when it submerges itself in prayer, because prayer opens us to God. Prayer leads us into a dialogue of Spirit to spirit. Being in an attitude of prayer gives us a clear channel to God and opens the group's collective spiritual ears to God's voice. As we hear God's voice, we jointly discern the way forward—or see that a stop sign has been placed in our path.

Prayer helps the committee sense God present in their process. Prayer keeps us from merely going through the motions of being a clearness committee, as though there was magic in the process. Prayer leads us to a place as a group of spiritual friends where God's presence with us is felt.

The Joy of the Lord

Just because a clearness committee's attitude needs to be one of prayer, doesn't mean that it is devoid of playfulness. Don't undertake group discernment in grim earnestness. Leadings are ultimately life giving; they lead to the face of a loving God. Joy fills such an encounter. Therefore, joy must be present in any process that leads us to God. We find soul satisfaction in following a will beyond our own. The sacred compass takes us to a place beyond our imagining—into the company of God. Times of joy and laughter are part of such work.

Be Still

Begin and end the committee's time together with being quiet before God. Center your thoughts on God and let go of the myriad thoughts and concerns racing through your head. That letting go is important if you want to be open to the divine word. Too many of your own words and thoughts buzzing around make it easy to miss which way the sacred compass is pointing. Aim for communal stillness and openness to God's word to and through the group. And remember, the goal as a group is to guide—not lead. Let God lead.

Hi, My Name Is...

Next, take a brief time to get to know one another. The more we know one another, the better we understand each other and the various viewpoints that will arise while we do this spiritual work together. That understanding helps us ask deeper clarifying questions and identify themes that bring us together. Personal friendship teaches us to trust the others we're seeking with and think the best of them instead of wondering how they ever came up with such a silly

thought. Invite those gathered to share their spiritual stories. One exercise I've used is to ask participants to finish the sentence, "The earliest spiritual experience I can remember is . . ." A question like that helps us get to know each other in an important way—and reminds us why we are gathered—for important soulful work.

Be Quiet

Silence is essential to a clearness committee's success. Silence is especially crucial as people begin speaking to or about the leading. Be slow to respond or answer. An unrushed silence gives words time to season. Silence gives the words the room to settle in to the mind and spirit, so both the mind and spirit will hear them.

Silence also gives the group time to ponder, so keep the following in mind:

- Take a breath.
- Put the thought away.
- Settle your body.
- Calm your mind.
- If a thought persists, give it time to percolate and become full-bodied before sharing.
- Don't just do something—sit there!

Silence lets you listen to God, sift your thoughts, decide whether to speak or not, and pray. And pray. And pray.

Speak Truth and Love

If we pay careful attention, a time to speak will come. Again, focus on asking questions, not making statements. Ask your questions in a tone of love. They can be challenging, but only so much as is needed to help the person fully test his or her leading. You're not asking questions in an attempt to quench the person's leading. You're asking them to open the person up to the Spirit.

Good questions are sensitive, seeking, and practical, such as:

- Do you need any special training to be prepared to follow this leading?
- How will you cover your expenses on this trip?

You should also ask questions that engage the person's imagination and spirit, such as:

- Why do you think God has called you to this work?
- How do you see this changing your spiritual life?
- Where will following this leading take you?

Take time for silence after asking each question. It's important to give the person a chance to think and weigh responses before speaking. Whatever you do, don't ask questions that have an implied "right" answer. It's fine, though, to hold people accountable for honesty with themselves, their situation, and God.

Listen Deeply

Listen well and carefully. Dare to ask if the voice being heard is the voice of God or the voice of ego. This brings discernment back to the most important question—*to whom am I listening?*

With that question in mind and soul, listen for:

- dissonance or divergence
- separation between what's being said and what's being sensed

- thoughts and feelings that seem to be moving toward each other
- recurring words and phrases, and what that recurrence reveals
- clues to discernment
- the tone behind the words
- joy, nervousness, excitement, or despair

Also listen for:

- places of unity
- the sense of the committee
- agreement
- disharmony
- confirmation of the leading
- deeper questioning

We must look, too, for how the fruits of the spirit—love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, and temperance—are apparent in the words we’re hearing from the group and the person examining the leading. If they are present, it is a good sign that the leading comes from God. If they are not . . .

Concluding

Eventually, the time comes when the work is winding down. Before you close your time together, make sure everyone is ready to do so. Remember that the group members were asked to participate because of their spiritual wisdom. If someone says he or she is not ready to close, trust his or her spiritual leading. Time is of the essence—but that essence has to be of spiritual deliberation, not haste. It has to be God’s time, not ours.

Ignore any internal human insistence to move things along. That kind of time keeping can stop the group’s spiritual sensitivity by calling attention to something external, rather than letting them focus on the eternal internal. Worry about time can keep the group from arriving at a deep place of spiritual wisdom.