

Meeting 16 —Introduction of Clearness Committees (Up to 90 minutes)



**women
thriving
in ministry**

AN INITIATIVE OF ASBURY THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

The Gathering Time—30 minutes

- As people join the meeting, welcome them and create a place of hospitality. When all have arrived, open your time in prayer.
- Revisit the covenant—how have you lived into your covenant this last year and a half? What recommitments do you want to make together?
- As a means of reconnecting in the new year, being with some extra time for “fellowship.” Chat freely, or consider the following questions:
 - What’s new and good since we were together last?
 - What is a high, a low, or an “a-ha” (something you’ve learned) in the last month (or share all three)?
 - What’s the best gift you gave or received for Christmas?

Conversation Starter—5 minutes

- Would you rather: ask someone for advice and HAVE to do what they say **or** make a decision on your own and do whatever you think is best?

Sharing Together—25 minutes

NO HOMEWORK this time! Woohoo!

Our shared time together today will be focused on introducing what we’re going to do for the next 5 months (February-June). We will be turning our attention to a way of discerning that honors both one’s internal voice and the voice of the community, the Quaker’s tradition of the Clearness Committee. It’s an opportunity for each group member to bring a “problem” to discern together (though it could be used to celebrate joyful occasions or transitions). During this session, the mentor will share the instructions on the screen and ask the group to read them together. Following the introduction of the Clearness Committee, facilitate a discussion afterward starting with questions listed below:

The Clearness Committee

This is written for Asbury Theological Seminary's Women Thriving in Ministry Program by Ashlee Alley Crawford

There is a Quaker tradition that dates to the 1660's for sharing a concern—or even a joy—with a group of trusted friends as a practice of discernment to hear the voice of Truth within one's context. Parker Palmer frequently teaches about the practice of a “Clearness Committee” and identifies this central conviction: *each of us has an inner teacher, a voice of truth, that offers the guidance and power we need to deal with our problems*¹. To be clear, the “inner teacher” and “voice of truth” is the Holy Spirit. All guidance below will be given with a humble prayer that the Holy Spirit gives wisdom and direction to all questions, responses, and actions. It is a vulnerable thing for someone to bring his or her joy or concern to others, even trusted friends. But, the Clearness Committee recognizes that their job is not to “fix” a person or even offer suggestions; rather, it is to listen—first to the Holy Spirit—and second to what the focus person is actually saying, so that she might be able to more clearly hear both her own voice and the voice of the Holy Spirit.

The Clearness Conversation

There are some “rules” that provide structure for the conversation. First and foremost, it needs to be a confidential conversation, even one that isn't brought up by group members to one another or to the focus person. If the focus person wants to bring it up, she may. Below are expectations for the group to consider:

- 1.) Someone will act as the facilitator and guide the conversation, keep track of time, and interject if someone begins to “fix” within the conversation. A simple reminder that our job is to listen and ask questions without offering solutions is all that is usually needed. This will be the mentor's role in our groups.
- 2.) Someone agrees in advance to be the “focus person” who is willing to share a problem that she wishes to bring before the group. As preparation, she should prepare a statement that articulates the following three things:
 - A concise statement of her problem, even if it is not clear—this process can work as well with murky issues as with clear ones
 - A recounting of relevant background factors that may bear on the problem
 - An exploration of any hunches the focus person may have about what's on the horizon regarding the problem

This should be no more than 1 page, single spaced and will be read when the conversation begins.

- 3.) Here's the “agenda” for the Clearness Committee conversation:

¹ Palmer has a 5 page description in detail about the origin and practice of a Clearness Committee: <https://couragerenewal.org/library/the-clearness-committee-a-communal-approach-to-discernment/> . Much of this guideline is based on instruction found in this document.

- The facilitator opens the conversation with a prayer asking the Holy Spirit to lead and guide the conversation.
- The following expectations should guide the conversation:
 - The focus person will begin by reading the one-page summary of the “problem” that she is bringing before the group. Everyone’s job here is to listen—to the focus person and to the Holy Spirit. The listeners may decide to take notes to track the conversation better. Do your best to write exactly the words you hear the focus person saying, or jot down questions that come to mind. Resist interpreting what they’re saying and instead, offer questions or honest observations that may help the focus person remove a “block” from how she is viewing their situation.
 - Don’t offer advice, your experiences, or your knowledge. The intent is open and honest dialogue. Be aware of your own tendency to phrase your advice as a question. “Did you blame such and such?” Is NOT an open and honest question. “What did you mean when you said you were frustrated?” IS an open and honest question.
 - To the focus person: resist the need to tell the whole backstory about something and do your very best to keep your responses focused. In order to go deeper within the problem, you’ll need to hear questions from diverse perspectives.
 - The Clearness Committee is not a deposition or cross-examination. Rather, it is a kind and gentle invitation for revealing a hidden truth about a circumstance, giving space for the Holy Spirit to do the revealing. Don’t be afraid of silence and don’t fill the silence with a question that doesn’t contribute to this purpose.
 - The entire agenda is to provide space for the focus person to bring a concern in front of God and the group entrusted with this conversation; thus, every effort must be made to give full attention to the focus person. Plan for your Zoom meeting to give you private space, resist the urge for chit-chat, don’t make that hilarious joke, and don’t use the Chat for commentary. The Committee’s job is to “hold space” as counselors say, and be present in a loving and kind, but not even overly reassuring space. Be present with your care and attention, don’t try to coerce or manipulate someone to share unless they feel compelled to share.
 - Prior to the time of closing—which will be done by offering a word of encouragement and celebration of the focus person’s gifts—you will spend about 10 minutes with an experience of “mirroring.” This is when group members offer observations including specific words that the focus person said. If group members are taking notes with exact words shared, members can read back over and see which of the focus person’s own words seems to have resonance. The intention behind this is to give the

focus person an opportunity to reflect *without commentary from the listeners* about what she may have said that sheds light on her problem.

- The **meeting agenda** is as follows:
 - Opening and Intros (no more than 10 minutes)
 - Opening Prayer
 - Facilitator refreshes the rules (above)
 - Focus Person reads (or speaks from) her prepared statement
 - The conversation (25 minutes)
 - The Facilitator starts a conversation with the first question (perhaps something like: what aspect of what you've shared is most pressing on your mind or heart right now?)
 - The group will discuss with open and honest, non-leading questions.
 - The Reflection (10 minutes)
 - The Facilitator asks the Focus Person if she is ready to suspend the questions and begin the "mirroring." If not, continue questions. If so, move on to the process of reflecting her own language and body language to identify if what you observed resonates with her experience. She can respond, "Yes, that's me," "no, that's not me," or even just be silent.
 - The Closing (5 minutes)
 - The facilitator asks the group members to affirm and celebrate the gifts of the focus person.

Do not expect complete clarity about the circumstance or deep insight in the moment, and the Focus Person should not feel compelled to share any particular insights. This conversation is one that opens a door and provides deep listening, and the actual insight may come later.

Follow Up/Discussion Questions for group about how the Clearness Committee works?

- What stands out about this way of sharing a concern in the midst of a community?
- What do you find compelling about a Clearness Committee?
- What concerns you about a Clearness Committee?
- What kinds of things would you consider sharing with a Clearness Committee?
- How easy or hard is it for you to share openly with others?
- At the end of our meeting today we will be asking who would be willing to be the first "focus person" and prepare a one-page statement. Consider if you might want to go first.

Shared Reading: “The Winter of Listening” —20 minutes

Share the reading of “The Winter of Listening,” by David Whyte (Page 6) and invite members of your group to each read a section (OR ask someone to read the whole thing). Following the reading, ask the questions listed below:

Questions for Group Reflection:

- What stands out to you from the reading?
- How does this reading articulate where you are right now?
- What is the shout of joy waiting to be born in you?
- How does listening prepare you for new life?
- Read it a second time, just to linger a bit longer with some of the possibilities that could emerge from these words: Is there a word, a phrase, or an idea that you may want to “hold on to” in the season ahead?

Inviting Response—5 minutes

- Is there anything that you've not said yet that you'd like to say?
- Who would be willing to go first by presenting something to us as a Clearness Committee next month?
- Confirm next meeting time.

Closing Prayer—5 minutes

Remind them of the Group Commitments, one being prayer for one another. Are there any updates or new prayer concerns within this group? Share them now. Ask each person to pray for another person. (Agree upon those prior to praying.)

The Winter of Listening, by David Whyte

No one but me by the fire,
my hands burning
red in the palms while
the night wind carries
everything away outside.

All this petty worry
while the great cloak
of the sky grows dark
and intense
round every living thing.

What is precious
inside us does not
care to be known
by the mind
in ways that diminish
its presence.

What we strive for
in perfection
is not what turn us
into the lit angel we desire,

what disturbs
and then nourishes
has everything
we need.

What we hate
in ourselves
is what we cannot know
in ourselves but
what is true to the pattern
does not need
to be explained.

Inside everyone
is a great shout of joy
waiting to be born.

Even with the summer
so far off
I feel it grown in me
now and ready
to arrive in the world.

All those years
listening to those
who had
nothing to say.
All those years
forgetting
how everything
has its own voice

to make
itself heard.

All those years
Forgetting
how easily
you can belong
to everything
simply by listening.

And the slow
Difficulty
of remembering
how everything
is born from
an opposite
and miraculous
otherness.

Silence and winter
has led me to that
otherness.

So let this winter

of listening
be enough
for the new life
I must call my own.