

The Quaker Clearness Committee Model

(referenced in *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life*. Parker Palmer. Jossey-Bass, 1998)

This informal model may be used in conjunction with another discernment process or as a “stand alone” process in small congregations where most of the members know one another. It will need to be adapted to our Diocesan model with a greater emphasis placed on the community’s involvement in organizing members and nominating an individual as all listen for God’s call on their lives.

The purpose of a clearness committee is to “[invite] people to help each other with personal problems while practicing a discipline that protects the sanctity of the soul.” (Although Parker uses the term “problems,” this process can be effectively used in discerning vocation. Much of the Listening Hearts material is based on the clearness committee model.) It works like this.

The discerner brings an issue to a group of 4-5 people she/he has invited to be on the committee. In preparation for their meeting, she/he writes 1-2 pages about the issue, giving a clear statement of the issue, relevant background, and relevant foreground.

The group meets for 2-3 uninterrupted hours, and the discerner is the center of attention. Committee members are forbidden to speak to her/him except to ask open, honest questions. Some attention should be paid to what “open” and “honest” means. Asking the question, “Have you ever considered therapy?” is a leading question – not open and honest. Asking “Have you often felt this way?” is acceptable. The discerner usually answers each question, but has the right to pass. There is lots of silence, and nothing is hurried. Advice and oversimplification from committee members are not allowed.

About 15 minutes before the session ends, the discerner is asked if she/he would like to do some “mirroring”. If not, the group continues with questions. If so, committee members reflect, or mirror, what the discerner said or did, but might not be aware of. “When you talked about X, your voice dropped and you seemed tired, but when you spoke of Y, your energy rose and your eyes got bright.”

There are two levels of confidentiality in effect in a clearness committee. First, what’s said in the meeting stays there. Second, members may not approach the discerner with comments or suggestions, either during or after the meeting.

Of course the clearness committee can (and should) be infused with prayer – both corporate and individual. The group may want to select a convener to keep track of time and to facilitate times for prayer.

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Discernment Process Suggested in *Listening Hearts*

1. In preparation for the first meeting, the discerner writes a brief biographical sketch tracing the significant threads of experience and background that relate to the question, stating the issue or decision the person is facing and mentioning any information that may be relevant.
2. Convener of the team distributes copies of the biographical sketch to the other team members at least a few days before the meeting. Members will keep the discerner and the rest of the team in prayers before the team meets.
3. When the group assembles, if all do not know one another, they take some time to introduce themselves.
4. The convener opens the meeting with a specified period of silence to permit all to become receptive to God's presence.
5. The convener ends the silence by having the discerner say, in his/her own words, the issue or question of call.
6. The task of the members of the team is to listen prayerfully and raise questions that will help the discerner consider the issue.
7. If the issue being considered is unclear, the first questions need to deal with that. Next, questions to establish relevant background may be in order. Thereafter, the questions should become slower-paced and more reflective.
8. Questions should be concise and presented one at a time. Avoid giving background as to why you are asking a question or explaining the reason for the question. If you are unsure exactly how to phrase the question, it is better to wait silently to let the question develop and become more focused.
9. The background information supplied by the discerner is often fertile soil for questions.
10. Avoid questions such as; "What does God want you to do?" If the person knew the answer, the group would not be gathered for discernment.
11. Members must refrain from giving advice. Do not ask questions that suggest the answer or cloak advice in the guise of questions.
12. It is advisable for the discerner to keep the answers brief because more questions and more silence may provide further clarity.
13. While articulating answers to the questions is usually helpful, the discerner is never obligated to answer any question.

14. The work of God often takes place in the depth of quiet. Preferably, each person will be conscious of permitting a period of prayerful, silence between speakers.
15. Each member of the group needs to help maintain a pace that allows reflection. Any member may ask for a time of silence.
16. Each member of the group needs to help maintain a gentle atmosphere, guarding against any tendency to become confrontational.
17. An atmosphere of open listening needs to be maintained.
18. Each member of the group needs to help ensure that members do not press their own agendas or feelings on the discerner.
19. Each member of the group should ensure that others in the group have the opportunity to speak.
20. About thirty minutes before the meeting is scheduled to end, the convener offers the discerner the opportunity to ask questions of the group.
21. About ten minutes before the end of the meeting, the convener asks the group to determine whether or not another meeting is desirable. If anyone in the group is not comfortable with the direction the discerner seems to be moving, it is important for that person to suggest that the group convenes again.
22. The final five minutes are for free and open prayers which the convener introduces and concludes.
23. At any time during the meeting, a sense that the group has crossed a threshold may emerge. A member may suggest that a common understanding seems to exist. Should this occur, the convener may check this perception with the group, and if verified, begin to conclude the meeting.
24. A meeting or series of meetings can take place without resolution of the issue raised by the discerner. The consensus may be that the group has gone as far as it can for the time being. Should this occur, the desire to “wrap things up” neatly or to come to closure on a particular question should be resisted.
25. It is essential that what goes on in the meeting is absolutely confidential unless the discerner expressly chooses otherwise.
28. Everyone should come to meetings prepared to schedule a time for another meeting.
27. At the conclusion of the final session all discerners should return their copies of the biographical sketch to the discerner.