

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.

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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