

Committee on Conflict Transformation

of New York Yearly Meeting

Clearness Committees for Responding to Conflict

If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church

Matthew 18:15-17 (NRSV)

These words from Jesus help us to respond creatively to conflict. Individuals first meet to air and resolve conflicts; if the first meeting is unsuccessful, they may meet a small group of Friends, sometimes called a committee of clearness, to try again to settle the matter; if there is still no resolution, Friends can bring the issue before the entire meeting for business.

New York Yearly Meeting Faith and Practice (page 20),

A clearness committee provides an environment, centered in Divine worship, for the Friends in conflict to remain engaged with one another in mutual listening while in the presence of seasoned Friends. Without such an opportunity, the Friends could become more alienated from one another. This sustained engagement of disagreeing Friends can bring about a natural evolution from conflict and mistrust toward understanding and renewal of caring relationships.

The Role of The Meeting's Ministry and Counsel or Pastoral Care Committee In Responding to a Conflict in Meeting

Upon learning of a conflict within the monthly meeting, the committee on ministry and counsel or pastoral care:

- 1) Discerns if there is a need for a clearness committee.
- 2) Selects as clearness committee members seasoned Friends or attenders who are not directly engaged in the conflict, who are able to separate from judgments regarding the issues or the people involved, and who are able to maintain confidentiality about the concerns.
- 3) Asks those in the conflict to participate in a clearness process and approve of the clearness committee members.

The Clearness Committee:

- 1) Contacts each conflict participant and sets up a meeting that assures privacy.
- 2) Determines length of meeting (maximum of two hours).
- 3) Reassures conflict participants of committee members' impartiality and of the confidentiality of the clearness process.
- 4) Conducts clearness committee as a meeting for worship, seeking Divine guidance as the conflict participants are encouraged to speak of their concerns and their condition.
- 4) Reassures the conflict participants that the clearness committee will not be judging the participants, their actions or their positions,
- 5) Reminds the participants of the purpose of the process: Guided by a desire to restore peace, the committee convenes the meetings to afford participants the opportunity to be listened to both by the committee and by each other.
- 5) Meets independently, after the first session with the conflict participants, to determine whether another meeting or some other action is needed. (The committee may need to bring this as a recommendation to the ministry and counsel or pastoral care committee for further discernment.)

If no further action is to be taken, it might be, God willing, that the simple listening and hearing in a worshipful meeting has led to transformation of the conflict and healing of the spirit, both for the individuals involved and for the community.

Suggested Guidelines for the Clearness Committee

The clearness committee provides a setting for conflict participants to hear each other's concerns. To support this process, the committee starts by setting out guidelines.

- The meeting begins and ends with worshipful silence.
- The convenor states the purpose of the meeting: Offering participants the opportunity to be heard in a spirit of worship about a concern which they bring.
- Each conflict participant will have a certain amount of time to present her or his understanding of the difficulty without interruption or inquiry. During that time, the other participant or participants must agree to listen respectfully, attentively and without interruption.
- Participants are encouraged to make their presentations as blame free as possible.

"The listening we advocate requires a particular mode: the questions are non-adversarial. The listening is nonjudgmental. The listener seeks the truth of the person questioned, seeks to see through any masks of hostility and fear to the sacredness of the individual, and to discern the wounds at the heart of any violence. Listeners do not defend themselves, but accept whatever others say as their perception, and validate their right to it."

Gene Knudsen Hoffman
No Royal Road to Reconciliation

Pendle Hill Pamphlet #321

The conflict will not be judged by the committee. The meeting should help the participants reflect on what has happened, hear the other positions and concerns, and consider what action might be taken in the fact of the situation beyond an opportunity to be heard.

To repeat, it should not be the intention of a clearness committee to make decisions about the conflict situation, nor to judge the positions taken, but to listen and seek, with Divine guidance, how way may open toward reconciliation and transformation.

The committee is encouraged, therefore, to make inquiries, but not statements, about the conflict situation.

"...authentic, challenging, open, loving questions so that the focus person(s) can discover his or her own agenda without being burdened by the agendas of the committee members...it is crucial that the questions be asked not to satisfy the questioner's curiosity but to help the focus person(s) clarify his or her inner truth. Caring, rather than paternalism or curiosity, is the rule for questioners."

Parker Palmer
The Clearness Committee: a Way of Discernment

"Weavings" (July/August 1988, 37-40)

After each has presented her/his understanding of what has transpired, the committee will ask questions relevant to the matter of each participant in turn, while limiting responses to the positions taken by the conflict participants. Questions could be:

- Are you looking for a certain response from the other participant?
- What would you like to hear that would help your condition?
- Do you feel that the Meeting has done what it can to resolve the issues?
- What would you like the Meeting to do in this regard?
- Are there other thoughts about remedy for the problems?

Ask the participants in turn if they would like to respond to what has been said by the other, and if they feel that they agree with the other participant's proposals for what should occur.

It is helpful to allow a time of worshipful silence between participants' comments.

Parker Palmer suggests ending the "questions only rule" about a half hour before closure, and that members of the clearness committee then reflect back what they have heard from each participant, without injecting their own opinions.

(as related in Patricia Loring's "Spiritual Discernment :
the context and goal of Clearness Committees," Pendle Hill #305)

Then ask that the participants consider in the last period of silence what they might wish to say to the other about the situation that they think would be constructive. Here is often where the most loving statements are made.

End the meeting, letting them know that you will not be judging their participation, but will speak separately as a committee, and close with a period of silent worship. The committee may first determine with the participants if they wish to meet for another time. The committee in its separate meeting will then consider the need for more meetings or alternative approaches. After reporting their findings to the committee on ministry and counsel or pastoral care, they will then contact the conflict participants for either another meeting, or to inquire as to how they have felt and understood the sense of the meeting and the potential resolution of the conflict.

Throughout this process, and in considering any other steps to be taken, everyone involved should try to be mindful of the goal, which is to bring Light to the parties and the situation, and in that Light seek to attain true peace and reconciliation.

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.

Colossians 3:12-15