The Clearness Committee Process
Adapted from an article by Scott Pierce Coleman of Guilford College

The discernment process outlined below derives from three hundred years of Quaker faith and practice, although it is not used exclusively by Quakers in our day and age. In fact, no religious context is necessary to achieve amazing results in a clearness committee.

Why Would I Want to Call a Clearness Committee?
Many people resist thinking seriously about decisions they feel unprepared to make. Perhaps unknowns prevent the decision from being framed clearly. Perhaps poor past decisions make a person reluctant to commit one way or another now. Sometimes people feel they don't know themselves well enough to make a good decision. Some people simply don't like giving up their options until the last possible minute.

When used with care, a clearness committee results in a state of inner rest that Friends call "clarity." To be "clear" means to have reached a profoundly satisfying resolution to some difficult question. Three important qualities of well being always accompany clarity: 1) a deep sense of inner reassurance that the decision will not lead to regret; 2) a feeling of release from emotional burdens associated with the decision; and 3) an increased sense of strength to persevere through the challenges of carrying out a decision.

Obviously, people make major decisions all the time without relying on a clearness process, and good, clear decisions can certainly be reached without one. But difficult decisions can be seen from surprising and refreshing new angles when one gathers one's community together to face them. Corporate wisdom and insight often reveal dimensions of a decision not visible when contemplated in isolation.

How Do I Set Up a Clearness Committee, Once I've Decided to do One?
Before beginning, a few technical terms require explanation. The person seeking clarity is referred to as the "Focus Person." People who gather to help the focus person find clarity are called "Discerners." One of the discerners, known as the "Clerk," calls the group together, takes note of questions and observations during committee meetings and keeps time for the group.

A sound clearness process involves three major steps.

**Step One: Self-Reflection (Done by the Focus Person):** Frame the question on which you seek clearness as fully as you can. For some people, it can be useful to write a few paragraphs, tracing the threads of your life leading to your clearness question. For others, it may be sufficient to make some notes about relevant facts and background information so other members of the clearness committee have a context in which to help you consider your question. Once you have selected a clerk, it is helpful to discuss the question with him or her to further sharpen its focus.

**Step Two: Selecting Committee Members (Done by the Focus Person):** A clearness committee is usually composed of three to five discerners and the focus person. You may find it useful to call together a slightly larger group, but beyond a certain size, the group loses its sense of intimacy and focus. As you think about whom to invite, keep in mind several key characteristics to look for:
1. Personal knowledge of you
2. Wisdom and groundedness about life
3. A sense of trust between you
4. Openness to all possible outcomes of your discernment process
5. A capacity to listen deeply

It is very important NOT to invite discerners who have a personal bias about what course of action you should take. They will not be able to be fully present on your behalf. It is also important to invite people of diverse ages, backgrounds and relationships to you. This leads to deeper listening in almost all cases. Sometimes people who don’t know you well, but who are able to listen deeply may be more effective that close friends who know what you "should" do or whose fears keep them from being fully present to you.

Sometimes the most "obvious" people—the names coming to mind first—aren’t necessarily the ones who will be the most helpful. Some people make a list of all who come to mind as possibilities (allowing for some who don’t seem so obvious). They then make time to sit quietly with the list to see which names "rise to the top." Some people select a clerk first or speak to a staff person familiar with clearness committees and discuss options for other discerners with this person. Be open to names that keep coming to mind, but seem like a stretch.

Once you have settled on several discerners, you’ll need to ask one to be clerk. Having someone else keep track of time and take care of arrangements for the group to meet (finding a place, negotiating a time, etc.) may feel uncomfortable, or seem unnecessary. But the committee’s purpose is to gather on your behalf, and releasing you from having to manage these details is an important element of supporting you in your discernment.

**NOTE:** Please consider asking a veteran of clearness committees to clerk (SEE LIST AT BOTTOM). It might also be a good idea to give a copy of these guidelines to any of your discerners who have never participated in a clearness committee before.

**Step Three: Calling the Committee Together (Done by the Clerk):** Once one of your discerners agrees to be clerk, that person then takes responsibility for finding a mutually comfortable time and place for the committee members to meet with the focus person. If you’ve done some writing to provide your discerners with context for your question, then the clerk should distribute your notes to the other members of the group in advance of the meeting.

The clerk begins the meeting by reviewing the clearness process with the rest of the group:

1. An opening period of silence, in which discerners orient themselves to the well-being of the focus person and to listening inwardly for themselves, while the focus person seeks inner space to best articulate his/her question (approx. ten minutes)
2. The offering of the clearness question and its context (approx. five to ten minutes)
3. An opportunity for discerners to ask clarifying questions of a factual nature about the clearness question and its context (approx. five minutes)
4. A period of silent reflection in which the members of the committee consider what the focus person has said, including what they hear behind the focus person’s words (approx. five minutes)
5. Asking reflective questions, as discussed in detail below.
At this point, the committee moves into its main work, occupying the rest of the meeting time. In an atmosphere of silence conducive to inner listening, discerners offer questions to the focus person, which the clerk writes down. Commonly, a fair amount of time will pass between questions, allowing the focus person to consider each one with care. Allowing space between questions also gives discerners a chance to make potential connections between their own reflections and a particular question that's just been asked. It's amazing how often a single question in a clearness process can focus the entire group's discernment and open up an important area of consideration.

A clearness process assumes deep wisdom within the focus person and that the person has within them answers needing to be discerned or discovered. Thus, it is important for discerners to ask questions rather than make statements. The group is gathered to support the focus person make his or her own clear decision, not to persuade him or her to make a decision that feels clear to a particular discerner. When a discerner has a clear statement emerge within him or herself, silent waiting will almost always reveal a way in which the statement can be phrased as a question. Keep in mind that questions also should be designed not to lead the focus person to a particular conclusion, but to consider a new point of view. Discerners’ questions should be as open-ended as possible and should arise from the discerner's deep listening both to the focus person and other discerners as well as to one's own deepest wisdom.

The focus person is free to respond to any question asked, or not, as he or she feels comfortable. Responses from the focus person can help the discerners direct their own reflections more closely to the focus person's needs, but aren't always necessary. When the focus person does decide to respond, keeping those responses brief but informative is helpful. If the focus person begins to ramble, the clerk should gently call him or her back to the question just asked. Likewise, if a discerner goes off on a tangent, the clerk is responsible to call the group gently back to center.

**How Do I Know When Clearness Has Been Reached?**

While it is hard to describe exactly, a group generally feels a shift in energy as resolution settles within them. Questions fall away and a group will often become silent and more deeply quiet. There will be a sense of relief or release or peace, even if the "answer" is "it isn't time to know yet." It is the clerk's job to say something like, "I have a sense we've come to some clarity about this issue. Does it seem that way to you?" Sometimes a group has a sense of being done for the time being, whether or not clarity can be articulated. Sometimes a group has the sense the focus person has everything needed to make the decision and merely needs to sit with the options a little while longer, or will know when the time comes to make the decision. Whatever the "results," the focus person generally has a sense of being able to let go the worry of indecision and live more freely in whatever answer arises.

**How Might I Think of a Clearness Process as Explicitly Spiritual?**

For Quakers, a clearness process is nothing more or less than seeking God's guidance. An underlying assumption of the process is that we hear God better as a group than as individuals, as each of us listen within for the still, small voice of the Holy Spirit. As the group centers in the beginning and gets in touch with their care for the focus person, it is appropriate also to pray for the person as well as to ask God to clear away any blocks to discerning the guidance of the Spirit within individuals or the group. An intentional decision to make Christ the center of such gatherings anchors the process in the One who is the very source and substance of Truth itself (cf. John 14:6). As George Fox, the founder of the Friends movement has testified, "There is one, even Christ Jesus, who can speak to thy condition."