



Outward Witness of Our Beliefs Through Service

A Resource Package for Seasoning of Leadings and Concerns

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Introduction

Quakers have a long tradition of witnessing our belief in actions. These are often referred to as “leadings,” “concerns” or “acts of personal witness.” You may feel drawn to action by the heart or compelled by a strong spiritual sense to pursue a leading.

Considering and taking a stand may be very difficult or lonely. The Meeting community can be a resource at every stage of discerning and following a leading. Many members have been in this position before you and can help you test your concern, consider its implications, connect with others who share this concern, find resources (emotional, spiritual and financial), and much more.

Experience and tradition have shown that it is helpful to “test” or “season” your leading by sharing it with others, informally with F/friends and/or formally by forming a clearness committee or presenting it to a standing committee of the Meeting. **To initiate the discernment process for a concern or leading that might involve the Meeting community, the only step one needs to take is to bring it to the attention of a standing committee of the Meeting or ask the Clerk, care & counsel or others to assist in forming a clearness committee.** Testing one’s leading in this way will help discern whether and how to pursue the concern as well as to provide you with spiritual and emotional support. When truly led, people find that they are energized by the process and others come forward in support. Being asked to be on a clearness committee is enriching to all who participate. If appropriate, a clearness committee or standing committee can present a leading to the Business Meeting for discussion and support. Any concern which is connected to the Meeting should be brought before Business Meeting.

This packet has been compiled to help guide you through this discernment process. It is intended to suggest a process for sharing your concern with the Meeting community, but not to be so structured as to impede the moving of the Spirit among us, nor to deter you from pursuing personal witness outside of the Meeting. We hope that you find it helpful, and encourage you to access the wisdom of this community.

- How to Get Started – Process Guidelines
- Queries
- Clearness Committees
- Advices on Leadings and Concerns
- Current Examples of Service
- Worksheet for Projects

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Newtown Business Meeting Spiritual Leading / Project Process Guidelines

Pre-work (Idea Generation)

Purpose: To reflect on a leading or project concept and prepare to engage the Meeting in helping to move it forward

- Outline Leading / Project Concept
- Begin to define the scope of the leading or project
- Identify the benefits of the activities and meeting key objective
- Identify the resources required and estimate costs
- Review the leading or project against queries below
- Discuss informally with other Meeting members

Discernment

Purpose: To refine a proposal and gain insights from different perspectives

- Prepare a brief preliminary proposal, highlighting major activities, events, milestones and objectives
- Discuss with a Standing Committee (e.g., Worship & Ministry, Care & Counsel, Peace & Justice) or ask the Clerk to convene a Clearness Committee
- Revise proposal based on feedback and new ideas
- If possible, identify and gain support of a standing committee sponsor
- To ensure that you have sufficient spiritual, emotional and other support

Proposing Meeting Involvement

Purpose: To engage the Business Meeting in support of the leading or project

- Clearly describe the work to be accomplished and the resources required
 - Include significant events or milestones, standing committee sponsorship and required resources in terms of people hours and physical resources
- Refine cost estimate and discuss with Finance Committee
- Prepare a brief summary document and, through standing committee, ask to be on the agenda at Business Meeting
- Present proposal and share summary document
 - Answer questions and be available for further discussion
 - Expect to allow a month of seasoning before a decision on the nature of support by the Meeting

Pursuit of Leading or Project to Completion

Purpose: To involve the Meeting in sharing progress, challenges and lessons

- Upon approval by the Meeting, establish what oversight and reporting the Meeting wants to track costs and progress
- Make periodic reports to Business Meeting or key standing committee
- When project has proceeded to completion, formally review for lessons learned and report back to Business Meeting or key standing committee.

At this time, the Meeting rarely supports an individual project with meeting funds. However there are several other funding sources to investigate, and individual members are generous with their support.

Queries to be Considered while Seasoning a Concern or Leading

Have you “tested” your leading, considered it from different perspectives, discussed it with others in the Meeting community who have posed questions or offered criticism, and refined it?

In pursuing your leading, in what ways would you need help from other Meeting members? Are there personal risks involved in taking action on your leading, and have you determined that those are acceptable risks?

Is your leading a matter of personal commitment? How would you proceed if the Meeting did not respond as you might hope?

Are there important questions related to how your leading might be pursued that suggest the need to convene a clearness committee?

Which of Newtown Meeting’s standing committees do you feel is the most appropriate to work with you to test and refine your leading before presenting it to Business Meeting? Have you contacted them or asked the Clerk for guidance?

Would a traveling minute or minute of support from the Meeting be helpful?

Would pursuit of your leading possibly require use of Meeting property?

Will fund raising be necessary to initiate or sustain the pursuit of your initiative? Have you explored how you will fund it?

Will the associated activities be totally consistent with and reflect positively on Quakers and Newtown Friends Meeting?

Who will provide insurance so the Meeting and its members will be protected from incurring liability that might result from accidents, mistakes, etc.?

Does your vision for this initiative involve efforts that will last longer than several months? How will you continue to get the support you need (not just financial)? Will you be able to disengage when the time is right?

Clearness: Reaching clearness is a process used to discern God's will. The process may be an individual effort to find the right course of action through prayer, worship and consideration. It may also be a more formal process of working with other knowledgeable people, who assist the individual or group in discerning where God leads. Friends often work with Clearness Committees when struggling with a difficult issue, or in considering life events such as marriage or joining a Meeting.

Concern: A concern is a Spirit-led interest in an issue or situation that is of sufficient importance that it motivates an individual or Meeting to take action. A concern may be an immediate issue and when the concern is addressed or fades in importance, it is "laid down". It can also be a long-term concern, held by a Meeting or individual over years, or even a lifetime, such as care for the environment. If an individual or group is seeking to act on a concern it is usual to "test" the concern through a clearness process.

Continuing Revelation: Quakers believe that God continues to lead us through our whole lives, providing new wisdom and strength as we encounter new situations and concerns. Historical spiritual writings provide instruction and information, but the will of God is discerned in a constantly renewed relationship with the Spirit.

Discernment: Discernment refers to a quality of wisdom which one hopes to bring to the process of seeking clearness or making a decision. It is a result of being open to the leading of the Spirit. Patricia Loring describes it as "to distinguish the true movement of the Spirit to speak ... from the wholly human urge to share, to instruct or to straighten people out."

Leading: A leading is the action taken in response to finding clearness regarding a concern. It may take the form of taking a stand on a matter, taking an action by oneself or with others, or redirecting one's life, work or Ministry. Organizations, such as the American Friends Service Committee, Oxfam and Amnesty International, have been founded by Friends who took action in response to a concern.

Meeting: A Meeting is a congregation of Quakers; our word for synagogue, church or mosque. The local congregation is usually called a "Business Meeting", "as they consider community business business.

Ministry: Ministry has several meanings in Quaker life. The act of speaking during worship is called vocal ministry. Friends also use the term more broadly to mean living our testimonies in everyday life, or doing Spirit-led work to address an area of concern.

Quaker Process: Quakers come together to consider the business of our organizations or meetings before God. We explore the issues around a particular piece of business together and as we explore, we work to discern God's will for taking this work forward. Individuals seek to express their understanding of the right direction and other Friends respond with more or less clarity.

When a "sense" of the meeting - a shared understanding of God's will - is felt, the presiding Clerk, or another participant will share this sense with the rest of the meeting. A minute

will record what has been discerned. Those present can either approve the spoken sense of the meeting/minute or share concerns about particular areas - which may lead to changes in what was presented to the meeting. After those changes, the revised sense or minute is again presented for approval.

If there are significant disagreements with the presented sense of the meeting, the body may continue its exploration of the issues and concerns as long as consideration is useful. At a discerned place the meeting either reaches clarity to proceed despite the raised concerns because the concerns do not have sufficient weight to put a stop in the way forward, or reaches clarity that the concerns do have weight to stand in the way and begin working to seek another direction or may table the discussion of this business until more information is available or Friends are better able to carry the consideration forward. The work of arriving at the sense of the meeting requires participation by all present in worshipful consideration. Discerning the sense of the meeting is the responsibility of all present, not just the Clerk - though they will most often be the person who presents the sense to the meeting.

Right Sharing of Resources (Stewardship): We regard our time, talents, energy, money, material possessions and other resources as gifts from God, to be held in trust and shared according to the leading of the Spirit. This has many ramifications including our consideration of the natural environment, the use of solid management and financial practices, care of our staff and many other considerations. None of these resources are ranked above the others. We are expected to seek a balance in our use of resources.

Testimonies: Quaker testimonies are the traditional statements of Quaker belief of how we can live in the world in obedience to God. Testimonies are not formal static documents or statements, but rather a shared conviction of how Quakers relate to God and the world. Testimonies cannot be taken one at a time, as they are interrelated. There is not full agreement on how many testimonies there are, or the specific understandings of each one, but the generally understood testimonies are Equality, Peace, Integrity, Simplicity, Community and Stewardship.

“That of God”: Quakers believe that there is "that of God", an element of the Divine Spirit, also referred to as the Inner Light, in each of us that recognizes the presence and work of the Spirit in ourselves, others and the world around us. Our understanding of the presence of the Spirit in each individual is the basis for our Quaker testimonies, especially honoring the inherent worth of each person.

Clearness Committees and Their Use in Personal Discernment-Jan Hoffman

A clearness committee meets with a person who is unclear on how to proceed in a keenly felt concern or dilemma, hoping that it can help this person reach clarity. It assumes that each of us has an Inner Teacher who can guide us and therefore that the answers sought are within the person seeking clearness. It also assumes that a group of caring friends can serve as channels of divine guidance in drawing out that Inner Teacher. The purpose of committee members is not to give advice or to “fix” the situation; they are there to listen

without prejudice or judgment, to help clarify alternatives, to help communication if necessary, and to provide emotional support as an individual seeks to find “truth and the right course of action.” The committee must remember that people are capable of growth and change. They must not become absorbed with historical excuses or reasons for present problems, but rather focus on what is happening now and explore what could be done to resolve it.

The Clerk, Worship and Ministry, Care and Counsel or Peace & Justice may form a clearness committee. The focus person may also choose the committee, gathering five or six trusted friends with as much diversity among them as possible. In either case, formation should be under a discipline of worship, taking care that people are chosen not just because they are friends, but through some discernment process. Note that the process is always initiated by the person seeking clearness, though a friend may ask, “Would a clearness committee be helpful?” When the committee meets it should be for two or three hours with the understanding that there may be a second, and even third, meeting.

A clerk and recorder should be appointed. The *clerk* opens the meeting, closes it, and keeps a sense of right order in between, making sure that agreed-on guidelines are followed, and that everyone who wishes to speak may do so. (While these tasks are assigned to the clerk, anyone may intervene to ensure that the guidelines are followed.) The clerk also sees to physical details which will nurture an atmosphere of seeking silence: seeing that everyone has a comfortable chair, turning off any telephones, and making sure the space is enclosed and a ‘do not disturb’ sign is up if interruptions are likely. The *recorder* writes down the questions asked and perhaps some of the responses, and gives this record to the focus person after the meeting.

In advance of the meeting, the focus person should write up the matter on which clearness is sought and make it available to committee members. This should be identified as precisely as possible: relevant background factors should be mentioned; and clues, if any, about what lies ahead should be offered. The exercise is valuable not only for the committee members, but especially for the focus person.

A meeting begins with the clerk inviting the committee to prepare for its work, reminding everyone of the guidelines to be followed and making sure there is a common understanding of the degree of confidentiality about the meeting. After this, all settle into a period of centering silence. When the focus person is ready s/he begins with a brief summary of the question or concern. The discipline for committee members is very simple but difficult to follow: members may not speak in any way except to ask the focus person a question, an honest question. That means no presenting solutions, no advice, no “Why don’t you...?”, no “My uncle had the same problem and he...”, no “I know a good book/diet/therapist that would help you a lot.” Nothing is allowed except honest, probing, caring, challenging, open, unloaded questions! And it is crucial that these questions be asked not for the sake of the questioner’s curiosity but for the sake of the focus person’s clarity. Caring, not curiosity, is the rule for questioners. Remember that your task is to serve as a channel for the Light to help the focus person clarify his or her inner truth; neither you nor the committee deals directly with the problem or makes the decision.

Committee members should try to ask questions briefly and to the point rather than larding them with a lot of background and qualifications. Not only does this help guard against turning questions into speeches, but it may also help open the focus person to some insight that gets obscured when the questions wander. Committee members should also trust their intuitions. Even if a question seems off the wall, if it feels insistent, ask it.

The focus person normally answers the questions in front of the group – and the response generates more questions. But it is *always* the focus person's absolute right *not* to answer – either because s/he does not know the answer, or because the answer is too personal or painful to be revealed in the group. The more often a focus person can answer aloud, the more s/he and the committee has to go on. But this should never be done at the expense of the focus person's privacy or need to protect vulnerable feelings. When the focus person does answer, it is good to keep this response relatively brief so time remains for more questions and responses. Some questions seem to require one's whole life story in response; resist the temptation to tell it!

Do not be afraid of silence in the group. In fact, value it, treasure it. The pace of questions and answers should be gentle, relaxed, humane. A machine-gun pace of questioning or answering destroys reflectiveness. If there is silence in the group, it does not mean nothing is happening. It may very well mean the most important thing of all is happening, inside of people.

Well before the end of the session, following at least an hour of questioning, the clerk should ask for a pause and ask the focus person how s/he wishes to proceed. This is an opportunity for the focus person to choose a mode of seeking clarity other than questions, which have characterized the rest of the session. The recorder continues to record during this time. Possibilities are:

- a. silence out of which anyone can speak under the same discipline as that in other meetings for worship;
- b. silence out of which people share images which come to them as they focus on the focus person;
- c. the committee continues with more questions;
- d. the committee is asked to reflect on what has been said;
- e. the committee is asked to affirm the focus person's gifts;
- f. the focus person may ask questions of the committee.

Before the session ends, any clarity reached can be shared, if the focus person wishes to do so. S/he and the committee should agree on next steps. If another meeting seems right, it should be scheduled at this time. It may be that the focus person will reach clarity and no further action is necessary. Or it may be clear that a support committee or an oversight committee should be appointed to aid the person in keeping clear and/or in being accountable to the clarity reached. Members of the clearness committee are free to release themselves from further commitment or to offer to serve on such committees.

The clearness committee works best when everyone approaches it in a prayerful mood (which does not exclude playful!), affirming the reality of each person's inner guidance and

truth, and the Spirit's capacity to strengthen and sustain. We must give up the notion that we know what is best for another person and simply try, through prayerful listening and speaking, to help remove anything that obscures their inner light.

These notes compiled by Jan Hoffman from her experience and the following sources: Parker Palmer at a conference on Solitude and Community; *Faith and Practice of Pacific Yearly Meeting* (1985) pp. 58-60; and *Living With Oneself and Others* of New England Yearly Meeting Committee on Ministry and Counsel (1985) pp. 50-55.

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Philadelphia Yearly Meeting Faith & Practice (2017) has several entries that address concerns, leadings and testimonies (p 15-17)

Examples of Service Arising Out of Leadings and Concerns

Shared simple meal

Description: Every year the Children's Religious Education committee organizes a shared simple supper for the Meeting to involve the children in a service project. The children review several worthy causes and choose one they want to support with funds raised.

Meeting Involvement: This project is conceived and implemented by the CRE Committee, with support from Meeting for Business. Members attend and make donations for the meal.

Contact: Clerk of Children's Religious Education Committee

Service in Puerto Rico following Hurricanes

Description: Scott Hoskins felt led to volunteer to help clean up after Hurricane Maria. He linked up with All Hands & Hearts volunteer organization.

Meeting Involvement: Scott sought clearness with a few members before embarking on this project. Individuals in the Meeting gave donations to AHAH to support this work.

Syrian Family Support

Description: When some members of the meeting learned of the plight of Syrian refugees, they wanted to act, joining efforts with members of several other local congregations to sponsor two families.

Meeting involvement: Meeting members have engaged in a wide variety of activities on behalf of these families, from collecting household goods to providing transportation, to finding jobs, etc. Members have contributed to the fund that supports this project in addition to their time.

Worksheet for Projects Arising from Leadings and Concerns

Name and describe the project.
What led you to this concern and prompted this response?
How will the project take place?
Who will benefit from the project, and who will lead and take responsibility for it?
What types of resources (human, financial and physical) are required to complete the project? How much of this from the Meeting? What other resources are being explored?
When would the project start and end?
How can the Meeting support this project throughout the process?
How will you report on progress to the Meeting?

