



Clearness Committees

by the Rev. Caroline Fairless

In the process of an individual's discernment regarding Christian service as a vocation, the evaluative bodies of the Church (Rectors and Vicars of congregations, Bishops and their staff, Commissions on Ministry, and Standing Committees) have identified a pattern that is causing considerable concern as we move in the direction of a new vision of what it means to be the body of Christ. The pattern generally assumes two forms: either a parish member approaches his/her rector/vicar in this way, "I am feeling a call to the priesthood (or a call to ordained ministry); or the rector/vicar (or other parish member) says to someone, "You have a call to ordained ministry." Thus begins what is perhaps erroneously called a process of discernment.

The difficulty with this pattern is that it tacks an outcome onto the end of the discernment process, before the discernment process actually begins; it sets up a parish committee that has a vested interest in the outcome; and the outcome itself tends to be limited: yes, you do; or no, we don't think so. If the latter, as we have so often witnessed, the decision often puts a congregation in turmoil. What if we, as the Episcopal Church in New Hampshire, could affect a cultural shift? What if we could teach one another to open the conversation without identifying the outcome? What if we could say to one another, "I am feeling a stirring within me, for some kind of service in Christ's name, which I would like to explore." What if we could learn to engage a discernment process in this way? To open an explorative process in the broadest way possible, without the limitations of stating an outcome? What if there were structures in this diocese that would not only allow just that, but encourage, and even require it?

In the words of Parker Palmer, the founding director of [The Center for Courage and Renewal](#): *"I want to describe a method invented by the Quakers, a method that protects individual identity and integrity while drawing on the wisdom of other people. It is called a "Clearness Committee." From their beginnings over three hundred years ago, Quakers needed a way to draw on both inner and communal resources to deal with personal problems because they had no clerical leaders to 'solve' their problems for them. The*

Clearness Committee is testimony to the fact that there are no external authorities on life's deepest issues, not clergy or therapists or scholars; there is only the authority that lies within each of us waiting to be heard."

A Clearness Committee is comprised of the following: a Focus Person/Seeker, who – in the language above – is experiencing a “stirring up” with regard to ministry or vocation; a clerk, who bears the responsibility of instruction, time keeping, and oversight; and several members of the committee who are practiced in the art of asking open and honest questions, questions which serve to help the focus person delve ever more deeply into what we are calling “a stirring”.

The work of a Clearness Committee requires training and practice in the methods of keeping to a true discernment process. As this Clearness process is becoming in itself the first step of ministry discernment, we want to be clear that **this is not an evaluative body**. This is **pure gift** to the one asking to enter a discernment process. This body makes no reference to anyone or anything that arises during the Clearness Committee process and makes no recommendation whatsoever. The only purpose is one of discernment, among people whose goal is to provide a safe place for the deepest possible listening. The Episcopal Church of New Hampshire is fortunate to have, among its members and neighbors, quite a number of certified facilitators, well trained and practice in the art of training those who wish to serve on a Clearness Committee.