

## **Committees of Care**

### **Ottawa Monthly Meeting**

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In early 2008 Ottawa Meeting of Ministry and Counsel discovered that we seemed to be getting an increasing number of requests for Committees of Care, so much so that we were sometimes having difficulty fulfilling them in a timely fashion. At the same time we noticed that the people requesting such committees and those willing to serve on them were almost exclusively experienced Friends.

In an attempt to make Committees of Care more widely understood as a resource by all members and attenders we began to plan a workshop on the subject. We were surprised to find how little written information was available on Committees of Care specifically. We held the workshop in November 2008 after making a special plea for Friends experienced in using and serving on such committees to join us and share their expertise. We had a good mixture of experienced Friends and of those who knew little about Committees of Care in attendance. The following was prepared as a result of that workshop and our preparation for it.

Traditionally two forms of committees have been used by Friends to assist members and attenders with difficult life situations and in decision making. They are ways in which Friends may “offer their presence, prayers, love and support.”<sup>1</sup>

*Committees of Clearness* are used specifically in decision making to help a Friend or Friends clarify their own wishes and the way the Light is leading with regard to an important or difficult decision. Sometimes such committees are also used to test concerns or leadings that may involve the meeting as, for example, taking up some specific project or area of social concern. Committees of Clearness focus on the decision at hand, generally meet only a limited number of times, and are laid down once the decision has been made.<sup>2</sup>

*Committees of Care* are usually, though not necessarily, longer-term committees that provide spiritual and practical support to a member or attender who is experiencing a difficult life situation such as illness, bereavement, loss of employment, relationship difficulties, separation, divorce or other stressful life circumstances. A Committee of Care may also be used “to sustain Friend(s) engaged in demanding Meeting work over a long period.”<sup>3</sup> Committees of Care focus on helping the individual or individuals involved to use the resources and guidance of the Light within themselves. Sometimes, as previously noted, Committees of Care also provide or arrange for practical assistance. This pamphlet focuses primarily on Committees of Care.

### **Getting Started**

In Ottawa Monthly Meeting, it is the Meeting of Ministry and Counsel that is responsible for arranging and overseeing Committees of Care. If you are experiencing a difficult life situation and want to request a Committee of Care, you may contact any member of Ministry and Counsel. Normally a list of the members is posted in the meeting house; if you cannot conveniently locate such a list, speak with the person greeting at the door or making the announcements

at any meeting for worship. She or he will either be a member of Ministry and Counsel or will be able to point out a member to you. The member of Ministry and Counsel with whom you speak will ask briefly about your situation and what you need and expect from a committee. He or she may also ask if you have persons in mind that you might like to have serve on the committee. Some persons have already thought of such individuals. This is not necessary, however. In any event the final responsibility for the selection of the committee rests with Ministry and Counsel, though you will be asked to approve prospective members before the committee is finalized. The goal is to create a committee that is comfortable for you to work with and who will work well together. A Committee of Care usually numbers between two and four persons.<sup>4</sup>

## **Purpose**

A Committee of Care is a form of spiritual support offered “after the manner of Friends.” It does not take the place of psychological counselling, couples counselling, crisis counselling or other forms of professional intervention. It is not “amateur psychotherapy” and its purpose is to give support, not advice. If you ask for a Committee of Care you should be prepared to look within yourself for the strength and the guidance of the Light within you. The Friends on the committee are to be present with you and to you in helping you discern and discover the way forward in the situation that motivated you to request the committee. They may also serve as a source of stability and support if at times the life challenges with which you are dealing feel overwhelming.

While Ministry and Counsel will make every effort to form a committee quickly, if circumstances require such, Committees of Care are not emergency measures. If you need immediate help, call a F/friend, a crisis line, or any member of Ministry and Counsel. Committees of Care at their best are formed by traditional Quaker means of group discernment and that process should not be rushed. Putting the wrong mix of people on a committee may create difficulties for all concerned. Committees of Care members are volunteers and Ministry and Counsel can provide such committees only if there are suitable persons available and willing to undertake the work. If there are not sufficient suitable persons available for a committee at any particular time, Ministry and Counsel may be able to help you locate other appropriate community resources.

## **Location & Time**

Where and when should meetings be conducted? *Organization and Procedures* indicates “...there should be an atmosphere of privacy, comfort and concern for the reputations of others.”<sup>5</sup> Most meetings are probably best conducted in a location that permits the use of silence and worship “after the manner of Friends.” In practice, however, meetings also have been successfully conducted in a coffee shop or over food at a restaurant. Much depends on the nature of the

issues being addressed and needs of the “focus person” for whom the committee was convened.<sup>6</sup>

Some Friends remember a tradition of meeting in the home of the person requesting the committee, though others indicate that they never heard of this custom. In this day and age it is probably not safe to assume that all persons requesting a Committee of Care would be equally comfortable inviting a committee to their home. Some may have homes with limited privacy, noisy pets, noisy children, noisy roommates, a spouse who prefers to play the TV at full volume and is unsympathetic to their spiritual concerns, a schedule that does not permit sweeping the “dust bunnies” under the rug as often as they would like, etc. In addition, it is quite possible that a person might be requesting a committee in order better to deal with problems in the home. Transportation issues also need to be considered in setting a meeting place. If committee members must travel from widely scattered locations, a central meeting place might be wise. Certainly if a person requesting a committee is ill, has mobility issues, or simply has a strong preference for meeting in his or her own home, that request should be honoured if at all feasible. The Meeting House may also be an option.

*Organization and Procedure* suggests, “A reasonable interval between meetings allows for reflection, prayer and growth for all concerned.”<sup>7</sup> The definition of “a reasonable interval” will depend on type of issue for which the committee was convened and on the needs of the focus person. Committee members may also check in with the focus person by telephone or by email between meetings and should in most cases ask the focus person to contact them, preferably through the committee’s Clerk, if problems escalate.

## **Procedures**

The first person named to a Committee of Care usually is expected to be the one to arrange a time and place for the committee’s first meeting.<sup>8</sup> The committee then decides who is to serve as Clerk to guide the committee process and make arrangements for future meetings.

*Organization and Procedure* has a section on “Records:

The recorder may make notes of the discussion and decisions. These confidential notes should be read back and copies given to the concerned Friend(s) and Clerk of the committee. Because notes could be evidence in a court of law, when the committee is laid down, all notes and minutes should be handed over to the concerned Friend(s), to be kept or destroyed as desired. No copies should be retained by the Meeting. \*\*\*\*<sup>9</sup>

Many, however, have felt no need to keep notes in a Committee of Care setting. Note taking may distract from the relaxed and informal nature of the process, and from careful listening to the focus person. If, for some reason, notes are taken, it

is probably wisest that they be destroyed when the committee is laid down since they can be subpoenaed should legal proceedings arise involving issues discussed. No Friend wants to be put in a position of being expected to testify in court regarding conversations that were understood to be confidential.

When Committees of Care find it necessary to provide help in practical matters such as providing transportation to medical appointments, providing food, assisting with handy-person tasks, etc. they should, with the focus person's permission, feel free to seek assistance from other members of the meeting and should not feel limited only to their own skills and resources. It might be useful in this regard if the meeting would keep a list of members and friends willing to undertake various helping tasks on occasion and of the special skills of such persons.

## **Method**

Many, perhaps most, Committees of Care provide support primarily through conversation. Service on such Committees does not require skill or training in counselling; it requires a willingness to listen attentively and compassionately to another person and to join them in their search for a way forward through a difficult time in life. These committee meetings are usually begun with a period of silence to allow the group to centre, followed by an invitation for the focus person to share needs and feelings. Committee members may respond with empathic statements, request clarification of something the focus person has shared, or suggest other possible interpretations of events or options that come to mind. It is important that the focus person feels safe in this process and not pressured to share beyond what she or he is comfortable sharing. It is also important to avoid giving advice. The giving of advice implies that the giver is wiser than the focus person about how he or she should conduct life; this is contrary to the belief that the Light within the focus person is sufficient for them. It is also rather egotistical. Advice can come back to haunt the advice giver if it is followed and does not work as expected. Suggesting options goes something like "You have mentioned A, B, and C as possibilities. Have you ever considered D, E, and F?" Giving advice says, "Why don't you do C? C looks like the best option to me." Sometimes the sharing of personal stories can be useful. Care should be taken, however, to be sure that the story fits and will meet a need for the focus person. It is too easy to assume that we understand what another person is going through or that their situation is just like one we experienced, when in fact it is not. Sensitivity and discernment are key here.

## **Confidentiality**

Meetings of Committees of Care are generally considered to be strictly confidential. Exceptions to the confidentiality rule would occur if the focus person is suicidal, is seriously threatening murder, or admits to the abuse of a child. It is

highly unlikely that a Committee of Care would be confronted with any of these situations, but in such an event a member of Ministry and Counsel should be alerted immediately. Ministry and Counsel should also be consulted if, after becoming involved with a focus person, a committee feels that professional help is needed for the individual, or if some members of the committee realize that they are not suited for the work. At times close friends of the focus person may agree to serve on a Committee of Care because they want very much to help, and they may later find that they would serve a more useful function simply as friends rather than as committee members. A committee experiencing difficulties of any sort should consult with Ministry and Counsel.

### **Who Should Serve**

Members of Committees of Care should be selected from among persons whose emotional and spiritual maturity are well known to Ministry and Counsel or to persons whose judgment in such matters Ministry and Counsel has reason to trust. Persons serving on Committees of Care should be Friends or Attenders who are well-acquainted with Friends' principles and the way Friends' meetings are conducted seeking unity in the Light. On occasion other persons, whose spiritual sensitivity is compatible with that of Friends, have also served well. It is important that Committee members be able to trust each other and each other's leadings. It has been suggested that persons who do not know each other well when called to serve together on a Committee of Care should try to arrange some social time together to become better acquainted and thus better able to understand each other in the Committee process.<sup>10</sup>

### **Feedback**

The committee should feel free to meet together without the focus person present. Such meetings are extremely necessary when the committee members do not know each other well or when the issues being addressed with the focus person are difficult, controversial, or highly emotionally charged. It is better to check in with each other more frequently than necessary than to risk leaving issues and misunderstandings to build up. If there is any doubt that committee members are going to "be on the same page" with regard to their work, a meeting to discuss process and procedures should take place before their first meeting with the focus person. It is important that committee members work together as a group and not simply relate to the focus person as individuals and carry out their work individually. Committee members should assume responsibility for caring for each other as well as the focus person. One Friend tells of an instance where a committee supporting a woman who eventually died of cancer failed to meet at all after her death and yet each member needed support in their grief.<sup>11</sup> It may be important for committee members to meet to debrief. Make sure everyone involved with a Committee of Care receives the care they need. Committee members are each other's support in the work.

Quaker silence is a very powerful healing, helping tool. It has been suggested that Committees experiencing difficulty might well increase the time they spend together in silence and in worship.<sup>12</sup> If you serve on a Committee of Care, or request one, trust and seek the Light in yourself and in each other.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>*Organization and Procedure*, Canadian Yearly Meeting, 2002, 8.1; hereafter cited as O & P.

<sup>2</sup>O & P, 8.10

<sup>3</sup>O & P, 8.11

<sup>4</sup>O & P, 8.5

<sup>5</sup>O & P, 8.8. “Concern for the reputations of others” may be more of a concern in smaller, more conservative communities than it is in a city environment, though it should be noted in any case.

<sup>6</sup>“Focus person” is a term used by Parker Palmer for the person who requests a committee and is the “focus” of its concern. See: <http://www.couragerenewal.org/parker/writings/clearness-committee>

<sup>7</sup>O & P, 8.7

<sup>8</sup> This is the person named first in the minute creating the committee, often called “the first named”.

<sup>9</sup> O & P, 8.9

<sup>10</sup>Gilpin, Mariellen, *God’s Healing Grace: Reflections on a Journey with Mental and Spiritual Illness*. Pendle Hill Pamphlet 394, 2008, Appendix B. Hereafter cited as Gilpin. (While we have some concerns about portions of the content of this pamphlet and advise that it be read with discrimination, Appendix B on Committees of Care is among the very minimal number of published materials on the topic and contains suggestions worthy of consideration.)

<sup>11</sup>Anne Thomas, personal communication, January 28, 2008. Used by permission.

<sup>12</sup> See: Gilpin, Appendix B.