



THE
CARE
COMMITTEE

a ministry of prayer and learning devoted to
the School of the Spirit

Table of Contents

I. Introduction.....	3
II. Why is a care committee needed?.....	4
III. Who is needed to serve on the care committee?	6
Desired characteristics.....	6
Potentially difficult issues.....	7
IV. How does the committee do its work?	8
The selection and connection process	8
Committee structure and responsibilities.....	10
V. Advices	13
Advices for care committee members.....	13
Advices for participants	14
VI. Fruits of our labors.....	16
About the School of the Spirit Ministry	16

A Ministry of Prayer and Learning Devoted to the School of the Spirit is under the care of the committee on Worship and Care of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends

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I. Introduction

Within the Religious Society of Friends the traditional meetings of ministers and elders were often referred to as a “school of the Spirit.” In gathered worship Friends learned to discern the movement of the Inward Teacher and to test their discernment with one another. Working within that tradition, the School of the Spirit Ministry has developed a two-year program, *On Being a Spiritual Nurturer*, devoted to a ministry of spiritual nurture. The purpose of the program is to deepen the participant’s relationship with God and to examine, clarify, support, and develop the participants’ gifts of ministry.

Ministry: The School of the Spirit Ministry recognizes and respects that some Friends Meetings are uncomfortable with the term and the concept of “ministry.” The word “ministry” literally means “service.” As envisioned by the School of the Spirit Ministry, ministry is defined as service devoted to God and to God’s beloved people, whether within our faith or world community. One serving in the ministry is led to make and sustain an *intentional commitment* to use his/her spiritual gifts in Spirit-guided, loving service, as long as he/she is called and graced with such gifts.

Spiritual Gifts: Our faith communities are blessed by, depend upon, and are grateful for the gifts each and every person brings to our Meetings/churches. When a faith community is in need, God sends what is needed. Often our gifts come to us through the skills and talents offered by individuals. When our gifts are blended, we have a well-functioning faith community.

The School of the Spirit Ministry uses the term **spiritual** gifts to refer specifically to *our God-given ways of serving and the God-given qualities brought to that service*, such as empathy, deep listening, tenderness, and so forth. In particular, given the nature of the School of the Spirit Ministry programs, the focus is on naming and developing spiritual gifts within and among members of the community.

An applicant to the *On Being a Spiritual Nurturer* program is required to undergo a clearness process within the applicant’s home faith community before an application is submitted. If clearness is achieved, the application sent, and the applicant accepted into the Spiritual Nurturer program, then the applicant, referred to henceforth as *participant*, is required to have a care committee.

Care Committee: Meetings and churches are always under a call to care for individuals within the corporate body. Ministry and Worship Committees or Care and Counsel Committees are specifically charged to encourage and support spiritual development and growth among members of the community. To facilitate that charge, care committees are created to serve in a variety of situations.

The work of a **clearness committee** is usually short term and specific, such as to help clarify an intent to marry, seek membership, or make personal decisions. The **care committee** generally functions over a longer period of time as determined by the complexity of the situation and the needs of the focus person(s).

The goal of a care committee is to provide **sustained support, guidance, and accountability** throughout the duration of the need (see section IV-B3 below). As an example a crisis may require a care committee to meet with a family for a few weeks or months, whereas someone called to work with counter recruitment in the schools may request and profit from meeting with those who offer a tender, loving ear throughout an entire school year.

The care committee in the *On Being a Spiritual Nurturer* program is asked to serve for a period of two years. Throughout the School of the Spirit Ministry experience, the participant's faith community is expected to step forward to meet the call for support for one who is seeking spiritual growth and depth. The care committee plays an important role in anchoring the participant in his/her faith community.

The School of the Spirit Ministry recognizes that the applicant's faith community and other Quaker organizations may call this type of committee by a different name and welcomes it being called "support," "oversight" or "anchor" committee, instead.

II. Why is a care committee needed?

Imagine for a moment that you are taking a short walk in a participant's shoes. You are on a spiritual journey that you find interesting, exciting, and deeply rewarding. But you also find that you sometimes are called to reconsider aspects of your spiritual life that you hold dear.

Queries are given you to reflect upon. Taking them into prayer, you find that you experience strong disquiet. You may be invited to surrender to being “searched” by a loving God. Self-examination is a regular practice on this journey, requiring you to look deeply at yourself, your beliefs, your practices. Assigned readings or teachers offer words that challenge your views. Fellow travelers on this journey, people you come to love and respect, make comments or ask questions that may jar you to the core. The way in which you practice your faith may be challenged by the diversity of practices present among your fellow travelers. Even “facts” you have learned about Quakers may turn out to be “myths.” The small group, with which you meet daily during residencies, reflect and name your gifts, gifts of which you may be unaware. Then you must “test” these perceptions, seeking Truth, and, perhaps claim and integrate them into your understanding, service, and accountability to God.

One can see that this journey may be a bumpy course. Queries, self-examination, and challenges from others are intentional parts of the Spiritual Nurture program. It is very helpful to have a supportive body of friends at home ready to listen, respond tenderly, and keep things in perspective. Fortunately, as a recent participant observed, “A spiritual journey does not happen in a vacuum.” The care committee is an essential resource to provide grounded community support for the spiritual traveler along this path.

In *Essays on the Quaker Vision of Gospel Order*, Lloyd Lee Wilson writes,

The responsibilities that accompany spiritual giftedness are numerous, and each must be assumed and carried out in order for the full benefit of the gift to be felt in the faith community. For the individual, the responsibilities of giftedness include naming and accepting the gift and offering it to the faith community in God’s service. For the faith community, the responsibilities include helping the individual name and develop the gift, and accepting its exercise within the community -- agreeing to be ministered to. If these responsibilities are shirked on either side, the gift will not grow into its maturity and the faith of the community will not be nurtured as it needs.

(Quaker Press of FGC, 2002, pp. 113-114)

It is important that the participant stay connected to his/her faith community or church throughout the School of the Spirit Ministry experience. Thus, in addition to personal support of the participant, the care committee plays a crucial role as the liaison with and solid connection to the participant’s local faith community.

III. Who is needed to serve on the care committee?

Desired characteristics

Over the years, the following characteristics of care committee members have been found to be helpful to participants and need to be considered carefully by both the participant *and* those considering service on a care committee.

Care committee members need to:

1. Be grounded in God and open to further learning and spiritual development, both for the participant and within themselves.
2. Have belief and faith in the divine-human relationship. Members need to have sufficient shared faith understandings to be able to work together and to communicate successfully with the participant and other committee members.
3. Be attuned to and accepting of the participant's seeking a deeper awareness of his/her Inward Teacher.
4. Have the ability to wait in silence and patience and to maintain confidentiality, as appropriate.
5. Be able to accept the participant where he/she is in the present moment, recognizing that the participant's views and concerns may be in considerable flux during the journey.
6. Be able to accompany the participant on his/her path in a caring, loving, non-judgmental manner which may include gentle critique and challenge, often expressed in the form of questions. Members need to be comfortable enough in their own faith that they can support one who may be experiencing spiritual struggles.
7. Be willing to hold the participant and care committee members and process in prayer, or in the Light.
8. Be willing and able to devote the time necessary to prepare themselves to carry out the care committee's task and to attend monthly committee meetings with the participant.

9. Be able to explore and translate the spiritual language of the participant into that which is familiar and understood by the committee member so that communication flows freely. Similarly, each member is invited to speak his/her heart in a way that is comfortable to the speaker.
10. Be open to the creative, empowering forces for Truth and for Love which are possible in corporate worship and collective discernment. A functioning care committee often experiences outcomes (new insights, new confidence and peace) for most if not all of its members as well as for the committee's focus, the participant. And, if attended to, this spiritual growth will impact the larger faith community.

Potentially difficult issues

Experience has taught the School of the Spirit Ministry teachers and elders (spiritual companions) that there are certain committee or member characteristics that are likely to impair committee functioning and lead to distress for all involved. Four issues that may prove especially challenging are:

1. **Time.** Committee members lead busy lives and may have trouble finding time to meet together for the requisite monthly meeting. We recognize, of course, that serious life events can alter anyone's plans, sometimes drastically. However, leaving such unanticipated occurrences aside, we trust that each potential committee member will take his/her participation under discernment to seek clearness *before* he/she makes a commitment to provide steady accompaniment for the participant.
2. **Acceptance.** Members who have difficulty responding to the participant where he/she is, rather than where the member thinks the participant "should be," lead the committee into trouble. In general, it will be helpful to members to remember that the participant may be exactly where God is leading him/her. If the member can accept that premise, then it is easier to turn to deep listening and discernment, rather than worrying about desired "progress" within the committee member's time line. Trust, love and acceptance are key factors needed on this journey.
3. **Not knowing what to do.** Members may have difficulty knowing how to be helpfully and lovingly challenging and discerning, as these behaviors may not be

expressed often in our faith communities. Remembering that a safe and loving environment is fertile ground for growth may help members formulate a gentle challenge to ideas or perceptions. A past participant commented that the most challenging thing said to her during the two year experience with her committee was when a rather quiet member suddenly asked, “Do you feel this is how you are being led?” That gentle, yet powerful, question took her away from the “rational” views she had been expressing and brought her back to the core issue.

It is hard for the participant and committee members not to have a road map for the journey, not to know where the hazardous curves are or what lies ahead. It will be sufficient to simply accept the course, tread gently, give encouragement and understanding, and “walk with” the participant.

4. **Leaving the loving way.** Lastly, members who have problems accepting or allowing new or different spiritual language and concepts, who have personality conflicts with the participant or with other members of the committee, who are not comfortable maintaining confidentiality, or who engage in attacking, belittling, or humiliating the participant or other committee members are harmful to the process. We know that without love, one doesn’t thrive and grow in the physical world. The same may be said of the spiritual world; the love of God and our faith community help us thrive and grow.

IV. How does the committee do its work?

The selection and connection process

The participant is responsible for selecting and approaching potential care committee members. This is often a very difficult task for participants who may be shy or embarrassed to ask for such time and attention for themselves. Also, many participants are far more comfortable giving support than they are asking for it. It should be noted that, in addition to the list of characteristics outlined above, the participant needs to attend to nudges *indicating God’s intention* as he/she discerns whom to ask to serve on the care committee.

It is expected that in most circumstances the participant will work in consultation with Worship and Ministry or Care and Counsel committee in his/her local faith community. In large faith communities, the participant may profit from recommendations because not all community members are familiar to him/her. Also, in the absence of community

members experienced in spiritual nurture, the Ministry and Worship committee may be able to suggest appropriate alternates to the participant. However, as the care committee is to serve on behalf of the participant during the program, the School of the Spirit Ministry recommends that the participant make the final discernment of whom to ask to be members.

The majority of members of the care committee, comprised of a minimum of three people, usually come from the participant's faith community. Thus, they are persons who know the community's needs, its strengths and weaknesses, and the challenges it faces today. Committee members should have basic nurturing skills themselves. Occasionally a participant may ask Ministry and Worship or Care and Counsel Committee for permission to include a person gifted in nurture ministry who attends a meeting or congregation other than the participant's own faith community.

It is possible that the participant has never before had a care or support committee. It is also possible that the local faith community may not include many, or any, people with much experience of *spiritual* nurture. In such a case, all involved may feel uneasy, vulnerable and lacking in confidence.

Previous care committees have shared that when a committee builds a God-centered, safe space of trust, honesty and openness, then confidence develops, differences between members exist without divisions, and experiences deepen. It takes time to develop and sustain such a blessed environment. If all present maintain patience, goodwill and God-centeredness, God will prevail and growth will occur--for all.

Committee members may be assured that their work is not the only support and care provided program participants. Teachers are available during every residency. Contact is available between residencies. Small group support is a basic, faithful and consistent focus of the program. Deep spiritual friendships among program participants often develop that are on-going avenues of loving support long after the program is completed.

Should questions develop that the Care Committee wishes advice from the School of the Spirit Ministry, the program participants have the name and contact information of their assigned core teacher.

It is recommended that the care committee be under the care and in relationship with the local faith community's Ministry and Worship or Care and Counsel committee. This connection provides yet another way to carry out Friends' *communal* practice of care and support for the leadings of participants.

Committee structure and responsibilities

Committee Clerk: It is important that the participant is not responsible for the leadership and process of the committee. Rather one of the care committee members serves as clerk of the committee.

The clerk:

- a. works with the participant and members to find a suitable place and time for committee meetings;
- b. reminds members when a meeting is scheduled;
- c. confers with the participant regarding the general agenda;
- d. guides the committee through the agenda, being flexible to the movement of God;
- e. keeps the meetings centered in worship;
- f. oversees the preparation of reports.

At the end of each program year, the committee provides the participants' core teacher a written review. The annual review grows out of the corporate discernment of the whole committee, in response to queries from School of the Spirit Ministry. The queries cover such themes as:

- a. the nature and development of the participant's relationship with God;
- b. the ministry (service) being considered, developed or carried out by the participant;
- c. the ministry's relationship to the meeting or larger community;
- d. the ministry's significance for the life and on-going work of the nurturer.

It may also prove useful to the local faith community's Ministry and Worship committee to receive periodic reports on the work of the care committee. The reports to the faith community need to be written in general statements, rather than specific comments, in order to maintain confidentiality.

It is best if reports to the faith community or to the School of the Spirit Ministry are discussed and shared with the participant before being released.

The agenda: Though each participant's path is unique, the general format of a care committee agenda includes the following items. The order may vary (except for worship) according to the needs expressed, or perceived, always allowing for the movement of God within the committee.

- a. The committee and participant come together for a time of *worship and centering*.
- b. A brief “check in” with committee members provides an opportunity for *attuning to each other*.
- c. The *participant* may wish to share and talk about some of the following: experiences during the previous residency; topics opened up for him/her during the readings or last residency; inward themes that have arisen in his/her life; passages from readings that have been particularly meaningful or challenging; possible topics for papers that must be written; ways to integrate the work of the program with family and faith community life; concerns about the naming, claiming, development, and/or practice of his/her service to God; occasions of ministry.
- d. *Committee members*, who are listening, encouraging, and discerning, may wish to: reflect upon the *participant's* walk with God and the faith community; help the participant reflect upon queries that assist the participant in guiding his/her spiritual life and growth; help clarify questions and concerns that the participant may need to raise during the next residency; follow the time table given and the progress of the participant for required research papers, reflective papers, spiritual self-examination or statement of faith papers (depending on the program); discuss reports the *committee* has prepared for core teachers at designated times; discuss how the *faith community/church* can more fully accept the participant's exercise of ministry (*see earlier Wilson quote*).
- e. It may be useful for the clerk, participant and/or committee members to *summarize some of the main points* or concerns that were lifted up during the meeting. A summary helps clarify for the participant and the committee members that all were heard; it also allows fine tuning for better understanding.
- f. The meeting closes with *worship*.

The goal revisited: In the introduction of this guide it was stated that the primary goal of the Care Committee is to provide *support, guidance and accountability* to the participant during his/her spiritual journey through the School of the Spirit Ministry programs.

The following reviews each aspect of the goal, individually:

- a. **Support:** Support involves intentionally holding the participant in the Light, or in prayer. Responding supportively requires that the committee consistently bring to the forefront of its work: acceptance, patience, faith and trust in God's involvement in the process, deep listening, discernment, kindness, and the expression of loving encouragement.
- b. **Guidance:** Guidance is likely to be most useful, effective and powerful when offered in a gentle, non-judgmental manner. It may take time to learn the most effective way to present guidance to the participant in a form that can be heard, accepted and used. Often guidance takes the form of a thought or reflection. Sometimes guidance is specifically requested by the participant and if, after discernment, the committee feels clear to respond, the guidance should be offered. Sometimes the leading to offer guidance comes from the committee itself; it, too, should be respected and offered.

The committee is responsible for *offering* Spirit-led guidance or wisdom drawn from experience; the participant is responsible for considering, accepting, or rejecting the guidance.

- c. **Accountability:** Accountability, in this case, refers to helping the participant to make right use of the opportunities given him/her in the program and to make right use of his/her gifts of ministry. As an example, it is in the participant's best interest to meet requirements of the program (readings, papers, spiritual practices, etc.) and to complete the assignments according to the recommended time line. The care committee may need to query and discuss problems the participant encounters regarding this aspect of accountability.

Or, the committee may want to question and examine with the participant his/her particular use of spiritual gifts in the exercise of ministry. Does he take on too many opportunities to serve others to be able to care for himself or his family? Is she shying away from applying her gifts where the faith community has needs for those gifts? (Note: We are *not* asking the committee to judge the *existence* of the participant's gifts. Rather, we are asking that the committee help the participant be faithful to exercising those gifts in God's service.)

V. Advices

Advices for care committee members

The following advices will be useful in focusing and enhancing the work of the committee.

1. **Mirror to the participant the ways you see God acting, speaking, shining, loving, and serving through him/her.** Participants attempting to be faithful often need their care committees to reflect back to them the small acts and subtle moments, as well as the larger deeds, that reveal God working through their efforts to serve/minister faithfully.
2. **Accompany the participant in personal places of spiritual desolation and fear.** By listening, being present, not trying to “fix,” praying, trusting that God is caring for the participant, and reminding him/her of God’s love and support, change will occur.
3. **Trust and remember that God sends participants to serve the wounded and broken people and places. Be open to supporting leadings in ministry that may take participants into uncomfortable or risky territory.** Pray for the discernment of the committee as well as for the participant led to serve.
4. **Kindly challenge the participant to live deeper and further into his/her ministry and gifts so that he/she may grow in the measure of faithfulness given to God.** Help the participant attend to the nudges or stirrings of the Spirit at the edges of his/her awareness, which may well be beyond the participant’s comfort zone. Support the participant as he/she is Spirit-led to become more vulnerable, authentic, humble, and bold.
5. **Evaluate the process and function of the committee with some regularity.** Periodic self-evaluation by the care committee helps it become more aware of what is needed at any given time. As the participant progresses in responsiveness to God’s call, the care committee will notice that different needs arise and call for attention. Some participants need to be drawn out and affirmed. Some need help in finding the right language in which to communicate what is given them to share. Some need to be lovingly challenged to grow into that which God is asking of them. Periodic self-evaluation also aids the care committee in understanding its role in God’s

ministry and thus improves the committee's capacity to anchor and nurture spiritual gifts and faithful ministry.

Advices for participants

Behaviors and attitudes on the part of participants serve to facilitate both the work of the care committee and the relationships involved.

1. **Help the committee prepare for meetings.** A written report sent to committee members after each residency which reflects the participant's experiences, joys and concerns will be very helpful. Be sure to send such reports long enough in advance of the committee meeting that members have a chance to digest what is being shared.

Assisting and advising the committee clerk in preparing the agenda helps the committee and the participant focus on what is uppermost in the participant's mind and heart.

Sharing readings or passages the participant wants to discuss is another way to bring the committee "into the loop." One does not want to over burden or "swamp" committee members. If, at first, the participant is unsure what information the members actually would like to have, *ask*.

2. **Be as forthcoming in what is shared as possible.** Participants sometimes mention that they are reluctant to bring forth concerns, fears or thoughts to the committee for essentially two reasons. One reason is the participant is unsure that the committee members will *understand* what is being shared. The other, that members of the committee will not *approve* of what is being shared. It is understandable that the participant feels vulnerable and unprotected if either of these situations occur. Yet, it will likely lead to growth on all parts if the participant can lift up exactly these concerns: fear of not being understood or of not being approved. The committee's response to and discussion about those fears will generally indicate the path forward. It may be that a few topics are best shared with the participant's small group during residencies.
3. **Keep in mind the mutuality of the care committee experience.** At least initially, both the participant and the committee members are finding their way. Members of the committee also feel uncertain and, perhaps, vulnerable themselves. They, too, want to do a "good" job, to be faithful to their task, to

be understood and approved. As the course progresses, members of the committee may also feel challenged in their own spiritual relationships.

Just as it is helpful to the participant to be accepted and encouraged, it will be helpful to the committee members when the participant is able to identify and share questions or comments that proved particularly helpful to him/her. Respect and consideration for each other are important factors in this mutual experience.

4. **Keep expectations reasonable.** Sometimes unreasonable expectations of what the care committee can offer lead participants to considerable disappointment. Satisfaction in the experience is more likely if the participant can appreciate and value the opportunities the committee is able to offer, rather than focus on what the committee is unable to offer. Remember: God gives us what we need--not necessarily all that we would like to have, but what is sufficient. Also, the participant has other means of support and challenge to draw upon within his/her program and faith community.

Consider two examples: The participant wants to “grow, stretch and be challenged.” In fact, the participant’s program wants the same thing for him/her. So, the participant brings up some topic to the care committee and then says, “Ask me the ‘hard’ questions.” Very likely, the members of the committee will return a blank stare or ask, “What *are* the ‘hard’ questions?” Rightly so. The request to the committee is unreasonable. If the participant knows what he/she considers the ‘hard’ questions to be, then the participant needs to lift up the questions and consider them in the care of the committee. If the participant does not know the ‘hard’ questions to ask, it seems a good time to turn to the Inward Teacher for further discernment. One needs to be mindful not to accidentally set up a potential “failure” experience for all involved.

Or, as a participant recently reported, *“If I had allowed myself to believe that the care committee was there entirely to support me in the ways I wanted to be supported, I would have been disappointed. . . . But to see my involvement with my care committee as a part of the ministry opened the Life working through us to me.”*

VI. Fruits of our labors

By far, most participants report having positive, helpful, supportive and valuable experiences in their care committees. Some of the committees have sought to establish an on-going relationship, through the Meeting's Ministry and Worship committee, for continued support of the participant's ministry beyond the length of the program. Participants have benefited from an experience of eldering, or spiritual companioning, in its most positive sense; often the committee members reflected the best example of nurturing the participant had witnessed in his/her local faith community.

For themselves, committee members have reported experiencing a deeper sense of spirituality, encouragement or a personal call to more spiritual formation or development, and a renewed sense of place in the larger faith community. An increased sensitivity to leadings in one's own life and an increased awareness of insight, comfort and guidance were also reported. Often through the School of the Spirit Ministry experience, the committee members report awareness of suggestions to make for the benefit of the local Meeting/church.

The School of the Spirit Ministry firmly attests that God is present to all who participate in furthering the ministry, or service, to God and God's people. We are deeply grateful for all who assist in fostering the growth and development of participants on their spiritual journey. We hope the benefits and satisfaction of serving on a care committee outweighs the cost in effort and time. It truly does take a faith community to accomplish this task.

About the School of the Spirit Ministry

A Ministry of Prayer and Learning devoted to the School of the Spirit is dedicated to helping all who wish to be more faithful listeners and responders to the inward work of Christ.

Within the Religious Society of Friends, the traditional meetings of ministers and elders were sometimes referred to as a "school of the Spirit." In gathered worship Friends learned to discern the movement of the Inward Teacher and test their discernment with one another. This practiced listening extended into every aspect of their lives. Living into this way of being is not easy; we often resist, preferring to ignore God's promptings into an ever-deepening union. But the still, quiet voice will not be silent, and with discipline and the support of others we can find ourselves becoming more faithful.

The Ministry in its conduct and programming has these Core Characteristics:

- Is rooted, grounded, and lived out in prayer and expectant waiting upon Divine guidance;
- Understands our spirituality and spiritual journeys in the context of the ongoing Judeo-Christian story;
- Combines a clear Christian grounding with the ability to listen and recognize spiritual openings and committed journeys in whatever form they appear. This rare combination helps to lead one into deeper spiritual understanding and brings forth a greater tenderness with each other;
- Fosters a deeper appreciation of the rhythms of the contemplative life as lived out within a faith community;
- Strengthens understanding and appreciation of the roots of Quakerism, its theology, practices, and traditions;
- Enhances the understanding of the life of a faith community grounded in God and the service of members within it, thereby building up the Religious Society of Friends.