

The ‘After’ People

Stephen Ministers provide care in life’s crises BY JESSICA FISCHER

“Bear one another’s burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ.” —Galatians 6:2

Just call Stephen Ministers the “after” people. After you find the pink slip in what’s now your final paycheck, after the doctors have said there’s nothing more they can do, after the relationship ends but the wounds are still bleeding, after family and friends have heard your story one too many times but you still need to talk it out—that’s when the Stephen Ministers step in.

A free and confidential service, Stephen Ministry takes folks in the congregation and the community who are struggling and pairs them with Stephen Ministers—laypersons who have been trained to offer Christian support and care.

“This is somebody that’s going to walk along beside you,” said Mary Watts, a parish nurse and Stephen Leader at First Baptist Church of Kingsport. “They’re going to hold your hand the whole way. If you want to talk with them, you can. If you just want to sit there and cry, that’s fine. If you want prayer, they’ll pray, but they’re not going to come and hit you over the head with a Bible.”

Named after St. Stephen, the first layperson commissioned by the Apostles to provide caring ministry to those in need, Stephen Ministry began in 1975 when the Rev. Kenneth C. Haugk, a pastor and clinical psychologist, trained nine laypersons at his congregation in St. Louis to be Stephen Ministers.

Today, an estimated 13,000 congregations are

enrolled in Stephen Ministry, representing more than 180 different Christian denominations from all 50 states, 11 Canadian provinces and 30 other countries.

First Baptist’s Stephen Ministry has been up and running for about six years. Other area churches involved in Stephen Ministry include Colonial Heights Baptist, Colonial Heights Presbyterian, First Broad Street United Methodist and Holy Trinity Lutheran, which commissioned its first group of Stephen Ministers more than 20 years ago.

“It’s what we’re supposed to be about,” said Loretta Nitschke, who served as a Stephen Minister at Holy Trinity for 12 years before completing her leader’s training in April. “It is helping someone walk through a difficult time in their life and showing them Christian care.”

After enrolling their congregation in Stephen Ministry, pastors, church staff and lay leaders attend a seven-day Leader’s Training Course, taught by the Stephen Ministries St. Louis faculty, to learn how to implement and direct Stephen Ministry in the congregation. These trained Stephen Leaders then return to their congregation to set up and administer their Stephen Ministry.

“The pastor alone can’t do everything, so basically we are an extension of pastoral care,” said Bill Crawford, a Stephen Leader at First Broad Street United Methodist Church.

Stephen Leaders recruit and select laypeople from the congregation to serve as Stephen Ministers and train them in Christian caregiving.

Some of the training topics include listening,

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feelings, assertiveness, confidentiality and ministering to people in specific situations such as aging, divorce, terminal illness and grief. Stephen Ministers are also trained to recognize when a care receiver's needs go beyond the care a Stephen Minister can provide, and where and how to refer the care receiver for additional care.

"A very key training module is focusing on the process instead of results," Crawford said. "This is one of the hardest things for some of us to learn, that we are there to perform a caring process and trust God for the results. We're the care givers, God is the cure giver."

After the Stephen Ministers are commissioned, Stephen Leaders link them with a care receiver—a member of the congregation or community who is in need of quality Christian care.

"Stephen Ministry is not just for people in the congregation. It is a community outreach," Watts said. "In fact, over the six years that we've had Stephen Ministry here, we've served over 60 people, and almost a third of those have been outside of First Baptist Church.

"We get referrals from other churches, or if I have somebody here who has had a Stephen Minister and they're going to move but they still really need somebody to talk to, I'll say, 'OK, tell me where you're going.' I'll call Stephen Ministries' office and say, 'I'm looking for a Stephen Minister in such-and-such city.' I did that with my dad in Florida when my mother died."

A Stephen Minister normally is assigned to only one care receiver at a time and meets with the care receiver for an average of about an hour each week. Stephen Ministers also meet twice monthly for peer supervision and continuing education.

The quality of training Stephen Ministers and Leaders receive is outstanding, said Nitschke, who has used the listening skills she learned when dealing with friends and family.

"It has been life-changing in terms of how I have used those skills," she said. "I taught juniors and seniors at Milligan, and I wished I'd had that training a lot earlier."

Stephen Ministry is also a godsend for pastors and other church staff, as the need for longer-term one-to-one Christian care is often more than they're able to handle alone.

"Stephen Ministers are not there to take the place of the clergy or pastoral staff," said the Rev. Jack Edwards, senior pastor of First Broad Street United Methodist Church. "They are an extension of our ministry that can provide one-on-one support."

Ron Davis, an associate pastor at First Baptist, was so impressed with the church's Stephen Ministry that he trained to become a Stephen Leader.

"There are so many cases in which people can have an opportunity to heal and to recover, or at least have support for a more extended period of time," he said. "Even when I'm counseling—and

Stephen Ministers aren't counselors, they're lay caregivers—I've had a lot of clients that I've been able to introduce to Stephen Ministry as an additional way of them getting help, so it's a real plus from that perspective, too."

But those who stand to benefit most from Stephen Ministry are the care receivers. Having someone to talk to, to walk alongside during life's crises, both big and small, can make the journey a little smoother.

"If you're not well mentally and spiritually, it's going to come out in a physical way," Watts said. "It's the whole package, and if any one part of that isn't well, it brings down the rest."

To those who aren't sure whether they should ask for help, Watts says, "God sent me to help you. He is helping you through this."

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For more information about Stephen Ministry, visit www.stephenministries.org.