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Peer Ministry Provides Long-Term Relationships

By LISA MAXSON
CATHOLIC VOICE

When Bonnie Hickey needed someone to talk to after her daughter died, she turned to a fellow parishioner at St. James, who spent almost a year helping her work through the grief.

That parishioner was a member of the Stephen Ministry, which provides one-to-one Christian care to hurting people in and around the parish.

“I was very angry and angry at God,” Hickey told the *Catholic Voice*. “I didn’t quit going to church, but I knew I needed someone to talk to about it.”

She and her “Stephen Minister” met once a week for about an hour. “I just needed to talk and I knew that’s what she was there for . . . to listen,” Hickey said.

“We know we can call on our Stephen Ministers to help.”

Father Jim Tiegs
St. Stephen the Martyr Church

After finding her experience of receiving care so beneficial, Hickey trained to be a Stephen Minister herself and has been providing care to hurting people ever since.

“I appreciated, and still do today, having had somebody there to listen to me—and I wanted to give that back,” Hickey said. “It helped me

so much, and I can honestly say I’ve now seen others benefit from having me there for them too.”

Ministry of compassion

Stephen Ministries was founded in 1975 by Rev. Kenneth Haugk, Ph.D., a Lutheran pastor and clinical psychologist who saw that people’s needs for care in his congregation and community exceeded what he could provide. He trained nine members of his St. Louis, Missouri, congregation to be the first Stephen Ministers.

Today, more than 11,000 congregations from 150 Christian denominations have Stephen Ministry—including more than 600 Roman Catholic parishes across the U.S. and Canada.

In 1984, St. James Parish in Omaha became the first Catholic parish in Nebraska to have a Stephen Ministry. Sister Joan Houtekier, OSM, trained Stephen Ministers for the parish, and has been involved in the ministry for over 25 years. Currently she is pastoral minister at St. Pius X Parish in Omaha and coordinates the Stephen Ministry there.

She said the Stephen Ministry is an asset to any parish because it helps busy priests. Father Jim Tiegs, pastor at St. Stephen the Martyr Church in Omaha, agrees.



Stephen Ministers are parishioners who have been trained to provide emotional and spiritual care to people experiencing life difficulties.

“Stephen Ministry is wonderful because it gets people from the parish involved in peer-to-peer ministry, and there’s great value in that, especially in a large parish like ours, because we priests can’t be all things to all people at any time in any situation,” he said.

The parish’s Stephen Ministers are “just so terrific because a human being’s personal needs and

Parishes in the Archdiocese of Omaha with Stephen Ministry

- St. Charles Borromeo Grentna
- St. Columbkille Papillion
- St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Omaha
- St. James Omaha
- St. Mary Bellevue
- St. Pius X Omaha
- St. Stephen the Martyr Omaha

spiritual needs do surface on a regular basis and we know we can call on our Stephen Ministers to help,” Father Tiegs said.

One of the biggest ways Stephen Ministry helps pastors is by providing follow-up, the priest said.

“A lot of times as pastors we might get the initial contact or two or three contacts,” Father Tiegs said. “Our Stephen Ministers can provide the ongoing, one-on-one



Stephen Ministers listen, care, pray, encourage, and walk with people for the duration of a crisis.

care people need. They can then report back to us if someone has a need for more priestly care. Stephen Ministry really provides a great service to our parish.”

Building relationships

Stephen Ministry involves building relationships, Sister Houtekier said. The role of a Stephen Minister is to listen, care, pray, encourage, and walk with the person for the duration of the crisis.

Although most Stephen Ministers are by nature very compassionate people, they aren’t professional counselors and they don’t always have the skills to minister to others. That’s why Stephen Ministers receive 50 hours of initial training in 20 weekly sessions. Their training covers topics such as listening skills, feelings, assertiveness, confidentiality, Christian caregiving, and prayer. Class sessions also include skill practice, role playing, and case scenarios.

After completing their training, Stephen Ministers are commissioned in front of their parishioners. They then receive twice-monthly supervision and continuing education, while serving as caregivers.

“Everybody needs someone who will listen and care.”

Sister Joan Houtekier
St. Pius X Parish

“People have wonderful gifts, and we need to call those gifts forth. We need to give people caregiving skills and involve them in doing ministry. We need to affirm them for the care they provide,” Sister Houtekier said.

“People who are experiencing a crisis or struggling through life difficulties need to tell their stories, and that’s what Stephen Ministry is about,” she said. “Everybody needs someone who will listen and care.”