

Finding God Amid Loss

Stephen Ministry brings the healing power of Jesus to those suffering losses and difficulties of any kind **by Bro. Octavio Duran, OFM**

When Beverly Delleart talks of helping people who are facing unexpected challenges, she is hopeful, not sad, because she has experienced God's grace pulling people through a difficult time.

Delleart, a Certified Spiritual Director, serves on the staff of St. Mary's parish in Pompton Lakes, N.J., as Director of Stephen Ministry, the lay Christian caregiving outreach that is a part of the pastoral care for the community.

These lay ministers attend to those who are dealing with the death of a loved one, the loss of a job, terminal illness, discouragement, hospitalization, transition to a nursing home, aging issues, and loneliness. Their care is confidential and offers listening, praying, extending acceptance, encouragement, and is distinctively Christian.

Father Frank Sevola, OFM, the pastor of St. Mary's, calls this healing ministry "an incredible service because it allows laypersons with the compassionate gifts God has given them to share those gifts with people in need."

Delleart describes those gifts as the "quiet gifts of the Holy Spirit, the graces of compassion, patience, mercy, gentleness, humility, as well as strength, and understanding."

She sees Stephen Ministry as a gift for all parishioners because the ministry builds a sense of community with Christians sharing the burdens of others.

"Responding to persons in need exemplifies faith in action," she says, "the Word made flesh, God made present. Stephen Ministry is very Catholic, very Franciscan, and very Christian. It reminds all of us that Christianity is not a spectator sport. We

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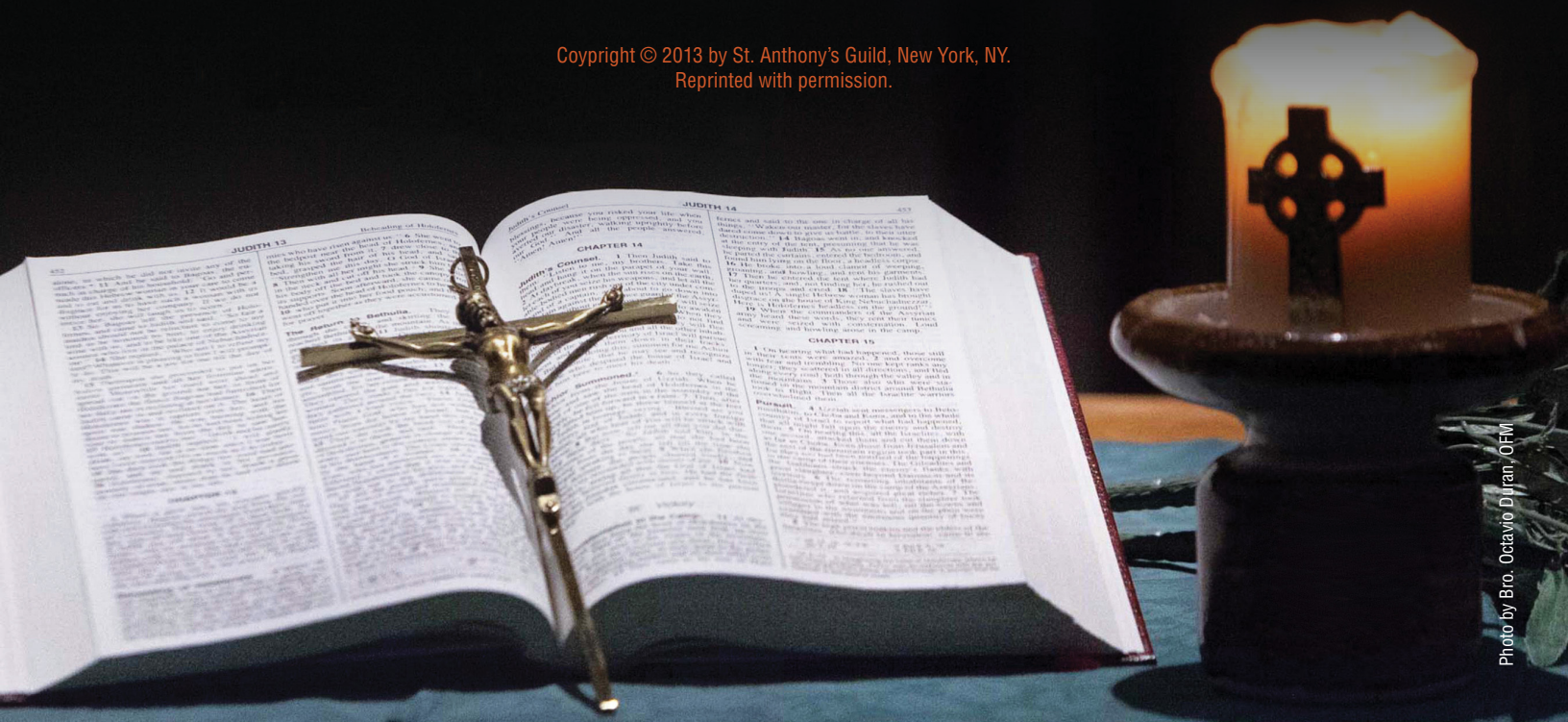


Photo by Bro. Octavio Duran, OFM



Photo courtesy of Bill Reul

become Eucharist to another. This is a ministry of prayer, discipleship, and service. Our desire is to remind those in need of how much our God loves them."

Stephen Ministry was founded in 1975, by Rev. Kenneth Haugk, Ph.D., a Lutheran pastor and clinical psychologist in St. Louis, Missouri. Haugk involved parishioners in this healing ministry because he explained, "I had more requests for care than I could handle." Since then, the ministry, named after St. Stephen, the first Christian martyr who served the early Christian community, has spread worldwide in more than 11,000 parishes and congregations among some 150 denominations, including

more than 700 Catholic parishes.

In the summer of 2010, Father Kevin Downey, then pastor of St. Mary's, tapped into Delleart's interest in helping parishioners facing life's losses and transitions. Fr. Kevin sent her to a one-week training conference in Pittsburgh to learn how to lead Stephen Ministry. "When I reported to Father Kevin," she ex-

plains, "he could see I was on fire and on a mission. Over the next 90 days, classes were scheduled, the first group of Stephen Minister candidates selected, and the ministry was birthed."

Stephen Ministry, now in its third year at St.

Mary's, has 36 active Stephen Ministers, with eight more in training.

This multi-cultural ministry reaches out to adults who are struggling through a crisis or life difficulty. Caring relationships are one-to-one and gender-matched (women are paired with women and men are paired with men). Each Stephen Minister meets with his or her care receiver once a week for about an hour. Caring relationships last for as long as the person's need is there.

Stephen Ministry has enabled St. Mary's parish to expand parish outreach by beginning new funeral care and nursing home ministries. The parish is also using Stephen Ministry to



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Compassionate Care: Spiritual Director Beverly Delleart (left) leads a training session on Christian caregiving, while Stephen Ministry trainee Pat Del Re (above) takes notes. Fr. Lawrence Anderson, OFM, (top) commissions newly trained Stephen Ministers.



Photo courtesy of Bill Reul

develop new outreach avenues for parishioners, care for new parishioners, and support for the community's military personnel and their families.

Stephen Ministers are also involved in monthly prayer services for those experiencing loss and transition.

Suzanne Montagna says she volunteered for Stephen Ministry "as a way of giving back to God for all the 'angels' who have helped me at different times in my life. I wanted to see if I could be that to someone else, and it turns out we are even more. When I put my arms around my care receiver, I feel it is Christ putting his arms around that person."

Caregiver George Ligotti says his ministry reminds him of a song from *Les Misérables*, "To love another is to see the face of God." He explains, "Over the years, I have volunteered to do many different kinds of work in the parish, but

none has brought me closer to God than ministering to someone who is suffering through a crisis. Serving as a Stephen Minister, I have found such joy in listening, providing hope, and offering friendship and support."

On several points virtually all caregivers agree. They say the greatest challenge in their ministry is to become active listeners and not advice givers. "We always have to remember," says Charles Nunzio, "our ministry is process-oriented, not results-oriented; we are the caregivers, and God is the curegiver. We listen, we care, we don't judge. We rely on God to help people discover their own solutions. We walk alongside that person for as long as it takes, one month or one year, for as long as the person needs care."

Caregivers also commonly agree that by serving in Stephen Ministry, they receive much more than they give. They are unanimous in proclaiming what they call a "spillover effect." When you share God's love, you are blessed in return. Stephen Ministry enriches them, their care receivers, their parish, and God's world.



Photo by Bro. Octavio Duran, OFM

Lay Ministers Abound: Fr. Lawrence Anderson, OFM, (top) holds a Stephen Ministry banner for the inaugural class of 24 Stephen Ministers. St. Mary's Parochial Vicar Richard Husted, OFM, confers with Stephen Ministers (from left) Charles Nunzio, George Ligotti, Georgina Calcines-Lowe, and Suzanne Montagna.