

Holy Infant one of many that embrace Stephen Ministry

by Jennifer Brinker, Review Staff Writer

In losing two wives to illness, Paul Davis has experienced some tremendous losses during his lifetime.

Davis' first wife, Joan, died from cancer after 35 years of marriage. He then married Carol, who died due to complications from back surgery after eight years of marriage.

So Davis was a bit surprised when his pastor, Msgr. Thomas Dempsey at Holy Infant in Ballwin, approached him several months after Carol's death and asked him to become involved in Stephen Ministry, a new program at the parish that would help people who were dealing with difficult life situations.

"Are you sure you want *me*?" Davis laughed. "I couldn't understand at first why he was asking me."

Davis said the priest explained: "I want you to be one of the leaders in this new ministry. I think you'd be good at this, because of everything you've been through."

Fast forward to today, and Davis is now actively involved as a Stephen Leader. He counts himself among a growing group of parishioners who are reaching out to others in their time of need.

A worldwide, interdenominational program, Stephen Ministry got its start in St. Louis in 1975 when Rev. Kenneth C. Haugk, a local Lutheran pastor and clinical psychologist, trained nine laypeople in his congregation to become Stephen Ministers.



MINISTERS FOR CHRIST—Members of Holy Infant Parish in Ballwin gather after their commissioning in January as Stephen Ministers. Holy Infant is one of 17 Catholic parishes in the archdiocese that offer Stephen Ministry. Worldwide, there are more than 9,000 congregations representing more than 100 Christian denominations that engage in Stephen Ministry.

They, in turn, provided spiritual care to people in the congregation and community. The caregivers were so excited about being involved in ministry that they encouraged Haugk to offer it to other faith-based congregations.

The group eventually became a not-for-profit organization and named itself Stephen Ministries St. Louis. The ministry's namesake is St. Stephen, the first layperson commissioned by the Apostles to provide caring ministry to those in need.

Holy Infant got its start with the ministry in April 2005 when six parishioners, including Davis, attended a one-week leadership training conference, which equipped them

to begin and lead Stephen Ministry in the parish.

These initial Stephen Leaders came back to the parish and selected 21 volunteers to go through 50 hours of training and become the parish's first Stephen Ministers. The Stephen Ministers were then matched with individuals in need of one-to-one care.

Msgr. Dempsey said he learned of Stephen Ministry through Patricia Foley, Holy Infant's director of religious education, who had participated in Stephen Ministry at a Texas parish.

Msgr. Dempsey said the ministry was appealing to him because it complements the spiritual support

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MINISTRY TRAINING—Stephen Leader Laura Teague, standing at the right, leads a training class for Stephen Ministers at Holy Infant. Training topics include how to deal with a person suffering a loss, spirituality, assertiveness and recognizing signs of abuse or suicide.

that a priest can offer to his flock.

“Stephen Ministry has a knack of working with people over a long period of time,” he said.

Msgr. Dempsey, however, noted that programs like Stephen Ministry are becoming even more important as the number of priests continues to decline and many congregations continue to grow. Holy Infant, for example, has about 2,800 households and continues to welcome new members every month.

“As our (priests’) numbers diminish, we’re going to have (lay) people doing the things that we do,” he said.

“The time is coming where we’re going to be needing those kinds of ministries.”

Stephen Ministers help people with issues such as the loss of a spouse through separation, divorce or death, job loss, loss of a child or other loved one, terminal illness, or other life crises, said Davis. The ministry also is available to new parishioners who wish to better acquaint themselves with parish life.

“Basically, Stephen Ministers are proactive listeners,” said Davis. “We’re not counselors, we’re not therapists. Our role is to listen and

care. We are the caregivers, Christ is the curegiver.”

This means that Stephen Ministers are not there to tell a person what to do but rather to “ask many questions and encourage you until you start seeing a solution for yourself,” said Davis.

A Stephen Minister also is required to maintain confidentiality. Confidentiality can be broken, however, if danger is imminent, such as a person who displays violent or suicidal behavior.

The rewards Stephen Ministers receive far outweigh the emotional ups and downs of helping a person in crisis. Davis said that Stephen Ministers often talk about how their involvement boosts their spirituality. Stephen Ministers also note how much they have learned from the ministry and applied what they’ve learned to their own lives.

“What we’re hearing from Stephen Ministers almost across the board is, ‘Serving in this ministry has helped me in my own walk of faith,’” he said.

“I think the people who are involved in it find it very satisfying,” said Msgr. Dempsey. “They feel that they’re really doing Church work . . . and I think that is the reward of the ministry—the good feeling.”