

Stephen Ministry marks 25 years in Tioga County Parish

By Mike Latona/Catholic Courier/October 6, 2010

Though 25 years have passed, Ann Domiano clearly remembers the first Stephen Ministry meeting ever held at Apalachin's St. Margaret Mary Church. As participants shared their reasons for becoming involved, it became apparent that nearly all were spurred by a personal hardship they'd endured—which, in Domiano's case, was the death of her mother.

"That struck me that we were all looking for the same thing. We learned from our experience and wanted to see if we couldn't help somebody, based on what we had gone through," Domiano said.

Stephen Ministers in Tioga County have assisted countless folks since 1985 by offering emotional support for people in crisis. The ministry was honored September 12 during the annual parish picnic.

Stephen Ministry is an international, interdenominational ministry that trains lay women and men to assist in pastoral care. It was begun in 1975 by Dr. Kenneth Haugk, a Lutheran pastor and clinical psychologist in St. Louis, Missouri, and has expanded to more than 10,000 congregations in more than 150 Christian denominations. St. Margaret



A cake commemorating 25 years of Stephen Ministry was made for the parish picnic held September 12.

Mary was one of the first churches in the diocese to offer Stephen Ministry, and more than 100 of its members have been trained as Stephen Ministers.

The parish's Stephen Leaders pair each Stephen Minister with an individual in need of care. These "care receivers" either come forward on their own or are identified through a referrals process.

Stephen Leader Ann Argetsinger observed that some sort of loss—of a loved one, a marriage, a job, or one's health—often factors into the need for a Stephen Minister. Other potential circumstances include loneliness, life transitions, parenting issues, traumatic experiences, and spiritual crises. Stephen Ministers work one-on-one with their care receiver via personal visits and phone calls for varying lengths of time.

Stephen Ministers are bound to strict confidentiality. This is key in establishing trust because "many times those who are hurting are not comfortable talking about their situation. Maybe they are embarrassed, ashamed or just overwhelmed and don't know where else to turn," said Stephen Minister Mary Ann Cascarino—who, along with Domiano, is one of two founding members to be active for the full 25 years.

Even though they may attend the same church, Stephen Ministers often do not know their care



Father William Moorby recommissions 18 veteran Stephen Ministers during a mass to celebrate 25 years of Stephen Ministry at St. Margaret Mary Church.

receivers prior to the caring relationship. What's more important is being able to relate to a situation. "The best Stephen Minister is often somebody who had gone through a similar experience (as the care receiver)," Domiano observed.

Argetsinger said Stephen Ministers aren't professionals—"We're not the fixers, we're the listeners"—but noted that they're trained in detecting when a person needs professional help or emergency care and making appropriate contacts. But in most circumstances, Domiano said a Stephen Minister's value is simply derived from the powerful gesture of "walking with a friend who's hurting" and being nonjudgmental.



St. Margaret Mary Church in Apalachin began its Stephen Ministry in 1985.

"We always think we have to go through things by ourselves, and I don't think God wants us to," Argetsinger remarked.

All Stephen Ministers have undergone at least 50 hours of

intensive training. Cascarino said that training has helped her not only as a minister but in daily situations, "learning so many new ways to effectively listen and 'be there' for others."

Stephen Minister Ed Syryca also has deep appreciation for the training: "Stephen Ministry training has given me the tools to help someone going through a life crisis. I've become a better listener and more patient—and that has strengthened my family relationships as well."

Stephen Ministry is available at a number of parishes throughout the Rochester Diocese. Argetsinger called for more parishes to consider it, since priests and staff members are already stretched thin.

"Stephen Ministry has been a great blessing. More people receive care during difficult times in life. They have someone who can meet with them week after week to listen, care, and provide support."

Father William Moorby

"It has pulled the faithful into realizing that they, too, have a ministry role," said Argetsinger, who has been a Stephen Leader both in Blessed Trinity, where she recently retired after four years as pastoral associate; and her home parish of Immaculate Conception in Ithaca, which has had a Stephen Ministry since 2000. She's also been on the receiving end of Stephen Ministry—having been a care receiver in 2003 due to issues at a previous job.

Stephen Ministers devote considerable time and effort, but Argetsinger said the payoff is to share in a healing process, noting that "people who have gotten into it have really felt satisfaction."

You can certainly count Domiano as one of those satisfied Stephen Ministers—all told, more than half-a-million of them have been trained since the ministry began in 1975.

"I've absolutely loved it from day one," she stated.



Stephen Ministry is a complete system for training and organizing laypersons to provide one-to-one Christian care to hurting people in and around their congregations.

To learn more, contact:

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