

Naples Daily News NEOPOLITAN

FAITH & VALUES

Earth Angels

Stephen Ministers Offer Emotional and Spiritual Support in Times of Trouble

by Beth Francis
emfrancis@naplesnews.com

Mary Larrabee's life was a mess. Her marriage had just ended in divorce, she underwent two major surgeries, and then her grown son was murdered.

"As a friend of mine put it, the manure truck just kept backing up and dumping on me," Larrabee said.

Then she heard about Stephen Ministry at her church.

The ministry matches specially trained members of a congregation with people going through a tough time. Nationwide, more than 10,000 churches representing more than 150 different Christian denominations offer Stephen Ministry.

"It enriches the church to have this consistent outreach available to anyone in the community who needs help."

Larrabee was matched with Stephen Minister Kathy Ames, a fellow member of North Naples United Methodist Church, and the two met once a week for more than a year.



"I'm stronger and I know how precious every day is," says Mary Larrabee, right, who was helped with a life crisis by her Stephen Minister Kathy Ames. "She would hold my hand and let me spill out my heart. I call her my earth angel."

"She would hold my hand and let me spill out my heart," Larrabee said of Ames. "I call her my earth angel. She really helped me through a hard time in my life. She didn't give me specific advice as much as she just listened to me and validated my pain."

Now that the formal Stephen Ministry relationship has ended, the two remain friends.

"I will always be grateful to her for all of her prayers and all that she did to help me," Larrabee said.

Stephen Ministry began in St. Louis in 1975 when the Rev. Kenneth Haugk, a pastor and clinical psychologist, found he was unable to meet the needs of all the people in his congregation. He trained nine laypeople in his church to assist him in providing Christian care to people who needed encouragement.

It went so well that Haugk began training Stephen Ministers in other congregations. That, in turn, led to the establishment of the Stephen Se-

ries Leader's Training Course, which trains pastors and lay leaders to go back to their congregations and train others to become Stephen Ministers.

"We train the trainers," said Joel Bretscher, Director of Communications at the Stephen Ministries headquarters in St. Louis. "We train the Stephen Leaders who then go home to train the Stephen Ministers in the congregation." Stephen Ministers then provide one-to-one emotional and spiritual care to people in need.

The name Stephen comes from St. Stephen, who was the first layperson commissioned by the Apostles to provide caring ministry to those in need, Bretscher said.

"Ordained pastors often find there are more needs for care than they can provide, so Stephen Ministers are there to supplement, but not replace, pastoral care," Bretscher said.

In Stephen Ministry, women are matched with women and men are

Naples Daily News

Earth Angels—Stephen Ministers Offer Emotional and Spiritual Support in Times of Trouble

matched with men. It is also important to note that Stephen Ministers are available to care for anyone in the community who is hurting, not just church members, said Becky Jarrell, Director of Congregational Care at North Naples United Methodist Church.

“We are here for anyone experiencing a life crisis, whether it’s death, divorce, illness, relocation, financial difficulty or whatever the need,” Jarrell said. “It enriches the church to have this consistent outreach available to anyone in the community who needs help.”

“It’s a wonderful thing to see God working in people’s lives.”

Over the past eight years, North Naples United Methodist Church has trained more than 60 people to become Stephen Ministers, she said.

At Community Congregational

Church in Naples, there are more than 20 active Stephen Ministers, said Gini Reinhold, Director of Congregational Care.

“The Stephen Minister is there to walk with you throughout your crisis and to help you see that, with God’s love, you will be okay,” Reinhold said.

Stephen Ministers go through 50 hours of training and commit to serving for two years. Most choose to serve much longer after they find they get as much out of the ministry as they give, Reinhold said.

“It’s a wonderful thing to see God working in people’s lives,” she said. “There’s something special about knowing that God has put you in a certain place at a certain time to help a certain person. Stephen Ministers grow a lot as a result.”

Patty Lengemann knows what it’s like to be on both sides of the fence. She had her own Stephen Minister about five years ago when she went through a divorce.

“I know how wonderful it is to give and receive,” Lengemann said.

“My Stephen Minister gave me the courage to start over again. Now I want to give something back.”

“The Stephen Minister is there to walk with you through your crisis and to help you see that, with God’s love, you will be okay.”

Lengemann, a member at Community Congregational, has had two care receivers since she became a Stephen Minister.

“So far, I’ve been matched with people going through the same kind of pain I experienced, so I’m able to identify with what they’re going through,” she said. “I’m able to share my experience with them and help them to see that, when God closes one door, he opens another.”