

The 'After' People: Stephen Ministers Provide Care in Life's Crises

by Jessica Fischer

Just call Stephen Ministers the "after" people—

... *after* you find the pink slip in what's now your final paycheck;

... *after* the doctors have said there's nothing more they can do;

... *after* the relationship ends but the wounds are still bleeding;

... *after* family and friends have heard your story one too many times but you still need to talk it out.

That's when the Stephen Ministers step in.

Stephen Ministers are congregation members who have been trained to offer Christian support to people struggling through a difficult time.

"A Stephen Minister is somebody who's going to walk beside you during a time of need," said Mary Watts, a parish nurse and Stephen Leader at **First Baptist Church** of Kingsport. "They're going to hold your

the Apostles to minister to those in need, Stephen Ministry began in 1975 when the Rev. Kenneth C. Haugk, Ph.D., a pastor and clinical psychologist, trained nine lay persons at his congregation in St. Louis to be Stephen Ministers.

Today, more than 12,000 congregations are involved, representing more than 170 different Christian denominations from all 50 states, nine Canadian provinces, and 24 other countries.

First Baptist has had Stephen Ministry for a dozen years. Other area churches with a Stephen Ministry include **Colonial Heights Baptist**, **Colonial Heights Presbyterian**, **First Broad Street United Methodist**, and **Holy Trinity Lutheran**—which commissioned its first class of Stephen Ministers back in 1984.

"Stephen Ministry is helping people walk through a difficult time in their life and showing them Christian care," said Loretta Nitschke, a Stephen Minister at Holy Trinity. "It's what the church is supposed to be."

"Nearly a third of our care receivers are from outside the church."

hand the whole way. If you want to talk, they'll listen. If you want prayer, they'll pray. If you just want to sit there and cry, that's fine too."

Named after St. Stephen, the first lay person commissioned by

"Stephen Ministers are there to listen and care—not to try to 'fix things' or tell you what to do," said Bill Crawford, a Stephen Leader at **First Broad Street United Methodist Church**. "We are the care givers;



Stephen Ministers provide one-to-one, confidential Christian care to people going through a difficult time. Five area congregations are involved in Stephen Ministry.

God is the cure giver," Crawford said.

The ministry itself works like this:

Pastors, church staff and lay leaders attend a one-week Leader's Training Course, taught by the Stephen Ministries St. Louis faculty, to learn how to implement and direct Stephen Ministry in the congregation. These trained Stephen Leaders then return home to get the ministry started.

One of their first tasks is to recruit and select congregation members to serve as Stephen Ministers and provide them with 50 hours of Christian caregiving training in the congregation.

Training topics include listening, feelings, assertiveness, confidentiality, and ministering to people in specific situations such as childbirth, divorce, terminal illness, and grief. Stephen Ministers are also trained to recognize when a person's needs go beyond the care a lay person can provide, and where and how to refer

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the person for additional care from a professional.

senior pastor of First Broad Street United Methodist Church. "They

ceivers. Having someone to talk to, to walk alongside during life's crises, both big and small, can make the journey a little smoother.

"If you're going through an emotional or spiritual struggle, Stephen Ministry is here to meet those needs," Watts said.

At first some folks are unsure about seeking care and wonder whether a strong person should need to ask for care. To this Watts replies: "God sent us to help one another. Stephen Ministry is one way God provides that care."

"Stephen Ministers provide much more one-to-one support than we clergy could ever provide alone."

After the Stephen Ministers are commissioned, Stephen Leaders link them with care receivers—people who need emotional and spiritual care.

"Stephen Ministry is not just for people in the congregation—it's also for people in the community," Watts said. "In the years we've had Stephen Ministry, nearly a third of our care receivers are from outside the church. It's a great outreach ministry."

Stephen Ministry is also a god-send for pastors. "Stephen Ministers are not there to take the place of clergy," said the Rev. Jack Edwards,

are an extension of our ministry and can provide much more one-to-one support than we clergy could ever provide alone."

Ron Davis, an associate pastor at First Baptist, was so impressed with the church's Stephen Ministry that he trained to become a Stephen Leader.

"There are so many people who need care and support for an extended period of time in order to heal and recover," he said. "I've been able to introduce a lot of people to Stephen Ministry, so it's a real plus to me as a pastor."

But those who benefit most from Stephen Ministry are the care re-



Holy Trinity in Kingsport has been involved in Stephen Ministry for more than 25 years.