

## Stephen Ministers serve as a “leaning post”

by Dawn Baumgartner Vaughan

DURHAM—It takes more than a set of ears to be a good listener to another member of your church. The Stephen Ministry is a nation-wide program in which congregation members go through intensive training to be there for others in their times of need.

On a Tuesday night earlier this month at White Rock Baptist Church, eight Stephen Ministers and Stephen Leaders gathered in a classroom. They started the meeting with a devotion led by Eloise Jordan, who talked about the building blocks for good relationships: love, encouragement, respect, managing emotions and prayer.

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Joel McCauley, Sr.  
Stephen Leader

In Stephen Ministry congregations, lay caregivers—called Stephen Ministers—provide one-on-one confidential Christian care to the bereaved, hospitalized, terminally ill, divorced, unemployed, relocated, empty-nesters and others facing a crisis or life challenge. Stephen Ministers and care receivers are paired by gender—women with women, men with men.

“We can’t stress enough how Christ-centered, God-centered this ministry is. God is always there,” said Stephen Leader Barbara Carney.

Stephen Ministries, which is based in St. Louis, was started in 1975 by the Rev. Kenneth C. Haugk, Ph.D., a pastor and clinical psychologist. Several local churches have Stephen Ministry, including Aldersgate United Methodist, Chapel of the Cross, the Congregation at Duke Chapel, Grace Lutheran, Pittsboro

First United Methodist, Westminster Presbyterian and Union Baptist. White Rock consulted Union Baptist when it first considered becoming a Stephen Ministry congregation.

In 2003, Carney brought the idea to her pastor at White Rock, the Rev. Reginald Van Stephens. “She could tell that, as a pastor, I was extended,” Van Stephens said. “It was also clear that this is not a counseling ministry, but a listening ministry. They don’t give advice. They’re simply there to be listeners.”

Stephen Leader Shirley Davis said one reason Stephen Ministry is active is because they realize the pastor can’t get to everyone in the congregation, so people in the church are trained and help the pastor.

That means 50 hours of training for Stephen Ministers and a week-long training session for Stephen Leaders. Leader Joel McCauley Sr. said it has been an extremely rewarding experience for him.

“You get an opportunity to really share intimate thoughts and feelings you don’t get to normally, because of the trust factor. You don’t build that overnight,” McCauley said. “All we’re really doing is being vessels for Christ, to be a listening ear and to walk with people during difficult times.”

Leader Teri Canada became involved after her mom passed away.

“At that point, nothing that big had happened to me. You can go to some dark places, and [Stephen Ministry] is having someone lead you out,” she said. Canada said the training helped her, too.

McCauley said that when a loved one dies, there is a rush of support and visitors, but two weeks after the funeral, the grieving person is alone. But the person’s Stephen Minister will still be there.

Brian Scott, who is a Stephen Minister, said that men are not bred to share their feelings.

“But when it all comes down, men hurt as much as anyone else, maybe even more,” he said. “It takes a little while to build trust, but once you peel back the layers, you see men have the same fears as everyone else.”

“If people don’t know what’s going on with you, they can’t pray for you. Maybe my charge as a Stephen Minister is to spread that message to other brothers,” Scott said.

When Brian sees his care receiver now, he gives him a big hug. They’ve become good friends.



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From left, Shirl Davis, Barbara Carney, Barbara Green, Joel McCauley, and Teri Canada, members of the Stephen Ministry team at White Rock Baptist Church.

Barbara Green was part of a similar program at her church in California, so she was eager to join the ministry at White Rock.

“It’s such a rewarding experience to see the results of you being there for them, and that what they say is not being repeated,” Green said. Before she meets with a care receiver, she prays first, asking the Holy Spirit to lead her.

“I think of it as being a leaning post. It makes you feel closer to God,” she said. Green said many Stephen Ministers are wounded healers, too.

“If you have gone through something when no one was there for you, like I have, you see yourself [in the care receiver]. I know God can handle anything,” she said.