

Sunday, August 26, 2007
Thirteen Pentecost Year C
Christ Church, St. Michaels

Jeremiah 1:4-10 **Psalm 71: 1-6**
Hebrews 12:18-29 **Luke 13:10-17**
The Reverend Abigail Crozier Nestlehutt

It was about six years ago that I first learned about Stephen Ministry. I met some people at a conference I was attending who were from a parish in North Carolina, I think. For some reason we got on the topic of pastoral care and they told me about a wonderful program of which they were a part. It was all new to me and it sounded like a great deal of work but they were so enthusiastic and the conversation made an impression on me. Still, that was not the focus of the weekend and so I filed it all away somewhere in my brain until a few years ago when I found myself thinking about Stephen Ministry again.

It is my belief that Pastoral Care is an important aspect of all parishes. And I define pastoral care broadly—to encompass all those things that we do to care for one another out of response to God’s call to us. It includes praying, offering tangible assistance in the form of a ride to an appointment or a meal to a family with a newborn and of course visiting people in their homes or simply listening in times of need. In these ways we extend Christian love to our neighbor as God calls us to do. If we take this ministry seriously and realize that we each have a responsibility to follow Jesus’ example then we have the chance to continue to develop a real culture of caring in our parish.

To be a community that actively strives to respond to Jesus’ call to love one another is a powerful thing. In your travels through life you have experienced such a community, I hope. You have been a part of a church, a family or some other group of people where you knew that you were accepted and loved for who you are—a child of God. I expect that also you have experienced times when the opposite has been true—you have been rejected or you have feared rejection if people “really knew you” or, as importantly, you have been swept up and into a situation and realized that you were among people who did not really seem to care.

As I have mentioned in the past, I consider Christ Church to be a place that cares a great deal. We offer help locally, nationally and globally in terms of outreach programs. Also, this is a congregation of people who enjoy being together and who simply do nice things for each other. Still, there is room to grow in the area of Pastoral Care. And it was not long after arriving here at Christ Church that I began to feel nudged by those conversations about Stephen Ministry from years ago. At the time we had a variety of programs designed to help people in need in the parish but I felt that we could do more. It took about two years or so before I felt that we were ready to seriously consider this comprehensive program but then the time seemed right.

Stephen Ministry began in 1974 when the new pastor of St. Stephen’s Lutheran Church in St. Louis, Missouri realized that he needed to train lay people to assist in offering caring ministry to those in need in his parish because he could not adequately respond to all of the ongoing situations that required care. And, as he put it he realized that “God gave all people gifts for ministry and that one of his roles as a pastor was to equip others

to use their gifts...” Within a year the program had made such a positive difference in the life of that parish that the pastor developed a program that could be offered to other churches and today there are more than 9,000 Stephen Ministry congregations around the world. Stephen Ministry takes its name from St. Stephen who was the first lay person commissioned by the apostles to provide caring ministry to those in need.

Last Fall it became clear to me that the time was right for us to begin Stephen Ministry at Christ Church. Kind of like the prophet Jeremiah in our first reading today, I was a little unsure. But God does not tend to call us into ministries that are easy—rather God calls us into ministries that need doing and that we need in order to grow. That was true for Jeremiah as he tried to protest God’s call to him as a prophet—but God persisted. It is a typical pattern with the prophets that God calls them and they resist, saying they are unworthy, but God assures them and they are commissioned to do the often challenging prophetic work that God has for them to do.

In two weeks we will commission our first Stephen Ministers. Ten people have completed 50 hours of training and are now beginning to be matched with care-receivers and are participating in ongoing supervision. Stephen Ministers offer caring to people in our church and in our community who are experiencing a variety of situations—divorce, loss of a job, loneliness, hospitalization or any of the things that make life difficult. Stephen Ministers are reliable listeners who keep confidential all aspects of the caring relationship.

This is a new concept in the life of this parish. To date it has been mainly clergy who visit those in real need at Christ Church. And, that has not changed. Mark, Paul and I will continue to attend to the pastoral needs of this parish. Still, there are cases where trained lay people can offer ongoing care that makes such an amazing difference.

You do not all feel called to be Stephen Ministers but each of you has a role to play in this ministry. Each week you pray—Stephen Ministry has been in the prayers of the people in one form or another for quite some time on purpose. Some of you have let me know of people in need who would benefit from having a Stephen Minister—this is an important way of supporting the program and also responding to Jesus’ call to love your neighbor. Some will let me know of their own need for a Stephen Ministers. Others of you will eventually become Stephen Ministers yourself. It is my hope that all of us will benefit from this ministry being a part of our parish as we experience together what it is to grow more and more as a caring community.

In the world today there are so many opportunities to be frustrated or hurried or harried or even angry. There is so much value placed on doing more and judging and being better that it goes against the grain of modern life to simply listen and care and offer acceptance. But unless we are striving to be worn out and lonely we need to continue to pay attention to God. I invite you to learn more about Stephen Ministry and to be a part of this ministry of caring in whatever way makes sense for you.