7**eature**

Lay people proffer care via program

By Lee Strong Staff writer

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ONTARIO - Three parishioners of St. Mary's of the Lake Church died while the pastor, Father Robert Kreckel, was on vacation in January.

For a parish with just one priest, three deaths occurring so close together would normally cause a strain on parish resources, perhaps forcing the priest to return suddenly.

But except for phoning the bereaved families to offer his condolences, Father Kreckel was able to continue his vacation. Meanwhile, the pastoral care and support needed by the families was provided quickly and smoothly by parishioners, all because of the parish's involvement with the Stephen Ministry series.

"It was unbelievable the way they were able to step in," Father Kreckel observed. "(The families) did not feel neglected by the way they were ministered to.'

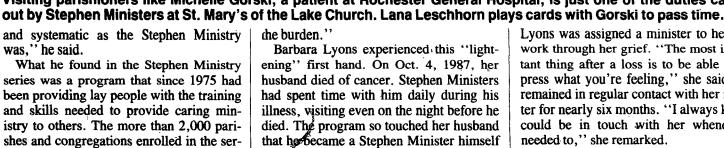
"There wasn't a void because (Father Kreckel) wasn't here," noted the parish's secretary, Donna Jeffers. "The families have sent letters thanking us for the help they got.'

was," he said.

ies receive intensive instruction for their

leadership teams, and a completely out-

St. Mary's has been part of the Stephen Ministry program since 1986. Over the years, 44 parishioners have made the twoyear commitment to serve as Stephen Ministers. They have have received 50 hours of preparation to minister to fellow parishioners during such times of crisis as death, divorce and serious illness. Each minister works one-on-one with someone in distress - called a "helpee" - to provide support, companionship and comfort.



before he died. After her husband's death, Barbara

Lyons was assigned a minister to help her work through her grief. "The most important thing after a loss is to be able to express what you're feeling," she said. She remained in regular contact with her minister for nearly six months. "I always knew I could be in touch with her whenever I needed to," she remarked.

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Visiting parishioners like Michelle Gorski, a patient at Rochester General Hospital, is just one of the duties carried