

Lay people proffer care via program

By Lee Strong
Staff writer

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."

St. Mary's has been part of the Stephen Ministry program since 1986. Over the years, 44 parishioners have made the two-year commitment to serve as Stephen Ministers. They 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. In addition to home visits and phone calls, the ministers also visit parishioners at Rochester General Hospital or Myers Community Hospital in Sodus.

St. Mary's is one of three diocesan parishes that have the Stephen Ministry program in place. Church of the Resurrection, Fairport, has been involved in the program since 1982, while St. Margaret Mary Parish, Apalachin, has been involved with it since 1985.

In addition, a leadership team from St. Ann's, Palmyra/St. Gregory's, Marion, received 12 days of training in January. This July, a leadership team from St. Francis DeSales, Geneva, will also undergo training. These leadership teams will, in turn, train fellow parishioners to serve as Stephen Ministers. These ministers will learn such skills as how to listen, to express feelings, to be assertive, and how to pray with people.

Father Kreckel discovered Stephen Ministry when he was at Church of the Resurrection. A Lutheran church in Fairport had started the program, and the priest became interested in it. "I was looking for something to equip lay people (for ministry), and we didn't have anything in our own denomination that was as thorough



Visiting parishioners like Michelle Gorski, a patient at Rochester General Hospital, is just one of the duties carried out by Stephen Ministers at St. Mary's of the Lake Church. Lana Leschhorn plays cards with Gorski to pass time.

Linda Dow Hayes/Catholic Courier

and systematic as the Stephen Ministry was," he said.

What he found in the Stephen Ministry series was a program that since 1975 had been providing lay people with the training and skills needed to provide caring ministry to others. The more than 2,000 parishes and congregations enrolled in the series receive intensive instruction for their leadership teams, and a completely outlined system for training people as Stephen Ministers.

When Father Kreckel arrived at St. Mary's in 1985, he suggested his new parish become involved with the program. The parish's need for the program became clearer in 1986 when he became St. Mary's sole priest. The parish council voted to join the series and appropriated approximately \$3,000 to cover the one-time enrollment fee and the expenses involved in sending leaders for training. The training itself is free.

Because of the Stephen Ministers, "there's a lot of people being ministered to who I would not have time to spend one hour a week with," Father Kreckel observed. And in situations such as the one that occurred while he was on vacation, "I don't have to worry when I'm away," he said. "The people here are extremely well trained."

Stephen Ministry at St. Mary's is directed by a leadership team that comprises Father Kreckel, Jeffers, and Jerry and Lee Skerrett. The team is responsible for training and supervising the Stephen Ministers. Lee Skerrett explained that the ministers are trained to support, not to counsel, those in pain. "We don't look to solve anybody else's problem," she said, "just to lighten

the burden."

Barbara Lyons experienced this "lightening" first hand. On Oct. 4, 1987, her husband died of cancer. Stephen Ministers had spent time with him daily during his illness, visiting even on the night before he died. The program so touched her husband that he became a Stephen Minister himself 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.

Continued on page 11

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