

## Compassion is main focus of Stephen group

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intense training this past August at Loyola College in Baltimore, Md. — one of six regional training sites for Stephen leaders.

These people are eventually commissioned as leaders in their home parishes. After receiving their commission, their responsibilities are twofold: not only do they perform the ministry, but they also formulate a staff of additional ministers through training sessions conducted within the parish.

The ministers provide regular one-on-one emotional support via home and hospital visits as well as telephone calls. All contact is handled with strict confidentiality.

Flanagan, who became a Stephen Minister in 1991 and attended the Baltimore leadership sessions last year, said the key element of Stephen Ministry is to listen, rather than offer solutions.

For instance, in the case of Lenore Dress, she said, "No one can take away the pain. But what we could do is be by her side and say we understand; we care."

"It's people being Christ to one another. That's it, in a nutshell," stated Haugk.

He added that the name for his organization was inspired by Stephen's work, along with similarities that exist between the martyr and Jesus Christ.

"Stephen was one of the first lay people commissioned by the apostles to do pastoral care. And, Stephen is a Christ-



S. John Wilkin/Staff photographer  
Ralph LaRose, a Stephen Minister who deals with acutely ill individuals, often uses his Siberian husky Copper as part of his ministerial work.

pastoral care among the laity — especially as the number of men and women religious continues to decline.

"As there are fewer and fewer of us, this is something that can be beneficial," said Father Bonin. "My job in the present is to empower the people, and Stephen Ministry is one of the ways. I can't stay in a person's life every week, so Stephen Ministers can provide the extra thing I know I can't do — the extra Christ walk that I physically can't give."

Father Bonin acknowledged that financial factors hampered his parish's effort to get the program off the ground. It costs \$1,000 to register as a Stephen leader, and subsequent training can cost thousands more.

Haugk added the emotionally draining nature of this work isn't universally appealing. "You really have to sweat to do this. It's not cheap and it's not easy."

Although Haugk would like to see Catholics increase their spirit of outreach by joining Stephen Ministries — "praying, paying and obeying just doesn't cut it" — he did say that some member Catholic churches around the country "are just going wild."

Father Bonin believes that the lack of Catholic participation regarding Stephen Ministry is largely due to the fact that the organization is not headed by the Catholic Church and therefore not as warmly embraced by Catholic leaders.

However, the Watkins Glen pastor commented, "you've got to be open to what other Christian denominations teach us."

Mike Currier, a Catholic who performs leadership training at the regional level, said that Stephen Ministry is "perfectly suited to the Catholic Church in this day and age."

"It really empowers people to do what their baptism calls entailed," commented Currier in a telephone interview from Cleveland, Ohio.

Currier, who helped mentor the three diocesan parishes in Baltimore this past August, describes Stephen Ministry as "the best ecumenical experience in the country today."

Not only do Stephen Ministers come from various faiths, but their service transcends denominations as well.

Flanagan said that St. Columba/St. Patrick ministers work mostly with parishioners, but they're available for anyone in the Caledonia and Mumfords area regardless of religious affiliation. Dress, for instance, is not Catholic.

In addition, neighboring Catholic parishes which do not have a Stephen Ministry often benefit from the efforts of Flanagan, St. Columba/St. Patrick Stephen Ministry Coordinator Elaine Dearcop, and their fellow members.

Many times, Flanagan noted, those who have been helped subsequently become Stephen Ministers themselves. Others who have experienced difficulty in their lives make excellent candidates as ministers, she added, because they can relate better to the troubling experiences of those whom they serve.

One such minister is Ralph LaRose, a Caledonia resident. In addition to seeing bloodshed while serving in the U.S. Army in Vietnam, LaRose has also dealt with divorce and alcoholism in his family life.

LaRose finds his ministry fulfilling, yet difficult — especially when working with those whom are severely ill.

"You know you're doing the Lord's work, but there's a certain level of happiness and a certain level of sadness," said LaRose, who became a Stephen minister in 1991.

"It goes from being a Stephen Ministry-type thing to being a friend-type thing," he added. "You get attached to a person for six or eight months and then that person dies, and it's like it takes a part of you."

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Valerie Swinson is staying off drugs and learning work skills thanks to the help she gets from Rogers House, a rehabilitation project for ex-offenders run by Corpus Christi parish in Rochester.

"Helping people get their lives in order is what we do," says director Jim Smith. As part of Urban Service's subsidy program, a diocesan grant paid for training for an on-site drug counselor. More than \$90,000 is

like figure — there are a lot of parallels," said Haugk.

Haugk described the Stephen Ministry approach as a combination of "sound theology and sound psychology."

"It's not limited only to mental health principles. There's got to be, and there are, strong theological underpinnings," said the ministry's founder.

He feels that Stephen Ministry's person-to-person contact is vital in an increasingly isolated society.

"People are locking their doors. People can turn on their TVs," said Haugk.

For Father David L. Bonin, beginning a parish Stephen Ministry program was "a dream" when he arrived as pastor at St. Mary of the Lake Church in Watkins Glen four years ago.

Father Bonin had first seen how Stephen Ministry works when he filled in for Father David P. Simon, pastor of St. Margaret Mary Church, 1110 Pennsylvania Ave., Apalachin, during Father Simon's 1988 sabbatical. St. Margaret Mary has performed Stephen Ministry work since 1985.

In the summer of 1988, Father Bonin accompanied an Apalachin group to leadership training in Baltimore. He returned to those sessions this year — accompanied by five parishioners from St. Mary of the Lake, as well as members of Odessa's St. Benedict Church, where he also serves as pastor. These leaders are now educating 20 trainees.

Father Bonin enthusiastically endorses Haugk's viewpoint about spreading

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