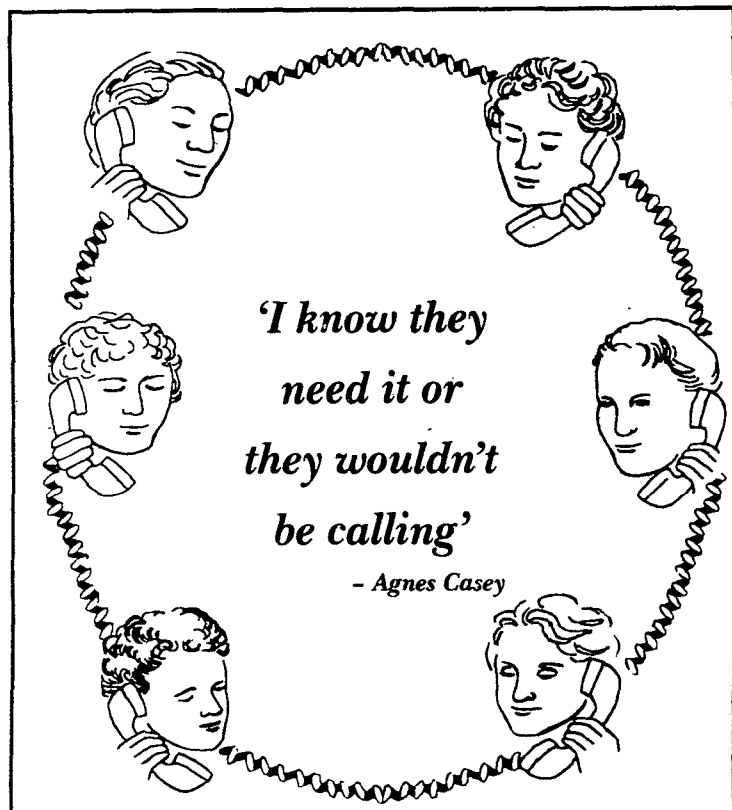


## CONTINUED...



## Phone

Continued from page 1

Valerie Brownstein of Greece had the Charismatic Renewal prayer line praying for her last fall. Facing biopsy of an apparent cancerous lymph node, and experiencing related symptoms, she was invited by a neighbor to a nondenominational prayer group meeting at Christ the King Church.

"I'd never done anything like this in my life before," said Brownstein, a retired librarian. "I wouldn't put myself in the category of Jerry Falwell."

After the group laid hands on her and prayed over her, one member, Gloria Nigro, took her name to the prayer line.

"Many things in my life have changed since then," Brownstein said, calling her experiences an awakening. When the doctor called with the negative results of her biopsy, he added, "Someone must be looking out for you. There's absolutely nothing that showed up in this biopsy."

Not only does she feel better physically, she said, but she feels a channel to God has opened for her. She now attends the prayer group meetings weekly, to pray, study and sing with others.

And this Easter, she said, she's been thinking about the Resurrection and its symbolism for her own rebirth.

"It wasn't just my body resurrected, it was my spirit," she said. "I consider myself more of a whole person."

## Credentials not needed

People on prayer lines don't claim to have a special connection to God.

Kathy Snyder of Wayland — herself a member of the Holy Family cluster prayer line — explained that when her 48-year-old husband faced the removal of a cancerous kidney a year ago Christmas Eve, "The prayer line was the first thing we thought of, the more praying for us the better. We could just sit back and say we're doing all we can do, it's in God's hands now. You get the strength from prayer."

From a strong Catholic family herself, she said there was a guilt involved because of the numbness, the inability to focus and pray herself.

Father Paul Schnacky, then pastor, she recalled, used to tell them, "If there are problems and you can't pray, just come and let others pray for you."

Intercessory prayer is part of the Catholic faith tradition, noted Ruth Page, pastoral associate at St. Stephen's Church, Geneva. Prayer lines are a popular form of it.

"What is unique about this method of doing it is you don't have to come together, it's not an extra meeting," she explained. "Yet you pray in the style of your own prayer experience. You don't have to pray a rosary or Hail Mary. So that gives people great freedom. You don't have to have these credentials in order to pray."

St. Stephen's Prayer Line consists of about 25-30 people, including Msgr. Gerard Krieg, pastor. They pray for a person by the person's first name and/or situation for week or two. After that the intention is incorporated into all the intentions of the prayer line.

"You could be prayed for for years, which isn't bad," Page said. The intentions also are included in weekend Mass.

"You know how people say, 'Father, will you pray for me?' or 'Sister, will you pray for me?' Well, a whole community can pray for you."

Agnes Casey, a homebound St. Stephen's parishioner, said she takes calls at 5 a.m., midnight, or whenever the phone rings.

"I know they need it or they wouldn't be calling," she said, adding that she offers to pray with the caller before hanging up.

St. Stephen's Prayer Line was begun about a dozen years ago, by then-Pastoral

Associate Judith Kiehl.

"I guess I really started it with my hope to find a way for homebound people to be in touch with the community," Kiehl said. The Spiritual Life Committee took it from there, she said, and several participants who are homebound signed up for the line, she added.

"It kept us together in prayer," Kiehl said. "It comes out of the whole understanding of prayer as a place we are all together ... a place we find each other, all our weaknesses, limits, disabilities collapse in prayer, all disappear in prayer."

"Of course, the definition of prayer is begging, that's what it is. It's an asking, a recognizing of our poverty before God. That's literally the definition of prayer. ... That is another way we are united; we are all seeking the face of God, the presence of God."

## A personal lift

St. Stephen's promoted its Prayer Line in bulletins this year, asking, "Are you looking for something to do for Lent (but will continue long after) that will give a lift to your prayer life?"

Father Francis Blighton, director of the Borromeo Prayer Center, noted, "A lot of people don't look at what happens to them when they pray for other people, and how it connects them."

"Another side of it is when people pray for people out of compassion, it moves them to act out of love, with no expectations for themselves," he said. "If they do this enough, it changes them."

The roots of prayer lines, suggested Deacon Al Bergeron of Brighton's Our Lady Queen of Peace, probably go back to Jesus' time, "where people prayed for other people, based on their own confidence in their relationship with the Lord and that prayers do help."

"It takes an unselfish person and a person who believes in God and is confident that God does answer prayers," Deacon Bergeron said. Formerly involved in the charismatic movement, the deacon started the church's Network of Prayer about eight years ago with 20 people. There are now 45 people, divided into six teams, involved, he said. When a request comes in, he calls six people heading those teams.

"First, we pray for each other every day," he said. "Second, it is not intended to be a social program. ... We could call each other up and talk all day if we wanted to." But the calls are kept to the necessary details, he said, so people can keep the prayer moving and also maintain their own lives.

Participants may respond in various ways, he said, including almsgiving, a sacrifice of their own, prayers, the rosary, Our Fathers, Hail Marys, "depending on how we feel moved at that particular time."

Despite the prevalence of prayer lines, the term hasn't caught on with many

Catholics, even those who specialize in prayer programs.

"Prayer lines or chains and all that are not a term that's part of the Catholic idiom," Father Blighton explained, adding the term comes from televangelists.

But the term now implies more than telephones and television. Just two years ago St. Ann's Media, run by the St. Ann's Passionist Fathers in Scranton, Pa., started PrayerLine on the Internet (www.prayerline.org). It is for people of all religions who want to share their faith, according to Father Peter Grace, director of St. Ann's Media, who was once active in the charismatic movement.

Although certain Christian denominations sponsor prayer lines, he knew of no other Catholic prayer lines, actually described as prayer lines, on the Internet.

PrayerLine acknowledges e-mail requests, he explained, but does not post them on the Web site. They also are printed out and taken up to the altar for each televised "Daily Mass" from the Basilica of the National Shrine of St. Ann on the Odyssey Interfaith Cable Television Channel. One of the priests may occasionally call if the writer appears to have a critical need.

Terry Marcheona, data manager for the site, said it has received more than 1,500 prayer requests since the beginning of 1998.

"Right now I might be getting requests because of the war starting in Kosovo," she said. More often the requests are for healing, she said.

"The ones that have the greatest impact on me is when I notice somebody has nobody," she said. "Some are reaching out to speak to anybody."

A diocesan prayer line uses the Internet as well. Retired Deacon Mike Campanelli of Eastside Catholic Parish in Elmira began a "Prayer Requests" program a couple of years ago, and many shut-in parishioners volunteered to participate and pray for people. He currently sends out intentions he gathers to the 15 participants each month.

"There is a definite need," said Father Pat Connor, pastor. "A lot of times when people call him for prayer, he is also able to be listening ... He almost becomes like a hotline of hope, I guess you could call him."

There is a need, agreed Barbara Marasco. She noted that the charismatic prayer line in the Rochester Diocese receives 1,000 requests a year, up from a few hundred years ago.

Whether people call her at 2 a.m. or she speaks with several in one day, she noted, "I have to reassure them there is a God and he loves them and we will be praying for their situation."

"My husband says I'm putting too many through that aren't important," she said. "But I think every request is important. The Lord is calling them to open up to him."

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