

Christ Caring For People, Through People
Romans 12:1-2, 4-8

Paul writes to the church in Rome:

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect.

For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members of one another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate in cheerfulness.

I'm going to read the second part, verse 4 – 8 from another translation, the Contemporary English Version, so you hear it a little differently:

God has given each of us different gifts to use. If we can prophesy, we should do it according to the amount of faith we have. If we can serve others, we should serve. If we can teach, we should teach. If we can encourage others, we should encourage them. If we can give, we should be generous. If we are leaders, we should do our best. If we are good to others, we should do it cheerfully.

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

The apostle Paul liked to encourage the early church communities with the image of themselves as Christ's body, each part, each person gifted to contribute to the ministry of the whole. "In one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function." Yet, that whole body, the community of faith, is called to be Christ's presence actively working and serving in the world.

Today we are beginning a new ministry, a new way of working and serving. We are beginning a new form of caring ministry that will be the particular work of some, and yet an expression of the caring of the whole body.

We are now a Stephen Ministry congregation: we are preparing to equip a group of church members to provide one-on-one Christian care for those who are experiencing difficulties in their lives.

Yes, your pastors are very good at providing pastoral care, and this is a ministry that compliments and enlarges our circle of care.

Today we are commissioning Stephen Leaders. Charre Symms, Reid Spearman, and I have just completed 25 hours of intensive training for this role. We will continue to inform and educate the congregation about this ministry, helping you to understand what it is, and what it isn't. You are commissioning us to support and direct the Stephen Ministry of Catonsville Presbyterian Church.

In the next few months, the three of us are hoping to hear from you, the members of Christ's body who are feeling the call to be LISTENERS.... the ears of the body, if you will... COMPASSIONATE listeners who would like to learn more about becoming Stephen Ministers.

If you express an interest, we will make time for an interview together. If your gifts are a good match for this opportunity, then you will receive 50 hours of training so that you can provide weekly, high quality, one-on-one care to a person who is a care receiver.

A care receiver is someone who could really benefit from emotional and spiritual care through that one-hour weekly visit for an appropriate period of time. It could be a few weeks, it could be a few months, or longer. While commitment to being a Stephen Minister is for a two-year term, it is possible to have several sequential care receivers during that time. Ongoing training, peer supervision and education are continually provided for a Stephen Minister.

So who might a care receiver be? Perhaps a member of the congregation who has been diagnosed with an illness, or someone who is facing unemployment, or a job crisis, or a divorce.

When paired with a Stephen Minister, a care receiver can experience Christ's presence in the midst of difficulty and challenge. And it is important to note, by the way, that this ministry is absolutely confidential.

If you take a look at the photo on the front page of the bulletin, you see a person on the left who is feeling hurt, experiencing brokenness.... a care receiver. The figure on the right is with them, with the cross of Christ between them, surrounded by the phrase ***Christ Caring for People, Through People***. The presence of Christ, the faithfulness of God is profoundly experienced through this relationship. One care receiver describes it this way:

When I was with my Stephen Minister, I felt Jesus was with me. I saw the love of God in her eyes while we talked and prayed, and it would fill me with such comfort and peace. It helped me know that I could make it through.

(Ashley; stephenministries.org)

Stephen Ministry is, in some ways, not a totally new thing. It's a structured way to fulfill the mission of Christ we already have, it's a way to help us live out our purpose:

first, equipping people to use their gifts,
helping people to grow in their faith,
providing care for people who are hurting
and building up the congregation as a caring community of Christ.

You'll see that there are some brochures in the pews that describe this ministry, a ministry of help, hope, and healing. You are welcome to read it, take it home, pray about it, ask questions, learn more.

And if you are at home, online, please contact the church office and we can send one to you.

There are many in this congregation who are already familiar with this ministry. When our Board of Deacons undertook the role of beginning the process, and shared it with Session, it was surprising that many said things like, "Oh, my dad was a Stephen Minister for years. He loved it!" They knew of other churches that are part of this ministry, and all spoke with respect and affirmation and enthusiastically endorsed it.

Session provided the funds for the Stephen Leader training and financial resources are already designated and committed for the training and ongoing support and supervision of our first group of Stephen Ministers.

Charre, Reid, Ken, the session, the deacons and I are all excited about getting started. It's an act of trust. It's an act of faith as we begin this process.

The good news is that the Spirit is already working...seeking...calling... connecting us all into the body of Christ and enlarging Christ's compassion through the caring work of this church.

The first weekend of October, our middle and senior high youth went to serve at a community church just 10 minutes down the road on Frederick Avenue in Baltimore City. They put in some hard work in the 10 ½ acre woodland at Stillwater Peace Park. It's an overgrown, urban forest (much like our woodlands used to be) that is being reclaimed so it can be used for hiking, for a meditation garden, for flood prevention, and for providing a natural space for enjoyment and relaxation.

Each one of the youth had to help with the baby trees that were recently planted by the forest service. The trees were trying to grow, but were becoming overwhelmed by the vines and other weeds that surrounded them. So carefully, gently, our youth tended them, brushing those things away, giving each little tree some safe space... space for sunlight, space to just be. They gently tended, and trusted that God will provide the growth.

In our Stephen Ministry, we will be gentle and compassionate caregivers, offering holy space and sacred room to allow people to breathe and be. And we can trust that God will provide the rest. There's a reassuring phrase that's a foundational part of this ministry: We are the caregivers, God is the caregiver. What's needed is a compassionate presence: the listening ears, the caring heart.

We are the body of Christ together, sharing our gifts to live out Christ's calling to love and serve with joy and gladness.

So continue to listen for God's call... teacher, encourager, leader, generous giver, listener, compassionate friend. Where is Christ inviting you to use your gifts?

May the Spirit open our hearts as we continue to grow and serve and love.