

## Stephen Ministers Helping People Get Back on Track



By Rich Brown | *The Joplin Globe* | January 23, 2012

**Oronogo, Missouri.** The fury of last year's Joplin tornado may have subsided and the stress of the holidays passed, but demands on the Stephen Ministry at Christ's Church are stronger than ever.

For the congregation's 39 Stephen Ministers—members trained to care one-on-one for people in times of crisis—it has been all hands on deck.

“Our Stephen Ministers have been caring for people ever since the tornado, but the need for care really surfaced again around Thanksgiving and Christmas,” said Ken Ansley, one of the Stephen Leaders at Christ's Church. “For some, this was the first Thanksgiving not in their home and for others this was the first Christmas without a loved one—some families lost as many as three or four people. Anything that centers on family is brought to the surface during Thanksgiving and Christmas. All of this kept our Stephen Ministers very busy over the holidays.”

The May 22 tornado placed the most demands ever on the congregation's Stephen Ministry, which got under way 11 years ago.

“After the tornado hit, we were able to activate our Stephen Ministers right away because they were all trained and ready to go,” Ansley said. “First we put up a tent with a banner on it to have a visible presence. Then, we went out among the people in the community to identify needs. We also went to the distribution centers where people came in, helped them find what they needed and talked to them.”

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One particular case where Stephen Ministers made a difference involved a young mother and four-year-old son who were in the process of getting toys at the Bridge, a local ministry that caters to middle school and high school students. “The little boy was a chatterbox and said, ‘You know, my brother blew away in the tornado,’” Ansley said. “We got to talking to the mother and, sure enough, she had an 11-year-old son who was killed in the storm. A couple of our Stephen Ministers took her under their wings, brought her around to all the agencies, and helped her get everything she needed. They developed a relationship with her and still keep in touch today.”

Ansley said there is more caregiving going on today than in the first three or four months after the storm. Shock is often the initial response,

but later on feelings that haven't been dealt with begin to surface.

Whether from a tornado or something else, everybody has crises in life, Ansley said. "Any type of loss in life can trigger the grief cycle. Our Stephen Ministers are here to help people during those difficult times."

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Although a lot of people have a gift for helping others, they often don't know what to say or do—that's where Stephen Ministry training comes in, said Ansley. "The training is very practical and helps you develop a lot of caregiving skills. Anybody who can feel empathy for someone else can be a great Stephen Minister, especially if they have weathered some type of crisis themselves," said Ansley.

Photo by Anne Brown



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The newest class of Stephen Ministers at Christ's Church began training last September and will be commissioned next month. "Stephen Ministers make a two-year commitment to serve, but many serve longer," said Ansley. "We have also been able to use people trained in Stephen Ministry in many other ministries in the church. Our divorce group, for instance, is led by people who have been trained as Stephen Ministers."

Ansley said he cannot imagine any church, whatever the size, not having a Stephen Ministry.

"Even if you are a smaller church with a limited staff, you cannot keep up with the demands for care, and that is where Stephen Ministers can help," he said. "Having Stephen Ministry is like having another full-time staff member—at very little cost."



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