

## **COH: The Two-way Gift of the Holy Listener**

*By Jackie McFadden*

*"You are suddenly faced with the terminal illness of a loved one and you cope with your chin up, yet you feel helpless and hopeless. Then someone calls just to ask how you are doing."*

*"I was pregnant and assigned a Community of Hope caregiver. She was so kind and kept up with me throughout my pregnancy and afterwards."*

*"They were life savers to me during both surgeries--mine and my husband's. They were just there."*

St. Stephen's Community of Hope (COH) and its band of 22 holy listeners have been here for our church and school families and the larger community for 20 years and counting. St. Stephen's is one of 125 COH centers. What once started as a training program at St. Luke's Hospital in Houston, Texas, for hospital chaplains under the guidance of The Rev. Helen Appelburg, is now a community with an international reach with other centers as far away as British Columbia, Canada, Mexico, and Malawi, Africa.

### ***So, what exactly is Community of Hope?***

What all COH centers have in common is they serve as places to train individuals in the art of compassionate listening, also referred to as active listening, through the Rule of St. Benedict. Balance, humility, and hospitality are the hallmarks of St. Benedict's Rule that is 1500 years old and has been distilled into such practical language that it remains relevant today.

Another commonality among the 125 centers is that they all use the same 40-hour training curriculum that was created by The Rev. Helen Appelberg. At St. Stephen's, this curriculum is taught over three Saturdays, all day, with the remaining training hours performed on-site at a local hospital or nursing home, in the form of an internship.

Something notable is that even though the Episcopal Church was the beginning of today's COH, this ministry is meant for all denominations, and other faiths and traditions are invited to come and learn as well. The original ministry was intended as training to become a hospital chaplain and has now expanded the training to become lay chaplains in a variety of settings: hospitals, rehabilitation centers, churches, and retirement centers.

### ***How did it get started at St. Stephen's?***

"Carrie Watson worked at St. Stephen's. She was assigned by our rector at the time, The Rev. Mac Keeble, to 'train a bunch of people to do hospital visits.' She researched this and found COH through a newsletter and contacted the Rev. Helen Appelburg, who provided the training materials. Helen is considered the 'mother of Community of Hope' and that's how we got started at St. Stephen's," explains Sharon East, one of the six COH coordinators at St. Stephen's. The other five coordinators include: Nancy Cooke-Jenkins, Becky Denton, Dot Green, Connie Maverick, and Kristen Schmidt. As a COH center, the coordinators conduct trainings here onsite at St. Stephen's, are part of the pastoral team working in tandem with the rector on referrals, and the group holds congregation-wide events such as Quiet Day.

## ***Who Can Use COH? How do I get started? What can I expect?***

While most of the COH requests for help come through referrals from either the St. Stephen's rector or Jeannetta, our Parish Administrator, anyone is invited to contact one of the six coordinators. (See their e-mail addresses at the end of this article.) Everything is kept in the strictest of confidence, and there is no charge for COH's help.

"Some people are hesitant to call on us because it's the Texas way to handle your own problems," begins Nancy Cooke-Jenkins. "I don't think the general congregation understands, though, the person asking for help is actually being very strong."

Community of Hope can fit a variety of situations when the timing is right: broken leg and subsequent rehabilitation, chronic illnesses and conditions like cancer or autoimmune disorder, degenerative diseases, divorce, becoming a new parent, marriage, moving, loneliness, job loss or change, and end of life transitioning, to name just a few.

"We work very hard to match up caregivers and receivers based on the care requested and take into account personalities, commonality, and interests," shares Kristen Schmidt. "We emphasize and stress privacy with all our care givers. I believe that saying your problems out loud helps you work through them. Sometimes a close friend, spouse, or relative is too close to the situation, and it can be emotional for everyone to talk through tough problems. We (COH caregivers) are a little more detached so sometimes it's easier to talk to us."

Dot Green also reiterates a very important piece of COH that makes it unique among other helping services, "We are trained to listen but not give advice nor fix problems."

Becky Denton keeps it real, "We all, in our daily lives, have our mask on. Yet, COH has a way of making it (the problem or situation) something comfortable to talk about without that mask always having to be on."

A COH care receiver especially appreciated the tenderness and honesty from her lay chaplain. "She continued to check in and later on gently nudged me to go to lunch or a movie. I'd cry, I'd laugh, and for a little while I'd forget my new normal. I began to count on those calls or notes, realizing that there will be no advice or even veiled suggestion. That presence continues as you put your life back together."

Each situation is unique, and each approach is individualized for both the lay chaplain and care receiver. In the case of lay chaplain Jan Atkins, she recently was inspired to take her CD player and wear a bright colored apron over her street clothes and subsequently chose to dance to the music while encouraging the special person she was visiting: "All you need to do is clap." And, all that clapping led to a big smile for both.

In the last few years, there have been events that have shaken whole towns and the world including the Wimberley flood of 2015 and more recently the COVID-19 pandemic. COH members have stepped up both times with a helping hand and extended hope. In the case of the 2015 Wimberley flood, Nancy Cooke-Jenkins reveals that not only did the COH receive 35 new requests for help, but divinely planned, there were exactly 35 COH lay chaplains available to respond.

In the case of our current world-wide crisis and pandemic, COH has already completed three rounds of calls to everyone in the St. Stephen's church and school family to check on us and see if there is any need they can help facilitate. As the pandemic runs its course, we can all expect another round of "checking in" courtesy the COH.

### ***A Two-Way Gift and Bond***

At St. Stephen's, COH trainings are held when there are more needs than current lay chaplains. We have people on the waiting list now who would very much like to put their calling into spiritual action. Whether you have been a COH lay chaplain for less than a year or for 20, all agree that COH is a ministry of heart and love.

"It's in my heart. It's just something that fills me up. It's just been my passion," thinks Dot Green.

"It just feeds my soul," realizes Nancy Cooke-Jenkins. "If one person can feel comfort or relief by talking about something, then that gives me comfort too. It forms the basis of bonding."

"COH is definitely a commitment. It never feels like a burden, though. It feeds me. It is always something I enjoy," reiterates Connie Maverick.

"I can't tell you how much this means to me," confesses Sharon East of her time at Deer Creek. "When we sing the old gospel hymns, they (the Deer Creek residents) come alive. Some may not know their daughter's face, but they can conjure up the lyrics to those old gospel songs we sing."

### ***I am interested in becoming a COH care giver. What's my next step?***

Of the six COH coordinators, some were invited to consider taking the training and others had been involved with similar ministries at other churches and were seeking an equivalent at St. Stephen's when they moved to the area. What each had in common, though, was a strong calling to become a COH chaplain.

"You are listening with the ear of your heart," advises Becky Denton. "Community of Hope takes a certain amount of discernment. Before you take the training, you will have to fill out an application and be approved by the rector."

"With Community of Hope you are literally building a community, a community of love and support to each other and out beyond the church into the wider world with other people in your daily interactions, all the time fostering hope. Hope is really important. If you think you would like to be a part of this ministry, contact a coordinator," encourages Connie Maverick.

#### **COH Coordinators:**

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