

St. Stephen's Lutheran Church

*Talented, Generous Volunteers Link
Oakwood and St. Stephen's of Monona*

By Keith VanLanduyt

For several years, Oakwood has enjoyed a particularly strong relationship with St. Stephen's of Monona. Lee Johnson, Bernie Knesting, and Carol Wiskowski, all members of St. Stephen's, have given generously of their time on various Oakwood boards and committees. Oakwood employs several members of the church, and Dale and Betty St. John, Oakwood's 2008 Outstanding Service Award winners, call both St. Stephen's and Oakwood Village East home.

In considering the connections between Oakwood and St. Stephen's, one can't help but be impressed by St. Stephen's commitment to outreach and volunteerism. The individuals above are but a few of the many church members who are involved in community outreach: besides volunteering at Oakwood, St. Stephen's ministry program reaches to many parts of its community. Under the leadership of Pastor Tim Hansen, who joined St. Stephen's last summer, the church hopes to grow by utilizing the many talents of its members.

Born and raised in Milwaukee, Pastor Hansen is a third-generation minister. He received his Bachelor Degree from St. Olaf College in Northfield, MN, and his Master of Divinity Degree from Luther Seminary in St. Paul, MN. His first call was to a two-point parish in Worthington and Heron Lake, MN. He then was called to Racine, WI, for several years before moving on to Mankato and, finally, Litchfield, MN, where he spent the past ten years as co-pastor before his call to St. Stephen's.

St. Stephen's has historically been blessed with talented, stable leadership and has had several long-time pastors. Bruce Burnside, the pastor of St. Stephen's for 14 years, was elected Bishop of the South-Central Synod of Wisconsin in the summer of 2007. Pastor Jon Enslin, who also was elected Bishop after serving at St. Stephen's, led the congregation from 1973 until 1988. Before him, Bob Anderson served as pastor of St. Stephen's for seven years before becoming administrator of the newly-constructed Oakwood Village Apartments.

While transitioning through a change in leadership after such stability can be a challenge, Pastor Hansen sees this as an opportunity to assess the strengths and talents of the membership, the direction of the church, and actively planning for the long-term future of the congregation. One of the goals of the congregation is to develop broader-based leadership, and Pastor Hansen sees great potential within the congregation.

"We are in the process of asset mapping," explains Pastor Hansen, "and asking ourselves 'What are the gifts God has given us at this time? Should we focus on youth ministry?"



"Should we focus on aging ministry?" If God has given us the gifts to do something, we need to recognize this and take advantage. We want to affirm we are doing what we have been called to do."

St. Stephen's currently has strong programming for all members of the church. "The Seasoned Saints," an older adult group, gathers regularly, coordinating trips and meeting monthly for breakfasts and fish fries. The church offers popular Sunday School programming. The music program has excelled over the past several years, largely in part to the leadership of Dennis Douglas (who also works at Oakwood part-time), Rebecca Redmann and Heide Powers. Pastor Hansen lauds this team for their strong communication, and incorporating music programming throughout the congregation.

Of course, St. Stephen's strives to offer attractive worship and social opportunities for young adults. A woman's Bible study group has appealed to younger women, and more discussions between congregation members are taking place online. "The more we are creative and the more we reach out to people in their 30's and 40's, the more we strengthen our ministry," explains Pastor Hansen.

Pastor Hansen also cites the leadership of Associate Pastor Nick Utphall as a noteworthy asset to the church and comments that his enthusiasm, creativity and energy are a draw to many members—particularly youth.

"Nick is passionate about social justice and is gifted in worship leadership," says Pastor Hansen. "He's a people person and a well-grounded pastor. St. Stephen's has benefited greatly from his four-and-a-half years here."

Many at St. Stephen's have taken a particular interest in the struggles between Israel and Palestine in the Middle East, partly because this continues to be a passion of (former pastor) Bishop Bruce Burnside. This past fall, St. Stephen's member and Oakwood employee Mike Brannan went with a large group, coordinated by the ELCA South-Central Synod and consisting of many St. Stephen's members, to Israel and Palestine.

"The trip really opened my eyes" says Mike, "to how the struggle is impacting both sides." Mike shares that St. Stephen's holds a monthly "Prayer Vigil for Peace" held the 20th of each month at 5:30 pm. The church invites anyone in the community to

come for half an hour to pray for peace and justice in the Middle East, a unique prayer opportunity in the Madison area.

The Food Pantry is a source of great pride for many members of St. Stephen's. The congregation partners with other churches, including Methodists and the United Church, of Christ, to operate a very successful community food pantry. The pantry is housed at St. Stephen's, and other congregations help by contributing money, donated items, and volunteers to run the pantry. The pantry is unique in that it is a "choice" pantry, which means that clients do their own shopping, selecting only the items they will use. Choice is intended to honor clients' dignity and eliminate wasting unused items.

"St. Stephen's has hosted this food pantry for 35 or 40 years," explains Bernie Knesting. "It serves people primarily living in Monona and East Madison." In 2008, the pantry shared 924 cases of food, valued at \$6,965.50.

Oakwood is particularly grateful to Pastor Hansen for taking the time to learn more about our communities and services, and how we can potentially partner with St. Stephens. At the encouragement of Lee Johnson, Pastor Hansen has recently toured both Oakwood campuses and met with Oakwood staff on several occasions. Given the aging of the City of Monona and the proximity of St. Stephen's to several senior apartments, Pastor Hansen sees their affiliation with Oakwood and the board experience of several members as strong resources.

"If we actively pursue senior ministry, I see Oakwood as a wonderful resource," explains Pastor Hansen. "Obviously we have a strong relationship with Oakwood's boards of directors, and there a lot of practical applications we could pursue. In addition, my wife is a registered dietitian and has worked in faith-based skilled nursing facilities, so I feel as though I have a good understanding of the ministry of Oakwood."

In addition to touring, Pastor Hansen has visited Oakwood Village East residents and St. Stephen's members Dale and Betty St. John and June Bale for lunch. June shares that Pastor Hansen's visits are greatly appreciated.

"He's very nice, and it's been wonderful getting to know him. I have been a member of St. Stephen's since 1956 and both of my daughters were confirmed and married at St. Stephen's. I am still a member, but since I moved to Oakwood in 2001 I usually worship in the Tree of Life Chapel," she explains. "I really appreciate the fact that he has taken the time to visit us, and he even gave communion in the Tree of Life Chapel—that was very thoughtful of him. It's just nice to have the opportunity to get to know the pastor of my home church."

Looking forward, St. Stephen's will complete its asset mapping and strategic planning process this year. The church is prepared to evolve as needed to grow and strengthen.

"We have, as a congregation, been receptive to change over the years," observes Lee Johnson. One thing the church knows it must do, believes Pastor Hansen, is to evangelize and focus on outreach.

"We are a welcoming congregation," explains Pastor Hansen, "now we need to be inviting."

The community is invited to become part of St. Stephen's ministry. Traditional worship is held every Sunday morning at 8:00 am and 10:00 am, with a more informal service held at 11:15 a.m.

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