

Lay Visitors Offer Conversation and Connection

Once a month Judy Freitag bikes over to Liz Markel's house for a visit. They talk about books, their childhoods in Iowa, family, and church. Markel, an active member of First Church since 1961, faces significant mobility challenges. Their relationship started when Freitag, a volunteer lay visitor, was matched with her. Now the two are like longtime friends.

Janet Lutz describes the First Church Lay Visitor program as a form of pastoral care that supplements the visiting pastors do. Lutz, a retired pastoral care educator, began the program four years ago with the support of then Pastor of Pastoral Care Bob Keller.

Through the program persons receive training and then are matched with another member – typically an older adult who is homebound and can't get to worship much or at all. Lay visitors commit to visiting their church member monthly for a year, and meet as a group every six weeks to check in with other lay visitors and the program coordinators for ongoing training and support. Lutz, who has started and led lay visitor programs at a handful of Atlanta-area

churches, calls this a "tried and true model."

Lutz and current Pastor of Pastoral Care Bonny Roth express gratitude for the work of the five current lay visitors: Glynis Doyle, Judy Freitag, Carolyn Hartmann, Tom Scott, and

Ladonna Taylor. "We are so thankful for our lay visitors. Their visits are an important way of communicating our care for folks even when they aren't among us," says Roth.

Lutz has trained three groups of lay visitors at First Church so far, and looks forward to a fourth.

Freitag has served as a lay visitor for several years, and finds the experience gratifying. Like other lay visitors, she initially viewed the role as an opportunity to say



Lay visitor Judy Freitag (on right) spends time each month with Liz Markel at Markel's home. Pastor of Pastoral Care Bonny Roth describes them as "a match made in heaven."

thank you to older church members for their longtime support of the church.

"I have gotten more out of this experience than I anticipated," reports Freitag. "And it has helped me to understand how important it is for the church to keep connecting with this demographic."

Another lay visitor expresses similar sentiments. He thought for a

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long time before deciding to go ahead with the training piece, knowing that he could discontinue if the program wasn't a good fit. The four sessions of training themselves were valuable, he says. "I learned the skills that help me to be a better listener overall, and especially in situations where people are distraught."

That lay visitor continued with the program and has visited several church members over the past four years. "It isn't a big commitment if you think about it. You are signing up to see someone for half an hour or an hour a month. An hour a month is a huge positive investment in the lives of people we visit. It isn't just an hour for them; it is a huge thing."

Liz Markel was instrumental in an earlier rendition of the program. In the early 1990's, she and Sigrid Perry co-chaired the Congregational Care Committee and started a lay visitor program

as a way to "give back" to the elderly members who had given so much to the church in their younger years. She regularly visited homebound members back then.

Twenty years later Markel is at the receiving end of a newer version of the program. "The program has given me a new friend, and at my age it is nice to have some new friends." For Markel leaving the house involves a wheelchair, someone to carry her down the stairs, and a medi-cab. She points out that the church friends she has known for years, like her, have similar mobility difficulties. Through these visits she and others feel connected to the church.

Roth points out that the Lay Visitor program is a profound reminder that "while *doing* things for people is very important, *being* with people is equally important." Roth continues: "I

think the beauty of this program is the way in which we are present with one another and open to the Spirit's moving between us."

Persons interested in learning more about the Lay Visitor program are welcome to contact Bonny Roth (847-830-4636) or Janet Lutz (847-328



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