International Nonprofit Stephen Ministries Celebrates 50th Anniversary, Launches National Tour

St. Louis, MO—Stephen Ministries, the international nonprofit Christian educational organization based in St. Louis and best known for the Stephen Ministry system of lay caregiving, is celebrating its fiftieth year in ministry with a nationwide 50th Anniversary Tour.

Stephen Ministries began in 1975 when Dr. Kenneth C. Haugk, a pastor and clinical psychologist, trained nine members of his St. Louis congregation as "Stephen Ministers" to assist him in providing emotional and spiritual care to people in the congregation and community. Over the half-century since, Stephen Ministries' resources have reached tens of thousands of congregations representing over 190 Christian denominations in 31 countries worldwide, as well as organizations such as retirement communities, correctional facilities, hospitals, and college campus ministries.

Through the Stephen Ministry system in particular, more than 80,000 laypeople, church staff, and pastors have been trained to serve as Stephen Leaders—the individuals who implement the Stephen Ministry system—and they have trained over 600,000 Stephen Ministers. Those Stephen Ministers, in turn, have provided care to millions of people going through difficult life situations.

"Stephen Ministry has been transformative for both those directly involved in the ministry and our congregation as a whole," says Rev. Molly Spangler, who serves at Unity Presbyterian Church in Fort Mill, South Carolina. "Our members respond to the energy and care of our Stephen Ministers and Stephen Leaders, and it's a comfort for us pastors to know that people are receiving quality care through this ministry."

In addition to Stephen Ministry, countless people have used Stephen Ministries' other resources, like *Journeying through Grief*, *Cancer—Now What?*, and *Don't Sing Songs to a Heavy Heart*, in personal, congregational, and professional contexts.

"Over the five decades since Stephen Ministries was founded, we have always been guided by our core value of incarnational theology," says Haugk. "Our purpose has been and continues to be to equip people for ministry—and to help people encounter Jesus."

As Stephen Ministries moves into its next fifty years, the organization is further expanding its vision to reach new audiences.

"Stephen Ministries will never be done reaching out and serving people," Haugk says. "We've accomplished a lot, especially with Stephen Ministry, but we intend to do even more. That's why we're broadening our focus to equip more and more people to care and relate with greater excellence—not just in their congregations, but also in their workplaces,

schools, and communities. We believe that, by doing this, we can empower congregations and individuals alike to build a more caring world."

Those efforts are already underway. In 2023, Stephen Ministries published the award-winning book *The Gift of Empathy*, followed by *Caring Assertiveness* in 2024. Group discussion guides for both, which have already been used by hundreds of pilot test groups across the country, are set to be published in 2026. The organization also plans to release several other books in the upcoming years on topics such as unexpected ways to care and dealing with the pressures to be positive and strong.

The Stephen Ministries 50th Anniversary Tour kicked off in St. Louis in August and has already made stops in four cities, with additional locations—including Houston, Tampa, Phoenix, Cincinnati, Indianapolis, Atlanta, Baltimore, Kansas City, and more—to come in 2026. Key Stephen Ministries staff, including Haugk, Director of Operations Janine Ushe, Director of Training Dr. Justin Schlueter, Program Director Joel Bretscher, and program staff members Amity Haugk and Lori Kem will be leading the events.

Each of these Saturday events offers participants an engaging look back at the organization's past; teaching presentations on topics like grief, what Jesus teaches us about empathy, caring for a full-time caregiver, and how congregations can help combat the mental health crisis; as well as a preview of what's coming next from Stephen Ministries. Additional event locations are set to be announced in upcoming months.

Stephen Ministries is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. For additional information, visit stephenministries.org or call (314) 428-2600.