



"Did I Call You, or Did You Call Me?" Gabriel's Callers at St. Paul's Lutheran Church and School, Bourbonnais

With so many things beckoning for our attention, from time to time the community and connection for which we were created slip by the wayside, often unexpectedly. A year and a half ago, members of St. Paul's Lutheran Church and School in Bourbonnais gathered together to pray over various ways they could proactively build, sustain, and enrich their congregation's connectivity. Together they embarked on mission to serve their own community through the phone lines in a ministry they named after the angel Gabriel, Gabriel's Callers. Callers as well as recipients of calls exclaim of the joy they have found through simple conversations. Pastor Karl Koeppen says, "through those phone calls we can share the love, compassion and grace of our Savior. It has been well received by many of those that have gotten calls as well as moving some to join the ranks of those who come in and make phone calls!"

How They Got Started

St. Paul's, Bourbonnais has participated in the LCMS's Project Compassion incarnational, visitation ministry for years. At St. Paul's, volunteers regularly meet together with their ministry teams for prayer, fellowship, and an opportunity to talk through the specific ministry. In November of 2017 as St. Paul's' Project Compassion team talked through ways they could serve some of the homebound adults they know who expressed they would still like to be connected, but, for one reason or another, preferred people not come to their home, Liz Deck, St. Paul's' Parish Nurse and a leader on their Human Care team, suggested they "go" through the phone lines.

This served as an answer to another question Pastor Michael Hanel, St. Paul's' associate pastor, had been asking, "how can we be more proactive in not losing track

of members of our congregation, especially as they get older?" After the team's initial discussion and others where they chose a name for the ministry and gathered a group of individuals interested in volunteering to be 'callers,' Pastor Hanel compiled a list of members of their congregation who were over the age of 70, taking note of those who were no longer attending church regularly. He then wrote a letter explaining what Gabriel's Callers would be, what time calls would be made, and more. In the letter, which was mailed to individual's home addresses, people were invited to say if they would rather not be called.

From there, Liz Deck created some helpful conversation starters and guidelines for callers to utilize as tools, especially as it pertains to how to respond to more difficult things people may share over the phone.

In March 2018, the volunteers began making their first calls. Today, nearly 125 members of St. Paul's receive regular phone calls from someone at St. Paul's who is calling simply to express love and care for them.

What It Looks Like

Every Tuesday and Wednesday from 1:30 p.m. to 3:00 p.m., two volunteers meet in the office at St. Paul's Lutheran Church and School and call members of their congregation. They call those who are grieving as well as those who are new members of the congregation and those who are no longer able to regularly attend church. Gabriel's Callers call each person once per month. Most recently, they have begun going down the alphabet of the full congregation, so even those who don't fall in one of the aforementioned categories can receive a call from time to time—church staff included.

Gabriel's Callers call with a simple goal, a tender "why"—they call to care for one another. They aren't calling to ask why people don't come to church anymore, to ask people to volunteer, to give money, or to see if they want pastor to visit them and possibly bring them communion, but all of those things have happened as fruit of the relationships built through the phone lines. Deck says, "we want to build the web of communication again. We're a community, a body of Christ; they're a part of our family; we want to call them."

Volunteers make sure to keep a log of when they called a member. In a line or two, they include information regarding any prayer requests members may have had, if they requested for a Pastor to visit them/bring communion, if they'd like to be included in the weekly congregation-wide prayer requests, and more. This is especially helpful if a different caller is calling the next month.

How They Are In This Together

Gathered around a table, several of the members of St. Paul's who share in the joy of Gabriel's Callers paused to share stories of how joining the Gabriel's Callers team has impacted them. They shared sentiments of conversations where a person on the other end of the phone shared their awe of the timeliness of the call saying "I needed to talk." They reflected upon how their participation has allowed them to flourish. One of the callers even joined the volunteer calling team, because she was once on the call list. And above all, they kept the main thing saying, "We care. We're all part of the body of Christ. We're part of St. Paul. We want the connection. We want people to be included."



The Gabriel's Callers ministry team pictured left to right are Kenneth Ebert, Carolyn Gebhardt, Marilyn Jenkins, Joan Gehm, Jeanne Vilt, Rev. Michael Hanel and Liz Deck.