

DIAKON CONNECTION

WINTER 2002-2003

Adoption offers chance at making the best of lives

For the Sharif family of Camp Hill, Pa., sharing their lives with two adopted children has changed life as they knew it, but also helped them experience it like never before, says Raihanna Sharif.

“Bringing another person’s child into your home connects you with humanity in a different way,” says the mother of five children. “It breaks down that wall of being uncomfortable with strangers. You don’t think twice about offering comfort.”

For Raihanna and Yasin Sharif and their three sons, Zakariyya, 18, Aqil, 17, and Yusuf, 14, there was no question that bringing sisters Alisha, 9, and Leena, 7, into their home was doing the right thing.

“Within Islam, adoption is encouraged, respected,” says Raihanna of their Muslim beliefs. “Over and over again in the Koran, we are told about taking care of the orphan.”

The road to adoption, however, was anything but simple for the Sharifs, who lost all their belongings in a house fire during their adoption-preparatory classes with *Tressler Adoption Services of Central Pennsylvania*.

“I remember thinking this is a message,” says Raihanna. “I didn’t feel like we weren’t supposed to [adopt], we were just to be delayed.”

After their paperwork was replaced, the Sharifs began the process

again. When one potential match fell through at the last moment, the Sharifs began to question whether they should continue. “I was done at that point,” says Raihanna. “My husband and our middle guy are really the ones who pushed me back in there. I think they both knew it was something I really wanted.”

In early 2001, the Sharifs learned about Alisha and Leena. “The problem was there were two [girls] and we were looking for one. The older girl was at the upper age limit that we felt would work in our family,” explains Raihanna.

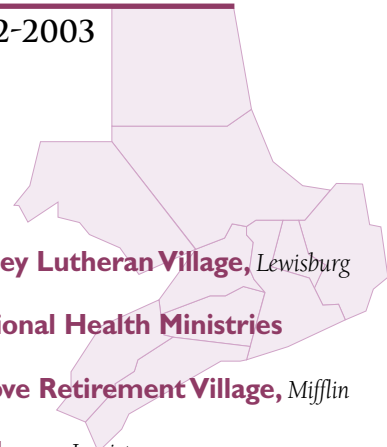
Although the Sharifs had not intended to adopt two children, Yasin felt that it was either these two little girls, or no adoption. “They happened to be girls who needed a home and who had really struggled with foster care and their birth families,” he says. “I decided at that moment, personally, if the rest of the family was going to go along with it, that we would just take a plunge into the deep end of the pool.”

In April 2001, Alisha and Leena joined their new family and began the process of building a new life. The journey to their finalization was and continues to be challenging.

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The Sharif family



Buffalo Valley Lutheran Village, Lewisburg

Congregational Health Ministries

Locust Grove Retirement Village, Mifflin

Ohesson Manor, Lewistown

Penn Lutheran Village, Selinsgrove

Refugee & Immigration Services

TresslerCare

Tressler Counseling/Family Life Services

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Lewisburg congregation Faith Lutheran sponsors

Mission: In response to God's love in Jesus Christ, Diakon Lutheran Social Ministries will demonstrate God's command to love the neighbor through acts of service.

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The Rev. John Yost and the members of Faith Lutheran Church, Lewisburg, were busy preparing to receive a refugee family from Kazakstan when the 9/11 attacks took place.

“With the terrorism problems, this family got stuck in the ‘pipeline,’” says Ron Kepner, refugee resource developer for *Tressler Refugee Services*. “We were expecting things to pick up in October, but we did not receive any refugees again until January.”

Although the congregation’s resettlement program had been put on hold for nearly a year, members quickly pulled together when Yost received word that the 11-member Shevchenko family, fleeing religious persecution, would soon arrive.

“Finding housing was the biggest challenge,” he says, adding that a member offered to rent the family a 200-year-old farmhouse for one year. “It is a great place for the family—a three-story farmhouse with plenty of room.”

However, the house needed repairs before the family could move in. “The last week before they arrived, we put in, as a group, a couple hundred hours getting the house ready,” Pastor Yost adds.

“The night that we went to pick up the Shevchenkos at the Harrisburg airport, we had 40 to 50 members at the house, setting up, doing last minute painting. We put that together in a hurry.”

The congregation’s selfless work did much to bolster the morale of the family, who arrived in Harrisburg in June.

“Talk about emotion,” says Kepner, referring to their welcoming, which included extended family members already in the United States, as well as congregation members and Tressler Refugee Services staff. “Everybody cried; even the baggage handler cried. The kids had excitement in their eyes, but they just weren’t sure what to expect.” As everyone’s emotions settled down, they piled into three minivans for the drive to Lewisburg and the start of their new life.



The Shevchenko family is met at the airport by members of Faith Lutheran Church, Lewisburg.

“We’re here as Christians to offer our support and care to them and to provide an environment where they can worship and worship safely,” says Yost. In the months since, with the help of the congregation, the Shevchenko children have enrolled in school, the father is working, and they are all learning English and their way around the community. The 120-day commitment from the congregation passed quickly, says Yost, but the friendships formed will continue.

“Basically our commitment was to provide support, care, and connections,” he says, sharing how families have continued their interaction with the Shevchenkos. “That’s the thing the people who have been very active with the family have found so rewarding. It helps the congregation to see what Christianity is like in different places.”

Refugee sponsorship effort 'a privilege'

Sponsoring two refugee families in the last two years has brought an equal share of blessings and challenges to Zion Lutheran Church in Sunbury.

Although both refugee families were from Bosnia, the congregation discovered that there are different cultural backgrounds, even within the same country, according to the Rev. Richard Fangmann.

The first family was very hard-working. The children did well in school, and the family became involved in the community in positive ways. "They really fit in well and became self-sufficient within three or four months," he says.

The family eventually moved to the Harrisburg area a year later. "It seemed a natural move for them," he says, adding that a member of the congregation still keeps in contact with them.

Although the second family was just as friendly and delightful as the first, successes didn't come as quickly. "We found that while they were eager to get jobs, sometimes keeping jobs was difficult . . . medical injuries prevented the father from working much of the time," says the pastor.

Because the second family had more children in several grade levels, congregational volunteers had to deal with a different school from that with which they had been involved the first time. The family's older sons also brought another challenge. While both got jobs immediately, the older one ran into trouble with the law.

"He was charged [as a result of the incident]," notes the pastor. "As a congregation we were caught in the middle supporting the family, but realizing that if he did something wrong, there are consequences. We aren't helping anyone by avoiding those consequences."

Tressler Refugee Services was helpful throughout the ordeal, he notes, providing translators and support for the family. "Tressler did a nice job of having one of their workers talk with the mother and help her sort through the whole situation," says Fangmann.

The ordeal took its toll on the congregation. Some members, the pastor notes, questioned whether trying to do good actually hurt the program through the negative publicity.

"When you receive a refugee family, everything is not tied up neatly in a perfect ball," the pastor notes. "These are real people in horrendous situations and they come to a new country and new culture, and at times there can be struggles. But those struggles should not prevent us from reaching out with the love of Christ."

As the congregation of Zion Lutheran Church reflects on the future of its refugee program ministry, the pastor points out that when you get involved in anyone's life you don't know what you will face.

"It is just a privilege to provide a safe home for a family when they've literally feared for the lives of their children for so long."

NEWS-IN-BRIEF

Tressler Counseling & Education/ Family Life Services recently received a \$5,000 Venture Grant to create a fully furnished play-therapy room within the Williamsport center. The room will be used to provide counseling services to children who have been victims of trauma and abuse.

Counselors work with the children using games, activities, arts, crafts, toys, finger paints, and other creative play techniques.

"When you work with children, traditional talking therapies are not typically productive," says Mark Basinger, director. "You need to enter their world and engage them at their level. This can usually be done through play."

A dollhouse, for example, can be used to help a child address distress or trauma. "They can use the family characters to act out family situations and other scenarios," he says.

The Venture Grant was awarded by the Lycoming County United Way.

Adoption *Continued from Page 3*

"Our younger one is . . . oppositional. The first morning we brought them home, it took us 45 minutes to get her out of the [adoption] facility. The next morning she ran away," says Raihanna, who adds she has made remarkable progress since then. "She allows you to get in there. She has handed over a huge amount of control and trust."

With their older daughter, Alisha, the Sharifs struggle with the effects of Attachment Disorder that make it difficult for her to love and be loved in return.

"She does everything she can to push us away. You have to parent her very differently," says Raihanna, who says she hasn't been able to parent her girls the way she wanted. "That's not what they needed. I've had to fight for their trust."

Yasin readily admits that their adoption has had more ups and downs than they expected. "You only know so much and you kind of have a romance," he says, comparing adoption to marriage. "Then reality hits and you realize you have grown-up little people who have had extreme challenges and you are their only hope."

The girls have also found a strong source of hope in the brothers who have accepted them from day one.

"There are moments where all of them will interact and it is so amazing that it just takes my breath away," says Raihanna. "Those moments make me feel as if that was the reason why I do it. We wanted our boys to see that you sacrifice for things you believe in. They might be uncomfortable and hard, but there are bigger things in this world than yourself and you need to strive for those things."

No matter what the future holds for Alisha and Leena, their family knows that they will have made a difference in their lives.

"Knowing where they've come from and what their life has been like, if we try our absolute hardest, even if it doesn't go the way we had hoped, they will still have been given an opportunity for proper safety, health care, and education," says Yasin, "as well as a chance at making the best of their lives."

Which, in the final analysis, is all any parent can hope.

Retreat gets students to open up on sensitive topic

In an effort to get teens to share concerns and questions, the Church of The Savior Lutheran Church in Williamsport in 2002 held two overnight retreats for junior- and senior-high school students on “God’s Gift of Sexuality.”

According to Rev. Harlan Frank Showers, the retreat came out of a desire to meet youths’ needs. “We’ve had some teenage pregnancies and a lot of concern about some of the habits of youth,” he explains.

The pastor, Heather Wagner, youth director, and Debbie Best, parish nurse and Diakon’s coordinator of *Congregational Health Ministries* in the Upper Susquehanna Synod, developed a curriculum based on a program used by the Presbyterian Church.

“We tried to involve parents but found some to be resistant and lukewarm in their support,” says Showers, adding that those who supported the effort were pleased the issue was being addressed. “We decided to present the curriculum on a retreat where we could build a trusting environment.”

Because of the different needs of each age group, retreats for junior high and senior

high were held separately. The smaller group helped the youths open up to the adult leaders. “We were able to get them to share their questions and concerns. Just to do that was quite an accomplishment,” he says. “We gave them a biblical framework for understanding their sexuality as a gift to be used responsibly.”

The program also looked at today’s culture and how the media play a role in how teens perceive their sexuality. “Adult leaders role-played dating situations,” the pastor notes. “The students were able to jump in and take part. That was the highlight of the whole event.”

Because the home is the primary place where faith is to be nurtured, he notes, a healthy understanding of sexuality needs to be shared there. The school and the congregation can then supplement that education.

“We decided that we need to hold the retreat again,” Showers says. “We need to do this with the adults first so that they know the positive content and can continue the educational process at home.”

Diakon’s *Congregational Health Ministries* within the Upper Susquehanna Synod and the Central Pennsylvania Diocese of the Episcopal Church recently joined to produce a seminar on establishing congregational health ministries in small congregations.

The joint effort was the result of both denominations’ desire to develop health ministries in smaller parishes, says Debbie Best, RN, BSW, Diakon’s coordinator of Congregational Health Ministries in the Upper Susquehanna Synod.

Synod Bishop A. Donald Main and The Right Reverend Michael W. Creighton, bishop of the Episcopal diocese, approved the distribution of a written survey to congregations in both denominations. As a result, Best says, numerous congregations in the synod want to learn more about how to develop health ministries.

Further, through the joint efforts, a successful Congregational Health and Wellness seminar was presented at Christ Episcopal Church in Williamsport this fall. Thirty-one participants representing 10 Lutheran and seven Episcopal congregations learned about the theological roots and current models of health, healing and wholeness ministry.

Best may be reached at (717) 320-0520.



NEWS-IN-BRIEF

Debbie Best, RN, BSW, Diakon’s coordinator of *Congregational Health Ministries* in the Upper Susquehanna Synod, continues to work with college nursing programs to discuss parish nursing.

Visits have included Bloomsburg University and Williamsport’s Lycoming College. In addition, she has met one-on-one with students from Mansfield University and Elmira College. Best hopes eventually to reach additional nursing students at Pennsylvania College of Technology and Lock Haven University as well.

“Parish nursing is becoming a recognized specialty,” Best says. “We can be proud of the efforts that are occurring in congregations within the Upper Susquehanna Synod.”

Liberian studies region

Esther Thomas was planning to return home to Liberia last year to complete research into domestic violence as part of her master's degree program, but she didn't make it.

It wasn't because she missed her plane or had a simple change in plans. Instead, she was unable to return home because of horrific events there. Under attack by rebels yearning to overturn Liberia's government, Thomas' hometown fell victim to the rebel movement, which began in 1989.

"My mother called me and told me that the rebels had raided my home. I no longer have a home. The physical structure is still standing, but everything inside of it is gone," Thomas says.

Many would have been devastated by the situation, but she took her unyielding spirit and looked for alternative locations to conduct her research project.

"When I found out I couldn't go home, I talked to my professor (at Wartburg Seminary in Iowa), and we decided that maybe I should do my research project in central Pennsylvania, where I know the people in the Upper Susquehanna Synod," she says. Her efforts aided the community-outreach efforts of *Tressler Counseling & Education/Family Life Services*.

Having strong connections to the Lutheran church in Liberia, Thomas was previously part of a missions outreach program and visited the Lewisburg area in 1998. "This is my home away from home," she says. "I am very comfortable here."

Yet she also fears for her family still in Liberia. "I have my two children here with me, but I still have my mother, three sisters, and a brother in the middle of civil unrest." Each day she prays that her family members will not experience what she did several years ago, when the civil fighting first began.

"I was captured by rebel forces. I had my two children with me, and the rebels literally used us as human shields. They had about 65 other captives as well. To be frank, the rebels took away all that I had except my faith and my love for my family," she says.

While captive, Thomas and her children

were forced to travel with the rebel group, often walking several miles a day in the bush, where food was scarce.

"When I did find food, I was concerned about my children, so I gave it to them. Sometimes we were lucky. If we encountered a deserted town, we were sometimes allowed to eat from its gardens," she notes. "It was not easy."

While she believes God ultimately saved the group, some believe He worked through Thomas. Assuming the role of group spokesperson, she was revered by many of the other hostages.

"One woman came to me. Her 13-year-old daughter had been taken away from her to travel with another rebel group. So I went to the rebel in charge and said to him, 'I came to talk to you.'" Negotiating with the armed man, she was able to arrange for the safe return of the child.

"Through my experience, God let me save a lot of people. God had a purpose for me," says Thomas. At one point, "our group was running away from another rebel group that was about to attack the area. Most people were using a footpath to get away, because if they used the road, they were sure to be seen or hit by gunfire.

"One handicapped woman in a wheelchair was left behind because the chair couldn't handle the rough terrain of the footpath. I couldn't leave her behind, but I couldn't possibly carry her, so I told her to lie down and be quiet. I told her God would save us. People came shooting around us, but they assumed everyone already left. So we were safe, but soon the first rebel group took us captive again."

After four months, peacekeeping forces stepped in, and Thomas, her family, and the others were allowed to go free. While the experience was difficult, Thomas is using it as a focal point for her studies.

"Because of the crisis at home, I thought domestic violence would be a good topic for my research. Because of the war, people have been abused. The topic fit in context," she says.

Her project also dovetailed with community-outreach efforts of Tressler Counseling &



Esther Thomas

Education within the Upper Susquehanna Synod. "Esther's project has fit in well with our agency mission," says Mark Basinger, director.

"Diakon Lutheran Social Ministries is attempting to reach out to the community to people with great need. Significant amounts of people have been exposed to abuse and trauma," he says. As part of her research, Thomas was able to speak with counseling clients who granted their permission. She also made connections with organizations such as Susquehanna Valley Women in Transition, Wise Options for Women, Men in Training Techniques and Services, The Bloomsburg Women's Center, and the Area Agency on Aging.

By working with the community organizations, Thomas ultimately learned various organizational approaches to dealing with domestic violence, says Basinger. "Domestic violence is a touchy issue," she says. "But I hope studying the topic will help others."

Having a bachelor's degree in education administration from Cuttington University College in Liberia, Thomas hopes to finish the master's program and work with the Liberian Lutheran church in holistic community development.

Basinger believes her future ambitions are within reach. "Esther has a tremendous understanding of the power of God and God's ability to use people to do His will. She is courageously reaching out to people with need."

Ohesson Manor neighborhood becoming hub of social services and health care

History and progress are crossing paths on the hill outside Lewistown where *Ohesson Manor* has operated since 1977. Originally the site of the Mifflin County Home, the acreage around Ohesson Manor is evolving into what administrator Cork Leiter describes as a “human/health care services development.”

The Mifflin County Home, which was located adjacent to where Ohesson Manor is today, closed in 1977, and its remaining 39 residents became Ohesson Manor’s first occupants. The building then became home to the Mental Health/Mental Retardation

agency of the Juniata Valley.

Across the road from the county home was a county-owned farm, leased and operated through this summer by a local farmer. However, the land is now being converted for use by two new tenants, Geisinger Lewistown Clinic and the Lewistown Children’s Center, a program of Snyder Union Mifflin Child Development (SUMCD).

“We are very excited about the changes under way with the development of our neighborhood,” Leiter says. “We’re exploring possible shared opportunities and discussing different ideas with both entities.”

Sharon Koppel, executive director of SUMCD, says that when her organization decided to build a new center, the area beside Ohesson Manor seemed “perfect.”

“We like the idea of being near another service industry and we think there is real potential for shared endeavors, such as intergenerational programming,” Koppel says. “We’re also hoping that we may be of service to Ohesson employees who need child care.”

The Geisinger clinic opened in October, while the Children’s Center is expected to open in early 2004.

NEWS-IN-BRIEF

Dodging raindrops to raise funds

The Sigma Kappa Sorority of Susquehanna University lets nothing dampen their enthusiasm for their friends at *Penn Lutheran Village*. Not even a rainstorm!

Sorority members volunteer time at Penn Lutheran every semester. This spring they also braved a thunderstorm to raise funds for special activities at the nursing center.

About 40 members donned walking attire and traveled a route of several miles from the campus to Penn Lutheran and back. Encouraged by their sponsors and their fondness for village residents, the walkers completed their trek—in the midst of a storm.

Thrivent Financial for Lutherans matched the sorority’s contribution.

Jessica Mikulski, chapter president of Susquehanna University’s Sigma Kappa sorority, presents a check to Ann Clark of the Penn Lutheran Village staff. The chapter raised \$1,500 for the village’s dementia-care programs.



Former teachers recall their ‘rewarding’ schooldays

They may have left the classroom years ago, but the group of retired teachers who now call *Buffalo Valley Lutheran Village* home still love to talk about their students and their profession. Whether they taught in one-room schoolhouses or college classrooms, they agree the job of teacher is important and rewarding.

“I’ve had so many wonderful students over the years and it makes you feel special when they still remember you,” says Sarah Ellen Mack, who taught elementary grades for 36 years in Pennsylvania, her first four in a one-room school. “Three of my former students are in the same Sunday School class with me now.”

In the past, teachers often taught a variety of subjects and grades within a single school year. But they usually had their favorites.

“I taught almost every subject,” says Elma Gerdes, a former teacher from Iowa who settled at Buffalo Valley because her son lives nearby. “But I’d have to say I liked home economics best.”

Evelyn Keefer taught grades one through eight in rural Pennsylvania schools and then became an instructor in the Penn State



Honored this fall at a special “Teachers’ Tea” were these former educators who now live at Buffalo Valley Lutheran Village: (Seated, left to right) Ruth Gommer, Elma Gerdes, and Sara Brown; (Standing, left to right) Helen Keyser, Sarah Ellen Mack, Jason White (who has since moved), and Evelyn Keefer.

University Extension Program. She has many fond memories of both her students and her colleagues.

“At our last reunion, only two of the teachers who taught with me were there,” she says. “On the other hand, I was leaving the local mall not so long ago when I heard someone say, ‘There’s my third-grade teacher’ and that made me feel good.”

The village recently honored the former teachers.

Lindquists honored at celebration



*Left to right:
The Rev. Ted and
Nadine Lindquist with
Bishop A. Donald Main
at the Diakon- and
Upper Susquehanna
Synod Church in
Society Committee-
sponsored Celebrate
Social Ministry banquet.*

ASelinsgrove couple received the Dr. Betty Amstutz Memorial Award for Outstanding Social Ministry at the Celebrate Social Ministry banquet late this fall.

Held at Tedd's on the Hill in Shamokin Dam, the event is co-sponsored by Diakon Lutheran Social Ministries and the Committee for Church in Society of the Upper Susquehanna Synod. The November event was the third such celebration.

The Rev. Theodore and Nadine Lindquist received the award, which memorializes Dr. Amstutz, a Lutheran deaconess known throughout central Pennsylvania and Maryland for her efforts to promote social ministry. She died in 1995.

According to Bishop A. Donald Main of the Upper Susquehanna Synod, "Ted and Deanie Lindquist have led the type of life exemplified by Dr. Amstutz—a life lived in service to others."

Pastor of a number of Lutheran congregations in central Pennsylvania including Sugar Valley and a large Liverpool charge, the Rev. Lindquist also served as an assistant to the bishop of the former Central Pennsylvania Synod of the Lutheran Church in America.

Visitation pastor of Sharon Lutheran Church in Selinsgrove for the last dozen years, he has been a regular volunteer at Penn Lutheran Village, Selinsgrove, and Buffalo Valley Lutheran Village, Lewisburg, where he has conducted worship services for residents and a series of Bible study sessions for residents of RhodesMere.

The Rev. Lindquist served two terms on the board of directors of Tressler Lutheran Services (now Diakon), as well as on the Social Ministry Committee of the Central Pennsylvania Synod. He also has served as a volunteer with a number of other community organizations.

A founder of the Friends of Buffalo Valley Lutheran Village auxiliary, Mrs. Lindquist is widely recognized for her commitment as a volunteer, having been honored several years ago as a "Volunteer of the Year" by the Pennsylvania Association of Non-Profit Homes for the Aging.

At Buffalo Valley, she has served several terms on the Friends' board, as chair of the village's annual Fun Fair and Valentine's Day party, and as a volunteer for the annual rummage sale and holiday bazaar.

In the community, she has served as a regular registrar for Red Cross blood drives and as a registered Girl Scout leader for many years, frequently assisting with the annual cookie sale. An active member of the Social Ministry Committee of Sharon Lutheran Church, she was one of the founders of Liverpool's Cub Scout Pack #91, where she served as a den mother.

Congregationally based Agape Awards were presented to:

- Mrs. Dorothy Wilhour and Mrs. Phyllis Webb, members of St. Matthew Lutheran Church in Shamokin Dam. They were honored for their community service, particularly for volunteer efforts at Sunbury Community Hospital and within their congregation.
- Mr. and Mrs. Donald Fisher and their son, Eric, members of Christ Lutheran Church, Milton, who were honored for extensive involvement in Habitat for Humanity.

- The late Thomas A. Muchler, a member of First Lutheran Church, Mifflinburg. Mr. Muchler had been extensively involved

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Celebration

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in service to his congregation, as well as to the community. He had served as Mifflinburg mayor, co-chaired several community committees, and been honored as Mifflinburg Citizen-of-the-Year.

- Nancy Porter, a member of Messiah Lutheran Church in South Williamsport, who was recognized for her commitment to social ministry and social justice. She has been involved in a number of programs including Shepherd of the Streets.

Program-based Agape awards were presented to Mrs. Anna Heimbach, a volunteer at Penn Lutheran Village for her dedicated service in providing a variety of musical programs and instruction at the village, and to Harry E. Kaiser, for his volunteer efforts at Buffalo Valley Lutheran Village, including his contributions as a musician.

The Diakon President's Award in the synod was presented to Dr. Gregory A. Krohn, a member of Faith Lutheran Church in Lewisburg, who had served as a member of the board of Tressler Lutheran Services (now part of Diakon) from 1990 to 1995. During his tenure, he helped to focus the board on critical issues and also was co-author of a study on "The Economies of Scale and Scope in Lutheran Social Ministry Organizations."



Mr. and Mrs. Walter Riggin of Juniata County, here with Diakon Board of Directors Chair Emried D. Cole, Jr., Esq. (right), were among a number of long-time Tressler supporters and former board members who attended a celebratory luncheon late this fall. Presentations were made by agency staff members and Lower Susquehanna Synod Bishop Emeritus Guy Edmiston, Jr., on Diakon ministries and directions. The Riggins have been long-time volunteers at Locust Grove Retirement Village near Mifflin.

These memorial gifts were made from early fall through November. In 2003, memorial gifts will be recognized in a new, special publication.

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