

LUTHERAN WOMAN'S QUARTERLY

WINTER 2025

WINTER THEME:
**LIVE IN PEACE
WITH ONE
ANOTHER**

*Finally, brothers, rejoice.
Aim for restoration, comfort
one another, agree with one
another, live in peace; and
the God of love and peace
will be with you
(2 Corinthians 13:11).*

Care for the Shepherds

Pastor Rich and Kate Steensma credit Shepherd's Canyon Retreat with helping them confront personal and marital struggles, rediscover hope, and rebuild their lives and ministry through deep healing and practical tools.

WINTER BIBLE STUDIES

NOT THE WORLD'S PEACE

ESTHER — A FAITHFUL WOMAN OF GOD

WHAT — IS — HAP — PEN — ING?

¿QUÉ — ES — TÁ — SU — CE — DIEN — DO?

*Spanish
Translation!
Traducción
Española*



Caring for the *Shepherds*

BY FEATURES EDITOR BECKY WEHRSPANN

Different vocations require different sets of tools — a carpenter keeps a hammer and pliers close, while a nurse isn't far from a stethoscope and thermometer. As Christians, we hold God's Word as our ultimate guide, but He also provides other tools that equip us to do the work He has called us to do.

Located outside Phoenix, Arizona, Shepherd's Canyon Retreat is a Recognized Service Organization of the LCMS. For more than 16 years it has been a hidden gem, a well-kept secret for pastors and church workers. However, the tools that are used at Shepherd's Canyon can hardly be kept hidden or in secret — for God is calling His people to live in peace with one another.

"There are two ways Shepherd's Canyon helps with the church worker shortage," Executive Director Pastor Kevin Bueltmann says. "Some church workers come to us ready to quit the ministry, but, after going through our intensive counseling retreat, go back with a renewed sense of energy and purpose. When they go back, they are able to serve with more joy! This renewed joy helps with recruitment, and it also helps keep church workers in the ministry."

Pastor Kevin and his wife, Tawn (pictured above), attended Shepherd's Canyon more than five years ago when he was ready to leave church work after a lifetime of service. "I've been a DCE, a parish pastor, and also a Lutheran camp director," he says. "Shepherd's Canyon began the healing process, and I'm now still in ministry." About a year and a half after their week of healing, they returned to Shepherd's Canyon as the site manager and hospitality director. A year later they became the directors of the program.

This powerful retreat is offered by Shepherd's Canyon for church workers and their spouses. Each retreat week is limited to eight attendees, so it is also a very intimate and highly confidential setting. There are two licensed counselors, one male and one female, as well as a Chaplain on staff. "Those 11 people are the only ones who know the stories. We want everyone to feel



safe to share," Pastor Kevin tells us. "They spend mornings in group time, then have free time and individual or couples counseling sessions after lunch. Evenings are optional group time. There is one day 'off' when they go into town and have a chance to explore the area. Then two more full days of work group sessions in the mornings and afternoons."

In addition to the counseling and hard work, the high-end resort setting is caring and comfortable, pampering those who attend. "We want to help them and give them comfort and peace, both emotionally and physically," Pastor Kevin adds. "There's a pool, a hot tub, and massage chair. We have a chef who comes in to prepare the food. There's comfort in a lot of ways — physically, emotionally, and spiritually."

At the end of the week, each person writes something they want to leave behind on a rock with a permanent marker — anger, pain, addiction, pride — and leaves it at the foot of the cross in the prayer garden. This symbolizes leaving that struggle or burden behind and moving forward.

Going back into the 'lion's den' at home can be difficult. "We definitely encourage them to find a counselor in their home state," Pastor Kevin relates, "Because they come from all over the country, and also from other parts of the world, we can't provide the type of counseling follow-ups that would be necessary. Most healthcare plans allow counseling, so we encourage them to use those after their week at Shepherd's Canyon."

Pastor Kevin compares the work at Shepherd's Canyon to having surgery.

"When you need surgery, you need to spend hours in the surgical room — then take time to heal and recover. At Shepherd's Canyon, you're getting a lot of help in a week, but you still have to recover when you go home. That's when you need extra help and therapy. Shepherd's Canyon is the springboard and gives the tools needed to get back on track to healing and serving."

A strong supporter of Shepherd's Canyon is Pastor Rich Steensma. At the encouragement of his district president, he and his wife, Kate (pictured on the cover), attended a week-long retreat ten years ago. Pastor Steensma was on the verge of resigning from his call as Senior Pastor and his marriage and family life was crumbling around him.

"I had a very quick transition from Vicar to Associate Pastor to Senior Pastor," he recalls. "I felt I was ready, and I could conquer the world, but it was really difficult. When things got more challenging, I became someone nobody wanted to be around. I was trying so hard to fulfill the 'Messiah complex.' It got to the point where it was obvious to me that God was finished with me in ministry." Pastor Rich's district president encouraged him to give Shepherd's Canyon a chance, with the added command of taking his wife — even if they didn't want to be around each other. Kate did attend the retreat with him, and the two of them found common ground to begin healing.

"Shepherd's Canyon is where you go to a physically different place and are wrapped in love and acceptance," Kate says. "You are free to be who you are with your warts and scars that we all carry. And, you are still loved by people who are also going through a struggle."

"The freedom of being able to safely share and be who you are and letting your guard down was very cathartic. It is very intense, and it's a lot of work, but Shepherd's Canyon equips you with the tools that can help you change."



At week's end, participants write a struggle they're ready to surrender on a rock and lay it at the foot of the cross. In the quiet of the prayer garden, this simple gesture becomes a powerful step toward healing.

Kate had seen what the pressures of a large congregation with multiple campuses and services, combined with a Lutheran school, had done to her husband. "The pressures of that turned him into someone I did not recognize," Kate says. "Rich was ready to leave the ministry, which broke my heart, because he is a born shepherd."

Kate also felt grossly unprepared for this change in her husband. "The Seminary does not equip wives; we were not equipped beyond anything but toxic positivity," she says. "You hear there are pewfuls of people waiting to welcome you and love you, but that's not always true. And, when it isn't true, no one talks about it. I was in a dark time with my marriage, and, yet, I always had a smile on. I always kept a positive presence at church."

"I felt like a single mom," she continues. "I was trying to pick up the pieces in a marriage where Rich put his love and dedication to the congregation before our family. I was never told this may happen and that there are life savers I could reach out to for help along the path. It was a very lonely place."

At Shepherd's Canyon, Kate finally felt heard and validated. "It was the first time in many, many years that I felt I could listen to the counselors talk to Rich and me and call him out on things I'd been saying to him for years and he could not see," Kate recalls. "But when the professional counselor said it, it sunk in."

"Through the week, it became clear what the issues were," Pastor Rich says, "and they were less about me needing to leave ministry, and more about how to recognize my own behaviors of performing and being in charge. It went right down to the very basics of conflict resolution, and identifying the difference between shame and guilt."

"The freedom of being able to safely share and be who you are and letting your guard down was very cathartic," Kate relates. "It is very intense, and it's a lot of work, but Shepherd's Canyon equips you with the tools that can help you change."

"The whole purpose of Shepherd's Canyon is that they've got a huge toolbox, and they identify the tools needed by the couples who are there," Pastor Rich says. "They identified the three major needs as physical well-being, mental well-being — connecting with a counselor or therapist — and medically benefitting from medication. I've been diagnosed with depression, anxiety, and PTSD, and I thank God for medication."

Pastor Rich is quick to clarify that the changes didn't come overnight. "It took time to explain things to our kids and for them to start seeing a change. The week is not magic; it's not hocus pocus. It takes time and a lot of work."

One way Shepherd's Canyon is different from other reconciliation programs is in the tools addressing individual behavior. "With reconciliation, you have both sides talking together, working things out," Pastor Kevin says. "But people come here to focus on their own behavior. When bad things happen to you, you either react, or you respond. When you react it's usually out of fear, anger, or hurt. When you respond, it's out of the grace God has given you. We are giving people the ability to not just react to things, but to respond — and they feel heard."

Shepherd's Canyon is staffed by several full- and part-time employees, but it also relies heavily on volunteers and donations to help keep costs low. "Some jobs can be physically demanding," Tawn says, so volunteering is not for everyone. "We love it when people do Thrivent Action Team grants for us. We have LWML groups now collecting gift cards that they send to us."

The retreat costs over \$10,000 per person. Pastor Kevin says, "We offer it for \$5,000 for one person, and, if they bring their spouse, it's \$6,000 total. The extra cost is covered by donations and grants. The LCMS covers part of that; the districts cover part of it. LWML is helping us out — we are so grateful for all of that. There is no way we could do this without donor support."

"Rostered church workers can apply directly to Synod for scholarships," Tawn adds. "Synod is very, very supportive of us. We were thrilled when we received the grant from LWML to help retired pastors or vicars who don't fit the criteria for a Synod scholarship."

Pastor Rich is a strong advocate for Shepherd's Canyon, not only because of his first-hand experience, but because of what he's seen happen in others' lives: "I saw how God used that ministry to save my marriage (and to save my ministry). We have had a number of church workers that have shared boldly that it has helped save their lives. It can be very overwhelming when you find yourself in the pit and unable to perform."

He has served as a Chaplain for weekly retreats, he has served on the Board of Directors, and he is excited at the possibility of a second campus in Missouri being within easy travel distance from his home. "The only person I was totally and completely and thoroughly honest with during my retreat was the Chaplain; I was able to bear it all to him," Pastor Rich shares. "I went back as a Chaplain, and I loved it. Shepherd's Canyon is the biggest secret in the Synod, but, thankfully, the secret is becoming known, and I want to be a cheerleader for it."

"Shepherd's Canyon has had well over one hundred retreats and impacted nearly a thousand participants," he continues. "Those participants also affected how many hundreds of thousands of people in their ministries? Yes, the church workers and spouses are the ones who go through the program, but, thankfully, God is using it for so many others as well. It is impacting all those congregations."

Pastor Rich also knows it can be difficult to convince pastors and church workers to take a week for themselves. "The hardest step is the first one," he says. "Shepherd's Canyon gave me a focus on how to begin the healing — in my marriage, in my family, in my congregation. I was better able to understand what was going on and returned with a whole different outlook on ministry and life and family."

"Shepherd's Canyon gave us hope," Kate says. "It gave us hope that we weren't alone in our struggles, that we could strive and continue. That hope was going to require work, but we were given many, many tools to use after leaving Shepherd's Canyon." Q

Becky Wehrspann is beginning her tenth year as the LWQ Features Editor and is fascinated by all the people she's encountered while sharing their stories with our readers. Becky works part-time at her local public library which fosters her love for reading. She also enjoys cooking, gardening, and hiking — especially getting to do those things with her family.



Ebenezer Stone at the entrance to the facility with this statement: This stone has been placed here as a strong visual symbol of God's Promises. It is a reminder of God's restoration and faithfulness. For those who seek new direction it is a statement that God has made a permanent covenant with them and all who put their faith in Jesus Christ. *Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Shen. He named it Ebenezer, saying, "Thus far the Lord has helped us" (1 Samuel 7:12 NIV).*



According to Pastor Kevin, much of the work throughout the week happens here in these red chairs, where hearts are shared and lives are lifted.



A new lakeside location in Missouri means more opportunities for Shepherd's Canyon to offer even more space for healing, renewal, and retreat.