



# Spreading Joy and Support:

## The Heart Behind The Gathering at St. Martin's

Every month at St. Martin's, a sacred rhythm unfolds — a warm, joy-filled gathering that reflects Christ's love to those living with memory loss and to the caregivers walking beside them. Known as The Gathering, this half-day, free program is part of a city-wide mission coordinated by CarePartners and hosted by more than 40 churches and synagogues throughout Houston.

At St. Martin's, the program has flourished for more than 20 years thanks to the faithful leadership and vision of longtime Parishioner Kathy Tellepsen. Through her calling, commitment and compassion, she has helped launch The Gathering, an organization of faithful volunteers who embody the hands and feet of Christ. Parishioners Jim McCulloch and Beth Ollenburger shared what this ministry means to them and how it has deepened their walk of faith and calling.

### A Simple Invitation, a Lasting Commitment

Jim McCulloch's journey with The Gathering began with an invitation from longtime volunteer and Church member Kathy Tellepsen, whom he affectionately refers to as "The Angel" of the program.

"We went the first time with some trepidation," he recalled, "not really knowing what to expect. We found that it is really quite easy to spend time there. You want to be smiling, welcoming and helpful. The attendees have a great time and without The Gathering, they would simply be sitting at home."

McCulloch quickly found his gift for hospitality: welcoming participants as they arrive, often greeting them at the Bagby



**CATCHING A RAY OF SUNSHINE —** Kathy Tellepsen and Beth Ollenburger pause for the camera during the June 23 event.

Parish Hall porte cochère with warmth and enthusiasm. "I tell them how glad we are to see them and that now that they have arrived, the party can start!"

### Creativity, Connection and Calling

Parishioner Beth Ollenburger has been volunteering for nearly four years and plays a key role as co-chair of the art projects — a vibrant and meaningful part of each meeting. "Crafting stimulates participants brains and can help cognitive function,

decision-making and creative thinking," she said. "It also gives them something to go home with and enjoy."

Each meeting features a themed craft — tied to holidays or seasons — and volunteers often dress for the occasion. "We've made a rock cactus, fish art out of seashells, Fourth of July decorations, paperclip birds and Dixie cup frogs," Ollenburger shared. "It's always a busy, fun-filled day and volunteers help in all the activities."

For Ollenburger, The Gathering is not just about creating art — it's about creating joy. "I love to see the joy on our Care Partners' faces, as well as watching their caretakers enjoy in the fun. After the first time, I loved it and look forward to coming back!"

Her faith is closely intertwined with this work. "God gave me the gift of creativity and it brings me joy to watch the joy as everyone works on their art project," she said. "In his letter to early Christians, Peter writes, '*God has given you a gift from his great variety of spiritual gifts. Use them well to serve others.*' (1 Peter 4:10)"

"All of The Gathering volunteers have the gift of hospitality. We enjoy making our participants and their caretakers feel loved, welcome and special."

### Moments That Matter

When asked what he finds most rewarding about volunteering, McCulloch stated, "I love seeing the smiles on their faces, as I imagine that in many cases their smiles are few and far between on most days." But it's not just the joy in the moment that sticks with him. He recalled an emotional encounter that underscored the impact of the program.



"A family member came to see us after one of our regular attendees passed away. She went on about how important The Gathering had been for her relative. They enjoyed it greatly and looked forward to it every month. It made me realize how important our efforts are to these people."

Perhaps most surprising, McCulloch says, is how easy it is to make such a big difference. "It doesn't take much to help — but it means so much to the people who attend."

## A Legacy of Leadership

Behind St. Martin's involvement in The Gathering is the faithful leadership of Kathy Tellepsen, who, along with her husband Tom have been members of the Parish since 1970. More than 20 years ago, she helped bring The Gathering to St. Martin's after a fellow Parishioner, whose husband had Alzheimer's, approached her with the idea.

Tellepsen's extensive background in elder care — including service as activities director at The Forum and later as an ombudsman for Alzheimer's patients for the State of Texas — laid a strong foundation for the program's growth. But more than expertise, she brings heart. Kathy Tellepsen sees this ministry to answer Christ's call to "love one another" (John 13:34) — especially those often forgotten or isolated. Her passion continues to inspire a new generation of volunteers who see The Gathering as an extension of their faith in action.

"I love being a small part of The Gathering every month, but it couldn't happen without the whole team of very special men and women," Ollenburger stated. "And I can't help but add a shameless plug ... we can always use more volunteers!" The monthly events are open to the community and are not just designed for Parishioners.

"If you're interested in learning more about The Gathering or joining as a volunteer, please reach out. Whether you want to help set up, greet guests or simply spend time listening and sharing joy, there is a place for you," shared Kathy Tellepsen.

## CarePartners and The Gathering: A Citywide Mission

The Gathering is made possible through CarePartners, a nonprofit organization that began in 1993 with the launch of the first Alzheimer's CareTeam at Memorial Drive Presbyterian Church. Since then, it has grown to support older adults, individuals with dementia, and their caregivers through educational programs and volunteer-driven services.



**BIRDS OF A FEATHER** — Each monthly meeting features a unique craft that reflects the theme. These birds, assembled from precut colored paper and paper clip legs, were inspired by the theme: "Birds of a Feather, Flock Together."



**HELPING HANDS IN MOTION** — Parishioner Carlene Warren, left, assists participants by catching balls during a mobility and coordination exercise.



**UPLIFTING SPIRITS** — Dancing, singing and rhythm games are essential and joyful elements of The Gathering's monthly program.



## THE GATHERING

*Meets the fourth Monday of the month  
10 a.m.-1 p.m. • Bagby Parish Hall*

For more than 25 years, The Gathering's planned activities have helped to strengthen motor and social skills through music, games, crafts, fitness activities, lunch and conversation. The meetings also provide caregivers with a few hours of rest from their duties, yet many enjoy the monthly social meetings as they provide a means to meet other caregivers and fellowship.

**For more information about the program or to volunteer, please contact Kathy Tellepsen at [kattellepsen@me.com](mailto:kattellepsen@me.com) or call 713-301-4786.**