

## Journey of the Heart

### A real life experience from a Stephen Minister

It was February 18, 1997 when I lost my job. Before that day, the church bulletin handed to me each Sunday had a footnote I had never seen in any other churches. It said something like, "If you are going through hard times or have suffered a life changing loss, Stephen Ministers are here to help you." Meaningless words - I never gave it much thought until that Tuesday when my boss called me into his office and my eyes locked on the Division Director and our Human Resources representative.

My whole life, personal and otherwise, quickly became a surreal blur. The following Sunday, those words in the church bulletin seemed to jump off the page, capture my whole attention and engulf me. If this was God's way of introducing me to something that would later become a significant life goal, I wish he could have found a gentler way to do it! Stephen Ministry has launched me on an eye-opening journey of immense Christian growth. Allow me to tell you about it.

\*\*\*\*\*

Emotional wounds hurt as much as physical wounds. Both types will heal, but without the attention of a competent care giver, healing is slow and scars run deep.

Understanding why this happens starts with understanding self-esteem. Next to God's grace, self-esteem is the most important treasure we have. When we feel positive about ourselves, we are happy, productive and clear thinking. We feel "normal." Esteem is like fine, delicate crystal that cracks and shatters when struck the wrong way and we learn to unconsciously protect it. Our sense of self is a huge, valuable part of our lives. People cannot tolerate despising themselves. So, most people surround themselves with emotional insulation as an instinctive mechanism that gets them through the potholes in life, but sometimes there's a gap in that protection and the inner self takes a hit. In so many ways, large or small,

self-esteem is potentially wounded any time there is a sense of loss. There is a minute sense of loss even when you can't find your car keys. But, it takes only a nanosecond to get beyond that. A blink and it's over. How quickly do we get over the loss of a loved one? How about loss of a marriage? Loss of a job? It's the big ones that cause us to stagger and fall. We may silently ask ourselves, did I love that person enough before she died? Was I fair in our relationship? Should I have done something different? If we are not sinking in self-judgment, we may find ourselves immersed in total chaos and confusion as our jumbled thoughts make no sense. We ask, "Why can't my feelings return to normal? I thought I was tougher than this."

Almost like an afterthought, most self-help printed material found in every bookstore and magazine consistently includes the point of talking to a friend to get through a crisis. Yes, good advice, but pick your friends carefully. We all live in a fix-it world. Our society lives at a fast pace and many people who want to help often have the wrong kind of help to offer. We all focus on results because that is what we are taught to look for. Corporate America will tell you if you know what your goal is you will find the process to get you there. It's how we live, how we work, how we go from day to day. But, those trying to extract themselves from the pit of grief and self-disdain don't have clear goals except to just get through the day. Attaining goals requires upbeat energy, something they don't have. They can't "fix it." They can't envision goals because depression and sorrow have swallowed them. They don't need a goal, they need a process. It's good and kind for others to make material fixes for you, but when the last well-wisher has gone home, it's just you and your tangle of thoughts. Oddly, loving family members can sometimes be the worst of the "Fix-it" folks and therefore not always a good choice.

What we all need in such times is someone who focuses on the process and knows how to listen effectively. This should be someone who will confidentially share your most personal thoughts and not judge you for what you feel. Someone who will share tears with you and assure you that your feelings are valid and appropriate. Someone who will give you unconditional positive regard. What you need is an “After” person. Someone who will be there after the funeral is over and the last person has gone home; after the pink slip arrives and your coworkers look the other way as though you didn’t exist; after the divorce is final and everyone else goes on with their lives; after the doctor delivers the bad news; after the gavel comes down and they lead your loved one away in handcuffs.

Good listeners are hard to find. Pastors are usually regarded as good listeners. Pastors are like firefighters. They extinguish the flames and would like to stick around to help with the re-building process, but they can’t because there’s another fire on the other side of town. Stephen Ministers are extensions of their pastor and they can stay for the long haul. They are not professional counselors, psychologists, or therapists. Rather, they are caring Christians who want to help in the best way possible and have received 50 hours of training in topics such as the art of listening, understanding human emotions, the mechanics of human crisis, confidentiality, recognizing signs of depression or potential suicide, the process of grief, and above all else – knowing their limitations. Stephen Ministers do not attempt anything that should be reserved for professionals. They are trained in how to recognize the point in which more highly skilled individuals should step in. Stephen Ministers help and guide their care receivers to make use of professional care givers.

Effective care giving is a team effort. Stephen Ministers do not operate in a vacuum. The strength of the ministry comes from God and their fellow Stephen Ministers. They meet twice each month in peer supervisory sessions and discuss

the relationships they have with their care receivers, but they do so in total confidentiality. Names are never mentioned in these meetings. Care receivers should feel as safe and private talking to a Stephen Minister as they would when talking to their family doctor or pastor.

Stephen Ministry is a total program designed to recruit, organize, train, and support lay ministers who give confidential one-on-one pastoral-type care to those who have gone through losses of any kind and need emotional and spiritual healing.

Stephen Ministry was created in 1975 by Dr. Kenneth Haugk, a Lutheran pastor in St. Louis who wanted to train members of his congregation to be an extension of his pastoral care ministry. Now, 35 years later, there are Stephen Ministers in all 50 states, 20 different countries, and in over 150 different Christian denominations. To date, over 60,000 Stephen Leaders have been trained and over 500,000 Stephen Ministers. This ministry is found in over 10,000 churches world wide.

In her book, *The Bible, a Biography*, Karen Armstrong begins by saying that humans are beings who look for meaning. Stephen Ministers will gladly tell you of the spiritual benefit they derive from being a care giver. And yet, it is not an experience of pride. More than once, C.S. Lewis tells us that pride is the basis of sin because it implies comparison with others and therefore is self-serving. Stephen Ministers do not look at their work and feel superior to others because of it. It is a deeply fulfilling, healthy combination of God-pleasing self-esteem and humility because you have answered a calling and feel like a useful part of the body of Christ. Over time, the experience of caring for someone in a distinctive way will take you far down your own Christian pathway and you will see more of the whole context of God's meaning in the world. Your priorities will change. Your vision will expand. Your relationship to God will become more intimate.

For most, there is always the issue of finding time for this ministry. God has a way of showing you how to find the time. Think of your favorite subject in school or your favorite thing you do now. If you love what you are doing, the question of time is usually a moot point. I assure you, once you become involved in Stephen Ministry, it's like a good book you can't put down.

Many who think they don't have the people skills to be involved in the lives of others will find that most of us already have the tools to be Stephen Ministers and the training will show you how to use them. Have you ever crossed paths with someone who just lost a loved one and you just didn't know what to say? Stephen Ministry training will teach you what to say – and what not to say.

Some have said, "I am not a good enough theologian to be a Stephen Minister." Make no mistake, this is a caring ministry, not a bible study. People in pain need love and caring, not theology.

In this ministry, you will live the words of Matthew 25 in which Christ said, "When you do this to the least of my brethren, you do it to me." It tells us when you give of your time, you do it for him. When you listen, really listen to someone else's grief, you do it for him. When you validate the feelings of someone who feels alone in a cruel world, you do it for him. When you help someone heal from the wounds of loss and fear, you do it for him. This is where service and worship blend together and can't be separated.

One other thing – your care receiver will know that he or she is receiving genuinely distinctive Christian care and won't really be concerned about what denomination you are or what kind of church service you attend. After all, it's about healing, not recruiting church members.

Do you find that you are coming to church each Sunday and leaving with the persistent feeling that you are not fulfilling your life's purpose in God's plan? Stephen Ministry is looking for those who hear of others in need and want to help

on a personal level. We will show you how to do it. You will learn that God does operate on our level, not in some mystical, puzzling context that we are not supposed to understand. During the training, you will find yourself thinking, “I knew that! Why didn’t I think of that? It just never occurred to me.” The tools of Stephen Ministry simply make sense.

Stephen Ministry is like a good book; once you start, you just can’t put it down.