



“I Began to Feel God’s Love Again”

Recently, I was teaching at a Stephen Ministry event where someone introduced me to “Megan,” a woman in her early 30’s who wanted to tell me her story about receiving care from a Stephen Minister during a difficult transition in life. Megan prefers to remain anonymous—but she gave me permission to share her story with you so you’ll know about the powerful difference Stephen Ministry made in her life.

—Amity Haugk

Amity: What led you to receive the care of a Stephen Minister?

Megan: It all began soon after I moved to [a new city] to live near my family. I had just ended an eight-year relationship and was depending on them to be my support system. But a few months after I arrived, they unexpectedly had to move away—so I felt very, very alone. Not long after they moved, my grandfather passed away. It was one of the hardest times of my life.

I knew I needed to talk to someone, but I hadn’t lived in the city long enough to

develop close, comfortable friendships that I could depend on. But my new church had Stephen Ministry. When I found out what Stephen Ministry was, I talked to my pastor about getting a Stephen Minister.

How did your relationship with your Stephen Minister start out?

It started off a little bit slow. I wasn’t sure how I’d feel about sharing deep, personal things with someone I didn’t know very well. But her consistency, compassion, and care for me

really came through. I realized that my Stephen Minister was a safe person who wasn't going to share what I told her with anyone else. From there we developed a deep relationship until I felt like I could truly share anything with her.

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What was it like to meet with your Stephen Minister?

We met weekly. Sometimes she'd come to my house and we'd sit and talk, and other times we'd go walking together. During our visits, she just let me talk while she listened. As I was talking through things, I realized that it was helping me to make sense of everything that had happened and how I was feeling. She accepted my feelings, including the ones that seemed risky to share—and that was really helpful.

I actually didn't need advice from her—I needed acceptance and affirmation. I had a lot of loneliness, a lot of hurts, a lot of uncertainty inside. I needed to be validated and not put down. My Stephen Minister did a wonderful job of creating a warm, caring space for me to process my emotions and work through my issues.

Could you tell me about a caring visit that stands out for you?

Definitely. It was a few months into our relationship, and I'd begun to trust my Stephen Minister

with some of my most difficult issues. As we were walking around a track, with the wind blowing in my face, I suddenly realized that she was literally walking right beside me as I journeyed through my pain.

I'd been struggling with some spiritual wounds that were pretty intense and needed healing—things I didn't want to share with family and friends. But on that visit, as my Stephen Minister walked next to me, I felt safe and comfortable. So I shared my deepest hurts with her—some really painful things that I feared she might judge me for and that made me wonder if God could possibly love me.

After I told her those things, I was really nervous and dreading her response. I was worried that she would think I was an awful person. But instead, she put her arm around me and said, “I'm sorry you had to go through that.” And that was a turning point for me. To go from fear of judgment to a positive affirmation of care, empathy—and even sorrow for what I'd been through—it was so meaningful. That's when I began to feel God's love again.

I've heard other care receivers say that their Stephen Minister helped them experience God's love. Could you tell me more about how that happened for you?

The fact that God is invisible makes it hard for me to experience him sometimes. I'd been through some very negative experiences in life that caused me to question whether God even existed—and, if he existed, whether he loved me. I truly wondered, after all the things I'd done and the mess I'd been through, if God could still love me.

I somehow knew intuitively that I needed a person that I could see and touch. I think that's truly why I asked for a Stephen Minister. When my Stephen Minister was able to share her concern and her sorrow over my experiences, God was there loving me *through* her. I experienced

God's sorrow and *God's* compassion and *God's* love—and it made all the difference for me.

What I needed the most was her unconditional love—to know that no matter what I shared with her, no matter what I'd done, she cared for me. Her care showed God's love for me. I needed to know that there was one person in the world who knew everything there was to know about me—the good, the bad, the ugly—and still loved me. It was the tangible expression of God's love in my Stephen Minister that changed my life.

How did your caring relationship come to a close?

My Stephen Minister helped me get to a place where I was able to deal with my issues without her. As that happened, our visits tapered off from weekly to every other week to every three weeks. We decided to meet for the last time on my birthday, and that was a very special day for me.

Based on your experience, how would you describe what Stephen Ministers do?

Stephen Ministers do a lot of listening and ask really good questions that help you talk through

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your thoughts and emotions. Stephen Ministers are there for you when it seems that no one else is. Just having someone to talk to—week after week—to bounce ideas off of, can help bring clarity into your life and help you sort through whatever it is you're dealing with.

The most important thing my Stephen Minister did for me was to provide spiritual care that led to spiritual healing. Doctors can take care of our physical needs, and counselors can help with our emotional needs. Pastors focus on spiritual needs, but can't possibly care for every person in their congregation who needs it. So sometimes there's a real gap when it comes to meeting spiritual needs. My spiritual wounds were the gap for me—the neglected part inside me that hadn't been taken care of. God used my Stephen Minister to really fill the spiritual gap.

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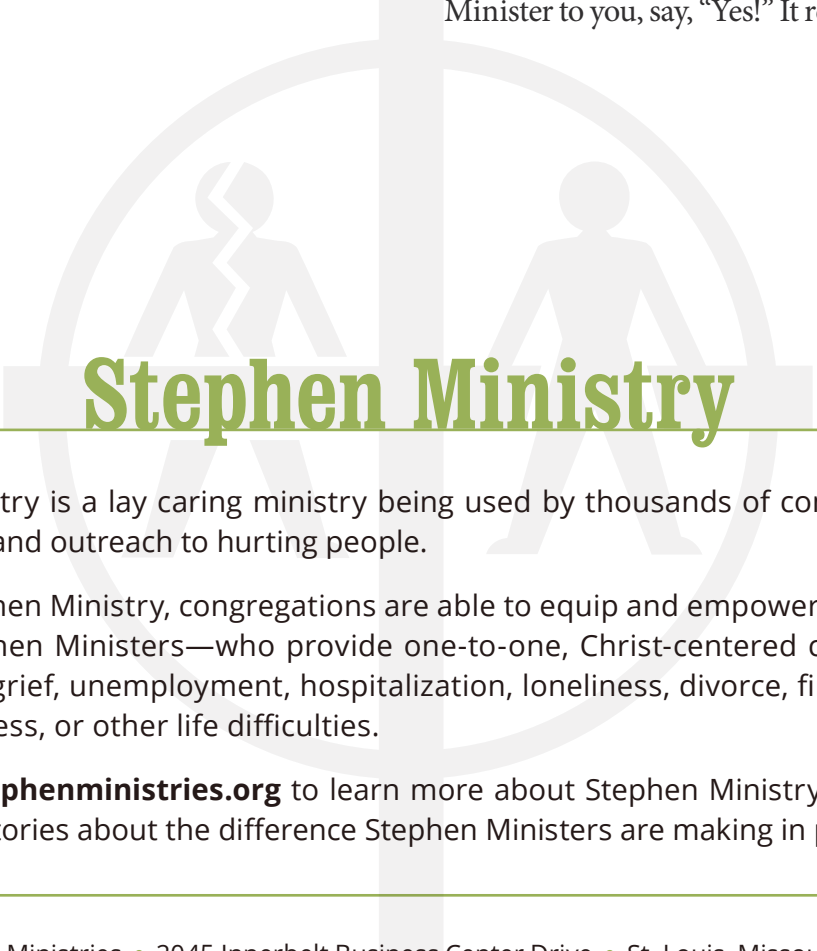
How do you think Stephen Ministers help fill that spiritual gap?

God’s love is always there, but sometimes it can be really hard to feel it, especially when you’re going through a crisis. That’s probably when people doubt God’s presence the most, when their faith is the most vulnerable. But a Stephen Minister is Jesus’ hands and feet, just being there and caring for a hurting person. Stephen Ministers express God’s love in a tangible way that care receivers can feel. Stephen Ministers help those they care for experience God during those times in life when they might be wondering, *Is God even there?*

What would you say to someone who’s considering receiving care from a Stephen Minister?

Asking for a Stephen Minister is the best thing I could have done for myself. Stephen Ministry is transformational. As a care receiver, you’ll grow so much through your Stephen Minister’s care, concern, and compassion for you—you may not even recognize yourself afterward! And you’ll be a lot better off for it.

I would encourage anyone who is suffering, discouraged, or going through a difficult time to ask for a Stephen Minister. And if someone offers a Stephen Minister to you, say, “Yes!” It really is life-changing.



Stephen Ministry

Stephen Ministry is a lay caring ministry being used by thousands of congregations to increase care and outreach to hurting people.

Through Stephen Ministry, congregations are able to equip and empower a team of lay-people—Stephen Ministers—who provide one-to-one, Christ-centered care to people experiencing grief, unemployment, hospitalization, loneliness, divorce, financial stress, a terminal illness, or other life difficulties.

Visit **www.stephenministries.org** to learn more about Stephen Ministry and to watch online video stories about the difference Stephen Ministers are making in people’s lives.
