



A Stephen Minister Story

“Well Done, Good and Faithful Servant”

by Joel Bretscher

As I made my way up the sidewalk to his door, I whispered a prayer: “Please, God, let me find something I have in common with this man to talk about.”

At the time I was single, 29, and had just completed my training as a Stephen Minister. Because of my age, I had assumed I would be paired with a young adult. However, the Stephen Leader who coordinated linking Stephen Ministers with care receivers met with me and said, “The person you will be giving care to is an 82-year-old man who is not a member of our church. He was widowed 20 years ago and stopped attending church at that time.

“He visited our church a couple of times in the past month and had a long talk with our pastor last week. He said he had been angry at the church and at God for a long time, but he figured it was time to make his peace with both. During the course of the conversation, the pastor told him about Stephen Ministry, and the man said he’d like to have a Stephen Minister.”

I accepted the assignment (gladly on the outside, yet somewhat reluctantly on the inside) and made the initial contact by phone to introduce myself and set up our first meeting.

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what I could say to this man and how I could be of help to him. Once more I muttered the prayer, “Please, let us have something to talk about.” As I stepped onto the porch, I saw through his front window that he was watching a baseball game on television. “Baseball! At least we have that in common,” I thought, breathing a sigh of relief that God had answered my prayer and given me an icebreaker.

Building Trust

Baseball worked well as a starting point, and we began to build a friendship during that first visit. Surprisingly,

despite our age difference, Henry (I have changed his name to preserve confidentiality) and I had a number of other things in common. We were both from small Midwestern towns, and we both went into that first meeting with a similar level of self-conscious awkwardness. During the first meeting we spent most of the time getting to know each other, and we agreed to meet in his home for about an hour each week.

Initially I avoided the temptation to guide our talks toward spiritual questions. My Stephen Ministry training cautioned me against pushing this issue before a relationship is ready.

A Glimpse inside Henry

We met regularly over the summer, and gradually Henry began to open up. One evening we were looking through his photo albums; he was showing me pictures of his wife, family, and friends. When I asked him to tell me more about his wife, he talked about her freely. He told me many stories about how they met and how much they’d loved each other. He touched briefly on her death and his



loneliness but seemed not to want to dwell on it, so I did not push. He had not come back to church since his visits that spring, so I asked him

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about his relationship with God. He said he still believed in God and felt it was time to start coming back to church, but it was very difficult to get going again. He had always gone with his wife and found it hard to go alone. I told him I would go with him. He thanked me for the offer and said he would let me know when he was ready.

Difficulty Going Deeper

As summer turned to autumn, I began to feel a little frustrated. Henry and I were very good at small talk and occasionally touched on some deeper issues, but we did not pursue them. I repeatedly tried

asking open-ended questions as I had learned and practiced in Stephen Ministry training, but Henry responded only briefly and went back to small talk. My own difficulty in communicating feelings did not help. We were two men from the same mold—“strong” men who have been brought up with the notion that we should not be emotional.

It was difficult for both of us to talk about feelings. Still, we kept on trying.

Support and Encouragement

I shared my frustrations with the Stephen Ministers in my peer supervision group.* Most of them were serving care receivers who were talking freely about their feelings, and Henry hardly did so at all, even after we had been meeting for four months. They encouraged me and reminded me to focus on the relationship, not on solutions. “Be patient,” they said. “Realize that it’s okay to move slowly; God brought you and Henry together for a reason.” Their support helped me immensely.

From time to time, I’d tell Henry about the major event going on in my life at that time—preparation for my wedding, planned for Thanksgiving weekend in

Indiana that year. Interestingly, it was this topic that God used to prompt Henry to broach deeper issues. As my wedding day approached, we talked more and more about marriage, wives, and relationships. Our relationship progressed to a deeper level.

The Crisis

The week before I was to leave for my wedding, Henry surprised me by asking to come to church with me. As I arrived to pick him up on Sunday morning, Henry met me at the door in his pajamas, saying he didn’t feel well and couldn’t go. Disappointed and wondering whether it was just an excuse, I told him I’d call later to see how he was feeling. When I called later that afternoon, I got no answer. I called again in the evening—still no answer. No answer again on Monday. I didn’t know whether he felt guilty or angry at me or whether it was something else. I didn’t want to leave for my wedding without knowing what was going on, so I drove to his house during my lunch hour on Tuesday. His car was in the driveway, but no one was home. I started to worry that something was seriously wrong, so I left a note on the door with my phone number, saying I was concerned and asking him to call.

That evening Henry called me—from the hospital. He had suffered a heart attack.

* Stephen Ministers are carefully trained to preserve confidentiality in peer supervision. They do not use the names of care receivers, and they center their discussions on the *relationship* between the Stephen Minister and the care receiver, not on details about the care receiver and his or her situation.



He had wanted to call me sooner but wasn't able to remember my phone number and his neighbor couldn't find the piece of paper he had written it on. His neighbor had found my note on the door and relayed the information to Henry.

I immediately went to see Henry. He had been in the hospital since Sunday, was doing better, and would return home soon. During the

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next couple of days I visited him in the hospital. We talked about life and death, about Jesus and salvation. He appreciated it when I held his hand and prayed aloud with him. He also enjoyed my reading from the Psalms and our reciting the Lord's Prayer together.

Henry was steadily improving and was scheduled to go home the day after I left for my wedding. As I visited with him the evening before I left, he gave me some fatherly advice I will never forget: "Always, *always* love your wife, and *never, ever* take her for granted." We both had

tears in our eyes as we embraced before I departed. I told him I'd be gone for only ten days and would call him from Indiana.

Henry went home as scheduled, and I called him from Indiana twice that week. He was eager to see me when I returned, and he promised he would go to church with my wife and me the first Sunday we were back. However, the day after we returned, he was readmitted to the hospital for bypass surgery. This unexpected setback caught everyone by surprise. Henry had not been in hospitals very much and didn't like them because they reminded

him of his wife's death. The prospect of surgery and a subsequent stay in intensive care also troubled him.

Henry wasn't the only one who was anxious. I was also intimidated by the situation, the surroundings, and especially the postsurgical visits with him in intensive care. It was my first time ministering in such circumstances.

Intensive Care

Henry's son had flown into town for the surgery, and I was able to meet him. The pastor came to visit Henry the night before surgery, and we all prayed together.

The surgery went fairly well. The doctors expected that Henry would be in intensive care for four or five days and then be in the hospital about another week. I resolved to visit him every day. His son had to return home after a couple of days. In the following days, Henry's only visitors were me, our pastor, and his neighbor. He was weak and couldn't talk much when I visited. I did some talking, but mostly I held his hand. I read psalms to him and prayed with him each visit. His smile conveyed his appreciation as he nodded his head and squeezed my hand. I checked in with our pastor each day to let him know how Henry was doing. (Given the size of our congregation, he wasn't able to visit Henry each day and was glad I could do so.) The four or five days in ICU stretched into six days, but the doctors told him he was finally ready to move to another room.

Henry Goes Home

I went to ICU to visit him there one more time and to celebrate his progress and transfer out of ICU, but I was startled to find someone else in that bed. I went to the nurses' station, thinking that perhaps he had been released from ICU a day early. "Where's Henry?" I asked the nurse. She reviewed her paperwork and asked, "Are you a relative?" "No," I



said, “he doesn’t have any relatives in town. I’m a good friend from his church.” She paused for a moment and then said, “I’m sorry, but he died this morning.”

What happened next in my supervision group I can only describe with words from Matthew 4:11—“. . . and the angels came and ministered to him.”

I was in a daze when I left the hospital. My wife, Della, was in the car, waiting for me to go shopping. She saw in my face what had happened. She hugged me and asked, “Do you want to go home?” I said I couldn’t just sit around at home; I had to do something active. Walking around at the mall, I wandered into a Christian bookstore. Behind the register was a large painting of a man standing at the gates of heaven, receiving a welcoming embrace from Jesus. Below it were the words, “Well done, good and faithful servant.” I was able to smile because I knew then that Henry was home.

Angels Ministering

Henry’s funeral was two days later. Only a handful of people were there—Henry’s son and daughter-in-law, his neighbor and a couple of friends, the pastor and me. Riding home after the funeral, the pastor and I stopped for some ice cream.

We didn’t say a whole lot, but the pastor smiled and thanked me for what I had done. “You know, you made a very big difference in Henry’s life,” he said, “and

I think this relationship has had a very big impact on your faith and who you are as well.”

Coincidentally, my Stephen Ministry peer supervision group met the evening of Henry’s funeral. I told them that my care receiver had been buried that day. What happened next in my supervision group I can only describe with words from Matthew 4:11— “. . . and the angels came and ministered to him.” That night my tears became their tears, my sorrows their sorrows, my joys their joys.

Jesus’ Promise Becomes Real

What does Stephen Ministry mean to me? It means growth. It means life. It means a faith that is practiced in giving care to others. Stephen Ministry made a difference in Henry’s walk with Jesus, and it made a difference in my own walk as I gave care in Jesus’ name. At the time I did not always see God at work in my caring relationship, but looking back, I can see Christ was there every step of the way. Jesus’ promise, “Where

two or three are gathered, there I am also,” became real to Henry and to me. Stephen Ministry offered me a way to be the personal presence of Christ to Henry in his time of greatest need.

About the Author



Joel Bretscher serves as Director of Communications at Stephen Ministries. Prior to joining the St. Louis-based staff in 1995, he trained and served as a Stephen Minister at Christ Church Lutheran in Phoenix, Arizona.

Christ Church began its Stephen Ministry in 1986 and has since trained hundreds of Stephen Ministers, who, in turn, have provided Christ-centered care and support to countless hurting people.

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Stephen Ministries

2045 Innerbelt Business Center Dr.
St. Louis, Missouri 63114-5765
Phone: (314) 428-2600
Fax: (314) 428-7888
www.stephenministries.org