

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 in my 20s, single, and newly trained as a Stephen Minister in my church in Phoenix, Arizona. Because of my age, I had assumed I would be paired with another young adult. However, the Stephen Leader who coordinated Stephen Ministers’ caring relationships met with me and said, “The pastor and I have decided to match you with an 82-year-old man who was widowed 20 years ago and stopped attending church at that time.

“He visited our church recently and talked with our pastor afterward. He said he had been angry at the church and at God for a long time, but he figured it was time to make peace with both. The pastor told him about Stephen Ministry, and the man said he’d be open to having a Stephen Minister.”

So I called the man to introduce myself and set up our first meeting. A few days later, I found myself walking up to his front door—wondering what I could say and how I could be of help. As I stepped onto the porch, I could see through the front window that he was watching a baseball game on television. “Baseball! We both like baseball,” I thought, breathing a sigh of relief that God had given me the icebreaker I needed.

Building Trust

Baseball worked well as a conversation starter, and Henry (I have changed his name to preserve confidentiality) and I began to build a friendship

during that first visit. Despite our age difference, we had a number of things in common. In addition to liking baseball, we both came from large families, we were both from small Midwestern towns, and we both went into that first meeting with a similar level of awkwardness. We spent most of the meeting just getting to know each other and then decided to meet in his home for about an hour each week.

We met regularly throughout the summer, and gradually Henry began to open up to me. I vividly remember one evening, as we were looking through his picture albums, when I asked him to tell me more about his wife. He began to share story after story about how they met, their life together, 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 didn’t push.

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A few meetings later, I asked him 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 hard to go alone. I told him I’d be glad to 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 he never seemed to want to pursue them much. It didn't help that we were both brought up with the notion that we should not be emotional or talk about feelings.

I shared my frustrations with the Stephen Ministers in my supervision group.¹ They encouraged me and reminded me to keep focused on building the relationship. "Be patient," they said. "It's okay to move slowly. God brought the two of you together, and God is right there with you in every caring visit." Their support helped me immensely.

Another thing that helped was that, from time to time, I'd tell Henry about the big event going on in my life at the time: preparation for my wedding on Thanksgiving weekend that year in Indiana. As it turned out, this was the topic God used to prompt Henry to broach deeper issues. With my wedding day approaching, we talked more and more about marriage, wives, and relationships—and 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. But when 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. I said I was sorry he didn't feel well and I'd call later to see how he was doing.

When I called that afternoon, I got no answer. I called again that evening—and again the next morning—still no response. I started to worry, so I drove to his house during my lunch break. His car was in the driveway, but no one was home. I left a note on the door with my phone number, asking him to call.

That evening Henry called me—from the hospital. He had suffered a heart attack. He had wanted to call me sooner but wasn't able to remember my phone number. His neighbor had found my note and relayed the information to Henry.

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I immediately went to see Henry and visited him several times over the next few days. The time we'd spent building trust and deepening our relationship began to bear fruit as Henry willingly dove into all the deep issues. We talked about life and death, about Jesus and salvation. He appreciated it when I held his hand, prayed aloud with him, and read psalms.

Henry steadily improved and was scheduled to go home the day after I left for my wedding.

¹ Confidentiality is a cornerstone of Stephen Ministry. Stephen Ministers are trained to preserve confidentiality about their caring relationships at all times, including in supervision. They do not mention any names, 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.

Well Done, Good a

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.

Surgery and Intensive Care

I called Henry 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 setback caught everyone by surprise. Henry did not like being in a hospital because it reminded him of his wife’s death. The prospect of surgery and a stay in intensive care also troubled him. Henry wasn’t the only one feeling anxious. I too was intimidated by the situation, the surroundings, and the postsurgical visits in intensive care. It was my first time caring for someone in such circumstances.

Henry’s son had flown into town for the surgery, and I was able to meet him. Our 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 in the hospital another week. I resolved to visit him each of those days.

He was weak and couldn’t talk much when I visited. I did a little bit of 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.

Henry Goes Home

I went to see him on his last scheduled day in intensive care to celebrate his progress and pending move to a regular hospital room, but I was startled to find someone else in that bed. I went to the nurses’ station and asked, “Where’s Henry?” She reviewed her paperwork and asked, “Are you a relative?” “No,” I said, “I’m a very good friend from his church.” She paused for a moment and then said, “I’m sorry, but he died this morning.”

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I left the hospital in a daze. My wife, Della, was waiting for me in the car since we had planned to go shopping after the visit. She saw in my

face what had happened. She hugged me and asked, “Do you want to go home?” But I knew I couldn’t just sit around at home; I had to do something active.

Stephen Ministry made a difference in Henry’s walk with Jesus—and in my own walk as I gave care in Jesus’ name.

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.” In that moment, I was able to smile because I knew 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, a couple of friends, the pastor, and me. Riding home after the funeral, the pastor thanked me for what I had done. “You know, you made a big difference in Henry’s life,” he said. “I think this relationship has had an impact on your faith and who you are as well.”

Coincidentally, my Stephen Ministry supervision group met the evening of Henry’s funeral.

I told them that my care receiver had died. What happened next 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 in my own walk as I gave care in Jesus’ name. Stephen Ministry offered me a way to be the personal presence of Christ to Henry during his time of greatest need. It wasn’t always clear at the time, but looking back, I now can see Christ was there with Henry and me every step of the way. Jesus’ promise, “Where two or three are gathered, there I am also,” became real to us in that relationship, and Christ’s presence transformed us both.



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. In the 30+ years since, the congregation has trained hundreds of Stephen Ministers, who, in turn, have provided Christ-centered care and support to countless hurting people.



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