



In 1975 Rev. Kenneth C. Haugk, Ph.D., a pastor and clinical psychologist, saw that people's needs for care in his congregation and community far exceeded what he alone could provide. So he trained nine congregation members to provide quality, one-to-one Christian care and matched them with individuals experiencing a life crisis.

"Stephen Ministry" was so successful in his church that other congregations wanted to become involved. Dr. Haugk then founded the Stephen Ministries organization and developed the Stephen Series, which now has been implemented in more than 11,000 congregations from more than 150 Christian denominations. A half-million laypeople have been trained as Stephen Ministers, who in turn have ministered to more than a million care receivers.

The name Stephen comes from St. Stephen, the first layperson commissioned by the apostles to minister to people in need (Acts 6).

Greg Lang recently completed Stephen Minister training, along with 12 other members of Perimeter Church in Johns Creek, Georgia. He sat down with Jenny Boren, leader of the Perimeter Stephen Ministry, to discuss how this ministry serves their church and community.

Greg: How did Stephen Ministry come to exist at Perimeter?

Jenny: Perimeter Church has had Stephen Ministry over 20 years; it was begun by someone who saw a great need for more care in our congregation and community and recognized Stephen Ministry as a way to meet that need.

Greg: How long have you been a Stephen Minister?

Jenny: I have been a Stephen Minister over ten years and became a Stephen Leader eight years ago. We have four Stephen Leaders here at Perimeter, each of us taking on different responsibilities based on our gifts.

Greg: What needs do Stephen Ministers meet?

Stephen Ministers provide one-to-one Christian care to the bereaved, hospitalized, terminally ill, separated, divorced, unemployed, relocated, and others facing a crisis or life challenge. Care receivers can be members of the congregation or people in the community.

Greg: What led you to become a Stephen Minister?

Jenny: God called me to this ministry because of struggles I've had in my life. I had a very troubled childhood, my mother died when I was 15, and I was the oldest of three siblings.

Because I was a Christian, I had a foundation to get me through that situation. Now as an adult, I have compassion for anyone having to deal with life challenges—because of what I went through.

Stephen Ministers are often people who have experienced trying times in their own lives. After conquering their struggles, they find they have a heart for helping others. Stephen Ministry is a way for people to share that compassion and mercy with others in a Christian context.

Greg: So one doesn't need to be professionally qualified to become a Stephen Minister.

Jenny: Exactly. We are qualified by our life experiences and our willingness to give Christ-like love to someone in need. And Stephen Minister training equips people with the skills and knowledge to provide a very high level of Christian care.

Greg: Why do you continue to serve after 10 years?

Jenny: It is such a reward to serve. If God will use me, even if only in the smallest of ways, it makes me so happy. It makes me aware of His presence.

Greg: How many Stephen Ministers are there at Perimeter?

Jenny: Over the last 20 years, we've trained well over 200 Stephen Ministers at Perimeter. Stephen Ministers make a commitment to serve for two years, although many end up serving longer. Right now we have 20 active Stephen Ministers and are adding 13 more from your training class.

Greg: Has the need for this ministry increased recently?

Jenny:

Yes, we have seen an increase in requests to see a Stephen

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Minister. We've witnessed this in the past; during times when job loss and financial pressures increase, so too does the demand for Stephen Ministers. Requests from men to see a Stephen Minister are on the rise in particular. The burdens on men right now are great; they are reaching out more for support.

Greg: And how long can someone receive care once connected with a Stephen Minister?

Jenny: Caring relationships go on for as long as the need is there. Typically they last three to six months, with the Stephen Minister and care receiver meeting together once a week for about an hour. Stephen Ministry is a confidential ministry; no one knows who is receiving care except the care receiver, the pastor or Stephen Leader who made the referral, and the Stephen Minister.

Greg: How does one get to a Stephen Minister?

Jenny: Our Pastors, Elders, and Deacons are all very aware of Stephen Ministry, and they regularly make referrals to us.

In addition, anyone in the congregation or community can ask about Stephen Ministry by talking with a pastor or Stephen Leader or by calling our Stephen Ministry Hotline. And, of course, all of those contacts are confidential.

Greg: And how does one become a Stephen Minister?

Jenny: We train a new class of Stephen Ministers every year. We offer the training every Monday night for twelve weeks beginning in January and then commission the new ministers in April. Anyone interested can contact me or one of our other Stephen Leaders.

As I wrapped up my conversation with Jenny, she offered me a brochure about Stephen Ministry. In it was the verse that I believe best explains the mission of Stephen Ministry:

"Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ." Galatians 6:2