

Once Lost, Now Found

by Rev. Kenneth C. Haugk, Ph.D.

I first met John¹ when we were freshmen in college. As we studied to become pastors and played countless games of pick-up basketball together, we got to know each other well. John was always at the top of his class and a tremendous athlete. He was a friend I really looked up to.

After graduating from college we went on to the same seminary. Midway through his first year, John decided that instead of becoming a pastor like his father and older brother, he wanted to be an archaeologist. So he left seminary and was accepted into graduate school at an Ivy League university. He excelled there, earning his master's degree and Ph.D. in quick succession, then got a job as a professor of archaeology at one of the best universities in the country. A few years later, he became the director of a major research institute at another top university.

I had lost touch with John for several years, but then my family happened to start worshipping at the congregation where his parents were members. As I got to know his parents better, they told me that in spite of all John's successes, he had experienced one major loss in his life: his faith. John had become disenchanted

with organized religion and had walked away from his relationship with God.

John's Diagnosis

I next saw John at the wake for his father, who had died of a heart attack. For the first time in a long while, we really had an opportunity to just talk. During our conversation, John revealed to me that he'd been diagnosed with a rare neuromuscular disease. He said he was functioning fairly well for the most part, although he could no longer drive a car—but the disease would eventually take his life. I was shocked.

Since John lived in a different state, his mother kept me up to date about how he was doing. I started thinking, "I wonder if John would like a Stephen Minister to talk with." So I mentioned it to his mother the next time I saw her. Later, she got back to me and told me he'd agreed. I knew several Stephen Ministry congregations where John lived, so I got in touch with them, and he was connected with a Stephen Minister.

Shortly after that, John's mother moved away, and my wife was diagnosed with ovarian cancer. With John's mother out of town and my wife's battle with cancer, which ended with her death, I lost track of John.

¹ To protect confidentiality, John's name and other identifying details have been changed.

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John's Return to Faith

Then, I heard through a mutual acquaintance that John had died. I tracked down his mother's address and wrote her a letter expressing my sadness. Several weeks later, I received her response:

I want you to know that John had a Stephen Minister with whom he had many hours of discussions. On several occasions he said that he had told his Stephen Minister, "I really want to have faith, but I don't know how." Shortly before Christmas, he became very sure of his beliefs again, and that faith remained with him until the end. John's Stephen Minister made his life so much more meaningful and played a big part in him finding his faith once again.

John always thought so highly of you and your work, and I want you to know how deeply I appreciate your founding of Stephen Ministries. I had a Stephen Minister myself for some time after the funeral, and she made a big difference for me.

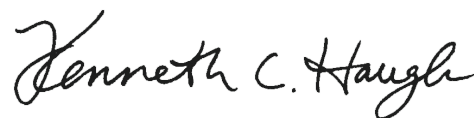
She also sent a copy of the eulogy given by John's brother at his funeral, sharing how John had come back to faith:

John began to see his own struggle with illness as part of all of creation's struggle with imperfection. And he saw that in all of it, he was not alone in his battle—that God really was at his side, getting his hands dirty with John's struggles.

Hearing that John had returned to faith was the ultimate joy for me. After feeling lost for so long, he had found his way back with God's help. In the end, he had come home.

God Getting His Hands Dirty

I like to think of John's Stephen Minister as a representative of our God who "gets his hands dirty." Through this lay caregiver, Jesus ministered to John in his darkest days. Just as Jesus entered our human experience of suffering through his life and death, Stephen Ministers follow his example and enter into the sufferings of those they provide care for. They are willing to get their hands and feet dirty in the pain and hardship of people facing life's challenges, answering the call to "bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:2).



Kenneth C. Haugk
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Since Stephen Ministry began in 1975, congregations have equipped over 600,000 Stephen Ministers, who have provided one-to-one care for millions of people going through difficult times in life, including those who are unchurched. To learn more about Stephen Ministry, visit stephenministries.org or call (314) 428-2600.