

A STEPHEN MINISTRY STORY



Arrhythmia—a single word that meant the end of everything one man loved to do.

At age 45, Mark was told that he could no longer fly planes—*any* planes. No more F-16s for the U.S. Air Force National Guard. No more 737s for a commercial airline. He was *grounded*—his career as a pilot was over.

To top it off, Mark had to give up running. He loved to run and competed regularly in marathons—but that part of his life was finished, too.

Nothing had changed about Mark outwardly. In the mirror, he looked the same as always. But inside, it was a different story. Everything had been yanked away by a one-word diagnosis.

“I was disoriented,” Mark says. “What do you do when you spend the first 45 years of your life preparing for and then doing something you love—you reach the pinnacle of your career—and suddenly the rug gets pulled out from underneath you?”

Living—and Losing—the Dream

Being a pilot was a dream. “I grew up in an Air Force family,” Mark says. “From very early on, my primary goal was to go to the U. S. Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs and be a pilot. I was able to realize that dream and graduated in 1972.”

For 25 years, Mark lived his dream. And all that time, he was rigorous in maintaining his health.

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“My diagnosis was as much a shock to me as to anyone, because I was in better shape and took better care of myself than most people.”

Mark reminisced, “Not a whole lot of people want to take an airplane—one that weighs upwards of 21 tons carrying heavy weapons—and fly it in an 80-degree dive at near the speed of sound. It’s physically demanding. The F-16 has a capability of pulling nine g-forces, so staying in shape, doing weight training, and running were a big part of my life. I maintained the standard of health and strength required for this career. The year before the doctor gave me the news, I had won a marathon.”

Christian churches are meant to be communities where individuals are parts of the body of Christ. Normally, that body is aware of what happens to each of its parts and gives each part the loving care it needs. But sometimes losses happen without leaving any visible wounds that signal the need for care—even losses as disorienting as Mark’s.

“My understanding of myself was that I was a fighter pilot. I was an airline pilot. I was a runner and athlete,” Mark says. “These were the ways I identified myself. And suddenly none of them were true anymore. So I can certainly relate to people who—due to an accident, the death of a spouse, or something else—suddenly lose their entire sense of who they are.”



Becoming a fighter pilot had been a dream of Mark’s. Becoming a Stephen Minister was a key part of his rediscovery of who he was and where God was calling him.

Becoming a Stephen Minister

During the next three years, Mark did a lot of soul searching. Although he could no longer fly, he was able to move into a teaching role as a flight simulator instructor. Yet he still struggled to understand who he was and what he was supposed to be doing.

About that time, his church started Stephen Ministry and began recruiting its first class of Stephen Ministers. The possibility of serving as a Stephen Minister intrigued Mark. “I looked at it from the perspective of my own story, my own loss,” he says. “I really felt like I was in a perfect position to relate to people who had experienced significant loss—lost their health, their career, their self-understanding. Maybe I

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Mark joined the class and completed the 50 hours of Stephen Minister training in his congregation. At first, he was a little apprehensive about this new role. He knew he was well prepared, but it was so different from what he had done before. Could he really minister effectively to other men?

He quickly learned the answer was a resounding *Yes!* One of his first Stephen Ministry caring relationships was with a man whose wife was dying. Another was with a man who suddenly lost his health and became bedridden. “I found that I could really relate to their situations and have deep empathy for them,” he says.

Grounded in God’s Grace

As a Stephen Minister, Mark’s faith grew, and he developed a deeper understanding of the new life God had given him. “The Scripture passage that’s been most helpful to me is Philippians chapter 3,” he says. “I feel a personal

But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ.

Philippians 3:7–8



Rev. Meyer recently attended a Stephen Series Leader’s Training Course to become a Stephen Leader. “By training competent, compassionate laypeople, we can reach out to many more people during their times of need,” he says.

connection with Paul because he worked for and achieved so much, but then he discovered, ‘It was all for rubbish.’ The only thing that mattered to him then—and to me now—is the new understanding that we are creatures of a God who loves us and provides for us in ways we cannot provide for ourselves. We are totally dependent on God’s good grace.”

Mark’s new sense of identity is firmly grounded in God’s abundant grace: “My worth comes from God. I am a child of God. That is my primary identity.” Once literally grounded, Mark is now spiritually grounded in this new identity.

A New Flight Path— Pastoral Ministry

As his faith continued to grow, he heard God calling him in a new way. “Because of my expe-

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rience with Stephen Ministry, I felt the call to ordained ministry,” he said. After serving as a fighter pilot and commercial pilot, Mark went to seminary to launch his third career—as a pastor.

In this new role, Rev. Mark Meyer gained an even greater appreciation for Stephen Ministry. “There’s no way that I as a pastor can offer the amount of care that’s necessary for everyone who needs it,” he says. “As my own experience bears out, by training competent, compassionate laypeople, we can reach out to many more people during their times of need. Stephen Ministry helps the church do what it is called to do.

“Stephen Ministers can walk with people who have suffered almost any kind of upset in their life. Something has happened that has changed their understanding of who they are. All the evidence they have at that moment may say, ‘I’m not who I thought I was. Everything I’ve worked for is for naught.’ They need somebody to walk with them while they rediscover who they are. That’s what Stephen Ministers are able to do so well, and why I refer so many people to them.”

Mark’s strong feelings about the value of Stephen Ministry are grounded in personal experience: “At the time I lost my health and career, the church I belonged to didn’t yet have Stephen Ministry. It would have been extremely helpful if I’d had a Stephen Minister to walk with me back then. I think healing might have happened more quickly.”



“There’s no way that I as a pastor can offer the amount of care that’s necessary for everyone who needs it,” says Rev. Meyer. “Stephen Ministry helps the church do what it is called to do.”

Reflecting on his personal journey, Mark says, “I felt like I discovered a new side of myself and an entirely new skill set that had been invisible to me during my flying career. It was by God’s grace that Stephen Ministry introduced me to a much more spiritual part of myself. Now, I can contribute in a new way and be a gift to other people. Out of my loss, God has given me a whole new opportunity.”



To learn more:

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