



SPEAK OUT

Helping the hurting

Looking for a way to make a difference? Consider Stephen Ministry.

BY MICHAEL SLAYTER

In February 1997 I lost my dream job. It was a Tuesday when my boss called me into his office and my eyes locked on the division director and our human resources representative.

Before that day, I paid no attention to the footnote in the church bulletin that said, "If you are going through hard times or have suffered a life-changing loss, Stephen Ministers are here to help you." The following Sunday, that footnote jumped off the page at me. I look back on that as a life changer: Stephen Ministry launched me on an eye-opening journey of immense Christian growth.

In a nutshell, Stephen Ministry is a program designed to recruit, organize, train, and support lay ministers who give confidential, one-on-one pastoral care to those who have gone through losses of any kind and need emotional and spiritual healing. Formed in 1975, Stephen Ministry is now in every state, more than 20 countries, and more than 100 Christian denominations.

Stephen Ministers are not professional counselors, psychologists, or therapists. Rather, they are caring Christians who have received 50 hours of training in topics such as the art of listening, the mechanics of human crisis, signs of depression or potential suicide, the process of grief, and, above all, knowing their limitations. Stephen Ministers do not attempt anything that should be reserved for professionals.

Stephen Ministers meet twice each month in peer supervisory sessions to discuss in confidence the

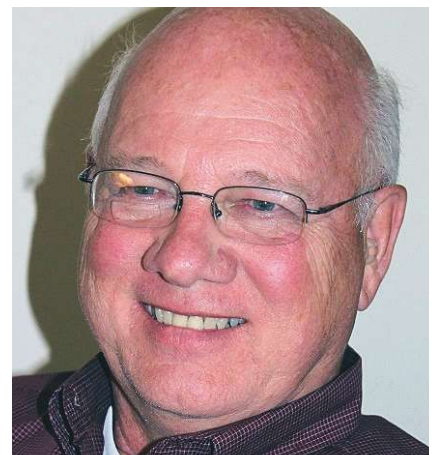
situations they're assisting with. They understand that emotional wounds hurt as much as physical wounds. Both will heal, but without a competent caregiver, healing may be slow and the scarring deep.

Understanding self-esteem is a key part of Stephen Ministry. When we feel positive about ourselves, we are happy, productive, and clear thinking. But self-esteem is like fine crystal that shatters when struck the wrong way.

Many people who want to help offer misguided advice. Oddly, loving family members can sometimes be the worst of the fix-it folks. Those trying to extract themselves from the pit of grief struggle just to get through the day; depression and sorrow have swallowed them. They don't need a fix-it approach; they need someone who not only listens effectively but also understands the process involved in healing.

Good listeners are hard to find. Pastors are usually regarded as good listeners. They extinguish the flames like firefighters and would like to stick around to help with the rebuilding process, but they often can't because there's another fire elsewhere. Stephen Ministers are extensions of their pastor, and they can stay for the long haul.

Those of us who serve as Stephen Ministers know the spiritual benefit that comes from being a caregiver. We know we have answered a calling and feel like a useful part of the body of Christ. As a result of our ministry, we now see more of the whole context



Michael Slayter is a retired veterinarian with 21 years in the US Army Veterinary Corps, four years in private practice, and 17 in private industry. He is a Stephen Leader and session member at First Presbyterian Church in Kissimmee, Florida.

of God's meaning in the world. Our relationship with God has become more intimate.

Most people find they already have the tools to be Stephen Ministers, and the training shows how to use them. Some think they have to be expert theologians to be Stephen Ministers. But this is a caring ministry, not a Bible study. People in pain need love and caring, not theology.

Do you feel that you are not fulfilling your purpose in God's plan? Stephen Ministry is looking for those who hear of others in need and want to help on a personal level.

If your congregation is not involved in Stephen Ministry but would like to know more, check out the website: stephenministries.org. But be careful; it's contagious. The mindset of your congregation will change.