

## The 'After' People

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"Bear one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ."--Galatians 6:2

Just call Stephen Ministers the "after" people. After you find the pink slip in what's now your final paycheck, after the doctors have said there's nothing more they can do, after the relationship ends but the wounds are still bleeding, after family and friends have heard your story one too many times but you still need to talk it out--that's when the Stephen Ministers step in.

A confidential service, Stephen Ministry takes folks who are struggling with a special need and pairs them with lay persons who have been trained as

Named after St. Stephen, the first lay person commissioned by the Apostles to provide caring ministry to those in need, Stephen Ministry began in 1975 when the Rev. Kenneth C. Haugk, a pastor and clinical psychologist, trained nine lay persons at his congregation in St. Louis to be Stephen Ministers.

Today, an estimated 10,000 congregations are enrolled in the Stephen Series, representing more than 100 different Christian denominations from all 50 states, nine Canadian provinces and 22 other countries.

The ministry itself works like this:

Pastors, church staff and lay leaders from a congregation attend a seven-day Leader's Training Course, taught by the Stephen Ministries St. Louis faculty, to learn how to implement and direct the Stephen Series in their congregations. These trained Stephen Leaders then return to their congregations to set up and administer a Stephen Ministry program.

The pastors can't do everything that is needed in the way of pastoral care, so basically we are an extension of pastoral care. Stephen Ministers are not there to take the place of the clergy/pastoral staff. They are an extension of pastoral ministry that can provide more one-on-one support than the clergy staff in a large congregation.

Stephen Leaders recruit and select lay people from the congregation to serve as Stephen Ministers and provide them with 50 hours of training in Christian caregiving.

Some of the training topics include listening, feelings, assertiveness, confidentiality and ministering to people in specific situations such as childbirth, divorce, terminal illness and grief. Stephen Ministers are also trained to recognize when a care receiver's needs go beyond the care a Stephen Minister can provide, and where and how to refer the care receiver for additional care.

A very key training module is what is called process versus results. This is one of the hardest things for some of us, especially those of us that have been engineers, to learn, is that we are there to perform a caring process, not to get any kind of results. We're the **caregivers**, God is the **cure** giver.

After the Stephen Ministers are commissioned, Stephen Leaders link them with a care receiver--a member of the congregation or community who is in need of quality Christian care. A Stephen Minister normally is assigned to only one care receiver at a time and meets with the care receiver for an average of about an hour each week.

The quality of training Stephen Ministers and Leaders receive is outstanding and we can use the listening skills learned when dealing with friends and family.

There are many cases in which people can have an opportunity to heal and to recover, or at least have support for a more extended period of time. Stephen Ministers aren't counselors, they're listeners and caregivers. Having someone to talk to, to walk alongside during life's crises, both big and small, can make the journey a little smoother.