

A Stephen Ministry Story

A STEADY REMINDER OF GOD'S PRESENCE

Mark and I had been married 26 years. Our sons were 18 and 20. We loved being parents, but with our younger son graduating high school, we were eagerly anticipating the empty nest and having more time for each other.

In the fall, when our younger son started college, Mark began having stomach issues and back pain, which would linger for a few days and then disappear, only to reappear later. He also developed a cough. When his doctor ordered an MRI, the results were devastating—Stage IV pancreatic cancer, already in his liver and both lungs. Mark was only 53.

Our lives were turned upside down. I suddenly found myself trying to provide emotional support to Mark and our sons during the worst experience any of us had ever endured. I wanted and needed to keep myself together to focus on caring for Mark, but I was emotionally drained—full of sadness and terrified of what the future held. I had always been a “take responsibility for everything myself” kind of person. However, I *knew* I couldn't do this alone.

I talked to my pastor about it, and she suggested matching me with a Stephen Minister. I agreed, and less than two weeks after Mark was diagnosed, my Stephen Minister came for the first of her weekly visits.

It's difficult to convey how important this Stephen Ministry relationship was for me. Our pastor was wonderful, and we had an amazing amount of support from many other people, but the time I spent with my Stephen Minister was the only time in the week when I could truly focus on my own needs. She was there just for me.

My Stephen Minister let me know that, while she was very concerned for Mark, her role was to be *my* support—to listen and help me process what I was feeling and going through, without giving advice or telling me what to do. The consistency of our Stephen Ministry relationship was crucial in helping me cope. Her weekly visits became an anchor in my life—something I could rely on when everything else was so uncertain. She was a steady reminder of God's presence, helping me know I was never alone.

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Although Mark and I chose to talk publicly about his condition, my Stephen Ministry relationship was completely confidential. I knew I could share anything with her, and that's where it would stay.

Mark's illness progressed rapidly—ten weeks of treatment, followed by six weeks of hospice, and then his passing. My needs changed as I went from being a wife to being a caregiver to being a grieving widow and dealing with everything that the loss of a spouse entails. Through it all, my Stephen Minister's love and support continued. She was there for me at every stage of my journey. It was never easy, but my Stephen Minister helped me through the most difficult moments of my life.

I really can't say enough about how much I appreciate my church's Stephen Ministry. The compassionate, consistent, and confidential support of my Stephen Minister was so important in helping me cope—and then begin to heal.

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Stephen Ministry is a lay caring ministry being used in over 12,000 congregations across the United States, Canada, and 29 other countries.

With Stephen Ministry, congregations can equip a team of lay caregivers—called Stephen Ministers—to provide one-to-one, Christ-centered care to people experiencing grief, divorce, major illness, loneliness, financial stress, and other life difficulties.

To learn more about Stephen Ministry and to watch videos about the difference Stephen Ministers are making in people's lives, visit stephenministries.org/stories.

You can also contact Stephen Ministries at (314) 428-2600 to request a free packet of information on how to begin this caring ministry in your congregation.

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