

Remarks from Janet Bolton during the morning message on Sunday, Oct. 22, 2017

When we talk about all the caring ministries here at FCC; one that usually comes up is Stephen Ministry.

As we were planning these Stewardship Sundays, we discussed asking a care receiver to speak about their experience. But because confidentiality is sacred when it comes to SM Care Givers & receivers, that is typically not done. But since I was a care receiver, I offered to share my story.

Our church began offering Stephen Ministry in about 1990 and this is what I learned periodically about the ministry from the pulpit:

It's a Christian caring ministry by trained lay people. It was developed in the 70's by a Pastor who was meeting the immediate & critical needs of his congregation, but he knew many of these church members needed more especially when they needed continued care. So he developed a very rigorous training for lay caregivers. Not to replace the Pastor's caregiving but to enhance it. This program has spread to over 10,000 churches internationally, over 55,000 people have trained as Stephen Leaders (like Doug King & Pastor Fred), over 500,000 as Stephen Ministers (like dozens of our members) and over 1MM people have received care (like me)!!!!

People from congregations request care including grief over the loss of a loved one, illness, loneliness, divorce, job loss, retirement, difficulty in parenting or in caring for critically or terminally ill loved ones...In others words, when we are hurting.

"WOW" was all I could think, boy is our church lucky to have the gift of this caring ministry, I certainly didn't need it but I did believe that others in our congregation & community could benefit from it.

Well, I was both right and wrong...many did and still do benefit greatly from our Stephen Ministers but I was wrong when I said I didn't need it.

The first time was Oct. 11, 1998 and then again just two years ago!! Some of you know this story but many don't.

It'll be 19 years this Oct. that my husband Barry and I returned from a relaxing long weekend away... bird watching!! As we were unpacking, the phone rang and our lives were changed forever. All I remember were the words "your brother died today...it was suicide". He was 44 years old, married with 2 beautiful young girls and absolutely no warning!

To say we were in crisis and hurting is an understatement.

My Mom had lost her only son; my sisters, our brother; my husband, a brother-in-law; my sister-in-law, her husband; and my nieces lost their dad.

Our family circled to grieve.

Our friends surrounded us

Our church family showered us with flowers, cards and meals

And everyone cried with us.

After months of crisis management and trying to comfort everyone else....I realized I needed help and it needed to be from someone outside my family circle that wasn't dealing with the same grief.

My faith has always been central in my life, so I knew I needed someone who shared my faith. Someone who could help me remember that God was somewhere in this mess and that there was a way out of the utter blackness I was feeling.

With Barry's encouragement, I called our church again, to seek guidance and reached Assoc. Pastor Jim Hartley, who happened to be one of our church's Stephen Ministry Leaders. I shared that I wasn't questioning my faith, that I wasn't angry with God or my brother but I did need to find a way to move forward and live my life without my brother. I needed to be "whole" again for Barry and my entire family.

I just needed someone to listen and remind me that God was right beside me that I didn't have to handle it all alone. I didn't have to be strong for everyone else. That I could and would heal and life would go on.

It was soon after that, I met with my Stephen Minister.

She cried with me, she prayed with me, she listened patiently as I lamented over and over my "what ifs" and "if onlys" or "maybe if I had just...."

The key was she just listened; she didn't try to fix it; she wasn't judgmental of my brother's suicide (as some were); she quietly walked beside me through my journey of grief.

In time, healing did come, life did go on albeit differently. 19 years later, the tears still come easily, but God's peace did return.

And now in the recent past I just celebrated the 2nd anniversary of my mom's death and, in addition to Barry, guess who's been walking beside me, once again, on this newer journey of grief?

I believe the Stephen Ministry program is a huge blessing for any church & community and I pray that when you find yourself hurting that you'll turn to our church family Stephen Ministers to help you find faith-based comfort, strength, healing and most of all, someone to listen.

This year our Stewardship campaign is not focusing on giving to a budget but on what our giving **does** and how our giving **does make a difference** in our lives and the lives of others.

Thank you,
Janet Bolton