

Stephen Ministry: Helping the Church *Be* the Church

Dr. John Ortberg, author, pastor, and clinical psychologist, is senior pastor at Menlo Park Presbyterian Church in Menlo Park, California. His most recent book is *The Me I Want to Be: Becoming God's Best Version of You*. Amity Haugk, a member of the program staff at Stephen Ministries St. Louis, recently talked with Dr. Ortberg about Stephen Ministry at Menlo Park.

Amity Haugk:

Menlo Park Presbyterian has now had Stephen Ministry for more than ten years. Can you tell me the difference Stephen Ministry is making there?

Dr. John Ortberg:

Stephen Ministry is helping our congregation in a number of ways. One is by building the spiritual and emotional life of the people who *give* care. I think a lot of people go into Stephen Ministry to help others but then are surprised by how much it enriches their own heart and relationships. It gives them much more than they think they're going to receive.

In addition, Stephen Ministry is such a gift to folks who are receiving care. People who are going through a job loss, divorce, grief, or other difficulties receive comfort and find hope. The relationships formed in Stephen Ministry really do become life altering.

AH: *Do you have any specific stories about ways people's lives have been changed?*

JO: We actually had two men share their story with our whole church. The first told how he had gone through some really difficult valleys in terms of marriage, finances, and feeling alone. He received a lot of help from Stephen Ministry, and that inspired him to go through training and become a Stephen Minister himself.

The second man then told how he'd been going down a similar path and hit a wall of pain. So he requested a Stephen Minister, and these two men were matched. Because of his own personal experiences and the Stephen Minister training, the first man was able to immediately connect with the second man and minister to him at very deep level. This caring relationship has been a great gift for both of them.

A long-standing principle in Scripture is that we're able to comfort others out of the comfort that we've received ourselves. This happens a lot in Stephen Ministry.

AH: *You've written a lot about spiritual formation. Can you talk about the spiritual growth people experience when they're serving somebody else?*

JO: In the twelve steps, which are really drawn out of classical Christian practices, the final step is that we take what we have learned, how we have healed, and *use it to help other people*. That notion is crucial—for every individual and for the church—that ultimately *there is no healing without helping*. The more my focus is only on me, the more self absorbed I become and the less I heal. But when I quit focusing just on myself and help someone else, not only does it help the other person; it also becomes healing for me.

We live in a world that encourages us to focus on ourselves—so much so that people don't even anticipate how healing it will be to focus on another person. So getting people to shift their focus to helping others has been really powerful for us.

AH: *A lot of the people receiving care from Menlo Park's Stephen Ministers are unchurched people. Can you tell me about Stephen Ministry as an outreach tool?*

JO: One of the primary dynamics we've identified in the Bay Area is *isolated living*. Many people have moved here from somewhere else and are pretty much on their own—without family or a support system.

This actually becomes a big opportunity for the church to *really be the church*—to be a family for folks who are lonely, searching spiritually, or in pain. But a church can't be a support system if it isn't equipped to help people during moments of pain. At Menlo Park, Stephen Ministry has helped us to equip people, so when somebody is in pain, we're able to say, "Here's someone who can come alongside you and love you."

I think we're living in an age where this kind of need is increasing dramatically.

AH: *It's interesting that you talk about people being more isolated today when technology has given us more ways than ever to communicate.*

JO: Robert Putnam [author of *Bowling Alone*] has written a lot about the loss of social capital. The sense of connectedness through family, service organizations, and community involvement has been on the decline in our culture for a long time—and it continues to increase.

That means people have an even greater need for a place to connect—a community where they can be part of a family. I think Stephen Ministry has really been helpful for us in meeting that need.

AH: *You're both a pastor and clinical psychologist like my dad [Stephen Ministries founder Kenneth Haugk]. What are your thoughts about Stephen Ministry from those perspectives?*

JO: Stephen Ministry offers an approach to caring ministry that's holistic. It includes great insights and practices from the social sciences and mental health disciplines—but the ultimate goal is conformity to Christ. Stephen Ministry is informed by the best possible sources of wisdom, research, and knowledge, but remains Christ-shaped and Christ-defined. It brings together the best of all possible worlds in that regard.

AH: *The Christ-centered nature of Stephen Ministry is reflected in the logo. The broken person behind the cross and the whole person in front of the cross symbolize that we are all broken people and it is only through Jesus we can be made whole.*

JO: A friend of mine, Keith Page, talks about the importance of normalizing brokenness and helping a community understand that everybody is broken, and therefore, everybody needs God's healing. A very powerful, healing part of Stephen Ministry is that you can't go through Stephen Minister training without coming to grips with your own brokenness.

AH: *The reason Stephen Ministry was started was to fill a gap in care. People needed more focused care than a friend could offer but less than a mental health professional would provide. What do you think about the importance of churches providing that kind of care?*

JO: Mother Theresa used to say: "Loneliness is the leprosy of the modern world." For a lot of people today, levels of care they might have once received through tight-knit communities are not available anymore.

Stephen Ministers are attuned to those needs, stand in that gap, and provide quality care. Stephen Ministry also has the mechanism to identify when people need professional care and then help them receive it, should that need arise.

The more people you have in the game and who've been equipped to provide care, the better off your congregation will be.

AH: *Menlo Park has a lot of small groups and support groups. How does Stephen Ministry interface with them?*

JO: There will always be people whose problems, pain, or issues become so significant that a small group isn't able to provide adequate care. In fact, a person like this can actually suck the life out of a small group because the person's needs can end up dominating the group. Having Stephen Ministers able to give one-to-one attention to people who need it is really helpful.

AH: *Do you have any other thoughts about how Stephen Ministry benefits your congregation or you as a pastor?*

JO: One time I went to visit somebody who had been in a very difficult, chronic health situation and was now near the point of death. When I arrived, the whole family was gathered, and they immediately told me how profoundly grateful they were for the ministry our church had been providing their family member through Stephen Ministry.

This person wasn't even a member of our church, which made it even more exciting to hear about the difference Stephen Ministry had made. That had a powerful effect on the whole family.

I like to remind our congregation that we've got *quiet heroes* in our midst who are doing this amazing ministry. That's a cool thing for the whole congregation.

AH: *You've got a very active Stephen Ministry at Menlo Park, and a lot of the people serving in it are busy professionals. Why do so many people make time to serve in this ministry?*

JO: When people serve in a ministry that taps into their spiritual gifts, their wounds, and their passions, you don't have to twist their arms or talk them into doing it. They *want* to do it because they *experience God* as they're doing it.

A ministry like that grows by word of mouth. One person says to somebody else, "Here's what it has meant in my life," and that other person then wants to be involved.

AH: *What would you say to another pastor who's considering Stephen Ministry?*

JO: I'd say bring some folks together to assess what your congregation is doing well—and what it's not doing well. If you find a gap in your ability to care for people, or think you can do it even better, then check out Stephen Ministry. It's very exciting stuff.