

**The Caregiver for the Caregiver
Commissioning of Stephen Ministers**

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Scripture: 2 Corinthians 1:3-5 NRSV

Prayer

Today is Stephen Ministry Sunday. So we're going to take a poll. Who might we know of *right now*, who would benefit from the services of a Stephen Minister?

Please raise your hand if there is anyone you *know* who has questioned the strength of their faith in the last 12 months.

Please raise your hand if there is anyone you *know* who has received a diagnosis of a terminal illness in the past 12 months.

Please raise your hand if there is anyone you *know* who has lost a loved one in the past 12 months.

Please raise your hand if there is someone you *know* who has had an addition to the family through marriage, childbirth, or adoption in the past 12 months.

Please raise your hand if there is someone you *know* who has separated or divorced in the past 12 months.ⁱ

Thank you for participating!

When you look around at the people who attend church with you on Sunday, what do you see? Do you see people who are smiling, looking like they have it all together? Or do you see hurting people in need of comfort; troubled people in need of peace; sick people who need healing? I suggest that we need to look beyond the facade & realize that the pews are full of hurting people.

What about our members who are not in the pews – those that are homebound? Our homes are full of “homebound” members wanting only someone to talk with, to share concerns with, to reminisce with, to cry and laugh with. And what about those taking care of their homebound loved ones? Might they need an ear for their heavy load, another voice to discuss *anything* with for one hour a week that can bring them the peace and strength to continue on?

The reality is that our *faith* does not give us “an easy out” from the trials of this life or easy answers to life’s most difficult and unanswerable questions.

What our *faith does* give us is HOPE! The hope we have in Jesus Christ - to which nothing else compares. And until Christ’s return you and I have an important job to do.

We are to care for God's beloved people. We are to pray for them. We are to rejoice with them in their answered prayers, and weep with them when their prayer goes unanswered. We are to give them hope in the goodness of God that will ultimately prevail in their lives. You and I are the embodiment – the living ambassadors – of God's hope.

Therefore, we extend the *care* and *compassion* of *Christ*. As today's scripture says, it is because of the comfort we ourselves have received from God that we are able to comfort others through Christ. Compassion opens doors that have been slammed shut by criticism and condemnation. It is a remedy for a heart that has been broken or a spirit that has been made cynical. Caring through compassion and prayer is what binds a church together. In a world where brokenness and sorrow are rampant, compassion is one of the most powerful healing forces the Christian community has. There is power in Christian caregiving because it is "Christ caring for people through people."ⁱ

If you look at the Stephen Ministry symbol on the screen, you will see that the logo's most dominant feature is the cross of Jesus, who is the center of Stephen Ministry.

If you look at the figure on the left side of the symbol – that person is broken and fragmented. The figure on the right side has moved beyond brokenness to wholeness through the power of the cross – the redemptive power of Jesus Christ in our lives. Helping others move from brokenness to wholeness is what Stephen Ministers do – they are a channel for God's grace in the lives of others. The circle is a symbol of God's eternal and never-ending love for us. God's love surrounds us, holds us, and heals us, with the cross of Jesus at the center of that love.ⁱⁱ

And so today, with great joy, we commission our *first* Stephen Ministers. These men and women have heard God's call to walk beside others during emotional, physical and spiritual crisis. This call has been affirmed by our Pastors and Stephen Leader, and through them, we as a congregation will discover a new level of caregiving. With the guidance of our Stephen Leaders, our Stephen Ministers will bring the hope, love, and compassion of the Lord to people in pain on a one-to-one basis *for as long as they are needed*. Not to be the answer; but to be a conduit. It is by *listening* to their needs and sharing a word of prayer and encouragement they will help bring a person beyond the ruins of their lives - trusting always that the *Lord* himself will provide the *cure*, as they provide the *care*.

Stephen Ministers do what every Christian is called to – to care for people who are hurting in body or in spirit. But these men and women have taken an exceptional step forward; they have taken 50-hours of training and committed themselves to a minimum of two years service. They will serve in a highly structured and *proven* ministry. Stephen Ministers are **not** counselors, though they are *trained reliable* listeners - who keep *strictly confidential all* aspects of the caring relationship. **Confidentiality** is the **central characteristic and promise** of this ministry.

Now with their initial training complete, our Stephen Ministers are ready to be matched with care-receivers - people in our congregation and community who are experiencing difficulty in any number of situations; divorce, loss of a job, loss of a loved one, loneliness, hospitalization or any of life's circumstances that leaves us to deal with the reality of our hurt, or loneliness, or frailty, or loss. Men will minister to men and women will minister to women. In addition to

meeting with their care receivers – usually once a week – they will meet twice a month for *supervision* and *continuing education*.

This is a new concept in the life of this church. It has been mainly clergy who visit those in real need at East Cobb UMC. And that will *not* change. Pastor Brian and Pastor Jim will have primary responsibility for attending to the pastoral needs of this church. However, there are *numerous* times when trained lay people can offer ongoing care that is an *extension*, not a replacement, for pastoral care that will make such an *amazing* difference.

Stephen Ministry has been in the prayers of people here at East Cobb for quite some time. Though you do not all feel called to be Stephen Ministers, **each of you has a role to play in this ministry.**

Because we are *one body in Christ*, this is **OUR** ministry – yours and mine – and it will be up to *you* to let Pastor Jim, Pastor Brian or me know of people in need who would benefit from having a Stephen Minister – whether it be you or someone you know. This is an important way of supporting the ministry. Through prayer we, your Stephen Leaders will do our best to refer a person in need to the right Stephen Minister – as they all bring different gifts and life experiences to their ministry.

So we your Stephen Leaders, ask *you*:

- to **Pray** for our Stephen Ministers and the Stephen Ministry program
- to **Accept care** from a Stephen Minister during your time of need.
- to **Tell a friend** who is hurting about our Stephen Ministry.

It is my hope and prayer that all of us will benefit from this ministry being a part of our church, as we experience together what it is to grow more and more as a caring community. **No one needs to be without a kind listening ear at East Cobb UMC.**

As Paul instructs us in 1 Thessalonians 5:11, "*Therefore encourage one another and build up each other*" and in Galatians 6:2 to "*Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.*"

May **YOU** be the gift of Hope to someone this week!

May **WE** be a church where **ALL** are loved, **ALL** are cared for, and **ALL** are promised Hope!! Rejoice in this ministry – OUR ministry - for we *are* a Stephen Ministry Congregation!

And now please join us as we commission our Stephen Ministers.

Rite of Commissioning

Sacrament of Holy Communion

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ⁱⁱ Stephen Ministries, St. Louis