A Conversation with Stephen Minister Jim Wottring

Jim and Ann Wottring moved to the community from Indianapolis and joined FUMCO in 1990. Jim retired from his position with the safety and security division of the 3M Corporation in 2005. He keeps active caring for their horses and serving the church in many ways, including as a leader of FUMCO’s Stephen Ministry chapter. FUMCO recently talked with Jim about his role bringing comfort to those in crisis.

FUMCO: How long have you been a Stephen Minister? And what got you interested in the program in the first place?

SW: I’ve been a Stephen Minister for about seven years. What got me into the ministry, when we were living in Indianapolis, the Methodist church we belonged to up there approached me about becoming a Stephen Minister. I was going to go through the training up there, but the pastor had another job he wanted me to do. So I knew what the ministry was about when we moved here, but I had not gone through the training. When we moved to Florida, Ann actually became a Stephen Minister first and I was a member of the second class.

The reason I became a Stephen Minister, primarily, I really liked the idea of working with people on a one-on-one basis. I have a desire to help people and the idea of interfacing with people like that appealed to me.

FUMCO: You mentioned that you were introduced to the Stephen Ministry at your former Methodist church and that you actually were trained in our church. Is this ministry unique to the Methodist Church?

SW: It’s not unique to the Methodist Church although there are a number of Methodist churches I know around the country that are involved with Stephen Ministry. When I went through the leadership training, there were a number of churches represented, Baptist, Methodist, and a number of other denominations. Also, the ministry is not unique to the United States. There are Stephen Ministry chapters serving all over the world.

FUMCO: Do you have to be a Christian in order to be a Stephen Minister or to receive help?

SW: No. In fact, in our church, you don’t even have to be a member to be a care receiver. All you have to do is meet with Karen Quick who leads our ministry. Once you are interviewed by her, and you meet the criteria and indicate you would like to participate, then you are assigned a Stephen Minister. But to answer your question, you don’t need to be a member of the church or even a Christian in order to receive help.

FUMCO: So is your objective to heal people who are in crisis?

SW: No. During our training, we are reminded that only God is the healer. Our purpose is to listen, to lend support, and to comfort those who are in need.
FUMCO: So you are not there to counsel your care receivers, correct?

SW: That is correct. We’re just there in a listening role, to comfort them. And we point that out to them as we talk to them. Whatever their crisis might be, we ourselves, as individuals, are not going to heal them at all. Only God is going to heal them. We are there, certainly, to lend support and to comfort them when and where we can.

FUMCO: Without compromising the identities of those you’ve served, are there moments that stand out in your ministry?

SW: As I said before, I’ve been a Stephen Minister for about seven years and I’ve helped a number of care receivers during that time. But there is one instance that just happened recently. It was on a Sunday morning and church was just getting ready to start. An usher came up to me, he knew that I was a Stephen Minister, and he asked me to come to the Narthex. I went back thinking I was going to be asked to serve as a substitute usher. But instead, I was introduced to an individual who had come to church and said he was in crisis. I could tell right away that he was in crisis so we went and found a room someplace and, at that point, this individual just fell apart. He told me what was happening in his life and I tried to calm him down. I asked that he contact the church office the very next morning, which he did. As it turns out, he became part of our Stephen Ministry program and I was assigned to work with him. We’ve gotten to be friends and things are working out so much better for him.

FUMCO: Is a situation like that unique? Is that typically the way people find the ministry?

SW: It isn’t that so much unique. We advertise the program and talk about it within our church. We have a Stephen Minister available after every service on Sunday. The whole idea is that if someone is in crisis, they have to come to us and recognize that they need help. We’re very cautious and cognizant of the fact that we only assign men to men and women to women. And if we realize that the person is in a life-threatening situation, either to themselves or possibly to others, we try to arrange for and get them professional help. We are not counselors; again, we are just there to listen.

FUMCO: What kind of requirements does it take to be a Stephen Minister? Do you need a counseling background?

SW: No, you don’t. I’ve thought about this and, as far as I’m concerned, you just need to be somebody that has empathy for others. You need to be someone who wants to work on a one-to-one basis with others who are experiencing difficulty in their lives. When we do work with our care receivers, it is a confidential situation; no one knows that we are there for them except for our Stephen Leaders. The biggest thing a Stephen Minister needs to understand during the training, which takes about 50 hours of instruction, is you are not going to cure anybody or solve any problems. You go into it with the understanding that you’re just there to be a good listener and try to be supportive and a good friend.