

Stephen Ministry

Helping dad hang on during personal earthquake

by Maria Meredith

Editor's Note: The relationship between a Stephen Minister and his or her care receiver is strictly confidential. Jay and Ginny Richards and Jay's Stephen Minister, Jim Dalke, agreed to be interviewed and to have their story published in the UPC Times.

Stop, drop, and hold.

That's what they tell you to do when an earthquake hits. UPC member and Stephen Minister Jim Dalke describes the events that rock our lives—death, divorce, illness, unemployment—as personal earthquakes. In the face of such earthquakes, Jesus tells us to “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28). By walking alongside people during difficult times, Stephen Ministers help people endure their earthquakes while holding on to Christ.

Last year, Jay and Ginny Richards and their two-year-old daughter, Gillian, faced an earthquake of enormous proportions. Early in Ginny's pregnancy with their second child, the Richards learned that their unborn son had multiple serious, and probably fatal, birth defects.

The journey began just before Christmas during a routine ultrasound when the technician performing the procedure realized

something was terribly wrong.

“It was a surreal day,” says Jay. “We found out that we would have a child who was severely handicapped. By the next day, our worst fears were confirmed.”

After consulting with a radiologist who specializes in high-risk pregnancies, they learned that the extent of the problems visible on the ultrasound likely indicated there were many more problems that couldn't be seen. The severity and number of the defects made the doctors fairly certain the baby would not live long after birth.

“Needless to say, it was a horrible Christmas,” says Jay. “The thought of terminating the pregnancy just wasn't a part of our universe, so our entry into grief was different than most people's. Usually, something happens, and then you experience grief. We were starting the process of grieving for something in the future—five more months of pregnancy until the birth and inevitable death of our son.”

Within a few weeks of receiving the news, both Jay and Ginny requested



Photo by Neil Jorgensen

The Richards family: Ginny, Jay and Gillian.

Stephen Ministers through UPC's Congregational Care Department. For Jay, the decision to request the care of a Stephen Minister was an intellectual one. “Men, in general, have a harder time talking about grief and loss,” explains Jay. “It seemed to be more natural for Ginny's friends to ask her about it, and she felt a very literal, visceral need to talk. For some reason, I knew I needed to have someone to talk with about what I was going through, too.”

Jay was matched with Stephen Minister Jim Dalke.

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Dad learns to integrate loss into his life

(Continued from other side)

Founded in 1975, Stephen Ministry is a national ministry grounded on Jesus' command to love one another. Through Stephen Ministry, people can enter into a confidential, one-to-one, Christ-centered relationship with a caregiver who will walk alongside them during a time of need. Stephen Ministers go through 50 hours of training to prepare for this specialized lay ministry and receive ongoing supervision and support. UPC has been a Stephen Ministry congregation since 1986.

For the next year, Jay and Jim met every week to talk. "The great thing about Jim was that it gave me someone I could talk to about the difficult thing that everyone else was afraid to talk about. We talked about many different things together, but it was good to know I could always talk about my son."

It was also helpful to have someone who knew how to provide care and comfort without offering trite platitudes. ("It's God's will." "He's no longer in pain." "Everything happens for the good.")

On May 9, Josiah Wesley Richards was born. He passed away peacefully after one hour and 45 minutes. The whole family, including big sister Gillian and grandparents, spent hours holding and cuddling Josiah during and after his short life. The worst part

for Jay and Ginny and their family was finally leaving the hospital while a nurse continued to hold Josiah in the room.

After the memorial service, Jay described his and Ginny's responses as very typically male and female. "Every day following the memorial service, Ginny would look at the pictures and cry. I thought, 'Why are you doing that? You're making it worse.' It worked for her, while I think my emotional response was delayed."

At their weekly visits, Jim told Jay how holidays and anniversaries could be especially difficult. Although Jay thought he was prepared, Christmas hit very hard. "We were more prepared for Josiah's birthday and created special ways to celebrate," explains Jay. "We baked a cake, sang 'Happy Birthday' and planted an azalea in our yard that will bloom in May each year. Gillian made her baby brother a card and we launched it to heaven on a helium balloon. It feels like we have accomplished something to have made it through one full year of anniversaries."

"I don't know what I would have done without Jim," continues Jay. "It has been wonderful to be able to talk with another man, who experiences things in the same way. The truth is that our grief has to be expressed, like Jesus in the garden at Gethsemane. I think many men have a need, but feel

afraid to seek help. I was afraid, too, that my grief would have a bad effect on my relationship with God. But instead, it has been enriched. I look at the cross very differently now, with greater understanding of how Mary felt and for the enormity of the Father's sacrifice."

What is Stephen Ministry?

Stephen Ministry is a way for congregations to provide high-quality care and outreach to hurting people in the congregation and community.

Stephen Ministers are congregation members who go through 50 hours of Christian caregiving training. Each Stephen Minister is then matched with a hurting person—men are paired with men, women with women—and meets with that person weekly to listen, care, pray, and encourage. Caring relationships last for as long as the need persists.

Stephen Ministers care for those dealing with grief, divorce, job loss, hospitalization, financial struggles, loneliness, convalescence, terminal illness, and other life difficulties.



For more information about the Stephen Series system of lay caring ministry and how to begin Stephen Ministry in your congregation, contact:

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