

“A Process Approach to Caring”

Ephesians 6:18-20

St. Paul writes his letter to the Ephesians while chained in a Roman prison. He asks the first century Christians to keep him in their prayers, to keep alert, and to persevere in serving all the saints.

On September 14, we begin a new Stephen Ministry class that will be taught by 3 new Stephen Ministry leaders who completed their leadership training online over the summer – Jim Deilly, Linda Grand, and Libbi Chilia. They will be joined by us old teachers – Leslie Crowe, Ken Vadini, Lana Gray, and myself. Those taking the Tuesday night class that runs through February are Ed and Pat Murray, Linda Howe, Delila Rogers, Sue Marko, and Lori Schifano.

I want to give you a taste of the first class I’ll teach entitled, “A Process Approach to Caring.”

The following situation paints a good picture of two very different approaches to caregiving.

Rebekah and Lindsey

Rebekah was assigned to be Lindsey's Stephen Minister after Lindsey's husband, Adam, was killed in a boating accident. Lindsey and Adam had celebrated their third wedding anniversary just days before the accident, and Lindsey was devastated by the loss.

Over the months that followed, Rebekah spent a lot of time listening to and caring for Lindsey, helping her recognize, accept, and express a lot of painful feelings.

Numerous times Rebekah just held Lindsey's hand or sat with her when Lindsey could do nothing but cry. Rebekah felt good about the caring relationship and how it was helping Lindsey.

There was one area, however, where Rebekah wished they could make more progress. Lindsey had long been a person of strong faith—someone others would look to as an example. Since the accident, though, Lindsey had become bitter and angry with God, and she had come to church only a couple of times in the past several months.

Rebekah had asked Lindsey on occasion what she thought about her relationship with God. Each time, Lindsey clenched her jaw and quickly changed the subject.

Two Approaches

Rebekah was anxious to help Lindsey resolve these challenges with her faith. She believed it would contribute a lot to Lindsey's healing. Rebekah saw two ways she could approach the situation:

1. She could shift her focus to **results**, trying to resolve Lindsey's faith crisis by urging her to put aside her bitterness and anger, start regularly going to church again, and have more faith.
2. She could continue the **process** of caring for and supporting Lindsey, trusting that God would work through her presence and care to bring healing to Lindsey.

The Results Approach

Rebekah was tempted to push for a quick resolution to Lindsey's spiritual crisis. She wanted Lindsey to experience complete healing as soon as possible, and she wondered whether she should urge Lindsey to move past her anger and trust God more.

As Rebekah thought about it, however, she recognized the risks of relating to Lindsey this way. If Rebekah focused on getting results right away, Lindsey might feel:

- judged by Rebekah for not trusting God enough;
- guilty or embarrassed that she didn't have more faith;
- annoyed or angry that Rebekah was pressuring her into talking about faith before she was ready;
- compelled to put on a happy face and pretend her faith issues were resolved; or
- more determined not to open up about God.

Rebekah realized that pushing Lindsey for a resolution would do much more harm than good, most likely failing to produce the hoped-for results.

The Process Approach

Rebekah decided to continue with a process approach—focusing on effective caring and being present for Lindsey and leaving the results to God. By focusing on the process, Rebekah would show that she:

- didn't judge Lindsey for being angry at God;
- wanted to hear Lindsey's thoughts and feelings about God;
- was a safe person to talk with about God and faith;
- wouldn't pressure Lindsey to talk about faith before she was ready; and
- trusted God to work through the caring relationship at a comfortable pace.

Rebekah realized that a process approach would help Lindsey feel more comfortable talking about her faith—and ultimately would produce a better resolution than a results approach would.

As a Stephen Minister or friend or co-worker or family member, you also may sometimes find yourself facing the choice to either push for a quick resolution to a particular challenge or continue to work the caregiving process. When this happens, it's good to keep in mind that a central part of what makes Stephen Ministry and all our relationships effective is a process approach to caring.

The Best Way to Get Results: Focus on the Process

This isn't to say that results don't matter. Indeed, results are good in caregiving. All caregivers want to see their caring relationships come to a positive resolution, with their care receivers experiencing emotional, relational, and spiritual healing. All of us, caregivers, and care receivers alike, want the best results possible from the relationship. The key to obtaining those results is to focus on the process.

As Rebekah and Lindsey's story demonstrates, your caregiving approach as a Stephen Minister, friend or family member, plays a significant role in determining those results. It's an unexpected truth of caregiving: The best way to get results is to put results out of your mind as much as possible and instead focus on the process of caring.

Pressing for a resolution in a caring relationship—trying to fix the care receiver's problems and make him or her feel better as soon as possible—is most likely to end up with negative results. It can add to the care receiver's difficult feelings, foster a sense of dependence on the caregiver, or increase the individual's resistance to change and growth.

Focusing on the process, on the other hand, is more likely to achieve the desired results.

“Results start happening when you stop pushing for them!”

Five Key Elements of a Process Approach to Caring

1. **Presence:** being with the care receiver
2. **Service:** helping the care receiver without expecting anything in return
3. **Skills:** using best caregiving practices
4. **Boundaries:** respecting the care receiver’s personhood
5. **Trust:** leaving the results to God

1. Presence: Being with the Care Receiver

Your presence is beneficial in multiple ways:

- It lets the care receiver know he or she is not alone.
- It brings an element of reliability to the care receiver’s life.
- It is tangible reminder of God’s presence in the care receiver’s life.

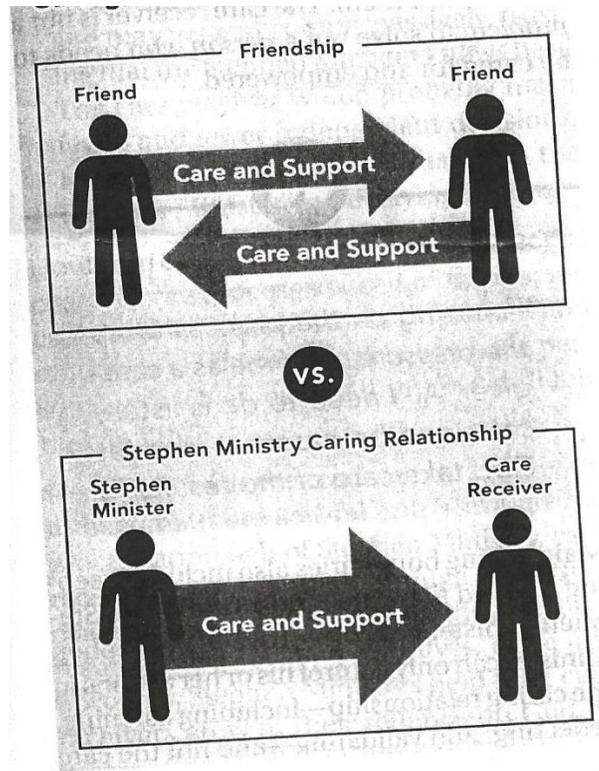
God gives us the opportunity and privilege to minister to people in the present moment.

It’s up to us to make the most of it.

2. Service: Helping the Care Receiver without Expecting Anything in Return

A friendship is mutual, with the focus on both people. A caring relationship, on the other hand, is focused solely on the benefit of the care receiver.

The Difference between a Friendship and a Stephen Ministry Caring Relationship



A process approach to caring focuses entirely on what's best for the care receiver. This might include:

- Sharing a care receiver's pain and listening to a care receiver express the same thoughts or feelings over and over for as long as needed;
- Spending time in silence with the care receiver until he or she is ready to share;
- Continuing to listen and care even when the care receiver has made a choice or expressed opinions you don't agree with;
- praying or sharing Bible passages with the care receiver only as he or she is open to it; or
- continuing to love, care for, and pray for a care receiver who may not be ready to follow Christ.

3. Skills: Using Best Caregiving Practices

The effectiveness of caregiving is not based on how quickly the care receiver starts feeling better or how soon the situation is resolved. Rather, it's based on the caregiver's consistency in working the process and exercising caring skills – being focused and attentive during visits, reflecting, and validating the care receiver's feelings, and so on.

4. Boundaries: Respecting the Care Receiver's Personhood

Maintaining boundaries includes keeping in mind there are limits to what the caregiver has control over. The caregiver can only control his or her actions in the caring relationship – including listening, reflecting, and validating – and not the care receiver's actions, or the ways God works in and through the caring relationship. Rather than crossing boundaries and attempting to control those other factors, the caregiver focuses on the process of caring and leaves the response to the care receiver and the healing of God.

All caregivers can provide care in many ways, but only God can change lives.

And God has changed the lives of Jeremy and Jessica with the arrival of their twins, Juliette and Joshua (Jules and JJ) on May 12 of last year. Today, Juliette and Joshua will be born a second time as they are washed in the waters of baptism to become children of God in the sacrament of Holy Baptism.

Raising twins, we pray that God can give the deep and lasting peace that comes from knowing that God is with you no matter what. “And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:7).

Amen

#769 – If You But Trust in God to Guide You; #732 – Boring Cry