



Season 2 | Episode 44

Ministry During COVID-19 and Hurricane Season

Leslie Dozier

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Crystal Keating:

I'm Crystal Keating and this is the Joni and Friends Ministry Podcast. Each week, we're bringing you real conversations about disability and finding hope through hardship and sharing practical ways that you can welcome and include people living with disability in your community. Be sure to subscribe wherever you listen to podcasts, so you don't miss any of our encouraging conversations. As COVID-19 has brought devastation to communities around the world, those living with disability have been hit the hardest. This Christmas, you can send critical Christ centered support to a family in desperate need.

Crystal Keating:

Your gift of \$125 provides basic medical care, mobility support, food and dignity supplies for an entire month. Give the perfect gift today at joniandfriends.org. Did you know we have a Joni and Friends location in Louisiana? Well, we do. Our Louisiana area director is joining us on the podcast today to talk about ministering to families impacted by disability, through the coronavirus pandemic and hurricane season. Welcome to the podcast, Leslie.

Leslie Dozier:

It's my pleasure. Thank you for having me.

Crystal Keating:

Well, thanks for joining us. I have to say you've had quite a year, so I'd love to start this conversation by hearing about some of the challenges you faced and especially some of the challenges being faced by people with disabling conditions in the Louisiana area these past nine months. What's life been like?

Leslie Dozier:

Yes, indeed. The events of 2020 have brought many challenges from the pandemic to a record-breaking hurricane season. At times, it's felt overwhelming, but Crystal through it all, God has faithfully provided new ways for Joni and Friends Louisiana to bring spiritual encouragement and the hope of the gospel to families with special needs children and those living with disabilities. COVID-19 did not stop us from sharing the love of Jesus.



Crystal Keating:

Amen. Amen. Well, you talk about the new ways Joni and Friends is ministering, and I'd love to hear more about that, especially because Coronavirus has really magnified isolation. I think people living with disabilities are often more isolated than they would like to be. So, I'd love to hear about some of the creative ways you've united families living with disability, and you've also engaged the local church to offer ongoing care, support and discipleship even despite the shelter in place restrictions.

Leslie Dozier:

When the coronavirus pandemic caused the cancellation of our family retreats, we went to prayer and God's clear message to us was to boldly, do something fresh and new. The Lord used the pandemic to help us design meaningful ways to connect to families who have been isolated and alone. So, we offered weekly outreach with live virtual connections on Zoom calls for prayer and fellowship for families, and each week, families could tune in and share their hearts and pray and encourage one another in God's word. This was a wonderful time for us to come together in fellowship, and this went on throughout this year.

Leslie Dozier:

Even with some of the safety protocols in place, Joni and Friends Louisiana provided an innovative family, retreated home for special needs families with disabilities and through this creative in-home model, we were able to go in with volunteers from our local churches and bring in Bible stories, worship crafts, and really some hilarious, fun recreational activities. So, we brought-

Crystal Keating:

Sounds like a blast.

Leslie Dozier:

Yeah. We brought family retreat to them and even brought box lunches and delicious home cooked meals, of course, with true Southern hospitality. So, it was really a wonderful time to come and bring family retreat to our families. One of the moms expressed to me that this was a piece of heaven in their home and she and her son felt deeply loved by God through Joni and Friends.

Crystal Keating:

I love the idea of moms being together over Zoom to pray together to fellowship. I think that's such a great model, even for churches who have integrated that virtual connection, even though there's a sense of "Oh, it's another Zoom meeting." But it's still meaningful fellowship where people can come together. What have you seen on some of the Zoom meetings? What's that like?



Leslie Dozier:

I agree with you Crystal. This is going to be something that I believe we're going to continue into 2021 and beyond. And in that, we've been able to come together and share the needs and also to get ideas from other families of how they can get out of isolation even better. It also gives our churches some opportunities to see how they can better meet the needs of those in their communities. So, I think that it's just been coming together and sharing ideas and then also being encouraged in their isolation.

Crystal Keating:

Definitely. You talk about family retreat at home. I have seen some wonderful videos and photos of that on our website, and it looks like people had a blast. Talk a little bit more about what family retreat at home looked like.

Leslie Dozier:

It was really a hybrid model to where we had Bible stories that we went through with the families, and then we had crafts, and it might've been a particular story that we were following. Then we had an online tutorial that Joni and Friends provides the resources, and then we would break and have a lunchtime and then have some other games. Sometimes we'd go outside with Slip N Slide and fun games for the children. So, it was a combination of things, but it also gave the parents some time of respite because we went in with Joni and Friends volunteers, and other local volunteers from our churches. So, we had three days per week, and each family could sign up and then we left them with a home cooked meal at the end of every day.

Crystal Keating:

That sounds so comforting and so fun. I know that you've also been hiking, I've heard. You guys have done some outdoor, safe, fun activities. Talk about that.

Leslie Dozier:

Well, I know that we're in the deep South and we're just starting to get a little cooler weather. I wanted to share a story about a special family that I met earlier this year. I really didn't know at the time how this year's events would unfold or that God would entwine our lives so profoundly, but this particular family, the Norwood's Amy and Bobby, they have a son Dustin, and he is blind with cerebral palsy and autism. And they have had a tremendous amount of isolation this year, Bobby contracted COVID, and on a Sunday afternoon, I spoke with Amy, and I could hear her voice shaking that they were having to make the decision of putting Dustin with the caregiver and what turned into a few weeks turned into six weeks. So, I was so thrilled that this past weekend we had an outdoor adventure hike and they were able to join us. So, by God's grace, they are doing well.



Leslie Dozier:

It was a beautiful morning, and I'll share a little bit about it. We partnered with Luke5Adventures. Luke5Adventures is a group from Ohio, and they have these special all-terrain trail chairs for families with disabilities and so with safety protocols, each family came to the park, and they had a specialized all-terrain chair for each family. It was awesome. We strolled through four ecosystems in this park. Families enjoyed the fresh air, surrounded by nature in the woods. They experienced the sights and sounds of Cypress and Tupelo swamp, a bottomland hardwood forest, and the [inaudible 00:08:55] river nearby. And Crystal, as we were surrounded with the nature, the uniqueness of God's creation provided a perfect canopy to celebrate the special needs families, their spiritual gifts, and to share how deeply God loves and values each individual created in his image. It was a wonderful adventure and a time of respite, and these types of family events and adventures is something that I'm hopeful that we'll be able to do more of in 2021.

Crystal Keating:

It's interesting in these difficult times, they really press us to think outside of the box. These are things that we'd probably want to do on any regular given day. So, I do hope it continues, and I love to hear that you guys have gotten to be outside and the all-terrain wheelchairs. That's awesome. Well, let's go back to one of the other challenges that has been very present is the effect of the hurricanes that your state has weathered. I mean, it wasn't just one hurricane or two, it's been three significant hurricanes. There was hurricane Laura, then Delta and more recently hurricane Zeta. So, Leslie, how did these impact your community and the churches you're connected with and especially families with disabilities? This must have been such a scary time.

Leslie Dozier:

Right, it has been. Actually, these events have been tumultuous. We have had a total of five hurricanes and tropical storms that have hit the shores of Louisiana. Hurricane Laura was a catastrophic hurricane four storm with 150 mile per hour winds. It came upon the Gulf coast and our dear friends and families in Lake Charles Louisiana took a direct hit. This created widespread devastation and displaced thousands of families. Homes were destroyed, businesses. The aftermath left many families without power, shelter, food, and drinkable water. It's been especially difficult for families with special needs children and those with disabilities. So, Joni and Friends Louisiana reached out to church networks statewide, and we continue to serve alongside our local churches in each community to provide spiritual encouragement to those with disabilities, including the tangible replacement of wheelchairs to those that may need one. The road to recovery from these types of storms will be a very long one. And we're really grateful for all the generous support from our friends and ministry partners to bring comfort to families. But we know that it's going to take a collaborative effort.



Crystal Keating:

Certainly. That's why Joni and Friends is so thankful to partner with churches where we can link arms together in the name of Christ to minister. Talk a little bit more about the displacement of families, where did they go and what did they do? How do you care for a family with special needs when maybe you're not in an accessible place, power's out, and maybe the machines that you rely upon aren't working? I mean, these are life and death situations.

Leslie Dozier:

They certainly have been. The challenge there is because thousands of families were displaced, and of course, many went to Texas or others went to other cities nearby, and then they may be there for months. Then they come back and they're having to see whether or not their homes are inhabitable. So, one of the challenges that our churches and organizations have been having is whether or not the families are coming back to the area and then assessing the needs. So, where we are is working alongside these different organizations to see what the assessment is so that we can meet those needs on an ongoing basis, but the identification of what those needs is part of the process. You're right, it certainly is a challenge.

Leslie Dozier:

The calamities of this year really heightened the need for statewide church networks to serve families with special needs so that we could come together collaboratively. That's something that I'm looking forward to us for next year is for Joni and Friends Louisiana, to provide church networking. We have 64 parishes throughout Louisiana, kind of like other States have counties. And in that, we need to build those networks to try and equip our local churches, to serve our families with disabilities. And these calamities of this year just really heightened that collaborative effort.

Crystal Keating:

Well, when you think about Jesus's call for those who follow him, it's not an individual call. We are to be unified. The church is likened to a family, it's likened to a body, which we talk about a lot. So, we will shine brightly when we come together, all of us to meet needs, to minister to people in Jesus name. But Leslie, I know the hurricanes, even though you've been ministering, it's impacted you personally. What's it been like for you and your own family to weather these storms?



Leslie Dozier:

Well, we had some immediate family members that needed to be evacuated. One of the things about hurricanes is that it does give you some advanced time that you can have your loved ones moved, of course that was happening all over the state. It is something that we know, thank goodness, that we have extended family and we have a beautiful state here. And the people of Louisiana, we're very familial. What I mean by that is we treat everyone as if they're our family member. So, if someone didn't have a place to stay, someone else would offer their home or their shelter. So, it's ongoing. And fortunately, my family members have been able to move back to their homes. It is something that we are accustomed to, but we're continuing to work with one another.

Crystal Keating:

Hospitality is alive and well in Louisiana. It brought to mind those who live with disabilities and are living in group homes. I think Joni and Friends has been able to even minister in that way.

Leslie Dozier:

There's actually 17 group homes in a particular area, I'm working with another volunteer, a few hours from where I live, but we had many residents, Crystal that lived in group homes that actually moved to Texas for a period of time. So, we've had different people that were displaced that were moved away from danger and then having to move back. With Christmas, coming up, we are going to be having some Christmas deliveries to the group homes, to their administrators, bringing them the Joni and Friends devotional and encouragement because we know that those that are there day in and day out, giving support and love need the word of God as their anchor.

Crystal Keating:

That's right. I love that. The holidays can be such a special time, and we have to keep the light of Christ continuing to burn brightly. So, Leslie, as you look ahead, you've mentioned some great ways that Joni and Friends will continue to mobilize the local churches. What are some other ways that we're going to be embracing individuals living with disabilities as we look into 2021?



Leslie Dozier:

Well, hopefully in a post-pandemic environment in 2021 and beyond we look forward to being able to provide more family type events in coordination with the local churches here in Louisiana statewide, perhaps a marriage get away for couples to have much needed renewal and refreshment and to be encouraged for a weekend. Also, the family retreats either on the hybrid model that I mentioned [inaudible 00:17:34] is online or at home or in person, as well as the outdoor adventures. Next fall, we're looking at having a fall barnyard dance. Well, Crystal moving forward into 2021, Joni and Friends Louisiana will provide church networking throughout the 64 parishes in the state of Louisiana to help train and equip local churches to evangelize and serve families living with disabilities. Many families with disabilities do not attend a local church. They long to be accepted and loved. So, we will provide church training and resources for both staff and volunteers and encourage them to go out and outreach and evangelize the unchurched and bring them where they can find comfort and hope.

Crystal Keating:

That's wonderful. I just love that aspect of our ministry that it's Jesus's call to go out, to look, to knock on doors, to say, "You may not be able to come to this church building quite yet, but we want to come to you. The gospel is not hindered. There's access to Christ for all." I love that.

Leslie Dozier:

People with disabilities are so desperate for hope in this difficult season. That's why we are committed to sharing hope through hardship here in Louisiana.

Crystal Keating:

That's right. If you're in the Louisiana area and your heart's been touched and you want to reach out, how do they connect with you, Leslie?

Leslie Dozier:

I think the best way would be on our website. They can go to Joni and Friends Louisiana. There are numbers there and contact information. They can reach out to me directly and help us make an eternal difference. We appreciate all of our faithful friends and support. I'd love to hear from them.

Crystal Keating:

That's right. And if you're a church in Louisiana and you're saying, "I want to help, I want to be more equipped. We have free training materials available on our website and people to talk directly to you." So, Leslie, it's been great chatting with you on the podcast today. May God bless you and the Louisiana office as you look ahead and minister to people with disabilities and the love and hope of Christ.

Leslie Dozier:

Thank you, Crystal. Thank you for having me, and God bless you.

Crystal Keating:

Thank you for listening today. To learn more about how you can give the perfect gift this Christmas, please visit [joniandfriends.org](https://www.joniandfriends.org). If you've been inspired by our conversation or have a comment about something you heard, please drop me a message at podcast at [joniandfriends.org](https://www.joniandfriends.org). I would love to hear from you. To get our next conversation automatically, please subscribe wherever you listen to podcasts. I'm Crystal Keating and thank you for listening to the Joni and Friends Ministry Podcast.

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