

Season 2 | Episode 45

More Than a Wheelchair

Jason Holden

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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. Your gift of \$125 provides basic medical care, mobility support, food and dignity supplies for an entire month. Give the perfect gift today joniandfriends.org.

Crystal Keating:

The global health impact of COVID-19 has distressed communities around the world, affecting workforces, transportation systems and supply chains. The shutdowns have also created serious consequences in developing countries, such as little to no access to basic necessities like food and medical care, with the greatest impact on families living with disability. Jason, I'm so glad that you're on the podcast today with us. You are the vice president of global programs at Joni and Friends, and you've surveyed the current needs in the developing countries. What have you identified as the most critical challenges being faced?

Jason Holden:

Crystal, around the world, the biggest challenge that we're facing as a ministry and really people living with disabilities are facing is just access to services. In a COVID-19 world, there's so much change happening, but the thing that always gets left behind, people living with disabilities. So, we are definitely trying to find new ways, stepping out and coming alongside of other organizations and really establishing new ways of serving people with disabilities.

Crystal Keating:

Absolutely. I was hearing that industries that rely on import and export are struggling. I read somewhere that food supplies are hard to get locally, and economic activities are being disruptive. I mean, these are all things that perhaps we've been taken for granted, and this has really exposed great needs. So, Jason, what needs are you hearing about from families who are raising children with special needs or from individuals around the world who have disabling conditions, and how are we identifying these families when gathering is largely discouraged, even prohibited in various countries?

Jason Holden:

Well, the first thing we do is we utilize our church networks. We have so many gracious partners around the world that are willing to step out and step in and serve. Those individuals that are going out to the families affected by disability, that's where we first connect with them. Some of the stories of the need they are amazing, things that you would never think of. Before we focused on isolation but now COVID-19, the ability to travel has been impacted. Systems like buses and trains in some of these countries are limited on the capacity and have even shut down in some areas. So, a trip that might've taken a person living with a disability longer than a typical person is now exacerbated even more. Something that took them 45 minutes is now taking them three hours. In El Salvador, where there are curfews, people have to get out, get to a place and get back before the curfew, or they risk being arrested, detained, or sometimes even hit with sticks in some of these countries.

Crystal Keating:

Wow. That's definitely I never really thought about. In the past we've had wheelchair provisions where people would come in to our location, but it sounds like that's not really possible anymore. What are some of the ways that we're actually reaching out to these families?

Jason Holden:

No, we can't have them come in into these large groups anymore. So, what we're doing is we are partnering with our international groups, our in-country partners to develop what we call family by family, or just a mini wheels outreach. So, our mini wheels outreach is where we still solicit applications from social networks, from the churches on who needs a wheelchair, and then we coordinate a very small group of a pastor, a physical therapist, and a mechanic to go and visit at the home. Of course, there's all the protections put in place. They're wearing everything from smocks to gloves, they're cleaning before and after. They are doing everything they can to protect both themselves and the recipient of the wheelchair, but they're still going out, and they're still serving, and in some programs, we're doing up to five families a day.

Crystal Keating:

That's awesome. Now I know that one of the areas of need that we're really wanting to meet is lack of food. I mean, hunger is happening all over the world. How are we meeting that need? How have we really shifted Joni and Friends and our ministry focus to meet that kind of need this year?



Jason Holden:

Well, this year, instead of just going into the home with the wheelchair or having somebody come to an event, we've also included food stuffs. So, some countries, we've partnered with grocery centers and did an allotment for people that could come in to make sure that one they're being registered, being tracked by the church, and they're getting the food directly from the store. So, we're taking out the intermediary of the church having to go and deliver the food because of some of these countries of the curfews and the high risk. So, they're already going to have to go into the grocery stores. So now the church is creating these food baskets or kits at the store where the person can just show up, give them their information. They're on the list. They meet the requirements and they get to take home up to 30 days worth of food.

Crystal Keating:

Wow, that is amazing. And I know the other aspect of some of our families impacted by disability is they don't have access to the kind of medical supplies they need, or even the necessary supplies they need for good hygiene. Are we able to also meet that kind of need?

Jason Holden:

We are. The medical supplies such as bandages, just wraps, things that are easy for us here to get in the US are a big challenge in some of these countries. So once again, we are working very closely with partnerships to make the supplies readily available and also to make sure they're being distributed as needed. We do that with medical supplies, and we're doing that with what we call our dignity kits, specifically in countries like India, where your status can be completely changed by your cleanliness. So, by providing a dignity kit to some of these families and giving them the opportunity to just shower and get clean and maybe have some little bottle of perfume just to change their persona as they enter into another environment like a store into the community, it can definitely change the way they're seen. Even if they have a disability where they're treated very differently, a clean person is treated so much better than a person that may be dirty and just not as clean.

Crystal Keating:

Right. And I think that's something maybe most of us take for granted, access to showers and running water, things in other countries where if they're not clean, they could be even more ostracized and rejected and not get the care that they need. And so actually providing the medical supplies and the dignity kits, the hygiene supplies helps them to access the basic necessities like food and be able to go into the grocery store. I just think that's such a beautiful display of God's kindness and generosity, and these are things that we haven't really done before. And so it's exciting to see. Jason, you're a pretty fascinating person. In God's providence, I believe he raises up leaders who are uniquely skilled and trained to intervene in situations such as the coronavirus pandemic. So, I would love for you to share a little bit about your own personal background and experience in managing global logistics while serving in the US military.

Jason Holden:

Yes, Crystal. I was in the military for 21 years, specifically the Navy. I focused on international construction projects. When I left the Navy a few years ago to join Joni and Friends, I was managing 13 projects in 11 different countries. Well, one of the experiences the Navy taught me was how to manage networks through osteo challenges. I had the opportunity of doing this build schools and clinics and countries like the Philippines, all the way to doing a logistical enterprise work for some of the nation's most elite special forces units. And really what I've learned is how to get stuff into places where nobody else can. And as-

Crystal Keating:

A good skill.

Jason Holden:

Absolutely, and it has given me an opportunity here at Joni and Friends to really step in and serve in a way that we never have before.

Crystal Keating:

Well, and that's exactly what we need right now because the infrastructure even of transportation has been really stunted and disrupted. And so, for your skills to be able to continue serving the lost and the least of these in the disability community is so imperative right now. Jason, you've also played a role in building ongoing international partnerships. How have these partnerships with local Christ honoring churches and in-country liaisons been foundational in meeting the spiritual and physical needs of people living with disabilities, especially in providing ongoing support and community through the body of Christ?

Jason Holden:

You hit the nail on the head, is the first thing we need to do is to envision what Christ would want us to do. And these partnerships that we're creating are just fellow believers, fellow Christians that just want to go out and serve their community in a different way, in a new way. And some just are trying to find community and what we're doing here at Joni and Friends is we're leveraging that, and we're creating new relationships. And this is so important, especially through COVID because this year all our international Wheels for the World after March were canceled. We sent no US teams internationally. But what we did is we shifted our focus and supported these in-country partners to continue to do the Wheels for the World events just without a US team. This was something that we had already started to leverage years ago.

Jason Holden:

We really were building upon our relationships that existed with these huge churches and these other NGOs that are international to help us just do this distribution effort. And we never really wanted to focus as that being the sole reason for it, but it really came true in our hearts of what God was doing back then this year, because as we saw our fellow brothers and sisters in other Christian ministries shutting their doors and some having to cancel everything they did because they had no international partnerships, Joni and Friends was still flourishing and they were coming to us saying, "How can we come alongside of you to continue to ministry because your network is still existing today?" And these partnerships were a key part of this entire plan, which is you raise up people in their own country to really establish a community health that has never existed before. And we did it focusing on people living with disabilities.

Crystal Keating:

That's right, and I love that model because people with disabilities need more than a wheelchair. They need the long-term care. They need to be part of the body of Christ. They need a community that's ongoing. We need one another. What better way to mobilize the local church and to infuse them with the resources they need to train and equip them to go and do the work of the ministry? Partnerships are so important. Jason, how can others become partners in demonstrating the love of God by meeting the most critical needs of people with disabling conditions around the world? I mean, how can our listeners join us in sharing the gospel and providing the most basic necessities like food, medical care, dignity supplies, each given with the message of salvation and Christ being welcomed at the table of God and becoming a part of the body of Christ?

Jason Holden:

Well, the first thing that comes to my mind, Crystal is the perfect gift campaign that's running with our ministry right now. It really explains how people can come alongside and provide services that they have, or provide donations to really serve people living with disabilities from despair.

Crystal Keating:

Right on, that's a beautiful thing. And I know that if you're listening today and you do want to partner with us, you can go to our website at joniandfriends.org to learn more. And we also need your prayers. We need people joining us to pray that God would allow us to reach the people who we haven't reached yet to meet the needs that we haven't met yet to share the gospel with those who have never heard about Christ. And in that way, we are reaching out to all the darkest of places with the hope of Christ. Jason, any closing thoughts for us?

Jason Holden:

Yes. I don't think that we're in an era of a time that we're waiting for this to end. And I keep hearing that both internationally and domestically with our friends and partnerships, because what if we are in a new normal, and I just want to make sure that our listeners and everybody out there understands that we are going to continue to find ways to serve and we're going to grow and serve more people affected by disability in any way we can, and we really would appreciate any support that they could provide.

Crystal Keating:

That's right. \$125 provides entire families living with disability essential support for a month. It provides basic medical care, mobility support, food, and dignity supplies, and \$1,500 supplies this care for an entire year. Again, you can learn more at joniandfriends.org. Jason, thank you so much for joining us on the podcast today. I just praise God for the way he's using you and your team to bring the light of Christ to the darkest of places.

Jason Holden:

Thank you, Crystal. It's been a pleasure.

Crystal Keating:

Thank you for listening today. To learn more about how you can give the perfect gift this Christmas, please visit 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@joniandfriends.org. I would love to hear from you and 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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