

Season 5 | Episode 24

How Including People with Disability Changes Church Culture

Stephanie Hubach

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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 include people living with disability in your church and community. Be sure to subscribe wherever you listen to podcasts or find us at joniandfriends.org/podcast.

Stephanie Hubach is joining us on the podcast again to talk about how including people with disability into every aspect of the body of Christ changes the culture of the church. Stephanie is a research fellow in disability ministries at Covenant Theological Seminary and visiting instructor in the seminary's educational ministries program.

Previously, she served as the Director of Mission to North America's Special Needs Ministry and is also the author of *Parenting and Disabilities: Abiding in God's Presence*. Welcome back to the podcast, Stephanie.

Stephanie Hubach:

Thank you so much, Crystal. It's great to be here.

Crystal Keating:

Well, it's great to have you again. And Stephanie, I know you're so passionate about including people with disability in the life of the church. So, let's start talking about disability ministry. How would you define disability ministry?

Stephanie Hubach:

I moved around through some different ideas as I was developing the ministry for MNA back when I was working for MNA Special Needs Ministries. I was the Founding Director there and so I had the luxury of changing my mind as I moved along.

And so, one of the things where I kind of landed with the whole view of what is disability ministry is what we ended up using as our purpose statement, which was making the Gospel, the Good News of the coming of Christ's Kingdom accessible to all in word and deed. Making the Gospel, the Good News of the coming of Christ's Kingdom accessible to all in word and deed.

And one of the things I loved about it is it didn't even use the word disability.

Crystal Keating:
Yes.

Stephanie Hubach:
Because isn't that really the mission of the church, right? The purpose of the church.

Crystal Keating:
That all would know Christ.

Stephanie Hubach:
Yes. You know, you have to recognize the context in which we're working at any point in time when we are communicating the Gospel to others, right?

And it could be a geographic context. It could be a social context. It could be an ability-related context, right? And so, one of the things that the Gospel always calls us to is to be agile in terms of how are we communicating the Good News of Jesus that was so clearly intended to be communicated to all.

Crystal Keating:
I like that word, agile. Flexible. Changeable. Right? Adaptable.

Stephanie Hubach:
Yeah, and organizations by nature aren't always agile. That's why the church is an interesting animal that way, in that it's both an organization and an organism. So biblically and spiritually, it's an organism. It's a living thing, and yet also practically and pragmatically we function like an organization and a staff and all that.

Crystal Keating:
With systems and processes and expectations and culture.

Stephanie Hubach:
Yes. So, the other part, if you go back to that definition is not only making the Gospel accessible, but in word and deed. And so, keeping that important, I'm not going to call it attention, I'm going to call it the marrying of those two things, that both the Gospel in word, that people understand what the saving grace of Christ is, how Christ meets us there, right?

And all that the Bible has to teach us about our relationship with God, but also the Gospel indeed, which is married to that and intertwined with that is how do we experience a loving hands and feet of Jesus in our lives? So, a Gospel with word that has no natural expression, no active expression of deed ministry, you know, James would tell us that that was basically dead, right?

And yet a deed ministry that has no active proclamation of the saving grace of Christ is just a deed ministry. It's not the full Gospel, right? So. The Gospel word...

Crystal Keating:
It's the heart and the hands, right?

Stephanie Hubach:
Yes, the heart and the hands. One of the ways I like to think about it is that the Gospel in word needs to be proclaimed in a way that the blind can see it, the deaf can hear it, people with intellectual disabilities can understand it, people with autistic spectrum disorder can experience it, people with physical disabilities can actually enter the church to hear the preaching of God's word, and then that the Gospel in deed is just that people would actually experience the healing hands and feet of Jesus in their lives.

Crystal Keating:
That takes a heart of love and a belief that, that the Lord will meet us when we try to love one another and serve one another and make the Gospel accessible, that the Holy Spirit is working in and through us and in and through that person. We're not alone in this. We don't have to come up with clever gimmicks.

Stephanie Hubach:
Right.

Crystal Keating:
God's Word alone has been power to save. We may not always get it right, but God goes way beyond our own abilities. And you know, let's talk about that. Can you help us to understand the ways God's Word invites his church to intentionally seek out and include people living with disabilities? I've heard pastors say with all genuine sincerity, we don't really have people with disabilities in our church. And it's like, okay, well, let's ask ourselves the question, why is that? Why is that? Let's think about our communities. Are we waiting for them to come or are we to go out?

What was Jesus's posture? What does the Word of God say?

Stephanie Hubach:
When I worked for MNA, one of the areas of the, of the larger ministry I was, I was actually part of in the Presbyterian Church in America was the church planting arm of the PCA. And I used to like to tell church planters, so when you go out into a community, if you are not actively looking for people with disabilities, you're already writing off 20 to 25 percent of the community, which you're going to build a church.

And that, that was always actually very attention-getting for church planters who are always really looking for people, right? And so, it's just saying, you know, it's really important that we actively look for people with disabilities and that we just build into the DNA of the church itself

from the get-go, how people with disabilities can be full participants in that body of life of that church.

Because otherwise what often happens is that a church gets formed around a whole group of typical people and then we think that inclusion is kind of like a snapdragon, right? Have you ever seen a snapdragon flower, right? If you squeeze the bottom of it, the top opens, right? So, the inclusion is, it opens up, we swallow the person into the way we already are, and then we snap it back, and off we go, right?

You think about it, and any new person in a community setting changes the nature of the community in less noticeable ways sometimes, and in more noticeable ways. And so, when people with disabilities are part of the fabric of church, right from the beginning, first of all, that just helps to make it easier all the way along.

But when people with disabilities are brought into the church, the church has to be willing to change and to be blessed by not to look at as negative change, but positive change, right? That comes as a result of the blessing, having people with different needs there than we've had before in different gifts, scripturally, you know, there are a lot of places you can go.

I love how Jesus just right out of the gate when he inaugurated his ministry in Luke 4, picked up the scroll of Isaiah, and read from Isaiah 61. And what he preached was good news to the poor, freedom for the captives, recovery sight for the blind. And then he says, these words are fulfilled in your hearing.

So, Jesus, right from his first synagogue sermon, talked about what his ministry was going to be about. Of course, Joni and Friends is famous for using Luke 14. Right? The Great Banquet, John 9, an amazing story that really teases out the differences between functional and social disability, right? The way that functional disability is the impairment itself, and in this case, the blindness, right?

But social disability, that's the aspect of where we disable people much further than the impairment itself because of attitudes, right? And so, if you look at John 9, it's just full of that. And then, of course, you have Jesus who is the antithesis of all the other players in the story. And so...

Crystal Keating:

Right, he really comes and restores, he restored bodies and souls but also restored people to community.

Stephanie Hubach:

Exactly.

Crystal Keating:

Because of the exclusion that often happened when disability was a part of someone's life.

Stephanie Hubach:

Right. And so, it's both, it's both and, right? And that's, it's both dealing with the functional impairment and the difficulties that come with that. And the restoration that God brings through different means in this lifetime and ultimately when there will be no more crying, no more tears, no more sorrow, and the social aspects that come from sinful hearts and selfish actions that adversely affect other people. And so, there's different kinds of healing needed, and it comes in different ways over different times.

Crystal Keating:

Well, you know, you said something that, you know, we're talking about our perceptions and even misconceptions. We may hold misconceptions about people like children and adults with disabilities. How do these misconceptions manifest in church culture?

Stephanie Hubach:

The idea that disability is a one-way street and that there's...

Crystal Keating:

Yeah, like, we're going to serve you, and you're only going to be a consumer of our care, rather than it being a mutually beneficial relationship.

Stephanie Hubach:

Right. And all that that really reflects, actually, is how distorted our own worldview is. Because that way of treating people with disabilities actually comes out of how do we look at people with disabilities from our own perspective. It just shows that we're seeing people with disabilities as an abnormal part of life in an otherwise normal world, which is very modernist or medical model view of how we look at people with disabilities. But the biblical view is that a normal part is to be expected, a normal part of life in an abnormal world, in a world where nothing is going exactly as it was originally designed to go. So that distorted view is very superior inferior. You're broke and I'm not.

The biblical view is this whole idea that every one of us experiences degrees of both the blessings of creation, right, in our image bearing and the brokenness of the Fall in every aspect of our personhood. At the foot of the cross, the playing field is level. The Gospel, it's a level playing field here.

And so, it really changes the way we relate to other people. You know, another one of those things that we see sometimes happen at church, besides disability being a one-way street, is we think that intellectual disability precludes wisdom. So, some of the wisest and most insightful people I know are people with intellectual disabilities. Because people with intellectual disabilities sometimes take in information.

There's things that you and I don't even notice. And then they apply it in ways that we don't even consider. Again, that's one of those ways that I think people are surprised often. When they get to know somebody who might have an intellectual disability, it's like, oh, having an intellectual disability doesn't preclude being very wise.

Another one is the idea that people with disabilities can't lead. That's a whole other topic there, right? You know, not every leader leads from the front of the room. And not everyone in the front of the room is actually a leader.

Crystal Keating:
I was gonna say that, but you said it so nicely.

Stephanie Hubach:
Again, what God does in us is to help us to look for real God-given leadership packaged in ways we aren't expecting it. And when we do that, I guarantee you that we find it in the lives of people with disabilities in our midst.

Crystal Keating:
Well, and that's really God's paradigm throughout the whole Scripture, right?

Stephanie Hubach:
Yes.

Crystal Keating:
He uses those that may be our unexpected and I think that's why we have to ask God to really give us eyes to see that. When you talk about leadership that makes me think of really encouraging our church bodies and people with disabilities to consider what is their spiritual gift.

How can they be not just a recipient of wonderful community, but where can they serve? So, when a church begins to understand it's not hard to extend care and friendship to people with disabilities, what does it take for the church to go the next step and also help them find a place of ministry where they can use their gifts, their natural interests, their God-given abilities?

Stephanie Hubach:
In some ways, it's really simple, right? If you're familiar with any of Barb Newman's work, you know, we lost Barb to cancer, and she had written and spoken on wonderful insights into how to love people with autism well in the church. And one of the things that Barb just taught me was to ask people what they love to do.

So, when you meet a parent, for example, who has a child with a disability, don't start the conversation with what is your child's disability. What is it that your child has trouble doing? What does your child love to do? And I think we tend to have this tendency to make spiritual gifts, I think, more magical than they are.

They're not magical. Spiritual gifts aren't entirely divorced from natural gifts. The spirit uses us in ways that he's wired us. And so, asking people, what do they love to do? What are they passionate about? That's how you start, right, to really understand this person has an amazing affinity for this particular topic area or for this particular age group or whatever. And then you start finding ways to create a channel for that person to be able to use that gift there.

I'm thinking of one particular fellow in our church years ago. We had a guy in our church who had had a brain injury from an accident and might also have had epilepsy. Depending on the season he was in, there were times that he would call out and contribute to the sermon during church. You can see that as an interruption or you can see it as prophetic, right? And so, our pastors, to their credit, always found a way to allow Gene to speak and to weave his words into the context of the worship when it would, when that would happen. And it was beautiful because sometimes it was amazing. And so again, it's this, this, this idea of, all right, learning to see that as that's that.

All right. There is a uniquely packaged gift that is about to pop into a very structured Presbyterian setting. Are we going to embrace that or are we going to shame Gene? And everybody leaned in.

Crystal Keating:

Yeah, we have to be willing to maybe think outside of our own boxes and see what, what God does. Well, at Joni and Friends, we talk a lot about how the culture of a church will change when the leadership understands and demonstrates God's heart for the disabled. So how have you seen churches actually change by welcoming families with special needs?

Stephanie Hubach:

There's a fellow named James Moss and he talks a lot about church culture and I'm summarizing here because I don't have a direct quote in front of me, but his idea was that church culture isn't what's printed in the trifle brochure in the narthex.

It's the unwritten values of the church. And often, the unwritten values of the church are things that even the church doesn't recognize that those are its values until you challenge them in some way. I don't mean adversarially challenge. You can just accidentally challenge. So, ask any pastor's wife that went to a new church and crossed some social line saying or doing or something that was not in the value system of that particular local church, which may have nothing to do really with anything biblical. And so that's what's very interesting about church culture is this idea that it's the unwritten values of the church and so sometimes I like to think about it.

We used to have a dog that don't judge me for this, but we had a Bernese Mountain dog that, that needed some training. And so, we had a dog trainer that was using a pinch collar. And so, the pinch collar just, just pull on it a little bit and it just snags enough that it gets the dog's attention. So, our dog got this pinch collar caught on the dishwasher tray one time and went absolutely ballistic, so dishes flying all over the kitchen.

Anyway, the whole thing, church culture is like the pinched collar of a dog. You don't know it's there until you step on it accidentally, right, until you snag it. And then everything goes ballistic, right? All that said, I think when churches are willing to be introspective, they're willing to actually have someone come in from the outside and help them to see the blind spots they can't see themselves.

And I've seen organizations like Joni and Friends, organizations like the one I worked for, many others that have come into being in the last decade or so that are offering this kind of services to churches, and I have seen churches change those individual congregations and in collectively, like by denominational groups.

And so, I find that very encouraging because I think it's gone from sort of this *que sera sera*, we don't have anyone like that here with the answer. I would hear it sometimes 20 years ago to wait, you know, pastors have been much more, wait, why don't we have people with disabilities here, or, oh, I didn't actually think about that, that that is a disability, and you know what, they actually don't attend very often. What should we be doing about that?

I still see a paradigm shift happening that way in terms of both awareness and adaptability, that agility, adaptability type of things. You just see a lot more churches that are expecting to have kids with disabilities in their children's programs, right, plan in advance for their inclusion. I think there's worship sensitivity is up both in terms of sensory awareness or just statements like stand as you are able, enlarged print, hearing devices, just basic, basic things like that.

But just this whole idea of just being aware that people with disabilities need to be actively embraced into the life of the church and actively pursued in the community, right?

Crystal Keating:
Absolutely.

Stephanie Hubach:
That whole Luke 14 mandate.

Crystal Keating:
Yeah. Well, and Joni has her famous saying, one of her many famous sayings is, it's not disability ministry until people with disabilities are ministering.

Stephanie Hubach:
Right.

Crystal Keating:
And that's really what you're saying. So, Stephanie, as we close our time together, how would you summarize the culture change that takes place in a church when this becomes a reality, when people with disabilities are ministering?

Stephanie Hubach:
I used to say that I thought it was kind of like hitting the refresh screen on a computer.

You know when you refresh your computer screen? When disability ministry starts to take hold in the heart of a church, it's like hitting the refresh screen on the Gospel in that church. Honestly, if we recognize that it was because of every person's profound spiritual disability, that

Jesus came to make access to the Father on our behalf. Then the kind of accommodations we need to make in order that our friend or neighbor or brother or sister in Christ might have greater access to the Gospel in word and deed become put in perspective, not only in terms of what we're doing and why we're doing it.

Even in terms of our own motivation of recognizing and thankfulness, what God has done for me, what God has done to create access for me. And so, the gifts of people with disabilities are already present when the person is present, right? It's simply the idea of building them a social ramp in order for those differently packaged gifts to be employed in the body of Christ.

So, I think if we're saturated in the Gospel, we have an accurate perspective of the world and ourselves (what I said before about the worldview), we expectantly look for God-given gifts in other people, including people with disabilities, and we're eager to serve so that others might experience and declare the excellencies of Christ. Sounds like church to me.

Crystal Keating:

Amen. I think that's what Jesus intended. And I just love that idea of that, you know, when we're really functioning all together as the body, there's a refresh on the Gospel. And if you're listening today and you're part of a church and think, I really want more training or more information on that, we have so many wonderful resources at joniandfriends.org on our Church Training Resource Page; free material, videos, downloads, helpful quick steps, and people who can walk alongside you and your church. So, Stephanie, this has been such a great conversation. Thank you so much for joining us on the podcast again today.

Stephanie Hubach:

Thanks, Crystal. Thank you so much. Take care.

Crystal Keating:

Thank you for listening today. If you've been inspired, please send me a message or leave a five-star review on your favorite app. That's a great way to help other people find encouragement from these conversations and to get our next episode automatically 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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