

Season 4 | Episode 8

Creating Belonging in the Church for People with Disabilities

Scott Sauls

Crystal Keating:

I'm Crystal Keating and you're listening to the Joni and Friends Ministry Podcast. Each week we're bringing you encouraging conversations about finding hope through hardship... and sharing practical ways that you can include people with disability in your church and community.

Pastor Scott Sauls is joining us on the podcast once again to talk about fostering belonging and the power of friendships as churches continue to welcome people of all abilities into the body of Christ.

Welcome back, Pastor Scott.

Scott Sauls:

Thank you, Crystal. It's great to be with you again.

Crystal Keating:

You, too. Well, I am so excited to talk about this particular topic. I love talking about friendships and how our churches can be a place of belonging. So, you know, I was reading about you, and I noticed your church held their annual Very Special Bible School for your friends with special needs and their siblings. I loved that. And it sounded like it was a true highlight. You had like over two-hundred volunteers serving over the course of three days. So, I wanna hear all about this.

Scott Sauls:

Well, yeah, that is one of the highlights of our church here in Nashville, Christ Presbyterian Church. We have a very robust ministry among people with disabilities and special needs and also their families. That includes kids. That also includes adults who are experiencing special needs or disabilities of some sort. And Very Special Bible School is just one of the things that we do in order to support and encourage and be encouraged by this wonderful community and something we do every, every summer.

But this is essentially a three-day annual event that we do and it's, it's really an all-day event, like you said, with typically somewhere between two and three-hundred volunteers and a whole lot of people, both from our church community and the surrounding community that are affected by disability and special needs, and they just have a lot of fun.



They also talk about different Bible stories and teaching from scripture. And it just aims to be an encouraging time for everyone. And as you know, it's really helpful to parents, especially if they're dropping their kids off, that it just gives them a few hours for three consecutive days, which is a very rare thing for those who are, you know raising kids with special needs. We try to make it something that ends up being a real gift and blessing to the whole family.

Crystal Keating:

That's awesome. I love that. And I imagine you get people in your community that maybe haven't visited your church before, or they are not generally part of the rhythms of the week. I mean, what a great outreach for people in Nashville as well. I love that.

Scott Sauls:

It certainly can be. And as you also know, Crystal, sometimes families with disabilities and special needs have this extra layer of self-consciousness about entering in to any kind of community, including churches and you know, the fear is that they're gonna be too disruptive. The church won't be able to handle the challenges that are unique to their households and their families. So, what we try to do is, is just say we are set up as best as we can be to create a meaningful place of belonging for such families and to provide as much support as we can through things like buddy systems on Sunday.

We have special classes and ministries on Sunday mornings for people with special needs and disabilities. And so, we're privileged to get to be one of those churches that can do that and can do that well. We have an excellent leadership and team here under the leadership of a woman named Gigi Sanders, who who Joni also knows. And so, we're just grateful to, to get to be part of this part of God's story.

Crystal Keating:

I love that. And, you know, thank you for bringing up that often families feel very aware of maybe some of the differences they experience when coming. And so just that sense of like, we can let our guard down. You are safe, you are loved, you are welcomed, you're accepted and you're part. We are all part and that's that strong sense of belonging that we all need to feel.

So, I think the way that we reach out in our churches to people with disabilities, it's not really unique to people with disabilities. I mean, how did embracing those who are often marginalized, I feel like that's so important to you personally as a pastor in your church - how did that come about?

Scott Sauls:

Any church that is focused on Christ and makes that their primary work, to focus on the person and work of Jesus Christ, it's not gonna be long before you recognize how taken Jesus Christ is with and how drawn to people with disabilities and special needs and who are just living in a place of weakness and sometimes being, and feeling overlooked, people on the margins of society. Jesus just had this really special place in his heart, and also a priority in his ministry for such image-bearers.



And so, we just figure that we wanna be close to whatever Jesus is close to. And we wanna be part of whatever Jesus is part of. And we just believe with all of our hearts, you know, just the way that he's constantly healing people. There's the paralytic. There's the man born blind. We could go on and on and on about how Jesus tends to those who have disabilities. Whether we're talking spiritual disabilities or whether we're talking physical ones or both, he's always just kind of like a moth to a flame and, and so we want to be as well.

Crystal Keating:

Mm-hmm, that's so good. Well, what are some effective ways to create a sense of belonging in a Christian community? We wanna do that well, too.

Scott Sauls:

Yeah. Well, I think for us when it comes to people with disabilities and special needs, it's not just about creating a welcoming space, but also creating avenues for meaningful service.

Crystal Keating:

Yes.

Scott Sauls:

...for those who are able, and so any given Sunday, for example, we serve communion every Sunday, for instance. And in the middle of the week, we have probably about a dozen young men and women with Down syndrome and autism and other similar situations come in and they fill the cups, you know, the bread and the drink. And they're also there at the tables offering the elements to people during communion.

They're greeting at the doors, handing bulletins to people, asking how they can help. And so, we really wanna provide a place where this group of image-bearers knows that they don't just belong, but that they are important, in terms of the life and ministry and service of the church.

And another thing we're exploring as well is opening up a, an event center that would include a coffee house, that we could staff with young men and women with disabilities and special needs who will serve the people who come in from the neighborhood and also from the K to 12 academy that's on our campus.

And so, you know, we're always exploring different opportunities, not only to welcome and serve, but also to unleash the gifts and the energies and, and the love that this group of image-bearers has to offer.

Crystal Keating:

Oh, that's so good. It's like being part of a family that you are a recipient of care and love, but you're also a contributor. I just love that your church is doing that. It is very appropriate and it's God's intention. I know that's our model. It's not about creating a place where people are just served, but really where they can use their spiritual gifts, 'cause everyone who loves the Lord and has his spirit has a gift to contribute for the good of the body. So, that's exciting. I love hearing



about that. When did it become poignant for you to think specifically about engaging families with disabilities and how has it changed your church?

Scott Sauls:

How has it changed our church? I mean, it, it galvanizes our community, and it has for many years. Again, when the people of God get close to the things that Jesus is motivated by it just has this renewing and reviving effect on the community. And we happen to be one of those churches that somewhere along the way, one of our most deeply held core values has become that Jesus is close to the weak. He draws near to the weak in the eyes of the world and often channels his strength and his power through those very people and through those very communities.

And so, it's been galvanizing and it also, you know, quite honestly, it does take a lot out of you. Tending to communities with disabilities and special needs in some ways is quite literally a high-contact sport. You know, sometimes my wife will come home after serving as a buddy to maybe a child who's, you know got kind of an extreme autistic situation. And she'll come home with scratch marks on her arms and ready for a nap and, and just saying it is amazing how parents can lean in with what I've been doing for three hours.

They lean in twenty-four seven, just a special, extra level of strength that God gives to parents with this, this calling, and the siblings, of course, who are also impacted and part of the picture. But for us it's, it's both tiring and energizing, to get to be involved.

Crystal Keating:

Right? Yeah. That's so good. Well, okay. As a pastor, what would you say to the pastor of a church who's maybe unaware of the barriers keeping people with disabilities from their church or who simply doesn't want to consider their needs for accommodation?

Some of the things we hear are - we just don't have anybody with disabilities at our church. If they showed up, we would care for them. Or something like - we don't do disability ministry now, but next year when we evaluate our budget, we'll think about it with the assumption that disability ministry will cost money. Or even - we're just not called to disability. We focus on other outreaches, like foster care or homeless outreaches. What would you say to that pastor that maybe is not aware of the barriers, keeping people with disabilities from their church?

Scott Sauls:

Well, I would say, it's our loss if we don't experience the privilege of living in community with people who have disabilities and special needs. I'll start there.

It's a profound blessing. And there's so much to be learned about the nature of the gospel, the nature of who Jesus is and what he's like by making sure that we are in community as far as it depends on us, making sure that we're in community and making space in our community, meaningful space in our community for those who are in a place of weakness and in a place of needing care.

And, you know, I, I would say just on, on the affordability question, the way that our special needs ministry started was just that. Somebody showed up and the people who were already at



the church were motivated enough to figure out what it would take to make sure that those people could keep showing up.

Crystal Keating:
Mm-hmm.

Scott Sauls:

But also bring their friends who are maybe reluctant to show up, because of the complexities we discussed a minute ago. And it started with a group of lay people who just committed to it because they saw it as a kingdom value before it ever became you know, a full-blown ministry and program.

But I would also say this to those who are concerned about affordability. You know, there's a certain reality to that, that some churches don't have the budgets or the ability or the space to, for instance, create space that, you know, accommodates people with sensory needs and things like that.

But when we think about, can the church afford it, I think it's really important to remember that Jesus is now the same savior that he was in the gospel and one of the things that he does is he brings great fruit through scarcity.

You know, the, the feeding of the 5,000 comes to mind where Christ has five loaves of bread and two fish and, and he says to his disciples, I don't need you to do anything in terms of multiplying these resources. I don't need you to multiply these resources. I just need you to be available to serve the people that are put in front of us. 'Cause the disciples say, hey, there's so many people. They're hungry. Send them into town so they can get some food. And Jesus says, no, you feed them.

Crystal Keating:
Right.

Scott Sauls:

You know, if I'm the twelve, I'm thinking, are you kidding? There's five thousand men plus their families and all we've got is a little basket of groceries and at the end of the process everybody is fed to the brim and the leftovers are greater than the original amount of food. And, and so, you know, that's just to say that don't underestimate the ability for Jesus to create abundance out of our scarcity. And really all he asks of us is that we lean in and be available and tend to those that God puts in front of us and that includes every kind of person.

We wanna be as inclusive and as embracing as Jesus is in any church community, large or small, while also recognizing that you know, a large church might have a greater capacity to absorb a larger ministry to this beloved community. But a small church can do some things with the right amount of intentionality to welcome these families who have a hard time in the world finding a place of welcome.

Crystal Keating:

So good. We're not alone in this. When we seek first the kingdom of heaven and do the things that Jesus is calling us to do, he promises that he'll provide what we need. Thank you for that powerful example.

You know, another barrier we hear about is that a church can only get stuck in caring for people with disabilities, kinda like what we talked about, rather than developing real friendships or allowing or encouraging them to use their gifts to bless the body of Christ. So, Pastor Scott, do you have any advice for our listeners today for how ministry leaders can better include families with disability?

Scott Sauls:

Oh, I, I think the book of first John, I think talks about the dynamic of how we can close our hearts to I think he's especially talking about people in need, specifically the poor, but I think that could apply to anyone. That to close our heart, to any group of people that God might put in front of us is a missed opportunity to, at, at the very least to see what God can do through our own availability and a situation that we may not immediately know how to handle, if that makes sense.

It, it's really about trusting God to do his work and being available and being willing to show up and being willing to welcome when others show up in our midst.

Crystal Keating:

That is the heart of God. And bless your church. You guys are a wonderful example of this. We are just so grateful. Thank you so much for sharing such great advice with us and Pastor Scott, may God continue to bless you and Christ Presbyterian Church in Nashville. Thank you for your time today on the podcast.

Scott Sauls:

Thank you, Crystal.

Crystal Keating:

Thank you for listening to the Joni and Friends Ministry Podcast. If you've been inspired, would you leave a 5-star review? And don't forget to subscribe! You can also visit joniandfriends.org/podcast to send me a message. I'm Crystal Keating and thank you for joining me for the Joni and Friends Ministry Podcast.

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