



Season 4 | Episode 11

Community: A Key to Hope for Families Living with Disability

Leisa Williams

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.

On our last episode, I talked with Leisa Williams, a special needs mother who has a passion for the well-being of families like hers – those who lovingly care for a child impacted by disability. If you missed that conversation, be sure to listen! Leisa shared how her life was thrown into turmoil and her hopes were put on hold when doctors predicted that her son Justin would never speak or progress beyond the capacity of a toddler. Today, Justin is twenty-one and interning at a church where he desires to be a pastor, and Leisa is here to talk more about God's provision in her life and the power of Christian community for special needs families.

You know, you have a beautiful acronym for **HOPE**. I love this. **H**aving **O**ther **P**eople **E**ngage. So how is connection and vulnerability with other people? How did that become life-giving to you?

Leisa Williams:

Well, out of the sense of isolation I had at the beginning where I did shut down in my grief and push others away, I realized that I did need people. And first of all, you do get a lot of people just come into your life immediately when you have a special needs child with a - speech therapist, an OT, and a physiotherapist and behavioral therapist and pediatrician, and ophthalmologist. Like the list just goes on and on and on. Like I was managing sometimes like fifteen people.

Crystal Keating:

Oh, my goodness.

Leisa Williams:

... around Justin. Wow. And I would say it's like running a small business. And at first, like I did, I struggled with that many people and how do I do it? It's like a full-time job. And some women will say they'd never work because this is their career. Mmm-hmm. But what I realized is having these people engage but not just the core specialist teams, but the body of Christ through our church, the school community, or if any other part of community we might be involved with really were the people that kept us going.

So, when I talk about that friend who would come up with her, all her scrapbooking and scrapbook with me that was having someone else engage with me that lifted my spirit and



helped me keep going. But then Justin's therapists and core team, some of them have stuck with us for nearly twenty years. Ah! And that engagement actually has been the stability that was needed to transition Justin into each and every other section of his life. And they are the people that I can pick up the phone and be really raw and real and vulnerable and honest with when times are tough. And so, one thing I like to talk about a lot is how to build a powerful caring support team.

And I know this is a real struggle for many people. But remaining connected in church and to the body of Christ, as hard as it can be, has been absolutely key. And our Christian community has been that caring, supportive community and being those people who have engaged with us as a family, not just for one or two years, but over the course of the twenty-one years of Justin's life.

And now that he's moved to Lake Macquarie and he's in an internship as a pastor, he basically has got another team from the body of Christ, who are engaging with him. And we actually this year, I never thought that I would ever be able to release Justin when I say into independence. He needs 24-7 care.

He cannot be left alone. So, this is not easy. My husband and I are at a point where we have been able to release him and where we are able to have him in the support and care with a Christian disability support company in a local church, interning as a pastor because a whole community is engaging, having other people engage and the tremendous hope that has given us as a family. I just can't even begin to put words around it. And this is the body of Christ being hands and feet of Jesus.

Crystal Keating:

Amen. That's incredible. Well, on that note, how did you stay connected with other believers and how have they supported you and your family through the years? I'm sure you've gone through ups and downs and many different seasons these past twenty-one years.

Leisa Williams:

We actually had a change of churches after the doing, where we were very heavily and we moved to a church, which we thought the Lord transitioned us to in that season, where we just sat for quite a while. And the pastor of that church has been incredibly inclusive. But we decided that we would no matter what keep turning up to church, even if we didn't feel we could be on a roster in those early days. And we also put our kids in Sunday school and youth group and things like that.

And Justin would go to youth and there was one young man at the time, he used to always just say hello to Justin. And he turned out to be the youth pastor many years later and turned out to go to Bible college. And Justin looked at his life and the fact that he would just say hello to Justin every week. And he was like, well, I want to be a pastor like him. And through that, those times of remaining connected, even at times when we might have felt isolated, and that people didn't notice us or might include us or invite us over because it's not just people in the world who don't notice people with disabilities. It's in the body of Christ, sadly as well.



One person noticed Justin and that one person has changed his life. Mm. And in that, it meant that Justin wanted to go to youth every week. Even if it was like you were flapping and ticking and stemming and sometimes just on the sidelines, cause people didn't quite know how to include him in things or involve him.

He was there to start with. And we kept taking him and my husband and I made a very big choice to remain connected and to choose not to take any offense if we didn't feel like our needs were being met, but to trust Jesus, that his way is the best way, even though we might not have perfect churches or there's not perfect Christians, as we all know.

Right. And we also raised him in a Christian school and kept connected to community there. So, we didn't completely cut ties at any point with the body of Christ or with even other organizations. But we did simplify to what we were doing within those circumstances if that makes sense.

Crystal Keating:

Well, yeah. And it takes the spirit of God in you working such a gracious response to difficult circumstances within the church where you're just so thankful for the ways that you are blessed and are seen, even if it's not as you wish or as it could be. And that's, that's exactly why we do podcasts like this because we wanna bring these families to the light and say you are in their church.

You, you are part. And we need to be aware, even just hearing about how Justin's friend and then pastor, kindness, how that kindness deeply impacted him, and how friendship is so important. So, what a picture of God's kindness and love to us.

Leisa Williams:

Mm-hmm. Yes, and I just wanna say that that then extended. So, when Justin said I would like to be a pastor, there was a church five hours down the road where a pastor of this church that we'd never met until before Christmas last year. We had never heard of this church or this place. But somebody was praying for Justin about where would be a place that he could intern.

Where could he learn to be a pastor that would embrace him? And this pastor just said, who am I to stand in the way of God's call on someone's life? Amen. Even though it's the least likely person. And that's the body of Christ and that's the power of having other people engage when this pastor said yes.

And he said, I don't know what I'm saying yes to. Right. He said, I don't have anybody with disabilities like this in my church. But I will say yes cause I don't wanna get in the way of God's call on his life.

Crystal Keating:

Such a powerful display of love for God, love for people, and such great faith.

Well, Lisa, are there some special ways the Lord has met you through the years to give you and your son incredible hope in the midst of such challenging situations?

Leisa Williams:

Oh, yes, like over and over and over again. I guess the first time was when he was really little, I took him up for prayer. We prayed the prayer of Hannah. I prayed the prayer of Hannah over him, and I just said, Lord, I think we all pray for the healing. I will never stop praying for healing.

Cause I do believe God is healing. But we trust God with what works out for us with special needs families. But I did pray, and I took him to the Lord. I dedicated him to God and said, if like Hannah said with Samuel, I will give him to you for all the days of my life. And I never expected that when he was like two and that prayer was prayed with the pastor of our church, that the Lord would actually plant right from the age of five, a seed in his heart to wanna be a pastor and to wanna serve God and to love God.

And right then when he had at school, somebody come and share Jesus in Kindie, he tells me he knew that he wanted to be a pastor. And then when he met that pastor when he was a little bit older at youth. And so, God has been faithful and met us with that promise. But in those years when it just looked like, well, God, how could this even outwork?

How could somebody with all the delays and all the challenges that Justin has, you know, become a pastor, or walk in your ways? God just said, hold on to my promises. And I just chose when I was writing my book seven promises, that God is always with us and he's met us by being always with us and being really, really faithful that he will protect us.

Like he will never leave us nor forsake us. And I've seen he's covering many times that Justin's had multiple surgeries. I've actually had multiple surgeries because there has been an impact. I've looked after my health. But I've had a health breakdown because being a special needs mum is tough. I'm not blaming it all on this. But there's been an impact. But in all of it, God is protecting us and walking with us through those times.

And he's said he is our strength. And we can find those scriptures that we can run to him in our troubled times. And he answers our prayers. I've seen him over and over. As I just shared before, like we got to a crossroads at the end of last year. I wrote a book. I declared hope wins. But I didn't actually know what Justin's future was when I wrote that book at the end. I knew what God put on his heart to be a pastor.

But we didn't have a community. We didn't have a church to move to. He could stay in our beautiful church here in Canberra. But we knew that Justin needed something more to grow and develop him so that he could become all that God's got for him. And then the Lord answered our prayer and gave him a church and a community and a Christian disability support company that we didn't even know existed.



And so, it says he listens to our prayers. He knows what matters to our heart and that God said he'll provide for us, that he provides for our needs. And so, as I'm even sharing on this podcast, I'm like we have financial needs coming out of our ears. Like this is not cheap. We've had to take out a, another mortgage.

We've bought a house for Justin to live in. The cost you have 24-7 care. We do have great funding in Australia, but we still need more funding. We need more money for him to live independently. It's just like, God, we're always coming and saying, God, we need more, and we don't have it. And it's like the five loaves and two fishes.

And we're like, Jesus, we trust that you will provide. We're not wanting or asking to be millionaires. But I think anyone who has got special needs, anyone who is a caregiver, just knows the financial burden and cost and the stretch. You know, most people are going into retirement and we're taking out mortgages that we don't wanna take out because we've got no choice.

Mmm. Because where will our children live? Right. What will happen to our kids when we die? And we need to start preparing for that. And in that, then God gives us his peace. He gives this incredible peace. And so, through all of this, as we've been walking this journey, transitioning Justin into adulthood, our life has been in turmoil.

I've had a health challenge or two or four. And I thought I would be moving with him to Lake Macquarie and so did he. But we realized God said, no, you can't because you need to stay and look after you and your health. And he says like, I've got it. I'll give you my peace. I've given you people. I've given you again, other people to engage with him.

And I don't know the answers. I don't know how we're getting all our money. But God does. Yes. And we're trusting him, and it gives us peace. And they're just knowing that he'll always love us and that he doesn't think of us any less or he hasn't abandoned us. And so all of those things are how God's met us and they're the promises that really just hanging onto and hanging onto them at the end of the book I wrote last year and seeing those promises fulfilled this year. But it doesn't mean that times have been easier.

There's been incredible miracles and blessings. There's been challenges, which is why I'm writing a second book that comes out at the end of the year called *Hope Overcomes* because it's been probably the most challenging eighteen months with Justin transitioning and different things that have happened in our lives admits to that.

But God has not moved one iota from being faithful to us, and we can just know that all his promises are yes and amen.

Crystal Keating:

Well, Leisa, it's been such a joy to have you on the podcast. You are testifying that hope does win because God's promises are true. You're just a beautiful picture of trusting the Lord.



Even when Jesus said, today has its own worries, but I will provide for you today and don't worry about tomorrow. It is so easy to think about our future and we do need to plan and yet you have really learned to lean into him today, and that is so evident. So, your book *Hope Wins*, how do people get a hold of a copy if they wanna hear more of your story and receive more encouragement?

Leisa Williams:

They can go to my website, which is www.LeisaWilliamsauthor.com. And Leisa is spelled L E I S A. So, www.LeisaWilliamsauthor.com. And you can click on International Guests, and that will take you to my Amazon page. But you can also look up *Hope Wins: Overcoming Feelings of Hopelessness in Special Needs Families* on Amazon, and you can also obtain a copy there.

I'd really love anyone to check it out and hopefully be encouraged by our story, our ongoing story, which is being written continually day by day, and just testifying to the hope and love of Jesus Christ. I believe that nobody's circumstances are too hopeless or too difficult for God.

Crystal Keating:

That is right. Never too difficult for God. Leisa, thanks again for joining me on the podcast. May God bless you.

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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