



Season 4 | Episode 13

Purpose, Identity, and Diversity in the Church

Dr. Lamar Hardwick – Part 2

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 Lamar Hardwick is back on the podcast today to share about life and faith from the unique perspective of someone who was diagnosed with autism later in life. He's a husband, father, author, advocate, and the lead pastor at Tri-Cities Church in East Point, Georgia. And on our last episode, he shared about being diagnosed with autism at age thirty-six and how that opened so many doors for him to understand how he related to and communicated with other people. So be sure to listen back if you missed that episode. It was phenomenal. And today he's back to talk about finding your purpose and identity and the importance of diversity in the church through the lens of disability. Thank you, Pastor Lamar, for joining us again.

Lamar Hardwick:

Thanks for having me back.

Crystal Keating:

Well, you learned early on that finding a purpose for living is an intrinsic part of being a human, that recognizing our God-given purpose is powerful and necessary. So, for you, how did that impact your life?

Lamar Hardwick:

Yeah, I think it made life actually more, more enjoyable. Like a lot of us, I don't know if we would say this out loud or not, but I will. A lot of us find ourselves sort of tolerating our way through life. Mm-hmm. From one season to the next, we sort of, you know, put up with things, especially when you're an adult, that this is just a part of being an adult and having adult responsibilities and to a certain extent that's true.

But I think finding our purpose and even understanding that there's an ever-evolving sense at which that's revealed to you from season to season, I think it made my life more enjoyable. You know, after my diagnosis and then being able to do the work that I do, I, I knew I was called to pastor.

I knew I was called to preach and then getting a diagnosis just further uncovered a lot of what my purpose is. And I can honestly say that a large part of that journey has helped me to enjoy my life even more. I feel like I'm in the zone. Like this is what I'm here for. Awesome. I don't



question as much not to say I don't have questions about what's next, but I don't have questions so much about my value anymore.

And so, you know, finding that purpose sort of puts you on a path to actually being able to enjoy. Jesus says, you know, he's come to give us life and give it to the full. And I'm not quite full, but you know, the glass is definitely more than half full now.

Crystal Keating:

So, Pastor Lamar, what would you say your purpose is?

Would you say it's doing a thing or being a thing, or is it being a pastor or what would you say?

Lamar Hardwick:

Wow. That's a great question. I don't think it's doing a thing because you know, from season to season, you might not be able to do those things like, so we think about, even a season of a pandemic, there were some things that we were just not able to do because of the restrictions.

So, I don't think it should, even though I probably felt that way in the past, since I've understood that my purpose is not into doing, yes, but it's, it's in the being. And so, I think, this ever-evolving sense in which God continues to show me who he's called me to be in the world, but also who he's called me to be in participating in the building of his kingdom. And so, for me, it's being a voice for the disability community to be one of the many voices that speak up for the inclusion of persons with disability, the inclusions of persons with disability in areas of leadership in our faith communities to be the voice for, including persons with disability as a matter of justice.

And so, I think being that type of person that God can call on to stand in the gap is where I've found my purpose. So, it's not just in the doing because the doing changes. Sometimes it's preaching. Sometimes it's writing. Sometimes it's praying for people. But I know that the being is, is that God has called me to be this person in relation to what he's building.

Crystal Keating:

And I think that truth is so important for the disability community, especially for so many that we've talked to feel like they can't quote "do" what's maybe most lauded in the church sometimes. Christ called us to something much deeper than doing, and he's always transforming us from the heart and the soul to be a reflection and to hear his voice and to follow him so that we're filled with him, so we image him. And so, mm-hmm, how are you helping others to find their purpose in God, and more specifically, how are you influencing other leaders to cultivate that same sense of God-given identity in their churches?

Lamar Hardwick:

Yeah, great question. I, I think for me it boils down to environment. So, in my most recent book, I've spent like three chapters kind of unpacking the parable of the sower. I, I'm assuming that most of our listeners know what that is. But one of the things I noticed about that parable, Jesus talks about the farmer that scatters seed, and it falls on three different types of soils. What I



noticed is that Jesus never blames the seed. The seed will do what it is designed to do if it's put in the right environment. And so, for me, one of the ways I help both individuals and leaders of the churches is to understand every person that's born is born with an intrinsic value.

They are image bearers. But they're also designed with a unique calling and DNA, whatever that looks like. And it is a part of who God created them to be. And oftentimes the issue isn't necessarily the person. The environment has to be one that can cultivate what God has already put in them.

And so, I learned that in my own process of being diagnosed, that some of the reasons why I struggled for years to fit into churches and to follow my calling, that I proceed to be a call and a pastor and to preach. It wasn't that God made a mistake in calling me. It was that I was trying to fulfill that purpose and live out that calling and exercising my gifts and environments that didn't accentuate what God had already gifted me to do. And so, I think it's something that helps address both individuals and leaders of churches is to understand that it, it's all about the environment. Are we setting up environments that allow people to be fruitful in the way that God designed them?

And so, I, I am fortunate. Even though I've had sort of a rough success. I'm fortunate now that I've been able to become a lead pastor. And so, I, I recognize the privilege that I have is that I'm able to create environments that are most beneficial to accentuate the gifts that God has given me.

And what I've learned is, is that that's the key. And so, I encourage people to find places where the environment is one that accentuates what's already in you. Like we don't stand over an apple seed and beg it to be an apple tree. Right? It does what it does when you put it in the right soil.

And it produces all the fruit that it's supposed to produce. And so, I think it's the same with, with our lives and our calling. And so, I encourage people to try to find environment. And there's, there's sort of ways in which you can assess if this is the right soil for me. And then I encourage leaders of churches to create soil that, as youth would say that doesn't produce storms that choke out the fruit. But create soil where you remove any processes or procedures or perspectives that are actually choking out the fruit.

And what I found is that most people who live with disability, it's usually one of those things. It's the way that the church does it, that doesn't allow them to be fruitful. It's not necessarily them and their disability that holds them back. It's the way that the church does things that, that are kind of those proverbial forms that Jesus talks about that chokes out the fruit.

Crystal Keating:

Wow. That's good. And we, as churches have to be willing to listen and adjust. Mm-hmm. I think it's easy, at least for human nature for us to point to others and say, you need a change rather than, how can we change to make this an environment where your gifts and talents and abilities and who God made you flourish by God's grace? Yeah.



Lamar Hardwick:

Yeah, we love the way that we do things, right?

Crystal Keating:

Oh yeah. Because my way makes sense to me and it's easy. Right? And so, to change is a sacrifice.

Lamar Hardwick:

Well, and Jesus has something to say about that, right? He says that there has to be new wine, and you can't put new wine in old wineskins. And one of the things that he says towards the end, that I, that really resonates with me.

He says, but people who keep drinking the old wine say the old wine is fine. And so, I tell people that you will trust what you have a taste for. And if you have a taste for the old way of doing things, you'll keep trusting the old way of doing things. You know, God is not responsible I tell people, for accommodating inappropriate appetites.

So, if you have an appetite for stuff, that's not leading the direction that God is trying to move things, then he's not responsible for accommodating that. But he does say those who hunger and thirst for God's way of doing things, those are the people that'll be fulfilled. So, I think some of it is when I consult with churches about becoming more inclusive of those with disabilities.

Some things you just, you might have to stop doing. And if, if it's gonna mean that you're opening up the door for people with disabilities to be more fruitful in their serving in God's church.

Crystal Keating:

That's good. Keep the focus on the fruit. Keep the focus on what could happen, not the cost that you may have to incur the uncomfotability you wanna keep presenting the vision of God's kingdom ahead. Well, through your own experiences, you become passionate about inclusion and diversity and unity in the church, and you have a deep desire to communicate the love and grace of Jesus by revealing his heart for the one, the one who's lost, or the one who's excluded from life with God.

So how have you fostered that place of belonging in your own church?

Lamar Hardwick:

Yeah, I think there's a, a scholar that I really love. He talks about how one of the things that we gotta do is constantly remind ourselves that we are adopted. We're grafted into the family.

I think one of the things that we forget as like you read descriptions as, as Gentiles or those who are, non-Jewish like, we, we, we are adopted that you see all this language from Paul, how God adopts us, and God brings us into his family. And I think one of the reasons why that's



important is because if we can remember what it was like to be on the outside, then it makes us more hospitable and more gracious now that we're on the inside. Right.

But whenever we forget, and this is what Paul is constantly challenging people with, especially like in the book of Ephesians, right? He says, remember, you were, you were invited in this thing, and we are glad you're here, but don't start to get the big head and think that this story is all about you.

We were all invited inside of God's story. And I think just that posture of humility makes us more hospitable, makes us more gracious because we're reminded what it was like when we were the one that the shepherd came after. And I think it's just that posture of humility that we always have to maintain in order to be more effective and, and to be hospitable to create our churches with a sense of hospitality. But then also the last thing I'll say is that we also have to remember that wherever Jesus is, Jesus is the host. So, you know, it doesn't matter whose house he's in. If you read the scriptures, it doesn't matter whose house he's in. He always acts as the host. He's the one who breaks the bread.

He's the one who's speaking at the dinner party. And so, Jesus is the host. It's not our table to exclude anyone from. And so, we just, we live with that posture of humility that we were once outside of the covenant and we were invited in, but also Jesus is the host. And so, Jesus gets to decide who is, or isn't included at the table. That's not up to us to decide

Crystal Keating:

That is good. Well, so what's your message and vision for churches who really do wanna do better at inclusion, especially embracing those who live with disabilities?

Lamar Hardwick:

I often share with churches that you can tell an organization or a church's commitment to disability inclusion by who it allows to lead.

And so, if you wanna know if a church or organization is committed to inclusion, in this case, inclusion of those with disabilities, who is on the leadership teams that has a disability, because what we've done is, and, and some of this is subconscious. I don't know that it was intentional. But part of the reason why it's so difficult to find ways to include persons with disabilities in our congregation is because all the ways that we conceived church to be.

And the things that are most meaningful in the churches that we have now, most of those practices did not take into consideration persons with disabilities, because they weren't at the table when we made those decisions. Right. And so, we wanna work our way out of it and do a 180 of being so exclusive and not inclusive of persons with disabilities.

The first thing I think that's necessary is to find who those people are in our congregations because there's many people already in our congregations that we're not aware of that may have an invisible disability, uh, or even, even persons who are adjacent to our congregations. Invite them in and give them a seat at the table, not in a tokenized way, but in a real way.



Because we're very good at inviting people. We're not so good at including people. And the difference is inviting people is inviting them to come share a space, a space that we've already decided what it should look like. We've already decided what the programming should look like. We've decided how long service would be.

We, we've decided what the lighting situation, the sound. And so, we just want you to share a space. But inclusion is, is asking them to come and help us shape the space. And so, having personal disabilities on your leadership team and give them a real leadership role so that as we move forward, they can speak into helping us shape the space.

So, a good quick example would be in a church I pastored previously to the one I pastored now, I noticed that persons in congregation who are elderly, who use assistance with walking, whether it's wheelchairs or walkers or mobility scooters, they often would sit in what was called the wings of the sanctuary, because there was a slight decline down to the front.

And so, they didn't feel comfortable always coming down to the front. So, they would sit in the wings. Well, as a part of what most churches do, we have the lights turned down and the lights on the stage have put all the focus. And what I noticed is that it was so dark in the wings that our people who had trouble walking weren't able to see.

And what I had to tell our staff was, we need to turn the light up in the wings to at least twenty or thirty percent. And of course, you know, there was some debate about it because the whole part of, you know, being in church is that we want to have a certain lighting effect. And I said, I would much rather than be safe yes, than for us to look cool.

And that was just having a conversation with some of them and taking their voice back to the table and saying, they're telling us that they don't feel safe. And they can't see when they're trying to navigate to their seat. But when you don't have those voices, my point in saying is when you don't have those voices speaking into the ways that we do church, we unintentionally end up with programming or worship services that are exclusive.

And so, the moment I realized that this was a challenge for them, then I brought their voice to the table and said, we, we just can't do that anymore. If we want them to feel safe and if we want to be more inclusive, a person with disability, that includes our elderly people who have trouble walking. And we don't want to create a space where they can't see how to get to their seat.

Crystal Keating:

Yeah, and it's so practical. And if the person themselves can't be at the quote-unquote table, at least have someone who can advocate for them or communicate what's needed. And I think that's really powerful for families who have children with disabilities. What are some of the ways that a service could be more inclusive of what might be helpful for them so they can hear and receive the message from God and be connected with other believers?

So, what next steps would you give to a pastor or church leader who maybe they're just now considering how to include families living with disability in their church family?



Lamar Hardwick:

Mm-hmm. Yeah. So, I, I would pick up right where I left off. Start by trying to find who those people are.

And put together, you know, whether you wanna call it a committee or a task force. One of the churches I recently pastored is a disability inclusion task force, where we gather those people who have insight that we don't often have and start getting their input. And then think about the ways in which you can sort of comb through and assess all the areas of ministry that you have currently going at your church.

And so, I, I tell the pastors that, you know, I don't advocate for you getting rid of anything. It's just how accessible is all of the programming that you have at your church. So, think about the mission, the vision, and the values, the way that you do things, the things that are important to you as a church, a unique calling that God has placed on your church. Do everything that you feel like God has called you to do. But reevaluate how accessible it is to people who have physical limitations or intellectual disability or the development of disability.

How accessible is it? So, your mission trips. I had a church once that it was as simple as taking communion at night was a tradition. But it was excluding the entire group of elderly people who don't see well, who don't drive at night. So don't stop doing what you do. Just think about how accessible is this to everyone.

But that group of people that you bring in will help you to start to evaluate those things. And then the, the next step, I would say from there, which is simple, is to figure out some short-term and measured ways of becoming advocates, but also becoming more inclusive. And so, think about things like, can we provide respite nights for families.

And think about, are there times of the year where it's more helpful. So, for example, back to school time, when school shopping has to be done, it's a really helpful time to tell parents, "We're gonna open up a respite day and give you four hours where you can bring your children with disabilities. We're gonna have trained staff and you can use that four hours to go do school shopping," same thing around Christmas time. Right?

And so, you don't have to try to tackle everything right away, but to find ways that you can do short-term, maybe measured ways of becoming more inclusive and then build from there as you continue to, to get more people. Because as you offer more, those families will come, and then they'll also come with more resources and ideas that will help you to serve that community better.

Crystal Keating:

Those are great starting points. And, you know, on the topic of making your message more inclusive, I know we get a lot of questions from parents and loved ones, especially church leaders who wanna better communicate the truths of God to children and teens who have autism.



And I know the spectrum is wide, but do you have any advice to share with our listeners about that?

Lamar Hardwick:

Yeah, I think one of the things that we are challenged with is, we have this notion that we are to nail down every single detail of the gospel and that's certainly, it's certainly some truth to that. But I think one of the things that I encourage passes you, I think that we forget that a lot of preaching is left up to the work of the spirit.

And so, to, to not get so bogged down into making sure that especially the teenagers with autism, are able to nail down every single detail. But, you know, like myself growing up in church, we have to also know that the, the spirit is working in ways that we're not always aware and to make that one of our number one prayers. But then also, leave space for lots of questions and doubts.

We gotta make space for these kids to tell us stuff that they don't understand that they don't get, which is why I say that they're not gonna be able to nail that on every detail but make space. And then what I found is to let the questions guide the curriculum. Instead of trying to jam a certain amount of information into a certain amount of allotted time that we have. Now, the good thing about that is whatever you're using, and I use this for years, whatever curriculum that we use that we purchase, I actually could stretch, you know, one lesson out for ten weeks.

Because we never actually got to like question number two. But I let the questions guide the curriculum. Yeah. It did the guided discussion because when they start feeling comfortable enough to tell you the things that they don't understand, or they're not quite ready to believe yet, then you'll know the stuff that you need to answer.

Yeah. And a lot of what the pre-written curriculum does is, it answers questions that they're not asking. There is a different neurology there that, that people with autism or ADHD or OCD or anxiety disorders have. And sometimes those curriculums they're not actually written for neurodivergent teenagers and young adults.

Right. And so, it's answering questions that they don't even have questions about. And so, I think again, it's listening to their voice, listening to the things that continue to surface. That the issues, a lot of it's gonna be understanding abstract concepts, like faith and love and salvation and things that are not as tangible.

That's gonna come up a lot. Yeah. And so, make room and make space for that. But then the last thing I'll say is, there's lots of great organizations out there that are now forming curriculum. I've had the opportunity to work with a couple seminaries that are working on curriculum for youth workers who work with children with autism and ADHD and other things that are not considered neurotypical. So those things are out there and they're forthcoming and a lot of places are looking to get help. And so, you know, just, be on a lookout for some of those places that are starting to have curriculum that is specifically designed to help teach children with neurological differences.



Crystal Keating:

I'm so glad you have the opportunity to speak into that, to seminaries and other leaders who are creating curriculum. And I love that. Be willing to have the conversation and listen to their questions, what are they interested in and go from there.

And again, that just speaks to our need for relationships and friendships. We talk so much about that here on the podcast, that we don't have to know everything about autism. We do have to know the person. What are they thinking about? What are they asking? How are they communicating? How do we share the love of Christ with them in a way that they'll understand, and also rest that the spirit is moving? If people want to hear more about your story or even just learn more about disability in the church like your book says *A Vision for Inclusion*, where can they purchase your latest book?

Lamar Hardwick:

Yeah. So, it's pretty much available everywhere books are sold, obviously Amazon, or you can go to my publisher's website as InterVarsity Press and then you can just search for my name or *Disability and the Church*. But then also if you want to go to my website, which is autismpastor.com. Just about anything that you need to find out about me or my social media, links to my books and where they're sold, even places that I'll be speaking, all that is housed on the website.

So that's pretty much a clearing house to answer most, if not all questions that people have.

Crystal Keating:

Good. That's helpful. Well, Pastor Lamar, it's been such a pleasure speaking with you. Thank you so much for joining me on the podcast today.

Lamar Hardwick:

Thanks again for having me.

Crystal Keating:

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