

Season 5 | Episode #2

How the Church Can Celebrate People with Disabilities

Hannah Snoots

Crystal Keating:

This is the Joni and Friends Ministry Podcast and I'm your host, Crystal Keating. Each week we're bringing you encouraging conversations about finding hope through hardship and practical ways that you can include people living with disability in your church and community. As you listen, visit joniandfriends.org/podcast to access the resources we mention or to send me a message with your thoughts.

Do you believe that God can bring beauty from the ashes of your hardships? Well, Hannah Snoots is joining us on the podcast today to share how the Lord continues to fill her heart with hope, purpose, and love, as she raises her two daughters with special needs and leads a parent support group at her church to help other families navigate their journeys.

Although Hannah still feels the weight of being a single mother to Angelina and Emma, her goal is to share that through the challenging and painful situations of life, God is producing so much loveliness in them. Thank you for joining us on the podcast, Hannah. It's so wonderful to have you.

Hannah Snoots:

Thank you for having me. I'm so excited to be here.

Crystal Keating:

Good, well would you mind sharing a bit about yourself, your life before kids, and your family today?

Hannah Snoots:

Yes, absolutely. I'm Hannah and I was actually born and raised in Michigan where it's much colder just to an amazing family. I loved my childhood. I have three sisters and we just had the most fun. My mother was the worship director at our church growing up, so of course my sisters and I have been leading worship since we were little girls, and we love doing that together. That's just one of the things that when we get together, we just love to sing together. And so, I, in school, got to do a lot of singing and I always felt a calling from God. I just kind of knew in my heart of hearts that he was gonna use my voice somehow.

Not just to sing, but in other ways. And, you know, I was raised Christian, obviously in a Christian home, but college years came around. I wanted to study music therapy because I had a grandfather who was suffering from Alzheimer's, and we saw how music was so powerful.



Crystal Keating:
Oh yeah.

Hannah Snoots:
In helping him through, you know, moments and episodes that he was going through.

It's so funny. Looking back now, I helped my grandmother take care of him while I was in school. I was attending a U of M Dearborn for two years. And looking back, I see how God was already preparing my heart to be a caregiver. I was helpful, in caregiving for my grandfather and seeing the way that God and music, and worship would change him instantly.

I mean, if you've ever been around dementia and Alzheimer's, it's such a tragic and horrible disease. And he would go through episodes of just not being himself, which was so interesting for the sweetest, calmest, kindest man becoming violent.

The power of music and worship could change that instantly. So hence my going into music therapy, but also a little bit wayward in my two first years of college. But in 1994, I had a beautiful experience with the Lord, and it really changed my heart forever. And I knew that I wanted to go into ministry, so I went to a Bible college for two years and studied praise and worship and really, really started to focus on what God wanted me to do and who he wanted me to be and using my voice for him. So right out of college, a ministry came to my home church kind of snatched me up.

And I became a worship leader for his ministry for many, many years. Traveled the United States, other parts of the world, got to really lead people to the heart of God through worship. And it really is my happy place. I love worship. I love leading it. It's natural for me. It's like breathing for me.

And I just love leading people to the throne room of God, because, for me, it's how my heart and my life was forever changed. So, in 2003, I did get married and then in 2005, we moved to California. My first daughter was born in 2006.

Crystal Keating:
Well for those who are listening and may not know you lead such beautiful worship at a large church that we are often connected with Calvary Community, which is kind of right across the freeway from the International Disability Center at Joni and Friends and so Hannah, we've just so appreciated your heart and your love for the Lord. So, you mentioned in you gave birth to your first daughter. And I know that you have two daughters who live with underlying genetic issues. So, as you were anticipating the birth of your daughters, did you know you were expecting girls who might have significant and lifelong disabilities?

Hannah Snoots:
Nope. Absolutely not. I actually, had such peace. I was so excited.



The day I found out I was pregnant with Angelina was the best day of my life. I couldn't wait to have children. I have loved children since I was little and knew that I wanted to be a mom. I couldn't wait. And so, Angelina when she was born, we did all of the normal or the typical testing that you do when you're pregnant.

I didn't do any of the blood work where they can tell you if they see anything. You know, I just did the normal stuff. The typical stuff. Because at that stage, I thought, and to this day, had they told me something was wrong, it wouldn't really have changed anything for me. I loved being pregnant. I didn't get sick. I just loved it. So, I was super excited, and Angelina was born, and everything seemed normal and typical and when she was three months old, I unexpectedly got pregnant again with my second. And, of course, didn't know at the time that Angelina, you know, already had some issues, so she seemed typical and, and it was sort of like that for a while, but, when Angelina was just six months old, I noticed her doing a couple things with her hands that sort of made me worry a little bit, but I thought, I'm just being oversensitive. I'm just being, you know, she's fine, she's fine.

And I kept pushing that back. So, when Emma was born, right away, we knew something was wrong. Her limbs were very, very floppy. She had severe hypotonia, which is very low muscle tone. She couldn't cry. She was making a very sad little sound. And all of a sudden, all the doctors and nurses start coming in and, you know something's really wrong.

In my heart of hearts, I knew right away, and I knew it was bad, and I was devastated. It was the worst day of my life. You know, she had to go to the NICU, and she was in there for eight days. They did all sorts of testing on her. Initially, her chromosomes came back normal.

When they called us to pick her up on the eighth day, they said we could come to take her home. Even though she, she couldn't eat properly. She had to have a therapist there to sort of work with her mouth to help her. I couldn't nurse her, which I wanted to do. I was able to do it with Angelina. But Emma just was too weak. And on the eighth day when we went to take her home, the doctor met with us and said that they had found an addition deletion on her 22nd chromosome.

And they didn't really know what that meant. It's not really a syndrome, it wasn't at the time. Since then, they've named it Phelan-McDermid Syndrome. It's very rare. But that was crushing and devastating, and I felt lost, and I felt angry, and the first year of her life was very, very difficult. When they told us that it was a genetic condition, in my heart of hearts, I just knew, oh my gosh, Angelina probably has something similar because when they made us do blood work, their father and me to see where this was coming from.

And their father's 22nd chromosome was inverted, but obviously, he was typical. But when he reproduced, it just sort of made the 22nd chromosome not properly developed. So, I knew in my heart that. Oh, this is bad. Like, Angelina's probably gonna have all those things that I had been thinking and feeling in my gut were probably true.



But I couldn't even deal with that. Like I had to focus on the fact that I'm taking a newborn baby home. Who couldn't, I mean literally was like a floppy rag doll. She was beautiful, she was absolutely beautiful besides being a little bit banged up from the birth, but she's been in therapy since she was three months old for everything, physical therapy, occupational therapy, vision therapy, feeding therapy, you know, you name it, and she's done it.

But that first year was quite the blur. I don't remember. And I went into a very dark place, a very deep depression. I felt abandoned by God. I felt like he allowed this to happen. And why did he allow this to happen? I'd given my life to him in ministry. I had sacrificed so much, I thought, you know, I mean, it sounds so whiny right now, but it's like, I just felt so devastated and crushed and hurt, hurt by God, the lover of my soul, the man who I trust with my life.

And I just didn't think that he would allow that to happen. And I was devastated. It took a long time for me to get back to the place where I was in love with him again. And those were really, really, really dark times. Looking back, everything's hindsight is 2020, And in our marriage, we both grew up in the Word of Faith movement. So, when they told us about Emma's diagnosis, we made a decision to not tell anybody because there was no obvious physical disability, if that's okay to say. Like she, she didn't look like anything was wrong.

So, we thought, well we can just keep this between us. Because we don't wanna speak that over her. We don't want people saying, oh, look at your child with a disability. And we didn't want those words, cuz we believe that words are powerful. We didn't want that spoken over her. You know, looking back, that was the worst thing that we could have ever done. But you live and you learn. And so, I didn't talk about it, and I was in my own battle, in my own heart and mind with nobody to talk to. You know, my mother was there. My sisters were there. But I didn't talk to them about it.

And I didn't talk to anybody at church or in the ministry that I was in. It was a very lonely, difficult time. I thought I was doing it, you know, for the right reason. But I think that's where the breakdown of our marriage happened as well because he couldn't accept it. He didn't want to accept it.

And I understand that. I think you know what, we all deal with tragedy our own way. And, and he couldn't accept that. Even to this day, he still is in a little bit of denial about Angelina, it's just one of those things. And I think had we gotten help right away, had we spoken to professionals, more people in the church, if there were more programs and I think there are now, but I'm talking 15 years ago. Had we spoken to people, had we opened up, had we, you know, talked about it, maybe things would be different today, but again, you live, and you learn and hopefully my story helps somebody else that is gonna walk this journey or is starting to walk in now.

The most important thing you can do is to talk about it, and I wish, you know, we would've done that because I think we would be in a different place today. Maybe not, but you know.

Crystal Keating:



Well, and for those listening who may be part of what you call the Word of Faith movement or the churches that are emphasizing God's ability to heal us physically, as he wills, could you speak to them directly? What did you fear would happen if you would've talked about it? And for those who may feel that same way, who feel trapped or feel afraid, where can they go? Who can they go to now? And what would you say to them?

Hannah Snoots:

Oh. Well, I mean, our point in not speaking about it was we didn't want her to be labeled. We didn't want those words that, you know, she's never gonna walk, she's never gonna talk, she's never gonna, all those things that we wanted to say, you know, God is able, he's well able to do anything.

And we see Jesus did so many miracles. But for me, you have to find the why and I think some people don't necessarily always agree with me on that, but I believe, I know that God is well-abled. I know that, and I mean, I just, I've seen him do miraculous things in my life and so many other lives, but I think for me it was okay, I have prayed for them to be healed.

Absolutely. Do I still do that? Absolutely. Why? Because I would love to have a conversation with my daughter, Emma. I would love to hear her say, Mom. I would love to hear what she's thinking, what she's feeling. Um, so yes, I pray for her physical body to be healed, and I pray for her mind to be restored and to be whole.

And Angelina as well. I want my daughters to get married. I want them to have families. I wanna be a grandmother, and at this point, I'm not ever gonna have that. Mm-hmm. So of course, I'm always gonna pray for that because that is a desire of my heart. Mm-hmm. But at the same time, I know that God has a purpose and a reason.

Yes. For Angelina, for Emma, and for me as their mother. And. This is what I do in our parent support group that I run at the church. I do my very best to try to encourage the parents to find the purpose, find the purpose, whether it's a small thing that God designed you to do because of this journey that you're walking, because of these children that he's given you or this child that he's given.

There's a purpose. And for me, finding that purpose changed my life. It gave me the energy. It gave me hope again. It gave me life again. So, my encouragement would be, first of all, it's okay to want your child to be well and what the world would say is completely healed or typical or normal.

That's okay. And I still pray for that. But at the same time, whatever God's will is. Obviously, we don't always know the "why's" and we don't always know the "how come" and Joni talks about that all the time in it, and she says it the most beautiful.

There's a reason. There's a purpose. Yeah. And you gotta find that because that will give you the strength to walk the journey that you're gonna walk or that you are walking. You have to find the



purpose and you have to stay close to him. I don't know how people who are raising children with disabilities, do it without God.

I don't understand that. I don't know how that's possible. And for me, I have my quiet place and my devotion and my prayer, it's always in worship. And it's at my keyboard. It's at my piano, and it's when I sing and I know that he's with me and he's breathing into my spirit and he's giving me the life that I need, and he's giving me the strength that I need, and sometimes I have to do it all day. Like I have to do it to make it to the next day. It's like raising a child with a disability is like climbing a mountain every day. It's hard. My girls need 100% care. I mean, Emma's a little bit more involved than Angelina, but still, I mean, Angelina doesn't understand danger and strangers and so my days are filled with taking care of two other human beings besides myself. And it literally feels like I'm climbing Mount Everest every day and I finally get to the top and something happens, and you feel like you've just been knocked right back down. And it's kind of how grief is in my opinion.

Crystal Keating:

Right. Yeah. Let's talk about grief. I mean, that's a very common experience for parents who have children with special needs. They love their kids, they love their life with their children, but also experience seasons of grief where their children are going through therapies. You mentioned several therapies and setbacks and hardships, so how have you moved through it?

Hannah Snoots:

For me it's worship. It's my place with the Lord. It's my time with him. It's him giving me the strength. And like I said before, this is my life. This is the plan. This is God's design. So how do I walk it with his strength?

And that's the only way that I can do it but also looking for the small victories. Like for instance, Angelina, I didn't think she'd ever be able to be potty trained. And then just one day, she was five years old, so she's late, but she did it. And then I thought, oh, she's never ever, ever gonna be able to put her own shirt on.

It's just not gonna happen. She's got too many sensory issues. She freaks out if something goes over her head, you know, et cetera, et cetera. And just in the last two years, she's 16 years old, so I think she was 14, and all of a sudden, she's putting her shirt on.

So, you have to find the small victories and you have to celebrate those. And that's one thing that we do in our parent support group as well, is I make everyone, well, I don't make them, but I say I encourage strongly, I wanna hear something, some sort of a victory that happened, whether it's, Johnny tied his shoe for the first time and he's 22. That's amazing. Like you have to give praise for the little things. Praise is so powerful. Praise changes your perspective of the situation. So, for me, it's like, I'm gonna praise you God because Angelina is putting her own shirt on every day, and that is a gift to me.



Like I am so thankful. Emma, Emma is 100% dependent on me. I mean, she really, she's so beautiful. She's so healthy. Other than her condition, there's a praise right there. I'm so thankful that my daughter doesn't have other medical conditions.

I can spoon-feed her. She doesn't have a G-tube. She swallows, okay. She can drink liquids. Okay. I have to help her, but she can do it. I'm so thankful for that. And I'm so thankful that she doesn't suffer in the hospital all the time. And a lot of my parents, they do have children that are suffering.

So, I understand that, that for me, that's, I praise you, God, that I don't have to walk that, you know, I don't have to watch my daughters suffer. For me, I think it's, really finding those things to give him praise for, because it really does shift your perspective on the whole situation.

Crystal Keating:

Yes, it, it does indeed. And that's such a good word for our listeners and for anyone who is facing ongoing challenges, cuz it's easy to get overwhelmed by the things that we'd like life to be different. And it's easy to focus on the negative things and the things that are hard so. May God help us all to see the good things. And Hannah, I don't know if you mind, but divorce for couples raising children with disabilities is high and it's not really something we have ever talked about here on the podcast. So, I don't know if you mind going back a little bit, but can you share how God carried you through even the difficulties of your husband accepting the genetic abnormalities and how did God get you through the separation and divorce?

Hannah Snoots:

Community, church, my family at church. It was right around the time that I went through the divorce that I found Calvary, and somebody introduced me to Buddy Break. I am so thankful. Again, I know that God ordered my steps all along, even me being in California and us coming here.

I'm a strong person and I always have been a strong person. My nickname growing up was Happy. My grandfather nicknamed us four girls, and mine was happy because that's what I was all the time. Always silly, always happy. And I felt so robbed of that. I think when this all happened. I thought I'm never gonna be happy again.

That's what you feel, and you know, no matter what the diagnosis or you know, whatever someone's facing. When something bad happens, you think my life is over. I'm never going to experience joy again and when I went through the divorce, I just felt, no, Hannah, you, you are strong. You're a strong person and thankfully I knew the Lord.

I mean, I can't imagine what it's like for somebody that doesn't. And also, just talking about it, talking to people in my community at church, which I know it sounds crazy, but I was in ministry for all those years, so, you know when you're in ministry and you're giving, giving, giving all the time, and you're never really just sitting.

Crystal Keating:

Yes.

Hannah Snoots:

And I think that was a mistake that we made as well. We were always giving in ministry, and I was traveling, and we weren't sitting doing what we were supposed to do, not forsaking the assembly of the saints, for us, going to church and, you know, I thought, well I'm in church three times a week cuz we were doing events where we did three nights a week. But I know how important and how valuable community is in the church, the big C church.

And that was God bringing that to me, to my attention right as I was walking through this divorce, and I really couldn't have done it without my Calvary family. And I think it was just even them, the way that they celebrated my children and celebrated the differences, the disability or what we call now special ability.

I know most people know it as a special need and it was the Special Needs Ministry. But I love the fact that when Gina was about to change the name and she reached out to me before I was working there and just said, what do you think? And it was right around the time when I was seeing the beauty in Angelina's different ability.

She has a gift to reach people that I'll never have, a lot of people will never have. And Emma too, it's such a beautiful opportunity to see something beautiful out of what some people might say is off or ugly or not right. So, finding that and finding people around you who see that beauty with you is vital and important, and I'm so thankful that I found Calvary because it helped me see the beauty in my girls and how beautiful it can be. Like you started the podcast out by saying, can God bring beauty out of ashes? Well, absolutely he can, and I think that is so vital for families that are facing any sort of difficulty, specifically raising a child with a special need or a disability or a special ability, whatever you wanna say, you gotta see the beauty in it because it's there.

It's absolutely 100% there. And there's a purpose and there's a reason. And that's really how I got through the pain of separation and divorce and doing it on my own.

It is devastating that the divorce rate is so high for families raising children with disabilities. But I just think if we have more programming, and more churches start to open their doors to having ministry to families like us. Another one of my goals in life is to get the word out and like really inspire churches. Do this, take the first step, please. These families are desperate to sit and hear God's word and to be a part of worship.

Knowing that their child is okay and that their child is being loved on and celebrated just the way they are. And if we could get that word out, oh my goodness, how it would change so many lives. It would change so many families and even programming. And I have ideas to help, you know, just to talk about it, talk about it with husbands and wives who are going through it.

Cuz, unfortunately, there is a breakdown sometimes and because people deal with grief differently and I think that's what happens. And then there's this disconnect and then it just, you know, it's a snowball effect. So, in my opinion, and because I'm a living example of how it



literally changed my life to have a church that was so beautifully accepting, not just accepting, don't go where you're tolerated, go where you're celebrated.

And they celebrated my children and me. And it was the most life-changing thing that's happened to me. And so, I pray that anybody listening out there, pastors or anybody, just take that first step. Do it for these families. They need it. These families are so vital to your congregations. We have made a difference in our church body, I believe. I believe, just by them honoring our community, God has honored Calvary. God has. As you've done it unto the least of these, and, and maybe these kids, some people think they can't give anything back, and I completely disagree. They will change your heart in an instant, you know, and that's the beauty that I'm talking about.

And I see it with my own kids, and I see it with all the kids in our ministry now. They have such a gift to change your heart, so fast. And it's the most beautiful, powerful thing. And I just pray that it spreads like wildfire and that more churches will do it and that they won't be afraid.

And I'm so thankful that Gina has been a resource to so many churches that have called us, contacted us, and how do we do it. What do we do? And we're always willing to answer any question we can. How can we help? We'll help you, you know? So that would be my way of saying this is how God carried me through, having this community.

And I pray that for so many other families out there.

Crystal Keating:

And we do too. And you know, you're singing our song. That's one of the reasons I know that Joni and Friends exists. And that's, yeah, that's our heart for the podcast. We love families and individuals affected by disability and we desire so strongly that the church be just everything that Jesus intended for us to be as his bride and his family, especially including everyone in the body of Christ. So, if you're listening today and you're thinking, I want my church to be like that, I wanna be a place where if we have a Hannah in our congregation, or maybe outside in our community, we don't even know someone like her. We wanna be a place that she can come to.

So, we have great resources on our website, joniandfriends.org/church. It's so easy. We have people who are standing at the ready to talk to your church leaders. You can also send us an email at podcast@joniandfriends.org and you can call over to Calvary and you can speak to Hannah if you'd like as well.

Hannah Snoots:

Anytime.

Crystal Keating:

Yeah. Oh, Hannah, it's been so wonderful having you on the podcast today. Thank you so much for your transparency and for the encouragement about how God really has met you through your hardships, and that is who he is. He does bring beauty from ashes. So, thank you so much for being on the podcast with us today.

Hannah Snoots:

Thank you so much for having me. What a delight. So nice.

Crystal Keating:

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