

Season 5 | Episode #8

Creating Equity, Equality, and Inclusion for People with Disabilities

Larea Kwakye

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.

Dr. Larea Kwakye from Tennessee is joining us on the podcast today to talk about being called into ministry alongside people living with disability. She's also here to share the pressing needs of those in her community and speak about how she's seen God transform lives and move through intimate prayer.

Over 20 years ago, Larea felt God calling her to bring the good news of Jesus Christ to those near and far. And since then, she has served alongside several pastors and currently serves as an associate pastor at International Gospel Ministries. Larea has traveled to share Christ in Europe and Africa and considers herself a lifelong learner, who has earned many degrees, including a doctorate in Christian counseling.

In addition to serving in the church, Larea works full-time as an Area Director for the Joni and Friends Nashville office. So, Larea, it's so nice to welcome you to the podcast today.

Larea Kwakye:

Thank you. I'm honored to be here.

Crystal Keating:

I just wanna jump right in. I think it'd be so interesting to start this conversation and hear about how you got involved in disability ministry.

What drew you to Joni and Friends, and even way before that, how did you sense your call into ministry?

Larea Kwakye:

So let me start with sensing my call. I grew up with preachers all around me, my brother, my grandfather, my grandfather's brothers, my aunt. And I didn't think that this would be, you know, something that I would do attending Fisk University. In 1998, I went right in to pursue a degree in psychology.



I always knew that counseling and understanding people was a passion of mine, but, right there in my dorm room my second year in, I just had an encounter with God that just blew my mind that drew me to ministry. And from there I've been working in the church in several capacities and have noticed something in churches, which leads me to what drew me to Joni and Friends.

Well, I heard of Joni Eareckson Tada before but had never really understood the story, but I was just blown away by the story once I did watch it, read it, and just embraced it because in my family I have specifically two autistic cousins.

My aunt has an autistic son, and my cousin has an autistic son. One is verbal, one is non-verbal. And I watched the way that they raised their sons and everything they had to encounter from schools to churches, to just places for entertainment. How some of these things that they encountered just made them stay in altogether, did not wanna try to come out or be a part of any social activities just because of their experiences.

My aunt, when she was raising her son, he was just two years old, they went into a church on one Sunday. They sat in the back. And because of his outbursts, they were asked to leave, and it really left her in a place where she did not have a church home for years because she was so broken by that experience.

So, the story of me coming to Joni and Friends is one that is just, I mean, it is not very inspiring. I was teaching prior to this, teaching fifth grade. My class was inclusive. I worked with students who had disabilities. So, individuals with disabilities or families living with disabilities was not foreign to me.

But when I was initially interviewed and I start hearing about what Joni and Friends did, what the team did, I was just blown away.

And I knew I wanted to be a part and to do ministry. In my opinion that mattered, ministry that mattered to another level. Let me say that all ministry matters. But to ensure that the families are accommodated and included, I mean, that's what ministry is all about serving all.

Crystal Keating:

Yes. I love that. Well, and it's really interesting that you had these experiences prior to coming to Joni and Friends, that really gave you a sense of what many families encounter, that sense of isolation, even that pain of exclusion from the very place where they would want to be most included.

You know, one of the conversations we had previously, and we've had this many times, is how the Gospel is really Christ coming to remove the barrier between us and God. He's making a bridge for us to know God, to love God. He's removing our sin and that's what we want for the church. We want people, no matter their ability, to have that deep connection with the church.

And we wanna remove all barriers so that we can all be included and have relationship. So, I can see how you felt even more deeply for the work of what we're doing here with churches. And I



just love that. You say it's not an inspiring story, but I think it is. I think that's, I think it's very much. And you know, I also heard, like when you hear the call to ministry, I've heard this said like, if you can do anything else, do it. But when God calls you to ministry you sense that, you know that's what he's inviting you into. It's very powerful.

Okay. Well, Larea what's it like to be active in ministry, bringing the Gospel to people throughout many parts of the world? You've gone throughout Europe and Africa. What's it like to experience the variety and diversity of Christians in different countries and different cultures?

Larea Kwakye:

You know, Crystal, I think it's the one thing that unifies us. Worship is worship. And I really did not experience that any differently than when I was worshiping in a small village in Africa, worshiping in a chapel in Germany. I experienced the presence of God and God is God everywhere. And being active, bringing the Gospel to people. Let me say this.

I'm overwhelmed about ministry. I'm overwhelmed that God would see fit to use me in any way in his kingdom. So really when I am in any position or place to share the Gospel, I really try to sit down so he can stand up. I really just try to lose myself in his presence and let him speak because I feel like he's the only one qualified to speak to his people and to make transformations in the kingdom.

And I feel like often, and I'll even say this sometimes when I'm speaking, that I'm also speaking to me because I'm encouraged by what he has to say to his children and I'm one of them. So, I feel like ministry is a beautiful thing. It's an amazing experience when you are truly letting God lead.

Crystal Keating:

That is key. And that's so true. I think before we started this conversation, we were talking about how it's Christ in us, right, the hope of glory, and that how God is working in and through you to do his goodwill. It's like that sweet verse in Ephesians, by grace we've been saved and it's not because of good works, but then it goes on and it says that we were called to walk in good works that he planned beforehand, right? So, there's this sense where we enter into relationship with Jesus, and it's not just to be saved from judgment, but it's that he's called us into good works, and he's planned it beforehand.

So, I just love that Larea that you're walking in what God has called you to do all over the world. So, when you've traveled all over the world, worship is the same, but the culture of Germany is very different than the culture in Africa. Like, talk about how it's been to kind of transition and work with people.

Larea Kwakye:

I definitely agree with that, and I would say probably some of the biggest differences is ultimately what we all have right in our own space is perspective. But a lot of the communities that I was a part of in Germany included people from all over the world, including many Africans were present there as well.



So, I think that what we get held up on is really not culture, so to speak, but language, but our ability to communicate well with each other, right? Because communication is key in whatever vocation, in whatever place you find yourself. Communication is key. And learning to communicate well takes time because you're not just communicating verbally, but you're communicating in many other ways and how you do a thing and your body language, everything about you is communicating whether you are using words or not. So sometimes I think we get lost in that, you know, where in Ghana, you know, as a sign of respect I need to accept whatever's given to me, the food or this or that.

And in Germany, it may not be as important. But I think the main thing is just loving people. That's what God did. He said, love me, love people. That's the commandment. It sums up all the other commandments. And I think you can overcome the barriers of communication and culture when you are walking with a heart and a presence of love.

Crystal Keating:

Well said. We can just end it right there. Well, Larea you're not only bringing the Gospel, you're doing the personal ministry of counseling and that's taking the word and really searching the scriptures to see how can God meet this person right here and now.

So, let's talk a little bit about counseling. I know you've felt called to that. What are you seeing as some of the most common situations in the counseling rooms, specifically for families affected by disability? What does it look like when you're there ministering with them and to them?

Larea Kwakye:

Fear. In so many words, in so many ways, in what's communicated, I hear fear. Who's going to help with my child when I'm gone?

What's gonna happen in my marriage when we don't- I mean, just this morning was on a call and, just heartbroken because of some of the things the individual is facing that I just come back to this place of love and feeling included.

I think it's so essential, Crystal. You know, a part of our mission is about restoring dignity, restoring that hope and that feeling of self-worthiness. And in my counseling conversations, a lot of situations and experiences, people have just lost hope on their situation or lost hope with their relationships, or even just have lost their trust and their hope in God altogether because they have not seen him do what they've expected him to do, what they've wanted him to do. So, a lot of my time I spend coming back to scriptures like that, he's promised to never leave you, nor forsake you, that he will be with you even until the ends of the earth that he will give angels charge over you.

That even though you suffer, those who suffer with him will reign with him also. I think we miss, which is what Joni does so well, talk about this thing that everybody would love to skip over, the beauty and suffering. It is not skipped over in the word. God tells us often through the word that we will suffer.



And it is not to our demise. It is not to his anger. It is not because we are unloved. It's a part of the walk. And to get to the beauty for ashes, to get to the place where we can be used by him. Because to be used by him does require a level of death to self. People don't want to hear that.

Crystal Keating:
No, you're right.

Larea Kwakye:

It is hard to accept because sometimes I feel like we are just taught this very very feel-good kind of message. And even though Jesus is wonderful, and he is loving, he's all of these things. He did give scriptures like ye though you walk through the valley of the shadow of death, fear no evil for I am with you. What does it mean? It means that we're gonna walk through some valleys. And it's gonna look like death. But we shouldn't be afraid because he's teaching us how to trust him even when we can't trace him. He's teaching us to trust him when we can't see him when we are walking by faith. And that's what this walk is about with Christ, not about faking it until you make it, not about figuring it out and then you make it, but putting your faith in him and really trusting that no matter what it looks like he is with you.

Crystal Keating:

Amen. That is so, so good. It's a painful, but a good reminder of setting expectations. Jesus said that in this world you will have troubles.

But take heart. Take heart. I have overcome the world. And so, when you are with people who have lost hope in themselves, in their relationships, in God not doing what they hoped he would do. That is a powerful ministry to restore the bonds of love with him. I am so glad you talked about that, that those sufferings often do look like death, and they feel like death to us.

And that is part of the Gospel. You know, the death, burial, and resurrection that often families feel like they're in the nighttime, they're in the dark. And it's hard to have and see evidence of God, but the morning will come. They will see the light, and it takes a process. And we're not really to do it alone.

And I, I think that's the hardest part about, you know, we probably say this every podcast, but how isolated families can be and so you feel alone in it, which is even more reason why the church can be the beacon of light, the place of open arms. So, let's talk a little bit about the church, Larea. What are some of the challenges churches are facing in your area, specifically in Nashville, in the Greater Tennessee, and how is Joni and Friends coming alongside to help them carry out their mission to reach Christ and especially include people living with disability?

Larea Kwakye:

Sure. I would say the number one thing that we found with some churches is perspective. They immediately believe that they don't have the money. They don't have the resources. They don't have the people to help. And I say perspective inclusive of all of that, and in reality, some of them are working on getting people more involved in their churches. What we try to do is go in and first of all, take the fear factor out of, again, what we are sharing with them. That you don't

have to be afraid to look at this out of fear. That you don't have what you need to support these families.

Even in churches, again, going back to what they perceive as challenges, even with money. Well, we cannot afford to change this. I mean, I think I had one church say, well, someone wanted us to build a ramp and we don't have the finances to invest in that. So, we go in just to have these conversations to kind of take out some of the fear and anxiety to let them know that whatever they're doing right now, they can include families living with disabilities.

They don't have to change anything but their mindsets to ensure that they're asking questions and they're making sure that people feel seen, and that should be happening regardless. So maybe you're asking a few more questions, or maybe you're taking more time with your families, but whoever is there, and whatever you have is already enough to care for these families.

Now, of course, if they need further accommodations, we have a resource list that we try to, you know for an example, well, just being there for a family is not going to help them get in the church if they don't have a ramp. Yeah. Okay. Well, how can we address this? You know, so we have resources, and we have like-minded organizations who partner with us and work alongside with us who may be able to help answer some of these questions or provide someone who can go build a ramp, because there are individuals who donate their time for that.

So, we really work to just kind of open a mind to look at the possibilities and not what's impossible and not what feels impossible, you know? So, that's what we've seen and uh, that's how come alongside to try to help our churches and our leaders.

Crystal Keating:

I love that. And just starting the conversation. What are some of the barriers? How do we support and remove those and, take one step at a time, which is great? Well, okay, so this is really interesting. I just learned this about you. You were appointed to the Human Relations Commission Board by the Mayor of Nashville.

Tell us about that opportunity. How is that impacting your community?

Larea Kwakye:

Well, it was for my first launch here back in May of 2022. So, Nashville was launched in 2019, but we all know that 2020 happened and it kind of slowed down the progress for what the ministry wanted to do here.

So, when I came on board in 2022, January of 2022, we decided to do another launch, and that was done in May. At that launch, the deputy mayor came to our luncheon that day and shared and invited me to one of her meetings where they were trying to get churches connected with schools and wanted to know how we can work alongside with them with getting churches connected to some of the local schools of support.



And from there, the mayor invited me to sit on this board. And this board deals with equity and equality throughout our city. Uh, we meet once a month and look at the issues, primarily the complaints that would come from communities on various topics and we come up with solutions and submit that to the higher government leadership who can make those laws or changes or whatever needs to happen, uh, for that particular issue or tell us how they would like us to address it. So, these conversations have been productive because I'm the only one that sits on that board who represents families living with disabilities.

So, there's things that are so necessary. Wow. Yeah, there are things I can share that might not have come to mind. And I have some of my constituents who will call and say, hey, we tried to visit this building downtown that we couldn't find an elevator for it. We couldn't find a ramp, but could you help us with this?

We've been able to address things like that everything from those types of things to not feeling, included in uh, social space or a space where everyone should be invited and included. I've been able to bring those issues up for families living with disability to try to make the city more inclusive for those families as well.

Crystal Keating:

That is so great. Okay. I look at that and think that is totally a God appointed opportunity that you could speak into that.

Larea Kwakye:

Yeah. And even with the schools too, because again, I came out of the schools, so I have a connection there. And those families, they share a lot about services and making sure their needs are met.

I've been able to advocate on those, in those rooms for them as well to make sure that parents are being made very clear on their rights and what they have access to what their children should have access to. I had one family they were just being treated poorly and we had to address that to get those issues resolved.

And I don't wanna go into too many details. Sure. But yeah, it is something I take very seriously, and that I thank God for the opportunity because I believe just like we are calling churches and asking them to come forward to stand by their missions and what they're saying and making sure all families are inclusive.

Well, cities, everybody pays taxes, and they should feel included as well.

Crystal Keating:

Yes, agreed. Agreed. That's so neat, you get to speak into that and then I can only imagine, you know, with that information as you connect with churches to be able to share, with discretion, some of the needs and barriers that you're seeing around the community.



I wonder how churches want to be the hands and feet of Jesus throughout Nashville where they are connecting with schools and connecting with businesses and organizations to create change, to create accessibility and inclusivity.

Larea Kwakye:

And really that response been amazing and very encouraging.

I had one church who wanted to take on two schools to be a part of that school, to encourage the teachers to serve those families. And through that, you know, those families would attend that church. We could serve those families living with disabilities, helping them, you know, know how to accommodate those families that they would receive from those schools as well who live with disabilities. So, it's been an amazing thing to watch God do. And I know that there's still so much work to do, but just to watch him connect the dots between the city, schools, and churches has been incredible to see. And even that the mayor himself has desired that in calling these meetings to his office to ensure that happens has been a huge blessing as well.

Crystal Keating:

Yeah, you've been given a platform, Larea. That is wonderful. Well, so what are some of the other pressing needs you've identified throughout your community?

Larea Kwakye:

Poverty? And you'll find this, I think, with a lot of families living with disabilities, especially if, unfortunately, that couple has gone through divorce.

I've seen it time and time again where the one who's left as the caregiver simply struggles, not because they are unwilling to work, not because they are incapable of working, not because they don't have a desire, but because they are the main caregiver. And if they hired another caregiver, uh, it would literally take anything that they brought in anyway.

So, because the price of taking care of someone with special needs, especially if they have severe special needs. It's astronomical. Uh, so poverty, I mean, we fight it. We face it every day.

We have a store in this building. And it's full of all types of necessities and essentials from food to hygiene and it is free to those families that we serve. They can come up here and shop for whatever they need. We have donors that come through monthly and donate. And we have a day where we push to fill up the pantry. That's something we're fighting for, praying about, asking God to help us have the resources, help us have things that are needed to help care for these families.

Crystal Keating:

Yeah. Wow. And you know, poverty can really be a cycle. If a family, let's say it's a couple who has a child with a disability, and then the couple divorces, and then the income is lower and there's less care for the child, and then there's less resources. They get more isolated. And so, there's less connection with families and it's just how does a family get out of that except God's

intervention and places like the church entering in and coming to and offering these services to say what are the needs and how do we meet them in the spirit of Christ and the spirit of love?

But then, okay, how do we help you rebuild so that the family living with disability then is also contributing because we talk about that. None of us wanna stay dependent. We want to be able to give whatever gift that God has given us, we wanna be able to be useful, whatever that is.

Larea Kwakye:

Amen. First find the families, because a lot of these families are not seen. Yes. The heartbreak behind trying to care for your child and not being able to, number one, see how it could even happen. And number two, be what you need to be for them because it's very difficult to be strong in the midst of a struggle.

All I can say is for anyone who's listening and want to get involved, there's no one who needs you more than a single mother or a single father caring for a child with a disability on their own. And I believe that, yeah, with Joni and Friends, because even if you have a child with a severe disability, it's very hard to even get them out of the house to a church.

But with Joni and Friends, being who we are, being able to even do some of our family plus events and go to the family and minister to them where they are, it's imperative. It's essential. It's a need.

Crystal Keating:

That is so true. I'm so glad you brought that to the light. Single parents raising their families and their children, we all need friendships, and we all need people to enter in with us into life, because that is what God does.

And Larea, one thing I know about you is that you're a woman of prayer. That you believe that you can come and enter into Petitioning and praising God and asking for his help. So, as we close this conversation, I'd just love to end on a very encouraging note. How has prayer played a role in your life and ministry?

Larea Kwakye:

I could not do anything without talking to God first. That's all I can say. I don't move, I don't speak. I don't wanna do anything without him. Even when I was unexpectedly called into ministry into the level that I am, one of the first things I did... I already had relationships with pastors we knew, because again, I came from a long line of pastors and family members in ministry.

But I went around, and I did a prayer meeting in every church who let me come in that church to pray. Uh, so I don't have a ministry outside of prayer. Prayer is it. He is my everything and I don't wanna be caught without him. That's all.

Crystal Keating:

Amen. I love that. I love that. Larea it's been such a pleasure and a blessing speaking with you. And I just wanna say, you know, if you're listening today and you feel called to give toward the Nashville office or even to pray, how would you instruct people to pray for what's happening in your community right now?

Larea Kwakye:
I always tell my constituents, pray for three things.

Pray for donors, those who have the resources to financially support the ministry. Pray for volunteers, those who can physically come and support the ministry. And then just pray. Yes, that's all I need.

Crystal Keating:
Yes. Yeah. Oh, Larea, I love your faith and trust in the Lord, and uh, we just love to hear what God is doing in and through Tennessee.

Thank you so much for joining us on the podcast today.

Larea Kwakye:
Thank you again for having me. It was a pleasure speaking with you today.

Crystal Keating:
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