

SHARING *Hope* THROUGH HARDSHIP

The *Love & prayers*

you sent Christine in Uganda gave her
the experience of her lifetime!

Thank you!



from the heart

“Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us and establish the work of our hands upon us; yes, establish the work of our hands!”

PSALM 90:17 (ESV)

Whether you are a leader at *Family Retreat* or a first-time volunteer, it's all about serving the Lord Jesus by serving families who live with disability. Before the first day of *Family Retreat*, there is often a “Blessing of the Hands” observance, complete with pitchers of water, basins, and washcloths (like this observance at our Southern California *Family Retreat*... that's Kirk Howe, the *Family Retreat* co-leader).

At first, I tried to bow out of the “Blessing of the Hands.” After all, my hands don't work. I wouldn't be holding song sheets for anyone or helping a disabled child with arts and crafts. I wouldn't be rocking a baby with Down syndrome in the nursery or serving a meal to someone in a wheelchair.

But Kirk would have none of that. So, after the other volunteers had their hands washed and blessed, Kirk encouraged me to get in line. “Your hands, Joni, have done more to bless these families than anyone,” he insisted. And I must admit: my heart was moved, and I felt *blessed*.

At *Family Retreat*, it's a solemn moment when the leaders pray over each pair of hands that'll serve during the week. And each of us needs the prayer! It's as A.W. Tozer said, “We go astray when we attempt to do spiritual work without spiritual power.”

Our *Family Retreat* season is behind us now, so join me in praying that the thousands of Gospel seeds that were sown will bear much fruit for the kingdom of Christ. Ask God to keep alive the hope of Jesus in the hearts of every family who attended *Family Retreat* this past summer. And if you would like to come and serve next summer, start making plans. I promise... as you serve, *you will be blessed!*



P.S. I'm excited that my Christmas cards are featured in this newsletter! Give to others in need by ordering your cards today. All proceeds go directly to supporting our great programs like *Family Retreats!*



Hope and Joy

Hope is 32 years old and has Angelman syndrome. She had her first seizure when she was just two years old, and doctors gave her parents a bleak diagnosis:

“She’ll never walk, never talk, and she’ll have a seizure one day that she’ll pass away from.”

But Hope’s father, Greg, never gave up—even after Hope’s mother passed away from breast cancer when Hope was 19. Consumed

by 24/7 care giving, Greg remained a devoted father. *Family Retreat* offers Greg and Hope a week of reconnection with the blessing of extra helping hands.

“*Family Retreat* is respite for people who are gasping for air,” says Greg. “Here, people understand our situation. For Hope and me, it’s a week where we get to love on one another.”



Greg, his wife Terumi, and Hope all find the joy of the Lord at *Family Retreat*!

Hope loves balls, slapstick comedy movies, bread, and church! “Her name is Hope,” says Greg, “but she brings a LOT of joy!” To be sure, Hope is always excited to see everyone at *Family Retreat*!

Greg has much to say about the spiritual impact of *Family Retreat*. “The worship has me in tears. There’s a very sweet spirit of the Lord here. *Family Retreat* provides me with the intentional time and space to come back to the Lord.”

“Come near to God and he will come near to you.”

JAMES 4:8

Showered With Love and Attention

John received a traumatic brain injury (TBI) when he was only three months old. Now nine years old, John lives with attention deficit disorder in addition to his TBI.

“It’s definitely not easy to get a break,” says his mom, Emily. “Finding someone we can trust who can put up with the behaviors caused by John’s disability is very difficult.”

Glen, John’s dad, agrees. “We only get about three hours of rest each night. The sleep deprivation is overwhelming.” There’s no doubt that Glen and Emily need rest and rejuvenation, and that’s where *Halftime Respite* comes in!

“*Halftime Respite* makes us all feel safe and accepted,” says Emily. “It’s very comforting knowing we have a place where John can come and play with other children with special needs. At *Halftime Respite*, John gets to be John.”

“At Joni and Friends, people with disabilities are celebrated for who they are,” says Glen. And what do John’s parents do while he’s having a blast with his *Halftime Respite* buddies?

“We go out on a date,” says Emily with a big smile. “We have dinner and go for a walk and have time together that we don’t get otherwise. Joni and Friends showers us all with love and attention.”



“John’s favorite part of *Halftime Respite* is being with his buddies,” says Glen. “Together they draw, do art projects, and worship. John’s buddies bring him joy!”

“Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.”

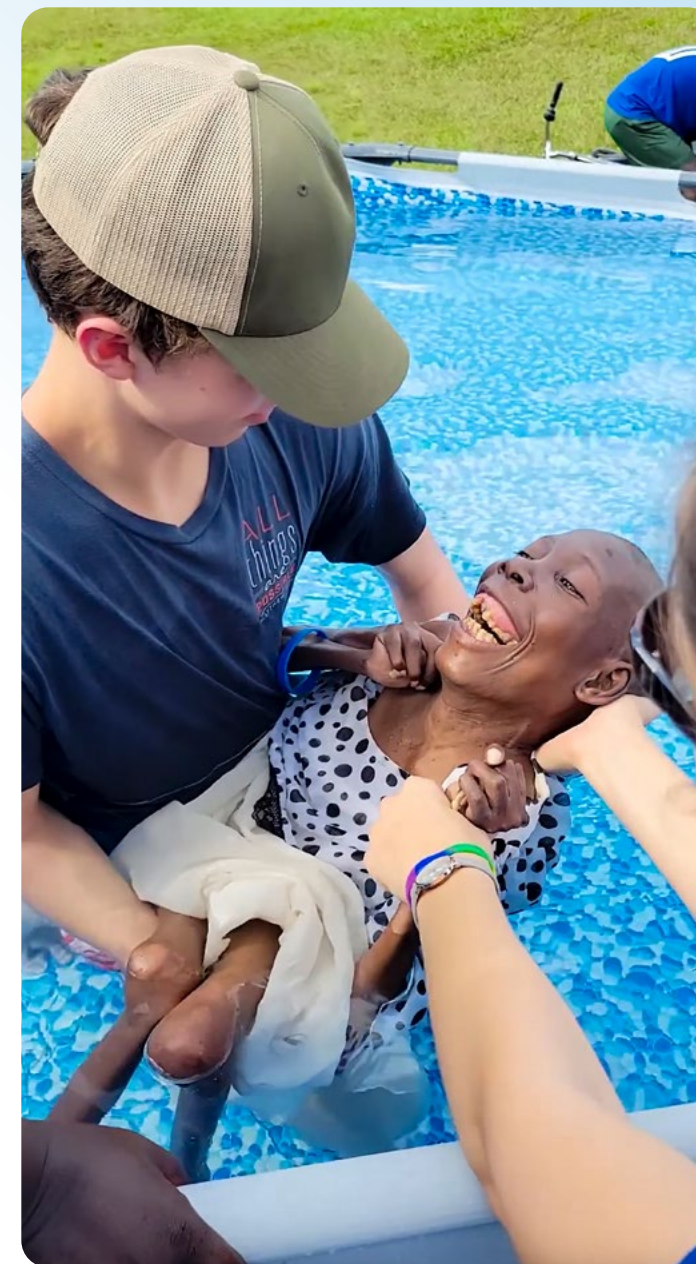
MATTHEW 25:40

“It’s overwhelming knowing that people are giving their time, talents, and energy to be kind to families like ours,” says Emily, and she’s talking about *you!*
Thank you for sending your love and prayers to families struggling with disability—here in the United States and all over the world!

Filled with *Awe and Wonder* at *International Family Retreat*

When his friends lowered the paralyzed man through the roof to meet with Jesus in Luke chapter five, an entire community came to know Christ through that man's disability. And when Christine came to our *International Family Retreat* in Uganda, everyone there saw God's love through her beautiful smile.

Christine has cerebral palsy and is a quadriplegic. She has been rejected due to cultural taboos and the fear of disability where she lives in Uganda. But at our *International Family Retreat*, Christine—and the other disabled children and adults there—found love and acceptance.



During *Family Retreat*, Christine was able to experience being in a swimming pool for the very first time. Our volunteers tenderly carried her in their arms, and Christine squealed with joy as she felt the cool water on her skin. Something so many of us take for granted—like going swimming—was a new and life-changing experience for Christine... and it was made possible through the love and prayers you sent!

You can see the video of Christine floating in the swimming pool on our Joni and Friends Instagram page at [@joniandfriends](https://www.instagram.com/joniandfriends). Hearing her squeals of delight will surely put a huge smile on your face *and* in your heart! As our *Family Retreat* team members say, “Through Christine, you can see the value Christ has put on every single person.”

“Everyone was amazed and gave praise to God. They were filled with awe and said, ‘We have seen remarkable things today.’”

Growing in Christ Through Retreats & Getaways

From Ohio ▼

When seven-year-old Jessica, who has spina bifida, first came to *Family Retreat*, she felt so included, loved, and celebrated that she couldn't stop talking about it! Her typical sisters felt the same way. "We are coming back, right?" they asked their parents, David and Julia.

Even though *Family Retreat* was more than a ten-hour drive from their house, David and Julia brought Jessica and her sisters back year after year. And why wouldn't they? *Family Retreat* was a slice of heaven on earth—something Jessica and her family had never experienced before.

Fast forward to today, when you can find Jessica, now a young lady, volunteering at *Family Retreat*. Jessica has served in a number of leadership positions over the years, including crafts, photography, children's music, and drama teams—just to name a few. After all, as Joni herself says, "It's not disability ministry until people with disabilities are ministering."

Jessica uses her own experiences and insights as a woman living with disability to connect with our *Family Retreat* volunteers and the families we serve. "It's a neat opportunity to watch new families and volunteers begin a week of *Family Retreat* not really knowing what to expect and then seeing the connections and understanding that they form by the end of the week," says Jessica.

Volunteer at *Family Retreat*—or with one of our many other Christ-centered outreaches—and be transformed by the love of God today!



Jessica loved meeting Joni at *Family Retreat* when she was a little girl!



Now, Jessica serves as the hands and feet of Christ as a *Family Retreat* leader!

From East St. Louis ▼

When Aaron and Sarah attended our *Marriage Getaway*, they shared that while their marriage is strong, their blended family of nine children—four living with disability—strains their relationship.

"One of us may have to quit our job just to stay home with the children, and this causes financial hardships and distress," says Sarah. One child with autism and others with developmental disabilities add physical safety concerns to their unique family dynamics. Violent behaviors are not uncommon.

"Aaron and I work hard to maintain balance in our home, but sometimes it can be overwhelming," shares Sarah. "The *Marriage Getaway* was a blessing to us. It helped us connect spiritually. A weight has been lifted off my shoulders!"

She continues, "Both Aaron and I were diagnosed with disabilities as children, but disability does not define us. At *Marriage Getaway*, we found a community of couples who understand us. We have found hope and the strength to continue fighting for our marriage and fighting for our family. We have decided to choose God over fear, God over doubt, and God over disability! We are keeping Jesus first in our marriage—not disability."

“Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.”

COLOSSIANS 3:1-2



Retreats & Getaways

Minister to the Whole Family!

From Fresno ▼

Matt and Marie are the proud parents of five sons: Luke (19), Kyle (17), Cole (15), Jace (9), and Blake (1). Kyle and Jace have Down syndrome. Matt and Marie often felt self-conscious in public and would choose to stay home instead, but they gladly packed up their boys and headed to *Family Retreat* for some much-needed fun and spiritual refreshment.

"I remember the first night at *Family Retreat* when we were having dinner with other families. I was thinking, 'Wow, we aren't the only family dealing with this!' It was such a blessing to be around other families who got it," says Matt. "Once we were around other families like ours, we had an instant connection with them."

Family Retreat isn't just a blessing to Kyle and Jace. It's equally important for their brothers. Connecting with other typical siblings who understand what it's like living with disability is vital for Luke and Cole.

"It's a blessing for our typical kids to have buddies who hang out with them all week," says Matt. "The volunteers made them feel just as special as their siblings. We really fell in love with the fact that Joni and Friends ministers to the whole family." And now, Luke and Cole serve as volunteers at *Family Retreat*!

"Life is much harder having kids with special needs," says Matt. "They require a lot of our attention. It also limits what we can be involved in. There are certain places where we cannot go. Having kids with special needs can become very isolating if you are not intentional about getting out as a family. Many people do not understand how hard it is. We have very few people who are willing to watch our kids."

Praise God for *Family Retreat*—and the donors and volunteers who make it possible!



Kyle and his *Family Retreat* buddy Ron are best friends forever!



Jace loves all the activities at *Family Retreat*!

From Minnesota ▼

Jodi was near death after being severely injured in a car accident at the age of eleven. Consequently, she now uses a wheelchair and is visually impaired. Thirty-one years after the accident that forever changed her life, Jodi boldly tells everyone about the importance of faith and resilience.

"I met Jesus and so should you!" proclaimed Jodi on the talent show stage at *Family Retreat*.

Her talent was not an act. It wasn't a song, a dance, or a joke, but authentic words of truth and Good News. When Jodi spoke, it was a deeply precious moment and there were very few dry eyes in the audience.

Connie was Jodi's volunteer buddy during *Family Retreat*. She held Jodi's microphone while they were on stage. "We all could tell Jodi spends time with Jesus!" says Connie. "Our faith was strengthened as we reflected on how Jesus is fearless, and so we also can be fearless!"

"What a treasure to have Jodi witness to us all," says Kurtis Smith, our Joni and Friends Minnesota Area Director. "There is no greater gift, no greater talent, than to clearly share the love of Jesus."

Jodi's mother, Linda, expressed her gratefulness to God and everyone who makes *Family Retreat* happen. "We thank God for Joni and Friends and how it has helped us and others," says Linda. "*Family Retreat* is an amazing blessing for each of us. *Thank you so much!*"

Linda is talking about *you!* It's your prayers and generosity that allow us to do what we do. Thank you for being a true friend of people with disabilities. Thank you for being a true friend of Joni and Friends!



Family Retreat *Full Circle!*

From Sacramento ▾

Kevin and Sarah adopted four children internationally—all with disabilities—as they knew in their hearts that God was calling them to do so. Yet they soon discovered how challenging their lives had become, and they started doubting their decision. *Was being a special needs family really their calling, or did they make a mistake?* “We were dead... just dead,” confesses Sarah, recalling that difficult season of their lives. “We exhausted ourselves and were empty.”

One week at *Family Retreat* not only confirmed their calling—it provided an absolutely life-changing experience for the whole family, and soon enough Kevin and Sarah decided to adopt two more children with disabilities!

As their family of eight returned to *Family Retreat* year after year, Kevin and Sarah sensed God placing another call on their hearts—a desire to see God work in the hearts and minds of *Family Retreat* volunteers. “Mentoring volunteers allows us to be a safe place for them to ask questions and learn about disability.”

Now seasoned volunteer coordinators, Sarah and Kevin are lifelong friends of Joni and Friends, looking forward to serving in whatever ways they can. They have mentored over 400 volunteers to date, including those at this summer’s inaugural *Family Retreat* in Sacramento.

“Life can be hard, but people with disabilities matter, their families matter, and we have so much work to do to make sure that they are welcome at their church as loved members of the body of Christ,” says Sarah.

Several of Kevin and Sarah’s children now serve as *Family Retreat* volunteers themselves. Their whole family has been transformed because of their time at *Family Retreat*.

“Attending *Family Retreat* was a new beginning for us,” says Sarah. “Serving together with Joni and Friends, using our life experiences raising children with disabilities, is our greatest joy.”



Family Retreat brings the whole family closer to each other and closer to Jesus!



“I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth.”

3 JOHN 1:4

Honor a Loved One, Transform a Life

We gratefully acknowledge contributions given in memory or in honor of loved ones to further ministry in the disability community. To give a gift in memory of a loved one or in honor of a special occasion, visit joniandfriends.org/donate or contact Joni and Friends at 818.707.5664

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LAST YEAR'S FEATURED FAMILY FOR HFTD: Matt & Christy's Children

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O Holy Night Christmas Cards

Joni loves sending Christmas cards and singing Christmas hymns! This year her new Christmas card brings the two together. Featuring Joni's rendering of Mary cradling Jesus, set against a background of "O Holy Night" sheet music, this elegant card will bring the joy of the season to your friends and family members.

Product Details:

- High quality paper stock
- 5" x 7"
- Each box contains 15 cards and 16 envelopes

\$14

Card interior reads:

"This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."
Luke 2:12

May you Delight in the Joy of Jesus
During this Blessed Season
And All Throughout the Year!
Knowing Our Savior, Messiah, and King!
Merry Christmas!

Joni's Christmas cards are available only through Joni and Friends. Quantities are limited, so please order right away.



*100% of proceeds go directly to
advance ministry to children and families living with disability.*

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