

Season 5 | Episode 23

Ways to Become a More Disability-Friendly Church

Jeb Beauchamp

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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.

Our very own Jeb Beauchamp joins us on the podcast today to talk about expanding the reach of the Gospel to those impacted by disability in the North Carolina area, overcoming challenges that churches often face when shifting the culture of their community to include people living with disability, and talk about biblical counseling and the way the truth comes alive and speaks to each person, no matter their situation.

Jeb is an Area Director of Joni and Friends, North Carolina, and has been providing disability ministry resources, training, and networking with local church leaders. As an ordained pastor, Jeb has also led a biblical counseling ministry at his church, providing free counseling for families living with disability.

Welcome to the podcast, Jeb.

Jeb Beauchamp:

Thanks for having me on today.

Crystal Keating:

It is so good to have you and just to link arm-in-arm with other people in the ministry. We're in California and you're in North Carolina and just to think about all that God is doing all across the country is so exciting.

Jeb Beauchamp:

It is, I am so grateful and excited to see what God is doing.

Crystal Keating:

Absolutely. So, Jeb, I love what you've recognized, that no church wants to be a disability-unfriendly church. And it really sounds like, in your years of working with Joni and Friends, that you've identified a few main challenges that churches often face.

So, I'd love to talk about what are those challenges, and how are you engaging with local churches to help enliven their culture and train them on welcoming people of all ability into the life of the church through service and community.

Jeb Beauchamp:

Yeah, if you ever hear a pastor say, we are a disability-unfriendly church, you just say thank you and leave.

Crystal Keating:

Yes, run for the hills.

Jeb Beauchamp:

Because the truth is no Christ-honoring pastor wants their church to be disability unfriendly. And so, in my conversations with Christ-honoring pastors, they have wonderful intentions, even though maybe from the outside it looks as though the culture, and the actions are lacking.

And so, when I approach this subject, I start from a place of grace for pastors, just because I know for myself, but for others, sometimes we're too quick to give ourselves a bunch of grace, but not quick enough to give grace to other people. And let me just say, as a former pastor, pastors need grace.

In fact, a Barna survey last year said 42 percent of pastors seriously considered quitting that year. That's almost half. And, uh, and so from my experience, my conversations, I've seen three main challenges for pastors, and these challenges, they directly affect the culture of their church. And so, I've seen often pastors are either unaware or overwhelmed or even isolated, or perhaps even all three.

And so, let's just break this down. The unaware pastor, the unaware pastor simply does not know of the barriers in the church service because no one told him that the font was too small on the PowerPoint, or the youth group moved their meeting to the second floor, and what challenge that created for your family.

He's unaware. In fact, there might be excellent opportunities for blessing your family with respite, but he doesn't know about them. In fact, he doesn't know what your experience is like on a Sunday morning and the challenge of getting your family to church or better yet the challenge on Monday morning.

And so, the unaware pastor needs grace and awareness. And then we get to the overwhelmed pastor and the overwhelmed pastor wants to serve you and your family, but the day-to-day ministry demands are overwhelming him. He doesn't know where to start. He doesn't know who to ask. He doesn't know what to do.



And for all those reasons, he's probably discouraged. And, uh, he's probably discouraged because he's not able to shepherd in the way God is calling him to shepherd. And he's not able to balance that with being present with his family. And so, the overwhelmed pastor needs grace and encouragement. And then, and then we get to the isolated pastor, and he's attempting to do it all.

He makes the coffee in the morning. He makes the PowerPoints. He writes the bulletins. He buys the youth group supplies. He preaches on Sunday. But he doesn't have a team of volunteers around him or a network of other disability ministry leaders around him that are asking great questions and sharing ideas.

He's isolated. And so, the isolated pastor needs grace and community. And so those three main challenges are real, and they affect churches. They affect pastors, and so I love that Joni and Friends approach to mobilize these churches are through the ministry relations teams and are sent out to offer greater disability awareness through church training resources and ongoing encouragement to pastors just to keep their eyes on Jesus to keep going, and also, to build a greater community through their growing local church networks. And so, as a former pastor who was at times unaware of the needs in front of me, or overwhelmed or isolated, I am so grateful for our ministry relations here at Joni and Friends.

Crystal Keating:

Oh, my goodness. I am too. And it's so interesting how you can pinpoint just some of the limitations that churches face through unawareness, through being overwhelmed, and through being isolated.

And you know, kind of what I was thinking is that this can often mirror the feelings of families living with disability who haven't been engaged in the church, they're feeling isolated, they're feeling overwhelmed. And so, how do we bridge that gap to almost say, wow, we're all in the same boat and we really need each other?

And I just love that idea of interdependence. Like even though not everyone in the church is living with a disability, we can all relate to those similar experiences.

Jeb Beauchamp:

That's so true with that belonging, like pastors and families they're wanting to belong at the church they're at and they're feeling on the fringe and pastors can feel that too.

So that is such a great observation. They're more alike, the similarities between pastors and people affected by disability.

Crystal Keating:

Right. And we wouldn't often think that because we think, oh, they're in the limelight and they're involved with so many people. But it sounds like that's, I mean, if 42 percent of pastors are wanting to maybe go a different direction that speaks loudly as to just some of the challenges, which is why, you know, I think the Bible really talks about the church being a group

of people who are called together. Churches that have the pastor in the position of bearing the weight and responsibility of doing the work of the ministry is very overwhelming. And I think that's where, you know, Paul to the Ephesian church, didn't he say, like, equip them and train the people to do the work of the ministry so that we're all using our gifts, right?

Okay, you're a pastor. You know the scriptures well. Is that right?

Jeb Beauchamp:

That is right. And there's a joy in serving with other people, sharing the same vision and serving alongside one another. And so that's the isolated pastor and perhaps the expectations are on him, or perhaps that's the way it's always been done.

And that person, that pastor's missing the joy of sharing that vision, praying with one another and evangelizing and discipling and serving the entire community.

Crystal Keating:

Well, I am so glad to know that Joni and Friends North Carolina is really on the front lines of changing that culture. It's interesting because you brought up the Barna survey.

And then I think you brought to my attention a recent local survey of Christ-honoring churches in Charlotte. Less than 5 percent have a disability ministry, and you illuminated the fact that most mission organizations would call that an unreached people group.

That blew my mind. And yet many are coming in for counseling. So, I'd love to hear about the biblical counseling you're leading at your church and maybe some of the conversations you're engaging in. What are some of the most common struggles you've encountered as you provide free biblical counseling for people living with disability?

Jeb Beauchamp:

Yeah that 5%, it was really shocking. It's heartbreaking. But God is really doing something amazing through the churches and with the biblical counseling, in addition to my seminary degree, I'm also certified with the Association of Certified Biblical Counselors, and I've had the joy of offering biblical counseling at the last three churches that I was a part of as a free service to members. And I'm now running that ministry at the church I'm at now. From my experience of biblical counseling, I found that most of those that I counseled, most of the people have been affected by disability. That's part of their story.

And so, our Charlotte office at Joni and Friends, we actually have collected a list of Christian counselors, local to the area and biblical counselors and give it to families that request it. In fact, one local seminary, they've offered to provide free biblical counseling to families that we refer at no cost to the families.

And so, there's a movement. There's something happening because soul care is so important, especially for families affected by disability. And so, when I'm in the counseling room and when I'm doing biblical counseling, those conversations and the way I'm leading the room, the



presenting issues they often center around the challenges and the burdens of living with disability.

And those challenges and burdens, they show up in the marriage, they show up in parenting, they show up personally. But when you dig a little deeper, those presenting issues, you start to see similarities because people affected by disability and those not affected by this were all made in the image of God.

And so, the challenges the core root issues start to look the same like anxiety and depression and unmet desires and relational sin and failed hope and misplaced identity. And so, one of the things that I get to do when I'm counseling is I'll draw on a whiteboard three attributes about God and ask, what is the most difficult to believe?

And so, I'll write, God is good. And then I'll write, God is powerful. And then lastly, God is sovereign. And so, the person in the counseling room will get to circle, you know, right now in my season, I'm wrestling with this deep question. Like, how can a good God allow my daughter to go through this and whatever that is or why pray if God's not able to help? Or deeper questions like, what does God have to do with my present situation or even my future? And so, when I'm going through this, there aren't any cookie cutter people, which means there's not any cookie cutter answers. There's no formula because we're all different.

We're all made in the image of God. But one of my goals as a biblical counselor is to direct the sufferer's emotion to God just as the way Jesus did on the cross. When he said on the cross, he says, part of a Psalm 22, he says, "My God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me?"

From the words of my groaning, and so often families struggling, ask very honest questions. God, where are you? Why aren't you here in this moment? I feel this burden. And it's amazing because as Jesus directs us to that Psalm, we see this honest prayer, and then we see, yet you are holy.

And then it continues on, yet you are he who took me from the womb. And then further down along, for he has not despised the affliction of the afflicted. And then it continues, and he has not hidden his face from him, but he has heard when he cried to him. You start to see in Psalm 22, God's goodness. He is still good in the suffering.

He hears you. And then we see God's power. He is holy. He is not far off. He is right there when we see God's sovereignty. He's with you. He was with you at your first breath. And then we see, and are reminded, he was with Jesus with his last breath. And because of what Jesus did on the cross, dying the death we all deserve, making suffering temporary and providing a way of salvation, and offering every believer an unshakable hope.

And so, as I walk through that in the counseling room for families affected by disability, there starts to be this unshakable hope and a hope that says, you know, God is going to see me through this, even this challenge.



Crystal Keating:

That is so good. That is so encouraging. And I wonder how many families or individuals come in the counseling room feeling pretty lost and pretty hopeless and pretty discouraged that they've lost a sense of their faith.

I mean, one of the things that we've heard is you know, when disability enters a family or there is a diagnosis, "What do we do?" We ask a lot of questions of God, and what a gift to have someone skilled and trained like you and so many other helpers and counselors who love the Lord to say, let's look at the scripture and what does God have to say?

What is God speaking right now that he continues to speak over those who are honest? Jesus was honest. Where are you? Why have you forsaken me? And I think that sense of, I feel all alone in this is very common.

Jeb Beauchamp:

Yeah, that's so true. I feel so alone. And one of the joys that I get to do in biblical counseling hear those questions, but then bring God into it and say, okay, God is here.

Where do you think God is in this moment? What do you think God is doing? Because sometimes our circumstance gets so big, and it occupies so much of our life and our mind. And our view of God gets smaller and smaller, and our hope starts to suffer and, that's so true.

The questions come, and part of that first step of just crisis counseling is just reminding, hey, God is still good. He's still here. He's still powerful. He's still sovereign.

Crystal Keating:

We need to be reminded of those things from a loving and compassionate voice like yours, Jeb. It makes all the difference, even how it's communicated, and I can hear your care.

I can hear the way that it'd be received. And so, you've been providing, not just biblical counseling, but disability ministry resources and training in your area. And again, another really interesting statistic, you noted that in Charlotte, roughly one out of every 10 people are living with a disability.

So, in your experience, what has stood out to you as some of the most impactful ways churches are reaching out to the disability community?

Jeb Beauchamp:

Yeah, 1/10. But then when you start to factor in the moms and the dads and the brothers and sister, that number of people affected by disability gets so much higher.

And so, as I thought about this, I was just reminded of Jesus's words. He says the harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few, but then he continues. He says, therefore, pray earnestly to

the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest. This is his harvest, and he is the Lord of the harvest.

And so, when I was a ministry relations manager, one of the things I got to do was help relaunch the Charlotte church network of disability ministry leaders so that they would gather on a regular basis. They would pray. They would discuss ways to impact our community for Christ.

And early on, sometimes it was just, three of us and we would just gather, and we would pray. We would pray to God, but God is the Lord of the harvest. And so over time, it's so neat to see God move this network. It's by his grace, it's grown to nearly 40 church leaders gathering.

That's right. Gathering, they're praying, they're sharing resources, which is like, okay let's work smarter, not harder. They're committing to evangelize, to disciple, to serve the disability community. In fact, one church, they visited the network last year and they're about to launch a disability ministry this year. So good. Just that collaboration is so fun to see and then there was another story a church about two hours away attended the network virtually and they connected to a church leader that's been doing Disability ministry for nearly 20 years. And then they drove two hours.

They visited on a Sunday morning just to see the disability ministry in action. And then they not only watched the disability ministry at their church, but now they're leading a disability ministry conference in a few months so that other churches, that's right, other churches can come and see what they've learned, see what they do so that they can reach their community.

God is the Lord of the harvest. And he is doing a mighty work, and his mighty work. And another incredible way the church is impacting the community, this one church is hosting respite nights in partnership with Joni and Friends, our North Carolina office.

And so, these respite nights are just community centered for moms and dads to give their kids an amazing four hours of Christ centered programming. And so, mom and dad can go get a haircut, do errands. In fact, I overheard a dad come back. He had a big smile on his face after one of these events.

And he came back, and he said, my wife and I went on our first date in nine years.

Crystal Keating:
Oh, my goodness.

Jeb Beauchamp:
Nine years. And I thought that just encapsulated so much the beauty of the respite nights because we're not only serving the family, we're serving the marriage.

These churches that are gathering together, they're sharing resources. It's an exciting thing. In fact, church leaders are visiting these respite nights to see how they can then take it to their



churches. And so, I'm just blown away. I'm excited. It's so fun to see what God is doing and this is his harvest. I have a friend of mine Dr. Cleveland Huntley, he's a good friend who attends. He's actually a leader on the Charlotte Church Network and he wrote a book and the title of the book, I just want to read the title of the book because it says it all, the title is, *The Worst Day of the Week, How Christian Faith Communities Can Transform Sunday into the Best Day of the Week for People Affected by Disability*.

Crystal Keating:

Wow, that's a shocking title. I wonder how many people really feel that way, you know?

Jeb Beauchamp:

That's right. And I think when we go on the family retreats, and we hear the joy of families, and they had such an amazing week that they say it's the best week out of the year.

My heart breaks a little bit because I'm thinking, well, what about those other 51 weeks? And so, Sundays, this network is on a mission to transform Sundays to make it the best day of the week for the disability community. And so just about community impact, I see this multiplication and what God is doing as just, this is only the beginning. So, I'm excited to see where it goes.

Crystal Keating:

Oh, my goodness. It's thrilling. You must just step back and think, okay, Lord, you are moving. And you know what, what really stands out to me is how much we need the example of others. Let's say disability ministry or ministering to people with disabilities ministering to all people isn't like a concept that we have seen modeled to us. It might feel very bumpy, but if we can see it in action if we can see God moving within churches and connect with other people who have gone before us, it's so much more of a resource for us to come back to our own churches and say, okay, we can do this, we can do this together.

I think church networks are so important and I know that we have church networks all over the U.S. So, if you're listening today and you're thinking, I feel really alone in my disability ministry or in our, you know, buddy breaks or respite events, give us a call. We'd love to connect you with another network. Let's see if we can connect you with other churches who are further along in the process. I think that would be such an encouragement.

Jeb Beauchamp:

Absolutely. Yeah. It's a joy to do ministry together, to share burdens with one another, pray and encourage and just spur one another on and then praise God for the results. It's pretty wonderful.

Crystal Keating:

So good. Well, Jeb, we've talked about you as a pastor, but let's kind of revisit that. You were a pastor for seven years prior to coming to Joni and Friends.



So, I'm just curious what led you to come to the ministry and how have your years as a pastor equipped you to work well with congregations and other leaders in the church? You just, you get it.

Jeb Beauchamp:

Thank you. I, well, I'm so blessed for the path that God led me and my family for the last 10 years. So, I started out as a youth pastor of a midsize church and that was my first introduction to the challenges of families affected by disability and the challenges that they face. And so that broke my heart. And I really felt as a pastor, my own limitations, where I wanted to do so much more. I just wasn't sure how or where to start. And, you know, I talked about the overwhelmed or isolated- that was me. And so, as these shepherding and counseling opportunities grew, I felt unequipped and then God put something on my heart. A question.

Is my word powerful and sufficient to address complex real-life issues? And I started thinking about is my word powerful and sufficient. I started thinking about that and scripture started coming to mind. And I think of Jesus's words. He says come to me all who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you learn from me and I am gentle and lowly and heart and there's amazing promises here. You will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light. And as I thought about that verse, I thought, really?

Is this true? Is this rest applicable to this situation in my own life, but also in the life of families? And then I thought of other verses. I'm thinking of in Hebrews, just before this verse, the author of Hebrews, he's talking about Jesus. He sympathizes deeply with what we're going through in the here and now.

And then he says this, it's amazing. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. Really? This is a mighty promise. With confidence we can go to God and he's going to help in the time of need. So, I had those questions. I wrestled with those authentic questions and God opened the door for me to get theological training and I pursued those questions of practical theology, of just where the tires meet the road, and seeing the biblical counseling program, and seeing God's word applied powerfully.

And so, while I was there, this was amazing and providential, I heard a woman was coming in to speak on disability and I was interested because deafness is part of my family's story and I wanted to hear what she had to say and that woman was Joni Eareckson Tada and she opened up her talk by inviting the audience to join her in singing a hymn together. And then she spoke about her unshakeable hope in Jesus.

And I was so blown away. So fast forward a little bit. I served at a church in Arkansas where I was able to give free counseling to people affected by disability there. And the Lord brought us North Carolina and I got to be a ministry relations manager and build those networks that we've talked about.

And so, I look back and I look at how God's been preparing me. I'm just amazed because my family has been affected by disability and I've been a pastor of families affected by disability.



And now I get to advocate for families affected by disability. And so, I've been on both sides and I understand the challenges and the frustrations of each side. I just believe God used that to knit my heart to see pastors surround themselves with key leaders united in their commitment to creatively love one family at a time in their church, starting in their church, and then going out into their community so that every person hears the Gospel.

And so, I love that I get to encourage pastors now to build those relationships with families affected by disability in the church, to build trust with families, and to then look for barriers in the church. And I talked about maybe the PowerPoint font is too small. Maybe the youth ministry needs to be meeting on the lower floor so that every person can attend.

And then helping pastors, remove those barriers one change at a time. I've just been reflecting on this and I'm thinking about just that commitment to remove barriers for people to worship God, isn't that the most Christ-imitating thing that a pastor can do because that's what Jesus came to do for us to take our sin, remove that barrier, give us his righteousness on the cross.

He removed that barrier so that we could have salvation. We can have fellowship with God through Jesus. And so, it is such a joy to be at Joni and Friends and to serve. And I'm just amazed at the way the Lord knit my story to bring me to this point.

Crystal Keating:

You know, and I love what you said, one family at a time. The idea of removing a barrier to me feels so hopeful because sometimes I wonder if pastors and churches think about disability ministry as being something that they're adding to the church rather than having a starting point of just removing the obstacles that they may not even be aware of.

So beautiful that you're able to even connect and kind of slowly illuminate those things. Hey, actually, you can make small changes so that everyone is welcomed, and everyone is included. And you're so right. Why did Jesus come? Well, he came for many reasons, but he came to reunite us to God.

Well as we wind down this conversation, I don't want to miss an opportunity to speak directly to families who have children with disabilities.

You noted that a pastor at Family Retreat last year shared this quote, the two most misunderstood people are pastors and parents affected by disability. So, Jeb, what are some of the ways you've tried to address this as a former pastor, as we just talked about?

And as you connect with families who are raising children with disabilities, those moms and dads, those caregivers, those grandparents who have stepped in, what do you want to share with them?

Jeb Beauchamp:

Yeah. The two most misunderstood people are pastors and parents affected by disability.



That's so true. And honestly, it's a recipe for conflict and misunderstanding. And so, all year round I get to work with pastors but at family retreat, I had the opportunity to lead a short seminar for parents on just how to help their church become more disability friendly. And I do this by laying a framework for communicating clearly and effectively with church leaders.

Because the truth is, I want parents and families, I want them to know specifically that they are not a burden, and they are not an annoyance. They are a gift to the church. Their story matters. Their voice matters. Their presence matters in the local church. And so, I share that God might be using their unique and precious family to make their home church more Christ-like.

And so, I give 10 tips that act a little bit like a roadmap. But that roadmap, it starts by asking God for grace and for patience. And we talked about grace earlier, but that's just an incredibly important starting place is grace and patience and in fact, God-sized patience. We need God-sized patience because things like this, they take much longer than they should.

I've worked and I've volunteered at many different churches around the country, and I've found this to be true for example. So, everyone donates their old couch to the youth ministries. That's just what happens at church. Yes. It's like, okay, I have an old couch. Let's give it to the youth pastor.

Well, and it's very kind and generous. But let me just say on behalf of all youth pastors, we have enough couches. And so, I once tried to remove an old, it was old, torn up. It was ready to go to the dump from the youth room. In my mind, I thought removing it would be simple. I just put it in a truck, take it to the dump, go get ice cream, and done. But no, I had to send multiple emails. I had to talk with different leaders. I had to check with different pastors and share. These are my plans for future seating before I can even touch that couch. That's kind of a silly story, but the truth is just, it's strange, but changing things in the church, they just take time. Weird things in culture. And let me just say, if we're moving a broken, dirty couch, if that takes time, cultivating a disability-friendly church culture, it's going to take time, but it is so worth it. It is so worth going on the journey.

So, another tip that I share with families is I just say why don't you send an encouraging note to your pastor? You know, as I mentioned about pastors and the challenges and pastors feeling misunderstood, pastors are more often than not discouraged. In fact, they probably have gotten an email that was a discouraging email or a voicemail that week.

And so why not be a source of encouragement for your pastor and just say, hey, I see you. Thank you for what you are doing. And that just lets the pastor know, hey, I'm not going to focus on what you're not doing. I'm going to thank God and praise God for what you are doing. And also knowing that this process is going to take time, that's going to help build that relationship.

Build trust for future honest conversations about barriers and removing barriers to take place. And so, going back to that quote, that the two most misunderstood people are pastors and parents affected by disability, you have more in common with your pastor than you think,



cause pastors can feel overwhelmed, discouraged, and isolated just like you. And they can be put on pedestals. They can be given expectations only Jesus fulfills. And so, both pastors, both parents really wanting that belonging in the church, kind of feeling on the outside. And so, pastors and parents can become one another's allies and just encourage one another. And that's all within the context of a growing relationship built on trust.

Crystal Keating:

That is so good to hear. So good to be reminded of. And, you know, I just want to say that if you're listening today and you're thinking, how do I get started? Where do I begin? Well, first, Pray. Pray. Ask God for guidance. Ask God for grace. Ask God for people to come alongside and start reaching out to your community.

But then check out our website, joniandfriends.org/church. Just as simple as that for all the church training resources to help you welcome and embrace people of all abilities with the love of Christ. We'd love to get you connected with people like Jeb with area ministries like the one in North Carolina.

We have them scattered all over the United States and our resources are free. So, Jeb, it has been an absolute pleasure to have you come on the podcast with us today. Thank you so much and may God bless all that you are doing.

Jeb Beauchamp:

Thank you, Crystal. Thanks for having me.

Crystal Keating

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