



The Flourishing Culture Podcast Series

“Lessons for Leaders after Five Decades of Ministry”

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Joni Eareckson Tada

Male: Welcome to the Flourishing Culture Podcast, where you’ll learn how to build a flourishing workplace culture that drives the ministry impact of your organization, your church, or your company, brought to you by the Best Christian Workplaces Institute. Now here’s your host, BCWI president, Al Lopus.

Al Lopus: I’ve been looking forward to this day for quite some time. That’s because our guest today on the Flourishing Culture Podcast is Joni Eareckson Tada. As many of you know, Joni is the founder and CEO of Joni and Friends. Founded in 1979, Joni and Friends has been built on biblical truth and the foundation of Jesus Christ. The organization is about advancing disability ministry and changing the church and communities as a result around the world.

Joni and Friends is answering the call found in the gospel of Luke, chapter 14, where it says, “...invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Make them come into my house so it will be full.” Joni and Friends began conducting employee engagement surveys of their staff in 2005, and for all 13 years has been certified as a Best Christian Workplace. Joni, it’s a real honor to welcome you to our podcast today.

Joni Eareckson Tada: Oh, Al, it’s good to be with you and of course all our listening friends.

Al: Absolutely! Thank you. First of all, I want to thank you for your lifetime of ministry advocating for people affected by disability. What a journey! Your story is well-known in the Christian community and beyond. In fact, in the last 50 years since a diving accident at 17 left you a quadriplegic, you’ve started and led an international organization. You’ve written 50 books. You’ve starred in a feature film. You’ve traveled the world. You’ve survived Stage 3 cancer. You host a popular radio program.

I would call that inspirational leadership. When we think about all of that, you know, share with us what gets you up in the morning. What really motivates you to face another day?

Joni: Well, Al, many people think of me as a strong Christian, but honestly, I'm really not. I am actually very weak because I know that given half a chance, on any given morning when from my bed I look at my wheelchair, I could so easily give in to a peevish, sour disposition waking up crabby and cranky. Part of it is due to my chronic pain, which in the mornings is always at its worst.

In my heart, I hear myself saying, "Lord, I cannot do this. I cannot do quadriplegia. I am so tired. I am so weary of it." Al, in the next breath, I just *choose*. That's the key. I choose to say, "But Lord, I *can* do quadriplegia through you as you strengthen me. So I am going to boast in my affliction so your power might rest on me because without you, Jesus, I can't do anything, not even life in a wheelchair!"

Al, I think that is the secret of contentment the apostle Paul was talking about. It's also the secret of strength for living each day, because when I am weak, then I am strong. The apostles said that, and it's all because of Jesus.

Al: Yep. What a great picture. It's a model of Jesus himself. Yep! Well, clearly as a podcast for Christian leaders, we know it takes a team to see the kind of fruit God has blessed you with in your life and your ministry. Tell us about the beginnings of Joni and Friends back in 1979. How did it all come about?

Joni: Well, after the *Joni* book was published and the Billy Graham Association made that into an evangelistic movie, I began receiving letters from people all over the world, most of them asking the same questions I wrestled with when I was first injured, you know, questions like, "How do I get out of depression? What about the goodness of God in the midst of suffering?" There were questions about accessibility, about special needs families in the church.

I knew if I were to be a responsible steward of all these inquiries, I would have to create the organizational capacity to address these needs. So with the help of the Billy Graham Association, I sought the counsel of wise leaders, created a board, designed a mission statement, a simple plan, secured a nonprofit status, all of which helped give birth to Joni and Friends.

It also helped that for a full year, the Graham Association paid for the salary of my executive assistant. Before long, I was leading a small staff and an army of volunteers in developing resources and disability ministry training materials for churches. From there back in 1979, we were off and running.

Al: You know, it's interesting. I was at Chicago at the Billy Graham Center at Wheaton College and stood behind Billy Graham's pulpit. You know, there was a video of you giving a testimony, a version of your younger self right there in Chicago. That was very interesting.

Many people have a passion and personal motivation to move a cause forward, but few people have the skills and gifts to lead an international organization. You already said you've had some help with the Billy Graham Association, but how do you feel God began to shape and guide you with your unique gifts since you started this ministry?

Joni: Back when I was on my feet back in high school back before my diving accident, I was recognized as a natural leader. After my accident, I had to forget everything I had ever been taught about personal power leading to effective leadership. Through my paralysis, I began to discover my calling as a leader is shaped as much by my weaknesses and my failings as it is by my strength.

Most people, even Christians, tend to run with your strength and avoid individuals or tasks that expose your weaknesses. You know how it is. We envision strategies for leveraging power and minimizing areas of weakness, but it's like God delights in leveraging weakness and minimizing power to get his work done.

Look at the examples of David and Gideon. God used their limitations so when he accomplished work through them, the whole world knew the Lord had done it. It wasn't by the power of men. I think the more we admit what is true about ourselves, the less we need to hide, defend, posture, and pretend, plus the freer we are to accept help and the freer we are to be of real value to the team.

For the Christian, it's all about leveraging your weakness and minimizing power, whereas the world will say, "No, you have to leverage your power and minimize your weakness." Well, let's go with God. I think that's the better way.

Al: I think you're right. That's a great reminder for our leadership audience here. That's for sure! You know, as you think about this, has there been a book or an author that's given you organizational leadership insight in this process?

Joni: Well, for years I have been reading books by Dr. Dan Allender. His book when I was first injured *The Cry of the Soul* was such a help to me when I was trying to come to grips with my paralysis. Later on, when I started Joni and Friends, his book on leadership (he called it *Leading with a Limp*) was a real eye-opener.

It was less of a "how to *do* it" book and more of a "how to *be* it" book in leadership style. I will never forget this one quote he said. I have it here. He says, "...the leaders God chooses are more broken than strong; more damaged than whole; more troubled than secure." Al, that was me after my broken neck. I may have been a natural leader before my injury, but my accident forced me to lean on God rather than my natural abilities.

That's when I discovered, "The most effective leaders don't rise to power in spite of their weakness; they lead with power because of their weakness." As far as the organizational part of leadership goes, I tell you, working side-by-side with Doug Mazza for nearly 20 years (he is our president and chief operating officer) has been a little like auditing an MBA course of study. This man is such an exceptional leader of people, a great problem-solver, an avid believer in resourcing his teams to be their best, plus he really understands disability.

Al: Yeah, and Doug is an inspirational story in himself. There's no question about it. We've enjoyed working with him. You know, as you took on greater responsibility and influence as the years went by, you had continuing success, if you will, as your ministry grew. What did you learn about yourself in that process? You've already talked some about this, but what else have you learned?

Joni: Well, I've learned it all falls apart if we think we are any better or any more important or more significant than the people we lead or, for that matter, the people we serve, because I'm convinced something redemptive that's wonderful, powerful on high is released when we say, "God, as a leader, I fail so often, but I can do all things through you. I can even push back the gates of hell, if you would, but strengthen me."

I have learned in my failures, stumblings, and weaknesses to fall *forward* rather than backward into the arms of grace. I have learned the best motto for effective leadership, I think, is still 1 Corinthians, chapter 1, verse 27, where it says, "But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. ...so that no one may boast before him." That's a lot to learn right there.

Al: There we go! We can just think about that and close out. Actually, let's keep going. A few years back, I heard you speak about servant leadership at the Christian Leadership Alliance Conference. It was clear to all of us in the audience that your views and perspectives about leadership have been so clearly connected to your relationship with Christ and his teachings. Tell us about how you solidified your convictions around servant leadership. How did you come to believe in servant leadership and begin practicing it?

Joni: Well, I don't know. As a leader, as a Christian, I will always fail unless I stay hot on the heels of Jesus. It's true for any Christian leader. The concept of servant leadership is not an axiom. It is a matter of practice, because if you study the life of the world's greatest leader, Jesus Christ, you learn two things. I mean, the Son of God could cast this incredible vision clearer than anyone, such as he did, you know, for instance, in Luke 14, telling his disciples to go out, find the disabled, and bring them in.

But then after casting this vision, Jesus flips the coin, and he models the vision, stopping for virtually every disabled person he met. This drove the disciples crazy! Here's the thing. I don't think they were

irked so much by the people with disabilities who crowded around Jesus. No, it was Jesus' style of servant leadership. That's what troubled them.

The disciples were enamored with power. They wanted Jesus to leverage his influence. They wanted him to... "Come on. Get out there! Flex your kingly muscles. Act like a real Messiah." In the end, his most committed followers who stuck with him through death were the ones who had bought into this amazing message of brokenness. Again, servant leadership is in its essence a celebration of God's power in and through weakness.

Al: I trust you're enjoying our podcast. We'll be right back after this brief word about a valuable tool that can pinpoint the true, measurable health of your culture.

Male: What if you could get an upper hand on unwanted turnover, relationship conflicts, struggling morale, and unproductive staff, and at the same time increase the effectiveness and impact of your organization? You can with the Best Christian Workplaces Employee Engagement Survey. This popular, proven resource pinpoints the true health of your workplace culture and ways to improve it.

You'll get a detailed breakout summary of the eight essential ways your culture and your organization can flourish, all from a principled, practical, faith-based approach that works. Join the more than 800 satisfied organizations, churches, and Christian-owned businesses who have said yes. Sign up online today at bcwinstitute.org. The Best Christian Workplaces Employee Engagement Survey. It's your first important step on the road to a flourishing culture.

Al: All right. Now let's hear more from today's guest. One of the challenges leaders of Christian ministries face is integrating their faith into the workplace. What does Joni and Friends do to encourage the spiritual and emotional health of your staff?

Joni: Well, I'm so glad you asked this, Al, because I think this is really cutting to the chase and getting to the point of our time together. At Joni and Friends, we strive to create a strong culture built around our core values. Those values are to honor God in everything we do, to build relationships based on trust and respect, to maintain integrity and excellence in programs and services, and finally to practice responsible stewardship.

Al, if our culture is strong, the spiritual and emotional health of our staff will be strong as well. It's one reason we have a mentoring program in which our staff can choose to come under the instruction of one of our directors or vice presidents who, in turn, reinforce those core values to those being mentored.

Joni and Friends also has an optional time of morning prayer where staff are invited to participate. It's not required, but they can come. Then once a month, we have a lively time of corporate worship. Also

(and you'll be pleased to know this; you know it well), our employees participate in Best Christian Workplace. It's this amazing forum you have designed in which our employees feel they are heard, their contributions matter, their suggestions are listened to.

I think it's interesting that in the survey, virtually all our employees strongly agree that Joni and Friends' programs are truly effective in building Christ's kingdom. I believe that's because we stress integration. When departments integrate, we all have the satisfaction of contributing to the success of Wheels for the World where we distribute wheelchairs around the world and Bibles and also our Family Retreats, both domestically and internationally.

Our employees feel because of integration they contribute to the success of our Cause 4 Life internship programs. Then, of course, finally all of our employees are required to go through the Lead Like Jesus training. To use a phrase from Lead Like Jesus, we try to promote EGO, not "Edging God Out," but, "Exalting God Only." I cannot stress how important it is that our employees all not only participate in Lead Like Jesus but go through refresher courses as well.

One more thing, and this is key. Most of our staff volunteer with our Family Retreats or Wheels for the World trips. They go out there, and they volunteer. They serve bone-tired, weary special needs families, or they go on Wheels for the World trips delivering wheelchairs and Bibles overseas. This gives our employees this wonderful, firsthand glimpse of how the gospel is empowering the world's weak and neglected. I think for them seeing the reality of Christ in the lives of the world's weakest cannot help but influence our staff emotionally and spiritually. It really does make a difference.

AI: Yeah, and I can tell you your employees really understand your core values, and they live them. That comes out in the survey to honor God, to build relationships based on trust and respect, to maintain integrity and excellence, and then to practice responsible stewardship. Those are really strong and effective and, boy, they are incorporated throughout your culture and all you do. That's really a great testimony.

In 1999, you brought Doug Mazza on board as the president and COO, as you mentioned earlier. At that point, the ministry was already 20 years old. You were nationally known through your radio program and as an advocate shaping legislation for our country, including the Americans with Disabilities Act. Tell us the story about why you considered going outside the Christian ministry world to hire someone like Doug who had been a proven leader and an executive in the automobile manufacturing ministry.

Joni: Well, back in 1999 when Joni and Friends needed new senior leadership, the board and I specifically prayed for, first, someone who was fully committed to evangelism. Second, someone who understood really (really resonated with) the world of disability in a personal way. Third, someone who exhibited great corporate skills.

When the board and I designed our Joni and Friends opportunity profile for a new senior leader, little did I know it would fall in the hands of a former senior American executive who successfully operated two major Japanese car companies in the US. This man (I mentioned him earlier), Doug Mazza, was a Christian but recently read Bob Buford's book *Halftime*. Some of our listeners might recognize that title. Basically, it's a book encouraging Christian corporate executives to move from business and invest their corporate skills in kingdom ministry.

Well, when our Joni and Friends opportunity profile coincidentally landed on Doug's desk, it just piqued his interest. At that point, he wasn't really even looking for a job. He was already head of a major IPO with significant stock options, but he was the father of a severely disabled son. When his wife, Lorraine, read our profile, what we do, and about our need, she said to Doug, "This is you. You were made for this job."

Al, had we knocked on doors, we would've never found Doug Mazza. But through a strange twist of events, God put a call on Doug's heart, I think, mainly from reading Bob Buford's book *Halftime* affirming he was God's pick for leadership at Joni and Friends. Doug and I to this day still both credit his disabled son, Ryan, for (as it were) leading him through the front doors of Joni and Friends really. It's all due to Ryan, his disabled son.

Al: Wow. That's a great story. I didn't know about the *Halftime* part of the story. Actually interestingly (you'd be interested, Joni), 20 years ago this last Thanksgiving weekend, I read *Halftime* and wrote my epitaph. I was 45 at the time. At age 50, that's when I transitioned out of my corporate role and started the Best Christian Workplaces.

Joni: Oh my goodness! That's an incredible coincidence! Wow!

Al: Yeah! That's interesting. I'm glad to hear that. You know, Joni, now for 13 years in a row, your organization has conducted the Best Christian Workplace Employee Engagement Survey. One of your organization's strengths is outstanding talent. That's what we call it. This factor is all about attracting, retaining, promoting, and rewarding great talent. From your perspective, what are some of the key qualities you look for in future leaders?

Joni: Well, Al, when there's a job opening at our ministry at Joni and Friends, right away we begin praying for the person who will fill that need. We don't know that person's name. We don't know where they'll come from, but we begin right away praying for them. Prayer paves the way. We look for young people who are fully committed to Christ who love the idea of mercy ministries to the needy and who wish to grow in their skills and abilities.

When we recognize exceptionally talented employees, we invest in them. We take time to invest in them. Joni and Friends sends staff each year, for instance, to the annual CLA Conference where they

spend four days emerged in classes that focus on everything from executive leadership to resource development, financial management, board governance, people management and care.

Many of our staff by going to those conferences have earned their CCNL it's called (Credentialed Christian Nonprofit Leader). It's a designation through the CLA. Honestly, we are convinced that opportunity is a transformational learning chance for our Joni and Friends staff. I think it's curious one of the most enthusiastic advocates of CLA's credentialed course is Laura Pulido. She works with us. Laura first volunteered with Joni and Friends (get this) as a docent coordinator.

She would coordinate the people who would give tours of our International Disability Center. After that, she applied for a support level job. Then she consistently gained stature while taking advantage of CLA opportunities. Now Laura serves as executive vice president and CFO of our ministry. This woman may be the only other person at Joni and Friends who loves her job more than I do. She is amazing! CLA has had a significant impact on leaders like her.

Al: Wow! That's a great lesson for everybody who is listening (the importance of investing in leaders in practical workshops like they find in CLA). That's great. Thanks, Joni. You know, speaking of developing talent, how would you encourage young women to grow in their own distinctive leadership skills? You're a role model for so many. What would you encourage young women to do to help grow their own leadership skills?

Joni: Well, thank you for giving me a chance to speak to the women who are listening, especially young women. I would encourage any young woman to take seriously Colossians, chapter 3, where we are told, "Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving."

So whether a young woman exercises her leadership skills as a mother and homemaker, in ministry organizations, or in the corporate world, she receives her validation not from her husband, not from her children, not from her supervisor, manager, director, or even her board. No. Her confidence, her validation, in her skills and abilities will grow as she intentionally works for the Lord with an emotional focus, an intentional focus, and does it with all her heart.

I'm convinced I am a Mary/Martha. You know, I love to sit at Jesus' feet but, man, I enjoy serving him through the work of ministry. I'm convinced any young woman can be a Mary/Martha as well. I think that's a good description of what a servant leader is if she keeps her focus on Christ. When a young woman casts a compelling vision, she need not worry about her followers, because if the vision is compelling enough and if she articulates it well, followers are going to stay hot on her heels. I promise!

Al: Yeah, focus on Christ and not on others. That's a great lesson. Thanks, Joni. You know, as you like to say, Joni and Friends is answering the call of the gospel of Luke 14 to "...invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Make them come so that my house will be full." I'd love for you to share a favorite story of how you've witnessed and experienced these powerful words of Jesus.

Joni: I tell you, there are so many stories, and it's hard to choose one. I'm thinking of Pastor Mark Mucklow, who has often spoken at our Joni and Friends Family Retreats. He is a pastor over in Phoenix. Pastor Mark recalls the time when he did not know anything about disabilities in his church, but he saw a young man with cerebral palsy struggling to get into the men's room at his church. It was after service. No one else was in the hallway to lend a hand.

He was there and utterly clueless as to what might be involved. Mark offered his help to this young man. Ten minutes later, he was still in the handicap stall in the bathroom trying his best to assist in toileting this guy. Much later, Mark was still dumbfounded by the overwhelming needs and the lack of help for this disabled person. It had put him in an awkward position, but it had shown him, "Oh my goodness! There are so many needs, and nobody is around to help."

Suddenly, the words of Jesus in Luke 14 went off in his head like an alarm. "Go out. Find people like this guy with cerebral palsy. Find the disabled, the lame, and the blind, and bring them in." It's a mandate. "Compel them to come in." Right there, Pastor Mark realized for his church's benefit, they needed to start a ministry of people like that young man with CP. Mark became the strongest advocate of disability ministry in that church.

Another quick example is Shauna Amick. As a mother of a little girl with Down syndrome, Shauna was in desperate need of respite help. She was weary and tired. Well, she heard about and attended a respite program sponsored by our Joni and Friends team in New England. From there, she and her family attended our local Family Retreat, five days of hands-down, slam-dunk fun, fellowship, respite, and spiritual renewal.

Shauna became hooked on the vision. Then when she heard of an opening for an area director for Joni and Friends New England, she applied with her husband's support, and she got the job. Then working her way up and developing her skill levels, we offered her the position of director of development at our home office here in Southern California.

Now Shauna and her family are thriving, happy. They are doing something that significantly helps other families like theirs. I think our most successful leaders here at the ministry are ones who really are intimately acquainted with disability, much like Shauna is.

Al: Wow! Those are great stories. That brings up the question to me I have to ask. You mentioned about Shauna and her husband. You've now celebrated 50 years of ministry. What does that mean for you and your husband, Ken? What does this milestone mean for the two of you?

Joni: Well, we're so amazed. We cannot believe 50 years! Wow! We look back on that day in 2002 when Ken taught and retired from teaching history at a local public school. He had no misgivings about his retirement. He knew God was calling him out of teaching and into serving the Lord alongside me.

It is Ken's and my great joy to not only serve on the board but also participate in all our programs, whether it's Family Retreats, Wheels for the World. Ken was in Peru this summer delivering wheelchairs alongside our physical therapists. He also encourages the staff. Together we cast the Joni and Friends vision. We expand the circle of donors and praying friends.

We pray for and financially support the ministry. We really are each other's favorite traveling companion when we are on the road for a Family Retreat or visiting our field teams. Both of us can hardly believe honestly God has blessed both him and me with such extraordinary health and stamina, for me especially these past 50 years.

Even today as we were driving to the Joni and Friends home office, our earnest prayer in the van was, "Lord Jesus, please allow us to continue doing what we so love doing at this ministry. Keep us healthy. Keep us fit. We so love serving you this way." It's kind of cool when you can pray like that with your spouse in the van on the way to work.

Al: It is! What a great example for all of us. You know, as we come into the final turn of our time together, I've had this question I've always wanted to ask now for some time. What is the one thing you've learned about yourself in the path God has placed you on in the last 50 years?

Joni: Well, you would think that after 50 years of quadriplegia, I'd be most excited about one day receiving a new glorified body in heaven but, Al, honestly it's not so. I am excited about receiving a new *heart* completely free of sin. I think that's why I'm such a big fan of the Puritans. I love how they encourage Christ followers to (as they put it), "Sit close to self-scrutiny."

I don't mean being self-absorbed. I mean make it a habit of constantly examining your heart. I don't trust myself, but I do trust the Lord. I don't boast in taking a stand for Christ, but I do boast in the stand he takes for me. I'm always mindful God has placed in my hands this amazing ministry to the world's one billion people with disabilities. I dare not jeopardize it. I dare not diminish it or risk losing it through, I don't know, foolish actions, thoughtless words, vainglorious ambition. Man, I just pray I will simply finish well and so see the torch of Luke 14 passed to the next generation.

Al: Well, Joni, gosh! That's a great response, one for all of us to think about as we are involved in our own ministries. You know, I've really enjoyed our time together, especially, you know, I think about some of the words you've just said. Servant leadership is a matter of practice. Let's keep practicing servant leadership.

Or prayer paves the way. Or we invest in our talents. You've given great examples of that. Or we work for the Lord. Whether we're a man or a woman, we work for the Lord. As long as we have our focus on Christ, we see fruit. This has just been a great time of discussion. Joni, here is a final question. If you had one minute, what would be the most important thing you'd like to leave with ministry leaders?

Joni: Well, I would tell ministry leaders, "Love Jesus more. Strive to be holy as he is holy." Every Christian leader sooner or later has to decide whether being the "chief of sinners" (that's a title Paul claimed for himself as the early church's preeminent leader) is a part of your calling of biblical leadership. There is nothing wrong and everything admirable about a leader who confesses a wrong and then goes forward in humility, because leadership is all about character, presenting our own selves as mature in Christ and then helping others in that same journey.

Al: That's a definition of inspirational leadership as we describe it. Thank you, Joni. Ladies and gentlemen, Joni Eareckson Tada. Thank you for sharing your wisdom, insights, and stories. Thank you for extending your ministry to the leaders who have been listening and benefiting from all you've shared with us today.

Joni: Oh, my pleasure, Al.

Al: Yeah, thank you, Joni. Yeah. It's really been a great discussion. To our listeners, thank you for investing this time in your workplace culture today. This is Al Lopus reminding you that a healthy culture drives greater influence and growth for your organization. I'll see you again soon on the Flourishing Culture Podcast.

Male: For a free transcript of today's podcast, visit blog.bcwinstitute.org. Join us next week for another one-to-one interview with a respected Christian leader. The Flourishing Culture Podcast with Al Lopus is a presentation of the Best Christian Workplaces Institute, helping Christian organizations set the standard as the best, most effective places to work in the world.