

CONNECTION. HEALING. AWE.

Joey Williams speaks with Anne Bonnefin

I'm here with Joey Williams who is currently serving as the hospitality director for the Community of Christ Temple Complex in Independence, Missouri. Previously he spent 8 years as Mission Centre President for the Western Europe Mission Center and the Eurasia Mission Center. He was a committee member for the current hymnal, Community of Christ Sings, and has served the church in a variety of other roles including as a youth minister for Central Mission Center in Independence, Missouri, USA (1998-2002), and Europe (2002-2007), as well as a translator in the international resources department (2007-2014). Joey is passionate about justice and peace, and believes music and the arts are at the heart of how we begin to re-imagine the world in which we live.

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Anne: Welcome Joey. I'm always amazed at how you seem to bring boundless energy, creativity, and thoughtfulness to whatever task you are undertaking. The last time I was in the US, we spent a bit of time travelling in your car back home from an event and, I was really challenged by your personal story of kindness and compassion. How about we jump right in. When does this story begin?

Joey: Well the story starts a long time ago when I went with Graceland University down to Honduras, Central America. They had something called a winter term and for three weeks over the winter break we could take a class somewhere. The class I chose was to go and build houses with Habitat for Humanity. I went with twenty some other Graceland students and a couple of our leaders to an area just outside of San Pedro Sula, one of the bigger cities in Honduras. We were arriving only months after hurricane Mitch had devastated the area. It was one of the worst hurricanes to have affected Honduras and most of Central America.

It was devastating and a challenging time to be in Honduras. People had lost their lives. They had just finished clearing the streets and removing some of the animal debris. We were in a small neighbourhood where most houses had been affected by flooding and people were living under temporary blue tarps that covered roofs of houses that had blown off. We got out of the buses and I remember it smelt so bad.

As we began to build, probably about two days in, I noticed a little neighbour boy who would come and lean back against a post that was just off to the side of where we were building. He would cross his arms and stare at us and watch what we were doing. A lot of the other kids would try to get involved and laugh at us but he would just sit back and observe silently what we were up to. I remember after about two days of watching him I invited him in. I said, "Would you like to help us?" and he came over and he began to carry the cinder blocks from the station where they were placed over closer to the house so we could begin to start building. He was eleven years old at the time. He continued to do that for the two weeks we were there. He came every single day to help.

Our little group just fell in love with this kid, and developed quite a connection with him. I began to try and figure out what I could do to help him and at the end of those two weeks I did not want to leave Honduras - I wanted to stay and do all I could for the people there due to the devastating hurricane that had gone through there. I remember being asked to speak at the dedication of all the houses we had built. We met in one of the houses and were joined by the families that would soon be handed the keys to their new homes. I couldn't make it through my speech - I started to speak and about four words came out before I just started sobbing. Luckily there was a guy there

from Venezuela, that was a good friend of mine at Graceland and, he took over and finished the speech. It was amazing because he spoke Spanish and he was there to translate for me, but he just took over and finished the speech. On the way back to get our things for the last time the little young boy grabbed my hand and started repeating a phrase and I finally realised from my very limited Spanish, that he was saying "You can put me in your suitcase and take me home with you if you want." This again melted my heart and confirmed the experience I had in not wanting to leave these people.

So how does that effect someone? What do we do with these experiences? So many of us have been on some type of mission trip or a trip where you go and you help people do something. How do you take in that experience? What does it become? For me it meant returning to Honduras with Graceland the very next year. Also when I became a youth minister at Central Mission here in Independence area, I led three more trips down to Honduras with young adults to build. We built kitchens one time, a wall around a school area another time and homes on our third trip.

I asked a church member in Honduras, that was seventeen at the time, to be my go between with this young little boy. I would send money to make sure that this kid could go to school because public education was through to only about sixth grade (or middle school). I made sure that he had money to be able to finish his high school education. That became my commitment to him. I would meet with him on my trips to Honduras. Sometimes he would come with us and build with us. Other times he was busy and working and couldn't come along but I maintained that relationship for a long time.

Anne: So he stayed at school?

Joey: Yes. He finished school. It took about five years. On one occasion, I asked the boy who was helping me "You know I've never thought to ask you, do you need help?" He was at university by this time and his father had just passed away. He replied, "You know I've never wanted to ask. It's wonderful what you are doing for that young boy." I decided to help him too and paid for some of his university studies one year. We are not talking tons of money but I was able to pay for shoes and some of the tuition.

Eventually we kind of lost contact. We didn't have Facebook or anything like that back then. It was back in the time we were writing letters. Out of the blue he sent a letter and said I'm going to try and come to the US. Can you help me? I remember writing him and saying, I cannot help you do that. I'm happy to help you where you are but I'm not comfortable doing that. And we lost contact for a really long time. Then about four or five years ago, because of Facebook, all of a

sudden I get this Facebook message that says "Are you Joey?" And I think "Oh my gosh, you are this kid from Honduras! And we are back in connection again.

Anne: So how old was he then?

Joey: Oh he was in his thirties. He was married with children. About a year later, two back to back hurricanes came and devastated the area where he lived in Honduras again. They basically washed away everything and everyone. He and his family moved temporarily into a gymnasium where there were tons of families made homeless by the storm and he made a decision to once again try and make his way to the US. He asked. "Can you help me do that?" And I helped him a little bit but again I said "I'm not comfortable with helping in that way, but if you need help down there, I can help you," I added, "however, if you ever make it to the US then maybe there is some help I could provide." ...So the next thing I know he is at the border! It was an awful journey to get there and he remained at the border for almost a year.

Anne: With his family?

Joey: Yes with his three children and his wife. We wrote back and forth every couple of weeks and I checked in to see how he was doing. He went through some very rough times during this time period.

Then about five months ago I get a phone call and he says "I'm in Arizona. I'm in The States!" So, you know, now it's time for me to prove everything I said. "How can I help you? How can I help?" Oh my goodness! I knew this is would not be an easy thing. Luckily he did the process in the right way. He declared himself having entered into the states. He has papers to be able to travel around, but the system is quite difficult. He has paper work to work but he can't have a bank account. There are lots of things that make it difficult to find your way.

Anne: You know Joey, if you recall the last time I was in the US, we were in a car talking. We drove past a house and you said to me "You could come and live in that house." And I said "Well you can live in the garage." And you asked "Where is this man and his family going to live?" I remember thinking "Gosh, Joey's commitment is really solid here. From way back when you first started assisting this young boy, your support and generosity has never wavered. I'm interested to hear where this story goes next.

Joey: It affected me and I asked myself "What is this full circle moment - there was a little boy that I wanted to take home in my suitcase and help him from the situation that I found him in. Not that his life was horrible but poverty has horrible effects on people's lives. He had a wonderful mother but he didn't have opportunities that many people around the world do

have. So even at that time I was trying to figure out how do we help make this kids life better. So now here I am again - we are now in the same country- how can I have an effect and make this kid's life better? And again it's not easy, there is not just a quick answer and a quick way to make this happen. Thoughts were spinning between my head and my heart. Is it better to get in a car and go visit him or send money down so he could have some money to live on? You try to weigh up the best way to support.

I spoke about this family at a church that next Sunday and there was just an outpouring of support and generosity. Someone came right up and handed me a cheque. That has happened only a very few times in my entire career at Community of Christ. I could tell people wanted to help out in some way. So those funds became crucial for him as he went from one state to another state. He found a family member that he could stay with and this gave him some support as he began his life in the US - in this new world, in this new reality.

And then just a few days before Christmas it hit me. I had to go and see him. So it's three days before Christmas and I'm running around getting Christmas presents and preparing for Christmas with the family.. This is always joyous and a wonderful occasion but I just couldn't do it. I couldn't enjoy Christmas the way I normally would. I knew this family was struggling. So I got in my car in the middle of the United States in Kansas City, Missouri and drove the sixteen hours all the way to Gulfport, Mississippi. On the way I called them asking "Where would they like me to stay? "Is there space for me?" "Should I book a hotel?" "If I stay with you I will have more money to help you out." I said.

Two families were living in their two bedroom apartment. Each family had one bedroom. He, his wife and three boys lived in one room and his cousin and wife and child were staying in the other room. There was no furniture in the living room - so of course there was space for me - I took down an air mattress of my own and camped out in the living room. This gives you a picture - they were living on the bare necessities.

When we met we were shaking - just to be with each other was overwhelming - we hadn't seen each other since he was eighteen years old and now he is in his late thirties. It was just a wonderful reunion! It was terrific to be together and for me to be able to give him this support. "You are not alone, my friend. Even though you are alone on this new adventure here." So we talked and talked and it was as though time had not even gone by as we told our own stories and caught each other up with where we were in our lives. I went and got him some necessities. As he was in construction I wanted to make sure he had the right type of clothing. We had a cold front at the time and it was down to 0 degrees celcius so I wanted to make sure he was OK. And it was good to get provisions and



spend the time together: to be there and listen to all the things he had been going through.

Anne: It seems at each stage you have asked yourself, How can I help? What's the best decision I can make?" I'm wondering .. there must be sort of broad lessons you have learnt that you could share with us that might be helpful as we reach out. What have you learnt?

Joey: One of the things I have learnt - It's important to share what's going on. There are people who do want to help. And be ready also not receive the response that you might hope for. So it's sort of a double edged sword, because you can share with people and they will say. 'Well good luck with that!' Especially when it's this type of personal connection and you want to make an impact. It's going to come down mainly to what you can do, and to realize that you can't do everything but it's important to assess "What is it that I can do at this moment?"

Ultimately, for me, it was really important to decide, "Is it better just to send some money down, or to go and visit?" After visiting him, it was very clear to me that it wasn't just about the money or the few weeks of groceries. What I could offer him, the connection and assurance that he was not in this by himself, was priceless. Having someone there to listen and to tell you "You are going to make it." Makes all the difference.

Anne: I guess it was a blessing of your presence that you gave to him.

Joey: I hope so. I am not going to be able to provide all the things that he or his family might need but I hope that he knows that we are in this together even though there are times that my help might be limited.

Anne: How important is that sense of presence we can give to each other.

Joey: Of course money can really help with immediate needs and solve a lot but probably the best experience we had while I was down there was when I took the family to an aquarium. The family were locked up in the house, scared to go out - they didn't speak English and couldn't communicate easily, so I decided to take them to a beautiful, large, outdoor aquarium near to where they lived. Of course Aquariums are expensive - for a single man, I had no idea what it would cost for six or seven people. Yet I wouldn't trade the day we spent there for anything.

If you were to take many of the kids that I know, who are wonderful kids, to an aquarium they are 'done' within a couple of hours. We were there for five and a half hours and the kids were still running around amazed by what they were seeing! That hit me - "What a day of just

awe!" We were all caught up in awe and amazement. I would not trade that moment for anything else.

Anne: You know Joey, I see in all your ministry a deep yearning to drawing people to moments of awe and wonder.

Joey: Yes, beyond all the questions about life, it's these moments of awe, of the great mystery of what is beyond, seeing beyond our own selves . As well as moments of healing and moments of the ability to reconnect and find connection. Those are probably the three elements that will get us to the other side. Connection, healing and awe.



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