

Lauren: I'm excited to introduce you guys to Jedd Medifind, who is with the Christian Alliance for Orphans and, Jedd, this is an organization I have followed for quite a while...we've been an adoptive family for seven and a half years now. But I've been in that process of engaging in the need for orphan care and continuing families for a decade. So I'm excited to get to share a little bit about your work with everyone today and dive into a conversation around where you see this movement kind of shifting or going in the next few years. So Jeff, welcome and why don't you let everyone know a little bit about you and what brought you into this work?

Jedd: Yeah, well first great to be with you Lauren. Thanks for inviting me in. So I've been married to Rachel for 23 years, and we have five kids. And we've received children through birth and adoption and foster care. We live just outside of the Washington DC area. And as you mentioned, I have the privilege of leading the Christian Alliance for Orphans, or CAFO we call it, which is a coalition of at this point about 260 organizations that are all committed to living out their Christian faith and service to vulnerable children and families in a whole host of ways...everything from U.S. foster care, mentoring, supporting aging out youth, helping broken families reunite to global work, serving the global church and working with street youth, children in residential care, helping to grow a culture of adoption within countries where maybe it was not necessarily traditional there. And so it's been...I get to work with wonderful people all over the U.S. and around the world. To seek to do that to grow both the hearts of followers of Christ for children and families, but then to seek to guide that passion toward well informed action.

Lauren: No small task there. I think it's probably something that's easy to sell to people when you're talking about what you do but when you just described how many different layers there are to serving children and the different types of scenarios that they may be in from, from foster youth in the US to street youth globally to kids in residential care to kids who are trying to assimilate into a family structure maybe for the first time...I mean, the ways that this story can manifest itself in the life of a child is is numerous. So I'm curious coming off of 2023 Summit—you guys were just was in Oklahoma City, right?

Jedd: Every year we're in a different city. Last year/this year, Oklahoma City, so it was great.

Lauren: That's great. I'm gonna put in a plug for the Nashville summit next year. I'm so excited. You're coming close. So I'm curious coming out of that summit, what were some of the themes that were emerging out of the keynotes and out of the workshops that you guys hosted there? What were some things that you're seeing kind of rise to the surface right now in the movement?

Jedd: Yep. Well, you know, first of all, I mentioned that at CAFO our vision as a community and what we seek to live individually is really a deep connectedness of our spiritual life, and the way in which we're engaging and serving in the world. And so, you know, there's always at the summit and again throughout the year CAFO's work, there is a pairing of on the one hand there's a pragmatic very practical elements of for instance, learning from the best research the current studies that have come out in the last year and that are you know, asking how do we

help children heal from severe adversity? What nutrition helps a child heal within a family organization? How do we do these things effectively? And so there's that side of it, but there's what we would also see is that the deeper issues of the heart—this wellspring—you know, when Jesus spoke about these things, one thing he said is a good tree will produce good fruit. Meaning that roots and the deepest part of ourselves are actually where everything else comes from.

And so you know, if we focus solely on just running well run programs and aren't also paying attention to our souls, over time, you know, we'll probably burnout in one way or another. And we may be doing the work more for ourselves and for others. And so, you know, at Summit again this year, our overarching theme actually was *The Word Unhurried*. It was unhurried living with the long view and we were grappling with the fact that all of us in this work feel a deep sense of urgency, and there *is* a great urgency. There's so much immense need in the U.S. foster system and for orphans around the world and for struggling families both near and far. And we feel that keenly. That's, you know, for many of us, that is part of what has driven us into this work.

But if our work is always just driven by the sense of need and maybe maybe even guilt or idealism, we're going to run dry. And so we need what's in our lives – habits and rhythms and practices – that feed the soul...that keeps us rooted deep in the life of God so that we can continue to pour out for a lifetime. And so those, you know, those pairing of themes of how do we do this work effectively in terms of the tactics and strategies and practices, but then, you know, how do we continue to nurture the lives of our souls? Those things were very much paired at CAFO 2023 this year.

Lauren: I don't want to gloss over what you just shared, because I feel that intimately. I feel that deeply. And in full transparency, you're catching me on a morning after staying up until 1:30am, making a spreadsheet of all of the resources that I can find for my kiddo that this is in a dark place at the moment and really struggling to attach to our family and kind of diving into a deeper ...a deeper level. You know, first line treatment, second line treatment, all of our interventions have yet to really make a lasting impact. And yet, I'm not without hope. And I'm not without a belief that something is out there for her and for us.

But there's nothing that has transformed me and my theology and my walk with God more than having to suit up, right...to show up every day. And I'd like to hang out here for just a minute because as you're one of the first guests in the season, and we're diving into this conversation, my intent was to end the conversation [this season] with an invitation of what it means to really dive into this work with a with a longer vision of what it means to be spiritually formed. But I'd like to just give you some more space to explore that thought because I think for those of us who watched a two minute video of a child getting a family forever or seeing a picture in front of a courtroom with a with a pretty letterboard sign, there's so much more to showing up for vulnerable kids. So I'd like to give you some more space if you would, to just kind of dive into what you just started to touch on there.

Jedd: Well, thank you for sharing that Lauren. And I know that you are carrying immensely heavy things. I mean, I just know you're touching the very, very surface of very deep matters and having walked through some of these same things myself and having many, many dear friends – and one of my best friends was over last night and we spent several hours talking about such things within within his family right now and praying together about those things – So yeah, it is. I mean, the simple truth is that anytime we follow Jesus near to the world's hurt, we will share in that hurt. You know the Christian model of restoration and redemption is not solving things and addressing them from a distance.

You know, like you imagine someone on the deck of an aircraft carrier, they send in a missile to some sight, you know, 100 miles away, that is not the Christian way. The Christian way is to go into the space, just like Jesus did, and share in the hurt of that place.

Also, beauty– we experience wonderful things that you would never find if you stayed in safe places, but you're sharing in that hurt. And it is a story. The Gospel story is a story of redemption. It's a beautiful, beautiful story, ultimately, but it also includes nails and thorns and a spear in the side. And for all who dare to come into these places, whether that's through adoption, you know, welcoming a child into your family personally; whether it's foster care, you know, bring a child or children into your life; whether it's through getting very intimately involved with a struggling family, maybe it's a single mother who is wrestling with addiction or mental illness... You know, in any of these things we're following Jesus near to the world's broken places, we will share it and feel those things.

And so as you alluded to, we need to, although we can never fully understand, right, what will be involved at the start...we still do need to have a certain sense of-as Jesus urged-count the cost. We know that when we fall into these places, it is going to be very hard, and we will lose some of the things we've valued. And for that journey, I think there are two things in particular that are essential. One is knowing we cannot do this alone. So we need a community of several followers of Christ, to walk with us to encourage and practically help to pray with us and for us.

And then secondly, we need to have rhythms within our patterns of life, that even as we're pouring out every single day, that we are receiving life from our Father. Because I, you know, I really believe that all ministry, the essence of ministry is that we are pouring out that life and health and strength. What's in us is pouring out. I mean, even you at one o'clock in the morning, last night, you were yes, you're working on a spreadsheet, but you are pouring out. You're going without sleep, your heart was earnest and anxious for your beloved daughter. And so something was pouring out of you.

And the same is true when we're mentoring or working with, you know, a child in foster care or a single mother, all of these things. And that's a beautiful thing for life to pour out of us. That is again, if it's not happening actually, that's a terrible life, a life where things aren't pouring out, you're like, you're like the Dead Sea or water flows in but nothing flows out and it just becomes more and more dead. So thank goodness that God invites us into this life. But we need to know if life is pouring out of us but not pouring in that we will eventually run dry. And so having those

habits of life that for me include, you know, a daily time with the Lord even if it's brief, just a brief time to have my hands open in essence before him and receive some of His life. And again for me a weekly day where, you know, it's called Sabbath for us, but the idea is not this legalistic, you can't work one day a week. It's that there is one day where your father says I know you're pouring out I just want you to take a day for me to pour in. And that's gonna look different in different seasons of life and things like that. But these are immense, immense blessings as part of a life pouring out and I think if we don't have them, we will run dry. If we do have them life will be very hard at times where we have ups and downs, but we can sustain this for our lifetime.

Lauren: I love that you're bringing this up because I have never cried such cries of desperation to God, more than I have over the life of my kids. Especially kids that are resistant to love - resistant to mercy - resistant to grace. And I have found myself multiple times in a place where I didn't have a prayer to pray anymore. I was running dry and I don't know where I would be without that community of my faith. I think community, you know, whether that's when we were living abroad and people were surrounding us there, whether that's to the house church that we have here...I'm just thinking about, you know, once my husband was talking with his mentor, and he said, "I just, Phil...I just don't have any words to pray anymore." And Phil said, "Gavin, I don't want you to think so highly of your prayers, that you think that the prayers that were praying for you are not enough to cover your family."

And, and I go, I mean, that's been seven and a half years ago, and I still go back to that on the days that I do feel depleted and know that I can reach out to them, my people. Just this morning, I reached out to a friend in our house church and said, this is the conversation we're going to have today. I would love as you're walking this morning to pray over the person who answers the phone, on the intake line. On the other side of this therapeutic place, that there would be mercy and a clear sign forward. I mean, I just can't imagine doing that alone. So I guess the question that I'm asking is, How do you talk to churches about this. Because when we talk about the orphan crisis, it is very urgent—you hear a lot of emotional stories around that. But not everyone is equipped to provide a family environment where for a kid from a hard place, or from, you know, a kid that's just needing a home...What does that look like in your mind from a whole church perspective? And how do you talk to, specifically, a North American church that has maybe been resistant to getting its hands dirty, and some of the hard work of loving and walking alongside others?

Jedd: Well, you know, I think one of the really key things is that it's vital not to sugarcoat, whatever it is we're inviting folks into. You know...that we need to be very forthright about both the beauty and joy that is found in a life of going out, but also the costliness of these things, and including the particular things that you know, whether we're talking about adoption, whether we're talking about foster care, we're talking about mentoring and working with struggling families, each of these things, you know, hold wonderful gifts, and really difficult elements. And if we're just telling people, "Hey, it's just so wonderful, it's roses and rainbows!" you know...we're doing them a deep disservice; we're not telling them the whole truth.

And so we need to talk about both, and that, by the way, does not mean that we're just telling them all the bad things, because actually, that's not the whole picture either, right? And, you know, I cannot tell you how many folks who are further down the road, you know, so they adopted 30 years ago, 25 years ago, 40 years ago, saying some phrase to me of, "Best thing I've ever done...Hardest thing I've ever done." Or the other way around, "Hardest thing I've ever done, but also the best thing we've ever done," in terms of their adoption journey. Or, and similar things with foster care as well. And you know that and those two things are side by side. And if we leave either out, we're not telling the full story. So I do feel like that just forthrightness from the start is probably the single most important thing.

But then again, getting back to what we talked about a moment ago, making sure that people know you're going to need community for this journey. Do not do it alone, as just a single person or as a family—you need an extended body I believe. You know, God's design for that is the local church, that we would be living this and in a scenario where we have a weekly gathering place, you know, to pray and worship and seek the Lord together. But then all throughout the week, we're living the true koinonia in the true fellowship that God calls his people to. And that actually, to me, is a very significant thing that I think, you know, in North America, we do so often live such autonomous lives as individuals and families. And we don't notice we think we don't really need each other and materially and and otherwise we don't need each other. But we actually do and you know, Scripture calls us to that of sharing resources, bearing each other's burdens, praying for and with one and all of those things are core to this journey.

Lauren: Jedd, thanks for bringing up the reality that we have to love others in community and with a whole host of support which feels really antithetical to our, our nature as an individualistic society. That leads perfectly into my next question and I'm sure that you are well traveled and have seen the ways that different, different countries, different churches, in and outside of the United States have responded to the issue of orphans in their communities. For orphans and vulnerable children outside of the United States, how have you seen the church abroad respond to this issue? Maybe in the same way, or in a different way from the church in the United States?

Jedd: Well, you know, Lauren, one of the things I've observed in in spending time with God's people all over the world is that every branch of the church, every each one of us as individuals, but also kind of as a kind of unique cultures, and unique expressions of the Body of Christ has distinct gifts to give, and distinct blind spots. I mean, that's certainly true of the North American church, right? We, there are real blind spots we have that when we spend time with God's people in other parts of the world, we see those blind spots, often for the first time and say, "Wow, man, I have been living such a autonomous life...so often a kind of a materially wealthy, but impoverished in other ways."

And it's a wonderful challenge. But the same is true for God's people in other parts of world and the North American church has unique gifts to offer. And we can affirm both of those: the blind spots and unique things to offer. One of the things I appreciate much about God's people in many, many parts of world is that there is a very strong ethic of what we would call kinship care,

you know, of welcoming in a niece or nephew or other relative. It's not just, you know, done, but it's kind of socially expected. And while sometimes people do it for the wrong reasons, they're, you know, meaning like, just I'm obliged, that's not necessarily wrong reason, but they're doing it because they feel obliged to do it. That is just a very healthy thing that is not as prevalent in the in the West. And, of course, we do have many families who still will welcome in their niece or nephew; it permeates traditional cultures around the world. And that's a really good thing.

And, and then you also just, you know, often we'll see, and I'm sure you've seen this, too, Lauren you know, the grandmother in the middle of the village who's welcomed in four, or five, or six or seven individual children from from around the village who may or may not be related to her, but she's, she's just welcoming. And so I feel like there's an informal hospitality in that. And those are very healthy things. At the same time, you know, very often the idea of welcoming in an unrelated child is very foreign in these places. And especially if they look different, if they're of a different tribe, a different skin color, that is actually, you know, not just not done, but it's actually seen as having problems, you know, and there's even tribal myths about if you're welcoming a child from another tribe that might bring a curse or a child that has a special need that might carry a curse for you and your family.

And so, there are, there again, strengths, but also places where I feel like those cultures just like our own need to be baptized by the Gospel, and to see a fresh - in those contexts, for instance - that if there is a child that's growing up without a family, even if they're not your relative, even if they don't share your tribe or your ancestry, to welcome them in to care for them, to love them, that is a reflection of God's heart, that is the Gospel. So once again, strengths, weaknesses, which is true for all of us, and we're all better when God's people from around the world come together and challenge and encourage each other in these things.

Lauren: You just laid out the whole vision and purpose of Kindred Exchange that produces this podcast and network with that idea that we all have things to bring to the table. And I have seen how, you know, my friends and colleagues around the world have taught me so much about kinship care, and just an openness to their homes. Before I lived abroad, I felt like my home was supposed to be some sacred place that only our family was, you know, this was supposed to be where we retreated from the world and had a safe place. And living abroad flipped that on its head for me to where my doors need to constantly be open to whoever needs a table to sit at.

I love that you're also bringing to light the fact that so many cultures have yet to be redeemed. There are things that need to be redeemed in the North American culture. There are things that need to be redeemed in cultures all over the world, and how the Gospel permeating those spaces really does bring freedom and hope in a way that is outside of the realm of human nature. Is there a story that you can think of that would illustrate this? I've got a couple of them that come to mind, but I'd rather hear, I'd rather hear from you. Everyone here gets to hear from me too much. So is there a story that comes to mind for you and that space?

Jedd: You know, I mean, of course, one is just, we, my family and I, lived in Guatemala for an extended period of time. And there's many dear brothers and sisters there, and a number of

them are choosing the very countercultural choice of welcoming in unrelated children into their family, you know, so, you know, within that culture, typically, if a family had no other way to have a children, child, they might consider adoption— might. And that would be only if it were a healthy infant that would look a lot like them. And so the idea of, you know, adopting an unrelated child or adopting an older child, who's 4,5,6,7... you know, older, and then all the moreso, adopting a child that is coming from a different ethnic or racial background, in Guatemala, there's kind of the more westernized European descent, families, and then those who are indigenous with the Mayan background. And so these, these families are choosing to, you know, both are working with families to help keep families together, when that's safe and possible. But then when there's a child who very likely is going to grow up without a family, they are choosing adoption, and I just respect them so much, because that is far more countercultural, even than it is here. And they are. And when they're asked why they're doing it, they point back to the Gospel, and they say, "This is Our Story. When we were in great need, God welcomed us into His family. And we are simply just giving a small humble reflection of that." And so I respect them deeply, and learn a great deal from them.

Lauren: That's so powerful, and it is a perfect picture. It's a perfect picture of our walk, and our fallen nature and our welcome back. What do you believe, Jedd, is possible? There is a lot (there are a lot) of critiques in the orphan care space, rightfully so. And we'll dive into those in other episodes. There are a lot of people who have great intentions, but aren't always informed by best practices that you talked about. But in a world where there are many children outside of the realm of a safe family, what do you believe is possible? And what do you believe is next in this movement, as we continue to learn and lean into the voices of adult adoptees or adults that were raised in care?

Jedd: Well, of course, there's so many different threads, we could we could follow with that, Lauren. You know, one of the broader, you might call it a framing thought is, I really believe that in than that, in all of the Christian life, we are called to grip side by side two things that seem to be opposite. You could almost call these polar truths. They look and sound like they're actually in contradiction to each other, but that to live well and wisely and effectively, we have to grip both. So for instance, in the Christian tradition, that's we are deeply committed to justice, but we also believe thoroughly in mercy. And we believe God is the God of justice. And He has also got a mercy. And it's not even that he's like, kind of just or kind of merciful. He's fully just fully merciful. And Jesus came full of grace and full of truth. And we are to live in the world but not of the world. And, and there's all of the many, many different things where we're grippingly seeming opposites. And when it comes to this question of just the ways in which God's people and those who you know, as well outside of the church have sought to serve the vulnerable in a whole host of ways, and here, we're talking about vulnerable children and orphaned children, and struggling families, that we can look back. And we can see many ways in which they made mistakes along the way. And in fact, if we've been in it long enough, we can look back at ways we made mistakes earlier on. And, you know, one tendency in that is to just sit in harsh judgment of others, and maybe of ourselves, or of those around us who don't quite get it, you know, that the things that we've just figured out, they're still doing it. And now we're sitting in

harsh judgment, we may speak of them with a lot of sarcasm, and think of ourselves as very sophisticated because we're sitting in judgment on others.

And of course, on the one hand, we should absolutely be in a place of continual critique of ourselves and knowing that probably we do have blind spots even right now, you know, Lauren as long as you and I are talking there are certain things that we assume to be true that probably are not at least not the best way of doing things, but we're thinking about them, right. So there's a humility there. And we think about things that came before with, "Hey, we could do those things better. We want to grow."

But at the same time, knowing that God calls his people not to sit on the sidelines because we're afraid of making a mistake. Because the only way not to make a mistake is to stay on the sidelines. And that's not what God calls us to. That's actually in the parable of the talents. The guy who was so afraid of making a mistake, he buried his talent. And at the end of the story, he had that talent left, he preserved, he hadn't made a mistake, in a sense, but he was the one who the master, you know, criticized most severely, because he hadn't been willing to risk. And I would say, in this space, we need to be willing to do that, even as we're continually saying that I want to continue to improve, I want to guard against that. And I do see that across this field of Christian adoption, foster care, orphan care, you know, there's been immense maturing and a deepening of the vision and growth over the past couple of decades, and still happening and still growing. But I, you know, I celebrate that, and the blend of the humility and the self critique, while also being still willing to risk boldly, because that's where God calls us to be.

Lauren: I hope that everyone will rely on this conversation as we dive into some of the really heavy and dark places of critique within this movement during this season. Because I think what you're calling us back to is what we know to be true. And what we know to be just, and what we know to be an invitation of transformation for ourselves and for the world that's in front of us. And that can sometimes get lost with our bitterness and our frustration and our critiques, right? It takes a lot of it takes a lot of delicate tenacity.

Jedd: Talk about seeming opposite, right? Yes.

Lauren: I'm saying you know, I am, I am absolutely committed to best practices. I am also absolutely committed to seeing justice and mercy pouring out the floodgates. And that is not always an easy place to sit in. I've never heard anyone put it quite like you have in describing the Christian walk. We talk about tension a lot. We talk about ironies in scripture. But how that is never going to be something that we overcome, in our walk with the Lord that we are grasping, not just holding, but grasping both ends of ironies together, and that that's what sharpens us and makes us makes us better and brings us closer to the heart part of God.

Jedd: Yes.

Lauren: Well, Jedd, thank you for helping lay a foundation for this, this conversation that we'll have this season for all of the nuanced areas we will go into and whether that's with, you know,

children in care in the Global South, whether that's children who are being trafficked for adoptions, whether that's people navigating infertility, and all of the all of the dark places that people don't really want to go into. I've said, you know, in my intro, this is the most nervous I've ever been to put content out into the world because it is so sensitive, and the stories are so intimate, and the needs of families are so unique. And I'm thrilled that CAFO will be in Nashville next year. So you guys have registration already open for 2024. I am planning to register. And I would love to know what attendees can expect next year? What...Where are you guys going in the next year? And what can people expect?

Jedd: Yeah, well, you know, what I what I mentioned early on, just in terms of we're always seeking to bring together that of the very practical nuts and bolts of how do we do these things, with ever greater effectiveness and wisdom, well informed by both the best available science and scripture, you know. So a lot of the work...we will have probably more than 100 workshops, where we're doing that and they're taught by people who most of whom are in the trenches, you know, these are not kind of armchair quarterbacks sitting with theory, but people who are in the midst of the real tangle of it all, and yet have have learned a great deal in that. So we love that part of it. But then at the same time, we also are talking a lot about the roots of things, what are the core practices of our life that sustain us in the long hard work of justice and mercy and and seeking after the heart of God because, you know, we believe that the the Wellspring, that core tap root of everything else, is a deep and pervasive sense of the love of God. That before anything else— before we've done any justice work and, you know, feel good about ourselves because we've done this or that...Long before that is that far deeper reality of God's pursuing us, and if we're motivated by anything else, it will not last. This work is too difficult, too challenging. I think until Jesus returns, there will always be, you know, deep hurt in our world. And yet, we're called to be present in that, to share in it, share in both the hurt and the beauty.

And the only way that we can do that for a lifetime is if we are receiving life from God. And the great news is, that's God's heart. He is the Good Shepherd who delights to lead us beside quiet waters and restore our soul. And so at Summit, we always seek to remember those things and hold those things together, the practical work with the wellspring of it all.

Lauren: Wonderful. I hope that people who are listening are encouraged to know that if you are not an adoptive parent, if you're not engaged currently with the foster care system, that there are ways to support families. I have had people come and wash my dishes, I have had people bring us bring us food, I have had people, you know, support our family financially, just the host of ways that it really does take an entire ecosystem of people to support one another and hold up our arms as we seek to love others. If people want to get involved with CAFO as we wrap up, how would you want them to get involved? Or how would you invite them to get involved in what you guys are doing?

Jedd: Yeah, well, you know, so of course, I'd invite them to our website cafo.org. And then there's a whole host of different initiatives that involve many different organizations and members of the alliance working together to address that. And so depending on the aspect, the areas of this field that you're engaged in there, there'll be something for you, you know, whether

if you've focused on foster care and desiring for whether it's your individual church, or networks of churches in a region, to work together to engage the foster system. That's the "more than enough" initiative. So if you're interested in that, "more than enough" is your thing. But then if you're interested in effective care for children and families globally, we have the "center on applied research" for vulnerable children and families. So that's a space if you're interested in helping the global church, as it really plays the lead role in serving vulnerable children and families of that place that it's the church of Guatemala, of Ethiopia, of the Philippines. That's the "case of global networks." And there's a number of other initiatives as well, that depending on your heart and your sense of God's leading, we would love to plug you into with a sense of both that there are things that these others that are already involved can share with you and strengthen you and your work. But of course, we believe that ultimately you have gifts to share as well. And we would love for those to be a part of the community also.

Lauren: Thank you, Jedd, thank you for taking some time with us today. It's such a joy to get to meet you and to get to hear a bit of how your hearts have been formed around this issue.

Jedd: Thank you, Lauren, and a joy to be with you.