Transcript 200

Jeff Laird

Hi, welcome to the Got Questions podcast. My name is Jeff. I am the managing editor at bibleref.com. And today's episode is a special one because it is our 200th podcast that we've put up. I have two special guests with me today. They are Shea Houdmann and MeLissa Houdmann. And they are the Co founders of Got Questions. And presumably you've seen them before in other podcasts but today we're going to take an opportunity to hear from them about some of what the history of this ministry has been like. Now for those who for some reason might be coming to this for the first time, the Got Questions Ministry family has been around since 2002, so this year we're celebrating 22 years. And we've managed to put together a tremendous number of resources. And at this point in 2023, we're talking 361 million page views, 7,000,000 app sessions, 4 million gospel presentations, 500,000 YouTube subscribers, and so on and so forth. It's gone from something that had to start somewhere into a really major phenomenon. So Shea, MeLissa, thanks for being here today.

MeLissa Houdmann

Good to be here.

Shea Houdmann

Thank you Jeff.

Jeff Laird

So the first question I had for you guys was the just a little bit of the sense of pre Got Questions. So what was what was life like? What was everybody doing before Got Questions Ministries was a thing?

Shea Houdmann

So it was probably late 2001 that I had graduated from Bible College and Seminary, and I was serving in our local church. MeLissa and I were both serving at Stonecroft Ministries in Kansas City, and Melissa was the writer, and for their Bible study program. And I was the supervisor of the shipping department, so not exactly using my biblical and theological training much. And so we were really just praying Lord what would be a ministry that would be a perfect fit. What was something that we could use to the training you've given us, the passion you've given us, our love of technology, our love to write. So it's really like the ministries we're serving in which we loved and still do, were driving us to something more. The ways that we were serving them was like, you know, it would be even better if we could serve God in a more direct form, especially for me.

Shea Houdmann

So we late 2001, we've been experimenting with putting a simple Bible question answer page on the Internet. And at the very, very beginning was actually called Theology 101. And there was an old site called Geocities where you would you would build a website next to the people's websites kind of picture like a city block. I don't remember who we were next to, but the very first iteration of Got Questions was there. And it was in February of 2002 that we purchased the gotquestions.org domain name and launched the site shortly thereafter. So we kind of view I think it's February 15th is actually the official anniversary of Got Questions Ministries. That's when you bought the domain name and launched that site. That's when it it really started to take off and we begin to see is like wow, this is amazing to see what God's doing. MeLissa, anything different in your recollection of the events?

MeLissa Houdmann

That's so long ago, but do you remember how we picked the name?

Shea Houdmann

I do.

MeLissa Houdmann

You remember? OK. We were sitting on the couch watching TV. And if for those of you who are really old like us, you'll remember that there was these got milk commercials.

Jeff, do you remember those?

Jeff Laird

I do, yeah.

MeLissa Houdmann

And I'm like, hey, Shea, what do you think about Got Questions? He's like, I like it. And we spent like \$14.00 or something like that and bought a domain that day and. And so that's how Got Questions was birthed. And you know, it's funny because I I think a lot of people think that we, like, started Got Questions on purpose. And God started Got Questions on purpose. We didn't. We started Got Questions as a hobby, something to do for fun in the evenings after we got off, you know, our real ministry jobs. So yeah, it's it's a story of God taking something that was really small, an idea that two kids had two well, early 20s and building into something really big. And it's it's been a fun ride.

Jeff Laird

And that's part of what I think makes this interesting is you started this as sort of a hobby, sort of a side thing, but how, how quickly, how busy did that, did that get? Did you just start with articles or answering questions? What was? How did the first, you know, little baby growth happen?

Shea Houdmann

Originally, gotquestions.org was a one page website. And the home page had a ask us your any Bible question you have and there's a form there where someone could ask a question, literally one page. I guess there was a landing page if someone actually asked a question. So 2 pages total on the website. And first few months, very little traffic was coming in, but then eventually the search engines that existed. Notice I said plural back then there were way more than just Google started to recognize Got Questions and people more people started

visiting the site. So then we started getting 10 questions a day, and then 20 questions a day, then 30 questions a day.

MeLissa Houdmann

Yeah.

Shea Houdmann

So it's like, wow. So that opened up two new avenues of the ministry one, we started realizing that we need help. I remember MeLissa and I, we'd we'd work all day long, come home. We had bought a laptop computer and a desktop, so I'd be on the desktop, she would be on the laptop. Between the two of us were trying to answer all these questions ourselves, so we started building up a volunteer team of people we knew from Bible College and different pastors and friends we knew. Hey, here's what we're doing. Would you like to help? Then also building up starting to add some FAQs to the website so that we started seeing the same questions coming in again and again. You know it probably should be better for people if they could find the answers instantly on the website rather than having to wait for us to be able to respond in a few days. So that was kind of the volume that increased traffic really drove us to make some changes that would eventually drive the ministry to even more and more growth.

MeLissa Houdmann

And and Shea, I think two of our very first volunteers still serve the ministry all these years later. Kevin, who's on the podcast, right. He's he was one of our very first volunteers and also my dad stepped in and helped us at the beginning. And he's still serving as well. So that's pretty fun to think about.

Jeff Laird

Yes well, I you can tell that there was a lot of rapid growth in that sense because if you were starting this in 2002, I first became acquainted with the ministry in early 2004, which is when I started as a volunteer as in April of 2004. So already by that point within two years and a few months it was significant enough that it had articles available and you were looking for more

volunteers for the Q&A team. So it seems like it took off pretty quickly when you were in that phase. Maybe ask MeLissa from your perspective what what was hard, what was easy, what seemed like it was impossible in those first couple of years of working with Got Questions.

MeLissa Houdmann

Well, I think the first thing that happened that was challenging for us was just the sheer amount of questions we were getting and Shea kind of briefly talked about that. But also is that we didn't have any money. So I remember the first time we needed to like, buy a computer or buy something we're like I wonder if we could like could this be self-sustaining? You know? Is this something that we could do as like a job? And that was like so overwhelming to think of that that God could use the Internet one, to reach people for Jesus, that was totally unheard of back then right? And then two, that we could use this as like a real ministry job. And that God could use that in both of those ways to help people to serve him, but also to reach people with the gospel. Another thing, way back then we used to have a chat and we would sit down. We would have chat hours and so it was like, you know, 9:00 to 12:00 central time on Tuesday nights we would chat with people. Well, that got to be really hard because all these teenage girls would come and complain about their boyfriends. And so he came like this, this like, call in radio show almost. It was horrible. It was so hard. So that's what I remember about that time that we just tried things to see if they would work. And then we were like, OK, I can't do that. I am not cut out for that. And so we would, you know, change the strategy a little bit.

Jeff Laird

I don't. I don't mind the sound of that. Maybe we could cook up something like a like a dear Shea sort of thing like a Facebook live. And, you know, just tackle it there.

MeLissa Houdmann

No. Don't do it.

Jeff Laird

No. OK, alright. No more suggestions like that. At some point in time, there was a recognition

that this was not only going to take enough time, but that it could be self-sustaining. And there was a move to actually doing this as a ministry, how did that? When was this? What flipped the switch on that?

MeLissa Houdmann

Someone tried to give money, I think is what happened, right, Shea?

Shea Houdmann

Yeah. So I could probably find the e-mail, because I know I saved it somewhere. This individual who I had submitted dozens upon dozens of questions, and wrote in and said so I've had these questions for many, many years and you are the only one who's ever like, given me satisfactory answers to these questions. I'd like to make a donation. Are you tax deductible? I was just like, hold on a second. You want to give us money to do this fun little hobby that we're doing? So MeLissa and I just sat down. Its like OK, wait a minute. How does this work? I have no clue how to become tax deductible. Really. Had no idea at that point. So. Then we have to establish a board of directors, apply for the 501C3 paperwork with the IRS, and do take all these important steps to get to the point where we were tax deductible. And then he he made a donation. I have no idea how much it was. It seemed generous at the time. But yeah, that was kind of the first hint. And even then like kind of as MeLissa alluded to, our thought was never that we would draw a salary from it. It would be, well, at least the ministry could buy its own laptops and those sorts of things. So but for the first couple of years really, MeLissa and I were funding Got Questions out of our own pockets. Just the minimal expenses we had. So yeah, that I think the fact that once he donated and then once we put a donation page up online, I think it was only PayPal at that time and more people started donating. We're like, Lord is this is this you saying that this could be much bigger than what we originally thought. So that was kind of like the wake up call so to speak.

MeLissa Houdmann

Yeah. And and Jeff, I also saw what kind of joy it gave to Shea to have a job that, like, fulfilled him so well and all of his skills and abilities. You know, his, he, he's a great writer and, you know, and it's it's really hard to make money as a writer and even to, like, pay your bills and pay your rent, you know. So to see, to have something that he just brought him so much joy I was like, we have to figure out a way. Is is this really God saying hey this is what I want you to do so.

Jeff Laird

And there came a point in time where you decided that that was going to be, at least for Shea, that was going to be your actual job. So it went from being a hobby to a part-time secondary thing to a full time. Was that a quick transition or was that sort of a grad? Was that catch you by surprise? Like, wow, I definitely need to devote all of my time to this.

Shea Houdmann

It's one of those things where God grew it slowly but surely over the amount of time from the time we launched it was really almost 2 1/2 years later that the ministry had enough funding to start paying me a a very modest salary. To make a long story short, we were still living in Kansas City, MO at the time when we launched Got Questions and I was from Colorado, really wanted to find a way to move back. And God eventually opened the door and another ministry here in Colorado Springs offered MeLissa a position. And the CEO of that ministry was a big fan of Got Questions. And so offered to both give me free office space in their suite. So and then that little extra funding for Got Questions so I could start doing it full time. Because when we actually stepped out in faith. And the Got Questions board approved me a salary. And we had enough money in the bank to pay two months of my salary. And there was not a huge salary. Trust me on that one. And in that history, you're 20 years later, since we actually started paying an employee, Got Questions, has never had trouble paying anyone's salary. So God has just been so faithful to confirm as we've grown slowly but surely over the years, strive to be good stewards, strive to set reasonable budgets and all of that. This is amazing to watch how God

provides with it. It's stepping out in faith to leave a job with the larger ministry with steady income to something others enough money in the bank to pay you for two months to see how it goes that's the.

MeLissa Houdmann

Yeah. And and Shea a lot of people thought we were crazy. No one really understood the Internet, right that this could be an actual something that was going to be sustainable for a long time. Is this just a fad? Right. So, yeah, I think a lot of people thought we were crazy, but God told us to do it. So we did it.

Jeff Laird

I can understand that. I had a Google blog for about 7 seconds and that was hard enough for me to to mess around with, you know. So I can imagine why people might have thought that. But I do see that there's this, there's this theme that's happening in what you're saying so far and what we've seen in the history where there's this steady constant growth. You guys just keep plugging in and keep working at it and things just continue to go. Now at some point in time you get from one website, which is gotquestions.org. And now Got Questions, has Compelling Truth, and Seek Find, and GQ kids, and 412 teens, and Bible ref, and a podcast, and YouTube. What was the the process that you started to get to? You know what? What made you feel like? Yes, we can or we should start to expand what we're doing?

Shea Houdmann

So the very first website, in addition to gotquestions.org that we launched was actually seekfind.org which we found, we go to Google or another search engine and search for a certain Christian topic that help us to write an article and we'd find good sites mixed with bad sites. It's like, why don't we just create a little internal Christian search engine that only indexes trustworthy Christian sites? And then we played around that eventually got something that worked pretty well, and then with you know this might actually be a good tool for people at large. So then we made it actually public, so people started doing it. And the second site after that that

we launched was actually the site, our site for kids, GQ kids.org, where tried to take the answers that we have on GotQuestions.org but communicate them in a more kid friendly format. So those were the two first sites we launched after Got Questions. As you said shortly thereafter we launched the site for teens, 412 teens.org, compellingtruth.org which is that a site with a little more of an apologetics and worldview focused than the others. And then eventually we had a a blog site for a while that eventually we kind of realized that I don't know the vision for this site actually fits our strategy. So it's actually still in existence that at blogs.org, but it's we're not actively building up that site anymore.

Shea Houdmann

But then later we launched them bibleref.com which Jeff which you are obviously thoroughly familiar with. Which is the verse by verse Bible commentary where any time someone goes to Google and searches for what does John 3:16 mean? What does Philippians 4:13 mean? We want to have an article on every single verse in the Bible that it explains that verse, but then also explains it in its surrounding context as well. And then it's it's grown over the years to yeah, OK people are finding us through Google through searching, how are people finding us on YouTube? So launch a YouTube channel where we create video based versions of our articles. Obviously in our history is when the iPhone came out and suddenly apps became hugely popular. So we launched apps for iPhone and Android so.

Shea Houdmann

It's not like an official slogan or anything, but it's kind of like wherever people are searching for truth, for biblically based answers to spiritual questions, we want to be there with content. So is what drives multiple websites, multiple avenues of getting our content out there. And just we want to be used of God. We want to be there where people are searching because just like every other mission field, the Internet is a spiritual battlefield. We're dealing with cults, we're dealing with Christian ministries or churches that don't teach the truth of God's word, or at least don't teach it very well. So we we just want to be there with the truth presented in love. Answer

questions biblically, that's always been our focus and passion. So wherever the Internet goes, we will strive to be there with solid biblically based answers.

MeLissa Houdmann

Yeah. And and Shea, I think if you look back at our history, I think it's of God asking the people and the staff have Got Questions to do the next thing. You know what? How can you be faithful in the next step? What's the next step? What's the next step? It's not like, oh, we knew we were starting this huge ministry. No, it was be faithful in whatever's next. And I think that kind of explains a little bit about that history. You know, it wasn't like, hey, start 250 languages tomorrow. No. How about you start Spanish? You know, it's just it's just a story of God asking us to do the next thing faithfully.

Jeff Laird

What I see when I'm talking to people sometimes about the ministry is a lot of people see what they see, they interact with it, but it's it's one of those situations where people typically they only grasp what they interact with. So you know, people think of the website, they think of the answers and stuff, but sometimes they don't realize everything that's behind this. So to make sure that people understand who are watching and listening, this thing that Shea and MeLissa started is is not still currently being operated by two people. This has grown and required resources to the point that there is a staff of people to do different things in the background. There's a small army of volunteers working with the Q&A. So one of the things I can say from my perspective of seeing that is that you've not only developed something that's provided answers, places for people to seek truth. But they are ministry opportunities for other people who are looking for that. That's something I don't know the people always understand that it's it's not just type something and press send. There is there's web development and there's servers, and there's translations, and all these things that go on behind that. And obviously that stuff not pay for itself. Has there ever been a time where there was a real concern

that something wasn't going to work or that Got Questions was just not going to have the funding?

Shea Houdmann

Each time we hire a new employee, especially in the early years, was for a few years, it was just me. I mean, once the the board approved bringing me on as an employee, me or no MeLissa Houdmann

And a lot of volunteers, right? Yeah.

Shea Houdmann

That's what I have, me as the employee and a ton of volunteers. The first time we hired someone else says OK, not only is my livelihood depending on this ministry, now I'm asking someone else to step out in faith. And doing that is another stepping out in faith in and of itself. And so hiring our third employee, our 4th employee, our fifth employee, and now we're up to 12 employees. Praise God. I'm so grateful for the Got Questions team. That even beyond that, a dozen or two contractors who serve the Lord in different ways, whether it's video production or translations or writing or editing or programming or development or so many different things going on there. And then an army like you said, a small army of about 200 volunteers who answer questions, who write articles and so forth. There are hundreds of people who are involved in Got Questions Ministries on a regular basis. Let alone not even talking about the approximately 16 million people who visit just gotquestions.org, our our main website every month. It's it's tremendous. It's the the verse in I believe it's First Peter, where God is doing immeasurably more than anything we can ask or imagine, and that's truly, truly the case with Got Questions Ministries.

Jeff Laird

I have seen a lot of people ask questions about that aspect, sometimes of the ministry, especially in that conversation comes up. And something that I think is unique and you guys can correct me, maybe if the phrasing of this isn't accurate, but the the way that Got Questions was

funded originally is effectively exactly the same way that it's funded today. This is not a ministry that does a huge amount of advertising revenue. It's pretty much all people who have come to the material and said this has really helped me and I want to be able to keep going with that. Is that a fair assessment?

MeLissa Houdmann

Yeah, I think you're exactly right, Jeff. The majority of our funding comes from people who have been helped from the website. You know, people will often say, you know, I had this list of 150 questions and I took them one at a time and went straight down the list and you guys were faithful to answer every single one. And here's \$50 or here's \$30 a month. Or or a church that would say, hey, I really, really appreciate what Got Questions does for not only for our congregation, but for in as an outreach, as a mission, biggest mission field in the world, right is the internet. And so we want to support that. And we're very grateful for all the donors. We couldn't do it without you. So thank you.

Shea Houdmann

Approximately, at this point it's about 90% of our income comes from donations. And there are a few foundations that support Got Questions, a few church administrators. But of the 90%, I'd say 90% of that is this individual donors who Jeff, exactly as you and MeLissa have said, just have been blessed, spiritually benefited by the ministry and want to give a donation as a thank you. And truly, you're right, we don't charge for anything. There's absolutely nothing on the website that cost any money. And a lot of people really appreciate that because you know everything we do to some extent cost money, but we don't charge anything and it's my absolute goal and passion to never charge for anything. Just to give everything away. Give the content away. Make it available to as many people as possible. And just trust that God will provide. And he's been so so faithful to do that in our history so far.

Jeff Laird

One of the the joy sometimes of serving and ministry is there's hard times. There's difficult things that you have to do. There's moments you have to get through. But one of the things you also do get in return for doing that is you get that sense that you're doing what God wants you to do, and there's a blessing behind that. What? What do you you start with, MeLissa, what do you find most enjoyable right now about the work you're doing with Got Questions? What is the thing that most sort of fills up your spiritual cup?

MeLissa Houdmann

Yeah. So right now my main responsibility, I have two responsibilities. One is I manage the kids site, GQ kids.org. And for that responsibility, when a child comes on and asks the question, often with the help of their parents, I'm assuming, but and then gets the gospel for the very, very first time man that makes everything, every single thing working worth it. That is just such a blessing to be able to lead anyone but in my case, mostly children to the gospel and say, here's what Jesus did for you. You know, do you believe this? And that's just a blessing. And then to hear them say, wow, I get it, right. I love that.

MeLissa Houdmann

And then I also do social media for Got Questions. And that's a little harder, but there's a lot of people on social media who share our content, share our versus that we present each day, and are truly thankful that we're giving them a tool that they can reach their friends with the gospel. Because that's why we're here, right? We're here to help people understand God's love for them. And what he did for them on the cross. So if we have a tool that can help someone do that with their friends and family, I'm and that just brings me joy.

Jeff Laird

Shea, how about you? What's the thing that, and this is a sort of an interesting question from Shea's perspective because he's the man with all the hats. He's the dude in the middle of the web holding a little thread with everything attached to it, so you have quite a few things to

pick from. But what's the thing right now that you feel like is the most fulfilling part of what you're doing with the ministry?

Shea Houdmann

Boy, let me answer the other side of that. As the ministry has grown, the administrative aspect of it has grown as well. And I I just being fully honest, I don't particularly enjoy that part of it. I know it's necessary. I know it's necessary for the leader of organization to handle that sort of stuff. So I'm happy to do it. But just recently I've been refocusing myself on actually like writing articles again. I've been writing articles all along, but the last few years it's been significantly less than it was in the past. And and just being able to, oh, this is a cool question. I think there should be an article on the site. I'm going to write an article on that. And as a CEO, I can have the prerogative. I, I can choose which ones I want to write, which ones I want right to make other people write so.

MeLissa Houdmann

Make Jeff write the ones you don't want to write.

Shea Houdmann

Something about camels, Jeff. Isn't that right?

Jeff Laird

What else? What else is new?

Shea Houdmann

So just truly the exact, the one thing I enjoy the most about serving at Got Questions, the same thing I enjoy the most when first launch is it's getting to answer people's Bible questions. And truly someone has a question, that's a great question. I want to answer that. And then the answer it for someone personally, but then also then answer it and publish on the website and know that you'll eventually be read by thousands of people. That's just so rewarding and encouraging. And then hearing back saying wow, I'd never imagine that Got Questions would already have this article, this question answered. So thank you for that. Hearing the the

testimonies of people have been impacted. So yeah, it's it's always for me been the same thing is I want to help people find answers to their questions about the Bible. So anytime I get to do that, that's that's what keeps me going, keeps me charged, keeps me excited about what the ministry and then watching the Lord take our feeble efforts and then using it in explosive ways, it's it's amazing.

Jeff Laird

I appreciate that you guys are taking the time to talk about this. The the last two questions I have for you guys are relatively brief or I'm gonna try to keep them brief. And one of them would be, can you give me a short description of something about working in a ministry like this that most people just would not realize? You know a sentence or statement that you could say people don't get that or people don't realize this. What's something that to you you find that when you talk to people about doing an Internet ministry, especially one that's as wide and far reaching is this that people do not expect. They don't understand until somebody tells them.

MeLissa Houdmann

Yeah, I'll start Shea. I'll give you. I'll give you a time to think. Since I work for the kids website gqkids.org, people are often surprised to hear that the questions we get from kids are harder than the questions we get from adults. Kids think very tangibly, very concretely.

Jeff Laird

OK.

MeLissa Houdmann

And so often it's it's very hard to answer their questions. And so that I think that would be the the first thing that came to my mind is that you know it's so important to answer kids questions. So important, but it's also kind of hard too. So it's it's a joy to do that, but it's sometimes very challenging.

Shea Houdmann

For me, a good sentence would be, no matter how big the ministry gets, actually hearing from people, is tremendously encouraging and and needed. The people who've like, I've been using your website for 20 years and I never even thought of like sending you a thank you. It's like well, yes we we've been thanked in our history probably a million times but that doesn't mean we don't want to keep hearing it.

MeLissa Houdmann

Yeah, it's it's very encouraging. It's very encouraging to hear from people.

Shea Houdmann

There are people behind these websites and who are receiving the emails and and we do receive some discouraging ones on occasion. So having that balance out with people who've actually have their lives impacted in positive ways is tremendously encouraging. We see the reports. I can see the reports that 16,000,000 visit people visited the website last month, but even hear from a handful of people in specific ways that we Got Questions as impacted them as tremendously encouraging to us. Powers us up to, we're at it for another day.

Jeff Laird

Awesome. Awesome. Well, I know another way that people can support is with prayer. So what would be the top prayer request or two that you guys would say people could be praying for for Got Questions right now?

MeLissa Houdmann

I would request prayer for our Got Questions staff and for our volunteers that they would not grow weary in doing good. That we would stay encouraged, and uplifted, and mentally strong, spiritually strong, so that we can continue the good work that we're doing.

Shea Houdmann

Amen. Absolutely, MeLissa. And to add to that, I'd say prayers for wisdom and discernment to know God's direction. There's so many things we could be doing. We want to go where God is moving. We want to follow his lead in regards to what specific avenues of ministry

that Got Questions pursues. We just want his leading. And that's a lot of great ideas are presented to us, a lot of great ideas come from our staff. We don't pursue all of them. It's we really want to stay focused on what ideas are most in harmony with the mission, vision, purpose and values of the ministry that God has convinced us of so. That discernment we truly covet those prayers. In addition to the prayers for protection and encouragement that MeLissa mentioned.

Jeff Laird

Excellent. Hopefully people who are listening are gonna pick up on those.

MeLissa Houdmann

Yeah, and just that God would continue to use the site to reach people for Jesus. You know it's it's blown. I remember the first time Shea was in the office in our one bedroom apartment in Kansas City. And he's like MeLissa, do you think someone can get saved on the Internet? And I was like, I don't know. I I think so. And just to think that over the last 22 years, God has led so many people to salvation through a little idea that Shea and I had so long ago, blows my mind. And I I pray, I pray daily, that God would continue to use it. That the Kingdom of heaven would be enlarged from the efforts of our team and from the Holy Spirit working in their in their lives. So yeah, that would be another prayer I would add.

Jeff Laird

That's excellent. Well, speaking as somebody who's gotten to interact with the ministry on almost every conceivable level, I can say that there's a lot of appreciation for what you guys have started and the way you've continued to lead it with the integrity that you have. I appreciate it. I know the other staff volunteers appreciate it, volunteers and the people who use the site appreciate it as well. So today this has been the Got Questions podcast, our 200th podcast episode. Today, we've been talking with Shea and MeLissa Houdman the co-founders of Got Questions Ministries and talking a little bit about this journey that's been going on for 22 years now. Watching this grow from something in a little back room of an apartment to

something that's impacting the world, millions and millions of times over. So we appreciate prayers and hope that this has been helpful. Maybe enlightening. Give you a little bit of a different perspective on what exactly it means to have a ministry like this. So that's who we are, got questions? The Bible has answers. We'll help you find them.