



## How I Led During the Creek Fire | An Interview with Vicki Clason

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wildfires, so we'll be talking about that a little bit today. I grew up in this community and I feel a sense of belonging that I feel some loyalty and a deep commitment to making things work in our community, not just an award but our community. I've been released society president for four and a half years. Exactly. Wow. It was called out during general conference, April of 2017. And here we are, general conference again and I'm still doing this so that's a little bit about me. Yeah, awesome. And are you a native to California? I did spend some time in Utah, so I know how that works. I know what award looks like in Utah. Very different than our ward, which covers almost 2000 square miles. Cool. That's great. And we're going to get in a little bit of the story that you experienced, so you were, you know, when you recall was really site president doing your release site president thing. Where does a story start where suddenly you weren't just a really exciting president, but you're suddenly charged to lead in a different way. Where is that story start? Well, if dealing with the creek fire in the Greek world. Oh my goodness. That started probably Sunday morning. The fire actually started Friday night. And this was September of 2020. Number of 2020 Labor Day weekend. And the skies on Saturday were smoky, but we're used to that. And it was far away. So I wasn't too worried. Sunday morning, though, the smoke was thick. And we had scheduled a ward council meeting by Zoom. And one by one, you know how you have all the little squares that you can see. One by one, people with disappearance say, bishop, I have to go help so and so evacuate.

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Bishop, I need to go check on so and so on. People took the little squares just kept disappearing. And that's when I knew our ward was in trouble. People were needing to find places to go. And at that point, they were going to lower elevation, towns that are in our ward. Of course, we would find out later that those people had to be evacuated too, so some people were evacuated twice. Because they would go to a lower elevation with board members and then they were evacuated also. So that's where it began. And that's when actually this sounds really awful. I left the smoke was really bad and I got on the car with my daughter and I was taking phone calls and text messages had my notebook trying to keep track of where everybody was going and what was happening and who was under evacuation orders. And we drove to saint George where the air was clear because I don't do well in smoke. And I got a little rental, vacation rental, and I set up what I called evacuation and headquarters. I set up my laptop and just pretty much like always on my laptop, taking text messages and trying to keep track of where everyone was going. Yeah, so help us understand when someone needs to be evacuated. I assume the local government is coming to the door saying or through the news or whatever saying this area is being evacuated. And you have so many so long to get out. Is that right? Yes. Ideally, you have so long to get out. My family got about 20 minutes warning. Okay. They were on a warning evacuation. They put you on a warning evacuation notice, which means you should probably get out, and then you go into a mandatory evacuation. And our county had a very good system where you could go online and you could get alerts on your phone, so you would know. So yes, my family got an evacuation notice on Monday morning, saying warning 20 minutes later they said, mandatory, so they had to scramble. They were pretty much prepared. And I'm talking about my husband and my daughter who lives just next

door to us on our property. And it was this before you went to saint George. No, it was after. Oh, okay. So I was like, please get please get yourself packed. I wasn't there to help. I had already packed away things and anticipation of a possible evacuation. So I wasn't worried about my own safety or my own possessions, but I was worried about my daughter. She has three children and her husband was away at work. And that's how it was for a lot of people. They were on a warning for so long and you do what you can and then the mandatory evacuation comes. And you need to get out. And sometimes actually in the case of my family, the sheriff came and knocked on the door. And that does happen. Quite often, sometimes it's in the middle of the night. You see the lights flashing and they have speakers, you know, the bull horns saying, please evacuate. It comes in a lot of different ways, but you pretty much know when they're serious that you need to get out. So I'm just trying to put myself in your shoes with a really excited president. Suddenly, I would say your entire ward is told that they need to evacuate, right? And some people maybe have the means to drive to saint George and get a rental property. Other people have family they can go to. Other people have nobody, I would imagine, right? I am so glad that you are intuitive about the really complex situations created by this. We were actually our word was evacuated in different phases. They had different evacuation zones. So we were able to keep up on people here and there. But I have to just say how thankful I am for stake presidency, release society state presidency and our state president who had seen what was happening and immediately asked the members of our stake in Fresno, far away from the fire, not in danger of any evacuation orders, asked them to please volunteer to house people who didn't have a place to go. And he was able to house he had the capacity to have the ability to house every single member of our ward if we needed. We didn't need it, like you said, a lot of people found family. Some people had insurance that put them up in hotels if they could find one because we had a total of 30,000 people in our community evacuated. So hotels were booked. Somehow we made it work, but we couldn't have done it without members of our stake, volunteering their homes and we live in a rural area, ranches and farms, livestock.

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We had members of the state come up with trailers and tracks and halt livestock down and house them on their own property. Oh wow. Because that's their livelihood, right? Yes. Oh, it was incredible. The amount of livestock that was evacuated from our community just incredible. So a good portion of your steak was not under threat of the fire. Correct. Correct. And so a lot of those members just said, hey, I got an extra bedroom, send somebody here. And I imagine, that's what your mainly coordinating. Is that right? Yes. Absolutely. So what we did is we would contact each member of the ward. We would let them know just in case they didn't. We have a lot of elderly people to let them know you are on just to let you know your honor warning evacuation notice. Let us know how we can help you. If you need a place to go, please let us know. Please let us know where you're going. So we had a spreadsheet, and that's the thing I would recommend for leaders. It's possible to get a spreadsheet from the tools that we have the member tools. It was kind of clunky and didn't really work for what we needed. So we created our own. And we kept track of where the territory that you were living in, the evacuation status where they were going and we tried to just keep track of everyone that way to make sure they

were all in a safe place. Yeah. So you were into the system and you can export the role pretty much, right? With address and everything. And import it into a spreadsheet. And you did that, but it wasn't awesome. It wasn't awesome. Because and probably it's unique to us, but we have a lot of addresses. If we sorted by addresses, we have a lot of addresses that tell us that someone lives in, say, Clovis, California, but they actually live closer to prayer. California. So we just it was as easier for me. I just made my own spreadsheet. Yeah. And so you just manually entered that data or? I didn't. Okay. Interesting. I was in saint George, and that's what I did. While I was keeping track and we kept it on keeping track of everyone, we had text messages going between me and the bishop and the elders corn president, they were receiving information from ministering brothers and sisters if we didn't have a strong culture of ministering in our ward. I don't know how we could have done this. Because they were awesome. They were everyone reported on each other. Called one sister that I was just particularly concerned about. She was older and her husband wasn't doing well. And I said, I just want to make sure how you're doing before I could even get the words out. She said, I just want you to know that someone says okay and so on, so I was okay. And she listed all of the sisters that she had on earth assigned to her as a ministering sister. She wanted me to know that they were all where they were going and what was happening. And I had to say, but what about you? And she was like, oh, and I also know my neighbor. What about you? And she finally said, oh, yeah, well, I'm okay. I'm and my daughters, and I'm doing fine. And we're both here. Safe and sound. So that's the kind of culture we have in our ward that we look after each other. Yeah. And you mentioned these principles that you sent me that the first one being everyone, everyone that must be counted. And that's really what you are initially trying to do is how can we organize this in a spreadsheet so that we don't let anybody fall through the cracks and whatnot. So anything else that you would address as far as this principle of making sure everybody is accounted for. Everybody is accounted for, even those people that don't want to be counted. And so I had to make some phone calls to people that I knew didn't want to hear from me. And didn't always get answers and denoise have friendly responses, but I just felt driven. And I say I, that's my experience, but I know that bishop and elders corn president did the same. And we try to reach every single person if their name was on our rosters, and we tried to make sure that they knew we were here and we could help them if they needed it. And then so you're mainly just calling calling calling and a team of people calling people and just making sure everybody's accounted for, right? Yes, using ministry brothers and sisters using neighbors, Friends. We did whatever we could. Do we catch everybody 100%? We did not. But we did very well. Did you feel at all limited just by being sort of out of town or was it sort of nice that you could have a headquarters there to handle all that? It was a blessing. Yeah. It was a blessing I was out of the fray.

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If I was here, I would have been driving around trying to help people pack so it was a blessing to be kind of removed from it, so I could really focus on reaching out to people by phone and by text by email, however means we could Facebook Messenger. We used all means possible. Yeah. So it sounds like, and I'm just trying to pick out those principles, I'm just, you know, in the future, when a leader suddenly finds themselves in this crisis, whatever it is, to maybe think,

okay, we need to set up a command and control center where one person or a team of people can be even just calling people, right? Because it's so like you said, if I was in that situation, I feel like I'm going to get out there. I got to find these people, but sometimes to have a team of people that are calling is going to be well worth it. Yeah, I think it needs to be organized so that you have one central place where that information is going to be collected and recorded. And so I managed that quite a bit, but after I had my initial document created, I put it on Google docs so we could share it with the state president. And the bishop, elders quorum, president, anybody that needed it. And we all then worked on it as information came in. And so that was ongoing. And there was one point there was one point when I was alone because bishop had and this is a blessing. I didn't have to be evacuated, but bishop had to be evacuated. The elders president had to be evacuated. And at one point, and it was late at night when it happened. It was unexpected, a community that seemed to be safe and everybody thought well, good thing we live here because we're safe. Suddenly the winds shifted. And yeah, I was they were evacuated and unexpected, middle of the night, and then the state presidency stepped in with a relief society to take relief study presidency and helped record things. So yeah. Kept going. Yeah. So that's interesting. I'm just trying to think, you know and each natural disaster sort of different, right? Maybe if it was an earthquake situation, be a little different because that sneaks up on you pretty quick, right? But just thinking, identifying certain people in the world that maybe they don't have close family nearby that can get off site and start that focus of tracking down people because I would imagine if you're there, I want to make sure my brother is okay. My sister and my aunt and you know, and so you can't blame them for doing that, but somebody who can maybe fall into that position and get Colin is helpful. Absolutely. Absolutely. So next principle is the importance of gathering. Anything you haven't mentioned about gathering or yeah, so it was just really heartbreaking our initial document, we've finished up, see Sunday Night, I think I've finished it up and put it online. And the elders come president text and me and he said, I'm looking at all these names of our board members who are no longer in their homes. And he said, I'm just, I just want to cry. And I felt the same way because they were gone. They weren't in our ward boundaries. They weren't in their homes. And so there's a loss of this sense of community when you can come together and face a crisis together, that looks different when you're scattered and some people did go with family and different states and different cities all across California. We were scattered. So it felt different. And I realized it's because these word boundaries mean something. It means we're a community and we're meant to be together. We're meant to be able to meet together. And having that taken away from us, literally and scattered it reinforced me how important that is. That sense of community. So it sounds like the first priority obviously making everybody making sure everybody's safe and then the second is like offering strength through community and gathering. And so how did you about what did that look like on the ground? You know, that was really difficult. And finally, I decided to with the help again, bishop and I thought this quorum, presidency. I started sending out text messages and using Facebook to let people know where we're at. And one of the fun things that we did is on Facebook, I said, okay, let's have everybody report in, where are you? What's happening? And just hearing from everyone, well, I'm at my aunt's house. And we had people respond that we never see a church at and of course, I just invite them.

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We keep them on there. The Facebook page anyway. And it's like a word Facebook group. Award Facebook page and they, you know, it was just nice to have that contact. So I tried to do more emails. And I think about that time or shortly thereafter. I began a different way of emailing because in the past, I usually just send a little page announcements. My secretary does that. And so we created something a little bit more friendly, more color. I use MailChimp and created something that I hoped would make people feel like, you know, we're communicating. We're still together. And so I think communication is key. Really, just to let people now we're here. And then the stake put together a couple of nights where we could go to the different buildings and the stake and collect items that evacuees might need. You might have forgot your toothpaste or, you know, our ward, this seems silly, but our ward remembers this huge pile of pillows that people collected. And for some reason, we were just so grateful for those pillows because we were not, we didn't think to bring your pillow when you're evacuated. That takes a lot of room. And we were, we needed more pillows, so we were happy. So that was another way to gather also. For us to come and go and find those things that we might have missed. And I'm saying, we, I was able, I returned home after not too long being in saint George. I just couldn't stay. After I, after we had pretty much located everyone, I came and wanted to be with family. I just couldn't stay away. And so I went to some of those gatherings at the stake center and do you have any knowledge as far as some of those supplies and things that church humanitarian step in and was that a place for them? Or where did this I mean, if you needed a pillow or a toothpaste, like, where did that come from? Our stake, I'm going to get emotional. Our stake was so supportive. I've heard stories of people fighting over linens and target because they wanted to donate those to evacuees. So our ward had first pick at was just from our stake members. That's all. And they gathered so many things that in our ward had first pick and we took what we needed and the people who lost their homes had private shopping time and then the rest went to other evacuees in the valley. That's awesome. Really cool. Anything else around the concept of gathering that you seem to work? For us to work, we did have some community gatherings. We were actually under pandemic lockdown in California. We weren't even supposed to be in our we weren't supposed to have more than 8 people in our buildings at a time at one point. So we kind of just didn't pay attention to some of those things. We did meet outside and we tried to do what we could. But we had a lot of people scattered. So our gatherings were very small, but our community had a gathering. A huge gathering of everyone in the community and a lot of the ward members went. And found each other. And it just felt really good. So somehow to get work around whatever the obstacles are, it's important for people to gather. And I think because we didn't have as many opportunities to gather as we could have, we're now in the kind of the healing and recovery stage. I think it would have helped us heal and recover faster. Had we been able to group together an award meeting directly after the crisis and just talk about our experiences and know that we're going to loan. And so emotional trauma that some of us experienced. You know, I have some close friends up in Alaska and a few years ago, they had a pretty significant earthquake there. And they said that following fast and testimony meeting, there's this feeling everybody had a sort of stand up until their earthquake story, right? But as human beings are sort of this healing nature of coming together as a community and saying, this is what I experienced. What did you experience? And

then just creates this natural empathy that heals so much, right? So it's almost like creating that venue. And now maybe with less restrictions or whatnot, you can maybe gather people more closely or in rooms or split them up in groups and say, just talk about your experience because that can be extremely healing. It can be. And one thing that I did not really anticipate after everything kind of settled down, I thought, we're done, yay.

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Got through that. What I didn't realize is how many people really needed that time to gather they need more tools to heal, we have them. We have people who, when they're smoke in the air now, it is frightening to them. Or when there's a helicopter that goes overhead. So in a number of people are hyper vigilant about their fire safety around their home. There's just a lot. There's some I call it emotional trauma. I don't know what else to call it. It comes when you are forced out of your home and you don't know if you're going to have a home to return to. Yeah, that's part of it. It's not just leaving your home for a few days. You don't know if it's going to be ash by the time it comes back. By the time you come back, right? Exactly. Wow, that's heavy. Next principle is you have to talk about having these moments of inadequacy as a lead. This is a serious thing that you can't just carry a few leadership books and be prepared for, but that you felt that that grace of God baking up the difference as in your experience, tell us about that. Incredible. I there are a number of times. My daughter was with me at evacuation headquarters and in saint George, and there were a number of times I just said, I just can't. I don't know if I can do this. Why am I relief society president right now? I am not qualified for this. But something inside me just kept me going. And one of it is one of the things that kept coming to my mind is that these people are important to only father. And I just felt his loving hands. Embrace me, and I was living arms around me and just knowing that you just go one step at a time and you just keep going. You don't stop. You just keep going. And also, remembering I'm not alone. There's a bishop. There's an elder's corn president. There's steak presidencies. There's a release size steak presidency. Administering brothers and sisters were never alone in the gospel and were never alone as leaders. It may seem lonely. But we're not alone. And so I learned that despite my inadequacies, somehow, some way the lord will give each one of us what we need to get through a crisis or a natural disaster or whatever the case may be, whatever it may be. And I've learned that my four and a half years. And a lot of different cases when I have to solace. People after not too long before the fire we lost to mother and her children in a car accident. That was pretty traumatic. And I thought, well, I just there's nothing what can you do? What can you say? And somehow, you know, you're given what you need to get through it somehow. Was it perfect? Could I have done things differently, of course, but overall, I just felt personally like Henley father was not going to let me let anyone down. Yeah. So I know one of my own religious my own leadership experience, you know, in hindsight, I look back and think, I dropped the ball there and there, and if I did it again, I probably hand a little bit differently. So just in the context of this emergency, this may be a vulnerable question, but did you feel like you dropped the ball anywhere that you would maybe do it differently if it happened again? If I had to do it again, I think I would have been stronger about communicating to board members about what was happening in our ward. I didn't realize how important that was until I

just started doing a few things and people responded. Thank you. We had no idea what was going on. And so to let people know in the process of what was going on. And I think maybe being a little bit more creative about how we could have gathered together in the middle of a pandemic. We needed that. And I know that more now than I did then. Yeah. Yeah, it's really helpful. Really helpful. So and then on the word level, like has this changed how you prepare or because this type of thing could probably happen again, right? Anything on the ward level you're doing differently to prepare or anticipate something like this? Yes, actually, we're a little bit more mindful. We actually had a ward council about this not too long ago about revisiting our ward emergency plan. And to use more of the resources that are given to us through the church and through local communities, Red Cross, you know, I had no idea what.

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They did. Now I do. And I think I would be more inclined to look towards them for help, a little sooner. Also, we have what we have a number of agencies. But it was maybe just a matter of months ago that someone from the church just wanted to follow up on the creek fire and she contacted me and gave me links to a number of resources that I really didn't know existed that can help ward prepare for things. But I think. I think I would really, really make sure that ministering brothers and sisters know their brothers and sisters well enough that when there's a crisis that comes, they can say, hey, they've got a horse trailer or they're going to need help with this or just have the confidence to contact someone that we might not see at church, but you still know them because you've been administering to them in some way or another. So I think ministering is a huge factor too. So I don't know that I would do anything different there except maybe. Have a better way of communicating again where they could communicate directly with me instead of. Bishop elders quorum. We had so many filters by the time we got information, but they seem because it seemed to work. Yeah, that's really helpful. Well, any other concept or point that we haven't touched on to or do we cover it pretty well? I think we've covered it well. I would just like to say how much my heart goes out to those in California who are in the middle of wildfire. Evacuations right now, even as we speak. And who are going through the same things similar to what we went through. I just have a testimony of the savior's hand in our lives and the those who lost homes in our ward are seeing these miracles that lies I don't want to say have been blessed, but they've been blessed. The lord looks after them, there's a picture that I have of a totally burned home from one of our board members, but you can see clearly all the cans of food storage. She was prepared with her food storage, but it was all gone. But because she was prepared, I think the lord blessed her and her family and they are safe in a new home, something that they didn't think would happen. But things transpired that made that possible. And I think that's the same with leaders. That we can do all we can to prepare. We may not eat that food storage or we may not follow that ward emergency plan. But the fact that we've made our efforts made those efforts to do that, I think the lord blesses us, and then gives us whatever else we need to make things happen. Awesome. We'll make you the final question I have for you as you reflect on your time as a leader, how has being a leader made you a better follower of Jesus Christ? I think the fact that I think I'm a better at listening to his voice. I think that will be something I will keep with me forever is being able to feel the inspiration of our heavenly father. I

feel closer to Christ because I know that I have heard his voice, and I have heard and felt his inspiration in matters that I am not qualified to handle, and I have no other explanation. So I know he's there. And I have a firm testimony of Christ and that's why we're all here to bring others to Christ. And that concludes this how I lead interview, I hope you enjoyed it, and I would ask you, could you take a minute and drop this link in an email on social media in a text? Wherever it makes most sense and share it with somebody who could relate to this experience. And this is how we develop as leaders just hearing what the other guys doing, trying something out, testing, adjusting for your area and that's where great leaderships discover, right? So we would love to have you share this with somebody in this calling or a related calling, and that would be great and also if you know somebody any type of leader who would be a fantastic guest on how I lead segment, reach out to us go to leading saints dot org slash contact, maybe send this individual an email, letting them know that you're going to be suggesting their name for this interview.

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We'll reach out to them. And see if we can line them up. So again, go to leading saints dot org slash contact, and there you can submit all the information and let us know. And maybe they will be on a feature how I lead segment on the leading saints podcast. And remember, text the word lead to four 747 four 7 in order to access the three free sessions of the LGBT saints library. It came as a result of the position of leadership, which was imposed upon us by the God of heaven who brought forth a restoration of the gospel of Jesus Christ. And when the declaration was made, concerning the all and only true and living church upon the face of the earth. We were immediately put in a position of loneliness. The loneliness of leadership from which we can not shrink nor run away. And to which we must face up with boldness and courage and ability.