



## **Navigating Autism as a Church Leader | An Interview with Michele Portlock**

April 30, 2022

00:00:02 - 00:05:00

Hey, hey, any youth leaders out there? Serving with youth in the church is probably one of the most enjoyable callings, but it brings with it a lot of responsibility. How do we effectively lead this rising generation? Well, I have good news for you. Leading saints is organized the young saints virtual library where we have 20 plus hours of presentations all about how to lead youth. We cover topics like how to help youth transition into adulthood, how to help them avoid loneliness, how to handle smartphones in class, and we even go over scientific data about how latter day saint youth differ from other youth. If you'd like to review the young saints library at no cost for 14 days, simply go to [leading saints dot org slash 14](http://leading saints dot org slash 14). That's [leading saints dot org slash one four](http://leading saints dot org slash one four). While you're at it, we'll give you access to all of our virtual libraries that cover several leadership related topics. So click the link in the show notes or simply visit [leading saints dot org slash one four](http://leading saints dot org slash one four). Today I'm welcoming Michelle port lock to leading saints. How's it going, Michelle? I am doing great. How are you? Very good. I'm glad we could connect. This is after a series of emails and you first reached out. I forget how you were even connected, but here we are. We're connected. And you're a fellow podcaster yourself. Tell us about your podcast. Oh, thanks for asking. You know, I have a podcast called navigating the spectrum with Michelle portlock, which is who I am. That makes sense. So I actually bring on guests who are either autistic themselves or they are a professional in the world of autism or they are a parent of an autistic child. And the goal is just to gain insight into the world of autism and how to better support the needs of our loved ones. Yeah. And did you like this all start with you just being a parent of somebody on the spectrum or? Yes, it did. So I have four kids and two of my children are autistic. And I also have one of my children has ADHD. And you know, those are all part of what they call the neuro being neurodiverse. That's neurodivergent, individuals. And it's just the way your brain processes information. And it's unique. And personally, I love the uniqueness. I

gravitate, those are my people. And it definitely has to do with the fact that I am a mother of neurodivergent children, and that changes you. And I'm grateful for that. I like the way that I see the world now better than I did before I became a mom. I think I understand what these individuals are going through and experiencing much more than I did before. So that spurred me. I kept doing research on autism, and I eventually said, you know what? Why don't I go get a master's degree so that I can help my kids. It was for my kids. I didn't really have an intention of launching my own business, but then I did. I launched navigating the spectrum. So I work with parents, raising autistic children. And then that also turned into a podcast. Because podcasting is fun. Right? Yes. Everybody needs a podcast. Because what needs a podcast? I'm wondering if everybody does have a podcast. I want to assume nothing, start build a foundation here. When you say spectrum, like what do you even referring to in the world of autism? That is such a good question. So a lot of times when people hear the word spectrum specifically with autism, they think of a straight line and you are somewhere on that straight line. But that's just not how autism works. And you can't see my logo, but maybe I'll send it to you so you can take a look at it, but it's almost like a Venn diagram. It's multiple circles of different colors and they all overlap each other. And that's more of what autism is. It's my child might be non verbal, but they also have a high skill set in, oh, like maybe they have high intelligence and very specific areas. Like they're really gifted in patterns and voice recognition and things like that. And that sort of like The Rain man that we have. Yes, it is the autistic, but brilliant individual. Yes, yes. And but see, a lot of people, not a lot, but many think that that's what autism is period. But it's not. There's a spectrum and also, if your child is autistic and they are diagnosed nonverbal, it doesn't necessarily mean they will always be nonverbal.

00:05:01 - 00:10:04

And sometimes the non verbal is not only temporary, but it may also be that they pick up a few words here and there, but it doesn't lead to full verbal communication. And so they still call it nonverbal. And so, but my children, they would be considered low support needs, although as their mom, I highly disagree with that terminology. Yeah, they were there on those long nights. They were not there. But in all fairness, I mean, they don't have the physical limitations that can sometimes be present. And they also are very verbal. And sometimes that's caused trouble. But they are who they are. And they both, both of my autistic children present autism differently. And that's been a learning experience for me too. Yeah. So is it safe to say it's sort of like an umbrella diagnosis where obviously with, for example, the other diagnoses like being diabetic, there's type one, there's type two, but generally, when you have diabetes, you have diabetes, right? It doesn't vary as much your pancreas has issues and you need help there with insulin whatnot, right? Yeah, that's actually a really smart question because in autism, when they're officially diagnosed, the diagnostician will say your child is level one autism or has level one autism spectrum disorder or level two or level three. So there's three levels. And level one is the

would be considered the level with the least support needs. But the interesting thing is people keep saying, how come autism has increased? And there are a variety of reasons. And one is that people are doing a better job diagnosing it. And two is that they've actually like Asperger's is no longer a is no longer a term used in the DSM-V, which is like the mental health manual, which is where people will say, hey, insurance, or insurance, we'll look and say, is it in the DSM-V? Okay, we'll cover it. But if it's not, they won't. So, but Asperger's used to be its own diagnosis. But now it's been smushed under the autism umbrella. And some people were really unhappy with that. But so what's the history with the term Asperger's? As I've interviewed other people, I've known that it's becoming less and less of a term. It is becoming less and less of a term. And you know, I don't know the total extent of the history, but I do know that in 2013, they decided to get rid of that term altogether and just and just take Asperger's and say, this is actually autism. And we're going to put this under level one autism spectrum disorder. Specifically in the past when somebody was diagnosed with Asperger's, they were much more of an independent individual, right? It wasn't like an extreme diagnosis, right? Yeah, yeah, that's exactly right. And that would be my children. I mean, my oldest daughter is autistic and she's in college. So I mean, I've had to do a couple emergency drives to Utah. But she's surviving. She said adulting is hard, and I said, yes, it is. And off I went to go visit. So where's the intersection between the spectrum and our faith tradition and going to church and callings and assignments and activities? And I mean, where do we begin to understand this from a leadership standpoint in the church? That is such a great question. Because autism is a spectrum. I think it's kind of challenging to give it one specific direction. So I think first and foremost, what we need to do is take autism on an individual basis. And I think we need to better understand what autism is for each individual that we come across who is autistic. And I think once we understand their needs, then we're better able to show up and support them in the ways that are most meaningful to them. And so like if I'm talking about my daughter and by the way, she gave me permission to talk about her. She said, good luck, mom. And she's 19. And she has told us my husband and I that she has never actually felt the spirit because she thinks about information in black and white terms. And so feeling the spirit is abstract for her. She doesn't really understand so. She would come home, growing up and going to church. She would come home and say, I'm so frustrated. They said I would just know because the spirit would tell me I would feel that warm feeling well, I don't feel anything. I don't understand what they're talking about. And honestly, as a mom, initially, I thought, well, maybe she just hasn't heard it in the right way. That was kind of what I thought. And so I tried all these different methods of how do I, how do I teach this to her? And the reality is, for her, she may not fill the spirit.

00:10:04 - 00:15:08

That just may be something that is always abstract to her. And so what we do for her is we give her opportunities to be actively engaged within the gospel. And for us, it looks like this woman is

a need, let's go and see how we can help. It's physically actively showing up. And actually, I mean, it's what I said. It's just taking action. And so I'm trying to teach her and my son. He's got a lot of that in him too. Of that very literal thinking. And that is, okay, let's go and go to a nursing home and let's go and present music to them. And let's just go and take them little treats. And then we talk about it. Did you see them smile? Did you see we talk about what they noticed? And because it's all action for my children, those two, in particular. Now my youngest child, she's got ADHD and she talks about God all day every day. He's her everything for her. But it's not like that for all of my children. So I often hear in the context of the spectrum whatnot, that social social cues are a big miss for them, right? You may have an interaction with somebody and maybe you and I do that, we can pick up like, wow, they seem a little sad or the way they say that seems really aggressive. And that was strange. I wonder what that's about where maybe that's not as obvious to them. Is that a good way to say it? That is a really good way to say it. That's actually right on. And I feel like, oh, I feel like it's probably wrong of me to generalize the church across the board. But we are a community of people who strive to be kind. And to be accommodating and to make sure that we pay attention to how people feel. And to not overstep our bounds, all those things. But when you're talking about someone who's autistic, they're not necessarily some kids do, but they're looking at what is true and honest, and that's what they're going to share. And sometimes that stings a little bit. Yeah, because really talking about spectrums, other spectrums of some people refer to it as codependency or the nice guy syndrome or where we are trying to we naturally want to project a feeling onto people and making sure they're happy. Hey, we're at church. I'm going to smile a lot. I'm going to shake your hand. Are you glad you're here? I hope you feel comfortable here. And then maybe a leader that's on the spectrum a little bit. That may not make sense to him to do that. And then we kind of think like, man, he was sort of just a cold, yeah, very individual, right? It could come across as cold, but here's what's interesting. There's actually something so not all not all autistic people feel emotions like a typical person would. And that's actually not because they're autistic. It's because they have something called alexithymia. And so that term is, it is what it is. It's that there's a lack of awareness of emotions. It's hard to put yourself in someone else's shoes. But not all autistic individuals have alexithymia. So there are some autistic individuals who have so much empathy. And really can connect and relate, but they also might not read people. It's just you don't know exactly what each individual person will show up with or present. That's why it's why it's a spectrum, right? Yeah. And it can be tricky. And so my whole feeling is, and this is how I serve, this is how I try to serve. This is my goal serving as a release society president. I make no assumptions. And I also make no judgment. And so when people show up and it might be a little bit of an odd interaction, I think to myself, okay, that was one interaction, and there's so much I don't know. And I don't understand. And either it will come out or it won't. And that's up to them. But my goal is to help all these individuals, whether they're neurodivergent or not, to feel like they can talk to me, and I'm not there to judge them. That's not my job. So thankful that is not my job. I am so grateful that I'm not a judge in Israel. And that I can send them to the bishop if they need, if that needs to be what happens, but luckily for all the people in our ward, our bishop is just genuine and loving and kind and I'm sure that's more often than not so. Yeah. But I just feel like, you know, it's my job to listen to love, to learn to gather information, and I get to leave the judgment for someone else, not me.

00:15:10 - 00:20:25

So, and again, as we're talking about the spectrum, we could probably have several interviews on different parts of that spectrum. Interviewed my friend Stan Beagley, he has a non verbal son, autistic son. And it's a type of situation that you can't leave him alone. You have to find a caretaker and it's sort of this. And it's almost like those type of individuals, though, not that we're we do great with that generally speaking as a community, but I am more comfortable with that individual like, oh, there he is. I'm going to go smile at him, maybe I'll talk with him real quick and acknowledge the parents, hey, I see you. I see your son right, but then it's almost on the other side of the spectrum where it's so subtle that I barely pick up on it. And then I start making judgment in a different direction. And so would you say that most of our discussion will sort of be in that more subtle, what do you think? I actually think that's probably a good place to be. And for us today, here's why. What you're talking about, you use the word C and I think that's perfect. When we see, we know, but autism can be an invisible disability, something we don't see and we don't understand. And so often, my daughter and even my son, they've been the weird kids. You know, they're just, they're really weird, or that was really awkward, or wow, that was harsh, or, wow, I went away and my feelings were hurt, but the interesting part is that's never the intention of my children. When I talk to them, and I explain, I'll say, you know, I had a conversation with so and so, and seems like you might have hurt this person's feelings. They're like, what? What are you talking about? And so that becomes kind of socially confusing for them. As individuals, because they're not aware, they're black and white nature can cause hurt feelings. That's tricky. That's really tricky. Because they either end up confused or offended or both when you're trying to sort of build that bridge between the social accused that you picked up and that they miss and they're just confused. Like, what are you talking about? You live in a different reality than me. So here's what I like to do when we're in situations like that or to prevent situations like that. I usually pull aside a leader or a teacher or someone that is over my child in an adult capacity within the church. And I pull them aside and I explain my child is autistic, but not only that, let me tell you what that means specifically for them. And I tell them what to look for and what they might see or not see things to notice, pay attention to, like my son, he has anxiety, but it shows up in the form of silence. He doesn't, which is different from my daughter. His anxiety, he's quiet and he'll just be off by himself alone. Because it's so uncomfortable for him. And an unknown social setting, whereas for my daughter, she really wants to be engaged and so sometimes she'll throw out a comment that maybe others felt that didn't really belong here. You know, that comment doesn't really belong. And that's really hard for kids to not understand. It's like standing in a circle of a group of people who speak Spanish and you speak English and you don't know what they're saying, but you really want to be a part of it. There's just a lack of understanding. And so I think when I communicate with other adults and I try to teach my children to advocate for themselves if at all possible. But that can be tricky too, especially when anxiety is involved. Yeah. And so how do we approach these as from a

leadership standpoint, whether it's a primary leader or a youth leader or even a relief society presidency or whatever it is, because I don't know, I'm sure they don't like to be talked about or know that there's this committee discussing them or they're deciding how they're going to have enjoyed church or whatever. I know. It can be really a sensitive topic. I think it's just here's what I feel. If your child is autistic and they're in primary, it is so helpful to primary leaders for you as the parent to just show up and explain this to the primary leaders. And that can feel intimidating. It can feel overwhelming sometimes as the parent because as a parent raising a child, you do not want your child to be singled out and you don't want them to be the weird kid or the kid that needs extra or you just want them to feel loved and embraced and included. But what we learn is when people don't know, then they're less inclined to be more inclusive because they don't understand and so when they do have a better understanding and we're able to take the time to communicate, those very specific needs for each individual, then I think that understanding leads to love and love in the form of, I guess, let me give an example.

00:20:26 - 00:25:16

My daughter struggles with fully embracing the gospel. And I don't even know if it's a struggle for her. It may have been a struggle for me more than it was for her. She may have just said, yeah, this is how I am. In fact, I know that's what she's done. Is that who she is. But she comes to church with me when she's home from college because she feels loved by so many of the adults. So that is something that you can always fill. And for many years, she hated hugs. She didn't like that physical hugging, and I'm a hugger. And so what it taught me is I always ask before, do you want to hug? A high 5 or a fist bump. Or do you just want me to give you a nod like a what's up? And I've gotten all the responses and I'm never offended if it's something that doesn't match my own need or my own desire. I've just chosen to not be offended by that. And so I think that that's something we can do better at as adults. Let's choose not to be offended. Let's choose to say, maybe we don't understand the full situation. And as far as adults who are autistic, I think that is actually maybe trickier than youth that are autistic or can be because I don't know the adults walk around saying I'm autistic. It's nice to meet you. You know, I've never really had anyone do that, but I think it's safe to say if you have an interaction with an adult where you suspect they might be autistic. First of all, don't ask them. That's like asking a woman if she's pregnant. That's just not something that you do. But you could in your mind, you could maybe assume and show up in a way that creates more understanding and more openness on your part. And I think it just goes better for everyone. Yeah, yeah. I'm curious as leaders or teachers or whomever is trying to make a more welcoming place and a more positive experience, especially a church. Obviously you want to involve the parents. But is it is there some genetics involved here? Is it common that the parent may be on the spectrum in some degree? Yes. And so talking with them, they're sort of not like, what's the problem here? What's the problem? I don't see the problem with my child. That's actually a really great question

because yes, there are genetics involved. And I actually read a study a couple years ago. I wish I had it on me right now, but the findings were that it was almost 80% genetics. When we're talking, and it doesn't necessarily mean that it came directly from the mom or directly from the dad, but maybe the dad has some characteristics and the mom has a few characteristics, but they wouldn't qualify for autism diagnosis. But their child has inherited those characteristics and all of that together qualifies for an autism diagnosis for them. Yeah. But it can mean that their parent is autistic, too. It can mean both, or it can mean, in my case, I'm not autistic, and I mean, I don't know. I can't speak to the parent to the father figures, but I don't think so. Right. But it might be something just to maybe anticipate as you're having this, because I don't know, and several words I've been there seem to be, like there were some families that obviously had some autistic children and it was a very common maybe for them to be sort of in this family group that's just a little bit different than others. You can tell the way their household runs or they're the way they keep their yard up or they'll see they're just a little off their different and they're not bad, but you could tell that it was sort of this family thing, right? Yeah, yeah, like a little unique and it's a whole group, family mentality and you know sometimes that sometimes it's tricky and sometimes it's actually easier. It just depends because I have an acquaintance who's she's autistic and she has two autistic children and she's very aware of what autism is. And so I can talk to her and say, how do we meet your child's needs? And she's very upfront with me because she's gone through it too and she knows what she's experienced and what was helpful for her. Because sometimes when we show up and we're not autistic and we're trying to help our child as a parent and we're discussing that with another adult leader, it's a trial and error process. We're just doing the darn best we can, which is okay. That's okay too. At least we're trying. So yeah. What would you say as far as leadership and autism as far as, you know, it's easy for a bishopric to be in an office, you know, picking, you know, you're praying over names and callings and whatnot and it's easy to sort of dismiss some names because brothers are and so is really quite odd.

00:25:16 - 00:30:28

And I don't know if I want to put him in the driver's seat of some of these organizations or whatnot. And that sort of breaks my heart, right? Because we were sort of projecting this on them and every leadership has been such a blessing in my life. I want more individuals, not less, to be able to experience the blessings of leadership, even though they function differently than I do. But you've worried that if I pick this certain people, I want them to succeed because that will look good on me and so forth. All these human dynamics we deal with. So how could we better consider individuals on the spectrum for leadership roles and then how do we help them succeed in those roles? That's a great question. I think if we're talking about individuals specifically those that function with fewer needs, but are still autistic. I think that a lot of my daughter, she served in multiple leadership capacities, and here's the thing, some of her

incredible skill sets are just amazing organization. She takes notes in their color coordinated. You know, so she is very detail oriented. So I think when you're calling an individual, you look at sometimes often we're just going by we are prayerful and we just feel like this person needs to serve. And so if that's the case, whether it's that or we're like, we really want to give them an opportunity to serve. It may be that we need to check in more often and how's it going? What is this looking like? Is there anything that you're struggling with? Is there anything you want to talk to me about? And you may get some questions that surprise you. But you just have to be ready for it. And also, I keep using my daughter, but that's because my son didn't give me the okay and my daughter did. She, you know, she was extended a calling at one point and she said no. And I think that was surprising. And the leaders came to me and said, your daughter turned it down. And I said, okay, I will talk to her, but typically that means that you need to find someone else. I'm going to have to. Yeah, I'm not going to talk her into serving in this capacity. And so that can happen. And it's not, for her, it was literally that's not something that I'm comfortable doing. It was a comfort level thing. And who she is, it wasn't a place where she was able to push herself. In that regard. And they were great. They respected it. The leadership was very respectful of the no response. And they went on and they chose someone else to serve in that capacity and they did a fantastic job. And sometimes I think the beauty is in being asked. It's not always in saying yes. For some of these individuals who may have some of these additional needs, and the beauty of being asked is you feel wanted, but maybe you don't feel comfortable. And some of us who don't have these needs, we often don't feel comfortable when I was called as release society president. I thought, okay, so what do I do next? You can fill a little overwhelmed. That's very common. But I think it's tenfold or can be for individuals that are autistic, but also there are many autistic individuals that have so many fabulous skill sets that it works out really well. And they can serve in a manner that is so unique to them. And like I was telling you earlier with my daughter and her color coded notes and the spreadsheets that she'd create, they would meet together as a presidency and she would pull out all these notes. She had taken and they could just move into the next activity because nothing was missed. She doesn't miss any details. That's just how her brain works. So there's beauty in it too, so much beauty. Yeah. And I think it's just recognizing those sort of those superpowers that they bring to the table. And then maybe supplementing them with counselors or whatnot who can pick up on those other things that maybe they miss, right? I think. Yeah, I think that's right on. And I think we were talking a little bit earlier. Maybe you have a bishop or one of the counselors in the bishopric or maybe in a relief society presidency and maybe somebody is autistic, but they have these incredible skill sets. So maybe the other counselors are more aware of how to read body language or whatever that is that this individual might not pick up on. Like you said, you've got other people there to help support in those areas. Yeah. So I'm curious with I'm just thinking like positions like really study president ehlers quorum, being a bishop where high levels of empathy of emotional intelligence or I feel like we default to them, whether it's right or wrong, but we sort of want the bishop who's like, or the elders corn president who picks up like, oh, you know, rather so and so, it was just often, I'm gonna go sit by him and engage there and see if I can pick up on those things or an individual may feel like I need a bishop.

00:30:29 - 00:35:02

Like, I'm going through a hard time. I need a bishop who's extremely empathetic. You can really just embrace me and help me through this emotionally and not somebody who's very logical and whatnot. And you mentioned earlier that autism doesn't mean they're not empathetic, but I'm just curious in those roles where we really need an empathetic person. How would they respond in that role? So I would say, if I really stopped to think about it, and I hope this isn't offensive, but sometimes people are called to lead in specific positions because there are more or less, well, I actually have to backtrack on what I'm about to say. I was going to say, sometimes it's more for the person that's serving in that calling. They have lessons to learn. But I don't know that that's necessarily how I feel if I really, if I really step back and think about it, it's okay for us to make a few adjustments ourselves although when we are in places of real need, I do know that we need more empathy than non empathy. Right. And so that can be a little bit tricky to navigate and many, many years ago. I had a bishop who stood up and gave a talk in sacrament meeting. I think he offended half of the of the congregation. 'cause I was at the time in the relief society presidency there. I was one of the counselors and I had so many people come talk to me and I just said, you can dwell on it. If you would like to, and you can also let it go. If you would like to. So what do you want to do with this information? And I actually, I'm a little irreverent sometimes. I thought it was so funny. Because it was really off the wall. And maybe that was me being geared up to have kids that were that are autistic to actually let things go. I think we have to learn how to, I always say to my kids, drop it like it's hot. Because you can't hold on to that. You just can't hold on to that. But it is harder. I think for the congregation, when it's someone that's leading you and you really just need that love and attention and care that you might not get and it might be that you lean into the counselors more for that if you can. I think maybe that would be the only other option. And it would be okay to say bishop I'd like to speak with you, can I also invite your first counselor second counselor to be a part of this conversation? I think that would be totally appropriate. Yeah. So maybe an I don't know if I'm painting the wrong picture of making the assumption that it's okay that somebody on the spectrum is less empathetic. But does that sort of a general rule you could say? I would say that that is something that is I'm going to get in trouble. You're going to wake up to be like, no, I should have answered a different way. Why did people on Instagram hammer me? You look grace here, whatever you say, but I'm just curious. We're just exploring you're not the expert in up stuff. Yeah. You know what I would say? I would say that it's more common for autistic individuals to struggle with putting themselves in someone else's shoes. My daughter always says, she struggles with empathy, but she can show up with sympathy. And so she may not fully understand where someone is coming from, and oftentimes she flat out doesn't. But she can look at someone and say, they're clearly hurting, and I have sympathy for the fact that they're hurting. And I may not say all the right things. But I do feel sympathy. And I said to her, what's the difference? What's the difference between sympathy and empathy? And she said, I just can't understand why they feel that way. But I understand that they do feel that way. And I feel for the fact that they feel that way. Yeah. And she can sort of step into that. I'm so sorry. Your day is obviously going bad. Yes. I'm sorry. That's probably hard. Yes, exactly. That must be hard. I can see that's difficult for you,

which actually sounds a lot like a therapist, right? Yeah, yeah. So that might work out. I don't know, maybe. Interesting. Maybe people would comment on that.

00:35:03 - 00:40:03

Another crazy question, because I'm just thinking there are probably people out there who are extremely frustrated, for example, with their bishop. And they just like, this guy just doesn't get it. Every decision he makes, I disagree with and sometimes we just chalk it up to people are different or we may even go to a place of like he's just not a good person or whatever it is or childhood trauma or whatever it is. So what would and again, I know we're generalizing here, but just a mental exercise here. What would a bishop on the spectrum look like and act like? That's an interesting question. I think, again, I mean, like you said, we're generalizing because autism is a spectrum, and it's individual. Right. It's tricky. It's tricky to say exactly, but if I'm looking at if I'm taking my kids only, my two autistic children and many of the autistic kids from families that I've worked with, I would say there's going to be a more logical thought process that is more logical approaches, which actually can be super fascinating. It's a different approach and maybe it's a way to approach a topic or an issue that we have never considered. So in some ways, it can be extremely eye opening for those of us who would be considered neurotypical. So I think that there's some beauty in that aspect of it. And I think on the flip side, it could be frustrating because you may feel misunderstood. You might feel as a member of the congregation that you went to have a conversation and you were misunderstood. Yeah. That may happen. But I think the way we get around that is through really effective communication. And I don't mean to say get around it. What I mean is work through it. It's communicating. And that can be on us too. We are responsible for how we show up and how we choose to communicate. And we are also responsible for how we choose to absorb information that is shared with us. And I said it earlier, are we going to be offended by this? We actually get to choose that. Our instinct might be, oh, that hurt. And then we get to choose. Am I going to hold on to that? Or am I going to drop it like it's hot? Which is actually easier said than done. I don't mean to make light of it because some of those feelings really are intense. And we have to take time to work through those feelings, and that's okay. Yeah. And it would be okay. We don't do this very often within our faith. At least I haven't seen it too often. When we actually show up to a leader and say, look, we had a conversation and this was something that was discussed. And when you said a, B or C, I actually felt hurt by that. And I want to better understand where you're coming from. That actually takes a lot of emotional intelligence. And it takes a lot of vulnerability on our part, but it is a really effective tool that we can use. As a relief society president, I have had a couple people come to me. And of course, it is never my intention to offend to hurt to make someone feel anything other than love. And acceptance and inclusion, but it can happen even when we're not trying. And I've had a couple one or two individuals say, hey, I just, when you said this, I really, that hurt my feelings. And I so appreciate that because it gives me the

opportunity to explain where I was coming from. And almost always, well, ten out of ten for me, two out of two, maybe. Which is, it's worked out and things have gone so much better and our relationship, whatever that little misinformation or that damage or that hurt, it's been healed, and they've allowed it to heal by coming to me and talking to me. So I have appreciated that too. Yeah. Yeah, that's really helpful. And I think, I guess the reason I bring that up is just that with a lot of the frustrations we feel in these leadership relationships that we have. Oftentimes we can reframe it in a way that is now manageable. And so not that we're trying to diagnose a leader, especially if we have no skill set to do that. Sure. I think it creates an opportunity for empathy if you struggle with a leader in your life to say, you know what, maybe there's somewhere on the spectrum and they just see life differently than me. Yeah, they come across cold. They're overly logical. They don't seem to lead out with empathy, but maybe that's just part of their nature. And as part of their where they're at on the spectrum and I can work with that and I love your advice of just saying like almost maybe pushing towards that conversation. So maybe if they can't show empathy, maybe they can at least realize they need to show some sympathy.

00:40:03 - 00:45:04

Well, and the thing about it too is if you have a leader and what they may be very verbal, very vocal about being autistic and they may be serving in a leadership position. And in that case, if you have felt hurt by them and you're going to them to talk to them, it's so great for them to understand, oh, it's a learning experience from both angles because they're saying, I didn't know that that was a hurtful approach. I can change my approach. So it allows the leader an opportunity for growth. And it also allows the individual whose communicating an opportunity for understanding. And so it's kind of a win win on both sides in that case. But it doesn't mean it always works like that. It often doesn't. And it is tricky, and it is. There are heart feelings. It does happen. And I think that's just something that we have to be aware of, and I think sometimes before I had autistic children of my own, I didn't actually know what autism could look like. I didn't even know what some of those traits could be, which is why I am very passionate about when you talk about autism, you need to be specific about your individual child's needs or your own individual needs. I'm autistic and here's what it means for me. This is what it looks like. So if I throw something out that seems a little unkind, it's because I only know how to speak straightforward and direct. And I haven't learned how to soften my edges. It doesn't mean that I'm trying to verbally assault you. But I just or to throw you off or to cause hurt to you, it just may mean I haven't learned how to do that yet. It's not natural for me. So yeah, that's really helpful. Michelle, I've completely taken you off your outline here, but I think we've hit some things here. But I'll let you where can we jump back into the outline? What are some point that you definitely want to make sure we cover? I guess the only thing I would say as a relief society president is that we did some ministering interviews last night. We did like little drive-through ministering where me and where I jumped into the car of one of the women in our warden, we did a quick

back and forth conversation. It was really fun. And my counselors did it. My secretaries were delivering cookies and waters and drinks and all the, it was so fun. It was really cold outside, but everyone had heated cars, so. It worked out. But what you learn is not everyone is going to connect. It's just not the way that we are. But when I think about serving within the church and when I think about my calling, I always fall back on ministering and what ministering really is and ministering is actually serving as an agent for another and we know as part of our faith that the person we're serving for is actually the savior. And so we may come we will. It's not may. We will come across people that we don't connect with as well as others. It's just a part of life. And I think whether they're neurodivergent or not, it is an opportunity to love, to listen, to learn, and maybe realize that we have more of a capacity to love than we realized. We can stretch ourselves. There's always room for growth. And I think that ministering is the most beautiful set up. I think, you know, it used to be visiting teaching and it was which seems more letter of the law to me. And now it's administering which seems like we're getting closer to the spirit of the law. And I think there's something beautiful in that transition. And I think the goal would be that we never have to have specific ministers assigned to anyone that we just show up and love. And we love deeply, but the beauty of how it is set up is it's kind of the no man left behind, no woman left behind. We want to make sure that we are touching base and connecting. I just feel like ministering plays such a huge role in this. I think oftentimes we become connected with women or with men, depending on who we're ministering to, and they share things that help us gain a better understanding of who they are, and it just expands our ability to love, and I think the key is to remember that it is never our place to judge. We don't have to hear someone's story and think if only they had done it differently, it would have worked out so much better.

00:45:05 - 00:50:04

They are acting within their own capacity to act within their own skill sets within their own understanding of the world that they have experienced, and that's where we all come from. And I would hope that people would give me the same grace that they would show up and say, you know, Michelle, she said something I didn't love, but I'm going to let that go. Because maybe she had a bad moment, or maybe she didn't understand that what she said could be hurtful. You know, I would hope that they would show up with love and with grace for me. And so I feel like the way we minister, which is always forever more for me, going to be listening first. And when we listen, we learn and learning leads to love, and it's all the L words. And they all, it's a Trello words, but it's really healthy path and I think it's, I watch, you know, we've all read about the savior and the way that he has served and I feel like he always shows up in a manner of love and there's so much listening and there's very little if any judgment of any kind. I mean, oftentimes he'll say, you know, like to the woman at the well, go and send no more. But here's the beauty. I don't have to say that because it's his, he gets to judge, not me. So I get to let that be him or the bishop for the state president's state presidency. So I've learned so much here

and just like a few things, especially with youth or involvement or children involving the parents, starting those conversations, figuring out, especially since it's a spectrum, each individual may have different needs and approaches. And so just starting that conversation and best understanding the needs there, and then just some of these characteristics that you talk about, you know, logical or sometimes they struggle with empathy or conversation or they can come across cold like that. I think brings us reframe it a little bit better. So is there anything else that you would suggest to award or word leaders to better make room in a place and a positive interaction for those on the spectrum? Actually, there is when I think about inclusion, I think about making accommodations for those who have additional needs. And here's what is so interesting about accommodating others. When we accommodate one, we unknowingly accommodate many. It's like, for example, it's like we put the little divots in the sidewalks, you know, so that we can get a wheelchair up and down a sidewalk. But that also helps people on a bike. And it also helps moms with strollers. It helps more than you intended to help. And so I think sometimes we feel fearful if we are focused on inclusion of this one individual, are we neglecting the rest of these individuals and we're not. We actually may be meeting the needs of so many more people than we realized. And I think as leaders of youth, it's okay to step back and say, what activities would really connect for some of these neurodivergent children? And guess what? Those activities, they will really connect for so many other children. Just naturally. And I think, I mean, I've taught lessons in relief society. I taught one on mental health and a lot of it was information. And I thought, it's okay because there are people who respond to information more than the spiritual piece. Of what I will share. I try to combine it. There's information in their spirituality and it's okay to have both. And it reaches many different people and the many different learning styles. And I think like I just said, when we accommodate for one, we inadvertently accommodate for many. So don't be afraid to accommodate for those and don't be afraid that that'll be offensive for that person that you're accommodating for either. That's a way of showing love. It's a very solid way of showing love and for showing up for that individual. And I just think it's, I think it's part of God's plan. It's reaching the one. Yeah, I agree. I agree. Well, I got a couple more questions for you. Michelle, but any other point you're topic. I want to make sure I don't zoom past anything you wanted to talk about. You know what? I could talk all day. The autism and neurodivergence it's my passion. So I'll just stop where I am. If only if only had a podcast feed for people wanted more Michelle information. Did you go to send them? If you want to listen to a podcast about autism, my passion project, it's called navigating the spectrum with Michelle portlock. Michelle is with one L, but I think you'll still find it even if you misspell my name.

00:50:05 - 00:54:06

And I have a hard religion theme or latter day saint name. It actually doesn't. It's very general, but I've had people that are religious and non religious, but if you're jumping on and you wonder

what it's about, I have conversations with people who are autistic. I have conversations with parents of autistic individuals, and I have conversations with autistic professionals. So it's just a variety. And it's something that I love dearly. Awesome. Well, hopefully people will link to it for sure. And then last question I have for you is more in the context of your relief society experience as you've had opportunity to serve as a leader, how has being a leader helped you become a better follower of Jesus Christ? Oh. What a great question. I should write that down. Do you know what I feel like? I feel like sometimes we think that leaders should have all the answers, and we don't. And what I've learned is that it's okay to reach out to those around us and ask. It's like when you're teaching a lesson in relief society and someone asks you a question and you really just don't know the answer. It's okay to say, what do you think? So I guess what I'm saying is I have learned to be a better disciple just in the way that I know fully better understand. I don't have all the answers. I never will. And that's okay. There are some things that I don't fully understand, and I'm okay with that. I don't put it on a shelf, but I'm okay sitting with it. And holding on to it and listening to other people's experiences. And I think that maybe that makes me a better disciple because I watch other people struggle and still lean into the gospel and Christ is their north star. And he always is. And I'm able to say, look at what they're doing. This is so inspiring. And I'm able to lean in a little more myself. So I've always appreciated it and I've told the women in my ward, I really feel like I'm serving so that my own love can grow as a disciple of Christ. That concludes this episode of the leading saints podcast. We'd love to hear from you about your questions or thoughts or comments. You can either leave a comment on the post related to this episode at [leading-saints.org](http://leading-saints.org) or go to [leading-saints.org/contact](http://leading-saints.org/contact) and send us your perspective or questions. If there's other episodes or topics you'd like to hear on the leading saints podcast, go to [leading-saints.org/contact](http://leading-saints.org/contact) and share with us the information there. And we would love for you to share this with any individual you think this would apply to, especially maybe individuals in your ward or other leaders that you may know who would really appreciate the perspectives that we discussed. And remember, go to [leading-saints.org/14](http://leading-saints.org/14) to access our full young saints virtual 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 old 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