



“He Will Magnify Your Efforts” | An Interview with Bonnie Oscarson

June 3, 2023

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Does a youth leader ever feel like they haven't figured out? This hasn't been my experience. However, I couldn't be an effective youth leader today without Dan Duckworth's presentation about going from youth worker to youth mentor. Mentorship is a key concept to understand when leading youth. In his presentation, Dan talks about ways to really turn the traditional approach to leading youth on its head. How can you better know your purpose? How can you find out their life goals? How can you build a relationship that is transformational rather than simply filling time during the weekly youth activity? You can watch Dan's presentation in the Young Saints Virtual Library by going to [leadingsaints .org slash 14](https://leadingsaints.org/14). You'll get free access for 14 days and that will give you plenty of time to watch Dan's presentation a few times. Let's give youth the leadership they deserve. Before we jump into the content of this episode, I kind of feel it's important that I introduce myself. Now, many of you have been around a long time. You're well familiar with my voice and with Leading Saints as an organization. But if you're not, well, my name is Kurt Francom and I am the executive director of Leading Saints and the podcast host. Now Leading Saints is a nonprofit organization dedicated helping Latter -day Saints be better prepared to lead. And we do that through content creation like this podcast and many other resources at [leadingsaints .org](https://leadingsaints.org). And don't we act like we have all the answers or know exactly what a leader should do or not do. But we like to explore the concepts of leadership, the science of leadership, what people are researching about leadership and see how we can apply them to a Latter -day Saint world. So here we go. I'd love it when I get the opportunity to do these

interviews sitting down with a former general organizational president. Is that the right way to say it? I don't know. But Sister Bonnie L. Oscarson, who served as the Young Women's General President from April of 2013 until March 31st of 2018. Sister Oskerson has so much more to her leadership journey than you may not realize. Her husband was called as a mission president to Sweden when he was 29 years old and she was 25 years old. I mean, she was the age of almost a sister missionary serving out there as the wife of mission president and phenomenal stories that later went back to serving the temple there and so many other leadership opportunities that we get into. I just love the behind the inside baseball stories of how these general organizational presidents are called, when they got the phone call, how they feel inadequate and overcame that. I think we can all relate to many of these experiences that general leaders go through and learn a lot from it. So fantastic discussion and I think you'll enjoy it. Here's my interview with Sister Bonnie L. Oscarson. Today, I am meeting with interviewing Bonnie Oscarson. How are you, Bonnie? I'm doing well. Thank you. Good. Now we've maybe people aren't familiar with your name or probably if they saw your picture, they'd say, I know Bonnie Oscarson. How do you how would you put yourself in the context? How do people know me? Yeah. Well, I guess it's mostly because I was the young woman general president of the church five years ago. I was released five years ago. Yeah. They just I guess they just replaced your replacement. They just replaced my replacement. So it's fewer and fewer people that recognize me. It's more you look really familiar. How do I know you? Nice. And there's so many directions we can go with your experience. Just give us a little bit about your background where you were raised and your upbringing and whatnot. Well, I think the way that I was raised probably helped contribute to my preparation for what came later in life. My family, I was born here in Utah in Salt Lake City and lived here until I was nine. And at that point, my parents decided they wanted bigger adventures. So they told the company that my dad worked for were willing to be transferred. And so we moved a lot. I lived in Oklahoma and then Denver, Colorado. And I went to high school in Nashville, Tennessee, tiny little branch at the time. And then after I graduated from high school, my family moved to St. Louis, Missouri. At that point, then I went off to be one of those. Nice. And so those developmental years, you saw a lot of diversity and all sorts of experiences. And I think it was valuable because I lived in small branches and I lived in well developed, you know, well functioning wards. So I kind of saw the spectrum of church, you know, of the churches in different parts of the world. And I think that did help me later on to be more empathetic to those who lived in different situations. Yeah. Pretty traditional upbringing in the traditional Latter -day Saint family. Yes. Although I have to say, if we're going to talk about leadership, I have to give my parents credit for being the examples of Christlike leadership to me that I observed throughout my childhood. I especially think of the time, the period of time that we lived in Nashville, Tennessee. When we first moved there, I was 14, I think. And it was one branch for the whole metropolitan area.

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And my father was called to be the district president. And so he had responsibility for these little branches way out in the hills. I'm talking very rural, very primitive. And I often went with them to branch conferences. And I saw my parents, how they interacted with people that didn't have a lot of education, perhaps, and were not always really experienced in church leadership, but who had faith. My parents were always loving and encouraging, never judgmental. I never heard them criticize. And we had some pretty unique experiences on those little trips. Can I share one with you? I loved it, yeah. We were at a branch conference in this little tiny branch out in the hills of Tennessee. And it was in a rented chapel of some kind. They didn't even own their own building yet. And it was Tennessee, and there was no air conditioning. So it was hot and muggy and just really miserable. And as they're getting started, my father said, we need to sustain branch officers. So he said, presented the branch president's name and said, all in favor. Half the congregation raised a hand. He said, all opposed. The other half raised a hand. And, you know, I'm a little girl from Utah originally, and I turned to my mom and I said, I don't think I've ever seen that before. You know, what happens now? And I love the example of my father and his counselors. They said, okay, we're going to suspend the meeting for the time being, and we would like to talk to each one of you and, you know, an opposing vote. So they were willing to listen. There was no judgment. There was, you know, let's listen. Let's find out what's going on here. It was kind of a Hatfield McCoy experience, and there was no worthiness reason why he shouldn't be sustained. It was just personal opinion, I guess. And so he was sustained to the end. But I got to observe experiences like that in my youth. I think my mother was the district relief society president for a while, too. Went to seminary there. I would get up at 430 in the morning and drive a half an hour across town to get to seminary, but had amazingly skilled and knowledgeable seminary teachers, for instance, Don Richards, who was a doctoral student at Vanderbilt University, was my seminary teacher for a year, and he was standing. I had my mom one year. So some great experiences in my youth that exposed me to a lot of leadership principles, to how the church is run, and mostly about love and being non-judgmental. Was BYU always the plan? That's hard to say. Both of my brothers went to the U, went to the University of Utah. Oh, wow. One was planning to be a doctor, one an architect. And it was back in a time when my parents were having to pay out-of-state tuition. So when I said, well, I want to go to the U, they said, no, I think BYU would be a better fit for you. And I know it was because I was a girl, and there wasn't the emphasis on women getting an education back then as much. But I've always been grateful that that's where I ended up. I really had a great experience there. Is that where you met your husband? No. Where did you meet him? My family moved from Nashville to St. Louis, Missouri, just after I graduated from high school. My husband is from St. Louis. He was born and raised there. And we actually met on the temple site in Far West, Missouri, which, if you know, if you've ever been there, it's out in the middle of nowhere. For anybody to have met there is kind of a miracle, really. But they were dedicating the site that they had just finished off with fences and markers and everything. It was dedication that weekend. And so his family was there. My family was just moving there. My father had met his father, who was the stake president of the area. And he said, oh, come meet our new stake president. And Paul was there. He was just home from his mission. And so that's kind of the first place we met. Oh, nice. But yeah, he was my Sunday school teacher that summer until we both went out to BYU. And it wasn't until a year later that we started dating. Nice. And then you got married. And how quickly did leadership opportunities find you? I know you went on a mission pretty quick,

but were there others before that? Well, just the normal. I taught primary. OK, yeah. Secretary of the Relief Society, that kind of thing. So we lived in, well, we were going to school at first. And then when he graduated, we moved back to St. Louis. Yeah. So when I was 25 years old and he was 29, we received a phone call from Marion G. Romney, counselor. Out of the blue. Out of the blue. Wow. One day. And they did things differently back then, calling mission presidents, mission leaders. They actually issued the call to him over the phone. Oh, really? And nowadays, I think they do exploratory interviews. And, you know, you're on our list, maybe down the road. So he got called and told where he would be serving in one phone call? No, not where he was serving. Oh, gotcha. Just that he was going to be called. And because of our ages, it was just totally obvious out of the blue. His brother, Richard Oskerson, who was quite a bit younger than his siblings, he had been called to serve as a mission leader in the Stockholm mission the year before. This was 1975 when his brother was called. But Paul was quite a bit younger. He was, like I said, he was 29 at the time. He always claims, just remember, I was 30 by the time we went. But yeah, so it was kind of a big surprise. And did he serve as a younger missionary there? He did. He served his mission there. And again, being prepared for, you know, things that I had, he was an assistant to the president for a year in his mission.

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So he had observed a lot of and had a wonderful mission president that he just loved and admired his leadership skills. So he had been trained well. But he was still young. So we didn't know where we were going and couldn't imagine, because Sweden had just been filled, you know, what the purpose was. I could think of 10 other couples in our ward with more maturity and experience and, you know, more qualified. So it just takes a lot of trust at times to say, I don't understand this. But OK, Heavenly Father held it. Who else would have thought of us? And so the call didn't come for, I think, two or three months. And we were watching the mailbox, just like any missionary back then, you know, for the call. And finally, we we heard that they were splitting Sweden in half and we were going to be on the south and west part of the country. And his brother had the east and north of the country. Wow. So we got to serve at the same time, you know, with his brother and wife and family. That was that was fun. And their father was called in the same group as we were to serve in Scotland at the time. Wow. So there were three of us, three Oscars since we were there all together. So their father was also the mission president. He was the mission president. Oh, wow. So the Oscars didn't just ran the. Well, not really. There were a lot of us. I said, wow, what an experience. Yeah, it was. So at 25, I assume you had a couple of kids at that point, or? We took a newborn with us. We had four children and the youngest was brand new. She was born June 13th and we were supposed to leave July 1st. I asked for an extra week or so just. And so I think it was a week or so later that we actually went there and they were creating a new mission. So we weren't having to replace somebody that wasn't a big rush. His brother was kind of helping to get the new mission set up. So, yeah, so we took four children with us, including a newborn, which presented. I just wasn't your typical mission president's wife. And could not travel. You know, we had children in school and couldn't

travel like a lot do. And plus, we have the same responsibilities that mission president's wives have now with taking care of the health issues of missionaries. Now it was a bit different back then. Didn't even have preach my gospel. I mean, that's the book of Mormon. We did have the Book of Mormon. You're ready to go. Yeah, that's right. Wow. And then we had a fifth child born there. Wow. So, I mean, as I think many people in the audience can relate to feeling like a very inexperienced leader. And I mean, that wasn't even on your mind. And suddenly you're thrown into this this role. I mean, what comes to mind as far as how did you walk into that role and begin to to lead and engage with the missionaries and when we were so young that I think it made us a little bit unaware of what we should have been feeling. I just I trusted the Lord. This must have come from him, because who else would have thought? And we were told at the mission process seminar that President Kimball wanted young families in Europe. And so we were not. It's not like we were so great that that's why we got called. There were a lot of young couples with young families being called to the European countries. Was there a specific, did he say why? I think just to be an example of what LDS families should look like, and which puts a lot of pressure on you, you know, better behave. And, you know, but it was a glorious experience. They said, you tell your missionaries, they are not to call you their mission mom. You're not. I was their same age practically. Yeah. In fact, the sister missionaries were very close to my age. Yeah. It was hard to stay as involved in the work because I had young children at home. And I was told by the authorities in our training, your first responsibility is your family. And so they were young kids and they were just starting school and they were going to a British school. We were in the city of Gothenburg. And so I was home more. I was not in the office every day. I was not involved in that. I tried. I tried in the summertime when the kids were out of school, we would travel with Paul to do zone conferences. And but it was a small enough mission that he could get home from any place in the mission easily within, you know, reasonable amount of time. So it just worked out. And I tried to read them the weekly. I think back, I think nowadays the wives maybe don't read the missionary letters, but back then it was it was encouraged. And so I tried to keep up with the work by reading their weekly letters. And we'd send the kids and I would make birthday cards for them. And I was like, and honestly, they do become like your children. Even though I wasn't as involved, I knew those missionaries and loved them. Yeah. Wow. So for the most part, sounds like just a traditional, you know, your husband has a job would go into the office. You'd be with the kids most of the day. That's true. But you just happen to be in a really cool country. Oh, we did. And and I I'm an adopted Swede. I don't have a lot of DNA that comes from Sweden, which disappoints my husband terribly. He thinks he's Swedish. But I really related to the culture. I loved the culture and the, you know, traditions. And we've adopted so many of those in our own family. Yeah. Was there some responsibilities like, I mean, now like, you know, mission presence, they go to stake conferences and they're sort of expected to speak. And, you know, the wife was that that was a lot of your responsibility as well. Yes. And I I studied Swedish while I was there. I felt like it was a great opportunity for me to learn to speak foreign language.

So I had a neighbor who is a member of the church and our children were the same age. And she was very, very skilled at languages. And so I would go to her house, you know, at least once or twice a week. And we'd have Swedish lessons. So I learned to give talks in Swedish and bear my testimony. And there were we had when we first got there, there were two member districts. There were no stakes in our mission. So my husband is also responsible for the membership. And so, yeah, we had a lot of district conferences that I bore my testimony in. And I would write it out and somebody would translate it for me. And I would read it, you know, and I learned to understand Swedish pretty well. Yeah, I wasn't real confident in speaking at that point, but that got better later as we were called back to the temples. Wow. And so you're there for three years. And did your husband have many like leadership, formal leadership roles prior to that or? He'd been in the bishopric. OK. So he was he was learning as he was learning. But like I said, he had had that experience serving in his own mission as an assistant president for a year, which is kind of a long time longer than usual. And he felt like that had really helped prepare him. That's great. Then you return home and just generally in your adult life, raising a family and whatnot, any other notable leadership roles that really stand out? Well, let me just share this with you on the way home. I remember taking off and as we're sitting on the plane, my thought was, how are we ever going to beat this in our life? There can't be anything in our life. We started at the top and it's gone going to be all downhill from here. I thought I couldn't have imagined, you know, what an experience what lay ahead. So I'm sure your husband needs to still get established in his career and things like that was and he he had asked for a leave of absence. He was he's a retail executive. He worked for May Department stores. And when he was called, he went to them and he said, I've been asked to do this for three years. Would it be possible for you to give me a leave of absence? And nobody ever asked him that before. Yes, especially twenty nine year old. Yeah. And and quite frankly, we were young enough that we weren't that concerned. And when we looked around to the other people in our mission group, they were giving up end of career. You know, a lot of things that were big sacrifices because they were at the end of their careers. And we felt like come home, get another job. But they did say yes, they said they would hold it. And enough, interestingly his brother -in -law was brought into that company. He got a job with him in H .R. right before we left. Oh, nice. He was there when we came home. So he you know, they couldn't find the exact same job. But they said we we may not have the same job open for you, but we'll put you at the same level somewhere in the company. His brother -in -law was working in the H .R. department and got him back into it. And we just resumed life. And it wasn't it was like, did that really happen? We just carried on like a young family. We went on to have. So we had five children by the time we came home and we had two more. And we've moved around a lot to my husband and I. He got transferred to different divisions of his company. So we've lived in our married life. We've lived in South, lived in Cape Girardeau, Missouri. I don't know if that rings a bell. It's where the Limbaugh's come from. OK, there are a lot of them there. And then we lived in New Jersey, Boston, and then 13 years in Houston, Texas, before Macy's department store, but made department stores and then we got moved to Salt Lake. Nice, nice. Now, what sort of preparation came for your role as general young woman's president? Did you have an opportunity to serve as a ward young woman's president? Three times. OK. Most of my clients have been working with the youth. So, again, I think the Lord does know what's coming. Yeah. And I'd served in three different wards as young woman president. I taught seminary for nine years, a lot of gospel doctrine. Oh, yeah. But let me just

give you an example of opportunities the Lord presents. Before we were called to go back to Sweden to serve as the president and major of the Stockholm temple, I was trying to fit. I didn't finish my degree at BYU first time around. I started out in commercial art. And when the kids were all just about to leave the home, I saw the little flyer on that everybody has on their bulletin board in the church that says finish today what you began yesterday, whatever it is. And so I enrolled in the BYU independent studies program and went back to school. My patriarchal blessing, it says in it, you will complete your education. And it always bothered me that I hadn't even gotten a bachelor's degree. So I went back to school and started doing it. Independent studies is not an easy way to get a degree. Because it's mostly online and you're working by yourself. And I didn't have access to a classroom setting with discussion and professor. But we got moved to Utah right in the middle of that process. And that helped because I could take some classes on campus and that helped me finish. So one of the classes that I needed to graduate was either statistics or some kind of math class or an advanced language credit. And I had studied French originally, but I hadn't finished that credit. Our son, Chip, his name is Christopher, but we call him Chip, is a professor at BYU.

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And he's in Scandinavian studies. And he said, Mom, I'll teach that advanced Swedish class this summer if you'd like to take it. And so I took a class from my son. It was fantastic. It was hard because I hadn't spoken Swedish for like 30 years. And I was in a class with a bunch of return missionaries who were fresh. And just, you know, but and my vocabulary in Swedish was bearing testimony. I could say the word atonement. I could talk about resurrection and, you know, savior. But this class, he taught it in Swedish and he covered literature and history and culture. And, you know, we had to read books. We had to write essays. Really stretched me. But it really helped me get better at speaking Swedish. Shortly after I graduated, within months, we were called to go back to the temple in Stockholm. And I was so grateful that I had just taken that class. I had never had to write in Swedish before. You don't do that when you're just learning the language kind of thing. But I think the Lord knew I was going to need it. Because when you're a matron in a temple, I had to do preparation meetings, training. I had to take care of new endowments who are coming for the first time. We had a lot of languages in that temple. Norway was in our temple district, half of Sweden, Latvia. So we had both Latvian and Russian, Spanish. We had a Spanish session every Saturday. But I'd worked in Houston and I had learned to do the veil in Spanish. Does the Lord know what's coming? Yeah, I just have firm testimony of that. So that was a great experience. The other thing about finishing my degree was I had never considered myself to be that good of a writer. I don't love to write and it was hard for me. But my emphasis was British and American literature, which means I was being asked to write a lot of essays. And it really helped improve my writing skills, I think. And later on, when I'm having to sit down and write general conference talks, I'm saying thank you, Heavenly Father, for helping me have that experience where I feel like my writing skills. I'm still not a great writer, but it helped. It helped me become a better writer. Wow. Yeah, just that the hindsight,

seeing how the Lord just molded you and gave you those experiences that later came into being a real asset, right? And being in the temple, too, was a great leadership training experience. Shortly after we arrived there, I think Paul maybe found a talk that I don't know where it came from, how I found it. It was called A Conversation on Leadership by Elder Bednar, where he had spoken to employees of the church, the leaders of the employees. I've seen it. It's a bootleg copy because it's not supposed to be. I know it's not, but thank heavens we got it. Because here we have this man, Elder Bednar, has a PhD in organizational behavior and business and leadership and has written books. I mean, he's an amazing talent in that way. And reading that talk really influenced my leadership in the Stockholm temple. Oh, cool. Because he emphasized training your replacement. You should always be thinking of, you know, the people around you and treating them with love and putting their needs ahead. It doesn't matter who gets credit for things. He just had a lot of principles in that talk that I really found useful as a leader in the temple. So what's the story of being called to serve as a matron? As a matron? How are we called to do that? Oh, oh, here it is. All right. Yeah. So when I graduated, my husband was able, we'd come to Salt Lake and he had a two year contract with Macy's. And when that was completed and I had completed my degree, we decided we wanted to serve a mission that we didn't want to wait until we were too old to do it. And so he was in his early 60s. And so we put in our mission papers and we received a call to go to Hong Kong. And we'd even talk, we were even talking to the mission president there and he was going to have us go to an island. And I can't remember the name of it in the Hong Kong area where we would be working with the international branches. Oh, wow. And we were excited. We were getting ready. We were supposed to leave June 1st. So we were flying around saying goodbye to our kids, farewell tour. And we got a phone call 10 days before we were supposed to go into the MTC to please meet President Uthdorp in his office. We never get these impressions about what things are about or hints. I'm right there with you. Some people do and we just don't. So we didn't know what it was about. But when we went to his office, he said, we'd like to call you to serve in the temple in Stockholm instead of Hong Kong. Well, my husband had bought all these short sleeve shirts. It was a tropical and we're just but it's Sweden again. And my husband loves Sweden. Like I say, he thinks he's a Swede who just happens to be born in America. But we both just burst into tears. President Uthdorp reached behind him like he'd done it a hundred times. Got a box of Kleenexes and, you know, it's like, I've seen this before and put him in front of us. But we were thrilled. So it meant sticking around for another four months. But, you know, first of November, we left for Sweden. And that's a three year assignment, three year assignment. We still say it's the crowding assignment of our lives. To get to work together every day in the temple and to be in Stockholm, you know, in the Stockholm area. It was heaven. It was pure heaven.

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Did you live just in walking distance from the temple or how does that work? There's like a campus there and it has they took a little I guess it's an old parish house or farmhouse of some kind that they've renovated. And that's where the temple president lives. There's also a building

that is a guest house for excursion workers to stay in and for those who are temple missionaries. And it's the best kept secret of the church. It's a great mission, a little apartment right on the temple grounds. There's a chapel there, too. And it's right across the street from the train station. So you can zip into Stockholm in 45 minutes, which we did on Mondays. That's cool. So leaving that responsibility as the matron of the temple. Like, what was your new perspective about the temple or like what reflection do you have of being in that role for so long? And what could you teach us about the temple? Well, I don't think we've ever served in a client. Well, it's hard to say because being young women's president, I felt this too, to see the hands have the hand of the Lord so clearly. I just always felt and I often say to people, the Lord knows you're in the temple today. I just feel like the Lord is really closely involved with the work that goes on in the temple. It's a leadership job. You have to deal with personalities and issues that come up and everything. But I think the biggest takeaway from that experience is that we saw miracles daily. The Lord's hand is in that work. And he, you know, if you had a Spanish speaker come in and you're thinking, oh, how am I going to take care of this? So they'd walk in next to serve their mission in South America and as a temple worker and can help. There were just miracles like that that happened daily to the point where you almost start to take them for granted. I would say that's the biggest takeaway is how much the Lord is involved in that work. We just felt his hand constantly. And you hate to come home. You hate to leave that environment because you're there every day. It's interesting, because we didn't come, we were not Swedish. I think it causes to feel a little more humility at realizing we don't understand the culture like you do. And we, you know, to tune into that and to say, I want to be sensitive to your failings because we're not we're not native Swedes. I think that's important to do since we have come home. They have had native temple presence and temple presidencies, which is a better, better thing to do and all. So I hope I was sensitive with that. I hope they felt like I love your culture. I love the traditions you have here. I love the kinds of people you are and the sacrifices you make. And the last thing you want to do is say, I come from church headquarters. I know everything. No, we don't. You know, I think you have to be really sensitive to local cultures, cultures. Yeah, yeah. Now, that assignment wrapped up about the time you were called as the general. What's the story behind that? Did you know coming home that that was your next step or? No, no, no. So we got home and that assignment was from 2009 to 2012. We got home the 1st of November of 2012. And that's when we moved into the condo. We kind of bought the condo sight and seen for my husband. I got to come home and kind of make some selections and all that while we renovated it. So we got home the 1st of November. And in January, I was asked to come in and be on a focus group. I didn't know what a focus group was. What's a focus group? But, you know, I went and there was a group of women. And also in this focus group was Elder Anderson, Elder Piper and Elaine Dalton. I didn't know it was unusual to have a focus group or you have an apostle 70. And I just was so unfamiliar. I'd never worked on that level, church leadership. So we just had this focus group. And when it was over, they just asked us questions and we discussed it. There were probably maybe 12, 13, 15 women there or something. And I do remember kind of saying to my husband, I wonder if they're looking me over or something. And you said, well, that's kind of egotistical of you to say, oh, you're right. You know, you're right. That's just information gathering. So in this focus group, they were just were they asking you just general questions about. I think they asked us that's a long time ago. I'm trying to remember. But I think they asked us questions about things they were discussing.

For instance, I remember one of the questions was about the age that women should be in order to go to the temple or should we change the requirement? You know, things like that that they were dealing with at church headquarters, I think. And because the policy had been unless they're getting married or going on a mission, women don't go to the temple. Should we change that? Because a lot of young women wanted to go to the temple who had either of those situations. So so we were just asked to express how we felt about it and our insights. So, yeah, a month later, I get a phone call on my cell phone. We have your number. Because we were in Las Vegas at the time, visiting a daughter. And it was Raquel's. And he said, I'm the executive secretary for the first presidency. And we would like to invite you and your husband to meet with the first presidency on Tuesday morning at nine o'clock. Wow. OK. And you're in Vegas. So we're in Vegas. Well, we were just about to leave to go home. OK. Yeah. So Tuesday morning at nine o'clock, we were walking into the North boardroom in the administration building. And I don't know why I was surprised. He had said the first president, but they were all three sitting there. It was President Monson, President Irene and President Uttar. And President Monson has a real love of Sweden.

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So we talked for a minute about his Swedish connections and how much he loves the people and the culture. And then he said, we'd like to call you to be the young woman general president of the church. And that's when I kind of fell apart. I just was not expecting it. And I'm really not your typical call. I don't think most of them from the board, right? Right. I mean, laying down had been there for like 14, 16 years. It started out on the board and then a counselor and then president. And so I had no. In fact, I said when I finally gained control of myself, said to President Monson, I don't know if I know how to do this. And he said, well, of course not. We just called you. I mean, no sympathy there. And President Uttar saying, you're going to be great. He's like the cheerleader. You're going to be great. I can tell this is a good calling for you. And President Irene, typical of him, I think, too, was saying, you will feel the hand of the Lord. He will help you. He was the kind of the spiritual mentor, you know. And finally, President Irene said, we haven't heard an answer yet. So it's OK. I guess nobody else would have thought of me, but the Lord. So I'm sure he'll help me. But they told us we could not tell anybody. It was six weeks before conference when I would be sustained. Had to choose counselors. I went through a really hard period of trying to adjust to the idea of what I was being asked to do. And I did receive a lot of support and help by Elder Anderson, who was had some responsibility in the priesthood department at the time, sat down with me and talked about choosing counselors and gave me, you know, a whole list of suggestions and ideas to look through. And that was helpful. But when it came down to it, I've been asked, how do you choose your counselors? You know, yeah, that's where I was one going to go next. Just the same way when you're called into it. Yeah. It worked. Young women presidents, you have to choose counselors. But you can pick anyone in the world. Well, kind of have to be in Utah. So Neal Marriott was the first one that came to mind. We had worked together years ago when they lived in St. Louis and we kind of

kept in contact through the years. And I just felt really good about the fact that she was a convert to the church. She wasn't from Utah. She has a Southern accent. She's just a little bit out of the mold. And she had no general church experience either. So I felt like I needed to look at those that maybe had some general church level experience. And so Carol McConkey had served on the previous board with Eileen Dalton's group. And, you know, you do a lot of fasting, especially at that level. Probably more so than I would have normally. Fasting and prayer and fasting and prayer. And and finally, these two names just felt solid. But I was afraid to turn their names in. I thought, I'm going to change their lives for the next five years. And I just kind of and finally, the spirit just said, you've got your answer. Make that phone call. Turn them in. You know, just get on it, please. So yeah, so I did. But the hard part was the feeling of inadequacy that just kept overwhelming me, a little bit of a panicky, panicky feeling at times of. And I remember very specifically one day I was sitting by myself and I just cried out loud and I said, Heavenly Father, how can I do this? And he answered me, not I didn't see a vision or hear a voice. But in my mind, I had a thought that came so clearly, and it wasn't my own that said, because I will help you. And I said, why? I said, because this is my work. Wow. And that kind of carried me to remember about my work. Yeah. And he was going to be there to help me. I wasn't doing this by myself. So, you know, that was kind of something I really needed to hear and something which did. Yeah. And something I could share with others when they receive a calling that they feel inadequate for and scared about. You will help you because it's his work. Yeah. So you're a Sustained General Conference. And I mean, it seems like they're adjusting this. But back then, like you were set apart later that day and off and running. Not that day. It was later in that week. OK, but you were, I mean, ready to go. Hey, I'm you're there. Yeah. Now they're giving them some orientation before they assume. Yeah, that's right. It is great. Yeah. It would have been great for me. So, I mean, I remember talking to sister Eileen Dalton about this of of just walking in that role. And, you know, you don't want to completely change things. And many leaders experience this, you know, I don't want to completely change what the last person did or whatnot. So how did you begin to walk in that set of vision, the revelation that would come? Well, Elder Paul Piper was one of our advisors at the time. And I think he was responsible for young women. I can't remember, but he he sat down and he said, don't feel like you have to do things the way they've been done. I think they were kind of the fact that that I was kind of out of the box, having had no experience at the general church level tells me that maybe the Lord was ready for some fresh ideas, new ideas, or, you know, new thinking. So, I don't know, unexperienced thinking.

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Maybe that's a better way. And so he said, like, when you're thinking about calling a board, don't feel like you have to do it the way it's always been done. And the day we were set apart, Elder Hales, who was the I think the executive director of the Priesthood and Family, what was called the Priesthood Department then is now the Priesthood and Family Department. He had the three of us and our husbands come to his office. And it was a really unique experience. He was

in failing health at the time when he walked in. He had a man carrying an oxygen tank behind him, a helper. And he seemed so frail and weak, I thought, you know, he's about to fall over. He sat down and he started to speak to us. And this change came over him that was miraculous. His voice got stronger. He was clear and firm. You know, his advice to us was he said, I don't know what's coming down the road, but some big things are coming. There's some big changes coming. And you're going to have during your tenure a barn burner, he called it. And he was kind of encouraging us to don't be afraid of that. You know, look for it's OK. It's time for changes. It's time for new things. It's time to look at it. So I kind of feel like that's the feeling and the attitude we were being directed by. We felt impressed to call international board members to our board. And so we could have eyes and ears on the ground in different parts of the world to know we're a global church now. So typically in the past, it was generally get local people so they could come to the meeting in person. Exactly. Exactly. And we did call four local board members, but we had a board member also in Brazil, one in Peru, one in South Africa, one in Japan and one in Brooklyn. That's the foreign country, right? So we weren't functioning as a typical board. Plus, things were changing in the church. We were being called on to councils and committees that weren't specific to young women, especially. And so our board members didn't get to do a lot of that kind of thing that in the past they've done. But the value of these international board members was that we asked them to at least once or twice a month. And they ended up doing it more in a lot of areas. Please visit young women classes. And we gave them a radius. We didn't want it to be a terrible burden on them. But within a 50 mile or 100 mile radius or something, so they wouldn't have to travel too far. But please visit and then send us a report of what you're seeing. And we didn't want it to be like you're spying on these groups. We want to know what things are like for these young women in different parts of the world. And for instance, our board member in South Africa, she was put on the committee. We were revising the camp manual for young women camp. And it was so helpful to know that the young women in Africa don't need to learn to cook over a fire. Yeah, because they're already doing it. And in Japan, camp looks different. They're not a camping society, especially. So what should camp look like there? And so they they would just report back to us whenever they could visit a young women activity or camp or just a class on Sunday and tell us what they were dealing with, what the situation was there. It was extremely helpful. And I feel like it was preparation for what they have now with these international council members, where they have called women now in different parts of the world who are so brilliant. But I really think it it helped that we showed we can communicate with each other. We used to meet once a month with our all of our board members in a video conferencing setting. We had to learn a lot. We learned we couldn't sing because there's a one second delay. You know, and we were doing that. Doesn't work to sing. Doesn't work to say the theme together. You know, we had to kind of learn as we went. And we had to find a time when we weren't catching any of them in the middle of the night. So some of them were meeting at five in the morning and some were ten at night. But you know, but it was a great experience. And like I say, when when they finally went to this system of international having council members, women who are called who now are being trained by the board members. They're not called board members. I can't think of what they're called now. I feel like we kind of we're a step in that right direction to show we can do that. We can communicate with each other internationally. And it's very valuable. Yeah. So and I think that sort of model that as far as reaching international is that council members or whatnot, that's more typical now. Right.

Oh, it is. That's how they're doing. And, you know, the question we had back then was, who's training our stake young women leaders? Well, it's supposed to be the stake president. And I was saying, does he really understand the young women's program? Like we do. And I think I think now they've kind of figured this out better. Now they have board members from Salt Lake City. They're not called board members. But they're the ones that are training these council, these international counseling women, you know, and who then can train stake young women presidents. Yeah. And it's a great system. It's much better. Yeah. Just tell me about like speaking in general conference. What was that first experience like that? Writing the talks. People say, is that hard to speak in general conference? And I always say speaking is not hard writing the talk.

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The work is done at that. Yeah, the work is done at that point. So you get asked to do it maybe a month or six weeks before conference. And they don't tell you what to speak on. You get to use your inspiration. And I think the hard part is feeling like it's good enough. You know, you write you rewrite it 10, 15, 25 times. You just keep refining it. And the first one first one, I wrote this talk and I just felt so insecure. And and I think it was Elder Piper who said, send it to me. Let me look it over. And they do that quite often, I think, among, you know, different speakers. They do a little peer review as well. And he had great. He was very honest. And he said, this part doesn't have anything to do with the rest. And it's just extraneous. And it was so helpful to get that advice. And so I rewrote it again and again, you know, and then you have to send it to correlation and they review it for accuracy to make sure you're scripturally correct and doctrinally correct and that you're not going to cause any lightning strikes because you said something to outrageous or so. But, you know, there were times towards the end, especially where they say, you really want to say it like this. I'd say, yeah, that's how I want to say it. I had more confidence at that point. First one, you're really nervous. And even when you finally get it done, you know, the thought that this is going to be published in the Ensign magazine may be used as a lesson and really say a piece. It was terribly intimidating to me, you know, that you do get to the point where you say, I've done the best I can. Heavenly Father, please magnify it so that people hear what they need to hear. And that happens a lot where the Lord does. I felt that many times during my time in the Young Women. But up walking to the pulpit, that's the easy part. I was scared that first time I always get really nervous. Like I used to get nervous 24 hours before I'd be pacing the floor and how can I do this? That day, the calm would start to come. And when you step up to the pulpit, I call it the bubble of calm. Wow. You just feel peaceful. I never felt nervous giving my talk. And I think because you've practiced it a hundred times. In fact, they have you go to this little room in the basement of the administration building that has a pulpit, just like the conference center pulpit, and they can put a the man who does the teleprompting running, he can put up like this thing on the speaker that makes it sound like the conference center, because it's really an echoey place. It's huge. It's a big place. And you slow down when you give a talk in there because of this echoey thing. And so you can put that effect

on there. And I would give the talk. I had one of our secretaries. She was always with me who would notice if I was stumbling over a phrase or something. And she'd mark, you know, you want to change this? You're stumbling there. You're not going to say that. And he would time it. And if it was you had a time, you know, to give a 10 minute talk or whatever, you can't be over. And he would say, says, I'll just go back and take 30 seconds out. And you wouldn't. Yeah. But you have that chance to practice it at the pulpit, you know, and it really is a thing to give you confidence. So it's good for that. But I do appreciate that bubble of calm. I bet. I bet. What about just a traveling and experiencing the world as the Young Women's General President, seeing different countries and cultures in the context of that, you know, inspired program? You can't do it without the Lord's help. That I can tell you. And traveling internationally, we normally did it once or twice a year. And those are marathon trips. And you don't know what's coming and you don't always have time to prepare because they throw things at you at the last minute. And and so those they're glorious trips because you do get to see the young women in in their home setting. And I loved home visits where I could visit their homes and kind of get a feel for what it's like to live in the Philippines or Africa or, you know. But you also have to trust the Lord that he's going to know. I would find out the day before. Oh, yeah, you're speaking in sacrament meeting tomorrow, you know. And so that night you're home trying to make notes for, you know, what I'm going to talk about tomorrow. You learn as you go along to just take with you lots of ideas and lots of things that can be pulled out of your pocket at the last minute. But again, the prayer was always Heavenly Father. I don't know that I'm enough for this. So please magnify my efforts. And he does. Yeah. You know, you'd feel the spirit just making it better, giving you words to say that you didn't know you had. And international trips are very valuable. I think it's a great time to connect one on one with local young women leaders and to say the Lord knows you. The Lord is aware of what you're dealing with here. And please tell me what you're dealing with. So it's kind of a two way thing, too. We'd learn and they'd learn. Yeah. So with the hindsight of that experience, it was five years. It was a five year call from the beginning. So that's what you expected. Yeah. Wow. And with hindsight of that, that experience, what would you if you go back in time and talk to Bonnie Oscarson as the ward young women's president, you know, day one, like, what what did you learn? What insight would you give yourself? That's a good question.

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I think our prophet today is it's got the best advice for anybody called to a new calling, especially, you know, with the youth. And that is listen to the spirit. You've got to be in tune with the spirit to know, because that will direct you who needs help. See that girl, she needs help. See, you know, and here's here's maybe what you could think of. The thing I worry about, it was a question I was asked the most often. What is your biggest concern for the youth of the church right now? And it was I pull out my cell phone and say, this is it. Our youth have unlimited amounts of information coming at them 24 seven. And to teach them to use those devices responsibly is a huge job. And it's not easy. Plus, how do we teach them what things they hear

and read and constantly what's true and what's not true? What can you trust? You know, and that to me is a huge concern. And so I think that's what parents are dealing with. And I think that's what youth leaders are dealing with, too, is helping youth to learn how to use their technology responsibly. Yeah. And they need to be aware of that. You know, when we raised our seven children, I could control what our kids were exposed to. I wouldn't allow our rated movies, you know, to be seen in our house or books or whatever. Parents have kind of lost a lot of control over what their kids are exposed to now because everybody has a cell phone. Yeah. So when you go back to that principle of like following the spirit, what does that look like for you specifically? Is it a meditative process? Is it pacing? Is it reading the scriptures? Is that like when you need to get in that mode of listening to the spirit? What does that look like for you? I want it all the time. I don't I don't just need it occasionally. And I, you know, we're told constantly the lifetime behaviors that will keep us in a in a spot where we can be receiving that. For me, going to the temple often, both my husband and I serve as temple workers, but we try and go every week as patrons to have an experience. When we lived in Houston, Texas was the first place that we they built a temple while we lived there. First time we'd ever lived near a temple. And honestly, I I had struggled with temple attendance and trying to understand what it was all about and seeing the savior in the temple until I became an ordinance worker. And then we were there three or four times a week sometimes. And that's when somebody said to me after I'd been serving in the temple for about a year, have you noticed any difference in your life? And I thought I really thought about that question. I thought it was a good question. And I realized that I felt the spirit more in my life in everyday little things even. So I think temple attendance is important. Again, President Nelson is saying, you don't want to go to the temple, go more often. How important that is to our spirituality. But prayer is very important to me to pray several times a day to just feel like you're kind of in tune all the time. I appreciate the gift of prayer. I can talk to my heavenly father anytime I want. And he encourages that. And I make it a habit to read my scriptures daily to study. And, yeah, those are I mean, those are the primary answers. That you always hear about everything. But how do we have the spirit with us? You have to be walking the walk and talking and just going through things that will invite that. Yeah. You mentioned technology was sort of that focus of concern you had for the youth during that that time of service. Was there any other issue or program or initiative that you really had to dig in and counsel together and and work through that that comes to mind during that time of? Well, it's interesting that I don't feel like I don't know if we had a barn burner. I don't know what the camp we did come out with a camp. I think the barn burner was a slow sizzle because things kind of changed during the time we were in to putting the women leaders, there was a lot more emphasis on let's have better representation from the women leaders of the church. There was a lot of the ordained women to the priesthood movement that was very strident at the time and going on. And the leaders are sensitive to the voices of women and wanting to make sure they felt like they're heard and listened to and that they're an important part of the work. So we started to be put on committees and councils that previously had not had women, for instance, about a year into my term of office. It was Sister Burton was the General President and Rosemary Wixom was in primary and me. And they called us to serve on the three main councils of the executive councils of the church. There's Temple and Family History Missionary. And the third one is now called Priesthood and Family Department, which takes care of everything that's not in those other two. Basically, you know, curriculum, auxiliaries, everything.

It's the first time they'd ever had a woman on the missionary executive council. And for me to go in there and sit once a week, we had a meeting at one o'clock in the missionary department. And Elder Oaks was the executive director, Elder Bednar, Elder Anderson, Bishop Waddell, Elder Brent Nielsen and me.

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And to be the only woman, you'd think it would be intimidating, but it wasn't. These men are so open and loving and inclusive and always. If I didn't say something, they would turn to me and say, what do you think? So I think that was a big movement. And like I say, Sister Burton was called to the Priesthood and Family Department and Sister Wixom was called to the Temple and Family History. Now they have two women serving on each of those committees from the Asoi presidencies, and which is probably a better thing to have a partner, because when you're the only woman in the room, it can feel like you don't have a voice. But again, I had to learn to listen to the spirit. And sometimes the spirit during a meeting would say, you just had a thought. Why didn't you say that? Why did you say that out loud? You know, and so I would. And sometimes the spirit would say, no, don't say that. That's not worthwhile. So that became one of my favorite meetings. But I did see how the church is run by councils firsthand. And I saw that these men in the quorum of the 12 and the 70, they're not there because they have an agenda and they, you know, know what's best and everything. It's all what does the Lord want to have happen? So we did in our presidency a lot of preparation for the big changes that you've seen since President Nelson has been sustained. We had meeting after meeting about the Come, Follow Me program of home centered church supported, and we didn't know COVID was coming. We had no idea with that, but we all felt this strong impression that we need to bring this back to the home. It needs to be taking place in the home and the church is a support. It was just so strong. I can't even hardly tell you about it, but curriculum meetings and trying to figure out what that looked like and everything else. The Lord knew what was down the road and what was needed. And so we were participating in those kinds of things. So we helped do the preparation for Come, Follow Me, but it didn't take place until after we were released. It's OK. And that was, again, part of Elder Bednar's thing is doesn't matter who gets credit. What's important is what the Lord wants to have happen in the church. You know, the youth programs have gone through some dramatic changes since we left. We were involved. We knew that scouting was about to be, you know, separated from church. So we worked closely with the young men's presidency and we said, first, they were saying, let's start preparing for what it looks like when we don't when we're not connected with Boy Scouts of America. What does the Aaronic Priesthood program look like? And our presidency said, wait just a minute. If you're going to be revising young men's program, could we please join with you? And we do this together. And I think that was inspiration for the Lord. Could we make the programs a little bit more equitable? You guys get a lot of money. And people notice that that the scouting program got a lot of money and a lot for their campaign. You know, could we please equalize the programs a bit more? Could we look at the personal development programs, the

personal progress and scouting had kind of overshadowed what their personal development program was. And so we did a lot of work interviewing leaders and professionals and meeting together. There's a lot of pre-work that then didn't really happen until after we were released. But that's kind of the way the church moves. It moves slowly. Things don't happen overnight when you want to make a change. It's like they used to tell us it's like trying to turn an ocean liner around. You don't just go, you know, it's a very slow process because it's so big. And it has translation issues and you have, you know, worldwide church again. So what a privilege, though, to have seen behind the scenes efforts in getting these things started and along the road. And then when we were replaced and the new presidency came in, they picked up where we left off and continued to improve. It's thrilling to watch that from afar, having seen behind the scenes. Yeah. So just listening to that, what I'm learning is I'm just thinking about the sisters that may be listening who feel like their voice isn't heard in a council setting or, you know, and they don't they often get frustrated by it, but there's these moments where either spirits really encouraging to speak up or, you know, even with the best intention of the men that were involved in these general authorities and whatnot. Sometimes they didn't realize that, you know, like with the young men, like we're going to revise the ironic preaching program. And you came in and said, well, wait a minute, let's broaden the scope a little bit and talk about it. So just sort of inserting yourself and giving that opinion was really necessary for that revelation to continue. I think we're doing better as a church. I think we've ward councils have gotten better at including more women. For instance, my husband was the bishop during the time I was young women's. Oh, yeah, just downtown Salt Lake Ward. And we didn't it's an inner city ward, so we didn't even have any youth. Here I'm the young ones. Don't you have any youth in our ward and barely a primary? We finally had like five or six kids in the primary. But so when he would hold ward council, there weren't very many women there because we didn't have a young women's president.

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We didn't have a primary president at first. So he would invite counselors to come, you know, the whole Relief Society presidency to come because you need women's voices in ward councils, too. I think we're doing better. I think the men are becoming more aware of the importance and understand that the principle of the council is that we discuss it. Revelation can be scattered among us all and that it's get everybody's opinion, hear every voice, and then it has to be unanimous. When we make a decision, it has to be unanimous. And I think we're I think we're getting better at that on the local levels of ward and stake councils. And the men are aware of how much the women can contribute. And if women feels like they're not being heard, then they need to speak up. They need to be strong and say, I really have a strong opinion about this. And I would appreciate it if you would listen. Oh, love it. In parts of the world, too, women aren't valued. Their voices aren't valued as much. And so I know when we were sent to places like Africa, we were starting at a more basic level and we were having to teach and encourage, you know, listen to each other and read the scriptures that talk about one voice at a

time. But listen to everybody. And yeah, that's a great mention that even in other countries, there may be some deeper cultural barriers that there are. You can't just write a new paragraph in the handbook and consider it fixed, right? No, no, absolutely not. Yeah. Yeah, that's tough. Bunny, any other principle, concept, story that we want to make sure we fit in here before we wrap up? Well, one of the things I thought about is happened shortly after I was sustained and had started. I was finding myself sitting in these councils. And because of my lack of experience in doing this, I felt really insecure and I felt like I didn't have a lot to contribute. They always will turn to the women in the room at that level and say, what do you think? And sometimes my mind would just go blank when they do that. I'm sitting with 70s and sometimes apostles. And I started dreading going to work every day because it like every day. It's like a full time job. And one morning in my prayers, I was kind of expressing this is scary. And I kind of got reprimanded by the spirit, which said, you know how many women get to do what you've been asked to do? What a privilege this is. I don't expect you to be perfect. I don't expect you to know everything. It's OK. I've told you I'll help you. And I changed my whole attitude about it. I just thought it's my pride that's hurt there because I feel like I should be great at everything and I'm not. And I'm going to have to grow into this. I'm going to have to learn. And you're right. How many people get to sit in the setting that I'm getting to sit in and listen and be with these people? And I stopped worrying about it. And I just thought, I'm going to do my best. The Lord has said he would make up the rest. And it started to become a joy. And it was I have to say, for the rest of the time I got to serve, it was a joy and a privilege. I was out of my comfort zone a lot. I was asked to do things that I just never could have imagined. There are pinch me moments every day when you say, I'm really getting to do this. But we're worried about yourself and how you appear and just say, I want to be a part of doing the Lord's work. And he's there for you. Yeah. Love that. A great perspective. So what's your life full of now? Temple and so we moved to Provo a little over two years ago. And we live right near the Provo temple and we we serve there weekly. My husband's a sealer. And so he does a couple of sealing shifts a week. And we're both origins workers. And when we're not in the temple, we've been called to serve in the MTC. Talk about a continuation of serving on the missionary executive council. So we're ecclesiastical leaders at the MTC, which means we're kind of we provide the home ward setting for the missionaries there. They're divided into branches. And we have a zone that's our branch. And some of them only stay two weeks. Some of them are there, you know, six or eight weeks if they're learning a harder language. But we nurture them. We're there for them. We have sacrament meeting and priesthood and Relief Society with them. We have discussion groups with them. And it's really, really a fun assignment. Sounds like it's great. Awesome. Well, last question I have for you, Bonnie, is as you reflect on your time as a leader in the church, how has being a leader helped you become a better follower of Jesus Christ? Well, going back to what I said about, you know, not not having so much pride, thinking you have to the leadership in the church is just so different than leadership in the world. And I've seen both watching my husband deal with dictatorial bosses who said, well, I say he goes and you don't, you know, get your own opinion. You do what I say versus the church where it's all what does the Lord want to have happen? This is all about individuals, not programs, show love and concern, help everybody have a good experience. To me, that's the difference in leadership in the church versus the world. And I'm glad I don't have to work in the world these days. I'm glad I get to be a

part of an organization that believes that Jesus Christ set the perfect example of leadership because he did it through love. That concludes this episode of the Leading Saints podcast.

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Hey, listen, would you do me a favor? You know, everybody's got that friend who listens to a ton of podcasts and maybe they aren't aware of Leading Saints. So would you mind taking the link of this episode or another episode of Leading Saints and just texting it to that friend? You know who I'm talking about, the friend who always listens to podcasts and is always telling you about different podcasts? Well, it's your turn to tell that friend about Leading Saints. So share it. We'd also love to hear from you. If you have any perspective or thought on this episode, you can go to Leading Saints dot org and actually leave a comment on the episode page or reach out to us at Leading Saints dot org slash contact. Remember, go listen to Dan Duckworth's presentation about youth mentorship by visiting Leading Saints dot org slash 14. 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. When the declaration was made concerning the own and only true living church upon the face of the earth, we were immediately put in a position of loneliness, a loneliness of leadership from which we cannot shrink nor run away and to which we must face up with boldness and courage and ability.