



## **Creating Safety for LGBTQ Latter-day Saints in the Bishop's Office | An Interview with Blake Fisher**

August 22, 2020

Kurt: Welcome back to another session of the LGBT Saints Virtual Summit. Today we're sitting down with Blake Fisher. How are you, Blake?

Blake: Doing well, thanks.

Kurt: Good. Awesome. You work for BYU. Maybe tell us your job. And then maybe we'll just jump into your personal story and then we'll get into some of the details you do at BYU. So what's your job description? What's your job title there?

Blake: I work for the BYU Office of Student Success and Inclusion. It's a relatively new office. So we focus on a lot of different groups that feel a little bit more marginalized here at BYU. Our main goal is to help them feel like they belong and more welcomed as well as helping all students just understand how to create more unity here on campus and to be more inclusive. It's a pretty exciting job. It's nothing I was expecting to go into when I was working at the university. I was actually working in University relations, and they opened this new office and they invited me to be a part of it. It's been really exciting.

One of my main focuses is actually working with students who identify as LGBTQ or experience same-sex attraction or gender dysphoria, and just working with them to find out what their needs are, and kind of how they're doing and just see what I can do to make sure that they're feeling supported and feeling welcome here on campus. A lot of unique challenges and a lot of really cool connections there.

Kurt: Nice. If I remember right, you're not a therapist, but you are just there to help, right?

Blake: Yeah. I'm an advisor, so I don't have a therapy license or anything. I love being able to connect with the students and to talk with them. I don't do any therapy with them. We just have great conversations. I see what I can do to support them and see if there's I think that the administration could really benefit from their experiences and stories. And it's cool. It's a completely confidential office even though I'm not a therapist. So we get to hear the raw details and really beautiful testimonies, as well some really hard trials these students are going through.

Kurt: That's why I wanted to make sure you're a part of the summit because you sort of experienced a similar dynamic that maybe a church leader experiences. They're not trying to give therapy but they're just trying to have helpful hope-filled conversations with individuals. But obviously, you focus on individuals, the LGBTQ Latter-Day Saints or students at BYU, I should say. Maybe they're not all Latter-Day Saints, though I'm sure a large majority of them are. So I think you've probably learned some things that could help a lot of bishops in there or leaders in general in their journey.

Blake: I hope so. It's neat because as I meet with students, the topic of meeting with church leaders comes up a lot. Some of them get a text from a bishop saying, "Hey, I want to meet with you." Then they come into my office, like, "Oh my gosh, I don't know what this is about." So we talk to them and try to help them prepare for this meeting or after a meeting that went really well or maybe had some struggles we get a touch face. So the topic of church leaders comes up a lot here.

Kurt: We'll definitely get into some of those details and interactions. But tell us a little about your background and story. Obviously, your background is connected to this topic as well and is part of the journey of you landing in this position.

Blake: It is. When they invited me to be part of this conversation on campus, they had heard about my personal experience with same-sex attraction or being gay. And they just started wondering if I could just be part of the conversations of what we can do as students. So I just started to share my story and then it kind of went from there.

The first person I actually talked to about my experience of same-sex attraction was a church leader. It was right before my mission. I had never talked to anybody about it. I was really nervous to talk to my stake president before being a missionary. So I talked to him about just having these experiences and these feelings, and he was incredible. I'm so grateful that my first interaction with a leader in the church was so loving. He said, "I know you and about your goals. You are going to be such a great missionary and it's going to be just fine." That confidence and love that I felt from him set a great trajectory for me. I'm really grateful for that.

Things started to get a lot harder as far as my own personal experience when I got back from my mission in this giant world of dating. Just the future opened up and I had no idea what I was going to do with that. [00:05:02] I felt pretty hopeless there for a while. I was able to get help

from some therapists and other church leaders to the point where I started to feel more comfortable talking about it. Eventually was able to open up with my family and close friends. That took a long time. It was hard because there's always this kind of denial from me. I was just like, "Is this real? Is it not? Is this good to talk about? Is it not?" It was really great whenever I was able to talk to people about it and felt loved. That helped me feel like I'm okay and just increase that confidence.

Kurt: Let me ask you about your time on your mission. I mean, was your mission president aware? Did it ever become an issue to any extent there or takes up the focus of your experience?

Blake: I never talked to my mission president about it. He may have been aware. I'm not sure. It never came up. I didn't think too much about my sexuality or my mission. I was one of those probably a little bit too focused missionaries.

Kurt: We all were.

Blake: I mean, it came up in moments, but they didn't create a lot of tension or anything there on the mission. My mission president, his wife since has found out and they've been a great support. So they check in and just see how I'm doing. But it never came up then.

Kurt: Did you leave your mission sort of feeling like this is sort of in a good spot. It's not a distraction in life. Maybe you can just carry on without issue or without having to reconcile some of these feelings?

Blake: That sounds a lot healthier than probably what was that like for me. I think it was a little bit more of a denial and suppression just trying to pretend it wasn't a thing. I think then coming home and just suddenly dating and marriage, and everyone's talking about that, that's when I'm like, "Maybe I need to look at this a little bit more because it's clear that I'm not feeling this attraction towards girls and this attraction to guys is there, and I have no idea what to do with it." It started to make me feel pretty hopeless. And I'm grateful that I had places to go for help.

Kurt: It sounds like the more you had opportunities to talk to people about it, that that really just helped you process what you were experiencing.

Blake: Yeah, it did. I think just putting it out there and just realizing it wasn't this dark, scary thing, and just realizing that other people could think about it and handle it with a lot of love and kindness helped me to think about it that way myself, which was huge for me. Not much just having people who I felt like just knew me better. I felt like there was this huge part of my experience that people just didn't understand.

Kurt: Not to pry into your personal life or experiences—but that's sort of what we're doing—but I'm just curious because I know there's just a diversity of experiences that people go through for this. So did your experience...was it mainly just talking with friends, church leaders or was therapy involved? Like professional counselors.

Blake: I talked to one stake president who was really great. He wanted to be supportive, but he knew that maybe a therapist could be more helpful for some of the questions I had. So he started setting up with therapists. I also saw therapists on campus here as well as group therapy with my peers. All that was extremely helpful for me, especially in trying to understand the shame I was experiencing, and trying to separate that shame from experience. That therapy and the group therapies helped me a ton with that.

Kurt: As far as how you would define that experience with shame, what did it feel like? And then what were some of the processes? Or what did it look like when you're able to sort of separate that shame from the experience?

Blake: The shame for me felt very much, like, "Okay, I'm experiencing these feelings that are very against the church teachings, are against the plan of salvation, and I must have done something wrong to land in this place or to be feeling these things. So I need to figure out what I need to do right in order to fix it and fix this giant problem that's going to keep me from my goals, that's going to keep me from salvation." It was just a giant problem I needed to fix and that it was my fault I was experiencing it. Which is just crippling because as hard as I tried to fix it, it didn't seem to be changing.

Kurt: Did you find that you became maybe a super missionary or you became a super Latter Day Saint? [00:10:00] Because a lot of time you hear that individuals tried to pray the gay away. But I really feel like I don't know there's more of the Latter Day Saint experience, they try and behave the gay way.

Blake: I think I was very perfectionistic and overly scrupulous anyway. That's part of my personality. So that played a big role in it. I don't know if it was as direct like, "Okay, if I'm righteous enough, this will go away." But I was extremely perfectionistic in all aspects of my life. I think more an attempt to feel worthy and lovable and okay and acceptable just because the feeling of being gay made me feel the opposite of that. So trying to make myself feel acceptable, lovable resulted in a lot of perfectionism, which was exhausting.

Kurt: What does that look like today? I mean, not to assume that you've solved the puzzle or figured it out. But I mean, how do combat those things when it feels like that shame comes back?

Blake: I'm really grateful a lot of that shame I don't feel like is there anymore. I really have learned to appreciate and value my experience for what it is and really divorce it from worthiness or God's feelings about me and even other people's feelings about me. It's part of my experience and it's important and there's a lot of really beautiful aspects of it that I've been able to just really enjoy and appreciate. Seeing how that helps my life, how it helps other people has really combated that shame. And just being around so many people who really did hear my story and I felt complete unconditional love, that I think what changed it. Especially as I felt that from a divine source, as I prayed Heavenly Father felt that He was okay with how these feelings and how I was doing and that there was level acceptance there, that melted the shame away more than anything.

Kurt: That's encouraging for sure. So I want to sort of pivot towards your role at BYU. What's the department again that you work in? I need to write these things down.

Blake: It's called the Office of Student Success and Inclusion.

Kurt: Success and inclusion. This isn't just an office for LGBTQ students, right? You cover all sorts of different things.

Blake: We like to talk about race, and gender, and religious minorities, and all the other historically marginalized groups. We work with those. Most of my work has been focused around sexuality and gender identity just because of my personal experience. But yeah, we try to look at the whole group.

Kurt: I imagine if there's a Baptist attending BYU, they're naturally going to feel alienated, and sometimes they just need someone to talk to about being the odd man, right?

Blake: And we love being available for them.

Kurt: Cool. In these interactions with students, I mean, obviously as part of your own personal journey, do you lead out with that? Do you even bring it up? Is the person who replaces you someday also needs to have same-sex attraction background?

Blake: I don't necessarily lead out with that. Most of the students who find us know already. The students are really good at doing their homework and talking to each other and finding out that kind of information. So most of the work I do doesn't really depend on my experience. I think the students feel comfortable knowing I can really empathize. But I think somebody could come in who doesn't have this and do a great job. My coworkers do an excellent job. But I do think there is something unique about talking to somebody who has experienced it. The majority of students who don't experience same-sex attraction or identify as straight have many mentors and people in their life to talk about the church or dating, or just how they're doing. There's so many people that they can do that.

A lot of our students who are LGBTQ plus don't have that. So I think I'm grateful, we can talk a little bit about my experience if they want to. But most of the time we try focus on them.

Kurt: So I'm just curious because I know a lot of leaders, especially bishops, they want to have these conversations, right? They want to be the type of leader that people are scheduling appointments with and coming in. So if a student is wanting to talk about their sexuality or same-sex attraction, how do they find out about your office? Then when they set an appointment, how does that whole process work?

Blake: That's kind of in flux right now. We're still trying to get the word out and publicized about our office. [00:15:00] But most of the time that right now it's been through word of mouth, where the students who know each other they get online. I've been doing a lot of presentations on campus as students find out about that. And then other employees who hear those refer students over. I also get a lot of referrals from church leaders as well as therapists in the area

who know that I'm here as a resource and who've heard my story before. A lot of them, if they know of students will send them this way as well. Just usually give them my phone number or email. That's fine.

Kurt: So why would they come to you rather than a therapist? Why would a therapist refer people to you?

Blake: I think a lot of the students who are going through this aren't necessarily feeling like they need therapy. They don't feel like they're struggling with mental health concerns, but they just are wanting somebody to talk to and somebody who gets it. So it can be nice just to have a larger network of support, to have their ecclesiastical leaders at their therapist. And just to try to expand that to more people, I think is usually why the referrals come. It's cool to be able to work with those people. Sometimes the students will invite their bishops to call me and so we all kind of work together and try to support them.

Kurt: Do you serve as sort of a reporting office? Like if an LGBTQ student has a negative interaction because of their sexuality, can they go to your office and say, "Hey, this happened in the biology class, and this is a problem."

Blake: We definitely want to support students that are going through discrimination. We aren't necessarily the...

Kurt: Like the police?

Blake: The police of it. But we would want to work with the student in getting those resources. Of course, we just don't send them there. I continue to walk through until we know that the student and whoever they're wanting to start with find some resolution. But yeah, that comes up a lot, unfortunately.

Kurt: Awesome. Let's dive in deeper here as far as what you hear as far as these interactions with bishops. Because a lot of students maybe they even have a negative interaction with their bishop. Not that he was offensive by any means. Maybe he didn't know and had a negative interaction and they may come to the office looking for support there. So maybe unpack that for us.

Blake: You bet. I think that it's really important to mention the vast majority of conversations I have about church leaders; the students actually talk really positively about it. I hear way more experiences like, "Hey, I talked to my Relief Society president or I talked to my Bishop or Elders Quorum president and it went extremely well." And they just come to tell me about it. That happens way more often than I think people would think.

Kurt: Oh, that's great.

Blake: The vast majority. But yeah, there are the occasions where the students are really nervous or have an interaction that isn't good and they just want someone to talk to about it. So

it's fascinating to hear some of those patterns of some common things that go really well and that don't go so well.

Kurt: Let's talk about as far as you hear certain things either, like you said, the beginning like someone will get a text from a bishop, "Hey, I'd like to see you." And the bishops thinking, "You're going to be our every other Sunday Elders Quorum instructor or whatever." But in their mind, they're like, "He's found out." Help us understand that dynamic and what it is you hear.

Blake: There's a lot of the students who will reach out to me and just say, "Hey, I just got this text and I have no idea what my leader wants to talk to me about." And because they're worried about stuff like "Did someone tell them about my experience? Did I get caught doing something?" there's so many fears are going through these students' mind that they start to freeze up and feel very paralyzed before they even know what the bishop wants to talk to them about. I get texts with a lot of nervous emojis and sweating emojis of like, "I just heard somebody wants to meet with me. I don't know what this is going on."

So a lot of times I try to help the students to say, "Is there any way that you can get more information about what this meeting is going to be, especially since you're so nervous?" Because a lot of times it is something like the leader just wants to get to know you, or they have a calling, or they want to talk to you about something you said in a meeting that they really liked. And trying to encourage the students to see, "Hey, can I get more information about this meeting?" It's so great when the leader does that proactively when they include all those details with the student saying, "Hey, this is what I want to talk to you about. [00:20:00] This is who will be there, the setup." There are bishops who even describe like, "Hey, just come in Sunday dress or don't worry about dressing up." All of those details seem to really lessen the fears and stress of the students. The more information that better. Just that prep work.

Of course LGBT individuals aren't unique in that stress of what is this meeting for, but it seems to affect them pretty deeply to the point where they're walking into these meetings with a lot of fears, which I know that the leaders certainly don't want.

Kurt: I think this is just awesome advice across the board because for a lot of members of the church, regardless if they're LGBTQ or not, the bishop's office can have a feel of the principal's office. Like you only go there, you only get called in maybe for calling. But if it's not a calling, then what is it? I remember one personal experience myself where it was in a stake that, for whatever reason, I knew it wasn't a calling. Then I got called in with very little detail. And even myself, I felt the sudden shame like, "Oh, no, like, what did I do? What misunderstanding?" And turned out to be nothing. So the more information you can give. Even the last ward I was in, the bishop was very proactive in just saying, "We'll always tell you why you're coming in. It's a calling. We have a calling for you. Can you come in Tuesday night?" Just the more details you can provide, it's going to be so helpful.

But especially individuals who are...it can almost be a trigger for them for additional shame or "They finally figured me out," or "they're going to throw the book at me this time," when in reality it could be nothing. So I love that more.

Blake: Absolutely. And I think the same is true when the person who wants to talk to the leader sets up the meeting. I was talking to a student recently who wanted to talk to their bishop about one of the newer policies in the handbook. They're really nervous. So they set appointment with their executive secretary. And the bishop reached out to them and said, "Hey, I saw that you signed up to meet with me. Is there anything that you would want me to be thinking about or studying beforehand before our meeting?"

Kurt: Oh, wow, that's great.

Blake: It was huge for the student because they had a specific question about a policy in the handbook. So they told the bishop that and the bishop was ready and prepared to talk about it. And it turned out to be such a good experience because there was a lot of information and details before the meeting even started. It was just awesome to hear that.

Kurt: So more details going both ways is helpful. I remember that as a bishop, a name would appear on my schedule, they'd walk in, and I'd always say, "Well, how can I help you?" And it's like I had no idea where we're going. And I sort of felt like I had to be prepared for. After a few years you sort of figure things out or direction you take whatever issue it is or topic. So making that extra step. Even those maybe listening that are interacting with bishops, I bet a bishop would appreciate saying, "Hey, I've got some questions about the new policies. Would you mind reading over? I'm going to meet with you on Tuesday. I've already talked with your executive secretary." Like, "Okay, all right. Better read up here and make sure I'm ready."

Blake: Yeah, absolutely. I think for a lot of leaders...I was talking to...this student came in and she heard from her Relief Society presidency member, I think, and it turned out to be like a four-hour conversation. She wasn't ready for that. So just like next time you can ask for a beginning and an end time. That might be really helpful. So even that kind of information really lowers anxiety.

Kurt: Love it. Anything else as far as before the meeting or the interaction began?

Blake: I don't think. I think one of the big ones, which is just so hard, because all leaders are so busy is a lot of students come and say, "I have this meeting. I don't know my leader at all, and they don't know me at all." So I think just, obviously, those leaders who the individuals already know, they already have that relationship, there's some trust, whether that's through dinners with their family, or just events and activities, the more somebody knows their leader beforehand, the more comfortable they're going to be in showing up and being able to really trust them.

Kurt: I would imagine some individuals get that call or the texts come in to see the bishop or to meet Relief Society president, or whatever it is, and I'm sure they're afraid that maybe they're going to be called out. I don't even know what that would look like. [00:25:00] Is that a thing usually happens? Or is it mainly just a fear? Or does a bishop come out and say, "Hey, I've noticed some things about you. I just want to confirm if you are..." I mean, I don't know. That sounds silly, but I've heard crazier things.



Blake: It's great because it does happen. Usually what happens is maybe a Relief Society president will see something on social media where somebody comes out, and they let the bishop know. So the bishop is like, "Well, I want to support them and talk to them if they need it." So sometimes the bishop will then call them in. And that can be a really awkward exchange because they don't want to be like, "Oh, someone told you?" That does happen, unfortunately. Usually in those cases, especially when somebody is wanting to disclose such personal information about sexuality or gender, I would just invite bishops to just wait till the individual initiates the conversation.

Maybe in that situation bishop could encourage the Relief Society president to just say, "Yeah, if you're talking to her again about the stuff, just feel free to invite her, if she wants to come and talk with me." Just to have that kind of organic direction. That has actually happened to me where stake president heard from somebody else that this was what I was experiencing, and he had kind of a weird picture. I think he thought I was really struggling and against the church and all this kind of stuff. He didn't realize that I actually really loved the church, and I was feeling pretty good and settled in life. So he called me in to talk and I was like, "Yeah, this is my experience." I think he was surprised that there wasn't more to the story.

Kurt: I appreciate you bringing up that dynamic of something could be said on social media or through the grapevine they hear that this individual has come out, they're more public about it. So as a leader, I want to make sure that they are supportive, that they know that I've got their back, and I want to encourage them or whatever. But when you just call them in...I mean, it's just this concept of calling people in can be so shameful. So just avoiding that. Maybe give them a phone call, "Hey, I heard some, some things. I just want you to know I'm here" or whatever. Or just wait for it. And loving them out as they come to church or whatever, and when they're ready, they'll come to you.

Blake: It's hard to navigate. I think when they intend to serve us there, that's going to come through, which is good.

Kurt: Cool. Anything else as far as before meeting with the leader?

Blake: I don't think so. I think just the more information the better.

Kurt: How about during the meeting? You hear as far as what transpired during that meeting either with a bishop or another leader?

Blake: I actually was talking to a student recently who had an experience with the bishop where the student felt like they received some revelation about the direction they should take with their life. They wanted to run it past their bishop to see how to navigate, how to feel about it. So the student made an appointment, they had a good talk. And then he sent me a message after saying like, "The bishop was really nice, he was great, but we never actually got to talk about what I wanted to talk about." Which is so easy to do, especially when we're connecting really well.

In this case, what he said is, "Yeah, the bishop got really hung up on labels, what words I label myself and we didn't really get to go to my question." I do hear those kind of situations a lot about what actually happens in a meeting, where it seems like the direction kind of changes. Sometimes it's kind of driven by the leader about where the question goes, or the conversation goes, where the question that came in with doesn't get addressed. Usually, always there's like, "This was nice though I didn't get to talk to them."

Kurt: I know just the nature of these callings, especially if you do it for a few years, you sort of get your canned response to whatever issue comes up. Like maybe you respond a certain way one time, and you thought, "Wow, that really worked out well. They felt supported. I'm going to go back to that every time. I'll read that scripture and I'll read that scripture every time now that anybody comes in." So for after a bishop would say, "How can I help you?" And then they bring up their topics, I go, "I know how to handle this. And here we go." And the person may feel like, "Well, no, that's not my question, but I guess our time is up."

Blake: Unfortunately, I do hear about that a lot. On the other end, when somebody has a great experience with a leader, it's almost always said, "They just listened to me and I felt like they really understood what I was saying." And it seems like almost universally when that is what happened, [00:30:00] the individual comes away with a really good experience.

Like in my office, sometimes I fall in the same trap. Like, "Oh, there's things I could do to help or support," and stuff like that. Then I'm like, "Oh, I think what they really need is just to really feel listened to and understood." That's really universal. Here, I just end up doing a lot of reflecting on what they said. They say something and I just say, "Oh, wow." Then I'm really empathizing with the emotion. That's a huge part is just stuff like, "Wow, I can't believe that happened. You must have felt so lonely." And sometimes they're like, "Actually, I didn't." But really empathizing with the emotion. Usually in those situations, I leave feeling really connected, they leave feeling connected. It just takes a lot of listening.

Kurt: That's fascinating. Even there's some great resources, great therapists out there, counselors. So I can imagine a leader just start stacking up those resources like, "Oh, great. We're here to help. Well, you got to see this therapist. She's really good. Have you been to the church's website? Oh, they got some great stuff. Let's go there now." And maybe the person is like, "I'm just curious if I can still take the sacrament." May they have a simple question like that. So I love this, that just being listening, reflective, asking them questions, and then even saying, "Well, what questions do you have? What concerns you the most?" Then that will help them guide the conversation where they want it to go.

Blake: I think that's so huge. Especially some of these individuals question themselves a lot and they have a lot of shame. So kind of allowing them to govern and guide with a conversation really actually helps them start building trust in themselves, as well as the leader. That I can show up here and that can be really beneficial. It's huge.

It's so cool in that process when somebody shares something, and then that's where the inspiration of the Holy Ghost can really come in. It reminds me actually of a quote from Preach

My Gospel. In chapter 10 about teaching, Elder Holland talks about listening. He says something like, "More important than speaking is listening." Then he makes this really powerful promise that he says, "As you listen to these people, if you ask them what are they afraid of? What are their goals? What are their concerns, and then you listen," he says, "I promise you, something that what they say you will be able to testify of a principle of the gospel. You don't need to worry about what to say. It's going to be given to you by the Spirit and by your friends—the people you're listening to."

And I have seen that be true over and over again. That I don't need to worry so much about what I'm going to be saying. Because if I'm listening with the spirit, a lot of times I don't need to say anything. Then there will be once a while prompting what to say. It's almost always better than what I would have come up with on my own.

Kurt: I would imagine if you don't what to say, just say, "I don't know what to say, Can you just tell me more about your experience right now?" Just be like, "If you feel it, say it."

Blake: I love that.

Kurt: I'm just curious as far as your experience when students come in. I would imagine like a Bishop's office, it's taken all of their strength to reach out for help and someone to talk to. And then when they're finally there, they just don't have any more strength to actually be that be vulnerable and open. So they're scared. Do you see that?

Blake: Yeah, I do. There's some times where I'll be sitting here in the office and I'll see somebody walk past and then not come in. Then they walk past again, they're so terrified to even come in. So a lot of times what I'll do and that case is I'll just kind of set the tone of vulnerability a little bit and tell them a little bit about myself. Sometimes like, "You're not talking to a complete stranger. I can tell you a little bit about me and my experience."

Kurt: I love that.

Blake: As I kind of show some of my own vulnerabilities, and I'm like, "This was a really hard time in my life," and stuff like that that can set the tone. You kind of see that worry and fear going on, like, "Oh, this is a conversation between equals. I'm okay here. I'm safe." A lot of times, once they sense that, then they feel more comfortable opening up.

Kurt: Especially with the bishop dynamic, sometimes this is like you're talking to...you might as well be talking to a member of the Quorum of the Twelve who you're on a different level, right? Which is true, but that's sort of the feeling. To just somehow be vulnerable on your side of the desk and let them know they're talking mortal to mortal and we are equals here. [00:35:01] "What's your experience been like? That's mine. It's not better or worse than yours. But that's my experience." That's great. I love that advice.

Blake: Sometimes storing out some hypotheticals. Sometimes when I'm talking to people, they like to talk about some of the concerns that are on their mind, or these kind of just storing some

hypotheticals out there. Because sometimes they'll fit. And sometimes they're like, "Actually, no, that's not..." And then they go from there, which is cool.

Kurt: So what does that hypothetical sound like that as far as how you use it?

Blake: If somebody is coming into my office, I'm like, "a lot of times when people are coming in, it's because they're not feeling like they can fit the BYU mold. There's a lot of stress being here at BYU when it seems like everybody is having a really similar experience. When that doesn't fit us, it's really hard." I'm like, "For example, for me, as a 33-year-old single guy working for BYU, there are very few single men working at BYU..." Just kind of throwing something like that out, it kind of sparks the conversation as like, "Oh, maybe you might not feel like you're exactly like everyone at BYU for a certain reason." I don't know. That's an example.

Kurt: This is tricky because you don't want to necessarily project anything on their experience. I remember this as a bishop. In the context of someone confessing a sin, they'd be able to get out maybe 10% of it. And they'd say, "I did this and this and this happened." And they'd be like, "Yeah." Again, this isn't a confession or a sin or anything, but just saying like, "I bet you feel alone a lot." Or "Do you fit in here?" Or "Can you hold a calling?" And they may say, "Oh, no, I haven't thought that." I think the people at VitalSmarts wrote the book "Crucial Conversation." They call that priming the pump. Like not just saying, "Well tell me more. I mean, come on, you can tell me. You can tell me." But instead giving them something they're like, "No, no, that wasn't it. It was this." And like, okay, you're sort of priming the pump to help them feel ready to talk about it and comfortable to talk about it.

Blake: And just going at their pace. Because if it's at 10%, and that's what they feel comfortable with, I'm in no hurry, and I'm in no rush. I love that with my own church leaders when it feels like there's no rush to a certain goal talking about a certain amount of things or that. That just helps me to feel like, "Okay." Most of the time, it's the opposite where they just start talking and talking. Something what I like to do is five minutes before, I'll say something like, "Hey, it looks like we have five minutes left. I'd love to keep talking about labels or those kind of stuff. But I'm just curious, is there anything else you wanted to bring up before that we've not been able to address yet?" That way, if they did have a specific question that they haven't brought up, then they're able to insert it then. Sometimes it's like, "Ooh, ooh. Yes, let's talk about that. Do you have a time next week where we can chat more about that idea?" I don't know if that makes sense. It's just kind of leaving that gap at the end of the meeting for them to bring up anything they haven't and just setting up more time to talk later.

Kurt: I think that's a great point. Any other tips as far as...? Because this is a dynamic that leaders deal with it. "Yeah, there's another point. And that person they're in crisis, too, and I can't just like put them off." So anything else you do to maybe push pause on the conversation or wrap it up? I'm sure there's times where it's like, "You know what, we got to just take some extra time."

Blake: I think the more work I do beforehand and letting them know, like, "Oh, yeah, let's chat I have 15 minutes." If they just walked in, "If have 15 minutes and then I have to go." If I do that

it's a lot easier to end on time. But usually just a couple minutes before, I need to go just say like, "Ooh, this is so important. I want to keep talking about it." I also ask them, "Hey, I want to keep thinking about this. Could I send you an email or text or something if I have more questions about this?" That way, it opens it up where we could talk in another forum. So they feel like, "Oh, this conversation is going to continue, but maybe not right now." It's just awkward. Most of the time people understand if there's somebody else going in.

Kurt: Awesome. Anything else as far as during the meeting, that interaction that we haven't touched on?

Blake: Yeah. I mean, we can talk more about principles later as far as things to keep in mind. But not really. Not really during the meeting.

Kurt: Okay, good. So we've talked about before the meeting, during the meeting. What do you hear after they've met with a bishop or a leader? What type of things or experiences do they have? [00:40:01]

Blake: It's amazing. I get a lot of these emails of people who have come into the office. You can just tell their brain has been going ever since a meeting. Like, "I can't believe I told them this." You start hearing and feeling the anxiety of "what did I just tell them?" and the nervousness.

One bishop, he was awesome in one of the situations. He sent a text to the person he met with and just like, "Hey, thanks again for meeting with me. I've been really thinking what you've shared with me about loneliness. Just so powerful." And just send them a text like that. It was just so meaningful for that student to hear a post-meeting text. It reminds me of post it text. "Hey, that was great. Let's do it again" kind of idea. It actually really helped this individual feel heard, especially because the bishop mentioned...I think it was loneliness. Like, "Hey, I've been thinking a lot about the loneliness you've mentioned and so hard." That was huge. So like a post-meeting text is awesome.

Another thing that I've seen leaders do, and this has been true for me, is whether that's in a text or just following up is just confirming the...I don't know how to say. It's like a character-based compliment. A lot of times people will tell me, like, "Hey, Blake, you are gay member of the church. That's so cool that you're staying in the church." And it's a very decision-based compliment. For me what means a lot after a hard conversation once like a character-based. Like, "Hey, after we were talking, it was just so cool. I can tell how deeply you think about this stuff. It's just so impressive." I love it when it is a character-based compliment. Leaders who do that, but it's not conditional on their decisions or what they're doing, that builds a ton of trust I've seen.

Kurt: Because behaviors change. And there's sort of this feeling especially in the LGBTQ experience in the church, where you meet these people or are going to interview several of them in the summer, you meet these people who are in a good spot. They recognize that this is part of their identity, but they also have reconciled it with the gospel of Jesus Christ. So we sort of in our mind is like, "You will always be here. That is so cool that you made this decision."

Then later on, if that changes or even smaller behaviors, then in your mind, you think, "Oh, yeah, that behavior was really important to them and now I'm not demonstrating it." So the shame comes in. "I must be less in their mind because of that." Right?

Blake: Yeah. Anytime it's that character, something that isn't going to change no matter what decisions they make is so meaningful because it helps them know that their bishop is seeing who they are not, just the choices that they make. It's just so awesome. I know for me, that's been huge because I am wanting to stay in the church. That's what I'm planning to do. But the people I know that they see my values and character traits that are independent of that, that helps me feel so much more grounded and supported.

Kurt: Man, that just spills over to so many other ways like congratulating somebody not on deciding to go on a mission, but just being a person who wants to share what's important to them. It has a totally different feeling. It's such a minor change it feels like.

Blake: Especially with LGBT people, a lot of the compliments can be stuff like, "Wow, I can tell you're really wanting to be honest with people. And that's just so awesome." Or "You're doing this with a lot of integrity. You're not wanting to say one thing and do another. I love that." Or "You are just so courageous. Even talking to me that takes so much courage." Some of those character-based things is so exciting to see a student come in and be like, "My leader recognize how much courage this takes. You can just tell that that relationship is strengthened."

Kurt: Going back to these feelings they feel after they've had the interview or the interaction, I don't know who...I've heard it from several people, but there's this term called a "vulnerability hangover."

Blake: Oh, yeah.

Kurt: Where an individual has all this strength, they've been praying, they finally get to that office, they have the conversation, then the next day they wake up and they think, "What have I done?" Then the mind starts giving you these perspectives that are so far from the truth. So those texts or those interactions can really calm that vulnerability hangover feeling that really stimulates some shame, right?

Blake: Yeah. I sometimes talk to people about that before they even leave the office. I'm like, "You've shared some really cool personal stuff. Sometimes when I've done that I kind of feel exhausted and kind of self-conscious afterwards. [00:45:00] I just want you to know that this is just been so great. Everything is just really cool." That kind of prepares them for their own vulnerability hangover.

Kurt: Just make a habit of ending that interaction with that. Like, "Wow, this has been great. I feel happy. I feel the Spirit is here. That's great." Awesome. Any other remedies for vulnerability hangover?

Blake: I think some of the biggest things is when they see that what they told you isn't changing your relationship for the worst. If someone came in talk to you about their experience being

trans, and then they feel like you're avoiding them in the hallways and stuff like that, that's really tough. So the opposite is so cool. Just a smile from the stand or across the hall after meeting is just so meaningful. It's just a recognition of this relationship is deeper now after what you told me, and not more awkward. I think that's huge.

Then I think another important thing is so many students come in and say, "Hey, I just told my bishop that I was unfaithful to my wife. The conversation went fine. I have no idea what's next." Then that stress is so high. There's like, "Am I supposed to call them? Are they supposed to call me? I don't know what to do next." Especially after such a vulnerable hangover the uncertainty of the next step makes the vulnerability hangover so much worse, like, "Oh, I don't know what to do from here." So the more information about what happens next, that helps a ton.

Kurt: That's great advice. I've heard these heartbreaking stories where the individual obviously has been very vulnerable and should have shared this part of their identity and experience with a church leader. That church leaders listen to their best, but they don't really know what the next step is. This person hasn't acted out in a certain negative way. So there is this sort of passive-aggressive avoidance that the leader doesn't mean to do it, but he's just so unsure. He's never maybe dealt with something like this, so he'd rather just not talk about it. And then it never comes up again, and that individual interprets it differently.

So even just having a follow-up meeting, even if there's nothing to talk about saying, "Hey, why don't we meet just in a few weeks and see how you're doing?" Checking in I think would help a lot too. But you're right, it can be unintentionally awkward.

Blake: I think the cool thing is a lot of people, let's say I've come out to them, there's like this changes nothing. And a lot of times when I've shared something that personal with them, I want the relationship to change, meaning I want it to be deeper and I want to be closer. For me, as someone shares something really vulnerable with me, I hope it invites me to connect with them more often not less.

Kurt: That's really helpful. Anything else as far as after the meeting? Any other dynamics do you see?

Blake: I don't think so. Again, I think it's cool that the most of the time I hear stories of bishops or Relief Society presidents or leaders is really good. Good intentions come through more than anything. I don't want leaders to feel too nervous, like, are they doing the right things or saying the right things. Because most of the time they're doing great and just to take the cues from the individual. If it looks like they're shutting down, it's okay to say, "Hey, I'm nervous. I said something that is getting in the way of this. I'm sorry if I did." And just being aware of if it seems like they're withdrawing, it's okay to bring that up.

Kurt: Awesome. You noted a few principles here as far as maybe some principles that individuals, leaders, parents, whomever they are having these interactions with can focus on. First one is helping individuals develop faith in Jesus Christ and not faith in a specific outcome. Expound on that.

Blake: For so many of us who are going through these complicated experiences, the future is so uncertain and can feel so hopeless sometimes. And really well-intentioned family members and leaders and stuff want to help us find hope, and so they give us something to hope for. Two of the most common things I hear that people put their faith in or hoping is like, "If you work hard enough, or if I work hard enough, I'm going to find someone I can marry and I'm going to have family just like everybody else." This idea of this future family I can look forward to is like this very specific outcome to give people hope. The other one I hear really often is the church eventually is going to change its doctrine and it's going to accept same-sex sealings and all these things [00:50:00] and so hold on until then.

These are really two very specific outcomes that I think in a desire to feel hope and look forward to a future people use to feel okay. It makes a lot of sense that people do that and feel that way. But I've seen in my own life as well as the people I've worked with, that focusing on the future and those specific outcomes is never enough to really motivate somebody to feel okay and to stay. The only thing I've noticed that really helps people to find hope is that relationship with God and with Jesus Christ, and to have that happening now.

So there are so many things are very future-oriented, and for so many of us, that just is discouraging. So the more leader can do to help us just say, "How are you feeling about your relationship with God right now? How's that going?" Developing that relationship right now, rather than focusing on the future is huge and helps a lot.

Kurt: Oh man that's so insightful. Again, these are principles that really work in any situation even. It's so subtle. I mean, we all do it where we say, "I have faith that something will happen to make this easier," or "I have faith that something will happen so that my life would be more manageable." And in reality, we just have to have faith that, regardless what happens, Christ will always be there. The atonement is there, the healing power is there, and have faith in Christ and not faith in an outcome. That's so insightful.

Blake: Thanks. I know I do it to myself a lot. Like, "I'm going to be okay because eventually X, Y, Z is going to happen." As I bring it back to Jesus Christ right now, it's so much stronger. I think of Christ in the Sermon on the Mount where He talks about the vows of [inaudible 00:52:00]. Or consider the lilies in this idea. He says, "Take no thought for tomorrow." That doctrine is so hard to live, but it really has made a huge difference for me to say, "How am I doing with God right now?" I sometimes worry that people are so focused on what to do to live with God eventually that they don't focus on living with God right now in that relationship. That's the only thing that gets me through is my relationship with God right now.

Kurt: I think it was Elder Holland, if I'm remembering it. He said something like "The command when we break the most is "Fear not." We do it every day. But that's why we're on a journey of faith here. Love that.

Blake: I think also with this idea of not focusing on specific outcomes, something people do is compare stories a lot. Like, "Oh, I read this article about a guy who was gay, who got married and it worked out really well." Or the opposite. "Oh, these people got married and it didn't work



well." We compare stories a lot. That's a very outcome-based response. It can feel really good in the moment, but in the end, it's such an individual journey that doesn't end up helping that much. As well as focusing a lot in the next life. A lot of leaders have done that with me where they're just like, "Just keep on because in the next life, it's all going to work out." I have a testament of that's true. But in those moments where I'm really hurting and really lonely, thinking about the future that much is not nearly as helpful as focusing on Christ right now.

Kurt: The next principle you put is an individual can develop a closer relationship with Jesus Christ as they learn to sit in the tension between faith and sexuality. And leaders can sit there with them.

Blake: In my experience with this tension, I feel like there's these really important aspects of my life. I have my testimony and these spiritual experiences is very real part of my faith on this handed. on this other side is very real experience of sexuality and romantic and emotional and spiritual attraction. And there's a ton of tension between them. That tension was really challenging because sometimes it feels like no matter what I do, that tension is still there. There's been times where I've tried to where other people have encouraged me, "Oh, just get rid of one of them. Don't worry about sexuality. It's not that big a deal. Things will work out. So just don't think about it and get rid of one of those things and that tension will stop." On the other side of the spectrum, like, "Oh, God is loving, so don't worry too much about spiritual stuff and the prophets. Just get rid of that aspect. So that tension will go away if you get rid of one of those two things."

But I've just found that trying to get rid of one of those aspects just isn't that helpful. I think it's hard because as I talk to students [00:55:00] who are feeling that tension, I want to help them not feel like they're in so much pain. That's such a natural thing to...I'm not explaining this well.

Kurt: No, I think you're doing great. Just because tension is uncomfortable, right?

Blake: Yeah.

Kurt: So why would we want to be in the tension? Or we misinterpret the atonement or the gospel makes tension go away, it makes life work? But in reality, is that tension that sanctifies us? Right?

Blake: Right. That's what I've experienced is when I've been trying to focus on not feeling that pain or not feeling that tension, that's a huge distraction. But instead, I found Jesus Christ in my relationship gets so much stronger as I learn how to feel it and just include Christ in that process. That is sanctify. I think there's a lot of things I've learned being in that. And it's hard because it sounds so negative. Like, "The pain is going to be there. Just deal with it. Feel it with Christ." The cool thing is the more I've been open to feeling that tension and pain with Christ, the more I've been able to feel the joy and stuff too.

Kurt: This concept of tension actually came up in my interview with Ty Mansfield, and I've been thinking about ever since. That a role of a leader is to oftentimes sort of point out the tension and sit with them in that tension. Not to make it go away, but recognizing the tension, saying

like, "Obviously you have feelings that want to take you one way, but the gospel wants to take you another way." That's probably hard. Recognizing that attention maybe helps them stimulate or helps them better talk about it. Like, "Oh, he noticed that too? I didn't want to say it, but it's tough."

Blake: I love that. For me, that's the key aspect of mourning with those that mourn. I have a friend and she doesn't identify as LGBT, but she's an older woman. Her patriarchal blessing says that she'll be married and has kids. And it doesn't look like that's going to happen in this life. And she can't reconcile those things. That's just a constant tension for her. My heart broke and I felt how painful that is for her. And to sit with her in that and to mourn with her is important. On the church website. Actually, they have one of those hope works talks that talks about mourning with those who mourn.

Kurt: Oh, yeah.

Blake: So excellent. I would recommend anybody to watch that.

Kurt: We'll put it in our resource section.

Blake: It's awesome. It talks about the difference of mourning for somebody and mourning with somebody. For me, that's what Christ does. He comes, and I feel like he understands the pain and He's sitting with me in that. The leaders who can do that is just so inspiring. I had a bishop who I felt like who did that, who just listened to me to the point where he understood why this is so hard and why this is so painful. He just empathized with me. He didn't try to fix it. He didn't try to solve it, but he sat there with me. That did more for build my trust in him. But more importantly just the gospel generally than anything else.

Kurt: That's really awesome advice. The last principle you wrote down here is a discern and focus on the light in their lives. Light leads to more light.

Blake: Whenever I thought about leaders, I always kind of attached the gift of discernment to that. Like, "Oh, man, they can look right through me. They can see my sins and my problems and where I'm falling short." And that's what the gift of discernment means. So that's what it is. What I've really valued about people in my life and leaders is those who I feel like they can see the good in me in spite of everything else. Like the discerning is like they're seeing the light and the goodness in me.

I meet with a lot of students who they're making a lot of decisions that I'm like, "Ooh, I'm not sure if that's going to lead you to the most happiness and I'm worried about this kind of behavior." But as I've focused on saying, "Oh, but they're doing this," that's such a true principle and so much light. I'm going to focus on that. I've seen how putting that focus and conversation on the good that's going in our life, it tends to grow and to lead. It reminds me of those Scriptures that light can get brighter until that perfect day. I just love when leaders do that for me. Just focus on the good that's going on to my life and I feel it expand. [01:00:00]

Kurt: I think this is a great advice to answer this question. You bring up a dynamic that a lot of leaders wrestle with is they sit down with an individual, and they have decided to go in one direction. They've even credit their personal revelation to going in that direction. And inside you're thinking, "No. Anything but that." You mentioned just focusing on the light. Any other ways that...I'm sure you see that dynamic is all like, no, you're about to step on a rake and it's going to hit you in the face and feel like I need to say something. But maybe that's not always helpful.

Blake: It's so hard because I think always I have to maintain the humility of even if I really think that this kind of behavior, this decision may end up really hurting somebody that I don't always know that. So for me, just maintaining that is helpful in the back of my mind. But more important is, again, just making sure that more than ever that means I want my relationship with that person to be strong. So that hopefully everything works out great. But let's say it doesn't, and maybe some of these choices do leads to some hard things, that they know that I'm still there. Again, that goes to some that focusing on the character of the individual and making sure to reinforce and complement that, as well as just focusing on that light.

I think the biggest thing for me is if they're making these choices not pulling back more and be like, "Well, I was trying to help you, and now you did that. So it's over." And just not ending the relationship there. I still have bishops and leaders from the past who still reach out to me and see how I'm doing. And just the fact that they're that committed shows that no matter which direction I go I believe that they're still going to be there. Which is so powerful.

Kurt: Especially people come and go from wards and you sort of feel like it moved out. Like, I guess I don't have to stress over that. But to maintain somewhat of a connection, checking in with that, that really is part of the ministry.

Blake: It's hard because in an attempt to be validating, you want to go, "Oh, that's awesome. That's great. I'm so excited for you." Most of my friends who have been walking this journey with me, a lot of them haven't stayed in the church. The relationship with the church has changed and they've moved into different directions. And still in the middle of the night at 2 am, I get calls from people just saying, "Hey, I was thinking about this spiritual prompting or this idea, and I'm so grateful for that." And I felt like if I was have changed too much of my beliefs or tried to adapt and not own up to what I believe, then there isn't that desire for them to come back.

I don't know how to describe this, but I wouldn't want leaders to feel like they would have to change who they are or their beliefs, because that's going to be invaluable for these individuals as they think back and evaluate their own beliefs later.

Kurt: That's awesome. Well, anything else we haven't covered, Blake? We've covered a lot and it's been great. Anything else that you want to make sure we insert here?

Blake: I don't think so. I think one of the coolest things that...the more time leaders spend with LGBTQ individuals, I just see that comfort level just naturally getting easier. So I would just encourage people if you have people in your ward or in your community who this is their story,

just spend time with them. Just get to know them. I think a lot of the individual details and stuff fall into place. I'm so encouraged by leaders who are trying. Those who are watching this, the fact that they're spending time to listen to something like this means a ton to me personally. It really does that leaders care this much about supporting people. And that good intention is going to shine through. So hopefully they feel encouraged in that.

Kurt: This conversation reminds me of a time when I was bishop and I stood up in front of the ward and I said, "Did you know that the bishop's office isn't just for confessions? You can actually set up an appointment with me and just talk. And we'll just sit with each other for a moment. That's okay." I remember a handful of specific appointments that comment stimulated and it was remarkable.

I remember one sister came in and told me, "I struggled so much with my mother in law." And we just talked about that for a minute. [01:05:00] It's not like I had all the answers, but it was so healing for just have someone to go talk to it. I love the title of you as far as student success and inclusion. If a bishop or a Relief Society president stand up and say, "This week I'm the coordinator for membership success and inclusion. So if you don't feel successful in life, or if you feel like you're not being included or you don't feel inclusion, let's set up an appointment to talk about it." It brings such a more pure dynamic to the bishop's office or to that relationship with the Relief Society. So I think it's great that you do this.

Blake: I love that. So thank you.

Kurt: As you've had opportunity to lead in this capacity as the coordinator - what's the title again?

Blake: I'm an inclusion advisor.

Kurt: Inclusion advisor. As you've been in this leadership role, how has being a leader helped you become a better disciple or follower of Jesus Christ?

Blake: That's a good question. I think, for me, as I've been able to be in this place as people are so vulnerable, it's been so cool watching just how where God is of these people, and just how much He loves them. And as I feel that just even in conversation, I can just be like, "Wow, this is such a lovable person. I can just feel that," it has helped me just know that that's how God and Christ feels about me as well. I just have so much trust in their ability to work with us because I see them doing it with so many people. And it's beautiful to watch as miracles come into people's lives. And that just helps me just want to continue to be a part of that work and to be a part of what Christ is doing.