



## **How I Lead as a YSA Branch President | An Interview with Geoff Thatcher**

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Kurt Francom:

Have you ever had a loved one leave the church and your relationship becomes awkward? This is so common and so sad. I got the chance to interview the Packard family who have been down this road. Cindy and Blair Packard are Orthodox believing parents and Josh, their son, and his wife have left the church. We came together to discuss their journey, and it was amazing what they taught. They talked about the communications they regretted, and how other siblings responded in positive and negative ways. They learned how to pick up the pieces again, express love, carry on, and build a beautiful relationship. This has become a favorite in the Questioning Saints virtual library. You can actually gain access to this interview at [leadingsaints.org slash 14](https://leadingsaints.org/14). This will give you 14 days to watch the Packards interview and many others related to helping individuals who begin to question their faith. Go to [leadingsaints.org slash 14](https://leadingsaints.org/14) and get access now. So my name is Kurt Francom, and I am the founder and executive director of Leading Saints and obviously the host of the Leading Saints podcast. Now, I started Leading Saints back in 2010. It was just a hobby blog, and it grew from there. By the time 2014 came around, we started the podcast, and that's really when it got some traction and took off. 2016, we became a 501c3 nonprofit organization, and we've been growing ever since. And now I get the opportunity of interviewing and talking with remarkable people all over the world. Now this is a segment we do on the Leading Saints podcast called How I Lead. And we reach out to everyday leaders. They're not experts, gurus, authors, PhDs. They're just everyday leaders who've been asked to serve in a specific leadership calling. And we simply ask them, How is it that you lead? And they go through some remarkable principles that should be in a book, that should be behind a PhD. They're usually that good. And we just talk about sharing what the

other guy's doing. And I remember being a leader, just simply wanting to know, okay, I know what I'm trying to do, but what's the other guy doing? What's working for him? And so that's why every Wednesday or so, we publish these how I lead segments to share. Another episode of the Leading Saints podcast. Today, I'm excited to welcome back a good friend, Geoff Thatcher from Savannah, Georgia. I actually had Geoff on the podcast. We recorded remotely. So this is our first time meeting in person. But that in August of 2016, we talked about his time in public affairs and social media and things like that. Geoff has a great creative background. He works in experience design. And so we actually started our conversation talking about AI and experience design and how that relates to the church. I love to geek out on that topic, but hopefully it wouldn't take too much time. But then we pivoted into his time as a YSA branch president in Savannah, Georgia. And he was part of the creation of that branch. And he goes through that story. things he learned, why they did it. I think there's so much there to learn. And then just some of his approaches from having theme days at church, as far as sacrament meeting, how to get individuals in the branch talking in sacrament meeting about things they're passionate about. And their approach is awesome. As far as how to treat YSAs as adults, because that A in YSA is actually adults, right? So we should actually treat them as adults. And that really brings a lot of power and engagement to the branch by doing that. So he's got a lot of great tips. He had a hard stop, so I'd love to go longer with Geoff another time, but we did have to cut it off. But you'll enjoy it nonetheless. So here's my interview with Geoff Thatcher from Savannah, Georgia. All right, Geoff Thatcher, you're in person and you came to town. I thought, well, let's jump in the studio in person.

Geoff Thatcher:

Yeah.

Kurt Francom:

You actually exist. You know, it was like 13 years ago that we met. It was 2016. So. Oh, OK. So that was a long time ago. Yeah. Two thousand. OK. Eight years ago. Yeah. So and we'll link to that. We had a great conversation about some social media and because you were in public of public communications, they call it public affairs then in Cincinnati, Ohio.

Geoff Thatcher:

Yeah.

Kurt Francom:

Right. Cool. And now you're in Savannah, Georgia. Savannah, Georgia. And we got all sorts of things to talk about. But so maybe explain you're in town. You're speaking at BYU on AI. Is that right?

Geoff Thatcher:

Yes. We're speaking at the business school, the Department of Experience Design on AI. Our creative firm does a lot of work with AI. We certainly use AI on our creativity. And we just led Really, the world's first AI-enabled museum experience at the College Football Hall of Fame, where we put guests, using AI, to put guests as the star of the show. So, for example, if you were to come to the College Football Hall of Fame, we'd scan your face, you'd answer some questions, and then we'd make you a 1950s cheerleader. We'd make you a football player, a coach. And we basically make you the star of the exhibit, the star of the experience. And so we're talking with the students tonight about AI.

Kurt Francom:

That's cool. That's awesome. And then AI, I mean, even as I've gone to different museums or traveled, like just talking to chat GPT about, Hey, what's this? Or asking questions as you go. I mean, it's a powerful. It is.

Geoff Thatcher:

It's a very powerful resource. We loved Elder Bednar's talk on AI. Really, it rings true. You have to be so careful and watch yourself that you don't ... I'm a writer, creative writer. You have to make sure you use it not to replace what you do, but to help and to augment and to speed what you do. To give you a quick example, just three weeks ago, we were in Yosemite Mountain Sugar Pine Railroad, just outside the gates of Yosemite National Park. We were there for a two-day consulting gig with this attraction. And, you know, we rode the railroad, we interviewed the employees, we talked, we walked around, we bought a couple of books, we read those books, and we just experienced it in general. And one of the things we did with those books, we just kind of thumbed through them. We read through them. We didn't have time in two days to read the books in detail, but we actually browsed them. And we could have gone to AI and said, hey, AI, would you please summarize the book *The Whistles Blow No More* by Hank Johnston? And it would have given us a summary. But it was in browsing the book and actually thumbing through its pages and looking at it that we found a poem. And it was a poem about the last whistle blowing at the Madeira Sugar Pine Lumber Company in 1931 when they shut down after clear cutting 35,000 acres outside Yosemite. And the poem was wonderful. And so, we immediately had the idea, the spark of inspiration, if you will. Hey, let's turn this into a folk song. So, we went to Suno, an AI song app, and we created a song, a folk song, with the lyrics being

the poem. And it was beautiful. And we put it into our presentation, and the owner of the railroad got a little tear in her eye, and it was emotional. Actually, all of the director and the owner and the employees that were there in our final presentation all got very emotional. And so, AI is scary to a lot of people because it threatens our humanity. And what I would say is don't use AI to read between the lines. Make sure that you read between the lines. Make sure that you do the research. Make sure that you don't get lazy like I did in high school and got cliff notes, right? I mean, I literally was the laziest student in high school and I suffered for it. I mean, I would show up at Davis High School here in Utah and I wouldn't, I mean, didn't read the book. I seriously did not read one book in high school at Davis High School. It says something about our public education system. So Davis High School, I'm calling you out. I literally graduated without reading one book. I'd read Cliff Notes or I would just show up with a yellow notepad. And I'd interview my students, my fellow students, I'd interview my classmates and say like, okay, who was the protagonist? And what was the story about? What was Of Mice and Men about? And I would just write a report. I'd get a C plus on it. And my parents really didn't care about my grades. And so neither did I. And I didn't learn. And if we use AI to shortcut, to say, summarize this, I mean, we have a rule in our company that we do not use AI to take notes. Now, trust me, it's a lot easier to use AI to take notes. It is. But we believe that note taking is actually, what you're doing when you're taking notes is actually managing your intellectual property. That's what you're doing. The person who is taking notes I tell young people all the time, ask to take notes, volunteer to take notes. Because if you get good at taking notes, you will be in every important meeting. Because what you're doing is you're managing the company's intellectual property. And what happens in note taking is you get ideas. And if you just sit back and have a meeting and you're not actively taking notes, you're you will miss out on inspiration. You will miss out on the spark of ideas that come from that. And so, yes, huge fans of AI, love AI, love creating a folk song. I'm not a musician. I could never create a folk song. I'm not a designer. I use Midjourney all the time. We use Midjourney all the time. But you have to be so careful and so watchful. I mean, Elder Bednar's talk is true about being slothful, right? We can't use AI to shortchange that spark of inspiration that we get when we actually do the hard work or that righteous work that Elder Bednar talked about. And it's the same is true in the professional world, and it's true in our own spiritual growth. AI is amazing, but it's never going to replace actually sitting down and reading and doing that hard work. And so don't let it read between the lines. Don't let it do your work for you.

Kurt Francom:

Just as an experienced designer, how do you anticipate AI will impact our church experience, or how should it or how should it not? I mean, you've alluded to many things, the ways that it shouldn't, but anything else come to mind?

Geoff Thatcher:

Well, we're on the cutting edge of it. It started in 2017 when IBM's Watson went to Brazil and went to an art museum and allowed patrons to actually talk to paintings. And the most powerful one was they asked this painting of a field worker at a plantation, do you play football or soccer? And the painting came back and said, no, he's basically a slave. And so it works constantly. It doesn't play football. But that's a very emotional response to have a conversation with a painting. And then the Shoah Foundation basically took all of the interviews they've done with Holocaust survivors and allowed people to actually talk. Now, the advantage of that is a curator usually would take that role of deciding what the guest gets to learn in a museum. Well, in this situation, anyone could ask any question of a Holocaust survivor. And kids ask different questions than adults do. And so, did you play? How did you have fun when you were in a concentration camp? How'd you keep joy? How'd you stay happy? What did you do? How do you still have hope in mankind and humanity? These are questions that are really interesting. And then in 2019, and then again in 2024, the Dali Museum in St. Petersburg allowed you to talk to Salvador Dali. Just yesterday, I was reading about the art museum in the Netherlands. I'm going to pronounce it wrong, write something. But anyway, it's a big famous art museum. They actually now allow people to use an app to really learn more about the paintings as they go through. But what we did at the College Football Hall of Fame is really the future of this, which is, How do we put people in the story? How do we put you in the experience? One of our favorite experiences that we produced with our amazing partners at the Hall of Fame and with AI is every guest gets a one minute mockumentary featuring them as one of the greatest coaches that never was. So, literally it takes all of your questions. So, like if I played my video, it would say, Geoff Thatcher, born in Farmington, Utah, even though I was born in Bakersfield, but it takes where you said you grew up. So, I grew up in Farmington. So, wanted to be a hotel manager because that was my childhood ambition, but then was recruited by BYU to be an assistant coach. I had an amazing victory over Utah, and then retired to Savannah, Georgia to have a donut store, because I like donuts. It talks about what I did, my personality, and how I motivated people, all based on the answers I give the AI when I check into the Hall of Fame. It's a one-minute video. that I become the star of the exhibit. Yes, at that same exhibit, I can go learn about Lavelle Edwards and Lou Paterno and all the great coaches like Newt Rockme, but for a moment, I become the star of the experience. And where this is going, we believe, is that in the future, if you go to a museum or any attraction, you become the star of the experience. In the future, when you go on Pirates of the Caribbean, yeah, you're going to see Jack Sparrow, but you're going to be a pirate with Jack Sparrow. You're going to actually be in the ride, not just on the ride, but be in the ride. How does that impact the church? Well, we'll have to let them answer that question. I am certainly not a spokesperson for the church in any way whatsoever. you know, where the industry is going. And I think Hollywood will go there as well. I mean, imagine, I mean, people right now, there's a picture of the Jesus from The Chosen over here in the studio on the wall. And, you know, I know people pay to be extras on The Chosen. Like they pay for that right to go out to the studio in Goshen and actually, you know, be extra on The Chosen. It's a revenue opportunity for The Chosen to help fund their film and their TV series. Well, In the future, you'll be able to actually be an extra in a film. You'll probably have to pay for that, right? But imagine taking your date. to Rudy since we're talking about college football. You know that great scene in Rudy where Dan Devine, the Notre Dame coach is in the locker room and he's giving that pep talk. He's like, gentlemen, this is our house and no one comes into our

house and pushes us around. And you'll see the priest and you'll see Rudy and you would have the ability to pay. No, I want to be the extra next to Rudy. Or no, I want to be the priest. And they put your face. on that priest's face and you actually are in the movie. That's you. Yeah, that's cool. And it uses artificial technology and all the amazing other technological tools that they do to put you in the movie. So, I mean, based on what I think I know about people and selfies and our desire to be seen and become part of the experience, I think that's where it's heading. And there's a trend this year. around what I think it's called a collective individualism or individual, I think it's collective individualism, which is people do want to experience an individual moment, but they want to do it collectively. They want to be and share that moment. And we're certainly, we're seeing that at the College Bowl Hall of Fame, where when you transform yourself into a 1980s fan or a 1920s fan, or you transform yourself into, you're in the weight room working out, it's much more fun to have that happen when you're surrounded by your friends and your family. It's a collective experience in the same way that when we're at church, you know, and someone shares a great testimony, it's an individual testimony, no doubt, but it's collective and everybody shares that moment and shares that experience. We want that collective individualism.

Kurt Francom:

Yeah. Yeah. That's awesome. I love geeking out about this stuff, so.

Geoff Thatcher:

Well, we could go on and on and on about AI. I mean, it truly is amazing and we do have to be very careful. And the thing I would tell people is, you know what? Calm down. This is nothing new. I mean, NASA did a report when the Columbia space shuttle crashed, right? It came down and broke up in orbit as it was coming back down to earth and reentry. And in that report, it blamed, again, there were a lot of problems, but it blamed part of the issue on quote, the endemic use of PowerPoint by the engineers. Wow. Because PowerPoint was keeping them from actually doing the harder work of writing a report. And how many of us, instead of sitting down and writing out a presentation, we go straight to PowerPoint or straight to keynote and we just start doing it? Yeah. It's so much better if we actually sit down and we take the time to write out our presentation and then take that written presentation and convert it into visuals and summaries in a PowerPoint. But we skip that. We cut short. We shortchange ourselves. And so AI will definitely allow us to shortchange ourselves. PowerPoint allows us to shortchange ourselves. A lot of technology allows us to shortchange ourselves. I don't know if it's true or not, but I remember someone told me that when literally like papyrus and writing things down was first created, that the scholars at the time were like, yes, but people won't remember things anymore. They'll stop taking the time to memorize things and remembering things and storytelling will go away. But from my perspective, as a professional storyteller, AI is a really powerful tool to help us tell stories and to give us, and it really democratizes, everyone's a designer now, everyone's a musician now, everyone's a composer now, everyone's a writer now, but just make sure you

don't shortchange yourself. And it's the same with the gospel. It's the same with our own spiritual development. And that's what Elder Bednar was saying in his famous talk that he gave, the 2.0 talk, is don't shortchange yourself. Don't, don't, don't shortchange yourself. Because if you shortchange yourself, you won't get that spark of creativity.

Kurt Francom:

So, let's talk about the main thing I wanted to address is your experience. You're currently the branch president of a YSA branch.

Geoff Thatcher:

A single adult branch in Savannah, Georgia.

Kurt Francom:

And you were a part of the creation of it. You were in the branch presidency to begin with. I'm just curious, like starting a branch, a YSA branch, what comes to mind? What was that experience like?

Geoff Thatcher:

So, just a little bit of background. Our son in 2016, 2017 went to the Savannah College of Art and Design as a swimmer. They call them artist athletes, right? So, he was a swimmer and an artist. And when he went, there was a family award, the Savannah Family Award, and there were probably, I don't know, maybe two or three active Latter-day Saints students who went to the Savannah College of Art and Design. And, you know, typical in a family ward, you know, I mean, he went and sat in the back with the other students and, you know, never got a calling. You know what I mean? Just kind of, you know, just kind of rode the back row, if you will, in a family ward, which I think is a pretty common experience for young single adults. And then our youngest daughter, Mia, was also wanting to go to SCAD. And so we moved down from Cincinnati in 2019. So when our son got home from his mission, after his freshman year competing and studying at SCAD, he went on a mission to Peru. And when we got home, again, still there was just a family ward. And again, still about three SCAD students who are members of the church, at least that we knew about, in that family ward. And then we moved down as well, because we essentially then had all three of our kids in Savannah. Our oldest, Zoe, who went to Auburn and swam at Auburn, she was in St. Louis designing costumes, and she was kind of tired of the cold. And so she came to Savannah. She joined our company as an

illustrator, and she bought a house in Savannah. And then little brother Joel and little sister Mia moved in with her, and they were going to both go to SCAD. And my wife, of course, turned to me, and she's like, why are we in Cincinnati? Our kids are all in Savannah. We hate the cold weather. So, we moved halfway between Hilton Head Island and Savannah, Georgia in a town called Bluffton, South Carolina. And once we moved there, got a call from the stake presidency of the Hilton Head Stake, because there's two stakes, Hilton Head Stake and the Savannah Stake. And he said, listen, we'd like to start a YSA branch. Would you help? So, he called his high council and he's like, would you help us do the groundwork essentially to get a YSA branch started? And we're thrilled. We're like, yeah, absolutely. Because our son and our daughter, You know, we wanted them to have a young single adult branch because we knew they were getting lost in the family ward. And so sure, absolutely. So the first task we did is we did a little informal focus group. We actually asked the young single adults, what do you want? And the answer surprised a lot of the people who had been involved with young single adults in both stakes, which is they said they don't really care about activities. They simply want to worship together on Sunday. That was number one. They want to worship together. The second thing they said is they want to be treated as adults. They don't want to be treated as youth. They want to be treated as adults. And the third thing they said is, yeah, okay, on activities, fine, but let's have it more organic. I mean, not so programmed.

Kurt Francom:

Yeah. So as you're collecting this, are you doing like a formal study or Google forms?

Geoff Thatcher:

No, we did a whole presentation, and we actually interviewed every single YSA branch president or bishop in the entire Southeast to ask them a few questions. Like, what's your average attendance? Is it enough? Is it not enough? And we found out that the average attendance from Jacksonville to Atlanta to Charlotte to Athens to Tallahassee was honestly about 35, 37. young single adults in these small branches. And there's some outliers, like Atlanta's huge, but by and large, they're all pretty small branches. And most of the, not most, all of the branch presidents said, no, absolutely. Small is good. Do it. Don't let the size- I'll wait until you can get a ward. Right. Don't know. No, there's nothing wrong with a small branch, nothing wrong at all. And we looked at our numbers and looked at how many young single adults we had that were active in the family wards. And we basically went around and basically said, hey, listen, if we start a YSA branch, will you commit to moving your records? And we got about 60 that said, yeah, we'll move our records to the YSA branch and we're committed. And then we needed to kind of prove that we could do it. And so we essentially were going to do a special sacrament meeting on a Sunday just for the YSAs. And then at the last minute, we were told you can't do sacrament. And I understand why, but you can't do sacrament meeting. And I asked the young single adult who was helping us to organize this, hey, we should let everybody



know that we can't do sacrament in this special, you know, 2pm, you know, meeting that we're going to do on a Sunday where all the YSAs were going to come down. And he confessed later that he did not tell anyone that, because he was worried that nobody would come if we told them there was going to be sacrament. So everybody comes, and we essentially had a sacrament meeting without the sacrament. We had an opening hymn, we had three talks, and all the talks were from young single adults. We specifically said like, no, this is not about, let's not have talks from the stake president or the bishops or anyone. We just had the young single adults talk. And we had like 60 people show up. And literally everybody was looking around and going, wait. I'm not the only one. Like there's more people here in Savannah. I had no idea, you know, it was great. So we kind of proved like we could do it. Then the pandemic hit and that slowed us down for about, you know, six months to a year. But then in March, 2021, we were finally able with the great help of president Alvord and the Savannah stake to start and support from president Maceda in the Hill Ned stake to actually get a young single adult branch started. And it was so great. And again, to share with you the impact, So in March of this year, it'll be four years. And again, I was called in as a counselor, I don't know, about eight months later, and then as the branch president last year. So again, very personal to me. When our son came down to Savannah College of Art and Design, there were two, maybe three active Latter-day Saint students. Now, After having a branch for three and a half years, coming on four years, we now have over 20 young single adults that go to SCAD. And not uncommon for us to have 13 to 15 at church on Sunday. Where did they come from? It's been amazing to see that growth. I think part of it is parents are more willing to send their children to a non-Utah or whatever, a non-BYU school if they know there's a branch, if they know there's a young single adult branch, because they are worried about the child getting lost in a family ward, and they should be. staggering and sad when you look at the records. Because, okay, we have 100 members. We'll have an average of 45 out every Sunday. Again, it's a very transient group of individuals and we embrace that. But if we could get all of them to show up on one Sunday, we'd have probably 65. We have probably 65 active. They're just active at different times. And right now, for example, all of our students are gone for the holidays. And so our numbers, in the summer, we get a lot back from BYU and other Utah schools, but it's a transient group. But we have close to probably 1,200, 1,300 young single adults in both stakes that aren't in our records, that are still in the family wards. Again, we're trying to figure it out, but there's, oh geez, probably another hundred active or partially active in some degree or another, and we've just lost them. That's one of the things that we try to emphasize with people is we have a tendency in our church to say we're losing our young single adults. I don't believe that. I think we've lost them. There's a difference. It's kind of like you have to change your mindset, right? It's not that they're lost, it's that we've lost them. And I want people to understand that difference because it's a difference that puts the blame, if you will, and puts the responsibility back on you as the shepherd. You're the one that lost them. And I love in the parable of the lost sheep, nowhere does it say how that one sheep got lost from the 99. It doesn't say the sheep- Rebelled or ran off. It doesn't say the sheep got interested in other things, or it doesn't say the sheep had a bad day or had a bad week, or it doesn't say the sheep's parents got divorced. It doesn't say why the sheep got lost. It just says the sheep was lost. And you left the 99 and you went out for the one. And we have members come to us all the time from Utah, and we're small. What I love about a small branch is, and I'm gonna make a plea, anyone who's watching this, who works remotely, if you're a young single

adult, please come to Savannah. We have a beach, we have a great young old single adult branch, we have a historic town, it's fantastic, it's warm weather, it's awesome. You'll love it, you'll have a great time. Please come to the Savannah area and be in our branch. So that pitch out of the way, right? Seriously, please come to Savannah. But you know, we have members come from from Utah. And oftentimes they're shocked because it's like, you know, I mean, we're immediately like, you want to talk next Sunday? You want to talk? I mean, like, like, let's, let's put you to work right away. We, we, we need, I mean, we need you, we need you. And, you know, I, I once pulled in this member from Salt Lake and, You know, on the first Sunday, we asked, would you give a talk? And they were like, I've never given a talk before in church. They were like 25. Wow. Never, never been asked. It's true. I mean, I know a lot of people who come to BYU and they never get asked to give a talk. They never get asked to do anything.

SPEAKER\_00:

There's just a lot of people.

Geoff Thatcher:

Right, there's a lot. You're just not needed as much. And the member said, yes, gave a great talk, an amazing talk, right? Great talk. Put them right to work. And then we were talking about this challenge of finding lost sheep. And I said, well, I said, how did people approach you in Utah? Like when you were not active, how did they actually approach you and try to get you to come back? And she said, what do you mean? I said, well, like when they approached you, how, how did the, like, how did they approach? Cause I was like, how do we go approach these, you know, thousand plus people in our two stakes that we want to reach out to? Of course, we don't have the resources to do all of it. So we have to prioritize, but how do you reach out? How do you reach out to them? And, you know, you know, and she's like, what do you mean? I'm like, I'm like, did no one ever contact you? No. And so, again, who has the responsibility here? Who's actually lost the sheep? And so, I mean, that for me is, I think, an important mindset shift when you look at ministering to young single adults, is realizing that they're not lost, that you as a shepherd have lost Them.

Kurt Francom:

Yeah. I'm curious how you approach the dynamic of those YSAs who are, do make the choice to attend their family ward or, I mean, do you still try and reach out and involve them in some way or how does that interaction go?

Geoff Thatcher:

Well, it's recruitment. you know, I mean, our current elders quorum president originally was attending his family ward and we politely bugged him and asked him and then we, you know, did what sometimes we do, which is like, Hey, would you be our gospel doctrine teacher? Then you can come every other Sunday. Right. And he agreed. And it was awesome. And he started coming every other Sunday.

Kurt Francom:

So you sort of make space for them. They don't have to come in all the way.

Geoff Thatcher:

You know what I mean? And then it was like, Hey, would you be in the elders quorum presidency? Yes. Then it was every week. You know what I mean? And then now he's the Oscar president. And so it's just, you know, you know, but like he has a, you know, you know, you know, there are others that just, you know, again, for some people, you know, it's a long drive. I mean, we once had a member who lived on Tuskegee Island, so they would take a ferry from Tuskegee to Hilton Head. Then they would go in a car from Hilton Head to Bluffton, then they would get in the carpool from Bluffton to Savannah. It's a long day. It's a long day. Yeah. God bless that young man. Right. We actually his nickname is Dufusky because that's what, you know, that we all call him Dufusky because that was his nickname because he came from Dufusky. You know, and but we do have we have members that will come for more, you know, more than an hour. We have others that won't. And we cajole, we invite, we beg, we plead. Yeah. You know, What I would say to any bishop or Relief Society president in a family ward is, listen, we need them. We need them. They will be treated as adults in our branch and they will serve and they will speak, but we'll take them. We take some. We have some that... We'll ask them to give a talk, they give a talk, and then we'll ask them in a year and they'll give another talk, but we don't see them in between because they go to the family ward. And we have to respect that. But honestly, I would love it, of course, if every single young, single adult would attend the YSA branch. And again, there's a perception about YSA branches. I would love to have advertising dollars to improve our brand, if you will. And every branch is different and some YSA units get a bad rap for a variety of reasons. And one thing that we've emphasized in our branch very specifically is the purpose of attending a YSA branch isn't to find a spouse, it's to get closer to Christ. Both our stake presidents have emphasized that repeatedly. And you make that pretty clear. Oh, we do. In fact, we tell high counselors, do not tell stories about how you met your wife from the pulpit. They're not interested. I'm not interested. I don't want to hear it. Talk about marriage as banned from the lectern, if you will. That's not the purpose. That's not why we have a young single adult branch. It's not. I mean, yes, we do occasionally have weddings that come out of our branch. Yeah, sure. But that's not why. That's not why we do it.

Why we do it is to bring us closer to Christ, to fellowship, to belong, to share. And that's the best part, is to share our passions. And so we really, really emphasize that. There's a couple of other things we've done. Really, the first branch president instituted this. concept and I love it where he felt, this is President Hull, the first branch president of the YSA branch, he felt that it was very important that we treat them like adults. And the best way to show them that we're treating them like adults is to not go to any of the activities. And he was once like, why aren't you at the Halloween party? And he's like, why should I be? You know what I mean? Well, who's going to chaperone? He's like, they're adults. Why do they need a chaperone? They don't need a chaperone. They're adults. Are elders quorum presidents there? Are Relief Society presidents there? Our second counselor is a young single adult. Why do they need? And trust me, they don't want. a guy with white hair to be hanging out at the beach party. And I don't want to be there either. And we, you know, I think it's very, very important. And I don't, you know, we don't always do a good job of that. I remember before we started the YSA branch, you know, most of the activities were planned as if they were youth activities, you know, let's go square dancing and let's do this. And, you know, That's not what they told us. They want it to be more organic. They're adults and we should treat them. like adults.

Kurt Francom:

Yeah. And I'm anticipating maybe what other leaders may think, like, obviously a lot of leaders think, you know, YSA leaders, they think, well, I want to go to that activity so I can build relationships, get to know people. And is there, I mean, how would you respond to that or what are other ways you do to sort of build that rapport?

Geoff Thatcher:

I would respond by that by telling a story. And I hope President Oliver doesn't mind me telling this story, but our young single adults were planning on having a general conference watch party at one of the homes. Actually, it was my daughter's home at the time. She was single at the time. They were going to wear pajamas, have breakfast, and watch what they call it, Gen Con, and watch Gen Con. Unbeknownst to this, and well-meaning. President Alvarez said, no, I'd love everybody, all the YCs to come watch it at my house. And the reaction was, then I have to dress up. I have to put on a suit. I have to put on a dress. I have to go sit there. I just want to hang out with my friends, watch General Conference. And so what we told President Oliver, it was very hard, but we're like, they don't want you. They would love you to show up after general conference for dessert or for Danish or pastries or whatever, but they don't really want you.

Kurt Francom:

And this is like a hard reality that a lot of YSA leaders need to sort of reconcile, that it's not that the older leaders are making it about them, but they sort of feel this obligation to be like, well, I'm the bishop, I'm the branch president, I'm the stake president. I should probably be there, right? But to sort of divorce yourself from that.

Geoff Thatcher:

And listen, I'm not going to tell anybody what to do in their own branch. We all have rights to that inspiration. But I would say that at least in the Savannah Young Single Adult Branch, we think it's important that these young single adults be treated as adults and give them the space to be adults. And there's plenty of time to bond with them in the foyer, in the hallways, and in the meetings that we have at church or in other opportunities.

Kurt Francom:

Yeah, so that makes sense. Is there any other ways to come to mind? Like, because that seems really, really straightforward. And like, okay, I can, I can consider that and do that. Any other ways that you communicate that we're treating them as adults?

Geoff Thatcher:

you know, I think it's also very important. We do have occasionally parents that kind of want to want to be involved. And we do welcome parents, parents are more than welcome to attend with us. We love it when they visit, you know, but we did once have a parent who, who, you know, actually more than once, but we've had parents who like, Hey, can I know about the activities so I can encourage my son or my daughter to come to the activities? And I'm like, no. They're like, well, can I get access to the ... My child says there's this WhatsApp link, WhatsApp about the group activities. Can I get access to it so I can remind my child when there's an activity? And I'm like, I don't even have access to the WhatsApp group. I'm not on it. You know what I mean? So no, you can't have access to the WhatsApp group. And again, I think treating them ... And again, I think this is the same in family wards when there's ... I remember once the bishop in a family ward went to my wife's mother to ask a question about my wife, who was 35 at the time or 32 or whatever it was. And it's like, no, get respect. Yeah, there's boundaries here. There's boundaries here, right? I think if you come to a young single adult branch, you should be treated like an adult. And I think the same is true with, you know, holding people accountable. I know you wrote a book about grace, and I believe in grace. And I know you talk a lot about shame, but by the same token, we don't have to use the word shame today, but when we do something wrong, whether it's embarrassment or shame or stupidity, we all feel bad when we do something wrong, no matter how old we are. You know what I mean? I think you have to hold people to a higher standard if they're adults. You need to hold them to a higher standard. You're an adult now. And

don't kick the can down the road. You know what I mean? If you're an adult, work, and it's not easy, obviously, and I feel like a failure constantly, but work to treat them like adults. in every moment you have with them. And I hope I do a good job of that. I probably don't, but- But you're aiming for that. Certainly, certainly. And the other thing I would say, and I think this relates to We are introducing them to, I mean, for many of them, especially the freshmen that come in, it's their first experience in a young single adult, right? It's the first experience being adult in the church. giving them opportunities to speak, giving them opportunities to serve, giving them opportunities to do something, to make a difference. And one of the things that we have had great success with, and it kind of happened by accident, is really encouraging people to speak about what they're passionate about. And how this came about is, this is actually before I was the branch president, we had a woman who was on the spectrum and she wore the noise canceling headphones. And again, I'm not sure how, I don't know all the details of her autism, but clearly was on the spectrum. But we wanted her to give a talk. Again, we wanted to treat her like an adult. She is part of our branch and we wanted her to feel like she was part of our branch and So, we wanted to give a talk. And so, we talked to her about it and wasn't interested. Then we talked to her about it and wasn't interested. And then we had an idea because she loved Star Wars. I mean, loved Star Wars, would wear Star Wars, actually branded clothing to church. She'd love Star Wars. So, we asked her, we said, would you give a talk on Star Wars and the gospel? And she said, yeah. She's like, yeah, I'd love to. And so we're like, okay, well now we have to have, like the whole theme of this Sunday has to be about pop culture. So we asked somebody to give a talk about, well, she talked about, I said, what's your favorite film or pop culture? And they said, Lord of the Rings. I said, okay, well, you talk about Lord of the Rings and the gospel. And then somebody else was Pixar and the gospel. So we had three talks and our Star Wars talks was first. And it was one of the most amazing talks I've ever heard. And she took her headphones off. She came to the... I'm still feeling the spirit today. It was just wonderful. And she talked and told the story of Luke Skywalker as if nobody had ever heard it. Let me tell you a story about a man named Luke Skywalker and how he grew and how he fought against good and evil and embraced good. Let me talk to you about the power of the force. It was an amazing talk.

Kurt Francom:

Yeah. It was so many gospel parallels.

Geoff Thatcher:

So many gospel parallels. Amazing talk. Totally came out of her shell. Amazing. Big smile. We're so proud of her. Yeah. Amazing. Right? An adult. She stepped up. I mean, she was only probably 19, 20 at the time, but an amazing talk. So amazing. We loved it. We love her. It was awesome. And then the Lord of the Rings talk. amazing, you know? And then what was funny is Mia, our daughter, had brought a teammate of hers from the swim team at Savannah College of

Art and Design. And it's a longer story, but suffice it to say, they were at the national championship the week before, and Mia's teammate, Sloan, was struggling. And she got kicked. When you're in the lanes, it can be pretty rough, and she got kicked. And so it was kind of frustrating. She had a bad swim the first day. And so she was talking to me and Mia was her roommate. And Mia said, well, why don't we just pray? I can pray for you. Why don't I say a prayer for you? And so they knelt down and Mia said a prayer. And the next day she went out and won a national championship. So Sloan's like, hey, would you pray again tonight for me? And so I was like, yeah. So Mia prayed for her again. She won another national championship. It was great. And then Mia's like, well, do you want to come to church on Sunday? And Sloan's like, yeah, sure. So Sloan was there for this Star Wars talk and Lord of the Rings talk. And immediately after church, she's like, I've never heard anything like that before. I've never been to a church where one, right, the students get to speak, right? The young adults get to speak. That was awesome, right? And I've never been to a church where you actually talk about the gospel and things that I care about. And so, you know, Mia called the missionaries over and they set up a first discussion. And then literally in the middle of the first discussion, Sloan says, So how one does actually become a member of your church? Cause I think I'd like to become a member. Of course, the missionaries fall off their chair. It was like, you know, it was one of those great moments in Sloan, you know, got baptized and, you know, and, and it was great. We let her, we, we called her to be our, our chorister and she was, because she was brand new to the church, she was picking these songs that were great. And again, you know, we had a few people that were like a little uncomfortable with some of her choices because. She was new. Yeah. You know what I mean? But we were like, go for it. Yeah. And it was, it was fun. It was fun. We had some, we had some very great musical selections that were very unique because again, we were, you know, that's in many respects, going back to your initial point of, you know, treating them like adults. And then, yeah. And then Sloan still actually Mia, Mia and Sloan are still roommates in Orlando now and going to the, uh, I forget the name of the YSA ward they're in, in Orlando, but still, you know, yeah, it's happening. That's cool. It's great.

Kurt Francom:

Is that related to the theme Sundays?

Geoff Thatcher:

Yeah. When we did that, we were like, hey, this actually worked. We asked people to talk about what they're passionate about. We started experimenting with that. Once we found out something that someone cared about, We were like, Hey, would you talk about what you care about and what you're passionate about and bring the gospel into it? And so, you know, since that time, it was about two years ago, we've had engineering Sunday where we had three of our engineering students talk about engineering and the gospel fascinating. Right. We had, you know, we've had a dog Sunday again. Now, again, the first time I ask one of these young single

adults to give a talk in church, they were like, no. I said, well, do you have a dog? Oh yeah, I love my dog. Would you like to talk about your dog? They were like, yeah. Now they did ask, can I bring my dog? I said, no, you can't. I draw the line there, no dogs in church. But yeah, I mean, we had dog Sunday. We have two students at Ralston College, which is the classics, Western civilization, Greek, Rome, all the great, it's amazing. Brand new university in Savannah. And we had classic Sunday. It was amazing, amazing. And they had, you know, it's like seven or eight of their classmates come from Ralston to hear them speak and play music, all rooted in the classics, which is so part of the gospel. I mean, they talked about reading, you know, John and the original Greek while in Greece, you know what I mean? On their study abroad, it was part of Boston College. It was amazing. And so we've had, we had a job Sunday, and this one was really amazing. We had, a army ranger who just completed sniper school. Talk about how sniper, what he learned at sniper school relates to the gospel. Wow. I know my wife called it, my wife called it bro Sunday because all the men were like this. Oh my God. She's talking about sniping. I mean, he went into great detail about what they learn in sniping school. And there was a time I was like, okay, bring it around. Let's bring it around to Jesus. Let's bring it around. And then right at the end, oh man, he was talking about the importance of having a spotter as a sniper. And then he turned to all of us and said, Jesus is your spotter. Wow. And we were like, yeah, you're right. We need to embrace Jesus as our spotter. So, yeah, I mean, again, what are people passionate about? Let them talk about what they're passionate about. I mean, if you're an accountant and an actuary, talk about numbers and the gospel. There's so many topics that relate back to the gospel and back to Jesus Christ. And so, absolutely, again, that goes back to that. Well, if you're treating someone like an adult, you know, I guess, you know, let that adult talk about what they're passionate about and what they care about. Yeah. And so we love our theme Sundays.

Kurt Francom:

Love it. So that's the question I always give is as you reflect on your time as a branch president of a YSA award, how has being a leader helped you become a better follower of Jesus Christ?

Geoff Thatcher:

I would say. That before becoming a branch president, I always heard people talking about like, you know, oh, you know, when you're, you know, you know, you know, I get inspiration, or, you know what, I'm doing this because I love you. But then when you're actually the branch president, you're like, you know what, they were right. You really do get inspiration. You really do get promptings. I mean, real promptings. And you really do love them and you want the best for them. And sometimes as a follower, you don't believe that. You just think it's yeah, yeah, yeah, whatever. They're just saying that because they always say that. But I think how it's changed me as a follower is I, I know my leader, right? My leaders, when they say that. It's because it's true



and they actually feel it. And so that changes how we should follow, I think, if we truly believe and understand where they're coming from and what they're feeling.

Kurt Francom:

And that concludes this How I Lead interview. I hope you enjoyed it. And I would ask you, could you take a minute and drop this link in an email, on social media, in a text, wherever it makes the most sense and share it with somebody who could relate to this experience. And this is how we develop as leaders, just hearing what the other guy is doing, trying some things out, testing, adjusting for your area. And that's where great leadership is discovered. So we would love to have you share this with somebody in this calling or a related calling, and that would be great. And also, if you know somebody, any type of leader, who would be a fantastic guest on the How I Lead segment, reach out to us. Go to [leadingsaints.org](http://leadingsaints.org) contact. Maybe send this individual an email letting them know that you're going to be suggesting their name for this interview. We'll reach out to them. and see if we can line them up. So again, go to [leadingsaints.org](http://leadingsaints.org) slash contact, and there you can submit all the information and let us know. And maybe they will be on a future How I Lead segment on the Leading Saints podcast. Remember, go to [leadingsaints.org](http://leadingsaints.org) slash 14 to hear the Packard family's experience of when loved ones leave the church.

Gordon B. Hinckley:

It came as a result of the position of leadership which was imposed upon us by the God of heaven who brought forth a restoration of the gospel of Jesus Christ. And when the declaration was made concerning the only true and living church upon the face of the earth, we were immediately put in a position of loneliness. The loneliness of leadership from which we cannot shrink nor run away, and to which we must face up with boldness and courage and ability.