



## **How I Lead as President of BYU-Idaho | An Interview with Elder Alvin F. Meredith III**

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Kurt Francom:

Attention youth leaders, if you have recently been called to lead the rising generation, I have a next step for you. Listen to an awesome presentation by Yvonne Hubert and Peter Vidmar, who are both respective members of the Young Women and Young Men General Advisory Council for the Church. Their presentation really helps clarify ways on how to effectively lead the youth using the Children and Youth Program. They also cover topics like youth-led groups, how to lead through personal ministry, how to meet youth where they are, identifying the youth's strengths and capacities. This presentation is part of the Young Saints Virtual Library and you can access it at no cost by going to [leadingsaints.org slash 14](https://leadingsaints.org/14). Again, simply click the link in the show notes or go to [leadingsaints.org slash 14](https://leadingsaints.org/14). If you wanted further insight into a Come Follow Me lesson, you'd probably search in YouTube or get the We Believe app. Tough church history questions? You'd reach out to the B.H. Roberts Foundation. But what if you wanted to learn to be a better leader? Well, I'm glad you asked. You'd come to Leading Saints. That's why we exist, to help Latter-day Saints be better prepared to lead by being familiar with others' leadership experiences, understand the latest leadership research, and finding a community to share ideas. That's why I'm glad you found the Leading Saints podcast. We hope you will dive into the archives and visit [leadingsaints.org](https://leadingsaints.org) to find out what are the top, most listened to episodes on the podcast. Welcome. You're going to love it. I'm happy to announce that this interview is the first interview with a sitting general authority in the history of the Leading Saints podcast. And it was with a phenomenal individual to have on the podcast, Elder or President Alvin F. Meredith III, who is the current BYU-Idaho president. And he was kind enough to get approval to come down to the studio and sit with me and have a conversation. And like most

Leading Saints episodes, it's like none other that you've heard because we dig into his leadership journey, his experience from being a young missionary in the Salt Lake City, Utah mission to being a young bishop in Tennessee, then a stake president, Tennessee mission president, Area 70, General Authority 70, and now the president of BYU-Idaho. So many gems in here. Listen for the advice that he's received about how to facilitate council meetings, and how to get people talking and gather the revelation from around the room together. Also, as I listen for those moments of how he's walked into this calling as or in this role as the president of BYU-Idaho, when he then so many remarkable men preceded him, right, and how he benefits from their experience and their encouragement, but still sets off with his own vision and focus. And one of the key principles that I took away from this is his approach of when he starts that new leadership role, the hundred days of listening, where he tries to listen to as many people, understand the dynamics happening in the organization, in the ward, in the stake, and then lead out from there. So, you're going to love this interview with President Alvin F. Meredith III. Elder Alvin F. Meredith III. Welcome. Thank you. Great to be here. So tell me about the third.

Alvin Meredith:

I know you don't hear about that much. My grandfather's an Alvin Frazier Meredith. My father's an Alvin Frazier Meredith, and I'm the third. The funny story behind that is I go by the name Trip, which is a nickname for being the third. So if you're from the South and you go by Trey or Trip, that's not likely your real name. It's likely a nickname for being the third.

Kurt Francom:

Yeah, I was trying to figure out how to get Tripp from Alvin.

Alvin Meredith:

Yeah. And I've gone by Tripp since I was born. Really? Except from the pulpit. Sure. So I'm always introduced as Alvin F. Meredith III. When I was called as a stake president, I was called by President Packer. And he's not a big fan of nicknames. And he said, so what's the story with Tripp? And so I explained that it was a nickname for being the third. And he said, but your real name's Alvin, right? And I said, yes. He said, After pausing the bed, he said, the Prophet Joseph would love that name. He said, you go by Alvin while you're a stake president, when you're released and you can go by Tripp. So, I've always kept my full name from the pulpit, but everyone calls me Tripp.

Kurt Francom:

The release never really came, right? You just moved on to the next thing and here you are, President Meredith, right? That's right. So, is there an Alvin IV? No, there's not. Okay. We discontinued the practice. That's great. Now you are how long has it been now that you've been the president of BYU-Idaho? Just over 10 months. Wow. Yeah. And tell us the story of how that came to be, because this I should highlight. I mean, you are the first active 70, General Authority 70 on the Leading Saints podcast, which is a milestone for us. I appreciate you being open to that. We're going to treat you nice, I promise. So but you were a 70 and then and the

typical your educational background maybe isn't the typical path to being a college president. So where does that begin?

Alvin Meredith:

I don't have any of the typical qualifications of a university president, but I do love those kids. Yeah. And if that's what they need, then we've got that in spades. And I say we because I really feel like this is it's an assignment for both my wife and I. But this came out of the blue. We had no indication that this assignment was ever coming our way. The Tuesday after April general conference, there is an assignment meeting. This happens every year. All the general authorities and their spouses gather in the auditorium in the church office building. And there's 15 chairs up front, the 15 red chairs. You have the 12 in the first presidency. And it's a little bit like a like a mission, like a transfer meeting. Yeah. And so, there's a PowerPoint, they get up and they just flash up the assignments. And my wife and I went to that assignment meeting, this would have been April 2023, with no expectations of change. I had been serving in the Middle East Africa North Area Presidency for a year. And typically, if you're in an area presidency, it's a three to five-year assignment. And so, we expected that we were going to continue in that area presidency, which meant that we were going to continue to live in Utah. That's the only international area presidency that's based out of Salt Lake, all the other international. Yeah, you go live there, right? Yeah, you live in the Philippines or in Brazil. So, I went to that meeting, I believe it was President Oaks kind of tabbed through the PowerPoint presentation and my assignment came up and it said no change, which is exactly what we thought. I went back to my office, my wife went home, and then that afternoon, I get a phone call from Brooke Hales, who's He's a general authority, but more importantly is the secretary to the first presidency. And he says, Elder Meredith, the first presidency would like to meet with you and your wife in three weeks, which is a long time to wait. And we could not, for the life of us, think of why the first presidency would want to meet with both of us. When I was called as a general authority, we met with one member of the first presidency. And when we were called as mission leaders, it was with one member of the first presidency, but this was the entire first presidency. Wow. As the date approached, it dawned on us, well, I'm in the Middle East, Africa, North area presidency. It's the only area presidency based out of Salt Lake. Maybe we're moving the office to the Middle East, Dubai, and maybe they're just inviting us in to let us know that our family will be moving. So, to make a long story short, we went into that meeting with the first presidency thinking we might be moving to Dubai and we walked out with an assignment to go to Rexburg, Idaho. I have to tell you, that meeting was so sweet. President Nelson was just so warm and encouraging. We walked in his office, he had a little chair up against the wall and they set their three chairs just right in front of us. He said to me and my wife, he said, you two sit on that couch and, and sit real close and act like you love each other. And so we held hands tightly. And he said, a few weeks ago, we had an assignment meeting and we've invited you here to change your assignment. And you're going to be the new president of Beley Lighthouse. Wow. And then I should tell you, before we left, he said, he said, Elder Meredith, over on my desk is a vase of flowers. He said, I want you to go pick the prettiest flower and give it to your wife. So we walked out of his office with a beautiful red rose and a ticket to Rexburg. And we have loved our experience there. We love those students. We love the faculty. We love the employees. It's been a real privilege for us.

Kurt Francom:

Was there any like a charge they gave you? Like, here's some things we want you to focus on or how did that go?

Alvin Meredith:

So it came, the assignment came with a job description and there were seven points on the job description. And there's not points, the points wouldn't be things that surprise you. You know, one is to model discipleship in Christ, to stay aligned with the board, which is the first presidency and other apostles. The one that I thought was interesting was to maintain and preserve the spirit of Ricks. That is a, it is an elder Bednar's phrase about the campus. It is a special set apart and sacred place. And there will be things that we change because we're in a new time and in a new season. However, we will always hold on to those things that make that campus unique and and is often captured by that phrase, the spirit of Rex. Yeah. Yeah, that's awesome.

Kurt Francom:

So you walk into this role again. No, no plan to be in academics or to be a leader of academia. And this is a dynamic that a lot of even, you know, lay church leaders experience is that you're replacing a remarkable leader, right? And you don't want to diminish their progress or momentum, but you also want to, you know, you have your own personality and maybe direction that you want to go. So how do you begin in that role, you know, establishing vision and really making it your own? Yeah.

Alvin Meredith:

A lot of listening at first, but let me back up a little bit. You talk about replacing a remarkable leader. If you were to ask me what surprised you about BYU-Idaho, it's that growing up, my recollection of the Rexburg campus, it was a small little junior college and it was a great junior college, but it was a junior college. And I hadn't thought through the leadership that's gone through that campus since the transition. David A. Bednar led the transition from Ricks College to BYU-Idaho, and he only left to be called in to the 12. And one may have thought, how do you possibly replace David A. Bednar? Well, Kimby Clark, the dean of the Harvard Business School- He's probably up to the task, right? Exactly. And you can feel the influence of Elder Bednar, and you can feel or see Kim Clark's fingerprints all over that university. And then Kim Clark only left to be called to be a general authority and the commissioner of church education. And you could have asked the same question. Well, he was followed by Clark Gilbert, Elder Clark Gilbert, the current commissioner of church education, master's from Stanford, doctorate from Harvard, Harvard professor. And as credentialed as he is, most importantly, he is consecrated and a disciple. Yeah, he's great. And then he was followed by Henry J. Eyring, who is just the poster child for innovating at the university level. And so, to follow those men, first of all, there's no organization, whether it be in higher education, in business, or in any other walk of life that can go through that transformative innovative list of leaders without becoming something new. And so, when we got there, we were just blown away by the quality of the education, just how

stunning the campus was. And for the most part, I was in a pretty good headspace until I would think about that list of leaders who came before me.

Kurt Francom:

You walked down that hallway with all the pictures, right? Right.

Alvin Meredith:

Well, and they were all very kind to spend some time with me before I began my assignment. And they all used different words, but their message was pretty consistent. One, BYU-Idaho is a special and sacred place. And two, you better not mess it up. Well, that message was communicated loud and clear, but not having a background in higher education, I was very intentional in the first hundred days of just listening. And I was on a listening tour. My wife and I were doing We were doing weekly focus groups with students. I was doing college breakfast with colleges and now I'm doing department breakfast. We were out meeting with alumni and we were just listening and we would ask them the question, what do you hope that we preserve? And then we'd ask the follow-up question, what do we need to do different given the time and season that we're in right now? And that 100 days of listening shaped what we're focusing on now and was incredibly instructive for me. And I think it was easy for me to approach it that way because I literally knew nothing. But I think that's a good... Even if you feel like you know the ward or you know the quorum or you know the Relief Society, I think with going into a new leadership opportunity, I think if you just take time to listen, then you're going to get great revelation. We've been taught multiple times that revelation is scattered amongst us. And so, I felt particularly in this assignment that my role as a leader was not necessarily to have the answers, but it was to ask the right questions so that revelation that was scattered amongst people that cared about that university would bubble with time.

Kurt Francom:

And it was the hundred days, like the goal from the beginning as far as listening and just, I'm not going to make any major change in the, at least in the first hundred days.

Alvin Meredith:

That's right. Yeah. It was just, it was just listening. And we've continued, we've continued that listening tour just because we've gotten such rich feedback, but we gave ourselves a hundred days and we communicated to the faculty and the staff there that Because when you assume a new role, people always ask, so what are you going to focus on? And we were really intentional about saying, I don't know yet, but on day 100, we'll let you know.

Kurt Francom:

Yeah. Yeah. And in a large institution like a college, you know, campus and an organization, you know, the it can become very bureaucratic. Yeah. Right. And that sort of has a negative

connotation. But how do you go about that? Like cutting through the bureaucracy and making sure that you're hearing everything from the janitor to the, you know, dean? Yeah.

Alvin Meredith:

Here's a little bit of a parallel. This came from a recent Come Follow Me study you'll remember and I think it's Mosiah chapter 22. So, Ammon stumbles across the people of Limhi. They're in bondage and they realize that they have to get out and you've got Ammon and Limhi. Limhi is the king. Ammon's a great leader in and of himself. And the first thing that they did the scripture says they began to consult with the people and they did cause that all the people should gather themselves together and this they did that they might have the voice of the people concerning the matter. And that was kind of the guiding principle of what we did. And then the way we executed on that was we did mass surveys. So, a survey to the entire employee base But you also really have to get kind of knee-to-knee with people. And we primarily did that through focus groups. Meeting with small groups of people, like for instance, with the students on Thursdays, we had this pattern of bringing 10 to 12 students in. We'd feed them Jimmy John's or Papa John's. We don't know who the John's family are, but they made a lot of money off of those focus groups. And we would bring in a couple questions and we would just listen. We also, we've got a really good leadership team at BYU-Idaho. And there's, you know, there was two groups. There's the president's executive group, which is my assistant, as well as the vice president. So that's a small group. And then you have a president's council, which is kind of two-layer leadership in the university. So it's all the vice presidents and all their direct reports. That's about 45 people. And we try to transform those meetings into from stand and deliver to counseling sessions. Years ago, when I was in Area 70, I had an assignment with Elder Christofferson to reorganize a stake. And when a new stake presidency is called, there's a little bit of training that the visiting authorities do before they leave. And Elder Christofferson said something to me that really shaped my approach to leadership after that. He said, if I were called to be a stake president again, He said, I think I would bring to my high council and stake council, just a couple of questions. And I'd bring in two questions and then I would just listen. I just thought that was brilliant. And so one of the things that new leaders need to wrestle with is, so what are those forums and mechanisms to gather that feedback and listen?

Kurt Francom:

Yeah, that's really helpful. And a few things come to mind as you tell that in that story is the because it's so easy, like in a church setting for this, the stake presidency to just focus on counseling with the stake council or the bishop focusing on the ward council, which is good. And there'll be a cadence of that ongoing. But to sort of push through that and go down to the the everyday member, like, what are you seeing? Like, what are you experiencing? Because there can be an echo chamber that happens in that dynamic.

Alvin Meredith:

Yeah, no echo chamber is a great is a great phrase. I think just being, being with the people that you're called to serve. And just as importantly, inviting the leaders to be with the people that you

serve. And so, you know, we've got, have established some patterns at Bowie, Idaho now that it's not just my wife and I that are doing these focus groups now. It's other leaders in the organization.

Kurt Francom:

Anything else, Principal, whether you've learned from others or just from your own experience as far as facilitating a council meeting? Because as you know, that's a big emphasis in our faith tradition and in leadership and, you know, that we council together and we seek that revelation that's spread among us. Anything else that a leader could consider to facilitate a better council dynamic?

Alvin Meredith:

I think if a leader will discipline himself or herself, to limit their contributions to questions as opposed to statements, then they'll get much richer feedback. So, going into the council with one or two inspired questions and then asking follow-up questions, and again, resisting that temptation to kind of descend from the mount with the answers, because once you do that, the counseling is over. We're a very deferential people, particularly to those that are in leadership. And there's nothing wrong with that, but it does make it really important for a leader to create safe spaces. for people to share their ideas and their thoughts. Yeah. Yeah, that's really good.

Kurt Francom:

We'll kind of bounce around here, but I want to go back to your developmental years. You grew up in Tennessee, right? And pretty traditional Latter-day Saint home.

Alvin Meredith:

No, very untraditional. In fact, my mother joined the church when I was six. My father has yet to join the church. He is a good, good principled man. We're hopeful that that will happen at some point. So, I grew up in a part member family. I was baptized when I was nine. And we, Tennessee, that's the buckle of the Bible belt. And so, I grew up with good faithful members of the church, also surrounded by other really good Christian people that happened to be of other denominations.

Kurt Francom:

Yeah. And then when the mission came along, it was a pretty easy decision for you?

Alvin Meredith:

It was. I think probably from my teenage years, I really felt like that's what the Lord wanted me to do. And I, even in my professional career, drew upon, just from a leadership perspective, was constantly drawing upon things that I learned from my mission. I mean, those are truly formative years, certainly for your spiritual growth, which is most important, but also from a leadership perspective.

Kurt Francom:

And you were called to the Salt Lake City, Utah mission, is that right? I was. Is there a story behind that or what did you think when you read that?

Alvin Meredith:

Well, you know, you never expect for the mission call to match the return address. Every missionary called to Utah has their little stories about, you know, they thought it was their friends pulling a prank on them. But that was the perfect place for me to serve. Yeah. As it is for every young missionary. But I was, no one grows up singing, I hope they call me on a mission with with dreams of the Salt Lake Temple in the background. But it was a great place to serve. I had a wonderful mission president. Don MacArthur was just a great mentor to me and really taught me a lot about the gospel and about leadership. And I'll forever be grateful to him.

Kurt Francom:

So taking that dynamic, what did mentorship from him look like?

Alvin Meredith:

I think primarily it was probably two things. It was example and it was feedback. He was just a constant example of what good leadership looked like, but he also led with high love and high expectations. Elder Anderson has talked about that recently and mission leader seminars. And that's not a phrase that was used back when I served in the late 1980s and early 1990s. But when I look back on that, I think, you know, that's what President MacArthur was to me. He led with great love. And he would, you know, always take us under wing. And there were times that he would pat us on the back. And other times, he'd give us a little swifter kick a little bit below. And I appreciated that because I felt like I became a better missionary and a better man because of him. You know, there's, if we're not careful in church leadership, sometimes we will become caretakers instead of difference makers. And my mission president was a difference maker. He wasn't there just to take care of things. He wanted things to get better. And I felt like he had a personal investment in me, which I was forever grateful for.

Kurt Francom:

So I recently heard the quote, I think it came from a 70 in a private leadership meeting that you can either run a ward or you can inspire a ward. Yeah. Right. Because that's the temptation phrase. Yeah. There's so much administrative or sort of those day to day things. Pounding on your door that you can fall into that rat race, right, of just making sure that lights are on and the



doors are unlocked on Sunday. Did we do it? You know, but do we have to really push through that? Yeah, right.

Alvin Meredith:

Well, you know, an example from the Savior's life in that and Luke chapter five, this is early in the Savior's ministry, and he comes to the lake of Gennesaret and there's these two ships here and it's Peter's ships. And Peter was just taking care of stuff. He was cleaning the nets at the time. And this is that great story where the Savior gives Peter the command to launch out into the deep. And Peter says, Master, we've toiled all the night and have taken nothing. And the savior wasn't interested in just taking care of the ships and the nets, but he wanted to make a difference. And by the way, there's a big sermon and just that phrase of launch out into the deep and what the deep means and what it means to launch. And But anyway, to take a full circle, I think that's what I appreciated about my mission president. I think that's what good leaders do is they invite people to change and to be better and to reach new heights and to stretch to reach their full potential. Years ago, Elder Maxwell coined this phrase, divine discontent. Michelle Craig gave a talk on this in general conference a few years ago. And I think that's one of the characteristics of good leaders is they embrace and share this concept of divine discontent, which to me means, hey, we're not satisfied with where we are today. We're intent on being better tomorrow than we are today. But we have all that in a very, in a divine way. Some of us are really good with a discontent piece. It's the divine piece that somehow that we've really got to focus. And your great leaders do that. They inspire you to be a little bit better, but in an encouraging way and not in a discouraging way.

Kurt Francom:

Because if you're too heavy on that discontent, it can turn into cynicism. And that's right. And just that toxicity that that doesn't motivate or inspire people.

Alvin Meredith:

Yeah. Yeah. And I don't think that's I don't think that's the way the Savior leads. Yeah. So.

Kurt Francom:

So you come over your mission. I mean, you're ready to take on the world. I mean, what was your your plan or what was your education?

Alvin Meredith:

My plan was always to go to BYU. And I went there and I studied psychology, always with the intent to go on to business school, which is eventually Which is eventually what I did.

Kurt Francom:

Nice. And then what did you do for your, the main part of your career?

Alvin Meredith:

So I was in business. I was kind of a jack of all trades, master of none. I worked for General Electric and Boston Consulting Group and then went to a, which at the time was a smaller startup that grew into a pretty good business until I was called a full-time service.

Kurt Francom:

Yeah. And then, so where does your leadership journey begin where you called as a Bishop or what was the sort of that big, the big heavy responsibility and leadership in the church?

Alvin Meredith:

Yeah, I was called as a bishop in Murfreesboro, Tennessee and learned great lessons there. I had a stake president, his name was Juanus Martin from Cookville, Tennessee. And you won't find a better soul, but he was, I described him, he was country as cornbread. He had this brilliant way of giving counsel that I still draw upon. In fact, he was ahead of his time a little bit. When he called me as a bishop, he said, Bishop, you spend your time with the youth. Those adults, they ain't going to listen to you anyway. And if you think about where we are now and how responsibility really has changed for the bishopric to really shift their focus to the rising generation. Another thing that he did that I ended up using in my professional life and certainly in my church service as well, I remember we had one month as a stake where we had zero baptisms. And back in Tennessee, that just doesn't happen much. And he called an emergency meeting. He called us all to his chapel in Cookville, which was an hour and 40 minute drive from me. And he said, I want you to bring the name of the very best man to this meeting. And we had no idea what that meant or why we were doing that. And so he pulls us all together and he says, bishops, we had zero baptisms last month. That's not going to happen again on my watch. He said, the name of the man that you brought, unless it's one of my counselors, the patriarch. We're going to release him from whatever he's doing and he's going to be the ward mission leader. Holy cow. Wow. I'm not advocating that approach. This was an inspired approach from where we were there. And so, there were half the high council was released. There were bishopric counselors that were released and they were called as ward mission leaders. And you want to guess what stake led the mission in baptisms? Every month. Oh, wow. It was our stake. Yeah. And he, if this were in a secular setting, I would say that hiring decisions are the most important decisions that a leader makes. But even in the church, making sure that you've got the right people focused on the right things is really key to getting things done. So, those were some of my learnings from a young bishop, from a good country stake person.

Kurt Francom:

Yeah, that's great. And what I appreciate, again, not that you're saying every stake should do this, but it's an inspired move. But I just love that. So, I guess the temptation is let's get everybody in a room and I'm going to talk at you. I'm going to lecture you until you understand this is a problem. But to say we're going to make a bold move here and we're going to take the

best men and put them in the place to have change here where I feel inspired that needs to be changed. I love that.

Alvin Meredith:

Well, and implicit in that kind of command to us was a confidence that he had that the revelation would come to the local leaders. The brilliance of President Martin's leadership was simplicity. He'd never overthink anything. But the counsel that he gave was just so practical and tactile that it facilitated divine revelation, which is the most important part of leadership. Yeah.

Kurt Francom:

So let's get in our time machine, go back to maybe that first year of Bishop trip, you know, what stands out, like with the experience you have now, what advice would you give to yourself at that time?

Alvin Meredith:

Well, I would start with President Martin's advice, which is now very much in line with prophetic guidance, which is focused on the youth and recognize that leadership for a bishop primarily is ministering to the one. Sometimes we feel in leadership, and I felt this as a young bishop that I was called a minister to a multitude. And there are, you know, if you look at the kind of the pattern of the Savior's leadership, by the way, Elder Bragg gave a great recently, I think it was called a master class on leadership. Yeah, that was a good one. And he talked about some lessons learned about leadership from the Savior's ministry in the Americas just one day. And one of the things he points out there is that that is focused on individuals. Remember how you had this multitude, but he brought them to him one by one and ministered one by one. I wish I had caught the vision of that earlier as a bishop, because I spent a lot of time thinking about what do I need to preach to the multitude? And I wish I had spent more time thinking about how can I help Damon and how can I help Lisa with, you know, things that individuals were wrestling with.

Kurt Francom:

Yeah. And then I want to highlight the recent encouragement we've received from President Nelson leading up to his 100th birthday to focus on the one. Yeah. And that's that could be the best gift for him. And really, that's the best thing we can do for our eternal father as well.

Alvin Meredith:

Ultimately, this is a work about individuals. Yeah. I love the account in Mark chapter two where the paralytic man was born of four and they carried him to the Savior. And there's several lessons learned in that. One is that they were focused on one. Two is that they worked together. When I teach this in a stake conference and a leadership session, I always ask people to be the man on the bed just for a minute. You're up on the roof, they've broken it up and they start to lower you down. What do you hope is happening between the four that are lowering you down?

You hope they've been coordinating and that they're working together. But three, the most important part of that story is that their focus was not just on a temporal service. And I think they may have thought that that's what they were doing is they were taking this man who had a physical ailment to the Savior to be healed, but they were taking him to the Savior. And ultimately that is our charge as leaders is to help one by one people come to the Savior.

Kurt Francom:

Wow. And then, so did you go from bishop to stake president? I did.

Alvin Meredith:

I served as a bishop for two years. Oh, two years.

Kurt Francom:

And then was called as a stake president. So you replaced that, your mentor there. I did.

Alvin Meredith:

I replaced my mentor, President Warren. And I never, yeah, never anticipated that happening. It was kind of a sweet tender moment for us. President Packer, He had had a friend in our stake and this was, you know, President Packer was well advanced in age and wasn't doing stake conferences. But when he saw that a stake was being recreated in McMinnville, Tennessee, which was our stake, that's where his friend lived, he assigned himself to come. So I was called as a stake president by President Packer.

Kurt Francom:

Usually, I mean, apostles aren't doing that, right?

Alvin Meredith:

But that was really, that was really sweet. And I'll tell you, as a stake president, I did a similar thing that I did that I just explained to BYU-Idaho. We took a hundred days. and just listened. We counseled with our counselors. I had the bishops in a meeting that I wasn't in put together a list of questions for them to answer, and they compiled those answers, questions like, what's going well in the stake? What do we need to continue? What are we missing? What areas do we need to focus on going forward? And then spend a lot of time talking with sister leaders about what their observations were. And that helped shaped the things that we focused on in our stake after that.

Kurt Francom:

Wow. That's awesome. Any other like from that time as stake president, because it was then you were called as a mission president.

Alvin Meredith:

Well, actually, so I was, I served for four years as a stake president. My company came to me and said, we were just starting to do business in Asia. And the exact words that my boss said to me said, we're doing business in Asia. We need a Mormon boy scout. Someone that we can trust. He had no commentary on any skills or abilities that I had. They just wanted someone that they could trust. And I really, I was really torn by that. And I called my Area 70, who is Devin Cornish.

Kurt Francom:

I've interviewed him actually.

Alvin Meredith:

I love Elder Cornish. And he said something that was interesting. I explained to him what my company had asked us to do. And I said, I've been serving for a little bit, a little less than four years. And I said, I'm loyal to the call. And he said, you'll be a greater blessing to the church if you go to Hong Kong than if you stay in Tennessee. And I think he was very, I think he was very prophetic in that. I mean, because I, with the benefit of hindsight, I look back and I think about growing up in Tennessee, serving as a bishop and a stake president in Tennessee, kind of the buckle of the Bible belt. And then not only did we do that one stint in Hong Kong, but we also went back and spent some time in Singapore and so served in the Asia area there. which is kind of the Kirtland era. The church there, it's still, it's blooming and blossoming, but it's in the early days. And then I served as a missionary and a mission president in the heart of the church in Salt Lake. And I think about what I've been called to do now, and I can just, with the benefit of hindsight, I can see how all that fell into place. So I was released as a stake president. We went to Hong Kong for what we thought was going to be a multi-year assignment. And it ended up, I think the company thought that there were some things were broken that need to be fixed. Turned out it wasn't that bad at all. It was kind of cosmetic and we got things in order. So, we came back a year after that. And when I came back, then I was called to be in a mission presidency for a few months. And then I was called to be in Area 70. Oh, wow. So I served as an area 70 for four years in Tennessee. And then my company came back and said, we want to grow more in Asia. Will you move your family to Singapore? Wow. So we moved to Singapore. I served two years as an area 70 in Singapore. We were there one more year after I was released as an Area 70. And then from there we were called to be mission leaders in the Salt Lake City South.

Kurt Francom:

Wow. That's quite the journey. I mean, all over the place. That's great.

Alvin Meredith:

I should say the heroes in that were our children. Yeah. Yeah. That can be tough. I've taken them all over the world and they've made great sacrifices. So my wife and I could serve in the

church and they're better for it, but it's still tender to me that they've just been champs and just kind of rolling with the punches. And I know that they'll be blessed for sacrifices. Yeah, yeah, for sure.

Kurt Francom:

He highlighted a dynamic that probably doesn't get talked about enough is that feeling of some of these leadership roles can be, you know, the 10 years is a good chunk of time, a decade for a stake president typically or near decade. And there's this feeling of you want to be a loyal, dedicated servant, but there's also demands outside of that that may move you around. And so there's often this dissonance when I think, am I giving up too soon? Am I disappointing, you know, the local authorities or even God, right? And just to breathe into that and say, you know what, like, in hindsight, this could be a great blessing down the road.

Alvin Meredith:

Yeah, absolutely. I think you articulated that very, very well. You know, our President Hinckley gave some counsel to bishops years ago. This was back when we used to have worldwide leadership. Oh, yeah. And he, in some counsel to bishops, he gave them their top four priorities. And it was wife, children, work, and then church call. And we've got to keep those priorities in mind. And it's tough. It's much easier to talk about than it is to live and to do. But the Lord wants us as leaders to focus on our families. I don't know what callings there are in the next life, but I do know that there's husband and wife and father and mother, and those are eternal relationships that we need to... There's sacrifices to be made, but we need to make sure that we're prudent in those.

Kurt Francom:

So, you get called as a mission president and you're headed back to your mission, correct? Was that, I mean, because I know the typical thing is you get those initial calls and you don't know where you're going at first. Was the hope to go back to Utah, I mean, or what?

Alvin Meredith:

You know, I kind of, and I think I would speak for my whole family. We kind of thought that we would go somewhere international. We'd spend some time in Asia. We'd done Hong Kong. We'd done Singapore. Our kids were really, really resilient. And so, we've done those expat assignments. So, we thought that that might be the case, but I got called back to my old stomping grounds.

Kurt Francom:

That's fun. That's fun. How would you describe the dynamics? I mean, I grew up in West Valley and, you know, I'm a Utah boy, so I somewhat understand this, but what's different about being a mission president in Utah?

Alvin Meredith:

So, we had 73 stakes. in our mission. And the mission back home in Tennessee, there were six stakes. Yeah.

Kurt Francom:

Most mission presidents know the stake presence first name basis.

Alvin Meredith:

Yeah. And I would recognize and probably know the last names of the 73 stake presidents, but that is something that I missed, you know, because they were just really good men and And you're spread really, really thin in the Utah missions.

Kurt Francom:

Yeah. And then as far as the, was there any type of vision or charge you gave to those missionaries that, I mean, because you can get distracted maybe by so much or. you know, detracting isn't necessarily a thing. So you're you're make sure that you're you want to keep them effective. But what comes to mind as far as leading missionaries in that area? Working with members.

Alvin Meredith:

And we drew upon our experience in Asia. The way we would teach this is we'd bring chopsticks into zone conference. And we'd have a piece of candy up on a table and we'd give a missionary one chopstick and say, you pick that up without stabbing it. Of course, you can't do that. But we'd give him another chopstick. And usually we would call on someone that had spent some time in Asia because not everyone can work a pair of chopsticks very well. But working with members, you know, the obvious object lesson there is members were one chopstick and missionaries were the other one. And if we work in concert, then we can do that. We can do things.

Kurt Francom:

Is there any advice you give to leaders as far as the being and helping out with that more with the member work? I mean, because I mean, we've all been there. The missionaries come over for dinner or whatever. They're sort of this passive aggressive, like, hey, you know, you should really send us your friends. Like, OK, I know I should, but I don't know if I want to, you know.

Alvin Meredith:

Well, you know, President Nelson coined this phrase a little while ago called spiritual momentum. I believe a lot in spiritual momentum and One approach is just invite people to do something. There's a tendency for missionaries to come over and say, hey, will you give us the

names of your friends or family that we can teach this week? But sometimes the invitation is, hey, if you have someone great on the other end, could we invite you just to pray for missionary experiences? And there's a whole host of things in between. But I think if we just start taking baby steps, there's some spiritual momentum that sometimes we'll catch and maybe that will end up in finding someone to teach. And if it doesn't, then it certainly will, at a minimum, will increase prayers for the Word, which make a difference.

Kurt Francom:

Yeah. Oftentimes it feels like, we'd like you to run a marathon tomorrow. So can you do that? But it's really like, can you maybe just get up a little early and put on your tennis shoes and we start there? Yeah. Yeah. That's awesome. Anything else from those mission, those three years as leading the mission that

Alvin Meredith:

Well, by the way, it was only two years. Oh, really? Okay. Because my service was cut short. Our service was cut short because of my call to be a general. Gotcha.

Kurt Francom:

You've never really done a full term of any kind. No, I can't finish the phrase. Let's get to 70, okay, in the 70s.

Alvin Meredith:

We, and I get them when I say we, my wife has just been such a big part of everything that I do. We are a couple in every respect, but we just grew to love the rising generation, these young people. We got to know the things that they wrestle with, their struggles, their trials. We saw all of their warts and all their blemishes and that just loved them. And that's what's been real sweet about the assignment that we have now at BYU-Idaho. It's a bigger mission. It is. Much, much bigger mission. But, you know, and that goes, you know, the President Irene at one point said there are two things that great leaders need to have. There's lots of other things, but all great leaders in the church need two things. One is to be led by the Spirit and the second is charity. And as I said before, we, as I think about the assignment at BYU-Idaho, we don't have any of the traditional qualifications, but we love those students. You can do that part, which is the most important part. And we loved, loved those missionaries.

Kurt Francom:

Yeah. Yeah. And that sort of takes me to the transition to the next broader topic of the YSAs and that rising generation. Right. I just yesterday I got an email from a YSA bishops just and I feel this from a lot of leaders like is there like what else is there like sort of this feeling of I just want to help and they're so it's such a difficult part of life. So what comes to mind is what are you learning or what have you seen? What how do you approach that rising generation?



Alvin Meredith:

Three impressions that particularly my wife has had, and I think she's spot on with this and working with the rising generation. One, we need to point them to the Savior. Two, we need to encourage them to be aligned with and follow the council of living prophets and apostles. And I think those two would be obvious to most leadership positions in the church. But the third is we have to do a better job of conveying that living the gospel of Jesus Christ is joyful. If we don't get the joy, we're going to lose this rising generation. When I was a young bishop, we had some pretty heavy meetings before sacrament meeting. We walked into sacrament meeting. When the meeting was over, I walked off the rostrum and my wife met me at the bottom of the stairs with kind of a stern look. And she said, are you happy? And I said, yes, I'm happy. And she said, well, when you're sitting on the stand in front of the saints, remind your face. And you think about how many times the Savior said to his disciples, be of good cheer. And it was often in the midst of really dark and trying times. Like when the disciples were on the boat that was tossed with contrary winds and he walked to them, they thought he was a spirit and they were afraid. And he said, be of good cheer at his eye. Even before he went into the Garden of Gethsemane, he invited his disciples to be of good cheer. And I think we have to exhibit that in our countenances and the things that we say and the way that we live. I think the Savior wants us to be reverently joyful. And sometimes we overemphasize the reverence and we come across as stoic. And that's not what the gospel is. The gospel is joyful. Elder Kieran is, he's just a wonderful addition to the Quorum of the Twelve. And he's given the senior leaders of the church, the general authorities and general officers, there's great, great training on being joyful. And he exhibits that and we all need to. Yeah.

Kurt Francom:

Yeah, that's so helpful, because the frame of the this isn't just like a list of commandments that God really wants you to keep. But this is a this is a lifestyle that really works. Yeah. And I mean, I've experienced that my own my own journey. But you know, to convey that sometimes is difficult. And then there's the balance of you don't also don't want to, because this rising generation can see through fakeness, right? And so, if you're just smiling to smile, trying to sell the deal, you know, that you really have to feel it. Yeah.

Alvin Meredith:

No, and that's a great point. So, the first step is to find the joy within you and then to exhibit it and let people know that that's, And again, I think the joy comes from following the Savior and following the prophets and apostles. It's not this kind of concept of fraternity happiness. It's a deep, rich joy that uniquely comes through living the gospel of Jesus Christ and by striving to be his disciples and by following the counsel of his prophets. And again, I just think those are joyful, joyful things. Yeah, for sure.

Kurt Francom:

Is there anything you do as far as to make sure that, I mean, you know, making sure your face knows the joy he feels is one thing. Anything else you do to help convey that or set that culture of conveying that the gospel leads to joy? Does anything come to mind? I know it's a nuanced thing.

Alvin Meredith:

Nothing that I'm conscious of. And I think to your prior point, that's probably important. I mean, like whatever I convey is what I convey. I'm not trying to sell joy. The gospel genuinely brings me joy. It gives me some hope when times are tough. It gives you kind of an eternal perspective, which is so helpful. So, a little bit of a detour. I was at a stake conference a little while ago and Draper, my wife and I were getting acquainted with the stake presidency. And one of the counselors confessed he was just this rabid baseball fan. He was really passionate about the LA Dodgers. And he told us that he records every Dodgers baseball game. He doesn't watch it live. He just records it. And then once the game's over, he checks the score. And if the Dodgers win, he watches the game. And if they lose, he deletes it. So, if I'm watching the game and in the fourth inning, the Dodgers give up a three run home run, I don't fret because I know in the end, the Dodgers win every game that I watch. And we have that perspective in the church as well. So even when in those innings of life where we give up a home run or commit a few errors, we know that in the end, those that strive to keep their covenants with Christ win. Yeah. And that can give us, if not joy, at least peace when we're going through tough times. Yeah. Yeah. That's really powerful.

Kurt Francom:

So, you're still a 70, right? And that's your priesthood office and your General Authority 70. So, are there still lingering responsibilities that you do for that

Alvin Meredith:

I was in Rupert, Idaho last weekend for a stake conference and we'll be in Ashton, Idaho this weekend for a stake conference. So, I still have stake conference assignments. They're lighter than the load of other General Authorities, which I'm appreciative of, but First and foremost, I'm a 70. And when it comes to church response.

Kurt Francom:

Your day job is you work at the college. That's right.

Alvin Meredith:

Yeah. That just happens to be, you know, general authorities always have assignments in the role. And sometimes you're assigned to the missionary department. Other times you're assigned to temple and family history. And my assignment at this point in service just happens to be, be where you want to go. Yeah.

Kurt Francom:

Now you have probably done several stake conferences or presided a stake conference. What's your approach walking into a stake conference or working with the stake presidency? Anything that's unique or come to mind?

Alvin Meredith:

Yeah, my approach is probably summed up by something that President Nelson has said recently. He said, true disciples build, lift, encourage, persuade, and inspire. And he was teaching us about discipleship then, but I also think that that's great counsel for leaders. And so my general approach is to first and foremost to testify of the Savior, be a witness of his name, a special witness of his name, but also to look for opportunities to build and lift and courage, persuade and inspire. President Nelson articulated that in a way. that's been really helpful. But I learned that lesson from my wife. Our youngest son is 14 years old. His name is Christian and he has autism. At this stage in his life, he's very high functioning. If you met him, you probably wouldn't guess that. But when he was younger, it was tough sledding. And we had lots of therapy. He was in a special school. Part of a requirement to be in that school was for the parents to get coaching and therapy to help our children with special needs. And one of the things that we learned there, and it's something my wife was constantly reminding me of in early days, is the best way to change the behavior of a special needs child is to catch them doing good things and praise them for it. My tendency when he was younger, he would just smack the fire out of his siblings. We had one of those minivans, one of those church member minivans, and there's three car seats in the back row. And we'd put him in the middle and he would just lean over. He'd grab his sister's hair and he'd smack her in the face. And my inclination as a father would be to say, stop, we don't do that. And my wife would say, we're not going to change his behavior if we do it that way. So what she would do, she would grab his hand and she would say, Christian, we use soft hands. And then she would grab his hand and then she would have him stroke his sister's knee and then would say, Christian, good job. That's exactly the way that we touch our siblings. over the course of time with that type of love and that type of praise, he became a new kid. And he's just such a loving kid, right? And he loves, he loves my wife because of what she's done for him. And in fact, he asked me a little while ago, he said, hey, dad, when you die, I can marry mom, right? Christian, that's not the way it works. And then he asked me a little while later, he's like, hey, when you die, I get all your money, right? So, I slept with one eye open for a while after that. But I think, so to go back to your question, it's, you know, it's to, first and foremost, it's to teach the gospel of Jesus Christ and the witness of Him. And while doing that, look for opportunities to build and lift and encourage. And sometimes that's a congregation, more often than not, it's an individual. And I would hope I've been with your good brother as a stake president. And I would hope that stake presidents would feel, you know, at least a little encouraged or at least feel like they had a friend after I left their stake. Yeah. Yeah.

Kurt Francom:

I mean, for my time in a stake presidency, there was sort of that, you know, OK, and visiting authorities going, you know, oh, man, I hope there's that encouraging voice. And most definitely 99 percent of the time there was, you know. And so it's I think that's just So many lessons to learn as a leader when maybe a stake president goes and visits a ward or the bishop stops in in Sunday school or whatever, you know. It shouldn't feel like an audit.

Alvin Meredith:

Yeah, exactly. In fact, usually, you know, we talk about there's a scripture in the Doctrine and Covenants that there's a promise that when the saints assemble themselves together that the Spirit will be poured out upon them. And we'll say, so what does that look like and feel like? And we'll go to Galatians, where it says, the fruits of the Spirit are love and joy and peace. And there's a long list of other things, but usually my objective in a stake conference is that people will leave encouraged in their faith in Christ, having felt love, joy, and peace. And so I tell them, hey, if you stumble over your conducting notes or the technology doesn't work, You smile your way through that. And as long as long as people feel the love, joy and peace that comes through the gospel of Jesus Christ, and we're going to count this weekend a success. Yeah.

Kurt Francom:

Have you seen because you go to so many, I mean, stake conferences, you see different approaches and different things. Anything cool you've seen or a unique approach that a stake has done?

Alvin Meredith:

So I was with this stake president in Rupert, Idaho this past weekend, and I was touched by him. He every Thursday he goes out visiting. And he's really caught the vision that you can't magnify your calls in the church under the rooftops of chapels. You magnify your calls in living rooms and sometimes on doorsteps. And I was really touched by that. And he was a great teacher, great, great messages in the meetings that I taught in. But the hallmark of his service is his ministering one by one, particularly in the homes of those that he visits. That's powerful. Yeah.

Kurt Francom:

And so simple. Yeah. Very simple. Yeah. Awesome. Anything else on your notes that you want to make sure we cover before we wrap up?

Alvin Meredith:

I have one little story that I could share on the on the wrap up. Oh, OK. OK.

Kurt Francom:

Well, let me ask this, give us your, I mean, BYU-Idaho, I mean, you are the, you're the face of BYU-Idaho to some extent, right? Like, so, you know, you have these leaders who are focused on the youth and helping them, you know, make big life decisions, you know, ideally admissions maybe in there and why BYU-Idaho or what would you say? I mean, sell it to us.

Alvin Meredith:

Well, I'll tell you what we've been surprised. We expected when we went up to BYU-Idaho that this was a place that people could grow in their discipleship. It is a protected enclave. The faculty, as well as the students, are very much aligned with the teachings of living prophets and apostles. The two things I was really surprised by, one was the quality of education and two, what a fun place Southeastern Idaho can be. We have an unparalleled faculty. We have really small class sizes. The average class size is 27. So the faculty, they know their students by name and they have impressive pedigrees and a lot of them have made amends somewhere else and have just decided they wanted to give back. And so they've come to teach in Rexburg, Idaho. And then the second thing that's been a surprise, it is a really fun campus. I didn't know what to expect in Southeastern Idaho. I should have known better. I mean, people come from all over to vacation in Southeastern Idaho to do corporate retreats there, but it's a really fun place to be.

Kurt Francom:

Nice. Nice. And it's cold, but it's still fun in the winter. So that's awesome. Well, I have, I guess the last question I have, and if the typical question I have, but if there's more that you want to say, feel free to expand. But as you reflect on your time as a leader, how has being a leader helped you become a better follower of Jesus Christ?

Alvin Meredith:

That's a great question. In fact, as I was anticipating this interview, I was thinking, I know this is the Leading Saints podcast, but I feel like I'm a much better follower than I am a leader. And I strive to follow the Savior and to follow the prophet. And I think that's what brings me the greatest joy in this life.

Kurt Francom:

Awesome. Anything else we left off you want to say?

Alvin Meredith:

Yeah, when I was when new general authorities are called, there's a meeting the Wednesday before that April conference. And it's for the new general authorities and their spouses. And it's the first official meeting that you have. And you never know who else is going to be there. I was serving as a mission president at the time. And so the meeting is in the church administration building in the conference room that's right in between President Nelson and President Oaks office. So my wife and I, we were the first ones there. We were standing in the foyer there, just

feeling terribly inadequate about what was about to happen. They let us in a little bit early, and so we could see the nameplates in front of all the chairs around the conference room table there of who else was being called. That was in Salt Lake. There were some brethren that were called that zoomed in from other places, but they're in Salt Lake. The first name that I saw was Clark Gilbert, and I've known Clark since BYU days, and we all knew Clark was going to be a general authority. He's just amazing. And then right next to him was Michael Dunn, who used to run BYU Broadcasting. He and I worked together when he was in Area 70. I was a missionary, amazing teacher, just so good. And then the other name was Vi Sykehema. And we're all Vi Sykehema fans. And I saw those names and those feelings of inadequacy just got worse. You know, there's this old saying that, what is it? Comparison's the thief of joy. I just started thinking about how smart Clark was and what a master teacher Mike Dunn was and just what an amazing example, an athlete that Vi Sikahema was. And I was really kind of wallowing. Patrick Kieran was there. He was the senior president of the 70 at the time. And he told us something that gave me a great deal of comfort. He said, brothers and sisters, talking to us and our wives, he said, in the church today, we need leaders who will love the people, lift the people in witness of the name of the Savior. And I thought, you know what, if that's the job description, if that's what is needed of me in this role, then sign me up, because I'll love and I'll do my best to lift. And I can witness of Him, because He has been my Savior. And I'm happy to witness to others that He can be their Savior as well.

Kurt Francom:

That concludes this episode of the Leading Saints podcast. Hey, listen, would you do me a favor? You know, everybody's got that friend who listens to a ton of podcasts and maybe they aren't aware of Leading Saints. So would you mind taking the link of this episode or another episode of Leading Saints and just texting it to that friend? You know who I'm talking about? The friend who always listens to podcasts and is always telling you about different podcasts. Well, it's your turn to tell that friend about Leading Saints. So share it. We'd also love to hear from you if you have any perspective or thought on this episode. You can go to [leadingsaints.org](http://leadingsaints.org) and actually leave a comment on the episode page, or reach out to us at [leadingsaints.org](http://leadingsaints.org) contact. Remember, check the show notes to listen to the powerful presentation by the general Young Men, Young Women Advisory Council members, or go to [leadingsaints.org](http://leadingsaints.org) 14.

Elder 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. 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.