

WILLOW CREEK STAKE PRIORITIES
Stake Conference General Session
September 22, 2019
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In the weeks before he was called as Stake President, Pres. Staples was awakened several nights with thoughts of key issues the Willow Creek Stake needs to address. He tried to ignore what those promptings implied, but the Spirit continued to impress those priorities on his mind. After being called to the Stake Presidency, Pres. Staples shared those priorities with Pres. Smith and me. I have to admit, I, on my own, would not have arrived at the same list. As we pondered and prayed, however, Pres. Smith and I each received confirmation that the Lord wants us to focus on the issues Pres. Staples identified.

Key Message: Our loving Father in Heaven runs the Church. While the master of the universe, He is actively involved in the details. We can take comfort in knowing He is aware of the Willow Creek neighborhood, knows our specific needs, and provides detailed direction for us through our Stake President. What a remarkable blessing!

We will follow that divine direction. To that end, Pres. Staples asked me to remind you of those priorities.

1) Help the youth of the stake lead morally clean lives.

- It is difficult to live virtuously in a world where God's standards are widely ignored, even mocked.
- We have taught and will continue to teach the Lord's Law of Chastity. [Have to apologize to the youth that I don't have time today to give them "The Talk".]
- You've heard repeatedly the benefits of staying morally clean: improved physical, mental and emotional health; better and less complicated interpersonal relationships with your peers; greater self-discipline and improved self-esteem; deeper relationship with your spouse, knowing the expression of deep love through physical intimacy is shared between you two alone; being able to kneel in prayer with confidence; and having the Spirit actively guiding your life.
- Ultimately, however, we believe the key to living morally clean lives is nurturing and maintaining an abiding testimony. If we truly understand the Plan of Salvation, the fundamental role of families in that plan, and the sacred and beautiful opportunity the Lord gives a husband and wife to partner with Him in creating life and family; If we trust that our Father knows us, loves us and provides commandments for our welfare and happiness, we are more

likely to resist the temptation of the moment for the unparalleled rewards promised to the faithful.

2) Prepare for what is to come.

Pres. Staples has shared that he doesn't believe our tenure in the stake presidency will be typical – simply filling callings, conducting conferences, conducting temple recommend interviews, etc. We may face unprecedented challenges, in what form, we don't know. Recognizing that if we are prepared, we shall not fear, we have called an outstanding team, led by Clint and Diane Cannon, to help us with emergency preparedness, employment, self-reliance, education, family budgeting, and more. We encourage all to visit our stake preparedness website: wcvillage.org.

Please, take preparation seriously, whether for emergencies, personal financial stability, health, or just the opportunity to develop your skills so you are better able to serve others. To the Lord, all things are spiritual. If we are more prepared in temporal matters, we will more open to spiritual matters.

3) Be a missionary-minded stake, with particular focus on contributing more senior missionaries to the Lord's effort to gather Israel.

We've heard wonderful talks by Pres. and Sister Meredith about missionary work. I'll just make a few points:

- As part of our stake missionary plan, we've asked all members of the stake to invite a person not of our faith into your home during the year and have some spiritual element to that visit. [Share our experience with Terrie and the missionaries]
- We've hosted two firesides for those considering senior missions and have seen an increase in those serving from our stake. Having missionaries in the field brings blessings to our stake. Those who serve come back stronger, more faithful, and better equipped to serve our stake members. Without exception, our returning senior missionaries report loving the experience. The need is great. The Missionary Department pressed mission presidents to give the bare minimum number of senior missionaries they need. We're at half that number.
- With apologies to those at the last fireside, I'm going to share a quote from Tennyson's "Ulysses" that seems to apply to our more senior members: "Old age hath yet his honor and his toil. Death closes all; but something ere the end, Some work of noble note, may yet be done, Not unbecoming men that strove with Gods. . . . Tho' much is taken, much abides; and tho' We are not

now that strength which in old days Moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are, -- One equal temper of heroic hearts, Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.”

May some from among “this equal temper of heroic hearts” in the Willow Creek Stake step forward to advance this “work of noble note”.

4) Help those struggling with faith

There are some in our stake, some in this room, that attend church regularly, but may not be getting out of it all they want, who are not regularly feeling the Spirit. Others, having had that experience, are drifting. Addressing these saints is challenging, each is unique and their experiences are theirs alone. Their issues can't be solved through a church talk or a fireside. Recognizing that, I'll share some brief and altogether inadequate thoughts:

To those who are struggling:

- Don't struggle alone or in silence. Leaders and friends who care deeply about you and want to help surround you. There is absolutely no shame in what you feel or don't feel, or in having questions. Many of us have had similar experiences. My path to a testimony has been a lifelong endeavor – a challenging, often frustrating, growing, and altogether worthwhile and rewarding experience. We love you. Reach out.
- Don't wait to be fed, thinking someone else has the responsibility to make you feel the Spirit. That is your responsibility. Prepare by surrounding yourself with uplifting influences, spending regular time in the scriptures, and praying honestly and sincerely. Go to church, and about your life, looking not for what you may get, but what you can give. We need you. You have much to offer. Bring your candle from under the bushel and help light the way for someone else. The flame on your candle will grow brighter.
- Take time to recognize the power of restored doctrine – human dignity and potential, eternal families, the Lord's active involvement in our lives and the Church. In Dostoyevsky's masterwork “The Brothers Karamazov”, one of the main characters, Alyosha, bemoans “the disavowers of Christianity.” One of the Elders in the monastery counsels him not to heed those critics, sharing words of great truth: “to this day neither their wisdom, nor the fervor of their hearts has been vigorous enough to create a higher image of man and his dignity than the one indicated of old by Christ.” The remarkable ennobling doctrines of the restoration and of our immense potential far outweigh the petty complaints of critics.

To those who have loved ones who may be straying:

- I've spoken with many of you during interviews. Your pain and sense of loss are real and intense. Those feelings are born of love for the wayward and faith in gospel truth.
- Don't judge negatively a loved one who is struggling, even if it seems they are rejecting what you value most. Those straying are usually sincere and motivated by good values; they just haven't yet received or regained understanding or the clarity of testimony. Don't take lightly their struggle. Examining the pillars on which they previously relied is painful. Love and nurture them through their journey.
- Take comfort in the love of our Heavenly Father for His children and the power of our Savior's atonement. Elder Boyd K. Packer stated:

"The measure of our success as parents . . . will not rest solely on how our children turn out. That judgment would be just only if we could raise our families in a perfectly moral environment, and that now is not possible.

"It is not uncommon for responsible parents to lose one of their children, for a time, to influences over which they have no control. They agonize over rebellious sons or daughters. They are puzzled over why they are so helpless when they have tried so hard to do what they should.

"It is my conviction that those wicked influences one day will be overruled.

"We cannot overemphasize the value of temple marriage, the binding ties of the sealing ordinance, and the standards of worthiness required of them. *When parents keep the covenants they have made at the altar of the temple, their children will be forever bound to them.*" [Ensign May 1992]

Joseph Smith, Brigham Young, Lorenzo Snow, Orson Whitney, President Eyring and many others have made similar statements. There is power in the sealing ordinance and in parents faithfully keeping covenants that binds even the wayward child.

We are led by our Father in Heaven and Jesus Christ through our good stake president. The more I know Pres. Staples, the more I recognize his depth of character, solid faith, commitment to doing the Lord's will, and profound love for members of the Willow Creek Stake.