

As another year winds to a close and we get ready to flip the calendar to 2025, I'd like to pause and describe what I see when I step back and take a good look at our church. I'll tell you this much: Elevation is thriving in a way that I wasn't sure was possible - and that's saying a lot coming from someone who is hopelessly optimistic! But the journey we've been on over the past five years has demonstrated what can happen when a community really gets on board with a vision. Of course one important thing we've learned since first casting this vision five years ago is that we need to be able to adjust on the fly! Some of the paths we've followed were not even visible to us when we first set out on the journey, and that's just part of the joy of following God's lead together. All in all, I feel so proud of our church today, and I want to celebrate how far we've come.

For starters, I'm proud of the way we've owned our responsibility to share the story of Jesus with those in our circles of influence. We've always *said* that Elevation is a place for the spiritually curious, but now we're finally being proactive about it by creating opportunities for people who don't have much (or any) church experience to journey alongside us - people like Joe. Many of you know him, in part because he's up here playing bass with the worship team, but that wasn't the case two years ago. During a conversation at a backyard BBQ, Joe's *Neighbours!* group (you know who you are!) invited him to join them that Sunday morning and he found Elevation to be the kind of community where he could ask his questions and explore faith at his own pace.

Part of what made that BBQ conversation possible was the work we did as a church coming up with language that would help people understand what it is we're inviting people to - not just 'to church' but to an intentional way of life rooted in community and oriented around Jesus. The Sunday morning service that Joe first joined us was planned with someone who would be attending church for the first time in mind. What Joe found that morning was a group of people who saw the world differently and lived accordingly, and that was compelling to him. I've seen a similar story play out for many of you who call Elevation home today, and it's a key part of what makes me love this church.

All of this begins with a belief that the faith we value so much in our own lives is worth sharing beyond these walls. And so we've stretched ourselves into new ways of thinking about church and are experimenting with new ways to connect with people in our spheres of influence. The result is that we're meeting dozens of people like Joe who are exploring faith for the first time (or the first time in a long time) and we're seeing what happens when people begin to pattern their lives after Jesus.

Spiritual formation has really taken root in our community as a whole, and not only with those who are new to faith. Five years ago, we started work on an idea that would help people understand what it looked like to grow in faith as a member of Elevation, and then we invited everyone into a season of reflection and to really pursuing God together. People started getting really honest about where they were on the journey and began making the kinds of investments that have led to some serious health and growth. We're hearing reports about everything from your financial well-being, to your marriages, to the relationships in your lives where you've been struggling with reconciliation. We're hearing stories of real, deep transformation. I'm not sure we've ever had a season of spiritual vitality like this at Elevation; it's just incredible.

This personal transformation has strengthened our commitment to the world around us. As I think back on all of the work we put into re-visioning our approach to Mission, I'm so encouraged to see how strong our partnerships are today as people have become more actively involved, living generous lives that are outflowing in support of both our local and global neighbours. As a community, we're more ready than ever to channel our time and resources for the sake of others, and the stories we're hearing prove that the personal transformation we're seeing is having an impact in ever-widening circles.

When we gather to worship on Sunday mornings, we're doing so in a place that is really and truly 'home' for us. After so many years living with questions about "what might happen," we finally know where we will be for the long run. The building is being used to its full capacity, seven days a week, and it's not only our congregation, but others as well, along with a nursery school and other valuable community groups. We're no longer holding on to a large expansion fund, because we created an opportunity to invest it in the wider community, which has been a life-giving decision for our church. I see so many of you getting involved with the new venture we've started up right here on the property - that's something we've been dreaming of for years!

Sunday mornings are vibrant and inspiring as we worship together with a renewed passion. If you've been around for a few years, you know exactly what I'm talking about. Something has 'clicked' along the way and we've been seeing people making our weekly gatherings a priority, showing up with a newfound expectation that God wants to meet with us when we gather as a community of faith. We're continuing to wrestle together with the call to follow Jesus, and I'm hearing more and more examples of how the things we're talking about in our sermons and that we're discussing together around tables are making their way into our homes, our neighbourhoods, our schools, and our workplaces.

And we're growing into this space of ours, too, finally breaking through the invisible attendance barrier we bumped up against for so many years. For a while it seemed like every arrival was matched by a departure, and I wasn't sure if we'd ever see more than 300 people gathering on a Sunday morning. We always shied away from talking about numbers, partly because we didn't want to be focused on externals like that, but I wonder if maybe it was partly because we were afraid of losing something if we grew. But our commitment to holding on to the good things we have while inviting others to join us has naturally resulted in numerical growth, and I don't know about you, but I don't feel like we've lost anything at all. Community is still at the heart of Elevation and always will be. As new people find us, they're getting involved, too, and are eager to build new relationships and serve without waiting a year or two like we used to see. We're all meeting new people and developing new friendships, often starting within our *Neighbours!* groups, which are definitely a key part of strengthening our community these days.

When I look out at the congregation on a Sunday morning, I see a community that is so much more diverse than we were five years ago. We've always been diverse when it comes to theology (which in many ways was an accomplishment of its own!) but I remember growing uncomfortable with just how middle-class and white our community was. It sounds harsh to put it that way, but we all knew we were missing out on something significant by not having other voices at the table. Now we're finally starting to benefit from a more well-rounded demographic and it feels like this is the way the church is supposed to be.

It's changed the food we eat when we get together, the music we play on Sunday mornings, and the kinds of relationships that are being built. I think about little Simona, who's all of eight years old. She wouldn't have been able to participate in Kids' Quest five years ago because of the physical barriers she faced in getting up the stairs. I think about Alan and how much we've all learned about joy from someone who, in the past, might have wondered if there was a place for him here because of his unique challenges. Or Nadeem and Dalia, whose journey to Canada has been every bit as transformational for us as it has for them as they've put down roots in our congregation. I could go on, but the main thing is that, while we started off worshipping and doing life with people who didn't always look, sound, or think like us, now the 'us' has been totally redefined and we're so much better for it.

Of course this reminds me of the challenging year that 2018 was for Elevation. As I reflect back on it, it all seems so long ago, but I'm really proud of the work we did to create a way for us to live together as a community of people who won't always see things the same way. Our decision to open our doors wider to our LGBTQ friends and neighbours paved the way to meet some amazing people who are now just part of the family, growing in life and faith right alongside us at Elevation. There's no doubt in my mind that we all have a deeper understanding of the love and grace of God as a result of that challenging season.

Over the past few years, we've finally found our way back to the students of our city, too, and I see them scattered around every Sunday morning. Some of them sit in pockets with each other, but others choose to sit with people in the congregation who have had them over to their homes and welcomed them into their families while they're on their own studying here in Waterloo. The Human Beans project we started way-back-when really opened our eyes to new ways to help students connect life and faith, and it's been an exciting season of experimenting ever since. But it's not just new students from out of town, either, some of our 'homegrown' students have been graduating from their Youth group and taking real ownership for the life of the church - that's something we've longed to see for years, and it's finally happening.

One of those same graduates is actually about to come on Staff to work with our Youth. As most of you know, she grew up in Kids' Quest, has been mentored over the years by Graham, and even interned with us last year, and now we're so excited to have her jumping on board in this role. The Youth group is growing! We finally saw that baby boom of ours reach highschool and now we have more than eighty kids out on a weekly basis. It's not just our own kids, either, but the Youth have caught the same vision for invitation and we're seeing their peers coming out, having a blast, some of them talking about how their lives have changed since they were first introduced to Jesus. That excites me to no end, because my own journey of faith really came to life when someone invited me out to a Youth group and exposed me to the life-changing message that I was loved by God and that the purpose I was looking for in life could be found in Jesus.

For a long time, Elevation has been inspiring young families to journey with us, and a big part of that has been our ministry to children. We have been seeing so much growth, not only in the number of young families joining us, but growth in the way we're raising our children up in a genuine, experiential faith in Jesus. We're confident that our kids feel loved by God and know that they have an important role in what God is doing in the church and the world.

And let me just say that maybe the biggest miracle of all is that I can't even remember the last time we struggled to find a teacher or helper to lead our kids on a Sunday morning - that's how invested our community is in our youngest members!

From one end of the age spectrum to the other, a growing and gradually aging congregation brings with it more trials and tribulations as time passes. But that's life, and what I'm seeing around here is a community of people who are more committed to doing 'Life Together' than ever before. I can remember when the idea of community-led pastoral care was just taking shape - today, I don't even hear about so much of what is happening in peoples' lives because they are being cared for so well by the community around them. I went to a funeral visitation for someone in the church recently and when I introduced myself to the member's family, they all knew about Elevation and were so impressed by the love and support the church had shown them. It was a little embarrassing when I realized that they didn't know who I was, but I thought, Hey, that's exactly how it should be.

Some of the things I see when I step back and take a good look at our church have been strengths of ours from day one - no surprises there. But some of what I see has pushed its way through the dirt of our resistance - the soil of phrases like "we've never done it that way" or "that doesn't quite seem like us" - and those new sprouts have blossomed before our eyes as we've paid attention to how the Spirit has been leading our community. In so many ways we're still the same church we've always been, but in many other ways it feels like we're finally becoming the church we've always wanted to be.

So how do I feel about our church right now?

I feel like we're clicking, like we're being the Jesus-centred community that we've always wanted to be, like we're really and truly living out Our Key Values in a way that has transformed the kind of people we are, the way we love and serve others, and the impact we're having in our city and in the world around us. I am beyond thankful that I continue to have the privilege of guiding our journey alongside an incredible Staff and Steering Committee, and I know we're all looking forward to what God has in store as we prepare to launch out into the *next* twenty-five years of Elevation's journey.