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Pastor's State of the Church Address

February 11, 2018

Dear New Life Family,

I wanted to use this time to pause, step back, and reflect on God's faithfulness to our church. Ministry can often feel like a tread-mill where the sheer immediacy of the next event prevents us from deep contemplation and reflection. This *State of the Church Address* is my way of lifting our eyes to the bigger picture so that we can see how far we've come as well as see where we hope to go.

Looking Back at 2017

2017 was a year of great change for our church. We moved to Beacon Park School. We hosted our first ever all church retreat in September. We initiated the process of becoming a self-governing church. We also had numerous staffing changes: a new assistant pastor, a new music director, new Sprouts Sunday School director, a new Sprouts Programs director, a new administrative assistant, and new youth leaders. Phew! I'm so thankful for the team of humble and committed servant leaders God has gathered at New Life. These leaders love you and are dedicated in serving Christ's bride.

2017 was also a year of great growth. Our Sunday attendance grew by 20% from an average of 139 people in January to 166 people in December. This has been fairly consistent with our track record the past several years. Since 2014, we have grown at a consistent 20% clip year over year and all indications suggest that our growth will continue in 2018. We also added 20 total units to our membership roster (30 adults and 12 kids). Of these additions, 28 reaffirmations of faith, 2 adult professions of faith, 1 covenant child profession of faith, and 5 baptisms.

Along with our numerical growth, our financial giving increased as well. At the beginning of 2017, the Finance and Advisory Teams jointly projected an aggressive 25% increase in our giving from the prior year. We wanted to project a number that caused us to pray, a number that required faith in a generous God. That projection was \$525,000. By the time all the giving came in for 2017, did you know what the final tally was for our church? \$527,000! Unbelievable! God not only matched our projection but exceeded it by \$2000 to let us know that He is a faithful Father and sometimes our biggest problem is that we simply don't ask.

Other blessings to note in 2017 include the continual development of our music ministry, the wonderful blessing of our all church retreat, the launch of our church app, our mercy in-reach team, the continued proliferation of our Life Group ministry, and the continued growth of our Sprouts Sunday School and Sprouts Programs. There are many more blessings I could note but for the sake of space, I will stop here.

In addition to these blessings, I also observed a few challenges in 2017. One of the challenges stems from the unavoidable impact of shifting church size. "Size culture" is a reality that we cannot ignore. The way a church "feels" at 100 people will be dramatically different from one

that has 200 people or a thousand people. A large church is not just a bigger version of a smaller church (kind of like the Whopper and Whopper Jr.). It will be fundamentally different in the way it communicates, fellowships, and assimilates. Though our church is certainly not what I consider a “big” church by any means, I do believe many of us can *feel* the effects of our growth.

For example, here’s an observation made by one of our lay leaders:

Larger numbers but as a result less warm/personable. Larger space is beautiful but as a downside, it is easier for people to hide/slither away without being seen/talked to. A growing but subjective sense that there are more people who show up as observers but are less plugged in.

Perhaps you too can relate. Church feels less intimate when you no longer recognize half of the congregation, let alone know their names. It feels less and less like a family and more and more like a gathering. This is one of the reasons why Life Groups continue to be vital to the life of our church. We hope every member participates in a Life Group. If you are feeling disconnected and detached, I pray you will join a Life Group.

Church growth also impacts newcomer assimilation. Newcomers are not as visible and easily identifiable in a larger crowd. As a result, we can’t expect them to be spontaneously welcomed. It is much easier for them to slip in and slip out without being noticed. It will take the entire church, not just the Welcome Team, to collectively do our best to introduce ourselves and welcome guests. If you are ever not sure if someone is new, simply look to see if their name tag is hand-written or not. If it is hand-written, that means they are relatively new to the church.

Another challenge I have observed for us in 2017 is the ongoing pull to become more and more inward facing. It is a pull we must do our best to resist. As you may remember from New Life 101, we are a *missional* church. That is, we believe God has commissioned us, New Life, to be a missionary to the city of Irvine and greater Orange County. We exist not simply for our needs and our wants. We exist to bring the Gospel to those who don’t know Him.

God has strategically positioned us in the fastest growing area of Irvine. Thousands are moving into Irvine every year which gives us a great opportunity to show people that man was created for much more than just the American Dream. Man was created to glorify and enjoy his creator and redeemer. If we’re not careful, we can easily miss out on this opportunity. I believe we need to do more in building bridges with the unchurched community.

Lastly, another area of growth for our church is the need to develop our Discipleship ministry. We have discovered the limitations of Life Groups in going both wide and deep. Life Groups exist primarily to connect believers to one another and foster community. As a result, it serves as an easy on-ramp for people to get immediately plugged-in and experience community. With this purpose firmly in place, we have discovered that it’s difficult to go deep in God’s Word and require commitments that are necessary to develop mature disciples of Jesus Christ. These two objectives: to go wide and deep compete with one another. As a result, many of our members who have been in multiple seasons of Life Groups have expressed a desire for something more, something meatier, something that will deepen their faith and walk with God.

Now as I share these challenges with you, let me remind you that many of these are what I call “growing pains.” I hope none of us are *bemoaning* the fact that our church has grown. The increase in our size and attendance means that more and more lives get to hear the gospel week-in and week-out. It also means that our reach and potential for future Gospel impact also increases. Our vision has always been “for the kingdom of God to expand in Irvine, greater Orange County, and the world.”

Looking Ahead at 2018

So what does God have in store for us in 2018? Well, in light of the observations I made concerning our discipleship ministry, we have developed a two-pronged discipleship strategy for our church. The first prong is our New Life Seminars which launches this Sunday. New Life Seminars “exists to develop mature and equipped disciples of Jesus Christ through classes that address various aspects of the Christian life that are better suited for a classroom environment.” Topics include exegetical studies (OT survey, Books of the Bible, etc.), systematic theology, life stage studies, and more. New Life Seminars will be hosted periodically throughout the year in 6 week stints on Sundays after service.

The second prong to our discipleship strategy will be our Discipleship Groups. Discipleship Groups exist to “develop mature and equipped disciples of Jesus Christ through intentional, life-on-life discipleship that occurs within a small group of men or women that meet weekly.” In order to do this well, the leadership is committed to a year-long training course that will commence next year. We hope to see our first discipleship groups launched in the latter half of 2019. Thank you for your patience!

In addition to the launch of our discipleship strategy, we are also forming a Community Outreach Team. This is distinct from our Mercy Outreach Team which focuses on ministering to the less fortunate. Our Community Outreach Team will be tasked with formulating and executing a strategy to build bridges with the surrounding community by identifying felt-needs and finding ways to creatively connect with them. Up until now, we have been inviting the community to “come and see” what God is doing through mailers and invitations to our Sunday worship services. Our Community Outreach Team will find ways where we can “go and bless” our community by serving them in meaningful ways.

Outside of these two initiatives, due to the resounding success of our first All Church Retreat, we will once again host an All Church Retreat on Labor Day weekend (September 1-3rd). In addition, we hope to elect and ordain our first ever church officers this Fall. These are exciting times for New Life! We are by no means a perfect church, far from it, but we are Christ’s church. He is our head. He is our leader. He is the one we follow. It is my hope that we can keep up with Jesus and participate in what He wants to accomplish in and through us.

Yours in Christ,

Pastor Jeff