

SPRUCE GROVE ALLIANCE CHURCH



**STATE**

**OF THE**

**CHURCH ADDRESS**

2023/2024

PASTOR BRENT FOSTER

# State of the Church Address

SGAC July 2023 – June 2024

Our Elders gathered for our monthly meeting in our new boardroom in the Community Life Center. Outside the room was a growing roar of volume of our youth who were starting to assemble for their weekly gathering too. A smile came across our faces as we needed to increase our own volume over the youth in the hallway. We deeply appreciate the impact of our youth ministry at SGAC and love that they are part of this place. A small and welcomed inconvenience for the sake of a thriving youth ministry. Like every Elders meeting, we started by looking up in prayer – praying for our church, praying for wisdom as we direct and protect, praying for God’s kingdom to come and His Holy Spirit to continue to move in our midst. Outside our room we could hear our youth begin to worship – it became holy background music as we collectively approached the throne of grace.

There was a moment though for me during that prayer that forms a lump in my throat every time I remember it. As the Elders were praying for unity in our church, the angelic youth voices in the next room were singing in crescendo the song “Great are You Lord.” “*We pour out our praise, We pour out our praise to you Lord...*” the words echoed down the hall and like incense these words mixed with our prayers and went upward. I snuck a peak across the table to see if anyone else sensed the same thing that I did. I saw one of our seasoned elders with two hands extended upward with eyes closed in worship giving full praise and glory to God. Eyes leaking and hearts humbled we prayed all the more earnestly for God’s

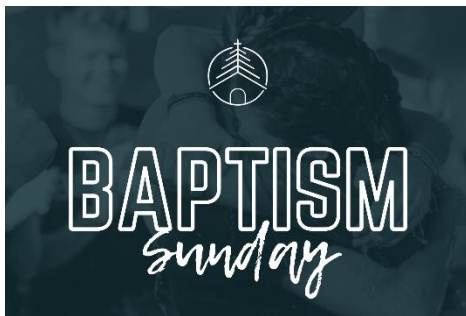


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presence to come as we reflected that 24 of those youth this past year followed the Lord in the waters of baptism. We all commented after the “amen” about the timing and the irony of that moment. In that moment as leaders, we all felt deeply blessed to be part of what God was and is doing in this place. It was like God made a deposit in our souls that night and we all felt spiritually rich.

Another Sunday, I stood at the back of the Sanctuary with my eyes leaking once again. It was baptism Sunday and we had placed a baptismal tank at the foot of the cross. That day we celebrated 37 people following the Lord in the waters of baptism. Story after story of commitments to Jesus will cause a lump to form in any believer’s throat. Many weeks before that during the “Indestructible Joy” series on Philippians there was a call for salvation, now many of those who answered that call were in that tank. Certainly, the towels that assembled at the foot of the cross weeks prior built anticipation for the crescendo of that moment. However, there were some stories that were extra emotional for me only because I knew more of their back story.

The impact of our Alpha group has been a bright shining light this past year at SGAC. Volunteer leaders gathered every week to explore the basics of Christianity with those seeking to know more about Jesus. God only knows the sacrifice and earnest prayer of these leaders as week after week they navigated spiritual conversations with those on the cusp of accepting Jesus. I was blessed to be part of one of those conversations with one of those Alpha participants outside of their meeting time. Someone noticed me at the gym one day and explained how God had drawn him to come to our church out of a place of desperation and spiritual thirst. He said that something was happening inside of him and he couldn't explain it – he just needed to respond. We chatted and I prayed for him and I quickly connected him to our Alpha group. Weeks later I received a text from our Alpha coordinator saying that one of the Alpha leaders indicated this person “*crossed the finish line last night...choosing to get baptized.*” Now on this Baptism Day, a tide of emotion swept over me as the Alpha leader was in the tank with this new believer and then another Alpha participant as well! Each one of the Baptism testimonies felt like small spiritual deposits in the bank account of my soul but that one especially felt like a million-dollar cheque! In that moment I know the Alpha leaders especially felt deeply blessed to be part of what God was doing in their midst, and we collectively as a church savored the richness of that moment too.



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Elders praying, youth worshiping, Alpha leaders persevering, people coming to salvation, people being baptized, people on mission, all these moments and many more this past year at SGAC were small deposits in our spiritual bank account that made us aware that we were richer than we thought.

## **Richer Than You Think**

This past Easter season we did a series titled “Richer Than You Think” (and yes, we stole that title from Scotiabank – heh!). However, this series was not about physical riches we can attain on earth but rather the spiritual riches that are available to us through the cross and the resurrection of Jesus. Perhaps the highlight for that series was when our children led us on Palm Sunday, walking

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us through the atonement language with a clay pot and diamond in hand. To have our children explain and illustrate the riches of the cross not only made us sense the wealth of the cross but also the wealth of having such an amazing children’s ministry at SGAC! Since this “Richer Than You Think” Easter series was the pinnacle fulcrum of our previous programed year, I thought that

would be a good phrase to use as a lens to view the state of our church. Join me as we do some “spiritual accounting” and take inventory of the rich things with which God has blessed us here at SGAC. Perhaps we will come to the realization we are “richer than we think” only because of the work of God in our midst.

## **Spiritual Deposits**

Let’s fix our attention on the positives in our spiritual accounting. Before noting the red ink, let’s note the black.

***New Community Life Center*** – Perhaps the highlight of the year is how God used our new physical building to do His spiritual work in our lives. This new and improved space for children, youth, adult groups and rentals enabled us to further fulfill our mission of “*Knowing Jesus, Knowing One*



*Another & Making Jesus Known.”*

Although it may have felt clunky at first as we adapted to the new space, this new facility certainly became the trellis on which God used to grow his spiritual fruit in our midst this past ministry year.

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***Sunday AM Spiritual Growth*** – It is impossible to measure the spiritual growth from the different topics that God led us to contemplate throughout the year: *Banners, Illuminate, Indestructible Joy, Richer Than You Think & Left to Our Own Devices* all became seasons where God chiseled and crafted us more into the image of His Son. Each week the wind of the Holy Spirit did that discernable yet unquantifiable work in our souls as hands lifted in worship, hands opened for receiving the Holy Spirit and voices joined in unison exalting Christ. Perhaps the highlight was the “Communion Table of Abundance” on Thanksgiving and at the end of the Banners series as we partook of the bountifully rich grace that is ours through Christ.



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***Key Events in the Life of Christ – Christmas, Maundy Thursday & Easter*** – These major events on the Christian calendar were the highlights of our year with record attendance at each. (Christmas Eve = 1152, Maundy Thursday = 416, Easter Sunday = 1352)

**Baptisms** – We hosted 2 Baptism Sunday’s this past year (January 7 & May 12) and saw 51 candidates enter the waters of baptism. That number includes 24 youth who were baptized at their regular youth night. As already noted, with each of those baptisms we collectively felt the riches of the kingdom.

**Youth & Young Adult Ministry** – As I noted in the introduction, these ministries have grown both numerically and spiritually this past year as they have taken advantage of the new CLC facility. Faithful passionate pastoral and volunteer leadership have been key for this ministry.

**Children’s Ministry** – Most of us only see the fruit of our children’s ministry at their Sunday AM productions on VBS Sunday, Christmas & Palm Sunday but there are so many more things that God is doing with our kids. The Awana mid-week program continues to go strong, the children are learning their bibles and they are learning about missions both locally and globally. The countless



faithful volunteers who serve in our children’s ministry are doing significant kingdom impacting work too! VBS is also one of the most significant outreach ministries of our church with over 300 in attendance last summer. Every time a young family with kids walks through our doors, we are reminded that the riches of the Kingdom belong to such as these.

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**Growth Groups** – These groups have continued to be a place where people connect and grow. We hosted 44 groups this past year with over 450 people in attendance. The “IF” conference too provided an opportunity for many ladies to Know Jesus and Know One Another. Again, passionate persevering leaders like those in our Alpha group are the backbone of our group’s ministry. Small groups who gather in Jesus’ name will certainly be key for us moving ahead as we look forward to more of the spiritual riches that God has in store for us.

**Keenagers** – A large number of our seniors also gathered every Wednesday for community, worship, prayer and bible study. These mighty in spirit warriors led by Steve Rigby and team faithfully exalted Jesus’ while being on mission for Him. If there is one group who knows their spiritual wealth, it is our seniors. Their prayers become the catalyst for God to pour out His riches in our midst.

**Vision Verse 2024** – We had 450 participants this year as in January many chose a verse(s) to fight their battles in 2024. The large sword on the wall in the foyer reminds us of this discipleship project and the spiritual impact will be continually felt throughout the rest of the year.

**Global Missions** – We hosted two “Global Focus” Sundays this past year (December 2 & April 14) where we directed our attention to work that God is doing around the world. Perhaps the highlight was how much we raised for the Jaffray Project (for training pastors in South Asia). Our church



collected 11% of the total raised across Canada! Making Jesus known globally has certainly been the heartbeat of SGAC over the years and will continue even more in the years ahead.

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**Local Outreach** - Grace's Table & Grace's Pantry was the main visible local outreach thrust at SGAC this past year. This ministry provided about 300 meals per month along with a rich supply of groceries for each family. We did 3 food drives this year too at Thanksgiving, Christmas & Easter each providing an abundance of much needed food for people in our community. Our benevolent fund also dispersed over \$28,000 to help families facing difficult times throughout the year. At Christmas time we once again partnered with the Spruce Grove Kinettes to distribute Christmas hampers in our community. On May 11 we had over 100 volunteers help on our "Here to Serve" Saturday by picking up garbage throughout our city. Our Young Adult's did a local missions trip this spring and became the hands and feet of Jesus in Edmonton. These are just a few examples of how we attempted locally to disperse the riches of the grace given to us from God.



**Newcomers** – "Scooch in" is the motto on Sunday as we have had to continually add rows of chairs at the back of the gym. Many responded with servant hearts to shift to the 11:15 Sunday service to allow more room at the 9:15 service for new families. Donut Sunday and projects like "Operation Just One" provided opportunities for connections and making new friends. We received an amazing 218 newcomer connection cards representing new families throughout the year and hosted 73 family groups at our newcomer lunches. With an average increase in 200-275 people per Sunday over last year, our improved first connect teams (ushers & greeters) worked hard to find room for everyone wanting to be part of the work that God is doing here. The recent parking lot expansion is just a necessary by-product of this increase. We certainly don't take for granted all the new people who have started to call SGAC home and we want to ensure they feel the riches of Christian community in the days ahead.

**Sacrificial Servants** – We recently took inventory of how my volunteers serve at SGAC. Did you know that over 400 people serve on a regular basis. Wow that is amazing! Many in our church have answered the call to be like Christ "who made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant" (Phillipians 2:7). With each unseen and unsung act of service of these volunteers whether it be in worship,

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children's, youth, grace's table, group leaders, prayer teams or hospitality teams, all can share in the fact that they are part of making spiritual deposits in our church. Our pastoral and support staff at SGAC have led the way being sacrificial servants and these along with our volunteers are certainly the "capital assets" of our church!

***Budget & Debt Reduction*** – One of the "future paths moving forward" in our State of the Church Address last year was "Stewardship." With a 21% increase in budget over the previous year we knew it was going to take all hands-on deck to make it happen. As we come to a close of the ministry year, although we are not on pace to collect all the money for our proposed budget, we can rejoice in the fact that we will meet our expenses. Our new Operations Director Corey Tilroe and our finance team have been prudent with the resources collected to put us in a fiscally secure place. Let's not forget about the debt reduction campaign in October called "This Changes Everything" either. With the \$180,746 collected in that campaign along with another \$30,000 that the finance team was able to leverage from our budget, we were able to reduce our mortgage principal by \$210,746. Thank-you to everyone who has given to SGAC this past ministry year. Thank-you! Thank-you! Thank-you! Your financial stewardship shows that you know deep in your soul that you are spiritually "richer than you think."

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## **Spiritual Withdrawals**

But let's also talk about the flip side. Certainly, this whole previous ministry year did not feel like continual deposits in our spiritual bank account. There were a few unforeseen taxes we felt like we paid and unexpected drains on our account.

### ***Staffing Shifts***

This year brought some challenges and transitions for our staff family as we saw a change in both support staff and pastoral staff. In late August, Kari Gehlert stepped down as children's support staff only to be replaced with another keen servant Julianna Merritt. With understanding yet sadness we saw Pastor Coreen retire in December after many years of amazing faithful ministry here at SGAC, only to be replaced by her capable protégé Debbie Funk. Since Debbie moved out of the admin side of things in the office, that created a significant impact and domino effect on the admin support side. Kim Friesen stepped into a new role as our "office admin lead" and we brought on a sharp young woman to help her – Joy Houcher. Joanne Fehr our long-time receptionist also retired in May and we brought on another gifted young lady – Kirsten Funk. We can't underestimate the impact this has had as this new support team diligently worked to keep up with the substantial administration it takes to keep SGAC running smoothly.

The resignation of pastors Joel Marquez & Andrew Bugiera also left us missing more close friends. Church ministry is such a relational thing and when God calls friends to another chapter it can leave us feeling unsettled and sad. The church is always a nebula of people coming and going, but it hurts with the going only because we love so deeply.

With great sadness we also grieved with two of our staff as they lost their spouses. Coreen Frey's husband Dave and Joanne Fehr's husband Bruce both went home to be with the Lord this past year. We can't underestimate the emotional toll that has had on those individuals and also with ripple effects on our staff team as a whole...and then the whole church family.

Losing friends, new staff added, staff losing spouses – all these things feel like withdrawals to our spiritual bank account. But overtime, as we learned in the Philipians series “Indestructible Joy”, our joy will remain steadfast as we make Jesus the most important thing in our lives. He has a sovereign plan in all this and He is building His church in all this transition preparing us for greater and richer things ahead.

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**Connecting the New to SGAC**

Did you know that our Sunday AM attendance is up an average of 200-275 people per Sunday over the previous ministry year? Also, our youth and young adults have grown and our children's ministry has already outgrown space downstairs in the new CLC. These are exciting things as God continues to draw people to come to this place and be on mission with us! But that also creates a new challenge.

During the Philipians series in January-February we did a project called “*Edify to Unify*” where you the congregation submitted statements completing the sentence “*I thank God for Christ's church because...*” As I read over the 67 submissions recently, I noticed that 38 had a comment about SGAC feeling like “*family, community or home*”. That is a great thing! I am so glad that many people feel connected to the rest of the body of Christ. It warms my heart as your pastor. But...

But I do know there are some newcomers to SGAC who feel like their spiritual bank account is depleted when it comes to “community”. They want to connect but they just haven't found their niche yet. Certainly, things like Donut Sunday, Newcomers Lunches & “Operation Just One” worked to help create pockets of community this previous year. The dynamics of a church that has increased Sunday AM attendance by almost 28% in one year has created a need to enfold those new people into the life of our church.

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As we move ahead it is important that we grow “smaller” as we grow “larger.” That we intentionally create smaller groups of community where people are known and cared for in their spiritual lives as we gather in a collective group each Sunday. When it comes to our spiritual development

and growth, the “diminuendo” of small groups is as important as the larger collective “crescendo” on Sunday AM.





As we learned in the Philippians series, it is the responsibility of ALL of us to ensure the spiritual bank accounts of “community” are filled in one other’s lives in the days ahead.

### ***Criticism***

Years ago, in order to connect with my son, I did this thing called “video games.” I was terrible at it and I didn’t last very long! Those first-person shooter games where you run around on a digital map trying to eliminate others was not my thing. But I do remember a term that was used in those games that made me chuckle. If an individual seemed to be using “cheats” or a computer enemy seemed unbeatable they called it a “bullet sponge.” It didn’t matter how much you threw at them, it felt like they absorbed everything completely unphased.

I think sometimes in the church we assume everyone who differs from us is a “bullet sponge.” Sometimes we say things thinking others will be unaffected. The truth is, these flippant words come flying out of our mouth like bullets that do damage to people’s souls. As I lead with my ears as your pastor, I’ve not only heard the “shots fired” but other leaders have made me aware of other “shots fired” within the church. Friends, we are not “bullet sponges” and these words do more damage than we ever thought possible. To mix illustrations, each of these damaging words are like an unexpected tax on the individual’s inner spiritual bank account.

**In the days ahead, let’s use our words to make significant positive deposits and “investments” in other people’s spiritual bank accounts rather than withdrawals.**

I know this doesn’t apply to all of us! Many are “shining like stars in the sky” (Philippians 2:15) when it comes to your words. In the days ahead, let’s use our words to make significant positive deposits and “investments” in other people’s spiritual bank accounts rather than withdrawals.

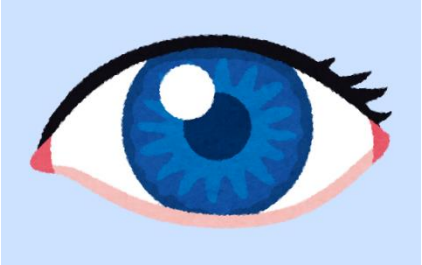
### **Spiritual Riches Looking Ahead**

We have a great Elders board at SGAC and this past season they have been shifting towards a governance model of leadership. “Directing” and “protecting” the church is where they place their focus, always looking at the big picture of who God is calling us to be and where God is calling us as a church to go. One of the projects that our Elders tackled this past year was to revisit our “Values” of SGAC. Values are both “actual” and “aspirational.” They are both “descriptive” and “prescriptive”. They describe who we are in part but also who we want to be as the people of God. As Elders, we spent a few days in April at our annual Elders retreat prayerfully discerning an inspirational set of values that will direct us towards God’s best. After all that prayerful hard work, we developed 6 Values for SGAC that flow from our 3-fold mission.



<b>Know Jesus</b>	<b>Know One Another</b>	<b>Make Jesus Known</b>
Looking <b>Up</b> with...	Looking <b>In</b> (to the body) with...	Looking <b>Out</b> with...
Value #1 <b><u>Intentional Proximity</u></b>  To develop core habits of prayer, worship, the word, listening to the Holy Spirit.	Value #3 <b><u>Sacrificial Service</u></b>  To develop our spiritual gifts for others, selfless serving, contributors not consumers, hands & feet of Jesus.	Value #5 <b><u>Missional Imagination</u></b>  To develop a heart for those far from God, urgency with good news in both word & deed, local and global minded.
Value #2 <b><u>Transformational Discipleship</u></b>  To develop holiness, the fruits of the Spirit, death to self, Christian character.	Value #4 <b><u>Collaborative Community</u></b>  To develop the One Another's, unity, transparency, life together in small groups.	Value #6 <b><u>Radical Generosity</u></b>  To develop stewardship of our time & resources, being salt and light in the world.

**“Looking”**



Have you ever heard the saying “they have an eye for that?” It means, that person sees things through a particular lens. They look at the world with a certain set of values. That is what Jesus refers to when He says in Matthew 6:22-23 *“The eye is the lamp to the body. If your eyes are healthy, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eyes are unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness.”*

Jesus is telling us that a Christian will look at the world around them with a different set of values. A Christian will “have an eye” for things that bring kingdom advancement. So, what do we see as people of SGAC when we look at the world around us?

**So, what do we see as people of SGAC when we look at the world around us?**

- As we seek to “Know Jesus” we **look up** with a desire for ***Intentional Proximity & Transformational Discipleship.***
- As we seek to “Know One Another” we **look in** (into the body of Christ) with a desire for ***Sacrificial Service & Collaborative Community.***
- As we seek to “Make Jesus Known” we **look out** (outside the church walls) with a desire for ***Missional Imagination & Radical Generosity.***

Wow! Wouldn't it be great if these values became the way in which we saw the world in the days ahead? What could God do in our midst if we allowed Him to deposit these values inside us through the power of the Holy Spirit. This fall we plan to explore each of these values in depth and learn

what it means to “see things” through that lens. Let’s expect God to make some major spiritual deposits in our church in the new year as we allow Him to form these values in our lives.

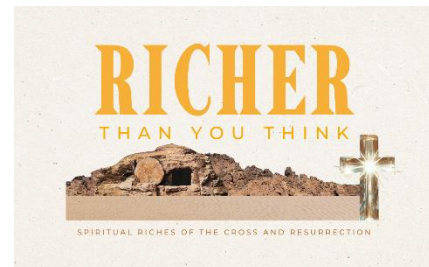
### **Pocket Change for Now**

There was another key moment this past year at SGAC where God made a collective spiritual deposit in our account. At the close of our “Indestructible Joy” series on Philippians God added a bonus Sunday to the series. You might remember that my wife Erica joined me for the sermon that day as we contemplated “Steps Toward a Joy-filled Marriage.” And then it happened... at the close of the first service God surprised us with an actual wedding. Heh! Unorthodox to say the least. I wish you could have seen it from my perspective. As I announced we were performing a wedding, I was the only one facing you the congregation as people behind me scrambled to reorganize the stage. I wish you could have seen your faces! What I saw in your collective faces that day makes my eyes leak and my pastoral heart proud of you. I saw your faces “looking” to be on mission with

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Jesus. And then as the couple added their baptism towel to the already growing pile at the foot of the cross you could almost hear the coins jingle as God deposited them in our souls. With eyes leaking and hearts spiritually rich in the Holy Spirit we saw God deposit something in all of us that day as we were collectively on mission with Him. As we recall moments like these, it provides the necessary “pocket change” to sustain us when times feel like they may be taxing.

As we look ahead to the next ministry year, I want us to hear God say deep in our soul “*You can be spiritually richer than you think...My spirit, My kingdom, My presence can become more alive in your midst...let **ME** show you how!*” Heh - let’s be “looking” for that in the days ahead.



Blessings,

Pastor Brent