

The State of the Church Address

Immanuel Baptist Church, Wiesbaden

12 January 2025

Good afternoon, everyone. I am truly glad that each of you is here. I believe there is a reason you are here on this particular Sunday, even if you are a guest with us. The message today is a bit unusual. We call this our State of the Church address and, as such, it is a look back at the past year with all of its ups and downs and a look forward to what God might have in store for the year to come.

And, in case you are interested, I will have a couple of copies of the address available at the Information table after the service and also you can download a copy on our website. For that reason, I try to stick pretty close to what is written on the page and not stray too far.

But this State of the Church Address is a bit unique.



This photo was taken as I left customs at Frankfurt Airport on Friday, January 2, 2015. On Sunday, the 4th I stood in the pulpit for the first time as your Pastor. Susan joined me in May of that year after finishing up the school year in Houston.

We have had 10 years together as church family. That is a significant amount of time. And, although I don't want to try to do any kind of review of those 10 years – or all of our time would be spent looking back, I think it is good to recognize what God has done. It has not always been an easy journey; we have faced some difficult days and difficult decisions. But we have faced those challenges together. In fact, as I thought and prayed about what scripture passage best expressed how this congregation has walked through the past 10 years, my thoughts returned to a passage that we read just last week as we discussed that God has created us to THRIVE in community:

Ecclesiastes 4:9-12

⁹Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. ¹⁰For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up! ¹¹Again, if two lie together, they keep warm, but how can one keep warm alone? ¹²And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him—a threefold cord is not quickly broken.

This morning, I want us to focus in again on this truth, that a strong sense of community is key to being who God has called us to be.

Like all families, the last 10 years have brought a great deal of change to our church family. We have grown and have become, I think, healthier in many ways. We are investing much more of our resources outside of our walls and have a much healthier relationship to the German congregation with which we share this space. Laughter has rung out throughout the building as we have fellowshiped together. We have celebrated weddings and seen so many babies born – we are nothing if not fruitful! We have fellowshiped around the table at untold numbers of meals together. We have cheered at the occasional talent show and wonderful children’s programs. We have watched our kids grow up, become wonderful young men and women and prayed as they take steps of independence and begin to find their own way in the world and the Kingdom of God.

We have had to say goodbye. Most of those goodbyes have come because of the transient nature of our society in general and our church in particular. I have tried to calculate how many people God has brought through our doors, whom we have then sent on to their next place of engagement. Based on our records, which admittedly might have some holes in them, and my memory, which absolutely has holes in it, we would easily fill this sanctuary completely three times if all of those who have been a part of this family over the last 10 years were together with us on one Sunday.

Instead, God has chosen to do something greater, spreading those who have come through this place throughout the world. We are the better because of the time we have had with each of those people and we hope and pray that they are the better for their time here. They take a part of our DNA with them, and we hope that they are a blessing wherever God leads them. We like to say that even if you are far away from us, you remain a part of us. I think there is at least some evidence of that in the fact that people often speak of a desire to return and, indeed, a number of families have done just that!

We have also said goodbye to those who have gone ahead of us to our eternal home; that place where there will be no more goodbyes. These are especially difficult moments. We mourn the separation, even as we rejoice in lives well lived and that these friends and family are truly more fully alive than at any time we have known them. In 2024 we felt the grief of separation deeply as our dear Ulrich Wedler joined his dear wife Beryl in worshipping before the throne of God.

As I reflect on these 10 years together, I see where God has given us the opportunity to thrive in community. The passage from Ecclesiastes reminds us:

⁹ *Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil.*

We have seen this over these 10 years together. When there have been opportunities to invest in the Kingdom, our efforts have been multiplied because each one shares in the vision and shares their resources and their gifts.

But of course, life does not consist of just the times of building and opportunity, there are times of sorrow and times when we feel alone. In those times we need for someone to take

the initiative to reach out to us when we are too weak to reach out ourselves. The writer of Ecclesiastes recognizes that and reminds us:

¹⁰ For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up! ¹¹ Again, if two lie together, they keep warm, but how can one keep warm alone? ¹² And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him—a threefold cord is not quickly broken.

While it would be wrong to say that we have perfectly lived out this passage together, I believe that the strong sense of community and the way in which you have walked together and cared for one another has, more than anything else, been key to Immanuel thriving as a church family.

As we move forward into a new year, we cannot lose this aspect of our identity as a church. In fact, we must do all that we can to strengthen the ways in which we function as community.

And.

And I want to bring in another picture that I think helps us see another side of our identity and the task before us for the coming year. We cannot / must not lower the bar of dynamic and thoughtful community, but I think we can add to that picture.

As I planned and prayed about today, I found myself drawn to the picture of a river. That may be due in part to our location on the Rhein. There is very little I enjoy more than a drive into the Rheingau. The Rhein flows to the north, one of the relatively few major rivers of the world which do so. It moves across multiple countries, starting in the Swiss Alps and eventually emptying into the North Sea in the Netherlands. All along the way, the river brings life; always moving and always changing, but yet has a wonderful long history full of tales of castles and kingdoms.

Now, even as I call this picture to mind as we talk about our identity as a church, I am very aware that to compare Immanuel to the mighty Rhein might be a bit overblown. But the Rhein doesn't start the way we see it when we drive to the Rheingau. **It starts more like this:**



The Dischmabach in the Dischma valley (near Davos), the most distant source of the Hinterrhein river system and largest source of the Alpine Rhine.

It isn't the only source, of course! There are many others that come together to form what we know as the Rhein river. But this small "Bach" plays a role!

The size has very little to do with the impact. I am reminded of a portion of one of Ezekiel's visions. We read about it in Ezekiel 9, and Ezekiel is looking out over this river that flows from the temple of God. He sees the trees lining the banks and the life around this river and, in verse 9 we read:

Ezekiel 47:9

⁹And wherever the river goes, every living creature that swarms will live, and there will be very many fish. For this water goes there, that the waters of the sea may become fresh; so everything will live where the river goes.

I love this description as we think about 2025!

"Every living creature which swarms will live, many fish, everything will live where the river goes" – the river gives life.

I want to for us to embrace both pictures of who we are as a church. We need the picture of living life together, of being a community and not a club or gathering. BUT, we also need the picture of the river to help us rejoice in our calling to be permanent, yet ever changing.

INTRODUCTION OF ANDY & KELLY AND ILLUSTRATION

- Andy and Kelly, we are so glad that you and your friends are with us this afternoon. Do you mind helping me with a little experiment?
- Could you please stand?
- Would you look around and maybe hazard a guess of what % of those who are present today you know and know you?
- Andy and Kelly were a life-giving presence in the church while they were with us. In fact, one of our major accomplishments as a church in 2024 was to totally redo our Constitution as a church and Andy was the architect behind that effort as he was on staff as our Pastor of Administration and Leadership.

There is a saying that you never step into the same river twice and what we just saw with Andy and Kelly is a perfect example of that. In the 18 months they have been gone, there has been tremendous change; new leaders, new people that God has brought our way and people that they might expect to see who have now moved to the next place that God has for them.

The river remains and the task of this river – to bring life and to help everything it touches to thrive remains the same, even while there is constant change.

This church is like that river described in Ezekiel's vision. Our task is to be the channel through which God brings life; spiritual life first and foremost, but Jesus tells us that He came to bring life – not just survival – but LIFE in abundance, that is, to THRIVE.

How do we do that?

Through a strong sense of community / of relationship that is rooted in our relationship with Christ. Our sense of community / of unique kind of family doesn't come because we are nice people to be around, although that might be true. It doesn't come because we enjoy a particular kind of music or even because of some kind of uniformity of belief. This community is rooted in our identity as the children of God. And that trumps everything else. We have been transformed through the power of God and have been given a new heart. And this heart beats for God.

As we move into 2025, my prayer is that in these three ways we embrace our calling as a life-bringing river and as a rock-solid community of faith.

- **First, my prayer** is that we would continue to deepen our relationship to the Father.

In 2024 our Fall Launch was centered around what it means to be an apprentice of Jesus, a disciple. We read the book "Practicing the Way" which asked us to consider what practices Jesus modeled which we too could practice and draw closer to God. The practices which God can use to shape our lives.

If you were there, you know that it is our steadfast belief that being an apprentice / disciple of Christ isn't just a calling for a select few, it is for everyone who calls themselves a follower of Christ / a Christian. If we follow the picture of the river, it isn't just certain parts of the river which bring life, it is ALL of the river which brings life to what it touches. And as His followers, we are given the privilege and the task to bring life to what we touch.

Think about that for a second. Is that how people would describe us? Would the people at work, home, school, the grocery store you frequent... say, "I'm not sure how, but life seems different... better and somehow fuller with this person in it." If you're like me, you want say "Wait a second, I can't do that. How is that even supposed to work?" And you are exactly right! You can't, but Jesus can and He does it through you! Remember when Peter and John are arrested in Acts 4 and are taken before the religious "court?" Do you remember what they said after hear Peter and John – who were not well-trained orators, they were fishermen!

¹³ Now when *they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated, common men, they were astonished. And they recognized that they had been with Jesus.*

See you don't have to impress anyone and you can't bring life of any kind to anyone, but you can show them Jesus and HE can do the rest. But if you are going to do that, you have to draw close to Him!

To that end, in 2025, we will do some follow-up to the practicing we discovered in "Practicing the Way". We're not going to do a full-fledged study like we did last year, but approximately once a quarter, we will consider practices which we may not have had time for last year.

Another thing that will be key is that we are reading the Bible through together. I know you have heard me talk about this over and over again, but I urge you to give it a try. You may not be perfect and you may not get to all of the extras available in our Bible Reading Plan, but try and don't give up! If you miss a day, come back the next day. I promise you that this kind of reading will help you see the big picture of the work of God in a way that you will not gain if you only study specific passages.

- **Secondly, my prayer** is that we grow as a church family.

The primary way I mean that is that we learn to love and serve one another even better! Now, you are good. I love hearing about someone reaching out in love to someone else in our church family. Maybe you take care of someone's kids so that they can accomplish some task, you translate for someone who has an appointment at an office or doctor's appointment so that it is less intimidating. Maybe you bring by clothing or make sure someone's heater is working properly. You pray for needs and then follow-up to see how to pray further. You do well!

But here is the truth. Community is hard in the river that is Immanuel Baptist Church. The constant change means constantly saying hello and constantly saying goodbye. And if you are trying to do this on your own, it WILL be overwhelming and you will give up. Ironically, the only way to do transitional community well is to embed yourself within that community.

Said another way; you need a place to belong which is bigger than yourself, but smaller than the church as a whole. Maybe that smaller part of this community is our Bible study on Sunday mornings. That is a great place to plug in! They are growing not just in knowledge of the Word, but in fellowship with one another and in touching the world. Maybe that place is in our children's ministry or tech team. The ministry teams of our church are not just places to minister well within the context of this Body, your involvement will make a world of difference in how you experience community.

Maybe you need to join a Life Group. I am so excited that to start 2025 we have two new Life Groups kicking off, one at the Schoppa's and one at the Lowry's. These Life Groups and others which I hope we will see established this year are there to help you find community.

We are going to do everything within our power, to connect you with other people. We are going to work hard to find opportunities, including things like the Family Fun Night which

you heard about a few minutes ago, but also the low key, below the surface things which are small in scale, but powerful in effect. Can I just encourage you to open your eyes and see the possibilities. Have lunch with someone and share your stories with one another. Have coffee together, have dinner together, invite someone to join you in a nice, long Spaziergang (walk). In other words, don't wait. Take the initiative to build community, especially as you see new people come through our doors. Reach out and invite someone to step into the river.

- Finally, my prayer is that we will become more passionate about the Missio Dei.

Do you remember the sermon series from 2024 in which we talked about being a part of the Mission Dei, the Mission of God? A surprising number of you mentioned that this conversation was important and helpful to you.

I believe we want to find ways in which we can help people see and understand the work of God in our world and the possibility of living in relationship with Him. I believe we desire to be a part of reaching our neighborhoods, and the furthest ends of the world. We want to give you that opportunity.

We will give! In 2023 we began focusing our attention on ways to provide resources for ministries with we could partner. Our goal that first year was 1500€, which we surpassed! In 2024 we came back with more projects and a goal of 3000€, a goal which we once again surpassed! Not only that, but from our missions budget, we were able to support a local ministry, Lichtblick, financially. We also contributed to the ministry of Jeffrey House, who, by the way, is one of those young people who came to Christ in his time in our youth ministry and is now serving in Taiwan. In addition, we gave to support Dina and Gene Roberts, former IBCers who have started an orphanage in Guatemala.

And we are just getting started!

I pray and believe that God grows our vision for how He would use the resources He has put at our disposal to invest in Kingdom ministries around the world. But I don't think He wants to stop there, I believe He wants YOU to go. You may be thinking, "he can't possibly mean me." But I do.

Whether it is joining our women's ministry in going to the Frauenhaus, passing out cookies on the US military base or joining a group of guys helping out at Lichtblick; in 2025 we will be giving you even more opportunities to go. Yes, we have an opportunity to share resources for the Missio Dei, but that is never the only step. God always, 100% of the time, wants you to be engaged in going. It might be across the street to your neighbors – in fact, that is almost always where it starts. But it is rarely where it ends.

It isn't that we just want YOU to go, WE want to go! I have been talking a good bit with Alphonso, who coordinates our missions ministry and I believe he isn't going to sit still and let us be passive in our missions involvement. He is already making plans for us to come

together as a community and GO to the nations. Quite honestly, I can't wait for some of those opportunities to develop and see what God has in store.

Church, by our very nature, we are a sending church! We are intentional that when the time comes that someone in our community is looking at a move, we let them know that this doesn't mean that they are somehow lost to us. They go with our blessing and we send them with gratitude that we have had the opportunity to spend this part of the journey together. And a part of them stays with us – waiting until perhaps God will bring them back and a part of us goes with them, hopefully so that they are better equipped to love and serve wherever God may take them.

That's the way a river works. It continues to flow, but the blessing of life continues to pour out all along the path the river flows.

In 2025 may I encourage you to seek to grow in your relationship to the Father. It is work, but it is so worth it! Grow in community with this Body. Find your place! Invest in people and look for opportunities to come together and encourage one another. Then remember that we are a part of a river through which blessings flow.

Do you know why the "Dead Sea" is "dead"? Because water flows in but has no outlet.

The church which helps people grow in their faith and grows together as a community will become dry and "dead" unless there is an outlet, a way for that blessing – that LIFE to flow through them and into the world. That, my friends, is why God has put us here and my prayer for 2025 is that He does a mighty work in us to His glory and that (to borrow from Ezekiel):

Wherever those from Immanuel go, there is life and everyone who crosses their path sees and hears of the life which God offers. For this "river" flows so that others may experience the Living Water; with the result that wherever the people of Immanuel go on our journey, we bring with us the Life which comes from the Father.