The God Who Leads the Way Jan. 4, 2026
1/6 in *The Way Through the Wilderness: How God Shapes Us in the Journey* Ex. 13:17-22

Happy New Year! A new year is a time to pause and think about beginnings. And so, today I'd like to start by remembering how Cornerstone first got its start. Then, I'll reflect on how we now stand at the beginning of a new chapter God is inviting us into as a church. And all these reflections will lead us into the first message of our first sermon series of 2026. Are you ready?

Around three decades ago, a group of 35 people gathered, captivated by a vision that had taken hold of their hearts. They believed God was calling them to plant a new church — a church that would share the love of Jesus with its local community in practical ways, building relational bridges with neighbours and making disciples of Jesus in the process.

Although this group had roots in a Chinese church context, they sensed that the vision God had for them was wider. They dreamed of an intentionally intercultural church — of a congregation that would reflect the loving unity-in-diversity of God's kingdom in the midst of their city—a city known for its multiethnicity.

Early in 1998, Cornerstone Christian Community Church would hold its first worship service in a rented community centre hall. It was a humble beginning — the kind that seemed too small to carry the weight of the vision God had given them. And yet, step by step, God proved faithful. Over time, neighbours were reached, lives were changed, and the congregation grew in faith as well as in numbers.

But God wasn't finished enlarging the church's vision.

In 2002, while the congregation was still modest in size, its financial resources more modest still—God gave them a vision to build a community-centre-style facility to better serve and reach the local community for Jesus.

From there it would take thirteen long years of prayerful faith and obedience—years marked by sacrificial generosity and steady service to the community—as we waited for capital to be raised, land to be purchased, and construction to be completed. Then, in 2015, the church finally gathered to celebrate the grand opening of Cornerstone Centre. From the very beginning, the facility was more than just home base for this congregation. It was and still is our gift to the wider community in Jesus' name—a hospitality space designed to help us extend welcome, care and life-enrichment to our Markham–Stouffville neighbours of all backgrounds.

Over the past 10 years, this congregation has grown to about 1,300, with people from over 50 different countries of origin represented. From such humble beginnings, we've witnessed God's vision for us become reality in so many ways. And as I think back on nearly three decades of Jesus-centred, intentionally-intercultural, community-oriented, disciple-making ministry, my heart joins the psalmist in crying out:

Not to us, LORD, not to us but to your name be the glory, because of your love and faithfulness. [1]

But God's not finished enlarging this church's vision.

What if all that's come before—every step of Cornerstone's journey so far—has been *preparation*? What if it's been a kind of *warm-up* for what God intends to do through this church in the years ahead?

2025 was a season of discernment for Cornerstone. It was a year to ask, "Lord, what's your leading for our *next decade* as a church?" We took the full year to listen deeply to God and to the hearts of people across this congregation. We also carefully researched the needs of our neighbors in the greater Markham-Stouffville area. Through this extensive process of prayerful learning and discernment, four key priorities have very clearly emerged — priorities that will guide and shape Cornerstone's direction for the next ten years. The Executive Team shared these with the congregation at the end of November, but here's a quick recap:

Guiding Priorities for Cornerstone's Next Chapters

1. DEEPER AND WIDER DISCIPLESHIP
2. BUILDING BRIDGES ACROSS DIFFERENCE
3. JOINING GOD IN THE NEIGHBOURHOOD
4. CORNERSTONE CENTRE AS A HUB FOR COMMUNITY CONNECTION & BELONGING

For more info, see www.cornerstonechurch.ca/emergingpriorities

1. DEEPER AND WIDER DISCIPLESHIP
This is a call to make disciples whose roots grow deep in Jesus as they abide in his love, grace and truth—and whose branches reach wider in mission, as they share the compassionate love of Jesus wherever they go.

2. BUILDING BRIDGES ACROSS DIFFERENCE
This is a call to live even more boldly into our core value of Unity-in-Diversity—deepening relationships across cultures, generations, classes and abilities, demonstrating the power of Jesus' reconciling love in a culture so often marked by division.

3. JOINING GOD IN THE NEIGHBOURHOOD
This is a call to embody Jesus' presence in our homes, workplaces, schools, and streets—bringing light, hope and life into the spaces we inhabit every day.

4. CORNERSTONE CENTRE AS A HUB FOR COMMUNITY CONNECTION & BELONGING
This is a call to expand this facility—Cornerstone Centre—not just to serve our growing congregation, but also to make it an even stronger beacon of connection and care in a fast-growing and fragmented city, where more and more people face isolation and loneliness.

You can read more about these Guiding Priorities on the webpage noted onscreen.

[1] Psalm 115:1

If these priorities feel familiar, it's because they are things Cornerstone has always valued and pursued. What's *changing* is not the *heart* of who we've always been as a church, but the *depth* to which God is now calling us to live that out. These priorities are an invitation to lean in more fully, intentionally, and courageously—becoming ever more engaged with our local community, ever more attentive and responsive to the needs of our local neighbours. As we do so, God will bring new levels of discipleship—of transformation in Jesus—not only for those we serve, but also for us in the process.

Last year's Ministry Theme, *Finding Our Way in God's Story*, re-oriented us within the grand narrative of Scripture and called us to prayer as we sought God's direction for Cornerstone's longer-term future.

God's call to us in 2026 is not only to continue discerning the way, but *to begin walking in it*.

Accordingly, our Ministry Theme for the year ahead is **On the Way**. This will be a year of taking our first faithful steps along the road Jesus has set before us as we intentionally begin to live into the four Guiding Priorities the Holy Spirit has revealed for our next chapter as a church.

"The Way" is a rich biblical theme. The earliest Christians were known simply as *followers of the Way*—people who understood that faith is not a static set of beliefs, but a living journey of discipleship and Spirit-empowered mission. [2]

You can read more about our 2026 Ministry Theme, Objectives and Initiatives on the webpage noted onscreen: www.cornerstonechurch.ca/on-the-way

While *this year's* ministry objectives *are* in place, many of the plans, particulars, and timelines for Cornerstone's next five to ten years have yet to be fully discerned and clarified. *And that's okay*, because throughout Scripture, God hardly ever gives his people the entire map in advance. More often than not, he calls them to step out in faith first, revealing the path only as they walk it. The longer-term details, strategies, and steps will become clear in God's time. For now, our calling us to simply begin the journey—to take the direction we *have* received from God thus far, and get started *on the Way*.

This conviction brings us to our first sermon series of 2026—an Old Testament series called *The Way Through the Wilderness: How God Shapes Us in the Journey.* Over the next six weeks, we'll trace key moments from Israel's wilderness journey, drawing from passages in Exodus, Numbers, and Joshua, to see how God forms his people while they are "on the way". Israel's wilderness journey is a story of God's guidance, presence, and provision — a story that mirrors how God is calling Cornerstone to take our first faithful steps into the future he intends for us.

Today, we begin with **Exodus 13:17–22**, which was read earlier in the service. I invite you to turn there in your Bible. In this passage, we discover **three principles for how God leads his people into the future**. The first principle is that:

1. God sometimes leads us on a longer path to teach us to depend on Him.

In verses 17-18, we read:

[2] Acts 9:2; 19:23; 24:14

> When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them on the road through the Philistine country, though that was shorter. For God said, "If they face war, they might change their minds and return to Egypt." So God led the people around by the desert road toward the Red Sea. The Israelites went up out of Egypt ready for battle. [3]

God had just delivered Israel from slavery in Egypt, having promised to lead them into their own land. Yet here, he deliberately avoids sending them by the shortest, most obvious route to the Promised Land. Instead, he leads them south, into the desert of Sinai, toward the Red Sea.

Had they taken the direct route, they would have encountered the Philistines—a somewhat formidable military threat. And though the text tells us that "the Israelites went up out of Egypt ready for battle," God knew better. He knew that this vast, newly freed people—still carrying the fears and instincts of slavery—might panic at the first sign of resistance and retreat back to Egypt.

At first glance, it seems like God is sparing his people from conflict, accommodating their fears and limitations.

But if we keep reading, we discover something surprising. The alternate route God chooses for them doesn't eliminate danger—*it intensifies it*. By the very next chapter, Exodus 14, the Israelites find themselves in a far worse situation. The Red Sea blocks their way forward, and Pharaoh's chariot armies thunder behind them in furious pursuit. There is no visible path of escape.

The God who seemed to be steering them away from a scary but potentially manageable conflict now appears to have led them straight into an impossible one. And that irony reveals something crucial. God wasn't trying to lead his people away from every danger. He was leading them into a situation where *the only way forward was faith*—a situation in which *they could only depend on God for deliverance*.

This is often the point of the longer road.

At the Red Sea, there is no military option. No retreat. No clever plan. Only God—*who parts the waters so his people can pass through safely*.

What looked like a detour to avoid fear becomes the very place where God decisively proves that he is stronger than Pharaoh, that Egypt's enslaving power has truly been broken, and that Israel's salvation comes by trusting in God alone.

The same pattern has marked our story at Cornerstone time and again. From the very beginning, the path God set before us seemed improbable, if not impossible.

Could a church with ethnic roots truly become a vibrant, intercultural community? Critics said no.

Could a small congregation with few resources truly construct a multi-million-dollar, community-centre-style facility as a gift to the wider community in Jesus' name? By every human measure, it was foolish.

[3] Exodus 13:17-18 (NIV)

And yet, in the very places where we faced the so-called impossible, God proved himself faithful. It's been a journey of nearly 30-years— but on that long path, all that Cornerstone could never achieve through size, strength, or strategy, God has accomplished through his presence, power and provision.

And God has used this journey not only to shape Cornerstone as a whole, but to shape and strengthen the faith each one of us who has been part of that journey over the years. We've grown deeper as disciples precisely because the Lord has led us step by step while we were *on the Way*.

Now, as we look to the next chapter of Cornerstone's story, the same principle applies. The path ahead may seem uncertain at times, the challenges daunting, the costs intimidating. Yet the God who led us through the impossible before is the same God calling us forward today.

And this principle applies not only to the life of the church—it speaks to each of us personally as well. There may be seasons in your own life that feel impossible: relationships that seem irreparable, opportunities that seem out of reach, challenges that feel overwhelming.

Yet the God who has brought his people through impossible paths time and again is the same God calling you to trust him today. Because the impossible becomes possible when we step forward in faith, depending on him rather than ourselves.

That brings is to the second principle for how God leads his people into the future.

2. God's plan for the future is anchored in God's past faithfulness.

Our passage continues in verse 19, which says that:

> Moses took the bones of Joseph with him because Joseph had made the Israelites swear an oath. He had said, "God will surely come to your aid, and then you must carry my bones up with you from this place." [4]

At first glance, it's a simple historical detail: Moses obeys a request Joseph made long ago, and takes his bones along as Israel journeys out of Egypt and on the way to the Promised Land. But look closer—this act is deeply symbolic. Joseph's bones serve as a tangible reminder to Israel of God's faithfulness across generations. Centuries before, Joseph had trusted God's promises and experienced God's faithfulness. In the form of Joseph's bones, the Israelites literally carried that memory with them as they moved toward the seemingly impossible future God had promised them.

This teaches us a profound truth: *God's plan for the future is anchored in God's past faithfulness.* The victories, lessons, and grace he gave in the past provide the foundation for what God is calling us into next.

That is precisely how the New Testament remembers Joseph in Hebrews chapters 11, which tells us that:

[4] Exodus 13:19 (NIV)

> By faith Joseph, when his end was near, spoke about the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt and gave instructions concerning the burial of his bones. [5]

Joseph's final act of faith was not looking backward to his successes in Egypt, but forward to God's promised future. His very bones became a confession of faith—a silent, enduring testimony that God would do what he had promised, even if Joseph himself wouldn't be alive to see it.

And throughout Hebrews 11, known as *The Faith Hall of Fame*, this pattern repeats. [6] God's people are commended not because they had certainty or control, but because they trusted God's faithfulness and acted on it. Abraham set out not knowing where he was going. Moses chose obedience over comfort. Many, the writer tells us, *did not receive the fullness of what was promised* in their lifetime, yet their faith became the foundation upon which future generations would stand.

As we look back at Cornerstone's history—including Andrew's faith and obedience as our founding pastor, along with the group of 35 who first planted the church, and the many leaders and members who have followed in the years since—we see the same pattern at work. Their courage to respond to God's call, their generosity, and their trust in God's provision have paved the way for everything we are today. Like Joseph, they stepped forward in faith without seeing every outcome, confident that God's faithfulness would bear fruit for many years to come.

Let me give you another example of God's faithfulness to Cornerstone over the years that gives us hope for our next chapter as a church. For nearly three decades, God has provided for Cornerstone financially, each and every year. Through seasons of growth and seasons of uncertainty, through moments of abundance and stretching moments that required real trust, God has blessed and sustained this community financially—often in ways that became clear only in hindsight.

As we moved toward the end of 2025, we faced a significant financial gap. In November, we were more than $700,000 short of our budgeted general income target. It felt daunting. Yet the God who has always been faithful in the past has proven faithful again. With thanks and praise to the Lord, I can joyfully report to you that the financial gap has been completely closed, our target has been met, and we even have a nice little surplus of over $35,000 and counting as of the time I finished writing this sermon.

What seemed uncertain has now become a testimony—not to our strength, but to God's steady provision through the generous responsiveness of his people. Thank be to *God*, and thank *you* for your part in this!

As we look forward to the next decade of Cornerstone's story, this gives us confidence. Just as Moses and the Israelites carried Joseph's bones to remind them of God's faithfulness, we carry these lived testimonies with us. They remind us that the God who has guided and provided faithfully in the past—year after year—is the same God who will continue to guide and sustain us as we step into the future.

And just as this principle applies to the church, it also applies to us individually. The faithfulness of God in our own past—moments when he provided, protected, or guided us—becomes the anchor for the unknown roads ahead. The challenges before us may feel intimidating, but the God who has been

[5] Hebrews 11:22 (NIV)
[6] Hebrews 11:1-40

faithful through every past trial and season will continue to be faithful. His past goodness gives us courage to trust him for what is yet to come.

That brings us to our third principle for how God leads his people into the future:

3. God's presence goes with us.

Our passage concludes with verses 20–22:

> After leaving Sukkoth they camped at Etham on the edge of the desert. By day the Lord went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so that they could travel by day or night. Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people. [7]

These verses remind us of something essential. God does not merely give Israel directions and then send them on their way. He does not hand them a map and say, "Good luck." Instead, *God goes with them*.

The pillar of cloud and fire is more than a navigational aid. It's a sign that Israel's future does not depend on *their* clarity, strength, or competence, but rather on *God's nearness*. Even when the destination feels distant, God is already there—walking ahead of them—even as he dwells among them.

Later in the wilderness story, Moses will put words to this truth in one of the most profound prayers in all of scripture. In Exodus 33:15, Moses says to the Lord:

> "If your presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here." [8]

Moses understands that what truly sets God's people apart is not the destination they're headed to, but the God who walks with them.

And that truth is just as vital for us.

At Cornerstone, the story of God's faithfulness has never been about flawless planning or uninterrupted momentum. It has been about God's presence—guiding us through uncertainty, sustaining us through challenges, and empowering us when the road ahead felt unclear. Time and again, God has gone before us, not simply opening doors, but walking with us through them.

As we step into the next season of Cornerstone's life and mission, this remains our greatest confidence. Not that the path ahead will be easy. But that the same God who has been with us on the long road so far *will continue to go with us*—by his Spirit—guiding, sustaining, and empowering us while we are *on the Way* — living into the four Guiding Priorities he has set before us.

And this promise is not only for us as a church; it's also deeply personal. Some of you may be facing seasons of uncertainty right now—decisions you don't yet know how to make, futures that feel unclear,

[7] Exodus 13:20-22 (NIV)
[8] Exodus 33:15b (NIV)

challenges that feel heavy. God's promise to his people has never been that the road will always be obvious or easy, but that *he will be present on it.*

Which brings us to the Lord's Table.

Communion is not only a remembrance of what Jesus has done in the past; it is a proclamation and indeed a celebration of his living, ongoing presence with his people, right here and now. The same Jesus who gave his body and blood for us has promised:

> "And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." [9]

As we receive the bread and the cup, we remember that we do not walk into the future alone. Jesus—our Good Shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep—leads us and goes with us. With this bread and this cup, he nourishes us for the journey. He strengthens us for obedience. And he assures us that whatever the road ahead may hold, he will never leave us nor forsake us.

So today, we come to the table not only to look back in gratitude, but also to step forward in faith—trusting that the God who has led us this far will continue to walk with us, every step of the way.

> Now, we pray come Holy Spirit, bless this bread and cup. Through them, make Christ present to us, fill us with his life, strengthen our hearts, and draw us closer to Jesus—the same Jesus who says:
>
> This is my body, broken for you.
> Take and eat, in remembrance of me.
> And this is my blood, shed for the forgiveness of your sins.
> Take and drink, trusting that I am with you, both now and forever.

COMMUNION SLIDE

[9] Matthew 28:20b (NIV)