

SMALL
GROUPS
WITH
PURPOSE

*How to Create
Healthy Communities*

Steve Gladen



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To the small group point people around the world. You are my heroes! You slug it out day in and day out to build health in your church. Yours is the hidden ministry most people never see, but never forget this: God sees it!

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Foreword

Small groups are the heart of Saddleback Church. They are the source of our church's health and growth. Small groups are the center of our discipleship, the structure of our ministry, the launch pad of our evangelism, the enrichment of our worship, and the network of our fellowship.

In 1980, when I was a twenty-five-year-old following God's leading to Southern California to begin a new church, there was so much I *didn't* know. I didn't know how Kay and I would feed ourselves and our four-month-old baby. I didn't know where we'd live, let alone where we would hold our first worship service. One thing I did know, however, was that this church would be built on relationships.

The first person I invited to attend was the very first person I met—the Realtor who found us a condo to rent. Two weeks later we held our first Bible study in the living room of that condo. There were seven of us. Like most churches, we began as a small group. Today, thirty years later, Saddleback members meet weekly in more than 3,500 small groups. From the start, groups have been our strategy for assimilation and discipleship.

Christlike churches have one thing in common: they find a way to meet the needs of the people God has placed in their ministry areas. People are hungry for love, purpose, and life transformation, and I know of no better structure than a small group where this happens naturally and personally. That's why churches must grow larger and

smaller at the same time—larger through evangelism and smaller through fellowship structures.

Over the years, our styles and methods have changed to meet the changing needs of our community. But what has not changed is our gospel message of God’s grace and the universal human need for relationships. Even in the perfect Garden of Eden, God said, “It is not good for man to be alone.” Groups meet that longing for belonging.

I always tell new attenders at Saddleback, “You will not really feel connected to Saddleback until you join and participate in a small group.” Of course, people know this in a larger church, but I believe it is also true in smaller churches. It is impossible to feel truly connected to a crowd, even if that crowd is only fifty people. Crowds are great for worship, but they simply cannot provide personal attention, encouragement, prayer support, a listening ear, and accountability. I need those things. So do the people of your church. So do you.

In *The Purpose Driven Church*, I wrote, “The key to a healthy church, just like a healthy body, is balance.” Balance is also the key to a healthy small group ministry. And in this long-awaited book, Saddleback’s brilliant pastor of small groups shares the biblical strategy, the secrets, the failures, and the lessons behind the remarkable growth of our small groups. Saddleback may possibly be the only church in America that consistently has thousands more people attend weekly Bible study in groups than attend our weekend services. So much of that is due to the genius of Steve Gladen, a pastor with a passionate heart for Jesus and his body.

Today our world is facing five global giants: spiritual emptiness, egocentric leadership, extreme poverty, pandemic diseases, and lack of education. The public and private sectors have failed to eradicate these crippling problems. The only organization large enough and powerful enough to take on these problems is the global network of Christian churches that exists in every corner of the world—specifically, the small groups of people within those churches. These small groups can work to *Promote* reconciliation, *Equip* servant leaders, *Assist* the poor, *Care* for the sick, and *Educate* the next generation. We call it the P.E.A.C.E. plan, and we invite you to join us!

Imagine an army of people composed of small groups from your church spreading across the world to do just that. In the past five years, Saddleback Church has sent out over 14,000 of our members to *every nation* of the world—195 nations—through the P.E.A.C.E. plan. How were we able to mobilize such an army? Two words: small groups!

If you are not harnessing and directing the latent energy of your members for the Great Commission and great commandment, your church will never be the church that God intends, and your people will never reach their God-intended maturity in Christ. So I invite you not just to read this book, but to study it with your leaders and adopt the biblical structures of “temple courts” and “house to house,” as the book of Acts repeatedly mentions. It will change your people. It will change your church. It will change your community. It can change the world!

Rick Warren, Saddleback Church

Acknowledgments

Many thanks to:

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Cheryl Shireman, who wrote a critical email that led her to become part of the solution and the right arm of the Small Group Network. Her passion for writing and making sense of senseless thoughts has been the salvation for me and this book. She read my mind and brought this book to life! Cheryl, you are a godsend.

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Church, the Small Group Conferences, and the Small Group Network are the untold story. Your reward is truly in heaven.

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The more than 3,500 small group leaders of Saddleback Church who week in and week out shape the destinations of thousands of folks one life at a time.

My small group, who has lived this crazy journey with Lisa and me: Bill and Elaine Crane, John and Janet Hertogh, Gina and Tyra Rikimaru. Our families are forever knit together.

My parents, who took a risk in their fifties to follow Christ and who are waiting for us in heaven—party on! To my brothers Kurt, Greig, Todd, Mark, and my brave sister, Nita; I love life with you and wish geography wasn't between us. Move to Southern California!

Lisa, Erika, and Ethan, whom I would die for and who are the reason I get up in the morning. Lisa, you cheer me on and give me grace. Since 1988 you have believed in me and this book. You sacrifice more than anyone knows; you are the strength behind our marriage, family, and ministry. I love you! Erika and Ethan, you bring a smile and a glimpse into the future. I pray for your growth in the Lord and impact for his kingdom. Live strong for him!

To Jesus Christ, who strengthens me and makes this whole work possible.

Introduction

The Purpose of This Book

When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power.

1 Corinthians 2:1–5

A man's errors are his portals of discovery.

James Joyce

On a daily basis, the small group team at Saddleback Church is inundated with questions from small group point people, lead pastors, and small group leaders. The denominations and locales vary, but the questions are all centered on one fundamental question: How can I improve my small group ministry? The callers and emailers look at Saddleback, a megachurch with over 3,500 adult small groups, and assume we have all of the answers. Let me say right now that we do not have all of the answers. I do believe, however, that we have found some of the answers through both our failures and our successes.

The people who call, email, and come to our Small Group Conferences desire to learn and get answers to their questions. If they are on the church staff, it is likely they are trying to lead the small group ministry

while also directing a different ministry. They may not be getting paid at all, and even if they are, the money they are making is not commensurate with the hours they are working. Very often they are pouring their hearts into the ministry with little or no support from anyone inside or outside their church. They call, email, or come to workshops and conferences eager to talk to someone—anyone—about small groups.

I talk with them on the phone, through emails, after workshops, or as we meet in the hallway during conferences. In these impromptu meetings, I am unable to give them the full attention they deserve. My answers are shorter than I would like them to be and lack the detail they need. For example, I remember meeting Norma from Missouri on a break from teaching. Her question was a good one, but my time was short. I rushed to answer her, but quite honestly, the answer was *good enough* at best.

This book is my attempt to answer those questions in far greater detail, to throw out a lifeline, and to share with you some of the mistakes I have made and some of the things that I have learned from those mistakes.

This book is organized around the questions I asked in my journey—the same questions I now am asked every week.

What is a healthy and balanced small group?

What does this look like?

Step-by-step, how can I do this?

What does this mean for overall church strategy?

And one more important question that is often unasked:

Do I have what it takes?

I am a hands-on kind of a guy. I don't want to just read information; I want to begin processing it and applying it to my situation. In fact, in my office there is a whiteboard with the maxim: "Vision without implementation is hallucination!" I want to help you begin the implementation process, which is why there is a section entitled "Questions" at the end of each chapter.

In this format of the written word, I will be able to talk with you without being in a hurry to move to another workshop or take another call. I will be here at your convenience. So grab a cup of coffee (Venti with cream and three Splendas for me), sit down, and let's begin.

What Is a Healthy and Balanced Small Group?





My Story

And What It Has Taught Me about Ministry

He must increase, but I must decrease.

John 3:30 NASB

It's not my ability, but my response to God's ability, that counts.

Corrie Ten Boom

Ministry did not come easily to me. At the point I felt God calling me to ministry, my response was, "God, you have got the wrong person." From that point, it was a seven-year run from God. I did everything I could to avoid going into ministry.

I have mild dyslexia, and when I am thinking quickly, I sometimes mix things up. If I am reading aloud, I sometimes swap words around and try to make sense of it as I go. This didn't make school very easy for me. I remember my sixth grade teacher, Miss Beatenhead (yup, I'm not making that up), getting frustrated with me because I never fully spelled out my name on papers. I would often write "Stev" or "Glade." I remember her asking me in front of the entire class, "How will you make it if you can't even spell your name?" I sank down in my chair and wondered the same.

Being raised Catholic, however, my fear of God was greater than my fear of failure, and I enrolled in Evangel College (now Evangel University) in Springfield, Missouri, even though I didn't exactly feel like college material. As a condition of acceptance, I had to take high school-level English classes during my first year. Not exactly an ego builder.

In addition, although my parents probably could have afforded to pay for my schooling, they believed I would appreciate my education more if I worked for it. At the time, I didn't care for that philosophy, but looking back, I can see they were right. During high school I worked part-time for a cable television company, so when it came time to find employment in Springfield, I looked for a job in that field. By God's providence, a new company called TeleCable was starting up. The general manager, Jerry Rutherford, was kind enough to hire me and allowed me to work a flexible schedule around my classes.

After four years in Springfield, I completed my BA in biblical studies with minors in Greek and philosophy. It was a tough four years, and I had to spend more time than most reading and studying. Social life was almost nonexistent. I had also just completed four years with a small company that started with just a few employees and had grown into a large company, and I actually liked my job. I had become comfortable in it, the pay was good, and the people I worked with had become family. Instead of going home during my last two summers, I actually stayed in Springfield and worked full-time to make extra money for school.

As graduation neared, an internal struggle began to develop. Should I stay in Springfield and continue working at the cable company or move on to graduate school? The possibility of working in a church didn't even cross my mind. I couldn't imagine how church ministry could be part of my future.

One day after work I ran into the general manager of the company, Jerry. I realize now this brief meeting was a God encounter that changed my course in life. I had previously shared my struggle with Jerry, and on that day he told me I was welcome to stay at TeleCable and he would never fire me. But then he went on to say he didn't believe God's plan was for me to stay. He felt my destiny was to finish what God started, and if a church wasn't the next step, I should honor God and continue on to graduate school. Jerry was a godly and wise man, and like a word from heaven, his words went straight

to my heart. Everything I knew, everything that was comfortable and familiar, I was about to lose.

I applied to Fuller Theological Seminary, was accepted, and attended the Pasadena campus. With my previous experience, I quickly landed a job with another cable company. Unlike Jerry at TeleCable, however, my new boss did everything he could to make my life miserable. Looking back, I think it was God's way of pushing me away from the comfort of working with a cable company and toward staying focused on graduate school and the possibility of working in a church. My schedule was tough, and it seemed as though every hour was spent attending class, working, studying, or sleeping. On the positive side, California felt like home. It was odd, since I was raised in Ohio and had just spent four years in Missouri, but when I moved to California in 1982, I felt as though I had come home.

I took morning classes or night classes and worked for the cable company in the afternoon. I felt as though I had a foot in both worlds. Most of the graduate students were already involved in ministry, but I remained outside that circle. I doubted myself. I felt inadequate. But I stayed. I struggled. I obeyed. Mostly I tried not to think about it.

I remember my guidance counselor at Fuller saying, "You're good. You try hard. But you can't graduate with a master's degree until you actually work at a church."

After a year and a half I decided to quit the job at the cable company. I remember wondering what I was going to do without the security of that job and no other possibilities before me. Shortly after, however, using a connection through my friend Doug Schmidt, God opened a door and gave me the opportunity to work as an intern for Pastor Paul Currie, who retired within a year. I had no church background and limited connections, so the very fact that I was accepted as an intern under such conditions was a miracle in itself. Although I wondered how God would provide, I felt at peace knowing my career was in his hands.

Somewhere during this time I came across 1 Corinthians 2:1-5:

When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and

persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power.

I felt as though God gave those verses directly to me when I needed them the most. I suddenly realized I was not alone in feeling inadequate; many before me had felt the same way. In fact, all I had to do was trust God, and his power would see me through whatever challenges were ahead. Of course that didn't erase all of my self-doubt and fear, but I knew that I didn't need wise and eloquent words and I was confident that God, through the Holy Spirit, would provide for my shortcomings. It was nothing short of life-changing. I remember

It is interesting to note that Jesus didn't pick the Who's Who in Jerusalem.

telling my mom, and she told me she had known I was destined for ministry from the time I accepted Christ. She was only waiting for me to catch on!

When Christ called the original disciples, what was the first requirement? *Follow me*. That is a very low bar. It is interesting to note that Jesus didn't pick the Who's Who in Jerusalem—the people with the most influence or the ones with the most biblical education (which by the way would have been the Pharisees and Sadducees). Instead, he picked the most obedient. Christ can use you in your weakness and fear if you will only obey and follow him. As I read this verse (Matt. 4:19) for what seemed like the first time, I realized God could use me too.

We are all on the same team, and if we work together we can accomplish a great deal. Since my Fuller days I have worked on staff for five churches of five different denominations—small churches (just north of one hundred members), medium-size churches, and megachurches. If the focus is on Jesus, amazing things can happen regardless of size and denomination.

You will never have all of the answers. But you don't have to have all of the answers; you just need to obey. If I had given in to my self-doubt and fear, I would be comfortably working in a cable company today.

Questions

These questions are intended to spark your thinking. Don't feel you have to answer all of them at one sitting. After reflecting on them, mark one in every chapter that particularly stands out to you. Then

when you have finished reading the book, take some time and go back to the questions you marked and consider them from your new perspective. Have fun.

What are some of the things you are afraid of losing when you think about reorganizing or starting your small group ministry?

As you look at your life story, where do you see the hand of God?

Are there any new areas where you feel God might be leading you now?

Is there anything you are clinging to that might be a hindrance to God moving you into a new direction?

2



The Saddleback Difference

The Ten Foundations of Saddleback's Small Group Ministry

For we walk by faith, not by sight.
2 Corinthians 5:7 KJV

The key issue for groups in the twenty-first century will be health,
not growth.

Rick Warren

Our church is located in Orange County, California, and has over 20,000 people in attendance on an average weekend. Your church probably does not fit this description. God has a specific plan for Saddleback, and he has a specific plan for your church too. In this book I will share a lot about what has worked for us at Saddleback; it's up to you to decide what will work for you in your ministry context.

Method versus Message

All too often people go to a conference and then try to implement in their home church the strategies that succeeded at another church. Very often their efforts fail. The fact that the strategies cannot be transferred to a church in a different setting, however, may have nothing to do with the merits of the strategy. Methods may or may not transfer. Principles, however, will always transfer. Principles are based on truth; God's Word is the truth. It is not the truth only in certain locations; it is the truth in every location. "If God's knowledge is complete and perfectly true, then truth itself cannot change; it remains the same for every time and place in creation; it is absolute."¹ Methods are merely what works in a given situation, a given culture.

The methods must continually change but the message must never change.

The *methods* must continually change but the *message* must never change. For example, some of Christ's last words were, "Go make disciples." As Christians, our responsibility is to make disciples, but *how* we make disciples has changed drastically over the years. For example, people may use television, the Internet, DVDs, CDs, MP3s, books, movies, social media, and so forth. The change reflects new technologies, our culture, and the times in which we live, but the message stays the same.

All Types of Churches to Reach All Types of People

A very small church may be very healthy; a very large church may be very unhealthy. This is also true of small group ministries—size is not indicative of health. When we have shared what works for us at Saddleback, sometimes the response is, "Sure, that works for you. You are a huge church with lots of resources." The thing people forget, though, is that Saddleback also started out as a small church. It began as seven people meeting in Rick and Kay Warren's living room. It is hard to get much smaller than that. Adhering to sound principles enabled Saddleback to grow not only in size but also in health.

Your church may never be over a hundred members in size. It may never have more than two groups. That is not necessarily an indication of poor health. You may be limited by the demographic of the people you are trying to reach or simply by smaller population in general. For example, if you are working with a church whose

members are primarily older people who are accustomed to attending Sunday school, they may be very hesitant to ever join a small group. That doesn't mean, however, that your Sunday school groups can't be healthy. We firmly believe the key issue for small groups in the twenty-first century is health, not numerical growth.

Saddleback Small Groups

I am often asked about Saddleback's small group strategy. How were we able to go from a small group of seven people meeting in Rick Warren's living room to a church of over 3,500 adult small groups (and still growing)? There's no quick or easy answer. Since our small group

In order for us to master change, our paradigm must switch from what we will lose to what we will gain.

strategy has a lot in common with those of other churches, I can't point to a specific key to our success. One thing remains constant at Saddleback Church, and that is our *message*. Meanwhile, our methods are always evolving and are subject to change. I can point to ten foundational principles we use that evolved as we sought to follow God's leading in reaching and connecting people into life-changing, healthy small groups. These ten principles not only have formed our strategy through the years but also serve as a funnel

through which all our present-day decisions are made. Each one of them was developed in the *laboratory* of Saddleback Church since its inception in 1980.

As you read about these principles and then continue through this book, please keep an open mind. Don't assume that something will not work because your church doesn't resemble Saddleback Church. Be open to all possibilities and avenues of thinking. So often we focus on what we will lose because of change. In order for us to master change, our paradigm must switch from what we will lose to what we will gain.

1. Bold Faith, Not Cautious Planning

From the beginning, when Saddleback Church was just a dream in the heart of twenty-six-year-old Rick Warren, bold faith has always taken precedence over cautious planning. "Very little of Saddleback's ministry was preplanned," Rick writes in his book *The Purpose Driven*

Church.² Instead, Rick followed the leading of the Holy Spirit and quickly responded to circumstances surrounding him. In fact, when he moved his wife, Kay, and their four-month-old baby to Orange County, California, they did not know a single person in the area. He writes that they were full of hope, “but we also arrived with no money, no church building, no members, and no home.”³ Did that make sense? No, not so much. But Rick had faith and was willing to follow the leading of God, even if it did not seem to make sense at the time.

In March of 1980 he stood in a high school gymnasium before the very first congregation of sixty people (most of them unbelievers). Confidently, and almost flat broke, he announced that someday they would be a church of over 20,000 members and they would build a facility on at least fifty acres of land in Orange County, California (some of the most expensive real estate in the United States). He finished by adding, “I stand before you today and state in confident assurance that these dreams will become reality. Why? Because they are inspired by God!”⁴

Today, Saddleback Valley Community Church has an average weekly attendance of over 20,000 people and sits on 120 acres of prime Orange County real estate. Christmas and Easter services average well over 40,000 in attendance. Rick would be the first to tell you the success of Saddleback has been more about faith in following the leading of the Holy Spirit than the careful and strategic planning of a single man.

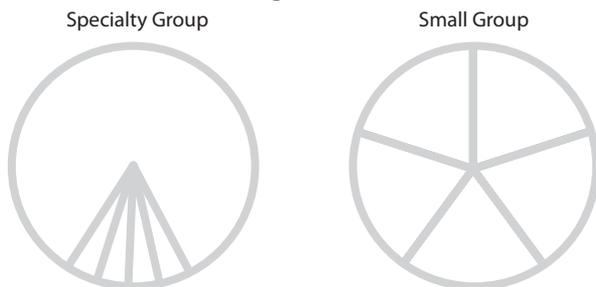
This bold faith is the kind of faith that enabled David to confront Goliath with a sling and five stones gathered from a stream. It is the kind of faith that gave Abraham the strength to place Isaac on the altar as a sacrifice. This kind of faith now leads Rick Warren to take on the five global giants (spiritual emptiness, corrupt leadership, extreme poverty, pandemic disease, and rampant illiteracy) through the P.E.A.C.E. Plan (*Promote* reconciliation, *Equip* servant leaders, *Assist* the poor, *Care* for the sick, and *Educate* the next generation). This bold faith is foundational to Saddleback and to all we do. If we believe God is leading, the dream is never too big—never impossible.

In the small group ministry it is the same. So often I call Rick Warren the *small group pastor* of Saddleback Church. We have two *delivery systems* at Saddleback—two ways we strategically distribute all five biblical purposes, which we will discuss in the next point. Based on Acts 5:42, they are: (1) temple courts (weekend services) and (2) house

to house (small groups). Temple courts should be the mouthpiece of house to house; temple courts and house to house are interwoven and collaborate together for the same cause. If you have a powerful temple courts leader who believes in small groups, your job is much easier.

In each and every phase since 1998, problem solving has never trumped decision making. When we have been at a crossroads in the small group ministry, we follow God's decision and sort the rest out as we go. Many examples run through my head of decisions when bold faith was needed and we were blessed to see God's mighty hand at work in the ministry. In 2007, after a one-week fast, it was clear to me that in order to get to our next goal in small groups set by the church and our team, we needed to take fifty-two part-time, paid positions (paid staff who served as *community leaders* overseeing a group of small group leaders) and re-staff them as volunteer positions. The current structure wasn't broken, but in order to reach our next level, we needed far more community leaders than our budget could afford. Today, as I look back, it would have been easy to leave it the same, but it would not have been right. Over half the paid community leaders (CLs) stayed on as volunteers, and today we have 188 volunteer CLs managing the small group ministry. Taking the ministry to the next level required faith and obedience on the part of everyone involved.

Figure 2.1



2. Purpose Driven Groups, Not Special-Interest Groups

In his book *The Purpose Driven Church*, Rick writes, “We don’t expect each small group to do the same things; we allow them to specialize.”⁵ That was in 1995. As time went by, we began to learn more about two groupings of people we have at Saddleback: small groups and specialty groups (see figure 2.1).

Groups of people who meet around special interests or ministries of the church are strategic, but they are not trying to balance the five biblical purposes (fellowship, discipleship, ministry, evangelism, and worship) to create healthy individuals and groups. For example, while our greeters ministry groups are an important and strategic ministry of the church, those groups don't generally focus on the *health* of the individuals and group but on greeting people who come to our campus.

Our small groups, on the other hand, focus on individual and group health and balance, and this book is all about the *small group* side of the church. Of course it doesn't matter whether you call your groups small groups, cell groups, community groups, or some other term; what matters is a healthy small group ministry full of healthy small groups. And we are looking for groups that are *balanced*, which as a verb means "to bring into harmony or proportion."⁶ Today at Saddleback we expect every small group to focus on health through balancing the five biblical purposes: fellowship, discipleship, ministry, evangelism, and worship. We call these purpose driven small groups.

We get these five biblical purposes from the Great Commission (Matt. 28:19–20) and the great commandment (Matt. 22:37–40).

Fellowship: "Baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (28:19).

Discipleship: "Teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (28:20).

Ministry: "Love your neighbor as yourself" (22:39).

Evangelism: "Go and make disciples of all nations" (28:19).

Worship: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind" (22:37).

Rick Warren sums up the Saddleback philosophy in *The Purpose Driven Church*: "These two passages summarize everything we do at Saddleback Church. If an activity or program fulfills one of these commands, we do it. If it doesn't, we don't."⁷ Our small group philosophy reflects the philosophy of the overall church. It is not enough for us to think about these purposes in the corporate structure of the church alone. It is not enough for people to be exposed to the five purposes only on weekends. We want them to experience the five biblical purposes in the context of a small group so that ultimately they become part of daily life.

We are far more concerned about *healthy* groups than we are about the *number* of groups. Having many groups or even having a large percentage of our people in groups is not the ultimate goal because it is possible to have a large number of small groups that are not producing fruit or life change.

In their desire to build health in their members, most churches have four delivery systems they use outside the weekend services: (1) Sunday school, (2) small groups, (3) midweek teaching, and (4) Sunday night services. Of course each church needs to come to its own conclusions, but more often than not, I see churches using certain delivery systems just because that is what they have always done. I suggest that rather than beginning with what your church has always done, start by asking yourself what kind of people you are trying to produce. Then begin exploring what delivery system would be best for fulfilling that outcome.

3. *Effective, Not Perfect*

Our small group ministry strives to be effective, not perfect. We never let problem solving get in the way of a decision that must be made. Our biggest strides have been made by pulling the trigger on ideas at the right moment, not by agonizing over every possible scenario that could go wrong. I love Ecclesiastes 11:4, which says, “If you wait for perfect conditions, you’ll never get anything done” (TLB). We don’t make perfection an idol, and we are not idle waiting for perfect conditions. If you are single and waiting for the perfect conditions to get married, you will always be single. If you are married and waiting for the perfect conditions to have kids, you will never have kids. God wants us to be good stewards of our resources, not roadblocks to his promptings. Sometimes we just overthink it.

During a management meeting in the summer of 2002, Pastor Rick spoke to us about *exponential thinking*. In the past we usually launched around 300 groups per year, but that year he challenged us to launch 3,000 groups. In that moment, the campaign strategy was born—a strategy that now has been used successfully by thousands of churches around the world.

I would like to say we had it all figured out from the beginning. But that would be far from the truth. When Pastor Rick first had the

idea of the campaign strategy, we were only six weeks away from our fall program launch, so we had a very short time to come up with small group resources. What later came together in a nicely organized kit called 40 Days of Purpose, which we later packaged for outside churches, actually started with us scrambling to get good enough resources to our groups week by week. Could we have made it look better for our own groups? Sure. But we would have missed the wave God wanted us to surf.

4. Intentional Focus, Not Flavor of the Day

In order for a small group strategy to be successful, a church must know how it will define success. Everything we do in the small group ministry falls under our vision and mission. Our *vision* is the reason we are here: to see every person, from the core of our church to the ever-growing community, connected in a healthy small group. Our *mission* is what we do: we help spiritual seekers become transformed believers who model purpose driven lives and motivate others to do the same.

Furthermore, our small group vision and mission support the overall purpose of Saddleback Church. I am not suggesting that you adopt our vision and mission, but I am suggesting that you have your own and that they direct your every action. They should keep you focused; they are the compass that shows you true north. In this book I will discuss how you can develop a laser-beam focus that will enable you to be intentional in your strategy and effective in your actions.

If your small group ministry lacks a clear purpose and focus, it will flounder and your small group members will see little value in joining other than fellowship. Too often, small group point people focus more on getting people into small groups than on defining the purpose of the small group ministry. You search for new small group curriculum or creative ways to train your leaders, but the real problem is a lack of focus and purpose. The Bible tells us in Ephesians 5:17, “Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord’s will is.” Every church must discover what God’s will is for their small group ministry. The small group point person’s role is to then fulfill that purpose. I believe my purpose as a small group point person is to see the five biblical purposes lived out in our groups and in the lives of the individuals in those groups.

If someone asked you what your church’s plan is for connecting people into small groups, could you articulate it clearly? Better yet,

if I went to your church and asked some of your key leaders, could they articulate the strategy? How about the members of your church? Could these people describe the process that people go through from the time they walk in your door as guests in the worship service to the time they are plugged into some kind of small group? Does everyone in your church know the process your church has developed to facilitate placing people into small groups? If you do not have an intentional focus and strategy, a lot of your people will walk in the front door to attend the worship service and then go their own ways to do ministry. Or worse yet, they may slip right out the back door, never to be heard from again.

I have a letter that is a harsh reminder of that fact. The opening line is seared into my mind. “After much prayer and soul searching, this letter is to inform Saddleback of our family’s decision to leave as members of the church.” The letter was sent directly to Pastor Rick, but my boss and I had also been copied. I had not been on staff long, but it still wounded like a knife to the heart. “We have had virtually no contact with anyone from the church regarding our small group in the five years we have been leading it. We have felt detached from the church as leaders.” I had two choices at that point. I could have

*If you wait for
perfect people to lead
your small groups,
you’ll be waiting
until Christ’s return.*

thought, *I haven’t been on staff that long, so this is someone else’s problem.* Or I could see this as an example of what happens when we fail to have an intentional strategy to connect and support people and do my best to ensure that it never happened again. I chose the latter, and that letter sat on my desk for years as a reminder. It is now in my conference notebook where I keep all of my notes for my conference

lectures. I read from it as part of my presentation to other small group point people. It is still humbling and painful to read, but it is an important part of my journey as a leader and a reminder of what I never want sent to me again!

5. Leadership Potential, Not Proven Leaders

If you wait for perfect people to lead your small groups, you’ll be waiting until Christ’s return. You don’t need all-star, supertrained small group leaders to create a successful small group ministry. All you need is people who are willing and obedient. Remember, God

doesn't call the equipped; he equips the called. Using biblically solid studies, even a member who is very young in the faith can be a *host* (our term for small group leaders, which will be explained in greater detail in chapters 12 and 13). We get people involved early in leading groups and then help them to develop the required skills *as* they lead.

Prior to coming to Saddleback, my small group strategy was to fully equip leaders through training before actually allowing them to lead. At Saddleback I worked with a team to develop a different strategy. The idea is to give people an entry-level opportunity to lead a small group. They don't have to be seasoned veterans of the faith. They don't have to be experienced leaders. We have made it very simple for people to take a first step into leadership.

This is the model Jesus gave us when he chose twelve ordinary men to be his disciples. His first words of training were *follow me*. "Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will make you fishers of men" (Matt. 4:19). That invitation started a three-year process of on-the-job training that culminated in the disciples being so committed that they were willing to die for the cause. The problem in churches is that we often skip past the *follow me* and scare off leaders by asking them to *come die for me*.

6. Simple Systems, Not Complex Structures

I have become convinced that the long-term success of leaders is determined by the support and resources they receive. Right now we have eighteen-, nineteen-, and twenty-year-old men and women who are serving in harm's way around the world. Military commanders would never send these young men and women to the front lines without training, without equipping, without a command and control process, or without supply lines. The commanders try to do everything within their power to set up the soldiers to succeed in the mission they have been given.

Obviously, leading a small group is not the same thing as flying to the Middle East in a military jet. But we are sending our small group leaders out to the front lines of ministry. Ephesians 6:10–20 makes it quite clear that our battle is both spiritual and aggressive. If you are going to ask people in your church to step up and take the risk of leading, shepherding, and giving pastoral care, it is vital to provide resources and support for them.

No matter how good your small group strategy is, though, your growth will be limited unless you have an infrastructure to support it. At

Saddleback we look for small group leaders who are natural in caring for people to begin training for broader leadership roles. We then develop and support them through our Small Group Leadership Development Pathway (this is discussed in detail in chapter 13). This pathway helps them understand the ministry, teaches them how to recognize God's call in their lives, and then trains them in head and heart fundamentals so they can be even more effective in the ministry. The Small Group Leadership Development Pathway provides the support our leaders need by building an infrastructure of volunteer community leaders (leaders of leaders) to develop, guide, and encourage our small group leaders.

Some people believe every small group should receive equal care. At Saddleback, however, we have found that not all groups are equal, so we believe in strategic care, not equal care. Some groups have very mature leadership. Some groups are brand-new. Some are full of baby Christians. Others have been liberally sprinkled with challenging types of people. Of course we love them all, but we shouldn't put the same effort and attention into them all because some will need more and others will need less. We have found that equal care can actually hinder leadership development and health. In subsequent chapters I will explain how we prioritize our groups based on four categories and how this simplified care management will allow your leadership infrastructure to be more effective.

7. Churchwide Alignment

Saddleback was the first church to use the campaign strategy—uniting the entire congregation around a single, multiweek DVD study that is executed through the weekend services and small group gatherings. This campaign strategy offers several advantages. One of the most desirable is that it puts the whole church on the same page, since during the duration of the campaign, the entire congregation is moving in the same direction. In the same manner, your staff should all be on the same page and moving in the same direction. Every ministry leader, and eventually every staff member, must buy into the overall vision and mission of your church. Your lead pastor's job is to communicate the value of small groups at every level—to the staff, to the members, and to people visiting your church.

Small groups are not optional at Saddleback. Our job applications clearly state, "If you accept a position on the staff, we expect you to be active in a small group." This book will explain how you can influence

not only your staff culture but also your church culture through ministry alignment and making use of all of your avenues of communication.

8. Growth by Campaigns, Not Disrupting Community

Small group ministries live in constant tension between fellowship and evangelism. We want small group members to develop deep relationships, but we also need to integrate new people into groups. Many churches handle integration of new people by asking existing groups to add new members or to break up and multiply into two or more smaller groups so they can add new members. All too often the result is that group members resent the intrusion, and a frustrated small group point person has to try continually to sell a concept to the small groups that they simply do not buy. We have found that it is better for all concerned to start new groups than for existing groups to multiply.

So how do we integrate new people? In short, through campaigns. We have grown to more than 3,500 adult small groups by using campaigns to launch new groups each year. Since 2002, campaigns have increased small group participation at our church from 30 percent to 120 percent—seriously! Since 2004 we have had more people in small groups than attend our weekend services. Rather than taking energy from our small groups by forced division, the campaign approach focuses on relationships, not multiplication.

We also do not subscribe to the theory that a small group needs to be kept at an optimum size. Some people are just natural gatherers. They start out with a few people in their small group and then keep inviting others until quite soon they have twenty or thirty people jammed into their house every Tuesday night.

At Saddleback, we don't penalize people who are able to gather others around them. Instead, we encourage groups to become any size they want and then equip them for health in spite of their size. We believe ratios are more important than size, so through subgrouping we help maintain ratios of attendees to leaders at optimum levels so that participation and group health are not jeopardized. In other words, we tell our small group leaders they can grow their group as big as they like and we'll show them how to foster an environment for life-changing, healthy community (this is discussed in detail in chapter 8).

Small group ministries live in constant tension between fellowship and evangelism.

9. Empowered Group Members, Not Passive Spectators

One of the questions we are always asked is, where do you find leaders? We have discovered tomorrow's leaders are today's group members. As we begin to share ownership and rotate leadership through the natural flow of group life, we find our best potential leaders in this setting. This is also contrary to traditional group theory that dictates a strong leader teaching listening members. I will unpack this idea in subsequent chapters.

10. Master Teacher Curriculum, Not Leaders as Bible Masters

People often are reluctant to become a leader because they have limited biblical knowledge and/or limited time to prepare for group meetings. One of the things we learned through our campaign strategy was that providing an easy-to-use, DVD-based curriculum takes a huge load of responsibility off the shoulders of the small group leaders. Providing a video-based study in which the virtual master teacher leads the group through the study at the beginning of the group session proved to be a win/win for us and the hosts, who merely had to facilitate the discussion after the video. Of course, we provide our leaders with additional tools, but we use master teacher curriculum to start them on the pathway.

Questions

Which of these points resonated with you?

What areas of small group ministry do you need to rethink?

How is your small group ministry unique? What are the characteristics of your church or ministry that make it different from others?

In one sentence, write down what you are trying to accomplish with your small group ministry.

What are some principles you believe to be true concerning small group ministry?

What are some of the possible benefits?

What is your church's delivery system for developing healthy and balanced disciples?

What is your system for developing leaders in your church?

What is your system for developing small group leaders?

What is your strategy for connecting people into small groups?

What resources and support do you provide for your small group leaders?

What opportunities do the people of your church have for shared leadership?
