

# PLANNING SMALL GROUPS WITH PURPOSE

A FIELD-TESTED GUIDE TO DESIGN  
AND GROW YOUR MINISTRY

STEVE GLADEN



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To the small group point persons,  
my heroes,  
who do not abdicate their responsibility  
for leading the house-to-house movement.  
Thanks for being willing to plan to succeed  
versus just hoping it will happen.  
You are critical to the kingdom.  
Plan, press ahead, and persevere!

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

# Foreword

When we first planted Saddleback Church, I understood that it wasn't about a physical structure. It was about transformed lives. People connected to God and each other, working together to minister to others in our community and around the world. And the one thing that has mobilized our congregation to step forward and meet need after need is our small group ministry.

In fact, Saddleback is an example of how just one small group can have a significant and powerful impact. When my wife, Kay, and I started the church, it was simply a small group that met in the living room of our rented apartment, and now forty years later, there are over 7,000 small groups within our congregation.

This has allowed us to grow larger as a congregation while also becoming smaller. How is that possible? Through the intimate fellowship in our small groups that connects people to each other at the heart level. We consistently have more people engaged in our small groups than attending our weekly worship services.

So much of this is due to the leadership of Steve Gladen, a pastor with a deep passion for Jesus and people. Steve has expanded and fine-tuned Saddleback's small group ministry for decades. He's learned what works, and he's learned what doesn't. That's valuable experience to tap into. And

Steve has generously shared what he's learned with thousands of church leaders who have started small group ministries.

The book you hold in your hands offers these same lessons from Steve, and I believe God can use it to radically change your small group ministry while creating greater intimacy among the people in your congregation. It will help increase outreach and service to your community and encourage small group members to work together to share the hope of Christ throughout the world.

Here's the thing. You may be overflowing with vision for your small group ministry, but there is a point where you have to stop thinking about it and talking about it and start doing something about it. There's a time to put your vision into action. I've met thousands of pastors with incredible vision for ministry, but sadly, they never got past the thinking stage. What good is a vision when it stays stuck in your head? Steve will take you past the thinking stage and show you how to take practical steps to turn your vision into faithful action.

I am convinced that small groups are the most effective way to harness the energy of millions of Christians. They equip and encourage believers to work together in order to fulfill the call of the Great Commission and the great commandment!

God bless you!

Rick Warren, Saddleback Church

# Introduction

## THE PURPOSE OF THIS BOOK

If you know anything about me, you know I love a plan. I have displayed on my office whiteboard, “Vision without implementation equals hallucination.”<sup>1</sup> I believe in vision, and you’ll hear me talk quite a bit about it in this book. If you don’t have a plan for implementing your vision, you are wasting your time. After I wrote my first book, *Small Groups with Purpose*,<sup>2</sup> I discovered people still needed a step-by-step guide for planning their small group ministries, and that’s the purpose of this book. If you read this book and complete its exercises, you will end up with a long-term plan, including specific twelve-month goals to start or accelerate your small group ministry.

Church culture is undeniably returning to small groups. And why not? The early church met to worship not only en masse but also in small groups, from house to house (see Acts 2:42–47). Thom S. Rainer published an article on May 10, 2017, titled, “Eight Major Changes in Churches the Past Ten Years.” One of these changes:

**Today: Vital importance of groups**

**Ten years ago: Marginal importance of groups**

Healthy churches today make groups (community groups, home groups, Sunday school, life groups, etc.) a high priority. Ten years ago, many church leaders did not see how groups could enhance the health of the church in discipleship, evangelism, prayer, ministry, and fellowship.<sup>3</sup>

Success involves the management of ideas. Ideas can provide wonderful breakthroughs for your ministry. However, trying to implement too many ideas at once can crush or fragment your ministry.

In order to effectively manage and execute ideas in your context, you have to understand your church or ministry culture as well as the systems your church or ministry currently has in place. Not only will this book build on the concepts I wrote about in my book *Small Groups with Purpose*, but it will also help you grasp more deeply how to work within the culture and systems your church has in place. We will also investigate fresh, new ideas and processes that will move your ministry forward in an effective, efficient, and—most important—God-honoring way.

It is important to grasp that God never calls you merely to imitate another church's successful model. As I give you examples of what we do at Saddleback Church, I am not suggesting you do things exactly the same way. You know your church culture, and you know your ministry. So take the ideas we discuss and tailor them to your church environment. God has called you to *your* church, for *your* culture, in *your* location, for *this* time.

As you move through this book, you will be presented with a series of twenty planning questions, along with suggested practical answers, to help you develop a strategic plan. In my thirty-plus years of doing small group ministry, I have had to answer each of these questions, and you'll need to answer them too. I'm confident that if these questions haven't yet arisen in your ministry, they eventually will.

You'll come up with many answers to these questions as part of your plan, but you don't need to implement all of the answers at once. You do need to know what's ahead of you. This book will help shed light on the unknowns of small group ministry and help you plan efficiently and

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*God has  
called you to  
your church,  
for your  
culture, in  
your location,  
for this time.*

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practically. I will even help you prioritize and calendarize your plan. I want you to succeed.

So no matter your denomination, church size, church paradigm, church polity, or church's location on this planet—if you will prayerfully, thoughtfully answer these questions, you will end up with a plan that will save you pain! (Smile.) Prayerfully approach each decision and idea, asking God to show you how it pertains to your ministry. Praying your way through this book will help you understand where the Lord is guiding your ministry.

Developing your ministry is not a linear process—step 1, then step 2, then step 3. Since this process is multidimensional and the order of your actions is unpredictable, I have structured the book around the metaphorical motif of building a home (which is kind of fitting, since most small groups meet in homes—but definitely don't have to!). A sound, secure home needs a strong foundation, so part 1 focuses on the foundation of your ministry. This prevents you from building your house on the sand, so it won't crumble when trouble comes (see Luke 6:46–49).

After that, in part 2 we will walk through five areas of the home, exploring four planning questions in each area:

1. The kitchen, where people *connect*
2. The family room, where people *grow*
3. The study, where people *invest*
4. The front door, where people *reach* others
5. The dining room, where family *sustains*

Each area, with its cluster of four questions, emphasizes a different aspect of your ministry, each critical to complete and necessary for long-term effectiveness. Even though this book progresses from one area to the next, the actual implementation of your plan will involve roaming back and forth among different areas. Stay flexible, and discover all that is in your home.

Feel free to use this book with flexibility. It is a dynamic, working document that you can refer back to as you grow your ministry. Take notes, write in the margins, highlight—whatever works best for you.

In this book, you will learn from Saddleback campuses of varying sizes that have developed small group ministries. You will also read testimonies from people who have attended our Accelerate! conference, which focuses on building small group ministries. These attendees come from different size churches, different denominations, and different cultures. Their encouraging feedback is my motivation for writing this book.

For example, I received this email from James Whitely, small group pastor from Word of Faith Family Worship Cathedral in Austell, Georgia:

My goal was to gain a better understanding of how to shape our church's small group ministry. Our church is a large, predominantly African American congregation, and there are not many effective models of authentic and effective small group ministries to research. So I attended the Accelerate! conference to start this journey, building a life-changing small group ministry in our specific church demographic.

I have studied several of the successful Caucasian megachurches, but I wanted a hands-on approach to building and organizing a small group ministry from the ground up. After returning from the conference to my church in Atlanta, we launched our small group ministry in January 2017 with fifty-one adult groups that engage over five hundred of our members. To God be the glory!

Your guidance helped me focus in on the main things, and then begin applying the principles to help build a thriving, authentic, and loving small group ministry at our church.

My prayer is that you, too, walk away empowered with a new arsenal of strategies and tools for starting your small group ministry or reenergizing the growth, influence, and reach of your existing ministry.

PART I

# The Foundation



# 1



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## Think Churchwide

Each local church is meant to be a unified body, working together in a coordinated way toward a common purpose. That means, as you plan your small group ministry, you should start by thinking churchwide. The weekend services, the small groups, and the other church ministries all work together to achieve the outcome of a mature disciple—what Saddleback calls the Purpose Driven Life.

Whole-church coordination doesn't happen by accident. It takes intentionality. As Christians it is possible to get caught in the passive "If God wants it to happen, it will happen" trap, and this can often lead to . . . absolutely nothing. While it's true that the Lord can and does make things happen, he has also equipped us to be his hands and feet. Therefore, the best kingdom outcomes require that we become intentional in our planning while depending continually on the Lord for wisdom.

### **Define Your Church's Success, System, and Plan**

The coordinated functioning of your local body requires understanding clearly what *success* means for your church. What is God's end for your church that you must keep in view? This is defined in your church's and

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*Great small  
group pastors  
have a  
plan that is  
coordinated  
with the  
church's vision  
and mission.*

---

your small group ministry's vision and mission statements, which we will discuss in chapter 4.

Based on this definition of success, it is imperative to have a churchwide *system* that moves people along a comprehensive pathway toward the end destination of mature disciples. Without such a unified system, a new or existing ministry, like small groups, will follow its own independent path, which may not take people along the pathway to success for your church. You may end up with chaos resembling that of the Tower of Babel. Your church's leadership must prayerfully communicate and work together to create a roadmap for your church that will help both leaders and congregants fulfill the church's vision and mission, guiding everyone toward eternal success. This chapter (and parts of chapters 4 and 5) discusses these whole-church considerations.

Within the whole-church system, each ministry—including your small group ministry—must develop a comprehensive *plan* that fits within the system and helps achieve your church's vision and mission. This is your ministry's pathway to help achieve God's end purpose for your church, and most of this book will help you develop that ministry plan. Average small group pastors provide training. Good small group pastors have a plan encompassing only their ministry. Great small group pastors have a plan that is coordinated with the church's vision and mission.

Let's consider your churchwide system. You may already have a good system in place, or maybe your church leaders need to continue working to create or refine your system. In the rest of this chapter I will share some principles to help guide this process, illustrating these principles by describing how we accomplish them at Saddleback Church.

Everything we do at Saddleback is based on two passages of Scripture: Jesus's Great Commission (Matt. 28:19–20) and his great commandment (Matt. 22:37–40). Our senior pastor, Rick Warren, sums up our 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.”<sup>1</sup>

In these two passages we find five biblical purposes:

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).

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, a purpose driven life.

Small groups were foundational to the early church, but what did they do? The answer includes all five of these biblical purposes, as shown in Acts 2:42–47:

They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

The small groups described in Acts that met in homes were a strategic part of the greater church, and it is particularly significant that they *balanced* the biblical purposes, which is the basis for spiritual health. As was true in biblical times, this balance of the purposes is vital to the health of small groups today.

Unfortunately, today many small groups focus on one purpose only. A group may be a fellowship group, a service group, a discipleship group,

or some other kind of group. At Saddleback we found that if we wanted discipleship to happen, we had to instill the idea of balance into the DNA of the church, into every small group of the church, and into every individual life in the church.

### *1. They Fellowshiped*

Membership in the body of Christ means we can identify with a family—God’s family. “They devoted themselves . . . to fellowship . . . and ate together with glad and sincere hearts” (Acts 2:42, 46). It has always interested me that right after Jesus was baptized and then tempted in the desert, one of the first things he did was get twelve guys and form a small group. Even Jesus saw the value of relational discipleship in a group context and the need for fellowship and authenticity.

### *2. They Were Discipled and Grew Spiritually*

The Bible says, “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching” (Acts 2:42). That means they devoted themselves to growing in Christ and maturity. Evidently not only did they listen to what the apostles were teaching in the temple courts on the Sabbath and other days, but these people also gathered in their homes and studied and practiced what was being taught in the temple courts.

### *3. They Ministered to Each Other*

“They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need” (Acts 2:45). That’s ministry—believer to believer. These groups became an outlet for support, ministry, benevolence, charity, and sharing meals.

### *4. They Evangelized the Lost*

This was their mission: “The Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved” (Acts 2:47). If you only go fishing once a week—a fishing service—you are only going to catch fish then. If you go fishing

throughout the week—through small groups—the number of fish will increase dramatically. When all five biblical purposes are happening within your groups and in the lives of each group member, the natural by-product is evangelism. People are attracted to the kind of changes they see in the lives of healthy Christians.

### 5. *They Worshiped*

“They devoted themselves . . . to the breaking of bread and to prayer. . . . [They were] praising God” (2:42, 47). In other words, these early Christians worshiped in their homes. And what was the result? “Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles” (2:43). The bottom line is that God shows up when people make room for him.

## Learning the Difference between a Ministry and a Small Group

In his book *The Purpose Driven Church*, Rick Warren wrote, “We don’t expect each small group to do the same things; we allow them to specialize.”<sup>2</sup> That was in 1995. As time went by, we began to learn more about two types of groups at Saddleback: “balanced” small groups and specialty groups that predominantly focus on one purpose.

Specialty groups that meet around special interests or ministries are strategic, but their goal is not 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 instead on greeting people who come to our campus. All of our specialty groups (ministries) overemphasize one of the purposes. In this example of greeters, it overemphasizes ministry. I could give hundreds of examples of ministries in each of the five biblical purposes (see pages 31–32).

Our balanced small groups, on the other hand, focus on individual and group health through all five biblical purposes. We are far more concerned

about *healthy* groups than we are about the *number* of small 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.

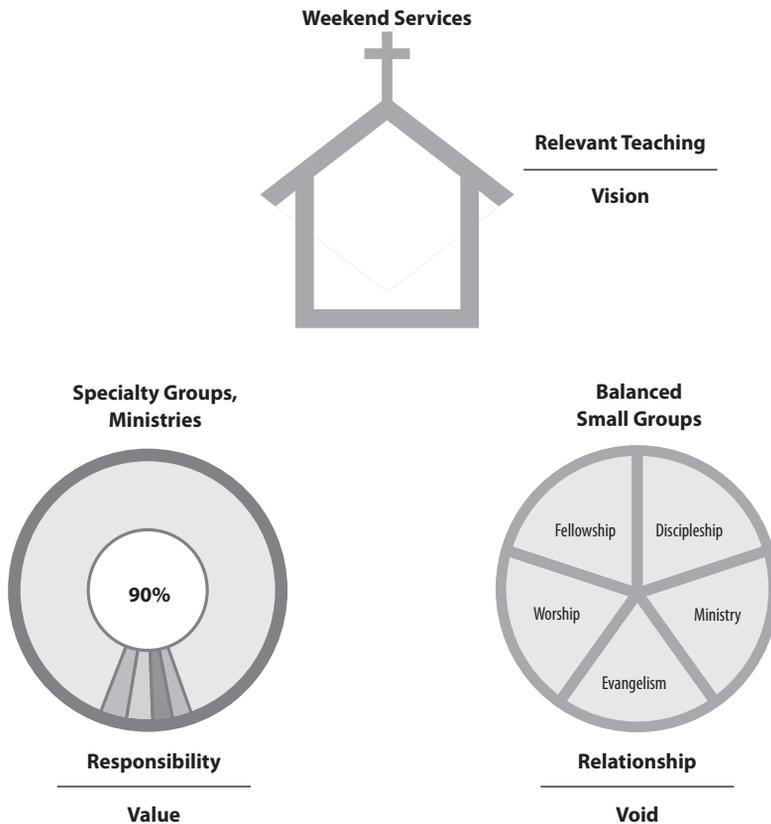
At Saddleback we still have specialty groups that don't balance all five purposes, and they are important. (Most churches call them ministries.) But we expect all other small groups to focus on health through balancing all five biblical purposes. And we encourage each member of a specialty group also to participate in a balanced small group for the sake of his or her spiritual health. This book's focus is on developing balanced small groups in your church.

### Church Systems for Growth

The entire structure of Saddleback Church's vision and mission is based on two settings for gathering, growing, ministering, evangelizing, and worshiping as believers, drawn from Acts 5:42: "Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah." In fact, the normative church structure throughout the New Testament included temple courts and house-to-house gatherings. This book will focus on the house-to-house side, but we will keep in view the larger picture of the goal of getting people to a weekend service and then to a place where God is daily using them in their giftedness (carried out in a specialty group). This will help you build a strategic plan for an effective small group ministry merged purposefully into the culture and context of your churchwide system.

Figure 1.1 represents Saddleback's churchwide system—our environment—and it may be similar to your church's environment. It represents three doors by which someone may enter—the main worship center, the small group ministry, and the other church ministries, which are specialty groups. It doesn't matter which door someone uses to enter your church; it only matters that they get there and end up working together for the advancement of God's kingdom. None of these three is more important than the others.

Figure 1.1



Your body has nine systems that work together to keep you healthy (the skeletal system, the circulatory system, and so on). When one of those systems isn't healthy, your body is in dis-ease, from which we derive the word *disease*. Similarly your church's three systems must all be healthy and remain in harmony with each other.

### Motivate People by Addressing Felt Needs

In God's providence these three church systems correspond with three significant felt needs of people—*relevance*, *relationship*, and *responsibility*. Addressing people's felt needs through the church environment is essential for keeping people motivated and involved.

Motivating people is one of the biggest challenges for most churches. Each person has 168 hours per week, and each one is understandably selective about how to distribute those hours among the many possible uses. How many times have you asked people to spend time in a church activity and heard the response, “I’m too busy”? You can empathize because you also struggle with priorities for your limited time. In some respects this response is legitimate because people are busy. But it’s often a handy excuse to get out of a commitment people simply aren’t motivated about. They don’t perceive that their choices about how to use their time are likely based on fulfilling a need about which they feel strongly. But if people discover that the activities you present in your church environment *do* meet their felt needs, they will eagerly commit part of their 168 hours to those activities.

People’s first major felt need, relevance, is best addressed in the temple courts—that is, in weekend services—through relevant teaching. The Pew Forum, a research center on religion and public life, studied reasons why people choose a church. The number one criterion was the quality and relevance of the sermons. So when Rick, during his series on the Ten Commandments, taught on “You shall not commit adultery” (Exod. 20:14), he titled his sermon, “How to Affair-Proof Your Marriage.” He taught straight from Scripture while making the topic relevant to today’s marriages. Some pastors, when they make their teaching relevant to people’s lives, are criticized for “watering down” their sermons. But people only attend and listen and change when we teach solid biblical truth in a way that is practical and applicable to them. Relevant teaching doesn’t require compromising God’s Word, and it meets people’s felt needs and real needs by addressing the issues they face each day. Relevant teaching inspires people to move from passively sitting and listening to active growth and commitment to their church.

The second great felt need of people is relationship—vertically with the Lord and horizontally with people—and it is best addressed in small groups that are balanced in addressing the five biblical purposes (fellowship, discipleship, ministry, evangelism, and worship). They accomplish everything encompassed in Jesus’s Great Commission and great commandment.

Even the biggest loner naturally craves connection. Your whole church environment—and especially your small groups—will motivate people to invest their time by fully addressing their need for relational connection.

Once people understand their purpose and why they were created (for the vertical relationship with God), and they learn how to flesh that out relationally (in the horizontal relationships with people) by interfacing with this broken world, they will understand how God wants biblical fellowship to happen. When relationship moves from below the surface to authenticity, it takes on new meaning.

Third, people love to feel needed, to possess some level of *responsibility*. This need draws people to opportunities in your varied church ministries. These are specialty groups that emphasize one of the five biblical purposes (from Jesus’s Great Commission and great commandment) over the others.

- *Fellowship*. These groups love fellowship and tend to be great assimilation engines for the church. Examples include scrapbooking, knitting, sports, and adventure groups.
- *Discipleship*. These groups love learning and strengthen the church’s cognitive growth. Examples include classes that teach theology, skills, and spiritual practices.
- *Ministry*. These groups generally fall into two buckets—task groups and caring groups. Examples of task groups include ushers, parking, greeting, landscaping, and cleaning teams. Examples of care groups include support, recovery, and counseling groups.
- *Evangelism*. These groups love putting the gospel into action. Examples include local outreach groups impacting the community, teams for global trips impacting the world, and centers that meet needs, such as Saddleback’s PEACE Center, which provides food, education, and medical care.
- *Worship*. These groups care about worship and the fine arts. Examples include worship groups, choirs, and people who enjoy the

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*When  
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valued.*

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arts, such as painting. Art is a powerful medium in culture around our campuses and in local art galleries. For the five hundredth anniversary celebration of the Reformation, we did huge paintings of each of the five solas.

Though these specialty groups don't address all of the biblical purposes, the plus side is that members have responsibility and are contributing, so they feel more a part of the church. And once people become active contributors together, their bonds with each other grow exponentially. When responsibility changes from a chore to a passion, people feel valued.

So how does your church move from just motivating people to making them long-term, engaged members of your church? Let me focus on three V words that correspond to each felt need: *vision*, *void*, and *value*.

First, relevant teaching not only brings people into the church but also makes them stay by providing a *vision* that is bigger than the individual and in which the person can believe. Second, small groups help people get below the surface, filling the spiritual *void* with knowledge of the Creator and in belonging with each other. Third, through active ministry people find *value* by contributing where God has gifted them as an active part of the church.

These three felt needs are your church's targets, and you should work hard to hit them. Don't lower your expectations or requirements when people say they're too busy; rather, work harder at running your programs to address felt needs so that people will be drawn in and want to stay and participate. Time is not the issue; the issue is how the church answers felt needs. When you provide ways to address people's needs for relevance, relationship, and responsibility, they will give you time from their 168 hours!

Don't say no for people. When you meet their felt need, they will say *yes!* Then watch with amazement the fresh energy and renewal that fills your church. How do I know this works? I have seen it happen at Saddleback Church, where the busiest people make time for things that matter. "Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert" (Isa. 43:19 ESV).

## Test Case: Saddleback’s Churchwide Plan

Let me now overview Saddleback’s whole-church plan—one of many ways to put all of these pieces together as a pathway for guiding people toward maturity and powerful service. This plan can be represented by a funnel (see figure 1.2). What does a funnel do? Its wide end gathers widely scattered items and draws them toward the narrow end.

Saddleback’s funnel invites people to interesting, low-commitment activities and starts them down a pathway toward narrowly focused maturity and high commitment. At Saddleback Church we fulfill the Great Commission and the great commandment through our funnel. You will need to establish your own pathway for people and determine what you want to accomplish as people move along your pathway. As you read, think of this like eating fish: eat the meat and throw away the bones. Choose what works for you and leave what doesn’t. Derive from this what works for your ministry, in your church.

Our desire is to see the Great Commission and great commandment burned into our people’s hearts and lived out on a daily basis. Following are brief descriptions of the four main “spaces” a person moves through

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*Time is not the issue; the issue is how the church answers felt needs.*

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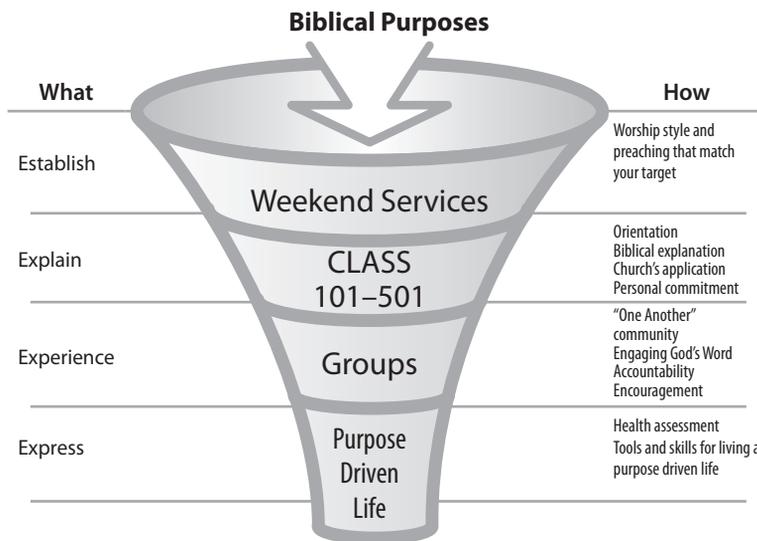


Figure 1.2

in Saddleback’s funnel—through four types of encounters: *establish*, *explain*, *experience*, and *express*.

### *Weekend Services*

This is the entry point for most people, where they begin to discover what our church is about. This is where we *establish* our paradigm through preaching, teaching, and testimonies. This is the best opportunity to promote the rest of our funnel, our pathway for people.

### *CLASS*

At Saddleback we have a series of four Christian Life and Service Seminars (CLASSES) to help people understand themselves, God’s plan for them, and our church’s various learning and ministry opportunities. In these we *explain* in depth the critical steps by which Jesus’s followers can fulfill his Great Commission and his great commandment. Remember, you must build something that works for your church. Be creative, and don’t be afraid to color outside the lines to build the best program for your church. But understand the sequence, as outlined below. People need to commit to a church, they need habits to last in their Christian walk, they need to contribute, and they must reach out.

CLASS 101 is designed to introduce the fundamentals of why our church exists—our structure, our systems, our story, our salvation. This is our *membership* class, which explains how one belongs in our family. People sometimes ask how important church membership is. We believe it is vitally important, just as marriage is important as the alternative to living together. We all recognize the value of standing up and making a public declaration. We become what we are committed to; this class inspires deeper commitment.

CLASS 201 goes deeper in *maturity* and explains how to slay the common Orange County giants of busyness, materialism, and isolation, through which the devil loves to operate. We present the Bible’s answers for developing healthy habits—regular time with God, tithing, and relational connection to the church community, especially through small groups.

In CLASS 301 we help our church members discover their unique God-given design and get involved in a *ministry*. We call this their **SHAPE**:

**S**—*Spiritual gifts*. What has God supernaturally gifted me to do?

**H**—*Heart*. What do I have a passion for and love to do?

**A**—*Abilities*. What natural talents do I have?

**P**—*Personality*. Where does my personality best suit me to serve?

**E**—*Experiences*. How have my spiritual, painful, educational, and ministry experiences prepared me for service?

Then in CLASS 401 we teach about personal, local, and global evangelism—our *mission* step. We are not spectators in this world; we are the hands and feet of Jesus. So we want our members actively evangelizing in fields near and far. We call our mission the PEACE Plan, about which you can learn more at [www.ThePeacePlan.com](http://www.ThePeacePlan.com).

We are currently experimenting with CLASS 501, in which we dig deep into surrender and sacrifice to *magnify* the Lord, growing closer to him. We may do this through small group retreats.

### *Small Groups*

The next level down our funnel is small groups—the central purpose of this book. This is the context where people start to *experience* true spiritual formation. It's the best place for people to fulfill the house-to-house aspects of Jesus's Great Commission and great commandment (see Acts 2:42–47). Small groups are where people get real, going beyond the safe public persona we allow most people to see. It's only in deeper relationships that we realize healing for our pain and our potential for impact according to God's purpose.

Saddleback offers three types of balanced small groups, all of which aim toward the same outcome: balancing Jesus's Great Commission and great commandment in the heart of each person and group. The strategies are a bit different, and we've brought them to various stages of

development—*crawl* (we’re starting to figure it out), *walk* (we’re well on our way), and *run* (well developed, with room for improvement).

*Traditional groups* are at the *run* level. These meet any time of the week, both on the church campus and elsewhere. Most off-campus groups meet in homes, but others meet in coffee shops, parks, yachts (personally, I like these), and trains. We even have a group that meets at 35,000 feet—flight attendants meeting during long flights. These traditional groups generally meet weekly for about two hours. For more information on these groups, see *Leading Small Groups with Purpose*.

*Workplace groups* are at the *crawl* level. They target the same outcome, but we have discovered the hard way that a traditional group strategy doesn’t always play out in the workforce. Our three hundred workplace groups (2 percent of our congregation’s involvement) are largely evangelistic, and we are now employing a five-step strategy to draw in unbelieving coworkers:

- W**—Wear your faith (on clothes, pens, coffee cups) to discover interest in others.
- O**—Online resources provide biblical answers to questions.
- R**—Reach colleagues through “planting and watering” opportunities (see 1 Cor. 3:6).
- K**—Kindle community through a study that paves the way to a workplace group.
- S**—Strengthen each other in a workplace group.

For more information, email [workplace@saddleback.com](mailto:workplace@saddleback.com).

*Virtual groups* are at the *walk* development stage and meet in an online environment. Their strategy: “Meet people where they are, bring them where we want,” using a six-step process described below. Online groups also serve to launch new campuses, called Saddleback Anywhere.

1. *Community*. We invite people to watch our online service at [www.saddleback.com/online](http://www.saddleback.com/online). We’ve found that these people stay engaged

in the life of the church, and new people can check out church before stepping through the door. Your website or online service *is* your first-impression ministry. When baseball was first televised, many said that people would stop coming to the ballparks. But the opposite happened. Make the most of your gold mine of possibilities through your online presence.

2. *Crowd*. You can visit our website to see the varied ways we engage online attendees. At the time of this writing, 4,411 people have reported accepting Christ through our online service. Thousands have engaged in other ways.
3. *Congregation*. People can start or join virtual small groups based on time zones. We have over 1,800 online groups. But we don't want to leave them there!
4. *Committed*. We encourage people to start a local small group with two or more friends. We have helped 63 percent of our online groups step away from the safety of the virtual environment and start meeting with people in person.
5. *Core*. Some local small groups gather to watch our weekend services together in addition to their small group meetings.
6. *Commissioned*. Some clusters of small groups or individuals in a local area gather monthly, which then becomes weekly, to start a Saddleback Anywhere campus.

For more information, email [online@saddleback.com](mailto:online@saddleback.com).

### *Purpose Driven Life*

At the narrow end of the funnel is Purpose Driven Life, where people learn to actively *express* their faith and growth through action. These people have etched the Great Commission and the great commandment on their hearts. This is the narrowest part of the funnel, not because few people belong here—we *all* belong here—but because few people rise to this level of commitment. A mature and vibrant church sees a higher-than-normal

fraction of its members live at this level, but this fraction may still be less than half, especially if the church is attracting new and young believers through the wide end of the funnel. At this stage of their journey, people carefully evaluate and plan their progress toward the five biblical purposes:

- *Fellowship*, engaging with God, family, and small group
- *Discipleship*, taking the next steps in spiritual formation
- *Ministry*, advancing God’s kingdom through volunteer opportunities, held accountable to exercise our spiritual gifts in service
- *Evangelism*, sharing on personal, local, and global levels, all of which we greatly emphasize at Saddleback
- *Worship*, evaluating one’s surrender and life as a living sacrifice to our King

### *Temple Courts and House to House*

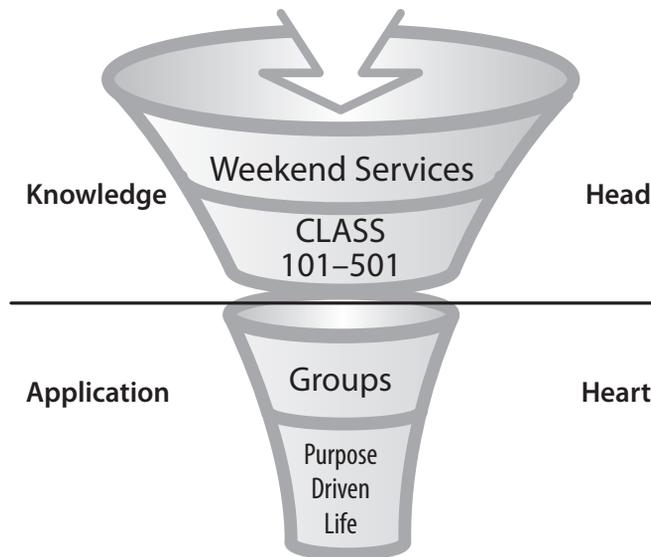
Figure 1.3 illustrates the two types of settings in which people progress along the growth pathway. Above the middle line are the steps that take place in the temple courts. These activities, such as the weekend service and CLASS, involve *presentation*, in which people sit in rows and listen to teaching.

Below the line are the pathway stages that take place house to house, involving more conversation and interaction, with emphasis on relationships. People are more likely to sit in a circle, as in small groups.

Everything above the line tends to be about knowledge, and below the line is more about application. Above the line is about information, while below the line is about transformation. This is how Saddleback ensures that the temple courts and house-to-house elements complement each other. People absorb knowledge with their heads (above the line), and then embed it in their hearts and lives (below the line) in relational community.

Your people need both solid biblical teaching and relational environments in which to apply what they’re learning. And small groups play a critical role in strengthening relationships. If you’re not seeing disciples

Figure 1.3



being made, or people aren't challenging themselves spiritually, or you're having trouble finding volunteers, check the relational temperature of your community. Also, as the relationships within your church strengthen, you will see people actively bringing others to church, and you will see surrender and sacrifice happen in ways you have never seen before. In John 13:34–35, Jesus said that our witness and attractiveness to others is based on our love for each other, within the church.

At Saddleback we seek to optimize the genius of God's design for the church through the complementary settings of temple courts and house to house, building both truthful knowledge and deep relationships for growth and impact.

### Control or Growth?

One more concept to consider as you think churchwide is as Pastor Rick says, "You can structure either for growth or for control." It is impossible to structure for both. Churches that structure for high control tend not to see high growth. I love this!

We prefer church to be more like a hospital than a hotel. Hotels are neat and tidy, but in an emergency room you may see chaos and messiness—yet it is a place of healing. Sick people enter the doors of your church, and hopefully they at least begin the healing process while they’re there. In the New Testament Epistles we see messy, chaotic churches, but miraculously they survived, and the corporate church has survived for two thousand years. That’s because the Holy Spirit works even in messy imperfection to create places of God-centered healing.

We think it’s okay to feel out of control if the result is growth. We prefer to release the reins a bit and leave a lot of the control to the Holy Spirit. That means refusing to let “problem solving” stop or hinder us when we could move ahead under God’s direction. It can get messy, but fear not!

Let me give you an example. You may know how Saddleback Church came to possess the Rancho Capistrano property during the early 2000s. Years earlier we looked into buying the property, but we just couldn’t swing it financially. God’s delays are not God’s denials. A number of years later, the church that owned the property was facing bankruptcy, which opened a new door for us. But the property cost was still high.

At that time we had a few established campuses, but we didn’t plan a new campus at this site. We wanted the property for its conference retreat center, where we hoped to train pastors. The Oklahoma City company Hobby Lobby, known for its generous support for Christian nonprofits, ended up buying the property, then came to us a year later and said, “We are going to donate this property to you.” Donate! They paid over \$22 million for the land and just gave it to us. Well, actually they rented the property to us for one dollar per month for a year. Then they gave it to us. As a bonus, we discovered the property also had a chapel, something for which we had been praying.

Simple, right? No. Sometimes when you receive something free, it comes with unforeseen costs. Some of the facilities had suffered from four to seven years of disuse and needed extensive repairs before we could use them. The prospect looked bleak.

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*You can  
structure  
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growth or for  
control.*

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But during a management meeting Rick said, “I don’t want to worry about problem solving right now.”

*What?* Problem solving seemed the next logical step. But Rick was asking us not to presume that all the solutions were in our hands alone. If God had given us the property, we needed to pray for his solutions to the problems. And in fact, in that first year three miracles happened.

The first was the tens of thousands of volunteer hours with which we were blessed. The donated work was invaluable. To this day we only have one full-time person who manages the 170-acre property. All the rest of the work is done by volunteers.

Second, a Saddleback member told us the Lord had put it on his heart to replace all the roofs. Third, another person matched every air-conditioning unit we bought.

All of this led to another, totally unexpected, fourth miracle: This site has become one of Saddleback Church’s twenty campuses and now serves 1,500 people every weekend at its four services.

Release the messiness to God. He has a plan. You will notice as you read the New Testament that two-thirds of it is written about how messy the church is. Shake off any lingering self-righteousness and understand that you must be praying and thinking about how you are going to structure your church for a healthy small group ministry.

### **Manage Change with Love and Patience**

Understanding must come before implementation. As the structure of your ministry begins to coalesce, you need to understand the goals of key leaders, especially senior leadership. You need to understand your church’s culture and small group history. And watch carefully for the issues over which people—especially leaders—may be unpredictably sensitive. Change is always hard and often meets with fear and resistance, even if the change is right.

Even if you have been at your church for quite a while, make sure you review the church’s history with leaders and ask clarifying questions over

a meal or coffee. Understand the past so you can shape the future. Always listen carefully and seek to understand before you try to be understood. This will help you measure people's trust in your leadership. You want to have a firm grip on these things before you attempt to implement any new ministry or ideas. It is detrimental to the overall health of your church if your ministry is not completely aligned with the church as a whole or with other church ministries.

First, you need to interview key opinion leaders in your church. Get to know them. Listen, listen, listen. Determining their goals helps you strategize and execute your plan in an efficient and effective manner, leading to churchwide alignment.

Second, survey current small group leaders and adult Sunday school teachers about their past experience. What have they been doing? How have they been supported by the church's leaders? What makes for a successful community in their minds?

From the stories you hear, try to discern: Has the church history been positive? Are new concepts embraced or resisted? Has trust been broken? By what? The answers tell you a lot about where you can go and how fast you will get there. You can also uncover hidden land mines—actions or statements that may trigger negative reactions in others.

It's good to ask, "How would you go about making changes in this church?" The answer may give you a wise roadmap for your efforts.

Take your time. This process doesn't happen quickly. By taking adequate time early, you will save tons of time on the back side of implementation. These conversations *will* happen! It is your call whether you want to have them before you implement change, using a relational approach, or after, as you repair damaged relationships and trust.

By doing all of this with care you will honor the past in a way that will help you progressively move into the future. Pray for the responsiveness of your church. Pray for leaders the Lord will raise up. Pray about timing. And pray for what the Lord wants you to accomplish.

Take a few minutes and respond thoughtfully to the following three questions:

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*Understand  
the past so  
you can shape  
the future.*

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Which people or ministries in your church are open and responsive to considering changes?

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What concerns do people have to which you need to be sensitive?

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With whom should you have follow-up conversations? When? Who is thinking it over but not yet on board? Who is actively resistant?

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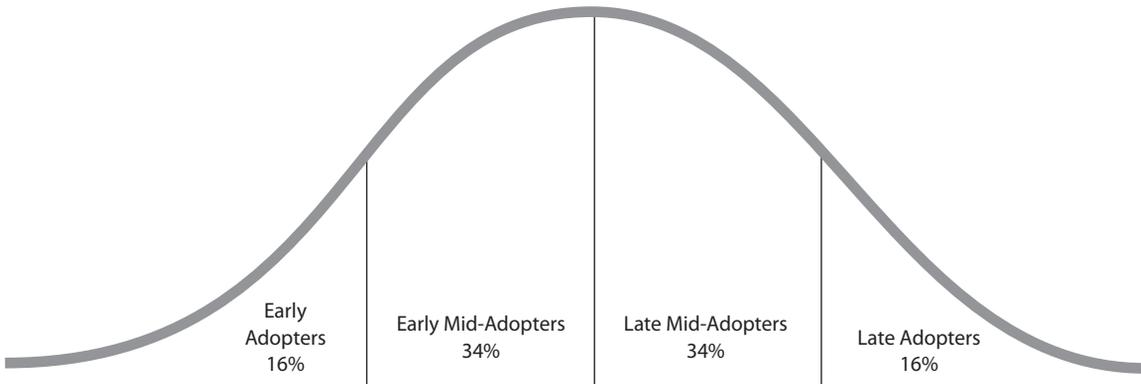
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Your answers will help determine the ease or difficulty of your path ahead. When starting a small group ministry, you are eager to see the fruit of your labor. But building before the foundation is ready *always* proves unwise. Trust me, I've done it both ways. Do it right the first time.

As much as we like to believe we are immune to statistics and numbers, some are inarguable. Whenever a new idea is introduced, acceptance of change runs pretty true to the Rogers Diffusion of Innovation Bell Curve (see figure 1.4). You will typically encounter about 16 percent eager early adopters, 34 percent early mid-adopters, 34 percent late mid-adopters, and 16 percent resistant late adopters. In light of this time-proven reality, don't be discouraged if your good ideas don't garner overwhelming support. With patience and wisdom, you will ultimately see wide adoption,

Figure 1.4

### Rogers Diffusion of Innovation Bell Curve



so stay the course. Meanwhile, focus most of your energy at first on those who see your vision from the start, and make them your allies in helping others see it.

We will come back to the importance of working in unity with church and ministry leadership in chapters 4 and 5.