

STEVE OCTOBER 2009

Multiply or Divide? How to Start New Groups

Posted on October 13, 2009 by Small Group Network

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When I was in Seminary taking classes on World Missions, one thing my professors stressed was if we wanted to bring the Gospel to other cultures, we needed to be sensitive to those other cultures. We had to focus on principles that would be cross cultural and never bring American idioms into foreign cultures. The principles were biblical, so they would be true in both cultures, but the methodologies must always be flexible and sensitive to the culture. American methodologies don't necessarily work in other countries, and vice versa.

In my early years of leading a Small Group Ministry, somehow I forgot what I learned in Seminary. When I began small group ministry, I read all the books on Cell Groups, Meta Groups, Small groups, and anything about community in general. All those books from churches around the world and in the United States, taught generally the same methodology—start a group, go a certain amount of time and then birth or split into multiple groups. The phrasing might have varied, but the focus was the same – divide the groups and multiply into new ones. In essence, the books all advocated building community for a short period of time, and then disrupting that community so more groups, and thus evangelism, could happen.

For years I tried to teach that, push that, beg for that to happen; all with the same results – a very small percentage would heed my leading. My goal was for the groups to multiply, but all they did was divide – against me! Now, it could have been an issue with my leadership; but when I talked with the people in other churches, they were having the same problem. Even when I talked with the people in the trenches of the churches writing the books on small groups, I would hear about the same type of problems I was experiencing. What sounded good on paper, wasn't working out in the day-to-day life of small groups.

Even knowing all this, I continued to try to make it work, because that's what books said to do. But then, an old tape that was in my head from Seminary kicked in. What was the principle and what was the methodology being used? Where were these methodologies coming from? I started doing some research and realized most of the American small group influence was coming from Korea, China and Columbia. In those areas, their methodology was working and working well. But bringing what worked in their culture into an American culture wasn't cross-cultural; just as I had learned (and forgotten) in Seminary. The principle wasn't wrong, but what I learned the hard way was (at least for me in a Southern California culture) the methodology was. The principle was evangelism. They birthed groups in

order to see evangelism happen. There is nothing wrong with that! Who doesn't want to see evangelism happen? What I found to be true was "how" to do that makes a big difference. I want the same principle to happen here at Saddleback Church—evangelism and aggressive evangelism at that! But that methodology just was not working for me. Why was this such a struggle for my church, and the American church in general?

In order to answer that question, I needed to look at what I had been learning about my culture. In doing thousands of Spiritual Health Assessments, I learned the majority of people scored low on the purpose of evangelism. It just wasn't a strength in comparison to the other four biblical purposes (fellowship, discipleship, worship, and ministry) found in the Great Commission and Great Commandment. Consistently, most people scored the lowest on evangelism.

Another thing I learned in looking at our culture was "community" (community as in Biblical fellowship) was in a fractured state. Family social foundations have seen two major cracks happen. One is the reality that adult siblings are now living greater and greater distances from each other, making family gatherings much more difficult, if not non-existent. Take me for an example; I have three brothers and a sister. Each one of us lives in a different state. Getting together as a family takes a lot of planning and traveling for everyone. As a result, it doesn't happen as frequently as we would all like.

Another issue attacking the family foundation is divorce. Like it or not, divorce has lasting impressions on the children. We are in our third generation of this rippling effect, sending people looking for "community" that the family system lacks. When you look at these three factors, it is no surprise that very few of the people in my ministry were willing to give up the sense of community they had found within their small groups. And yet, all across America, Small Group Point Leaders are dying on the hill of believing in a principle, but totally missing the correct methodology for their culture.

Let's all agree, we want to do evangelism in our small groups. Let's also agree that if birthing groups out of groups is working in your culture, that's awesome! Let's also agree, that if it's not; we need to figure out how to accomplish evangelism in the context of small group life in a way that's a cultural fit.

At Saddleback Church, we have adopted a methodology that has helped us take our small group ministry from 280 adult small groups to over 3,500 adult small groups over the last twelve years. Since 2004, we have had more people in our small groups than in our weekend attendance. How has this happened? What is our methodology for ensuring evangelism still takes place?

We have found two things to be true. One, it is far easier to start a new group than to get an existing group to multiply. I learned to avoid division by stopping talk of multiplication. Now we add. Two, it is also easier to empower a new person to start a new group with a couple of friends they already have than place them in an existing group of people they may or may not know (or like). We call this the Two

Friend's Rule—if you have two friends you can start the journey and begin a group! If you don't have two friends...well, uh...there might be another issue.

Our primary strategy, and we have many sub strategies, is our Campaign Strategy. See <http://www.saddlebackresources.com/en-US/campaigns> for more information. This Campaign Strategy is something we do once a year, usually in the fall. We align the five learning modes around a central compelling question and implement it throughout the church, from the children to the adults. Everyone is on the same page, with a similarly themed sermon series, and delivery of additional materials through the small group system. Roll these factors together and the result is exponential growth and alignment in your small groups. If you don't have small groups, this strategy is the perfect way to begin them. If you do have small groups, but they all seem to be going in different directions, this is the perfect way to align them.

So, how long do we allow our groups to continue meeting? We let our groups go for life, if they like. We don't tell them that ahead of time, we let them discover that! Letting our groups focus on building community helps instill some natural by-products. First, it helps them see that you care about their spiritual health and the community needs they have. It also builds trust and opens communication for you to teach evangelism in a safe way that won't disrupt community in the process.

A common question I get asked at almost all of our conferences, is if you don't encourage groups to multiply, won't they become "Us Four and No More" or "Us Seven till We Get to Heaven"? Again, just because we don't birth groups, it doesn't mean we don't have the people in the groups do personal evangelism—we do! So if they don't add people to their group, but still effectively do personal evangelism; then it is a win/win. Also, my experience has been, even when you don't plan to add people to the group—you do. People move, schedules change, life stage changes happen. There are many factors that influence the dynamics of the group. Whatever the factors, however, a group has two options: either it will dwindle to nothing or organically grow.

A key component to launching Groups For Life is to use the yearly Campaign to give people a reason to leave their group. The pastor needs to challenge the people in the group to leave annually. Why? Because leaving a group is hard when you launch it for life. People need a reason to leave, and the pastor asking them to is a great reason. It may be that they just aren't gelling with their current group, or it may be that God as plans for them to step it up and begin leading another group. Whatever the reason, you need to provide them with an easy out. Over the years three couples have left my small group and started new groups during a Campaign...never to come back. Is that bad? No. Is that strategic? You bet!