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The Importance of Gathering Your Small Group Leaders

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There are two questions inherent in every small group ministry: How do you get people connected into new groups, and how do you sustain existing groups?" There are two crucial areas you need to consider in sustaining your Small Group Ministry. One is how you do infrastructure; not sexy, but needed if you have over ten groups in your church. This topic will be discussed in next month's issue. The second area, and the topic of this article, is Sustaining Gatherings.

What in the world is a Gathering? Why are Gatherings important and why should your church do a Gathering? How do you do a Gathering? Are Gatherings just for large Small Group Ministries? Each of these questions needs to be answered in order for you to sustain the small groups you start.

What is a Gathering? MLM's (Multi-Level Marketing) or companies doing a "pyramid" strategy have known the value of bringing together their people for a rally for some time. At these gatherings, the companies cast vision, share values, and get their people excited about the future. This is a valuable lesson we can learn from. The church, however, reaches far beyond any MLM or "get rich quick" pyramid program. The focus of the church is people and their eternal destination.

A Gathering (Appreciation Event, Small Group Night, Connection Rally, or whatever you want to call it) is bringing together all your small group leadership (current and future) under one roof so they can see the big picture beyond their individual small group. Current leadership consists of those doing the small group ministry, from those working the infrastructure to those leading the groups—anybody and everybody that plays a part. Future leadership are those that are going to play a future role, but don't know it yet. Now don't spoil it for them, they don't need to know it now. So, how do you determine who to invite for future leadership? A couple weeks before the event, ask all of your existing leadership to answer the question, "If you were to be gone tomorrow, who would do your role for the church?" That is who they invite to the Gathering. If they don't know "who", which is the case more times than not, get them thinking and praying about who to ask.

Why are Gatherings important and why should your church do a Gathering? People need to be valued and to know what they are a part of. What is the macro part they play beyond their small group or helping the Small Group Ministry? A Gathering helps reinforce your church's vision, values, and reinforces why those in Small Group Ministry are doing what they do. At Saddleback, we do two Gatherings a year. We do one in the late summer to get the groups ready for our Fall Campaign. We do another one after the holidays in January or February to get our groups out of the holiday funk. Our

infrastructure has gotten so large now, that in the summer we do a Gathering for our Community Leaders (our infrastructure that oversees all of our 3,500+ adult small groups) and one for Small Group Hosts (leaders). We call our Gathering just that, Small Group Host Gatherings.

Here is what a Gathering can do for your church:

- United people under the same focus
- Cast vision repeatedly
- Reaffirm “why” they do what they do
- Honors—shows value for what they do
- Connect them with body—all the other people doing what they do
- Alignment behind common vision & goal of the Pastor
- Help them see what part they play in that vision
- Give people a chance to see their leadership up close and personally – hear from heart & ask questions
- Gain ownership – pulling people together creates a sense of shared ownership in the vision
- An opportunity to recruit new volunteers
- Empower your leaders – newbies seeing leaders take hold of vision
- Instill discipline and motivation to carry it forward. They will sacrifice for a vision not a task.
- Motivation & inspiration, alignment & direction = fuel toward vision
- Demonstration of community produces excitement
- Show the authenticity & integrity of leadership
- Begin to teach your leaders how to think out of the box

Getting people together to share a common vision is a powerful thing. This is a quote from someone who just attended our last Gathering: “I was inspired to feel such a personal connection with other people in the room including the pastors who greeted and hugged each guest. I knew in my heart this must be the foundation of Saddleback’s small groups, making each person feel as though they belong while sharing the love of Jesus Christ” -Heidi Harjer (guest from the Rock Church San Diego).

How do you do a Gathering? Here are some practical suggestions based on what we have learned at Saddleback. Regardless of the size of your small group ministry, most of the same things need to be done. The only difference is size and scope.

1. Set a date – we all need a deadline to do anything. A Gathering is no exception. Avoid major holidays and other church events.
2. Get your Senior Pastor there to speak. Make sure that the date works for the Senior Pastor and put him or her in front of the core leadership of the church.
3. Have good worship and a flow that has energy, heart and a message.
4. Make sure the Gathering aligns for optimum impact for the launch of small groups on the calendar.
5. Provide food or dessert not pot luck. When at all possible, invest in your leaders.
6. Budget the Gathering. When you look at where you spend money, you see what you value.
7. Make it a big deal to elevate emphasis of importance. Everyone has 168 hours a week. Make sure they know their hours are needed. If you don't, something else will creep in.
8. Word of mouth advertising. It is important to put your Gathering in the bulletin, mailers, email, social media, etc., but the best invitation is a personal invitation. Nothing else works better.
9. Keep creative, fresh & new by building on a theme. It doesn't have to be expensive and resemble an art festival; but building a theme keeps your message in front of your people.
10. Personal recognition in program. It costs you nothing to recognize people. Recognize the newest, the oldest, the longest doing group life, the youngest...you get the idea, think of a reason to highlight them! Be sure to recognize spouses—they are the unsung heroes!
11. The more personal the better. Create low-key & high spirited events. Sizzle fizzles. Let your people see you (authenticity and enthusiasm). Focus on tenor & tone of the presentation to do that.
12. Have them take an action step. What do you want them to do with what they heard that evening? Minimally, let them know of upcoming events.
13. Follow up on their action step after the Gathering is over. At Saddleback, we follow up with the guests each leader brought to see if they want to be a part of the ministry.
14. Send all participants a personal thank you note for coming, or save the postage and place thank you notes at the tables instead of place cards.
15. Celebrate after the event. Gather those that planned the event together and write down what worked, what didn't and what's next.

Are Gatherings just for large Small Group Ministries? You may be thinking, my church isn't as big as Saddleback, so do I really need to do a Gathering? Bottom line – yes! If I had five groups, I would do a gathering at my house and have them bring “up and coming” leadership—basically, do everything I do for thousands, but scale it down. Think about it and go set a date for your Gathering!