

Can Virtual Community be Biblical?

Let's start this conversation by clearly stating Saddleback does not have this figured out. I would also like to state that Saddleback isn't afraid of messiness or trying to figure out how to build this plane while we are flying it! Yes, many times we discover we don't have all the parts, but sometimes we figure it out and a cool God thing gets opened up for us and hopefully other churches. So let me catch you up on our latest strategy.

We know God knows everything. The scriptures seem very quiet about specifically mentioning virtual community. Maybe, you say, because the internet wasn't around? Although scripture is silent, history and biblical context gives us some perspective. History shows us that whenever technological advancement happens, when it was used right, the Gospel spreads (i.e. the printing press, telephone, television, smart phone, etc). However, none of those technological advancements stretched our thinking of redefining community like the internet.

Biblical community is clearly done in the first century "face to face". The "one another's" throughout scripture clearly need "another". Are virtual small groups a STEP in the process for biblical community or can they BE biblical community. It seems a case can be build for the latter if the Great Commission and great commandment can happen virtual. Many churches embrace the virtual "temple Courts" (the online weekend service) but shy away from virtual "House to House" (online small groups). Over a year ago I wrote an article on where our Online Groups were. You can find it [here](#).

By shying away from virtual "House to House" we seem to be turning our back on figuring out the biggest frontier the small group community has ever faced. A lot has happened since early 2011 when we launched successful online groups. The biggest issue back then was discovering what people wanted in an online small group. So what has happened since that article in May of 2011?

One thing is clear, we still haven't figured it out, but the picture sure is coming into focus! Are we going purely virtual online groups or are we doing online groups as a step? If you look at the info-graphic, the strategy is both. We are aligning our online weekend service, our online small groups and a new paradigm for domestic church planting we are calling "Saddleback (video) Extensions". This all fits under a team called "National Health" in the Spiritual maturity Team I lead.

We see the Internet as our next big room to assimilate people. The question then to ask is, "What are we assimilating them to?" For Saddleback, we want to engage them in a virtual Acts 5:42, while at the same time moving them to a physical presence of Acts 5:42. Will some stay virtual? I am sure they will. Will we leave them purely virtual...I think the jury is still out. If you know the Saddleback's concentric circles, this strategy will make sense to you. The basic strategy is "thinking developmentally". Identify where people are at in a circle and drive them more toward the center. Our outside circle is "Our Community" moving into the "Core of our church".

- **Community** Over 15,000+ weekly who are checking out virtual weekend service under 30 minutes

- **Crowd** 5,500+ weekly who watch our service (watching greater than 30 minutes. These are individual ISP's and we factor 1 person for each ISP, which it is probably more one person watching at an ISP!)
- **Congregation** 81 online small groups who also watch the virtual weekend service (900+ people)
- **Committed** "Saddleback Extensions (less than 70 in attendance)" (currently 80 extensions watching our virtual service together, ½ are also doing a physical small group during the week)
- **Core** "Saddleback Campuses (greater than 70 in attendance)" (currently none, but 3 in the mix in our "Hot Spot Cities") This doesn't factor in our Saddleback Regional Campuses in our 5 county area here in Southern California

The strategy isn't as linear as what is stated above, but it is a start. We want to use the virtual environment to eventually identify small group HOSTs who are tomorrow's new paradigm of our church planter.

