

## Online Groups – A New Frontier?

By Steve Gladen

In 1999 a team of us met with talkcity.com to learn from them. The lady we talked to shared how they were 80% volunteer driven and had 1.2 million people in chat rooms in any given month! What church wouldn't want an audience of 1.2 million people? But in Chat Rooms? Really? Fast forward to 2011 and social media is dominant force. Back in 1999 I heard stories of community that was happening in chat rooms. Last month I chatted with Scott Heiferman, CEO of meetup.com. They have 7.2 million people in their chat rooms. Again, stories of community echo those that I heard in 1999. Evangelism tells us to go where the people are at. Yet in church circles we seem to turn a blind eye to where millions of people gather. At Saddleback we've experimented with 'Online Small Groups' for the last two years. Different than our online services, our online groups are targeting the spiritual formation process. Online services are great, but a passion of mine is to take people deeper in the environment they call home. The following is a compilation of our findings.

### **What is an Online Small Group?**

Simply put: A small group that meets online. Yep, the idea is that simple. However, when taking a closer look, there's a lot more under the hood to help them experience a spiritual formation process.

When I first thought about Online Small Groups I thought it was a pretty amazing frontier: meeting with people from all over the world. But, could 'real' community happen? Were the people sharing stories in chat rooms able to experience the same sense of community as a tradition small group or Sunday school class? Who would be there for you in person if you needed them? Although we didn't have all the answers, it was clear; chat rooms were where people were gathering. We needed to join the party and bring biblical community.

Take a look at this video that our online groups team did which explains what Online Groups are: promo video here, <http://saddleback.com/mc/m/8206a/>

### **Why Online Groups?**

We already know that 600 million users socialize on Facebook. We also know that almost 12 million people pay a nifty monthly fee to team up with total strangers in what might be the most popular *massively multiplayer online role-playing game* (MMORPG), 'World of Warcraft'. WOW currently holds the Guinness Word Record for the most popular MMORPG by subscribers. If you make enough friends, you get to join

a “guild” (small group?) and do a mission. Millions of people are looking for community online in any shape or form.

Let’s take this a step further.

Since connecting with people online is far easier than knocking on their doors, the internet has become a mission field with many great evangelism/outreach efforts, like AllAboutGod.com and others. I loved when I was at Len Sweet’s house in Washington State he re-enforced a thought when he said what we need in our evangelism classes are “How to be a Christian Avatar.” Cool concept!

However, in the discipleship area there are still very few efforts around. Online Groups help in this: They allow people to meet together (fellowship), discuss curriculum (grow), pray, surrender and share struggles (worship), serve together (check this [link](#) out) and reach out to others looking for community (evangelism). If you have services online, why not try online groups?

Currently we have 68 online groups with 675 people participating. I know this isn’t millions, but we are moving in the right direction!

### **How does Saddleback do online groups?**

Well, we’ve tried many ways and failed a ton over the past 2 years. At the beginning Ron Wilbur and myself did what we could - trying everything. Later we hired Efraim to help dedicate time to online groups. Now we have groups in all shapes and sizes. We post groups that are ‘open’ up on our [website](#). People can apply for those groups and, when the host adds them, they can access the group’s private meeting rooms. We also encourage people to start an online group by clicking on the “Become a host” button at the bottom of the website. We built these rooms to facilitate live as well as continued discussion.

Live meetings happen through streaming video (curriculum) and a chat box to communicate. Continued discussion happens through a Facebook-style wall where people can discuss ideas, comment on them as well as post prayer requests and videos. When someone posts on the wall, the others get notified through email and this way the conversation continues during the week.

### **How can we get online group started in our church?**

Rather than going off and building something, I’d recommend starting with some experiments first to see what your target group likes to use, how they use it, and what fits your church.

Some tools to get you started can be:

- [Skype Groups](#) (live video, paid)
- [Google Talk](#) (chat only, free)
- [Facebook groups & chat](#) (chat & continued discussion, free)
- [Campfire](#) (chat, paid)

On top of that, I recommend making a couple of technical volunteers excited about this, since you'll get flooded with questions like:

- How do I connect my webcam?
- How do I chat?

Do we have it all figured out? Nope. Is this an end all for community? Not sure. Are online groups and online services the next gen of Acts 5:42? We are trying to figure this out...stay tuned.

I pray this stimulates your thoughts. If you have any questions, experience or ideas, please don't hesitate to post a comment below.