

Building a baptism culture in your church

by Kristine Noelle

LAKE FOREST, Calif. (PD) — Behind every person's baptism is a story. When a person publicly declares his or her decision to follow Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, it is a moment ripe with pastoral possibility. It's a significant step on a believer's spiritual journey and a powerful witness to onlookers who have not yet made a faith commitment. But, as pastors and church leaders, how do you create a church culture that encourages and equips believers to take that next step?

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Steve Gladen, small groups pastor at [Saddleback Church](#)

At [Saddleback Church](#), attendees hear about baptism from the pulpit, read about it in church materials, learn about it from small group leaders, and see it happening at the baptismal pool outside the worship center after services. "Pastor Rick has imbedded baptism into the culture here as a natural part of being a Christ-follower," said Steve Gladen, pastor of small groups at Saddleback. "There's not a weekend that goes by without someone being baptized."

Baptism by immersion is also one of the requirements for membership at Saddleback. "It's one of the ways people in the Bible said, 'I am part of this family called Christians,'" Gladen said. "And when Christ left this Earth he didn't tell us to remember his birth – which we do a good job of at Christmas. He told us to remember his death, burial, and resurrection. We do that through the Lord's Supper and baptism." Baptism is one reflection of a believer living out a biblically based, purpose driven life.

The impact of the small group connection

Small groups leaders at Saddleback are trained to encourage group members to take spiritual growth steps, such as being baptized. Often whole small groups are present at baptisms, and sometimes group members are baptized together.

Chuck Pope, a community leader at Saddleback, understands firsthand how powerful baptism can be when incorporated into small group life. When Hurricane Katrina hit, one of the small group leaders he was shepherding went to the Gulf Coast to help. While he was stepping in as the temporary leader of the group, several members decided to be baptized and asked Pope if he would perform the service.

"I had never baptized anyone," Pope said. "I tried to suggest going to the church on Sunday and letting the pros do it. But they wanted me to do it." Once he agreed, God prepared and equipped him for the assignment. One friend told him that the church had a CD that showed a baptism service and another friend offered to help out in any way he could. A Saddleback pastor gave him T-shirts and encouraged him until he thought, "I can do this."

The night of the baptism was a moving experience for the whole small group. It not only helped the group grow together in Christ, but it helped Pope grow as well. "When they first asked me to do it I thought I wasn't the guy, that I didn't have any authority," Pope remembered. "Then Pastor Rick mentioned Matthew 28 at a weekend service. Jesus said to go and make disciples, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Those people were tax collectors, fishermen, regular people. I realized that you don't need to be a pastor. You just need to be a follower of Christ," Pope said.

Baptism as evangelism

"When you're at the water's edge and you give people an opportunity to tell the story of how they came to know Christ as Lord and Savior, it's a great evangelistic tool," Gladen said. "I encourage pastors to explain the biblical view of baptism at the start of the service and let the crowd know that baptism doesn't save people; it's the symbol of it." That way non-believers who come to watch the service have a better idea what it's all about.

People who have just been baptized at Saddleback are encouraged to tell others about their experience. "We challenge people to take advantage of opportunities and divine appointments to share Christ through the story of their baptism," Gladen said.

Tips on making baptism an active part of your own church culture

- 1. Keep it simple.** "You don't need a fancy baptismal," Gladen said. "In the early days of Saddleback, we just went to people who had pools."
- 2. Take the time to make it personal.** "If the church is small enough and the numbers are small enough, you can make baptisms part of the church service. But you don't want to get so locked into time that it's not personal," Gladen warned. "Over all the years no one has ever come to me after a baptism service and said, 'This baptism service was too long.'"

40 Ways to Increase Your Baptisms

Need some ideas to increase the number of baptisms in your church? In this [leadership development lesson](#), Rick Warren will help you do just that as he shares from his own experiences at Saddleback. Earlier this year, Rick Warren celebrated the 20,000th baptism in the 26-year history of Saddleback Church.

3. Remember that it doesn't have to be perfect. "If you have people and something that contains water, then you're ready to make baptisms a part of your church culture," Gladen said.

4. Remove the obstacles that might prevent someone from getting baptized. "At Saddleback we have shorts and shirts ready, and we even go so far as to have hairdryers," Gladen said. "We take away the barriers and obstacles so that it's easy for people to let the world know that they are a follower of Christ."

5. Teach people about baptism. Don't assume they know what it is. "There's so much potential that pastors miss because we don't teach about baptism. But that's part of our job," Gladen said. "I've met many people who were not baptized before because they just didn't know it was part of their journey as a believer. There's a whole lot of ripe fruit out there."