



How to connect every person in your church

by Steve Gladen

How do you connect people in your church? How do you meet them where they're at? Your church will only be as connected as you are dreaming and praying for. If you're at 30 percent, dream of the day that you'll get to 35 percent. If you're at 50 percent, dream of the day you'll be at 60 percent. Eventually you want a goal of connecting 110 percent of your congregation in life-changing small group communities.

In Genesis Chapter 2:18, when Adam was in the Garden of Eden – the most perfect environment known to mankind – God said, "It is not good for man to be alone." How much more important is it in our broken, destroyed world for people to find community through Christ?

Let's look at six ways you can connect the people at your church.

1. Remove the barriers and focus on the benefits.

Connection is about true community. If people are worried about not fitting in, or not being spiritual enough, or not having time for a small group, it's your job to remove those barriers and focus on the benefits.

For example, one concern people often have is a lack of childcare. To help remove that barrier at Saddleback we started family small groups. This allows the kids to participate too. Another idea is to get your high school guys and girls to serve at the church by offering free babysitting for the couples' groups that need it.

In addition to removing the obstacles, you need to make sure the benefits are clear. What are some of the benefits of group life?

- Support
- Accountability
- Spiritual growth
- Friendships
- Ministry partnership
- Prayer covering
- And the list goes on...

2. Utilize all communication avenues.

You need to be aggressive in your communications. You need to make fellowship a verb, and you need to pray for the Lord of the harvest to bring people into groups.

Here are just a few of the communication avenues we use at Saddleback:

- **Personal invitations** – People are starved for real connections to happen. Sometimes all it takes is a printed or e-mail invitation. Whatever you do, this is the number one way!
- **Pulpit announcements** – Pastor, you are key to connecting people in groups. Don't be afraid to share from personal experience how important your small group is to you. And make it clear from the platform what the next steps are for people.

- **Multiple entry points** – However people come into our church, we make sure they hear about small groups. They hear about them in our membership class, on the weekend, and at our classes and events. And we make it easy for them to join a group online or after our weekend services.
- **The bulletin and Website** – We regularly promote small group connection events, curriculum studies, and other opportunities in our weekend bulletin and electronic newsletter, and we have a page dedicated to small groups on our Website.
- **Testimonies** – We often include testimonies as part of our weekend message – either live or in video form. This is a great way for people to hear firsthand how important small groups are, especially during a crisis. Remember, you are the sales person and testimonies are the satisfied customer.

3. **View transitions as strategic times to connect people.**

When people share significant life events together, it's a great opportunity to connect them in groups. You can connect people through baptisms, baby dedications, weddings – things like that. Life struggles are another one. Maybe there are people in your church with spouses overseas in the armed forces. Or maybe there are people caring for aging relatives. You need to have a strategy for connecting people going through similar spiritual steps and seasonal changes in life.

4. **Unleash the power of a campaign strategy.**

If you've ever done 40 Days of Purpose, 40 Days of Community, or 40 Days of Love, you know what I'm talking about. This is the time when we grew exponentially in our small group ministry. The 40 Days of Purpose campaign just rocked our church. The one thing that helped add groups was changing some of the terminology. We used to call our small group leaders *lay pastors* and we got them by the tens. Then we changed the names to *shepherd leaders* and we got them by the hundreds. But for whatever reason, when we started calling them *hosts*, we got them by the thousands.

HOST stands for:

- Have a heart for people
- Open up your home
- Serve a snack
- Turn on the DVD player

We didn't hassle anybody. We said, just try it for six weeks and if you don't want to continue, that's OK. A lot didn't, but a lot did. The small group was also the distribution point of the campaign materials. If you wanted the book, if you wanted the key tags – you had to be in a small group. This strategy added hundreds of small groups to our church.

5. **Host small group connection events.**

Invite people to a small group connection event on your church campus. Put people around tables and give them discussion questions to help them get to know each other. You might mark the tables for couples, singles, men, women, etc. Once people have made a connection and want to continue as a group, select leaders. There are several ways to do this. The ideal approach is to find the people in your church who want to plant more small groups. They'll launch the groups, and then after six weeks, they'll help raise up new leaders.

6. **Provide a safe environment for building relationships.**

You need to provide a safe environment for people once they're connected. Small groups need to be a place where people can be real and authentic. When there's safety in a group, people feel

comfortable to just show up just as they are. They're with friends who accept them. They are making authentic connections.

One way to create safety in small groups is to teach good listening skills. Accepting others means giving them your full attention. You can't "skim" relationally. If you're going to build a safe environment, people have to know that you're listening to them.

Another way to create safe small groups is to teach good conflict resolution. Every group has what I call EGR people. EGR stands for "extra grace required." You know who these people are. They're the ones we describe as "heavenly sandpaper." But here's the thing: Jesus died for those folks too. And we need to teach leaders good conflict resolution skills to keep groups healthy.

Connecting people in small groups is part of growing a healthy church. If you want to learn more about transforming your church through a small group network, join us at a [Purpose Driven Small Groups conference](#) in 2009:

- February 19-21 in Lake Forest, Calif.
- March 26-28 in Houston
- April 23-25 in Atlanta
- May 14-16 in Cincinnati



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