

Announcements - local church conference & bike day. Guest Cards, Dismiss Children's Church

Waite Park Church is in its second year of small group ministry and in a few minutes I'll tell you what that has looked like but first of all – we need to say that none of it would be possible without the men and women in our church who were willing to be used by God to make it happen.

I want to present our leaders with a gift on behalf of Waite Park Church. Quite frankly, it's a modest gift compared to the time, the energy, the love, the prayers, and the money that they've invested into their small groups. But nonetheless it's a token of our deep appreciation for your service.

I want to invite our first year leaders to come up first (Give Bags as they come)

FIRST YEAR	SECOND YEAR
Cameron Freeburg	Ed Douglass Miriam Douglass
Than Johnson	Ed Idarraga Renata Rohleder
Joseph Kasper Sarah Kasper	Zach Johnson
Karen Rogers Micah Rogers	Joan Kinde
Jonathan Slye	Ben Mauthe Kirsti Mauthe
<p>These men and women took a chance, stepped outside of what was comfortable or familiar and were willing to change their schedules around in order to create an opportunity for a small group of Christians to pursue God together.</p> <p>Stay up here. I'd like to invite our second year leaders now.</p>	Paul Pearson
	Leah Slye Terry Slye
	Valerie Sobus
	Jean White
<p>Ministry is tough. Leading and caring for a group of people week in and week out is hard. The recurring weekly ministry of a small group leader often means that you're going to small group regardless of how your day or week happened to go.</p> <p>You found that out your first year and decided to do it again for another. Thank you for serving our church and intentionally pursuing God with others through Word, Worship, and Friendship.</p>	

Join with me and let's say a prayer for our small group leaders.

Intro

State of the Church Small Groups Edition: Defying Expectations & Unsustainable

If you've gone to a Christian college then you know what it's like to go to a chapel service and expect worship and a message only to end up hearing announcements about homecoming court or a talk on STD's. You're frustrated. It's not what you signed up for. It's a waste of time.

Today's message might not feel like a sermon BUT there's two main reasons for us as a church to use Sunday morning time to focus our attention this way: The first is to give glory to God for what he's doing and the second is to be a genuine & likeminded community

I was talking to the Assistant pastor at Cross Culture Community Church and she said, "You guys have a pretty good small group ministry, don't you?" And my response to her was "yes" and "no." "Yes" because we've done a lot and we've got a lot going for us. As a matter of fact – in many ways we're "defying Expectations" and "No" because we're unsustainable.

So let's flesh this out together.

We've defied expectations

Small Group experts say that it takes about 4 years for a church culture to fully adopt a small group ministry mentality. We accomplished this our first year.

Our first year we had 7 small groups and 100 participants.

This year we've had 7 small groups and we'll finish out the year with 97 participants.

In a Christianity Today article Ed Stetzer (A Pastor and author who specializes in Church Research and revitalization) said, "Some would say that 50 percent of your Sunday morning attendance should be in small groups... Realistically, though, I don't think that 70 percent is an unreachable goal for churches that rightly emphasize small groups."

To put this into some perspective for you – we've got almost 80% of our average Sunday morning attendance involved in small groups.

Let me point out something else that's significant... Saddleback (a North American Church that is a leader in small group ministry) expects about 80% of their small groups to make it through a whole year of small group ministry. For the past two years all of our small groups and their leaders have finished out the year.

So to summarize, here's what we've done:

- We built a clear structure with crucial values
- We built a small group culture in a quarter of the time it should take
- We surpassed participation goals of most pastors/churches/small group researchers
- Our retention rate for small groups during the small group year is perfect
- Because of this – our church has been able to minister to one another in a way that's more reflective of the New Testament than we've ever been able to do in the last 8 years.

We've got a lot going for us

There are a lot of factors at play for why we've been able to do what we've done.

- The senior members of our church set the example for us by giving up their resources, power, and preferences in order to see the church grow.
 - o They invested their money into a building project & capital campaign
 - o They voted in young leadership
 - o They embraced change even when it meant they'd lose the things they enjoyed. Their space looks different. Their worship is different. Their preaching is different.
- Pastor Kory and the board were sensitive to God's Spirit and to the needs of our congregation. They correctly diagnosed the church. They took risks and invested in a full time small group pastor before having a full time youth pastor and before having a full time children's ministry pastor. A move that is almost completely unheard of.
- & the people of our church stepped up.
 - o Some were asked to be leaders but didn't necessarily think it was right for them. Others wanted to be leaders but felt underqualified. Some wanted to be leaders but knew it would require that they give up some other part of their life to find the time for it.
 - o AND Each one of you that is or had been involved in a small group has made your small group community what it is and I'm so thankful for your investment and participation.

Some of you know – I went to Southern California this past March to spend several days learning and building relationships with Small Group Pastors. I originally went primarily because I had no formal training in small group ministry and so I wanted to learn all about what I didn't know. You know, what are those blindspots? What am I not seeing? What do I not know to ask? What is ended up being was a time of encouragement as well as a time of defining – defining what it was that our small groups were meant to be.

So let me tell you why it was encouraging and why it was defining.

One Pastor I met – his name is **Ron Wilbur**. He was the pastor of small group health at Saddleback Church. When I spoke with Ron about our church and our small group ministry he said, **"You must lie awake at night with excitement about all the things that God is doing in your church... I know I would."** That for me was such a resounding affirmation that we as a church were in a good position.

Here was the other encouraging thing for me. **When I was at this conference** there seemed to be a plethora of pastors that had 100 small groups, 300 small groups, and I think Saddleback Church has over 3000 small groups. When I shared with people about how much of our church was involved in small groups or when I shared that our Senior Pastor and our board made small groups a priority – people were envious. When I told them that our people were ready for a small group ministry and jumped right in – pastors wished that they had what we had. When I told them that as a church we had invested in a full time small groups pastor before investing in a full time youth or a full time children's ministry pastor – they were shocked. None of this was typical behavior. When the small group pastors were asked to rate their church's small group culture on a scale of 1-10 most people said 4 and no one said anything above a 6. It was eye opening for me to realize that the resources of a megachurch didn't automatically cause them to have a more effective small group ministry.

Then came the defining moments.

I attended a break out session where the topic was “How to make disciples that make disciples.”

What we ended up talking about was “How to create environments where people could become more like Jesus.”

But what people actually ended up talking about was “How to create Christian environments where people could feel comfortable.”

Pastors began to spout off answers. These environments needed to be comfortable. They needed to be welcoming. They needed to be warm and inviting. It needed to be a place where people could be themselves. People needed to know they weren't going to be judged. It needed to be an environment that raised the bar but let people know it was okay if they failed. It kind of went on and on in this direction for a while.

At one point someone said, “My question is, how do we attract millennials?” And that was more or less the breaking point for me. So I leaned I, somewhat dramatically, and I said, “half of your people are struggling with pornography... how does any of what you just described – address that? The divorce rates in the church are almost the same at the rest of the nation – do you really think that anything you just said will change that? If you want to attract millennials – then offer a place where people are addressing the real issues of their lives. Why aren't we talking about creating environments where people can reveal their sin and their skeletons? Why would we make disciples that are trapped in sin just so they can go and make more disciples who are trapped in sin?”

And there was some head nodding. And then someone else chimed in with an idea about how to reach millennials and we completely moved on. I was sad guys. I was surrounded by small group pastors who only wanted to talk about creating comfortable environments. And I knew that there was no way I was willing to spend my life creating impotent ministries.

The last session of the conference was led by a guy named Carl George. Carl George is a church growth consultant and a veteran small groups champion.

Let me tell you what he said because it's so concise and so clear. Unfortunately these aren't verbatim because I was trying to write as fast as he could talk and I couldn't keep up but

Carl asked this question:

- What's wrong with the small group model?

Then he answered it: We aren't doing the core stuff that's needed to change people's lives.

Then he said there's two things that are needed. This is the core stuff. I loved it.

1. **People** who are willing to acknowledge their brokenness (and he referenced groups like Celebrate Recovery)
2. **People** who lovingly interrogate their friends and invest in each other's lives. (And he referenced John Wesley's small groups about 4 times or so after that)

Those two things, for me, were the perfect summary of what a small group should look like. We need communities where people could be fully known and fully loved and in order to do that we need to be able to acknowledge our brokenness and have people who lovingly interrogate us. Now, not every small

group is going to get to an extreme level of that and not every small group will want to and not every small group should want to. But it has always been my goal that our church will get to a place where each of you is fully known and fully loved by at least one other brother or sister in Christ. And our small groups will be a vehicle for that.

I spent most of my time with a small groups pastor of 300 small groups. When I shared with him my vision and my heart for our small group ministry – he didn't think it could be done – to be fair to him – he didn't think it could be done without years and years and years of trying. He thought Minnesotans weren't capable of being vulnerable and transparent with one another.

Here's the thing – when I spoke with my leaders about my heart for our small groups – Our oldest leader Jean White said, "When people ask me pointed questions it shows me that they care." And our youngest leaders – Zach and Cameron said, "Our group is already doing that." When I told Kory about my goal for our small groups we decided on a FOCUS season to get us there.

The two final things we've got going for us:

- A vision of whole and holy communities where people acknowledge their brokenness and lovingly interrogate one another
- Leadership that believes we can get there

We've Got Room for Improvement

So when I was asked if we had a pretty good small group ministry – I said "Yes" because

- We've done a lot and we've got a lot going for us.

But I also said "no" because

- **We're not sustainable**

The truth is we had 5 great small group leaders step down from leading their small group our first year and I predict that we'll have about 6 more small group leaders step down from ministry at the end of this year. That's 11 great leaders over the last two years. And quite frankly... you only get so many potential small group leaders until you burn through them all. Not everyone is fit for this ministry.

Where We're Going

So here's where we're going and some of this is in response to addressing our flaws and some of it is in response to what we feel God is challenging us in.

1. **We're going to pursue smaller groups**

We want to aim for small groups of about 10 people. Right now all but one of our small groups is over 10 people. The highest amount of people in a small group this year has been 19.

2. **We're going to recruit more leaders**

More leaders means small groups but it also means opening our community up to more and more people. Currently we have at least 6 people who are looking to start small groups of their own. And several who are thinking and praying about it. I invite you to do the same.

3. We're going to start Beta Groups

The addition of Beta Groups means creating places where skeptics, seekers, and new Christians have a place where they can comfortably ask questions and search for truth together.

4. We're going to focus on building our team rather than building our structure

We've got great structure in place and that means being free to focus on building our leaders. We want to be more intentional about coaching, training, and supporting our leaders and on a consistent basis. This means creating more opportunities to meet together and it means creating a highly relational coaching ministry.

5. We're going to pray more than ever.

Ron Wilbur, former pastor of small group health at saddleback church has asked to take part in a prayer team for Waite Park Church's small group ministry. One of the reasons that worship is a core value in our small group ministry is because we recognize that no spiritual fruit can be achieved without doing a spiritual work. Next year, more than ever before, our small group ministry will be soaked in prayer.

Here's What You Can Do:

1. **Come.** Join our small group ministry next year if you're not already in it. Some of our groups may meet every other week which may mean they're more accessible.
2. **Commit.** It's easy to treat small groups as extra-curricular stuff but the truth is our small groups are the cells of the body. In the same way that cells are the basic unit of life in the human body – cell groups (small groups) are the cells of the church body. It's here that we can fulfill the 59 "One another" verses of the Bible. It's here where each person can be known and loved and cared for. Consider 1 Peter 4:10 "Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms." The Holy Spirit recognizes that you and I are to be stewards of God's grace in order to serve others. Meaning that when we don't participate – it's at the expense of other people receiving and experiencing God's grace that's meant to come through you. Does that make sense? God's given us grace (his goodness) for the express purpose of serving others with it. We can't do that if we don't show up.
3. **Contribute.** Don't just be a consumer of your small group. Contribute. Consider 1 Corinthians 12:26: "What then shall we say, brothers and sisters? When you come together, each of you has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. Everything must be done so that the church may be built up." The Holy Spirit expects that we would all contribute and bring something. Before small groups starts ask yourself, "What am I bringing?"
4. **Care.** Care for each other. Pray for each other. Listen to one another. Love one another. Serve one another. Bear one another's burdens. Check in with one another. Encourage one another. Spend time with one another.

5. **Celebrate Change.** There are going to be some changes that come our way. Some of you may not be able to stay in your current small group. This might mean changing your perspective on things. Sometimes when a group multiplies or gives birth we might focus on the fact that we're losing people when in reality God's ministry is growing. It's not awesome to have worked on a community for the last year only to find out that that community will get disrupted or dissolved but the truth is – God uses diasporas all the time to grow his church. We can expect it to happen on a smaller scale and maybe even celebrate when it does.

Come. Commit. Contribute. Care. Celebrate Change.

Look at that. You got a sermon afterall. You can tell because I alliterated it.

I want to take a moment to say thanks to our Senior Pastor for leading us and prioritizing small group ministry. Thanks to our LBA for authorizing and supporting small group ministry. Thanks to Don Corliss for keeping track of the budget of our small group ministry. Sorry for going overboard. Thanks to our small group leaders for the time, energy, money, and passion that they've willingly given to the small group ministry. Thanks to the other ministry leaders who have been supportive of small group ministry even at the expense of their ministries. Thanks to the childcare providers like Anna, and Britta, and Connie, and Mark and Sharon and others who I'm probably failing to mention who have made it possible for our parents of young children to be a part of our ministry. Thank you to each of you who are involved in small group ministry – without you, there's no ministry, without you there's no group, there's no church. And Lastly and most importantly Let's thank the Father for creating us, the Son for redeeming us, and the Spirit for leading and guiding us.

Let's Pray!