

# SMALL GROUPS WITH PURPOSE

*How to Create  
Healthy Communities*

Steve Gladen



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# Introduction

## *The Purpose of This Book*

When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power.

1 Corinthians 2:1–5

A man's errors are his portals of discovery.

James Joyce

On a daily basis, the small group team at Saddleback Church is inundated with questions from small group point people, lead pastors, and small group leaders. The denominations and locales vary, but the questions are all centered on one fundamental question: How can I improve my small group ministry? The callers and emailers look at Saddleback, a megachurch with over 3,500 adult small groups, and assume we have all of the answers. Let me say right now that we do not have all of the answers. I do believe, however, that we have found some of the answers through both our failures and our successes.

The people who call, email, and come to our Small Group Conferences desire to learn and get answers to their questions. If they are on the church staff, it is likely they are trying to lead the small group ministry

while also directing a different ministry. They may not be getting paid at all, and even if they are, the money they are making is not commensurate with the hours they are working. Very often they are pouring their hearts into the ministry with little or no support from anyone inside or outside their church. They call, email, or come to workshops and conferences eager to talk to someone—anyone—about small groups.

I talk with them on the phone, through emails, after workshops, or as we meet in the hallway during conferences. In these impromptu meetings, I am unable to give them the full attention they deserve. My answers are shorter than I would like them to be and lack the detail they need. For example, I remember meeting Norma from Missouri on a break from teaching. Her question was a good one, but my time was short. I rushed to answer her, but quite honestly, the answer was *good enough* at best.

This book is my attempt to answer those questions in far greater detail, to throw out a lifeline, and to share with you some of the mistakes I have made and some of the things that I have learned from those mistakes.

This book is organized around the questions I asked in my journey—the same questions I now am asked every week.

What is a healthy and balanced small group?

What does this look like?

Step-by-step, how can I do this?

What does this mean for overall church strategy?

And one more important question that is often unasked:

Do I have what it takes?

I am a hands-on kind of a guy. I don't want to just read information; I want to begin processing it and applying it to my situation. In fact, in my office there is a whiteboard with the maxim: "Vision without implementation is hallucination!" I want to help you begin the implementation process, which is why there is a section entitled "Questions" at the end of each chapter.

In this format of the written word, I will be able to talk with you without being in a hurry to move to another workshop or take another call. I will be here at your convenience. So grab a cup of coffee (Venti with cream and three Splendas for me), sit down, and let's begin.

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# What Is a Healthy and Balanced Small Group?



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## My Story

### *And What It Has Taught Me about Ministry*

He must increase, but I must decrease.

John 3:30 NASB

It's not my ability, but my response to God's ability, that counts.

Corrie Ten Boom

Ministry did not come easily to me. At the point I felt God calling me to ministry, my response was, "God, you have got the wrong person." From that point, it was a seven-year run from God. I did everything I could to avoid going into ministry.

I have mild dyslexia, and when I am thinking quickly, I sometimes mix things up. If I am reading aloud, I sometimes swap words around and try to make sense of it as I go. This didn't make school very easy for me. I remember my sixth grade teacher, Miss Beatenhead (yup, I'm not making that up), getting frustrated with me because I never fully spelled out my name on papers. I would often write "Stev" or "Glade." I remember her asking me in front of the entire class, "How will you make it if you can't even spell your name?" I sank down in my chair and wondered the same.



Being raised Catholic, however, my fear of God was greater than my fear of failure, and I enrolled in Evangel College (now Evangel University) in Springfield, Missouri, even though I didn't exactly feel like college material. As a condition of acceptance, I had to take high school-level English classes during my first year. Not exactly an ego builder.

In addition, although my parents probably could have afforded to pay for my schooling, they believed I would appreciate my education more if I worked for it. At the time, I didn't care for that philosophy, but looking back, I can see they were right. During high school I worked part-time for a cable television company, so when it came time to find employment in Springfield, I looked for a job in that field. By God's providence, a new company called TeleCable was starting up. The general manager, Jerry Rutherford, was kind enough to hire me and allowed me to work a flexible schedule around my classes.

After four years in Springfield, I completed my BA in biblical studies with minors in Greek and philosophy. It was a tough four years, and I had to spend more time than most reading and studying. Social life was almost nonexistent. I had also just completed four years with a small company that started with just a few employees and had grown into a large company, and I actually liked my job. I had become comfortable in it, the pay was good, and the people I worked with had become family. Instead of going home during my last two summers, I actually stayed in Springfield and worked full-time to make extra money for school.

As graduation neared, an internal struggle began to develop. Should I stay in Springfield and continue working at the cable company or move on to graduate school? The possibility of working in a church didn't even cross my mind. I couldn't imagine how church ministry could be part of my future.

One day after work I ran into the general manager of the company, Jerry. I realize now this brief meeting was a God encounter that changed my course in life. I had previously shared my struggle with Jerry, and on that day he told me I was welcome to stay at TeleCable and he would never fire me. But then he went on to say he didn't believe God's plan was for me to stay. He felt my destiny was to finish what God started, and if a church wasn't the next step, I should honor God and continue on to graduate school. Jerry was a godly and wise man, and like a word from heaven, his words went straight

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to my heart. Everything I knew, everything that was comfortable and familiar, I was about to lose.

I applied to Fuller Theological Seminary, was accepted, and attended the Pasadena campus. With my previous experience, I quickly landed a job with another cable company. Unlike Jerry at TeleCable, however, my new boss did everything he could to make my life miserable. Looking back, I think it was God's way of pushing me away from the comfort of working with a cable company and toward staying focused on graduate school and the possibility of working in a church. My schedule was tough, and it seemed as though every hour was spent attending class, working, studying, or sleeping. On the positive side, California felt like home. It was odd, since I was raised in Ohio and had just spent four years in Missouri, but when I moved to California in 1982, I felt as though I had come home.

I took morning classes or night classes and worked for the cable company in the afternoon. I felt as though I had a foot in both worlds. Most of the graduate students were already involved in ministry, but I remained outside that circle. I doubted myself. I felt inadequate. But I stayed. I struggled. I obeyed. Mostly I tried not to think about it.

I remember my guidance counselor at Fuller saying, "You're good. You try hard. But you can't graduate with a master's degree until you actually work at a church."

After a year and a half I decided to quit the job at the cable company. I remember wondering what I was going to do without the security of that job and no other possibilities before me. Shortly after, however, using a connection through my friend Doug Schmidt, God opened a door and gave me the opportunity to work as an intern for Pastor Paul Currie, who retired within a year. I had no church background and limited connections, so the very fact that I was accepted as an intern under such conditions was a miracle in itself. Although I wondered how God would provide, I felt at peace knowing my career was in his hands.

Somewhere during this time I came across 1 Corinthians 2:1–5:

When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and

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persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power.

I felt as though God gave those verses directly to me when I needed them the most. I suddenly realized I was not alone in feeling inadequate; many before me had felt the same way. In fact, all I had to do was trust God, and his power would see me through whatever challenges were ahead. Of course that didn't erase all of my self-doubt and fear, but I knew that I didn't need wise and eloquent words and I was confident that God, through the Holy Spirit, would provide for my shortcomings. It was nothing short of life-changing. I remember

*It is interesting  
to note that  
Jesus didn't pick  
the Who's Who  
in Jerusalem.*

telling my mom, and she told me she had known I was destined for ministry from the time I accepted Christ. She was only waiting for me to catch on!

When Christ called the original disciples, what was the first requirement? *Follow me*. That is a very low bar. It is interesting to note that Jesus didn't pick the Who's Who in Jerusalem—the people with the most influence or the ones with the most biblical education (which by the way would have been the Pharisees and Sadducees). Instead, he picked the most obedient. Christ can use you in your weakness and fear if you will only obey and follow him. As I read this verse (Matt. 4:19) for what seemed like the first time, I realized God could use me too.

We are all on the same team, and if we work together we can accomplish a great deal. Since my Fuller days I have worked on staff for five churches of five different denominations—small churches (just north of one hundred members), medium-size churches, and megachurches. If the focus is on Jesus, amazing things can happen regardless of size and denomination.

You will never have all of the answers. But you don't have to have all of the answers; you just need to obey. If I had given in to my self-doubt and fear, I would be comfortably working in a cable company today.

## Questions

These questions are intended to spark your thinking. Don't feel you have to answer all of them at one sitting. After reflecting on them, mark one in every chapter that particularly stands out to you. Then

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when you have finished reading the book, take some time and go back to the questions you marked and consider them from your new perspective. Have fun.

What are some of the things you are afraid of losing when you think about reorganizing or starting your small group ministry?

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As you look at your life story, where do you see the hand of God?

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Are there any new areas where you feel God might be leading you now?

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Is there anything you are clinging to that might be a hindrance to God moving you into a new direction?

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