

**“Willow Creek, Saddleback and the Metachurch Model” by Joel Comiskey<sup>1</sup>**  
*(Statistics are from 1996 when this tutorial was written. The content directly follows the excerpted article from Unit 4 entitled The Pure Cell Model Compared with the Metachurch Model. This article refers to information included in that comparison..)*

## **Willow Creek Community Church**

1. Probably the most well-known church in the United States at this time is Willow Creek Community Church. It is being promoted as the church of the future—the new way to reach a secularized culture for Jesus Christ. George Hunter calls it, ‘the most visible apostolic experiment in the U.S. today’ (1996:14).

### **History of the Church**

In 1975, Bill Hybels started this church with a vision to plant a church for the unchurched. However, Bill was not alone. A group of young adults who were all graduates of an innovative youth ministry accompanied Bill in the founding of Willow Creek Community Church. The goal was to plant a church for those who couldn’t handle traditional religion (Hunter 1996:14).

### **Growth of the Church**

Like a sprinter racing from the blocks, this church has not looked back. Starting from scratch in 1975, the church now has a huge facility that can seat 4,500 people and as of June, 1996 was averaging 15,000 to 16,000 people in their three seeker-sensitive services (note 65). The church also has 1400 small groups to care for the needs of their growing congregation (note 66).

### **Core Values**

From my research on Willow Creek Community Church, three core values stood out:

Commitment to reach the unchurched

The philosophy of the church is built around how to reach ‘unchurched Harry’, This fictitious person who represents the secular man or woman today who could care less about traditional religion. Everything that is done in their weekly seeker-sensitive services has the unchurched person in mind (note 67).

Commitment to Small Groups

Although from the beginning small groups were important, it wasn’t until 1990 that small groups became a priority (Hunter 1996: 93). The church found that the only way to disciple those who had come to Christ was through a small group ministry. Bill Hybels says, “...virtually every

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<sup>1</sup>This article is excerpted with permission from Joel Comiskey, *Strategies for Cell-based Ministry Today* by Joel Comiskey (A Ph.D. Tutorial Presented to Dr. C. Peter Wagner In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Doctor of Philosophy In Intercultural Studies, The School of World Mission, Fuller Theological Seminary, July 1996); available at <http://www.joelcomiskeygroup.com/articles/tutorials/CellStrategy-Part1.html>.

significant decision and step of growth I've made in the last decade of ministry have come in the context of community, ... That's why we want Willow Creek not to be a church that offers small groups but to become a church of small groups" (1995:178).

Jim Dethmer, the leading small group pastor at Willow Creek says it this way, "Our goal is to make average, ordinary lay person extra-ordinarily successful in shepherding the six to ten people entrusted to their care" (George 1994:59).

### Commitment to Excellence

Those who have made their pilgrimage to one of the many seminars at Willow Creek come back with this thought on their lips---Willow Creek is committed to excellence (note 68). Everything they do is first class. The phrases 'high powered' and 'perfectly orchestrated' aptly describe this ministry. Jim Egli of Touch Ministries reminded me that Willow Creek is located in a very wealthy area and thus has the resources to do a first class job (note 69).

## **The Small Group Ministry**

I could say much more about the Willow Creek Model. Loads of material has been written about their innovative seeker sensitive services. However, when studying Willow Creek, my main concern was how they conduct their small group ministry.

### **Meta Model**

Willow Creek openly declares that they have espoused the Meta Model of small group ministry. The characteristics of the Meta Model are clearly seen:

Flexibility

Variety

Jethro Model (note 70)

Small groups supporting the program.

### **Variety Of Groups**

There are four basic types of groups at Willow Creek Community Church:

#### Discipleship Groups

These are curriculum oriented small groups (six unit course) which runs on a two year life cycle. For the most part, they are considered closed groups (except in special circumstances). This type of small group can meet anywhere.

#### Service groups

These groups are made up of volunteer people. They are task oriented groups. The groups are built around the particular program. For example, when the drama group meets together for practice, they would pray, have a lesson, etc. Wayne, the

staff person responsible for information in the church, told me that the bread and butter groups at Willow Creek are now these service groups. He said that previously, the discipleship groups were the most important groups.

#### Seeker small groups

These small groups are made up of six to eight people. The goals of these groups is to reach non-Christians.

#### Community groups

These are larger groups of up to fifteen people. They meet in a community near the church. According to Wayne, these groups are a 'holding place' or a 'beginning place' for those who haven't yet found a service group. In other words, it's sort of a fishing pool for the service groups. These groups normally meet once per month.

### **Curriculum**

All groups can choose whatever curriculum that they want. The only criteria is that it's sold in the Willow Creek bookstore.

### **Meeting Places**

Many of the groups meet in the church. I was told that the group might arrive 1 ½ hours before their regular scheduled activity takes place. There are many rooms in the church's huge building where these small gatherings can meet.

### **Administration**

The church follows the Jethro Model. They have coaches who are over five small group leaders. They have a division leaders over five coaches. Right now, there are twenty five division leaders on staff in the church. Under each division leader is ten to fifteen coaches. The information flows down from the division leader to the coach to the leader. The coaches and the division leaders are supposed to visit, council and generally pastor those under their care.

### **Ongoing Training**

There are leadership training sessions for small group leaders every year (note 71). There are training sessions for coaches (over 5 cell leaders) every month or every other month. Due to the fact that there are no regular cell leader training session, a lot depends on the visitation and care of the coaches and division leaders.

### **Multiplication**

According to Wayne, there is no time set for multiplication. The multiplication takes place naturally as the group members invite friends and family. Although Wayne gave me the impression that there was no pressure to multiply, the Willow Creek Small Group Leadership Handbook talks about reproduction as an important goal. It says,

Success in leadership of a small group is ultimately seen in the viability of daughter

groups....The new group can only be considered viable if it eventually births a new group itself. In this model, a 'Senior Leader' is someone who's birthed at least three groups, which in turn have birthed new groups---in other words, a leader with at least three small group' grandchildren (p. 3 in Hunter 1996:96).

## **Evaluation**

Willow Creek is truly a work of the Almighty God. It embodies the motivation of Paul, the apostle, who sought to become all things to all men (I Cor. 9: 19-23). This general principle of using 'bait' that will attract men and women for Jesus Christ is a needed emphasis in the church today.

However, as in any model that God has greatly blessed, there is the danger of copying it verbatim, without analyzing the contextual factors. It seems to me that this danger is especially present in the Willow Creek Church because of the high financial and cultural level of the church. In other words, the type of high tech program at Willow Creek demands large resources and talent that many churches simply do not have.

Concerning the small group system used at Willow Creek, several questions arise in my mind:

I wonder how many of the task or service groups can reach non-Christians for Jesus Christ. If in fact the service groups are centered around a ministry task, It seems unlikely that a non-Christian is going to join that particular ministry function (most of these groups meet before or after their particular task).

Because the task groups are central at Willow Creek, I wonder about the dynamics and the components of small group life at Willow Creek. Are the groups simply scaled down programs that support the larger machinery of the church? How much of the life of the true church is manifest in many of these gatherings? Can a group meeting 1 ½ hours before their church task, experience the vital life of a home cell group? Without a further, more in-depth study, these questions cannot be fully answered, but my initial observations cause me to raise these questions.

## **Saddleback Community Church**

Saddleback Church is Southern California version of the Willow Creek model. Instead of unchurched Harry (Willow Creek), this church is after 'Saddleback Sam' (Seminar 1995:18). Rick Warren founded the church in 1980 with only his family, his trailer, and a big vision (note 72). Today the church has grown to over 10,000 people in attendance with 6300 members.

After moving seventy-nine different times, the church is finally constructing their own building (Seminar 1995). They are located on 127 acres of property and they're using 75 acres right now. In 1997, the church had planted some twenty-six daughter churches (note 73).

## **Core Values**

Commitment to Reaching the Lost

This seems to be the key foundation upon which the church is built. Before starting public services, Pastor Rick did a neighborhood survey to discover why the Saddleback Community were not attending church. Based on their responses, he designed his methodology. One of the key principles at Saddleback is to 'let the target audience determine the approach' (Seminar 1995: 25). Carefully designed seeker-sensitive services attract non-Christians who would never enter a traditional church.

There first goal is to reach the uninitiated through an attractive service or other programmed events that will attract non-Christian people. They try to attract the crowd at first. We were told that they have a core value of making it very easy for people to come to church.

They are also into campaigns. They recently had a "love-campaign for 50 days. Out of that campaign, they asked people to commit to 8-week group life, hoping they'll continue longer in small groups.

Commitment to a well-defined purpose based on the Bible

I, along with over 1000 pastors, recently crammed into a Baptist Church in Ohio to attend one of Rick Warren's Purpose Driven Church seminars. In a nutshell, the seminar emphasized the need to have a clear Biblical purpose for ministry, as opposed to being led by church tradition or even new, successful methodology. In his most recent book, *The Purpose Driven Church*, Rick delineates his clear cut philosophy of ministry. One of the pithy slogans that he uses to describe his philosophy is: *A GREAT COMMITMENT TO THE GREAT COMMANDMENT AND THE GREAT COMMISSION WILL GROW A GREAT CHURCH*. The church's mission statement reads, "To bring people to Jesus and membership in his family, develop them to Christlike maturity, and equip them for their ministry in the church and their life mission in the world, in order to magnify God's name (Seminar 1995:10).

The five purposes explained to me were:

Fellowship

Discipleship

Serving

Evangelism

Worship

The glue that holds these purposes together is balance. There is no real order. The key is balance. Yet Mark Carver admitted that there are ebbs and flows in this whole area of balance.

Commitment to lay involvement

Pastor Rick is committed to allowing the laity to minister. He makes a strong point that ministry placement is a top priority at Saddleback (Seminar 1995:43). The four pillars of the church in this area are:

Every believer is a minister

Every ministry is important

We are dependent on each other

Ministry is an expression of my spiritual gifts, heart, abilities, personality, and expenses.

## **The Small Group Ministry**

More than half (56%) of the 6300 members attend one of the 250 small groups at Saddleback Church. Pastor Rick's commitment to small groups can be seen by the following statement,

“One of the biggest fears members have about growth is how to maintain that ‘small church’ feeling or fellowship as their church grows. The antidote to this fear is to develop small groups within your church.... Our church must always be growing larger and smaller at the same time.... you can't share personal prayer requests in the crowd. Small affinity groups, on the other hand, are perfect for creating a sense of intimacy and close fellowship. It's there that everybody knows your name. When you are absent, people notice” (1995:325,326).

### **Meta Model?**

I have classified this church under the Meta Model due to the characteristics of Saddleback's small group ministry. However, the church does not officially line up with any particular model.

### **Pastoral Emphasis**

The emphasis in the small groups at Saddleback church is more pastoral than outreach oriented. Rick Warren doubts that in today's society, non-Christians can be effectively won to Christ in a small group environment. Rather, he feels that non-Christians are more likely to be reached in a large gathering (note 74). Therefore, the small groups at Saddleback function to integrate the new believers and old time members into the life of the church. Rick says, “Small groups are the most effective way of closing the back door of your church. We never worry about losing people who are connected to a small group. We know that those people have been effectively assimilated” (1995:327).

### **Variety Of Groups**

Variety is a key buzz word at Saddleback. It seems that any type of group is acceptable. The leaders are free to pick the group of their choice. All they have to do is come to the office with a purpose statement which details their focus, their plans, and what they expect that their groups will look like. In other words, they can design the group as they please. Some of these designs are more general while others are very specific (empty nesters, teens, 21 years or more groups, single women over 35 who have never gotten married, etc.). Most groups come under one of four categories:

Maturity groups

These are discipleship groups that use a particular curriculum. They meet on a given

night in the church to go over questions that are presented in the didactic materials. These groups are closed and meet for the purpose of promoting Christian maturity. There are thirty five of these groups at Saddleback.

### Ministry groups

These groups might include Sunday School teachers, traffic ministries, ushers, etc. They might meet once every month. They are also closed groups (note 75). There are about twenty five of these groups in the church.

### Mission Groups

These groups meet every Wednesday night. Actually, they are sub groups from the larger congregational gathering. Their focus group is new believers. The new believer will attend the first part of the Wednesday night meeting and then will go into a particular classroom to receive instruction. These groups meet for nine to ten weeks. There are twenty five such mission groups

### Home groups

The home groups are for anyone in the church. The focus is fellowship and nurture. There are 150 such groups in the church at this time. To their credit, they now have some 700 groups meeting off campus. When I asked how often those groups meet, Pastor Steve Gladen seemed unsure (I think the statistical tracking is lacking). He guessed that 40% met bimonthly while 60% met each week.

## Purpose Driven Home Groups

I did appreciate the fact that they've tried to make each home group more purpose driven. They try to get each person in the cell to crawl, walk, and run.

Rick Warren also has made a big change in this area. For a long time, he was focused on the purpose driven church, but more and more he's been focused on the purpose driven life (a new book coming out soon). Supposedly, this helped him focus more on small groups in the church.

## Mixed Signals

Yet, we were told by Mark Carver that the main purpose of the small group is discipleship and fellowship. In other words, people come to Christ in the big group and then receive fellowship in the smaller group. Small groups are primarily there to get people connected. The idea is:

Come to a weekend

Get connected

Serve

Yet, there are both primary groups and secondary groups. Primary groups fulfill all the five purposes, whereas the secondary groups only fulfill some of them.

We were also given mixed signals about whether off-campus cells are more promoted than on-campus cells. In fact, an illustration was given of Steve Gladen's wife who brought a non-Christian to a 22-week doctrine class that broke up into a small group during the class.

They want everyone at Saddleback is growing in Christ. They don't have Sunday school because of space. They have a traditional home group. They have growth in the classroom. This is a value of the church here.

### **Administration**

I was told that apart from promotion on Sunday morning, Rick Warren is not intimately involved in the small group leadership (note 76). Other staff people, under Rick, handle these responsibilities. From what I understand, the administrative system is not very complex at Saddleback. They emphasize the role of district lay pastor (20 of these district lay pastors at this time)

These lay volunteer people are assigned to oversee six to eight small groups per quarter. The ministry assignment of these volunteer lay pastors is diverse. For example, I was told that a lay pastor might be asked to serve communion to a small group. To be a lay pastor, one must take the training session taught by pastor Rick and pastor John, as well as pass through a personal interview conducted by the top leadership of the church.

The cell leaders do not turn in a report every week; rather, the lay pastors call the cell leader to ask about the average attendance in the small group during the month. In comparison with other small group models, the administrative structure at Saddleback is very is very loose.

It's interesting how Saddleback advertises the availability of the small groups. From what I understand, when a group reaches twelve to fourteen people, it will no longer be advertised by the church. Only those groups which are smaller are made available for the general congregation.

### **Flexibility**

If there was one value that underlies the small group ministry at Saddleback, it's flexibility. The small group ministry at Saddleback is flexible with regard to:

#### Multiplication

Groups are encouraged to multiply but not required (some have been going for fifteen years)

#### Meetings

Groups meet when they want, as much as they want, and break when they want

#### Assistants

Small groups are encouraged to have an assistant, but not required.

## Leadership training

When I asked about ongoing leadership training, again, that word ‘flexibility’ was mentioned. They have tried different things such as quarterly meeting, Saturday training, etc. It seems that they are still trying to decide what pattern to follow.

## Curriculum

The small group leaders pick their own materials. When they talk with pastor John, they discuss the type of material they will study.

## Evaluation

Saddleback church is doing something right. Any Evangelical, Bible preaching church that can attract more than 10,000 people Sunday after Sunday deserves to be applauded. The strengths of Saddleback include the innovative techniques for reaching secular people, a clear, concise philosophy of ministry, strong pastoral leadership, and definite, visionary goals (note 78).

However, I was not impressed by their small group ministry. Here are some of the reasons for that statement:

**Low Participation:** Only about one third of those who attend the church are in a small group. This fact alone tells me that small groups at Saddleback are one program among many and are not at the very heart of the church. I believe Saddleback now has 50% participation in home small groups.

**Lack of Direction:** There seems to be a lack of clear cut goals and plans for the small group ministry at Saddleback. I almost sensed that the goal was ‘flexibility’ (not to have much of a system). I interpret a lot of this flexibility as actually being a hindrance to greater effectiveness in their small group ministry.

**Little Quality Control:** Since each leader decides on the materials, the target group, etc., it seems to me that a potential leader would need to be very creative and gifted to maintain a successful group. Their system isn’t conducive to produce multiplying cell groups.

**Lack of Clear Small Group Driven Focus:**

The plethora of ministries mixed in with small groups tell me that there is no clear direction in the church.

For example, they invite non-Christians to serve in the traffic ministry and these ministries serve as functional ministry groups. The choir is considered a fellowship group. They have some 150 ministries in the church. How these all fit together, I don’t know. In fact, from outside the celebration area, the plethora of “ministry booths” spoke to me about variety being the key option.

[NOTE 70:](#)