

Sticky Church

Authour: Larry Osborne
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We've often become so focused on reaching people that we've forgotten the importance of keeping people and that's the thesis of this book: Our churches need to be stickier. My goal is to provide you with a working model that you can adopt and change until it's ready to be put into play in your unique ministry setting. Much of this story will be told through the lens of North Coast Church, located in a suburb north of San Diego.

The sermon-based small group model worked just as well when we were a small church of less than two hundred adults as they do today in a multisite megachurch with more than seven thousand in weekend attendance. So here's the North Coast story. We've never marketed or advertised. Basically, what we've done is to take most of the energy and resources we would have spent on special programming and front-door events and instead poured it into making our church more welcoming and sticky. Everything we do is aimed at helping the Christians we already have grow stronger in Christ. But everything is done in such a way that their non-Christian friends will understand all that we're saying and doing. Bottom line: We've tried to create a perfect storm for come-and-see evangelism while velcro-ing newcomers for long-term spiritual growth.

The 80 Percent Factor. By far the most powerful tool for keeping our back door shut and making the church sticky has been our commitment to sermon-based small groups. In fact, the most important number to know about North Coast Church is not the weekend attendance. It's the percentage of adults who participate in one of our small groups. Since 1985 that number has equaled at least 80 percent of our average weekend attendance. We use the following formula to determine how many are in our groups. First, we only count groups that meet under the umbrella of our small group ministry. To determine our percentage in small groups, we take the average weekend adult attendance in the month of October and figure out what 80 percent of that number is. Then we check to see how many people are in our growth groups (the name we use for our organized small groups). For us, this number should equal or exceed the 80 percent figure every year. So far it has.

Scalability The same principles that made us sticky at two hundred and four hundred have kept us sticky at thousands. The same emphasis that made us healthy as a small church—our focus on closing the back door and velcroing people to sermon-based small groups—has kept us healthy as a large church.

Killing the Dream When I gave up the dream of reaching everyone outside the church, I was suddenly free to focus on n taking care of those who were already inside the church. I hate to admit it , I was using the people I already had to reach the people I wanted to reach. They weren't sheep to be cared for; they were tools to be utilized. And while I doted on every new person who came through the front door, more and more were walking out the back door. I now realize that's because people who come through the front door of a church through word-of-mouth referrals have a fundamentally different experience than do those who come as the result of a marketing campaign. What matters is that those who come find a ministry and relationships worthy of spontaneous word-of-mouth recommendations. When that happens, a church is primed to hold on to the people it already has and the people they bring with them.

It led to three major changes. First, it changed the way I related to our lay leadership team. - a sticky church needs a healthy leadership team composed of people who genuinely like one another, share the same vision, and pull in the same direction. The second big change was in the way I taught and led our congregation - finding a way to help these people discover a path to spirituality that worked for them, one that would enable them to finish the race—not by excusing sin but by accommodating their slower pace. The third change involved launching a small group ministry focused primarily on building significant relationships rather than growing the church.

Why Stickier Churches Are Healthier Churches

Churches that close the back door effectively do so by serving their congregations so well that the people don't want to leave. And happy sheep are incurable word-of-mouth marketers.

Basic laws of retention - whatever you do to reach people you have to continue to do to keep them. A word-of-mouth church also has some significant advantages when it comes to evangelism, follow-up, and assimilation. It takes place whenever someone shares a spiritual need or interest and we respond by inviting him or her to come to a Bible study, to attend a church service, or just to hang out with some of our Christian friends. While every service is designed to help Christians become better Christians, it is always done in a way that non-Christians can understand everything that's said and takes place. That makes it much easier for even the most introverted and reserved among us to say with confidence when a friend or coworker expresses a spiritual interest or need, "Why don't you just come and see?" *Natural Follow-Up* - Friends don't need a follow-up program to remind them to ask, "How'd you like it? Any questions I can answer? Do you want to come again?"

Natural Assimilation - Friends don't have to be reminded to assimilate friends. They do so naturally—and enthusiastically.

Proficiency in opening the front door tends to blind us to any growing problems at the back door. And by the time we notice, it's too often a huge hole that can't be closed easily.

How small groups changed everything

Most spiritual growth doesn't come as a result of a training program or a set curriculum. It comes as a result of life putting us in what I like to call a need-to-know or need-to-grow situation. We all learn best when we understand why a topic is important, and we change best—well, when we have to.

The focus of a sermon-based small group is not so much on the curriculum as it is on the process. The ultimate goal of a sermon-based small group is simply to Velcro people to the two things they will need most when faced with a need-to-know or need-to-grow situation: the Bible and other Christians. The simple process of handling the Scriptures on a regular basis and looking into them to see what they say sets the stage for future need-to-know or need-to-grow moments.

While many church leaders claim that small groups are an integral part of their ministry, I've learned that two simple measurements will always tell me their real place in a ministry's pecking order: (1) the percentage of adults who attend a small group, and (2) the participation level of senior staff and key lay leaders.

By far the most important of these measures is the participation level of a church's leaders. If they're fully and visibly involved - the congregation usually follows. It's the key to reaching critical mass—the all-important stage at which the full power and benefits of a small group

ministry begin to impact the ethos, DNA, and spiritual health of nearly everything and everyone. Getting there usually requires that somewhere between 40 to 60 percent of the average weekend adult attendance be involved in a small group. If fewer people participate, small groups will still have a profound effect, but it will be primarily on the individuals in them, not on the entire church.

When this happens, small groups open up lots of new opportunities for frontline ministry. I noticed the demise of a great falsehood that cripples our churches: the *Holy Man myth*. It's the idea that pastors and clergy somehow have a more direct line to God. Once people begin to realize that God's anointing and spiritual power aren't restricted to the guy who speaks each Sunday, they whine a lot less when he's not available.

The Holy Place Myth – A significant small group ministry undercuts this myth because when people begin to see God at work in their apartments and living rooms, they start to realize that a baptism can take place in a swimming pool, that Communion can be celebrated around a dining table, and that God is just as likely to answer their prayers in the e front room as he is to answer mine in the front of the sanctuary.

How Sermon-Based Small Groups Made Me a Much Better Preacher

Increased Attentiveness What changed was the congregation's awareness that they were going to discuss the message later. *Increased Note Taking* That alone had a significant impact. - even the most note-resistant listeners tend to write something down, because they know they'll be discussing the key points later in the week

Sermon-based small groups also made it much easier for our teaching team to keep the entire church *focused and headed in the same direction*. Whether we're casting vision, clarifying direction, or simply dealing with an important issue, it's much easier to get people on the same page and keep them there.

One of the great advantages of a sermon-based lecture-lab model is that it exposes people multiple times to a passage, principle, or spiritual truth. It helps move them from the inspired and familiarity stages toward a working knowledge of God's Word and biblical principles. And it happens simply because the process makes everyone listen more attentively, encourages note taking, causes most people to review the sermon once again, and then ends in a spirited discussion with friends.

How Sermon-Based Small Groups Made Us a Much Better Church

It's a relatively short step from listening to a sermon to joining a small group that discusses the sermon he's already heard. But it's a much bigger step into a traditional small group Bible study. That's because if people don't perceive a natural connection to the worship service, they tend to feel like they're signing up for the equivalent of a spiritual honors course—hardly the type of thing most window-shoppers or marginally interested Christians are looking for.

Sermon-based groups also make it easier to mainstream new believers. That's because these groups tend to be less intimidating for those who lack any spiritual or biblical background. The truth is, if we want to disciple people, the best thing to do is not to separate out all the newbies. It's to get them into a situation where they can rub shoulders with longtime Christians and benefit from life-on-life modeling and mentoring from those who've learned what it means to live out their faith on a day-to-day basis.

Other advantages:

Because they've already heard the sermon, everyone comes to the meeting with at least forty-five minutes of preparation (the length of a typical weekend sermon at North Coast). Sermon-

based small groups only need a facilitator who has a growing relationship with God and a heart for the people in the group.

Why Some Groups Jell and Some Don't

The Right Size - The ideal size for a group of married couples is usually twelve to fourteen people. For singles, eight to twelve can be ideal. If less - too small to sustain long-term energy and focus. It's an awkward dynamic that lends itself more to just hanging out than diligently working through the assignment. When a group gets too large, it loses stickiness. We've found that whenever a couples group reaches sixteen people (or a singles group reaches fourteen), attendance becomes predictably inconsistent.

The Right People - We've found that the sermon-based small groups that have the greatest life-on-life impact and stay together the longest are always those in which the friendships are deepest. That's why we tell people to choose a group primarily according to who else is in it rather than where or when it meets. A much stronger likelihood of future friendship exists when we build groups around shared interests or a common station in life. That's why we've instituted groups for singles, peace officers, newlyweds, blended families, parents of teens, and a host of others. I call the people in these groups "schooling fish" because they naturally stick together and easily accept and bond with others who share their same interests or station in life. There is one grouping that works particularly well - New Groups for New People.

I think of people as being like Lego blocks. We all have a limited number of connectors. Introverts have a few. Some extroverts have dozens. But either way, once they're full, they're full. And when that happens, we tend to be friendly but to not connect. It's what happens when you move to a new town and are excited by everyone's friendliness, only to be discouraged three months later that you haven't connected with anyone. The reality is, it's not so much a church full of cliques as it is a church full of people whose connectors are already full. New people, by definition, have lots of empty connectors. The same holds true for our new groups for new people. The people in them tend to bond quickly. From a distance, these groups appear to be far less homogeneous than a typical station-in-life group. But in reality they are very homogeneous. All the members share a lack of existing relationships and a deep desire for connectedness. It's a strong bond on which to build.

Contrast this with the common practice of dividing existing groups to make more openings. The unintended consequence is often a case of friendliness without connection. Those who come from the previously existing groups show up with an already overloaded set of connectors. While they might genuinely desire to reach out and build new relationships with those who are new to the group, their relational overload makes it unlikely that they will connect outside of the meeting. They don't have the time or the energy. On the other hand, the new folks have lots of empty connectors. And while they are likely to appreciate the friendly atmosphere during the meeting, they're usually looking for something more than a couple of hours of friendly banter at a Bible study.

What Happens When a Sermon-Based Small Group Meets

In reality there is no such thing as a typical meeting in the sermon-based small group format - there is a basic template. But the model morphs into endless iterations so easily that our template functions more like a launching point than a blueprint.

1. Refreshments
2. Sharing

3. Study and Discussion – To improve the quality of the discussion, we work hard to make sure that everyone comes with their answers to the study questions already filled out. One of the most effective ways we do this is by having our leaders periodically ask people to read what they've written down - "Inspect what you expect". All the questions are provided in the worship bulletin beforehand (and posted on our website for those who miss the service or listen online). The homework always consists of three types of questions: Getting to Know Me, Into the Bible, and Application. They are seldom labeled as such, and they don't necessarily follow that order. But ideally every question should fall into one of these categories. Our goal is not to neurotically review everything the pastor says; it's to connect people to one another and get them to dig deeper into the Scriptures.

4. Prayer

5. Freedom to Digress – I don't care all that much if a group deviates, as long as it's led of the Spirit or in response to the needs of the group.

6. Worship

7. Service Projects and Socials – We ask every group to take on at least one service project a year (the ideal is two) and to have at least one social gathering per quarter. To make sure that good intentions become reality, we monitor the service projects.

Overcoming the Time Crunch

As a rule of thumb, most people will participate in only two time slots a week. No matter what that third meeting is for or when it takes place, it's hard to get anyone to show up. At North Coast we've chosen to adjust our ministry to this reality. Our entire church and our sermon-based small groups are designed to work within the two-time-slot paradigm.

We chose to radically cut competition because we felt that none of these other programs had the potential to provide the breadth and depth of significant relationships, or the laserlike focus on God's Word, that we could achieve with sermon-based small groups. Without cutting the competition so severely, there is no way we ever could have reached an 80 percent participation rate in our small group program. And without keeping things trimmed back, we wouldn't have been able to sustain it, either. Admittedly, it's much easier to cut the competition in a small or start-up ministry. All you have to do is say no. In more-established ministries, layer upon layer of competition already exists. When that's the case, it's best to simply stop adding new programs and let the dying ones die. Over time, this will create a void large enough for sermon-based small groups to thrive.

Leader Meetings - I've come to believe that one of the major reasons it's so hard to find and keep quality leaders in our churches is that we've chased them away with unrealistic time demands. We now have just two major meetings a year. The first is a Friday night fall kickoff designed to recharge and refocus everyone as we restart after our summer break. The other is a halftime refocus that takes place in January. Leaders and hosts also meet for training and updating two other times a year—but these meetings are now held simultaneously with our worship services, meaning they no longer demand an extra night out. Another way we've cut down on the number of meetings for our leaders has been by providing weekly training and insider information through an audio recording that can be picked up on a leaders' CD at any of the weekend services or accessed online. Our typical weekly training audios run ten to fifteen minutes max. Another way we've dealt with the time crunch is to take the summer off.

Determine Your Primary Purpose

Some see small groups as the ideal vehicle for discipleship. Some think they're the perfect tool for evangelism. Some view them as the secret to unlimited church growth. Still others use them to shepherd the flock, administrate the church, provide for deep Bible study, or produce an environment that fosters no-holds-barred sharing and prayer. And then there are always those who just want everyone to have some friends. At North Coast we made it clear from the beginning that our primary purpose would be to foster significant Christ-centered relationships. Everything else was secondary. It all starts with our mission. We describe it this way: Making disciples in a healthy church environment.

Here is my bottom-line concern. If we focus our small groups on evangelism, deeper discipleship, church growth, or shepherding, when and where will we meet the widespread need for significant and sticky relationships that launched our small group ministries in the first place? What will we use to take their place? I've never found a better tool for creating and sustaining authentic Christian relationships than healthy small groups. That's why, despite nearly constant pressure to add a new initiative or veer off in the direction of some other good and important aspect of ministry, I've refused to let our original focus on relationships be sacrificed on the altar of other important tasks, no matter how essential they may be.

To measure the quality of relationships, I look for stories of mortgages and rents being paid, meals provided, hospital visits, holidays and vacations spent together, encouragement, and tough confrontations. All in all, the same stuff I'd look for in a healthy extended family. The best way to see the most people grow deeper in their walk with God is not by having a few folks gather for an in-depth study and worship. It's by having lots of folks tightly velcroed to other Christians and the Scriptures for the long haul.

What Revisioning and Reengineering Really Means

The clearest sign that many of our popular small group models aren't working as advertised is the constant level of revisioning and reengineering that goes on in the movement and within our churches. The turnovers in leadership and changes in direction remind me of a giant game of musical chairs. Even the most prominent churches and those that provide conferences on how to do small groups keep changing horses and riders midstream, often swapping one model or leader for another. Let's be honest. Things that work well and fulfill their purpose don't go through a series of major revisions and reengineering—which are simply code words for “We're starting all over again. To my thinking, the major culprits have been an idealism that expects small groups to do too much, and a form of mission creep that has them quickly veering off to chase everything except their original purpose. Unfortunately, every time that happens, the congregation's confidence in the credibility of the leadership and in the effectiveness of small groups is eroded, making each restart harder than the last one. In contrast, by staying fearlessly focused on sticky relationships, our sermon-based small groups have been able to provide powerful, life-changing relationships for decades without the need to revision or reengineer. And they've done so despite radical changes in the size, complexity, and makeup of both our ministry and our community.

Entry Points and Escape Routes

The Weasel Factor People won't stick with things or groups that make them uncomfortable. Maybe they should. But they don't. So they weasel out. What's the best way to avoid the weasel factor? Make it unnecessary. Give people pain-free off-ramps and easy escape routes. Make them plentiful. We do that by limiting our small group sessions to just ten weeks. We also give new members the first three weeks to decide whether to opt in for the rest of the session or bail

out. No questions asked. At the end of each ten-week session we ask everyone to fill out a brief evaluation form. There are three options:

1 - continue in this group. 2 - be taking a break. 3 - try a new group.

It's a big deal. By making it simpler and socially acceptable to make the change, we greatly decrease the odds of a one-and-done experience and increase the odds that they'll give another group a shot.

How Groups Grow Deeper

But just as the relationships in a group can't be forced, neither can spiritual depth. Groups must be allowed to grow deeper at their own speed. When pushed or coerced to go too deep too fast, people will inevitably head for the exits. Trial and crisis are easily the most powerful forces for bringing a group to a deep spiritual level. The path that turns strangers into a tightly knit spiritual family is pretty straightforward. Groups predictably go through the following stages.

Acquaintance – Friendship – Trust & Openness – Authenticity & Accountability

I came across a series of studies that indicated that the amount of time a group spends together correlates directly to the level of personal appreciation for one another and overall sense of group cohesiveness. In other words, it's not what people do in a group that matters as much as simply staying together for the long haul. If the real power for deeper relationships and spiritual growth is found in the process of spending time together grappling with the implications of the previous weekend's sermon and text, it doesn't matter all that much which sermon it is or where it fits in any given series.

Why Dividing Groups Is a Dumb Idea

Admittedly, dividing to multiply is an idea that looks good on paper. It sounds great at leadership conferences. It's organic, mirroring the cellular growth of the human body. It offers the potential for unlimited kingdom expansion. It encourages people to reach out to the lost. It forces new leaders to step up and take the reins.

But what about those who are in a small group? They generally hate the idea.

Unintended Consequences - People are a lot like Lego's - once those connectors are filled, our capacity for close and significant relationships is maxed out. It's inevitable that after a few cycles of splitting healthy groups, the quality of the relationships within the new groups starts to dissipate. That's because members have fewer and fewer connectors available with the start of each new group. They may have plenty of physical openings in their group, but they usually have few if any emotional openings in their lives. That explains why those who join a group in which half or more of the members come from a previously existing group so often complain that the group is a bit cliquish and hard to break into. In most cases the problem isn't cliquishness. It's a differing set of relational needs, expectations, and capacities.

Church members who repeatedly experience the death of their small group to start a new group begin to operate in a self-protective mode. They learn to keep relationships at a safe level—one that won't cause them too much hurt when the group disbands.

When ministry leaders convince people to join a small group to counteract the relational bankruptcy of our culture, and then immediately turn around and tell them that if they love Jesus, they'll split the group right after it jells, the leaders are sending a mixed message at best, a dishonest one at worst. Either people need the relational stability and deep relationships of a small group or they don't. Church leaders can't have it both ways.

Rather than ask healthy groups to divide, we not only allow them to stay together as long as they like; we encourage it. Some have been together for decades. Contrary to what many would predict, they haven't grown stale. But their members have grown older together with a dignity and beauty reminiscent of a time when communities had stability and people had roots. As for fresh blood, even our longest-lasting groups get their share of it, thanks to the normal transitions of life.

Seeding New Groups

Two strategies: starting new groups for new people, and hiving off leaders rather than dividing entire groups. We ask every small group leader in our existing groups to appoint an apprentice leader who will head up their group at least once a quarter. Then, at the end of each quarter, we contact the leaders and ask if anyone in their group (apprentice or not) is ready to step up and lead their own group. If one of the leaders suggests a name, we ask for permission to recruit that person as a potential leader. But if the current leader says, "No, this isn't a good time for me, our group, or the prospective leader," we move on. No pressure. No drive-by guiltin'g's.

Finding and Developing Leaders What to Look For

The most important trait to look for is *spiritual warmth*. By that I mean a growing relationship with Jesus. It's absolutely essential. No amount of giftedness, knowledge, or people skills can compensate for its absence. But don't confuse spiritual warmth with spiritual maturity. They are not the same. Spiritual warmth is characterized by obedience to the light we have. It can be found in a new Christian. It can be found in someone with a sketchy understanding of the Bible. Spiritual maturity, on the other hand, is different. It's godliness with a track record. It's equated with a solid grasp of Scripture, significant time in the faith, and a short list of other factors that varies from one tribe of Christians to another.

The sermon-based small group model demands a less skilled and less biblically literate leader. All you need is spiritual warmth. You don't need spiritual maturity.

The second essential trait in a good leader is *relational warmth*. People with low social skills or low emotional intelligence make lousy small group leaders.

Whom to Avoid

Anyone who is hyper-spiritual, constantly peppering their speech with God-talk, makes for a terrible small group leader. They squash any sense of authenticity or honesty in a group.

Another kind of leader who will destroy a group is the single-issue crusader. It almost impossible for a single-issue crusader to appropriately deal with legitimate differences in the body of Christ.

The Best Fishing Pools are found within the groups you already have. The key prerequisite to being a leader is not a stint as an apprentice; it's a firsthand experience in one our groups. The best way to find new leaders is to ask for recommendations. The worst way is to ask for volunteers.

The Worst Fishing Pools are found among those who previously held a leadership position in another church or served in a parachurch ministry.

Training Leaders

When we at North Coast Church began our small group ministry we fell into a common trap. We over-trained.

Time Shifting - Another way we've made the training process more accessible is by shifting it to a time when our leaders are already at the church. Training our small group leaders during our worship services — in a separate meeting, during my sermon. All we had to do was provide them with a CD of the message at the end of their meeting. The result has been greater participation, more effective training, and better leaders—and a few extra empty seats in the worship center for visitors.

Need-Based Training - Instead of overloading leaders with information, we just answer the phone when it rings and give them the information and help they need when they need it.

What Every Rookie Needs to Know - New leaders need to know some spiritual basics. To get all this across, we add an extra half-day training session to the fall kickoff. The rest of the rookie track material is covered during a couple of Sunday morning mid-quarter training sessions. When they meet separately from the veterans. Our goal with rookies is twofold. We want to expose them to basic information and processes they'll need to lead a healthy group. And we want them to know we're here to help the moment they're faced with something they either are uncomfortable with or can't handle on their own.

Veteran leaders and hosts simply need to be reminded that we're available, just a phone call or email away. The content of the veteran training is not particularly important. It has to be relevant and helpful.

Why Cho's Model Didn't work in Your Church

Most small group programs and methods don't work very well. They haven't for a long time. There's a huge gap between what we claim they do and what they actually accomplish. , it's become standard practice for any church with a small group ministry to restructure or reengineer the program every few years.

It all goes back to the pervasive and often unrecognized influence of an amazing church in Seoul, South Korea of Pastor David Yonggi Cho. Cho's model is characterized by three traits. First, it strongly emphasizes evangelism. Second, it's based on the idea that the most effective way to bring new Christians into the larger church is to first reach them through a small group. Third, it promises the potential of unlimited evangelism and church growth.

Cho's model and concepts were gaining traction at the same time that we at North Coast Church were launching our own mode of sermon-based small groups – I had some serious reservations about its adaptability to Western culture and the American church scene.

Cho's model is perfectly designed for a culture that has little or no historical connection to evangelical Christianity. There is some form of Cho's empty chair that finds its way into nearly every small group ministry model. But there is nearly always a strong belief that the groups can and should be evangelistic. Yet the reality is that in the American church, very few people come to Christ through a small group. The reason is pretty simple. For the average non-Christian in America, it's far more threatening to walk into a home Bible study than to walk into a worship service.

Cho's model works best in a society that lacks mobility and therefore produces plenty of long-term relationships and an abundance of extended-family relationships. In a highly mobile culture like that of the United States, most of our relational ties are weak; they're short-term and role based rather than long-term or family based .When taken together, these significant cultural differences add up. They help to explain why Cho's model (and most of the current adaptations

of his model) didn't work very well in your church—or mine, for that matter. It's not that it's a bad model. It's an incredible model. It's just not a very good cultural fit for most American churches.

Five Key Questions before you start

One of the biggest mistakes leaders make when it comes to either launching or reengineering a small group ministry is a failure to carefully align both vision and methods.

Five key “alignment” questions before launching or reengineering your small group ministry:

1. **Who Are You Trying to Reach?** “By that I mean, “Specifically who do you imagine being in your small groups? Who is likely to opt out? Who are you willing to leave out?”
2. **What Are You Planning to Do?** “What do you plan to do in your meetings?” The options are endless. But once I know what happens in a small group, I can predict with uncanny accuracy who will come and who won't. Every time we raise the bar of what we expect from and do in a small group, we proportionally shrink the number of people who will be in a small group, so we carefully think through the impact of what we choose to do in a group ahead of time and to decide if it helps or hinders us in reaching the people we've been called to reach.
3. “How well does who you want to reach match up with what you plan to do?” comparing who we want to reach with what plan to do can be an eye-opener. The most important thing to understand about any potential misalignment is that what we do will always trump who we want to reach. We always end up reaching the people who best fit what we choose to do.
4. **What Is Your Philosophy of Discipleship and Leadership Training?** “How do you think people are best trained to live out the Christian life and best prepared for leadership?” Your answer should ideally be reflected in the curriculum you choose, the way you structure your meetings, and the way you train your leaders. Mentoring – Education (ie. Adult CE) - Apprenticeship. Each has its strengths and weaknesses. Each works better in some settings than in others.
5. **Who Can We Speed Model?** “Who already does what we want to do well—and does it in a church we would go to if we lived in the area.

It reminds me of what I used to call the Willow Creek effect. Many pastors benefited greatly and came home energized and equipped to expand their ministry after a conference at Willow Creek Church. But others had a completely different experience. They came home and nearly tore their church apart. It wasn't Willow's fault. It was the returning pastors' fault. More than a few have gone to one of these conferences and seen the food court, the huge crowds, and lots of new Christians, and said, “That's what I want and need.” But in the next breath, I'd hear them criticize the lack of participatory worship, the absence of verse-by-verse expository preaching, and a host of other things! No wonder the insights and strategies didn't work back home. They weren't a cultural fit.

Sticky churches are ultimately held together by strong webs of relationships. That's why a healthy and highly attended small group ministry can slam the back door shut. But alignment is essential. Without it, things will bump along. People will burn out. With it, things will hum along and people will stick around for a long, long time.

The book has further 50 pages of appendixes: sample sermon sheets/notes/questions, evaluation forms, Leadership and host practicals.

Further notes:

From Marian Lensink (Christian Reformed Church Home Missions):

We found Sticky Church to be helpful, in terms of some of its dynamics about helping people to go deeper. Sermon based small groups have the following advantages:

- * People can speak of their experience, rather than needing Bible knowledge - they just need to show up for church.
- * Hearing the sermon allows for a considerable amount of small group prep.
- * People may engage questions ahead of time, if they've been introduced in worship.
- * People will know what the topic is, if they're at church. No wondering about what's happening at Small Groups.
- * Weekly allows for greater connection as well as continuity (over bi-weekly groups). If someone misses a week, they don't have to wait 3 weeks to connect again.

Sticky Church also has a helpful diagram (funnel shape) dealing with the concept of who you are trying to connect through small groups. It shows that different types of groups will connect with different types of church membership. He focuses his groups totally on those already in the church (not outreach). He's convinced that the better we care for one another, the better we'll keep people in the church. Outreach happens on a different level

From Randall Neighbour – noted Cell Church specialist on what he liked and did not like:

Like: Osborne's general writing style. The book was easy to read and he was honest about how he feels about all sorts of things related to small groups and the small group movement.

Like: Osborne's illustration about people being like Lego bricks is fairly accurate. People only have time and emotional space for X number of close friends, or only so many other legos can be snapped to yours before some fall off. This is a good analogy for those who seek to be more relationally evangelistic (although he doesn't make this point in the book, that's my application of his analogy).

Like: He's a big fan sermon based small groups, which is what is done in South Korea and at Victory Christian Center in Tulsa, OK, just to name a few. This is a big distinction of his book and church... so few American churches have "pulpit groups," favoring DVD curriculum or giving each leader or group the freedom to choose their own subject matter for the Bible discussion portion of the meeting.

Like: Osborne does not see small groups as a supportive program for his church or his pulpit ministry. He has a paradigm that allows him to view weekend services as being a gathering of small groups for instruction and worship.

Gripe: Osborne speaks of small groups as one of the main things that helps his members "stick" and remain in his church. It is his church's primary method of closing the back door. As I have commented before in other blog posts and book reviews, this is indeed a value of small groups, but should be a byproduct for groups, not the main reason a church launches them... small groups of people meeting in Christ's name are the church. I truly believe the bride of Christ is being prostituted for man's glory and structures ... and her Husband isn't content with the way biblical community is being used in the Western church world.

Gripe: Osborne states that his church's small groups are formed to build relationships and apply the sermon, not encourage relational evangelism. He wrote that people just won't sign up for groups if this is a stated purpose. He commented that relational evangelism does happen, but it's not a major thrust of

their groups. He maintains a "involve the consumers more" type of attitude about small groups, vs. helping people discover their ministry giftings and harness the power of biblical community to storm the gates of hell and set captives free.

Gripe: Osborne firmly writes that the Cho model will not work in America, citing that Americans are not good at obeying authority like South Koreans. He also extended this comment to other places in the world as well where highly motivated cell members reach friends for Christ and desire to one day multiply their group and lead one of their own.

Combo Like/Gripe: Osborne states that multiplying groups doesn't work in America and people hate it so they don't ever ask groups to do it at his church. They invite new people who join the congregation or visit the church services to join a new 10-week group starting up and hope it will become a sticky place for the folks, who make the group their permanent home.

Instead of what he calls "splitting or dividing" groups, he comments how the church staff approaches apprentices and asks them if they're ready to start a new group of their own. I like this because it's actually what all the cell-based churches around the world do, even though Osborne doesn't seem to understand this about these churches.

My gripe is the fact that the groups in North Coast Church seem to be populated through the big church services, not primarily from the hard work of the members through relationship building. He writes this is the best way to start groups and be "sticky" because unbelievers are most comfortable with a big, impersonal event compared to a scary small group experience. While this is a true sociological statement (especially in Southern California where his church is located), it completely ignores the fact that people are looking for faith through genuine relationships, not religion or spirituality.

If the members of a holistic small group are spending time with unbelieving friends outside of small group gatherings to build a genuine, two-way relationship, they will develop enough of a friendship to draw the unbeliever into the biblical community. In a relatively short period of relationship-building time, unbelievers will gladly visit a gathering in a home where they will see Christ's presence, power, and purposes manifested in such capacities that the person is brought to faith in Christ and repentance.

Recommendation: If you desire to see your small groups develop a passion for Christ in their midst that drives them to love Him more, each other sacrificially, AND the lost through friendship and servanthood, this book isn't going to help you in that pursuit. Osborne shares his opinions about what has not worked in his church concerning holistic small groups (cell groups) because his church, like so many others, went about it all wrong... making congregational assimilation the primary goal and treating it like a program launch, not a completely different way of viewing and being the church.

Sticky Church: Interview with author Larry Osborne

Why did you write this book?

I wrote *Sticky Church* in response to feedback from pastors and church leaders I've trained or mentored over the years. It seemed like every time I'd talk about the principles of stickiness, they'd ask for more. It's as if nearly everyone had issues with people coming but not sticking--or attending at such an infrequent rate that it was hard to genuinely disciple them.

At [North Coast Church](http://www.northcoastchurch.com)(www.northcoastchurch.com) , we've never done any marketing or advertising. In fact, we've never even had a special outreach or bring-a-friend event. Yet we've grown to over 7,000 in

weekend attendance. That means we've had to learn how to be *sticky* with those who come--especially with spiritual window shoppers and new Christians who often don't know Job from Job.

What does it mean to be a sticky church?

It seems to me that many of our churches (especially our larger churches) are far better at opening the front door than closing the back door. In fact, many pay scant attention to the back door because as long as we have more people coming in the front than going out the back, it *looks* like we are healthy and growing. But that's not necessarily so.

Most everything in *Sticky Church* was hammered out on the anvil of real-life ministry experiences. Some of it was birthed out of negative experiences in my early days as a Christian; some out of the failures and struggles I experienced as a young pastor of a small church plant. And much of it flows out of the things I've learned in my 28 years at North Coast Church.

What are one or two things that you've learned about stickiness?

The first is that stickiness starts and ends with significant long-term relationships. It's not about providing better programs. It's not about developing a slick assimilation process. It's about finding practical ways to velcro people to one another for long-term (even lifetime) relationships.

A second would be that we can never forget that the purpose of being missional is not just to reach people--it's to reach them *and* grow them up to maturity. At North Coast, one of our plumb lines has long been: *Disciples, not just decisions*. I find that as leaders we can sometimes become so focused on evangelism that we forget that the people who already attend our church (both long-time Christians and spiritual window shoppers) aren't just tools to help us accomplish more of the mission. They *are* the mission!

What is unique about what you have to say in *Sticky Church*?

I show what stickiness looks like, and explain why so many of the things we currently do to "reach" and "assimilate" people actually hinders the process. I explore on the edges where conventional wisdom and the way that life and ministry really works don't match up. It's like a look at ministry through a different lens.

For instance, let's take the assimilation side of stickiness. Assimilating new people and new Christians most often focuses on connecting them to the programs and ministries of the church. Once they attend on a regular basis, we assume they're "assimilated." But truth be told, programs and ministries are not very sticky. They're sort of like Post-its; they do connect people to the ministry; but the connection is easily removed.

Or how about small groups? If we're honest, we have to admit that most of the models we're using today are broken. They work far better in theory than in real life. How else can we explain the fact that most churches retool and re-engineer their small group ministry every three to seven years? In contrast, the model of sermon-based small groups has helped North Coast maintain a participation rate of 80% of weekend attendance for over 23 years (scaling from a small church of 180 to the so-called megachurch it is today). It's an organic, simple model. Much of it runs counter to conventional wisdom. But it works.

Who is the book for and why should they read it?

I wrote *Sticky Church* as the book I wished I had years ago. It's aimed primarily at pastors and church leaders. It's the sort of book that a pastor or leader can work through together with their staff or lay-

leadership team. That's why we put a study guide and reflection questions in the back.

Share one idea from the book that's been helpful for pastors.

I think the most common, "Thanks I needed that!" response has come from people who appreciate the fact that I'm challenging some of the most widely held and seemingly unquestioned bits of conventional wisdom about assimilation, special programs, and small groups. I've had lots of people tell me, "I always thought that, but I didn't know anyone else did."

For instance, in the chapter titled "Why Dividing Groups Is A Dumb Idea," I point out the bait-and-switch strategy that takes place when we recruit people to get into a small group because of the relational deficiency most of us have in our highly mobile, fast-paced lives; and then we immediately turn around and tell the people in the groups that if they love Jesus, they'll help us grow the church by leaving all their new friends behind.

There's something disingenuous about getting people into a program to meet their personal and spiritual needs and then turning around and using that program to grow the church rather than grow the people.

What do you hope the reader takes away from the book?

The sticky church paradigm is not primarily about church growth. It's about church health. It's not about hoarding people or refusing to release them to ministry and mission. It's simply about keeping them connected to the church long enough to fulfill the second half of the Great Commission: "*Teaching them to obey all things I have commanded you.*"

Retention matters--in everything. If we're not sticky, it's hard to be healthy.