

## How to Assimilate Members in a PDC Church:

An Interview with Saddleback Brett Eastman and Steve Gladen  
by Purpose Driven Ministries Staff

Brett Eastman is Membership Pastor at Saddleback Church and Steve Gladen is Small Groups Pastor.

### Q: Steve and Brett, give us an overview of how Saddleback assimilates new members?

A: First, we try to move people through our weekend services into the next steps of assimilation. Those steps would include getting them into small groups, getting them into ministry, or CLASS 101. We also try to get them into daytime and evening classes that are held on-campus, discipleship courses that are our equivalent to Sunday school.



### Q: If you could do only one thing to help new people connect with the church, what would it be?

A: For Saddleback, the number one assimilation vehicle is the CLASS process. If we can get someone into the 101 Class, then we know how to move them into and through the other classes.

### Q: How do you assimilate new people prior to Class 101?

A: The number one strategy for this -- beyond peak events, like Easter and Christmas -- is to get them returning on the weekend. If we can get them to return regularly on the weekend, then we offer many opportunities for them to take baby steps toward a greater commitment.

### Q: Give us some examples of those baby steps?

A: There are over 50 support groups that are built around "felt needs." For instance, grief support, addiction recovery, or parenting. Also, every week in the bulletin, we list groups that are brand new and starting up that week. We've found that it's easier for people to assimilate into new groups that are just starting and - once they're involved -- then they will hop into groups that already exist. In addition, we offer entry-level opportunities for service, where attendees can jump right in. For example, we always need people to help with the weekend services and for special events -- Easter, Christmas, and youth programs. We're also exploring some new "baby step" opportunities like one-time open houses for new people, and a pastor's information meeting in a home.

### Q: Do you plan any intentional personal contact for first timers?

A: Not nearly as much as we should. This is an untapped opportunity. Honestly speaking, we're working hard to improve our existing systems for assimilating new contacts and people who are "warm calls." We're always looking to move people from the "community" to the "core." Some of it is as simple as follow-up letters or teams for phone calls. We also use more advanced approaches like inviting them to neighborhood events, where someone in our church will throw a party in their neighborhood and invite people who are new to Saddleback. That way the new people are meeting Saddleback members right in their own neighborhood. The natural next step is to then get them to a pastor's chat or to our 101 Class.

**Q: Do you encourage churches to have a "Pastors Chat" after church services to meet with newcomers?**

A: It can be after the service but what we've learned is it's best to have it in the home of a pastor or a key lay leader. This provides an atmosphere that is open and inviting for people to participate. The meeting itself is simple and basic. We ask people to share what brought them to the church and what keeps them coming back. We may also invite them to share where they are at in their spiritual journey.

**Q: What is the difference between a Pastor's Chat and a Pastor's Information Meeting?**

A: It's essentially the same thing. The concept is that you have a senior pastor or one of the pastoral staff at the meeting, and this draws a crowd. It's a baby step designed to move them toward 101. And here's an IMPORTANT POINT TO NOTE: ninety percent of the people who attend one of these gatherings eventually move into class 101.

**Q: Do you invite people geographically close to a particular pastor or lay leader?**

A: Yes, and if the senior pastor can participate, the attendance will double or triple.

**Q: Do you have people commit to coming or do you just see who shows up?**

A: One of the things we've found is you need 50% or more commitments against those who actually come -- that is, for every 20 who commit, we get 10. We have them register on a communication card during the worship service. And we're also using another strategy that helps us to assimilate people into small groups and move them into other parts of our assimilation processes -- we call it a Small Group Connection.

**Q: Tell us about a Small Group Connection?**

A: This is a gathering that is designed to draw people from the weekend services that are unconnected. It puts them into a short-term (six week) small group experience. We host it on the campus immediately following one of the services on an infrequent basis. (Once or twice a year).

**Q: What happens after the 6-week commitment to the new small group?**

A: 70 percent of these groups continue - they just start with a new curriculum of their choice.

**Q: Who leads the new group?**

A: We follow the Acts 6 model - They select a shepherd leader from amongst themselves, and that person facilitates the group. We then do a confirmation interview with that "shepherd" and provide him or her with a basic training class. This increases their success rate.

**Q: How can we train and equip our laity to help us with the assimilation process?**

A: Rick Warren is a master at empowering our congregation to share the ownership on everything from greeting new people to having them serve according to their shape. Rick also challenges them to reach out to people who are just like them. The 301 Class is a primary tool for this. But even when they land in a small group, every member is challenged to become a minister. Over time, it's a natural and healthy process to be more than a consumer and to become a contributor.

**Q: How do you handle it if an unbeliever wants to lead the group and is chosen or affirmed by the group to lead?**

A: We ask questions that help filter out non-members. We've found that the questions minimize the fall out rate, and raise up the most mature believer. Additionally, we give them a "plug and play" - "just add water" -- curriculum to lead the six-week study. We've done this with thousands of people in every major life stage and affinity.

**Q: What are the steps beyond 101 for assimilation?**

A: The step beyond CLASS 101 is primarily CLASS 201. There's a connection process that is actually integrated into the 201 Class. This last year we launched over 100 new groups through the connection process. We also find that the Class series of 101, 201, 301, and 401 provide the natural steps that you need in assimilating people into your church.

- ▶ Class 101 will get them on board and committed to your church.
- ▶ Class 201 sinks them deeper into maturity and launches them into a small group.
- ▶ Class 301 helps them find their ministry to serve the church.
- ▶ Class 401 helps them to reach out locally to evangelize and internationally to do mission work.

*It's important that you realize that -- as clean as the process sounds -- it doesn't always happen in a sequential or linear fashion. However, all points lead back to the CLASS process -- challenging or encouraging the natural next step in order to live a healthy and balanced and Purpose-Driven life.*

**Q: What kind of assimilation rate is considered healthy?**

A: On average, our actual assimilation rate into and through the CLASSes is:

- ▶ 9 months in attendance before they make it to 101
- ▶ 15 months into 201
- ▶ 21 months into 301
- ▶ 26 months into 401

This is from beginning to end. This last year we moved at a much more accelerated rate and started to have people who had not completed covenants of the previous class, enter into the next class. So, we're working toward a better balance.

**Q: How do you handle people who want to go through 101, 201, 301, and 401 in rapid succession?**

A: The fastest rate that we encourage is to hit 101, and then a few months later jump into 201, a few more months into 301, and the same for 401. Some people are overly anxious, but we've found that the commitments of having a quiet time in 201 and being mobilized into a ministry in 301 need at least a few months to develop. Keep in mind that the CLASS series is not graduation but is the initiation into the process of our church. The key word for each of the Classes is discovery.

**Q: If CLASS assimilation doesn't happen in a "sequential, or linear fashion," then how do you handle the mentality of finishing one base before you get to the next base?**

A: We have them attend the Classes sequentially, but they sometimes get mobilized into ministry before attending 101 -- and now with small group connections from the weekend -- many people assimilate into a small group

before they even join the church. Even though the process may go out of order, each church function -- like a small group or ministry involvement or even baptism -- intentionally leads them back to the last CLASS that they attended.