



The Seven Deadly Sins of Small Group Ministry
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Sin One: Unclear Ministry Objectives

Symptoms of Unclear Ministry Objectives

Leaders don't agree on the purpose for small groups

The church's road to ministry progress is blocked

Relationships are breaking down among those most committed to community

Church members expect too much attention from the staff

Small groups have a myopic vision and don't know their role in the overall church strategy

It was the meeting to end all meetings. I (Bill) still get a shudder when I think of it. My son was in the Cub Scouts, and a meeting had been called for boys and their parents to attend. We arrived on time and took our place among the eleven boys and fifteen parents who were able to attend.

“Okay, so let’s get started,” began Kevin, the forty-five-year-old scoutmaster. “It is that time again when we should be thinking about the annual Cub Scout campout. Does anyone have any thoughts?”

“We will need some trucks to carry the garbage out after the boys leave,” said one father.

“Why don’t we have a different menu than last year?” asked Maria. “I think the boys are getting tired of peanut butter!”

About thirty seconds of silence reigned among us as we gathered in the cluttered church basement where these dreadful meetings were endured. Then seven-year-old Bobby broke the silence.

“What if it rains again? I hate it when it rains.”

“You’re a wimp!” said Mark, an eight-year-old veteran of camping life, whose speech was often laced with such encouraging words for his fellow Scouts. Others chimed in with their cracks and jokes.

“Okay, calm down. Let’s just stay with the program we did last year,” the scoutmaster suggested. “It seems like that worked fine.”

Unless, that is, like our family, you were not involved last year. We had no idea what to expect this year or what had taken place last year as hundreds of young boys invaded the forests of Illinois.

“Last year was great . . .” started young Mike, pausing long enough for Kevin and the parents to think this whole camping experience might actually have some impact, “. . . if you like mosquitoes and mud!” The room erupted in laughter. Little Mike pleaded, “Please don’t make us go to the same campground! That place was a swamp!” By now the boys were roaring hysterically and parents were needed to help restore order.

“That’s enough boys—settle down. Parents, we need your help with this event. Who would like to volunteer to help this year?” asked Kevin. “We’ll need about ten people. Our troop is responsible for organizing the sports equipment and games.”

The response was unanimous: fifteen parents sat motionless as they pondered why they had chosen scouting instead of swimming lessons. *I could be lounging by the pool, getting a tan, watching my kids frolic in the warm summer sun. Instead I will probably be trudging through a sweltering forest, fending off insect attacks, and struggling to get three hours of sleep in a tent with a group of second graders whose life ambition is to do exactly the opposite of everything I say.*

“What about skills? Will the boys learn any skills?” asked Harold. At a Scout camp in 1967 Harold had learned to tie an assortment of knots. “I want my boy to learn something while he’s there. Won’t they learn to set up a tent, or carve something, or maybe build a fire?”

Harold’s plea caught Kevin off guard. He was thinking logistics, not skills. He had parents to recruit, not kids to train.

Harold’s comment forced me to think. *Isn’t that what scouting is for? Isn’t scouting supposed to train young men in the fine art of frontier survival—to impart skills for fending off wild animals without a weapon, catching fish with their bare hands, and building a log home without an axe? Scout camps should be raising up the next generation of Daniel Boones and Davy Crockets!*

“I don’t want *my* son playing with fire,” said Linda, who thinks the Cub Scouts are a babysitting service with uniforms. “The last thing I need is to spend all day in the emergency room! Oh, and my son Jimmy 17 has a question. He wants to know if the kids will be allowed to bring video games along.”

Sure. And why not a portable refrigerator, a mobile phone, and a laptop computer so he and the boys can keep up with the latest trends in the stock market? So much for developing the next King of the Wild Frontier.

“There will be plenty of safe things for the boys to do,” assured a frustrated scoutmaster. “But no video games are allowed. Now, as I was saying, we will need people to plan the activities and supervise the boys at each of the sporting events. Does anyone have a bow and arrow and know how to shoot it?”

At this point in the meeting I wished I had brought one along. This misery had to end, one way or another. Others seemed to share this sentiment. (A few parents in the back of the room were contemplating a game of Russian roulette, several mothers were angry that their husbands were home watching baseball, and the boys—who had crossed the boredom threshold long ago—were beginning to plot the abduction of the scoutmaster one evening at camp.)

Mrs. Peters and her son Jeffrey, late arrivals to the meeting, suggested that all the parents attend the camp and share a tent so they could all “experience scouting firsthand.” She was never seen again. Authorities are still looking for her. Well, actually that’s not true, but it got pretty close.

“Why don’t we just skip this year? Nobody has time to take three days off work in the middle of the week to help.” A few others nodded.

“But then there would be no archery, BB guns, rope swings, or late-night campfire stories” lamented the boys.

And no mosquitoes, no portable toilets, and no muscle cramps, thought the parents.

By this point even our beloved scoutmaster had had about all he could take, so he raised his voice to get everyone’s attention. “Look, we have to do this camp—all the other troops will be there, and it will be just fine! Now, who can help?”

18 Reluctantly parents began to volunteer, the boys agreed to quiet down long enough for some order to be maintained, and another summer scouting camp was on the calendar.

As I reflect on the experience, I realize it had all the makings of disaster from the start. In some general sense everyone knows that scouting is good for these boys and that camp is fun for them. But there was no clear vision for the event, no understanding of how it fit into the overall plan for developing these young kids, and no structure or process for getting to the desired outcomes. Every parent has a different definition of success for scouting and for the camp, so no consensus can be reached. People were frustrated and angry with the leader and with one another. Other than that, everything was just fine!

Small group ministries often suffer the same fate. There is a general sense that building community in the church is the right thing to do and that somehow small groups will help. But few understand or even agree on what must be done to get there. The leadership has failed to provide clarity—about God’s call, the vision for their church, the purpose of groups, and the role each member plays in achieving the God-given vision. Other than that, every thing is just fine!

Why does this happen?

Because too many churches plunge into small group ministry without an end in mind. They’re like the college kid who happily studies art and German poetry, works as a lifeguard each summer, then decides at graduation that he really wants to be a rocket scientist when he grows up. In church after church (Willow Creek included!), otherwise savvy adults begin building small groups without deciding what they want small group ministry to be “when it grows up.”

In the excitement of starting groups, these churches might have great discussions about ministry models, group types, and spiritual formation objectives. But they never actually decide on the purpose of small groups or define how small groups will fit into church life. Inevitably these small group efforts reach an impasse. Church leaders who influence the congregation’s strategic direction say the road to ministry progress seems blocked. Small group members, leaders, and coaches feel confused, angry, or indifferent about their groups’ role in the church.

Lost in the Soup?

If the following case study sounds familiar, then your church probably suffers from unclear ministry objectives. We've changed the names, but here's what happened in a real meeting at a real church—a church that hasn't yet decided what it wants to be when it grows up. This church never really chose a small group ministry structure or analyzed the underlying values of different small group models. **19**

Ten years ago this church started some groups, eventually assimilating about 30 percent of its adults into the groups. The board wants to grow the small groups ministry, so three months ago it unanimously approved a new small group model presented by Jennifer, the small groups pastor.

Jennifer now gives the board an enthusiastic update: "Things are going well. We have thirty-five groups, and I'm training coaches to oversee small group leaders. This will free me to develop and train more new leaders."

Suddenly Doug, a seasoned elder and board chairman, asks, "Bob, how's your class going? I see more people each Sunday. Does it use groups?" Jennifer pauses for Bob's response. Bob says the class doesn't use groups, but he loves teaching, and more members join each week. Doug says, "Classes are a great way to connect people that groups can't reach. We've had groups here for ten years, but many people haven't joined. We should beef up the classes."

Before Jennifer can jump in, Hank speaks. "What if we really promoted the classes? We have gifted teachers. Our service attendance is skyrocketing and we're bursting at the seams. If we don't get these people into a class or something soon, we'll lose them."

"Let's put that on the next agenda," Doug says. "Thanks, Jennifer, for spending a few minutes with us. You're doing fine work with small groups. Keep it up." Jennifer doesn't bow out yet, because she wants clarity. She says, "It was my understanding that our limited classroom facilities made small groups an imperative. We said that if we promote classes too much, we'll frustrate people." A few board members agree.

But then Mike says, "That's why we have to move even faster on the facilities options. Sarah, did you get that report on prospective sites?"

(Not privy to these discussions, Jennifer is surprised to learn that two weeks ago the board stepped up its land search.) Sarah, the building committee chairperson, says, “We’ve got some viable options. If people respond well, we could be in a new building in eighteen months!”

“Then we can really take a run at our space problem,” Hank says. “Let’s be sure to include six to ten new adult classrooms. That should accommodate the jump in attendance and help everyone find a place in the church. Let’s take a look at possible locations right now.”

Doug gracefully dismisses Jennifer. “Sorry, Jennifer, but we’ll have to continue this discussion at another meeting. Now we need to jump on those potential properties, and it’s confidential financial business. Thanks, again, for your input.”

Jennifer leaves dejected. *Why build a group model, she wonders, that won’t be supported or promoted? Why was the board so excited about groups three months ago but now appears ambivalent? Don’t they see how groups and classes can work together to build community?*

When churches fail to choose a small group ministry model and define its underlying values, staff members become disillusioned, people remain unconnected, and the cause of Christ limps along instead of running at full throttle.

Small Group Models

Visionary leaders such as Ralph Neighbour, Carl George, Lyman Coleman, Roberta Hestenes, and Gareth Icenogle have provided great ideas for building transformational community through small groups. Together, their ideas comprise a continuum of small group models. Though each small group model is different, most fall into one of three categories along the continuum. We admit these categories risk oversimplification but believe they’ll help you determine a direction and purpose for small groups in your church.

At one end of the continuum is the “church *with* small groups” category. In this model, small groups form a department, one of many in the church. At the continuum’s other end is the “church *is* small groups” category. This model views each cell group as a little church. The “church *of* small groups” category views each group as a little community within

the larger church. This church's staff and ministries are all built on a small groups skeleton, so that every member is connected through community to the church.

As we say repeatedly in public settings, Willow Creek Community Church has elected to be a church *of* small groups. But that model might not be best for your church. The deadly sin here isn't choosing a different model than we did. The sin is failing to wrestle this issue to the ground and make a clear statement of intent so that everyone in your church understands where small groups fit in your overall vision and strategy.

The telltale symptom of unclear ministry objectives is relationship breakdown among those people most committed to community. In the beginning everything is rosy. People discover a powerful vision for community—rooted in God's very nature. They see God using small groups to change lives. Leaders hone their leadership skills, shepherd people with intention, and develop the next generation of rising leaders. More people ask to get connected to groups.

But soon tough questions mount. "How do small groups work in the church? What happens to Sunday school? What are the implications for staff, volunteers, and current ministry initiatives?" As the church struggles to manage the tension, conflict rises. People ask why the senior pastor and board won't "get on board." Staff members wonder about their roles and job security and have trouble sustaining leaders and support systems. Meanwhile, senior leaders wonder why small groups won't get with the existing program. Some fear that renegade groups, flush with success, may spin off to form a new church.

It's ironic how much trouble could be avoided if churches first analyzed, then chose, from among the small group ministry models described in the following chart. We suggest you immerse yourself in the current literature about small groups. Remember, it's fine to pick and choose the values and strategies that best fit your ministry philosophy. You can use the chart to avoid mixing and matching incompatible components.

Small Group Models

	CHURCH WITH GROUPS	CHURCH OF GROUPS	CHURCH IS GROUPS
Purpose	Help People find a Place in the Church	A Means of Building the Church as Community	The Primary Expression of the Church
Organizing Principle	Someone Wants to Start a Group	Strategy using Affinity with Geography considered	Strategy using Geography with Affinity considered
Getting in a Group	Placement System (Centralized)	Group Invitation or Assimilation Event (Decentralized)	Assigned by Geography (Group responsible)
Group Membership	Optional for Growth Not Required for Church Membership	Essential for Growth Required for Church Membership	Essential for Growth Required for Church Membership
Role of Group Leaders	Mostly Reactive Leader	Proactive Shepherd-Leader	Pastoral Shepherd-Authority
Use of Curriculum	Chosen by Leader	Recommended by Staff or Chosen by Leader	Designated by Staff
Group Meeting Format	Designed by Leader or Curriculum	Designed by Leader + Ministry Strategy	Designed by Leader + Designated Pattern
Church Authority over Group	Low	Low	High
Church Monitoring of Groups	Low	High	High
Group-based Evangelistic Activity	Possible	Encouraged	Expected

Church with Small Groups

In the church *with* small groups model, everyone sees the purpose of small groups as one way for an interested person to connect with others. Other ministries are seen as equally valid ways to connect. Typical comments in such a church would be: “Hey, it’s great you’re in a group. Oh, you’re in a class and not in a group? That’s great too. Oh, you’re on a committee, but you’re not in a group or a class? That’s great too.” In other words, it’s a choice, a way to connect. As long as you are connected somewhere, you’re “in.”

Turf wars are an inherent risk in churches *with* small groups, because the small group ministry competes with all other departments for leaders, financial support, meeting space, and visibility. Turf wars can get nasty every year at budget time: “How can you drop my guest speaker funding before you cut the brochure budget?” “Who needs a new church sign anyway?” “Let the youth bring their own furniture and food!”

Church of Small Groups

As you examine the chart of small group models, you could draw a heavy vertical line between the *church with* and *church of* models. Everything to the right of *church with* assumes that the whole church will be involved in groups. Crossing that line requires a total shift in church philosophy, the gravity of which must be weighed seriously.

The purpose of small groups in the *church of* model is to build the church as community. This model sees the larger community as a network of smaller communities that develop people in Christ. Therefore, the small groups concept penetrates every area of the church. Ministry leaders and congregation members become accustomed to designing and building ministry around a small group infrastructure. Small groups are not limited to any one department or subministry. But neither do they become the full expression of local church community life. In this philosophy you will hear neither “we have a small groups department” nor “the group is our church.”

Church Is Small Groups

You will, however, hear “the group is our church” in the *church is* model. This model is obviously on the same continuum as *church of*.

But the *church is* model often differs in its theology of the nature and expression of church and in its intensity of small group emphasis.

24 The purpose for small groups in the *church is* paradigm is to be the church in its smallest form. This model sees small groups as the centerpiece of congregational life. Some advocates teach that “the church is the cell; the cell is the church.” They emphasize that evangelism, worship, communion, and Bible study all take place in the group.

Let’s face it. Regardless of the model you choose—*church with, of, or is*—your theology of the church will influence your decision. Some theologians believe a small group represents all the fullness of the bride of Christ. Others, however, would argue that small groups must be tied to a larger congregation for effective and accountable pastoral leadership, appropriate administration of the sacraments (even when observed at the small group level), sound biblical teaching, and church discipline.

Are Your Underlying Values Clear?

Churches that never commit to a ministry model lose the opportunity to define the underlying values of their small group ministry. Without defining your underlying values, how can you know what your small groups should accomplish or how they will change people?

At Willow Creek Community Church, we want to become a church *of* small groups. It is not a right or wrong decision. It is a clear decision. We all—from Senior Pastor Bill Hybels to elders, board, staff, and key volunteers—agreed on a dream to give every person that calls Willow Creek their church home a place in community. Small groups are central to our practice of community life and are our primary method for accomplishing ministry.

Beyond simply saying we want to give everyone a place in community, we decided to adopt—and adapt—the metachurch model developed by Carl George. The biblical theme underlying this model is its focus on enfolding the individual into community life, so each person is cared for and the community remains intact.

This theme surfaces in Exodus 18, when Jethro, Moses’ father-in-law, observes that Israel, a complex nation, is not properly organized to adjudicate conflict among its members. Jethro prescribes guidelines for

structuring the nation so all its people will be cared for but leaders won't burn out. (Don't you wish your father-in-law would do the same for your church?) Through his teaching ministry and writing, Carl George became a Jethro for us. He explained how Scripture—from Exodus 18 to Ezekiel 34 to Acts 6—shows God's concern that the individual never be overlooked within the larger community. God acts to ensure that people develop spiritually, resolve conflicts, have basic needs met, and are shepherded well by competent leaders. 25

Once we understood how these underlying biblical principles could be embodied in a ministry model, we shaped the way we organized small groups and modified the results we expect from them. Drawing on the examples of Jethro and Jesus, Carl George coined the term “span of care,” which refers to the ability of one person to effectively respond to the needs of those they shepherd. Everyone should be cared for, but no one should be responsible for the care of too many. A reasonable span of care is that leaders should have no more than ten people in a group, and coaches should oversee only four or five leaders. Our coaches gather leaders in “huddles” to connect them for mutual learning and support. Coaches visit small groups to encourage leaders and groups as they build community together. And coaches meet one-on-one with small group leaders to develop and care for them. While these activities are never rigidly prescribed, they are practiced to ensure care for the flock.

Straining Gnats and Swallowing Camels

Over the last several months I (Russ) have visited several huddles and “superhuddles” (which include leaders, coaches, and staff leaders.) After numerous conversations with coaches, leaders, and apprentice leaders, a common theme emerged—too many people are not clear about our strategy. I thought, *This can't be! Didn't we already decide this?* After reflecting further, I realized that attaining clear ministry objectives requires more than a decision; it demands vigilance. We committed *sin numero uno*—again!

Two glaring symptoms led to our diagnosis that although our congregation has clearly embraced the goal of getting every member into a group, we've lost clarity about how groups fit into local church

community life. One symptom is that many people are disappointed about not getting staff attention. They want Willow Creek Community Church to function like a traditional church, where they would call on the staff to address their needs. In turn, too many of us are being unduly responsive to those calls, so we lose the opportunity to have people cared for by their group or their small group leader. We are not honoring the strategy and structure we have put in place.

The second symptom of this ugly sin is that more and more people say, “I do groups, so I’m exempt from all other church activities, particularly evangelism.” People have focused so intently on one part of our vision—groups—that they have missed the overall purpose of our church: to turn irreligious people into fully devoted followers of Christ. This comes dangerously close to pharisaic patterns of church life. And we cannot tolerate it.

The Pharisees became so focused on the system that they lost the big idea. They cleaned cups instead of hearts and followed the letter of the law but killed the spirit. As Jesus put it in Matthew 23:24, they strained gnats but swallowed camels. Our people have embraced group life, and have embraced it well. And we are thrilled. But some of them have contracted myopia and now see only the community, not those who stand outside it, far from God. If uncorrected, this nearsighted vision will result in “seeker blindness,” the inability to see the plight of lost people. You likely have comparable issues to overcome as you dovetail small groups with other core objectives, whether evangelism, worship, or global ministry efforts.

At Willow Creek Community Church we’re not just pursuing a metachurch model, we are also pursuing a seeker-targeted model. Jon Wallace, who led our small groups ministry from 1993 to 1995, once stated that Willow Creek was trying to do something unprecedented in church history. Willow Creek was pursuing a seeker-targeted, aggressively evangelistic weekend service model, while simultaneously pursuing the metachurch small group strategy, an aggressively community-oriented model. That combination has required intense effort and committed leadership every step of the way. (Which makes it clear why we have hit a few potholes on the implementation highway!)

Don't miss this issue. Whenever people grouse about your public services, evangelistic strategy, or any other central ministry philosophy, you have a clarity challenge. When you add small group issues to the mix, whether the metachurch model or another, you need even more ministry-level clarity on how small groups fit into the church. The two root causes of this confusion are fuzzy churchwide goals and ministry nonalignment. **27**

Fuzzy Churchwide Goals

I (Bill) recently flew to Europe to teach on behalf of the Willow Creek Association, a worldwide network of over seven thousand local churches with similar values. While I waited for a plane from Frankfurt to Geneva, the loudspeaker said: "Mr. Sagamoto, please report to gate B24 immediately. Flight 1135 is waiting. Mr. Sagamoto, please report to the gate." Ten minutes later the message came again. Then again.

My guess is that flight 1135 had 238 passengers on the list and 237 of them were getting angry. I pictured Mr. Sagamoto sitting in an airport lounge, sound asleep from the jet lag after a fifteen-hour flight. "Your flight is waiting. Please report to the gate!" Even the announcer sounded peeved. By then, if I were Mr. Sagamoto, I might have decided to take another flight, if only to avoid 237 angry passengers. I'd imagine my picture and story on the news: "Transatlantic flight delayed by sleeping passenger. Passengers miss connecting flights all over Europe. Economy suffers setback. Sagamoto beaten with pillows and blankets while boarding. Remains in critical condition."

Some churches are stuck at the small group departure gate because someone is not on board and refuses to fly. It may be the pastor, a key elder, or a staff member. Or it may be that everyone agrees flying is the right thing to do; they just all want different planes and schedules. A stuck church have worked through the *church with-of-is* issue to gain consensus on how they want to live out community. They've selected a model and adapted it to their context, creating a "when our small groups grow up" goal. Yet they can't get the plane off the ground, because it's not enough to create conceptual clarity about direction and design. You must also translate these concepts for every ministry

setting where you expect small groups to take root. All the ministries must get on board for this flight to take off. Simply agreeing to the process (flying) and objective (Paris) is not enough. We must fly the same plane together and arrive as a community.

At Willow Creek we've agreed on a churchwide set of terms to clearly embed goals in every ministry setting. We've expressed our small group goals through both quantitative and qualitative statements.

The Five Gs: Our Term for Individual and Organizational Goals

We use "the five Gs" as a framework for individual spiritual development. For example, when a person becomes an official member, we ask them questions in each area.

- *Grace.* How does someone become a Christian in the true sense of the word? How did that happen for you?
- *Growth.* How are you presently nurturing your spiritual growth through spiritual disciplines on your own?
- *Group.* Are you connected to a small group of believers here at Willow Creek for the purpose of growth, loving support, and accountability?
- *Gifts.* Are you responsibly using your spiritual gifts in a place of service within the church?
- *Good Stewardship.* In light of the tithe as a biblical precedent for giving, do you regularly support this body, using 10 percent as a goal to reach (or surpass as God prospers)?

This common terminology for goals helps individuals affirm their commitment to Christ and this church, as well as assess their next steps for spiritual growth. We form our small group curricula around the five Gs, so small group leaders use the same ideas and language in their groups as we do in the church. We also apply the five Gs to organizational goals. Regarding our goal to grow in grace, we talk about individuals experiencing and extending grace, and we also describe how we think God wants to build Willow Creek as a grace-filled community.

Qualitative and Quantitative Goals

At Willow Creek we get a lot more specific than simply saying we want to become a church *of* small groups. We clarify our churchwide and ministry-level objectives by making *qualitative* and *quantitative* statements about small groups. Setting and reaching such goals is a challenge. For example, in 1995 we set a goal to “give everyone who calls Willow Creek their church home a place in community.” Try that in a church where weekend attendance exceeds 17,000. **29**

We qualitatively defined “a place in community.” It meant that every person needed to be connected to a group with an identified, qualified leader. We wanted every person in every group (beginning at age three in Promiseland, our children’s ministry) to view their group as their primary community. This implied that every group needed to become a community of care for each individual. And it required quality leaders who would do their best to nurture each person along spiritually.

Regarding quantity, we wanted it to become abnormal for a person not to be in a group. When a person showed up at Willow Creek and was asked, “What small group are you in?” and they answered, “I’m not in one,” there would be shock and dismay, because it would be viewed as abnormal to be disconnected from the community.

We went so far as to put a number and timeline to this goal. For example, in 1995 we had approximately 8,000 people in small groups, so we thought we could connect 20,000 people in small groups by the end of the year 2000.

Clear whole-church objectives, fleshed out in the form of goals, forced us to draw a line in the sand. It was a declaration that Willow Creek Community Church would become a different kind of church in five years, as God worked among us. It would become our expression of the body of Christ, working together for his purposes, in South Barrington, Illinois, for the next five years.

We still needed to give each leader a part to play in achieving the dream. Having declared what the future might look like if God so blessed, we broke the churchwide goal into pieces so that those in each ministry—couples, singles, men, women, students, children, seekers, the hurting, and volunteers—could share in the objective. It made our dream tangible. Every ministry had a commitment to a clear ministry objective.

Ministries out of Alignment

30 Besides setting clear churchwide goals, we also needed to align our ministries, both vertically (with the church's mission) and horizontally (with one another). Churches with ministry-level nonalignment will not bridge the gap between clear objectives and the realization of their dream for community.

Setting goals and then breaking them down to a departmental level leads to interesting conversations, because people have to start pursuing the church's agenda and not simply their own. These conversations have brought out the best from our leaders. From musicians to women's leaders, from care-based ministries and men's ministry to single adults and students, we have come together to try to build a church *together*. It forces alignment.

Vertical alignment means matching leadership objectives with leadership practice. It declares, "Our church knows our direction. We prayed it through, listened to wise counsel, and have come to consensus among our senior leaders. We've specified it, described it, and diagrammed it. We have paid attention to quality and quantity outputs for each ministry and the church as a whole. Now, everybody, let's get together and work toward that goal."

Horizontal alignment gets everyone in sync as they move toward the vertical, or overall, churchwide goal. Horizontal alignment requires moving ministry leaders beyond simply communicating with each other, toward coordinating and collaborating with each other. At first, ministries moving toward vertical goals are like a marching band with great music but no sense of formation or cadence. They step on each other's toes and bungle opportunities. Later they learn to address opportunities together.

For example, our Promiseland ministry presents wonderful opportunities for horizontal ministry alignment, because so many children visit our campus each year. Their parents may not want to attend church yet and may simply drop off their older kids or send their children with another family. They may think, *Church is good for my kids, but not for me yet*.

Remember the pharisaical problem we described in groups that have tunnel vision and are losing sight of seekers? They've embraced

the Group G goal for individuals within their small groups, but they've forgotten that Willow Creek promotes community for a cause. If, however, we encourage key groups to realign horizontally, imagine the possibilities. They can capitalize on the Promiseland opportunity. Our couples' ministry, men's ministry, and women's ministry can probably work through those Promiseland children to reach their not-yet-attending parents. We just need to sit down together and dream. 31

How clear have you been with each ministry about your objectives as a church? Have you created qualitative and quantitative goals for becoming a church of small groups, having people realize the Group G in their daily experience as Christ followers? Is everyone clear about his or her part of the mission? Does everyone understand how their small group aligns with other groups in fulfilling the whole-church mission?

Graduate-Level Clarity

Forming a clear purpose for your church and its small group direction and carrying it out throughout the church requires a graduate school work ethic. Once the sin of unclear ministry objectives is exposed and confessed, the real labor begins. But here's the good news. When you determine your small groups direction, express that in a well-formulated model, and then align yourselves around specific goals, you'll feel remarkable energy. While we at Willow Creek still commit our fair share of sin in this area, our hard work has paid off. We now have several thousand leaders moving us in the same direction.

The next chapter will describe strategies and tools that helped us along the way. We hope that as you use them or adapt them, you will gain clarity about where you are headed and how to get there with integrity and focus.

We might wonder what would have happened in Jennifer's life had the meeting described earlier in this chapter taken a different turn. What if the church had really known what it was called to become, had worked to clarify a strategy and model, had adapted the core components of that model to its setting and culture, and had then aligned the ministries around achieving that aim? She would have finished her presentation and the board would have had increased confidence in her leadership.

Jennifer would probably be back in her office taking the next step in the small group process. She'd be putting together strategies and tools so leaders could implement what the elders, board, and staff had so wholeheartedly committed to. And her task, despite its challenges and occasional heartbreaks, would allow her to travel to challenging ministry destinations instead of staying stuck, idling at the gate. *Please stand by while we try to get you an update on the delayed departure of flight 1135.* No thanks. We're changing airlines.