

the secret of CHURCH MULTIPLICATION



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I am no mathematician. My high school math teacher would chuckle at the thought that I would have anything good to contribute to a conversation about mathematics. But maybe it takes a simple-minded, mathematically-challenged individual to help us to see the obvious.

Basic math is made up of four different processes involving numbers: addition, subtraction, multiplication and division. In the sequence of positive numbers addition and multiplication gain in numerical sum, while subtraction and division reduce. When it comes to the Kingdom of God we want to increase, not decrease, so addition and multiplication are more preferable.

Multiplication is a popular topic in missions and church today. Unfortunately, when you look more closely, much of what people call multiplying is really just addition. When a church adds a small group, it is often called multiplying. When another worship service is added on Sunday morning, it is often called church multiplication, but it is merely addition. Adding a venue for worship in your church or a satellite campus is not multiplying a church, it is merely adding. I am not against addition, but let's not call addition multiplication.

The thing about basic math is that it is a world of absolutes; there is one right answer and an infinite number of wrong answers to every equation. But if the processes are mixed up, the solutions are way off. In Christendom today we have poor math skills, and our bottom line is wrong in the end because of it.

Imagine what would happen in life if you got the two processes mixed up in other areas of life. What would happen if NASA engineers added when they should have multiplied? What if Wall Street mixed things up and multiplied when they should have only added? The results would be problematic at best, disastrous at worst. So why do we confuse the two when it comes to something as important as reaching the world for Christ?

Even if you add an additional church to your denomination, you are still not multiplying, at least not yet. $2+2=4$ and $2 \times 2=4$ as well. In the early stage of multiplication, addition plays a part. The difference starts to happen with succeeding generations. If you merely add another 2 to 4, the sum is 6. But if you multiply by 2 you get to eight, then sixteen, and now you know you are multiplying.

THE MOMENTUM OF MULTIPLICATION

Addition is good, but multiplication is better. Addition produces incremental growth, but multiplication produces exponential growth. Paul gets to the heart of multiplication in his second letter to Timothy when he says, “The things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, entrust these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.” (2 Tim. 2:2) This is the key verse in the Bible about what it means to multiply disciples. There are four generations in the verse: Paul, Timothy, “faithful men” and “others also.” Of late, I have taken to commending people not to use the multiplication language before the fourth generation. Until we get to “others also” we have not succeeded in multiplication. It is possible for a strong leader to attract other leaders who, because they are leaders, will have followers. You can have three “generations” of influence without really multiplying. But in order to get to the fourth generation of disciples, leaders or churches, everyone must be giving everything away to the next generation. Then we are multiplying. This is truly the test of a movement in my own understanding.

Multiplication begins slower than addition. In fact, you cannot have a multiplication movement that is not rapid. That doesn't mean it begins rapidly; in fact multiplication starts slowly. But it gains velocity at an exponential rate as it goes—that is, its velocity increases with each generation. Like a proverbial car starting to roll from the top of a steep hill, it builds in momentum as it goes. Each foot it passes in descent increases the speed and momentum, which becomes increasingly harder to slow or stop.

To illustrate this dynamic, Christian Schwarz and Christoph Schalk, in their *Implementation Guide to Natural Church Development*, give the following example: “Imagine a water lily growing on a pond with a surface of 14,000 square feet. The leaf of this species of water lily has a surface of 15.5 square inches. At the beginning of the year the water lily has exactly one leaf. After one week there are two leaves. A week later, four. After sixteen weeks half of the water surface is covered with leaves.” The authors then ask, “How long will it take until the second half of the pond will also be covered? Another sixteen weeks? No. It will take just a single week and the pond will be completely covered.”

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THE SEDUCTION OF ADDITION

Multiplication may be slower than addition in the initial stages, but in the long run, it is the only way to fulfill the Great Commission in our generation. The population of the world is rapidly multiplying. If all we do is add disciples and churches we will not even scratch the surface of what we have been commanded to do. Nor can we simply add multiplication to our current addition strategies, because each one has completely different requirements. We must stop adding if we want to start multiplying. Could it be that our commitment to strategies that cannot multiply is in fact what is keeping us from seeing a movement here in the West?

Because addition is faster in the beginning and multiplication takes time, often we are content with growth through addition. We are easily seduced by the more immediate success and instant gratification of addition instead of waiting for the momentum that can build

with multiplying. As I said in my book, *Search & Rescue*, “Don't be content with addition! Stop applauding the pathetic success we see in addition and start longing again for the incredible power of multiplication.”

In our current context, however, the success promised by addition is hard to turn down. It is so rare to have a church ministry grow at all that one that grows fast with addition is very desirable. The glamour of potentially being labeled “the fastest growing church” is hard to turn refuse. It is difficult for leaders to turn away from the crowds and invest in the few, but that is exactly what Jesus did Himself.

Jesus knew the power of multiplication, and He was willing to wait for it. He rejected the pressure of the crowds and chose instead to spend His life with the few that would multiply. We need leaders who are willing to do the same. 