

MULTIPLY

A Theological Foundation



On Belonging, Capacity, and the Ancient Logic of the Gospel

Keith E. Powell

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“So the word of the Lord spread, and the number of disciples in Jerusalem increased greatly.”

Acts 6:7 — The growth is reported as a consequence, not a campaign.

A PREFATORY NOTE

This document is not a treatise. It is a pastoral epistle — written for the working pastor, the weary elder, and the faithful church leader who has tried most of what the experts recommend and is wondering what’s wrong – why do the “models” work for everyone but me and my church. Worse yet is the faithful pastor who is asking why their church is so resistant to reaching the community with the Gospel – after all, that was the #1 priority of the church when they accepted the call.

It is also, intentionally, a document that can be read quickly. The theological argument it makes is not obscure. It is, in fact, embarrassingly simple. What took time was not discovering it — but unlearning the noise that had buried it.

The MULTIPLY framework rests on a conviction that is old enough to require no defense and recent enough to require some courage: that the church grows when it creates space, and that it creates space when it stops trying to engineer growth.

What follows is an attempt to ground that conviction — not in the latest sociological research, not in the success stories of megachurches, and not in the personal charisma of any consultant — but in the nature of the gospel itself, in the witness of Scripture, and in the stubborn, ordinary logic of how human beings come to trust and be transformed.

This document may be shared freely in academic, ecclesiastical, or ministerial settings. It is designed to be read alongside the MULTIPLY Masterclass, but it stands on its own.

— *Keith E. Powell*

I. THE PROBLEM WITH THE WORD “GROWTH”

There is a moment, repeated in nearly every pastor’s biography, when the ambition to grow a church quietly becomes something darker: the need to grow a church. The shift is almost imperceptible. It happens in the space between prayer and panic, between vision and performance anxiety. And once it happens, it corrupts everything it touches.

We do not often name this corruption clearly. We dress it in the language of mission — “we want to reach people for Christ” — when what we sometimes mean is, “we need the numbers to justify our existence, our budget, our calling, ourselves.” This is not cynicism. It is a pastoral observation made with full sympathy. The pressure is real. The stakes feel real. And the consultants who sell growth systems are usually well-meaning. They are solving a real problem. They are simply, too often, solving it with the wrong tools.

The first thing MULTIPLY asks is not “what is your strategy?” It asks: “what do you believe growth is for?”

This is a theological question before it is a practical one. And it matters, because the answer shapes everything else. If growth is for God — if it is the natural fruit of the Spirit’s movement in a community that has made genuine room for people — then our work is to create that room and trust the outcome. If growth is for us — for our sense of meaning, our denominational standing, our personal vindication — then we will pursue it with strategies that ultimately undermine it.

Growth is not a goal. It is a response. The question is always: a response to what?

The Scripture is almost tediously consistent on this point. The language of the New Testament around church expansion is overwhelmingly passive and organic. The word “spread.” The number “increased.” The faith “grew.” Rarely does the text describe a church growth campaign. What it describes, repeatedly, is a community so shaped by the Spirit that the watching world cannot help but inquire.

This does not mean strategy is faithless. Paul was a strategist of extraordinary sophistication. He understood networks, cultural access points, and the power of the household as a social unit. But his strategy was always in service of something prior: the creation of communities in which the love of God was genuinely, tangibly experienced. The strategy served the space. The space produced the growth.

FOR THE EVANGELICAL READER

MULTIPLY does not ask you to set aside your convictions about the authority of Scripture, the necessity of the new birth, or the importance of the gathered church. It asks you to let those convictions be expressed through practices that actually embody them — rather than marketing techniques borrowed from a culture that does not share them.

FOR THE PROGRESSIVE READER

MULTIPLY does not ask you to set aside your commitments to justice, inclusion, or the full humanity of every person. It asks you to let those commitments be expressed through genuine hospitality — the kind that makes a real place for real people before they are asked to adopt any identity or agree to any creed.

II. THE THEOLOGY OF BELONGING

Before any person believes a doctrine, they decide whether they belong. This is not a concession to culture. It is a description of how human cognition actually works, and it is also, when examined carefully, a description of how the gospel moved in the first century.

The word the New Testament uses most frequently for the community of faith is not “church” in its institutional sense. It is *ἐκκλησία* — “the gathered ones.” And the gathering is always into relationship before it is into doctrine. The earliest communities met in homes. They ate together. They wept together. They prayed together in close enough proximity to hear each other’s voices break. Belief grew in that soil. It did not precede it.

“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer ... All the believers were together and had everything in common ... They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.”

ACTS 2:42–47 — NOTE THE SEQUENCE: COMMUNITY PRECEDES ADDITION.

The growth described in Acts 2 is the Lord’s addition to a community that had become genuinely attractive — not through its programming, but through its quality of life together. The *koinōnia* — the deep, costly, joyful sharing — was itself the proclamation. People watched it and wanted to be inside it.

This is what the MULTIPLY framework calls relational capacity: the space within a community where a new person can genuinely belong before she has committed to anything, agreed to anything, or been asked to believe anything in particular. It is not a watered-down gospel. It is the precondition the gospel has always required.

Theologians working in the tradition of missional ecclesiology have a term for this: the church as “presence before proclamation.” The idea is not that proclamation is unimportant, but that it lands differently — more honestly, more humanely — in a relationship than in a program.

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The theological concept undergirding this is the doctrine of the Incarnation. God does not communicate salvation through a message delivered from a safe distance. God enters. God becomes present. God takes on the form, the vulnerability, the specific flesh-and-blood particularity of a human life in a particular time and place. The Incarnation is the paradigm for all genuine ministry: presence is not merely a strategy. It is the form love takes when it is serious.

This is why MULTIPLY insists that the most important qualification for a small group facilitator is not theological training or communication skill. It is emotional presence — the capacity to be genuinely, non-anxiously available to another person. A facilitator who can do that is already enacting the gospel before a word of Scripture is read. And one who cannot do it will undermine whatever is said.

III. THE MARGINS AS THE MISSIONAL CENTER

Every renewal movement in the history of the church has begun at the margins. This is not a sociological curiosity. It is, the New Testament suggests, a theological constant.

The ministry of Jesus is almost perversely oriented toward people who do not belong to the centers of religious and social power. Tax collectors. Women of ill repute. Lepers. Samaritans. The ritually unclean. The economically excluded. These are not occasional encounters in the gospel narratives — they are the pattern. Jesus moves toward the people whom the religious system has moved away from, and he does so not as a social program but as a theological statement: the Kingdom of God is structured differently than the kingdoms of this world. The seat of honor is at the foot of the table.

“But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed.

Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”

LUKE 14:13–14 — THE GUEST LIST IS THE THEOLOGY.

MULTIPLY is designed, from the beginning, to create space for the people who are not already in the room. The “marginal member” — the person on the church rolls who has not attended in years, who carries a quiet wound from a previous encounter with institutional religion — and the non-member who has never had a reason to come: these are not afterthoughts in the MULTIPLY design. They are the design.

This is theologically important because it resists the gravitational pull of every successful institution, which is to serve its existing members with increasing excellence and inadvertently make itself less accessible to anyone who wasn’t already there. The church is not exempt from this institutional logic. It requires active theological counter-pressure to resist it.

MULTIPLY provides that counter-pressure structurally: new groups are launched alongside existing ones, never instead of them. The existing community is honored and undisturbed. But the

new relational space is explicitly oriented outward — toward the neighbor, the de-churched, the skeptic, the exhausted, the curious. The margins are not the place the church reluctantly visits. They are the place it deliberately goes.

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This is also why MULTIPLY insists on what might seem like an unusual principle: that the groups it creates are not primarily for church members. A group composed entirely of the already-committed may produce deep discipleship for those already inside, but it does not create new relational capacity. It merely intensifies existing capacity. The Kingdom grows at its edges, not only at its center.

A NOTE ON THEOLOGICAL TENSION

Some will rightly ask: does a framework that prioritizes belonging before belief risk reducing the church to a social club? It is a fair question, and it deserves a direct answer. MULTIPLY does not ask churches to remove theological content from their groups. It asks them to sequence it honestly — allowing relationship to create the soil in which genuine inquiry can grow. The goal is not less gospel. It is gospel that lands in prepared ground rather than on concrete.

IV. THE GIFT OF LIMITS: WHY FORTY DAYS IS ENOUGH

One of the most counterintuitive elements of the MULTIPLY framework — and one of the most theologically rich — is the insistence on a fixed, limited commitment. Forty days. Not a year. Not a lifetime. Forty days, after which the group ends, participants are given options, and no pressure is applied.

This will strike some as pastorally thin. Should we not be discipling people into permanent, accountable, covenanted community? Should we not expect more than forty days of one another's lives?

These are good instincts. And the answer is: yes, eventually. But not as the entry point.

The forty-day limit is not a concession to the short attention spans of post-modern consumers. It is an act of pastoral honesty about where most people actually are. The person who has been burned by an institution, who carries scar tissue from a previous church experience, who is spiritually curious but has learned to be cautious — this person will not say yes to a lifetime of covenant community. But she may say yes to forty days. And forty days, entered into freely and honestly, is enough time for something real to happen.

“For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven.”

ECCLESIASTES 3:1 — LIMITS ARE NOT THE ENEMY OF DEPTH. THEY ARE OFTEN ITS PRECONDITION.

The number forty carries its own theological weight in the biblical narrative. Forty days of rain. Forty years in the wilderness. Forty days of Jesus' testing. In each case, the finite period is not a consolation prize for those who cannot manage the infinite. It is the crucible in which something essential is formed. MULTIPLY does not use forty days because it is convenient. It uses forty days because it is enough.

There is also a profound respect for human freedom embedded in this structure. The person who joins a forty-day group has not been recruited, pressured, or guilted into a commitment she did not understand. She has been invited — plainly, simply, without hidden agenda — to try something for a fixed period of time. When the forty days end and she is offered options with no pressure, the message she receives is: you are valued as a person, not needed as a number. That message, delivered honestly, is more evangelistic than most sermons.

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V. THE SPIRITUALITY OF NUMBERS

The church has a complicated relationship with numbers. In some traditions, they are everything: weekly attendance charts are posted in the foyer, giving comparisons are announced from the pulpit, and a pastor's worth is quietly calibrated against the size of his congregation. In other traditions — as a reaction against this — numbers are almost forbidden: to count is to commodify, to measure is to miss the point.

MULTIPLY charts a different course, and it does so by returning to the biblical theology of stewardship. We count not to evaluate, but to steward. Not to rank, but to understand. Numbers in the MULTIPLY framework answer a different question than the one they usually answer in church culture. The usual question is: “Are we successful?” The MULTIPLY question is: “Do we have enough relational capacity to receive the people God is sending?”

These are not the same question. The first makes the leader the subject. The second makes the neighbor the subject.

“The Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.”

ACTS 2:47 — THE ADDITION IS THE LORD'S. THE COMMUNITY'S JOB IS TO BE THE KIND OF PLACE PEOPLE ARE ADDED TO.

Counting, in this frame, is an act of attentiveness — to the people who are present, to the relational space available, to the gap between who is in the room and who is in the neighborhood. It is not a performance metric. It is a pastoral tool. And it requires, at its best, the same quality of honesty that good pastoral care requires: the willingness to see clearly, without flinching, what is actually there.

MULTIPLY does not ask churches to stop counting. It asks them to count differently, and to hold what they count differently — with curiosity rather than anxiety, with stewardship rather than status.

VI. AGAINST ANXIETY: THE NON-ANXIOUS CHURCH

There is a kind of church leadership that is energetic, creative, strategically sophisticated — and profoundly anxious at its core. It launches initiatives constantly, not because the Spirit is moving, but because stillness is terrifying. It chases models, not because they are wise, but because the alternative is to sit with uncertainty and trust that God is at work when the metrics are not confirming it.

This anxiety is understandable. The pressure on church leaders — from denominational structures, from congregants, from their own deeply internalized measures of faithfulness — is real and relentless. It takes a particular kind of spiritual maturity to lead without being driven by it.

MULTIPLY is designed, in part, to be a practice of non-anxious leadership. The forty-day group is an act of trust: we create the relational space, we show up with presence rather than performance, and we release the outcome. The numbers we track tell us something, but they do not tell us everything. The conversation that happens in a living room on a Thursday night between a pastor's daughter and a woman who hasn't prayed in fifteen years may not appear in any metric — and it may be the most significant thing that happened in the life of that church all year.

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The theological ground for non-anxious leadership is pneumatological: the belief that the Holy Spirit precedes the church into every neighborhood, every conversation, every season of apparent dormancy. The church's work is not to manufacture movement but to participate in movement that is already underway. MULTIPLY creates the conditions for that participation — low pressure, genuine presence, honest invitation — and then trusts the Spirit to do what the Spirit has always done.

This is not passivity. It is a specific kind of active faith: the faith that prepares the soil without claiming credit for the rain.

“I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow.”

1 CORINTHIANS 3:6-7 — THE DIVISION OF LABOR IS CLEAR. OURS IS NOT THE HARDEST PART.

VII. A WORD TO THE SKEPTIC

Every generation of church leaders produces a cohort of skeptics — men and women who have been burned by enough “next great things” that they approach any new framework with earned suspicion. This document is, in part, written for them.

MULTIPLY does not ask you to believe that it is the answer. It asks you to consider that the questions it is asking — about belonging, about capacity, about the difference between creating relational space and manufacturing growth — are questions worth sitting with, regardless of what you ultimately do with the framework.

The shiny objects are real. The corporate marketing dressed in theological language is real. The consultant who arrives with a proprietary system, a speaking fee, and a book deal, promising that this particular model — unlike all the others — will finally solve your church’s growth problem: this is a familiar and wearisome figure.

MULTIPLY does not promise to solve a growth problem. It promises to help you build relational capacity — and to do it in a way that honors your existing community, respects the dignity of every person you invite, and gives the Spirit room to move without the noise of institutional anxiety drowning out whatever the Spirit might be trying to say.

That is a modest claim. It is also, this document argues, a deeply faithful one.

The most courageous thing a pastor can do in a culture of hype is to choose something simple, honest, and repeatable — and to do it without apology.

The Arizona story — a church of three hundred that saw eight hundred people in forty days through twenty home groups — is not offered as a template to be replicated. It is offered as evidence for a theological principle: that when genuine relational space is created, without pressure,

without marketing, without gimmick, people will fill it. They were filling it before the church noticed. The church's work was to make room.

That has always been the church's work. It is not new. It is simply, in an era of extraordinary noise, quietly countercultural.

A CLOSING WORD

The church does not need another model. It needs to remember what it is.

It is a community of people who have encountered grace and cannot stop talking about it — not from a stage, and not in a program, but across a table, in the ordinary intimacy of shared time and honest conversation. It is a community that makes room for strangers because it was made of people who were once strangers. It is a community that holds its practices lightly enough that new people can enter without first decoding an institutional culture that was never built with them in mind.

MULTIPLY is not an attempt to reimagine the church. It is an attempt to help the church remember what it has always been at its best: a place where belonging precedes belief, where presence matters more than performance, where the margins are honored rather than managed, and where growth is received as a gift rather than pursued as a goal.

The theological foundation for this is not novel. It is as old as the upper room, as tested as the Acts 2 community, as simple and as difficult as the command to love your neighbor. What MULTIPLY offers is a practical, repeatable, honest way to live that command — without hype, without pressure, and without asking God to bless strategies that God was never consulted about.



May the church you lead become a place where people feel the grace before they understand the theology. May the groups you launch create room for the neighbor you haven't met yet and the former member you have almost given up on. And may the growth that comes — if growth comes — find you genuinely surprised, because you were too busy making room to notice you were building something.

That surprise is a grace. It has always been a grace.

— *Keith E. Powell*

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