

## **Chapter 5**

# **Multiplication**

*You get to decide what legacy you will leave.*  
~ C.S. Lewis

Apart from a good Sunday head count and offering, most of the pastors I've met dislike and shy away from math. As someone who has spent much of my life surrounded by numbers and physics (in my past life I was a nuclear engineer working with submarines for the U.S. Navy), I find it difficult to address the subject of multiplication without at least touching on some very fundamental concepts of math.

When it comes to church growth and church multiplication, words like “growth,” “subtraction,” “plateau,” “addition,” “reproduction,” and “multiplication” are unavoidable (remember that we used these words to define the five levels of church cultures in chapter 1).

As leaders, we tend to adopt our own definitions based on our unique context for church. Our temptation might be to look at our success and incorrectly conclude that we're being obedient to Jesus' commands and multiplying. Or to look at our church size and mistakenly conclude that we can't be a reproducing or multiplying church if we're small.

Let's start with a very simple and basic review of some mathematical concepts—just enough basics to equip you for the journey to becoming a Level 5 Multiplier. Rather than making up our own definitions, I'm embracing the terms that have been handed down to us through mathematics. These are not “secular or business” concepts but rather the principles that emerge from God's creation.

### **Growth**

The process of increasing in size. Growth can happen through addition, reproduction, or multiplication. Regardless of the strategy, model, or culture we embrace and pursue, growth is a

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primary goal. Level 5 Multipliers must throw off the shackles of an addition-growth scorecard, opting instead for the pursuit of multiplication growth.

### **Subtraction**

The output result (the number of whatever you're seeking to measure) decreases with time. Every positive unit of effort results in a loss or "subtraction" in the output number.

We all know the pain of seasons of subtraction and loss. On the personal front, it might be losing loved ones. In ministry, losing launch team members is agonizing. Subtraction compels us to action. But subtraction is a normal part of life, including the life of a church. Think about the first 500 churches founded in the first century. All (100 percent) of the early churches ultimately experienced subtraction, all the way to their death. But the Church is still around and vibrant today. Not because of the growth of churches, but rather because of the *sending nature* of churches.

As hard as it is to accept and unless God changes the way He has worked in His church for 2,000 years, *any* church that experiences growth will ultimately experience subtraction. It's as certain as death. Churches are born and will eventually die (including yours). Subtraction is inevitable. Embrace it. The reality is that subtraction will likely be the final chapter in whatever church you lead (or start).

Don't let that reality discourage you, but do let it mess with your thinking. In all the turmoil of subtraction, we desperately pursue and seek out addition growth. But addition is temporary. Multiplication, however, carries the legacy of your church to future generations, far beyond the accumulation you achieve in your local context. That's why sending out leaders to multiply and start new churches, and then continuing the movement into the future is so vitally important. Your sending capacity is your best asset, and your sending results could ultimately be your primary legacy.

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### **Plateau**

When a church is plateaued, the number of whatever is being measured remains steady over time. Each incremental effort seems to produce no discernable increase in the thing being measured. What you add is offset by what you lose. You break even. Some behavioral experts would argue that most things do not remain plateaued over extended periods of time, but tend to be transitional, meaning that either subtraction or addition is likely to emerge from seasons of plateau.

### **Addition**

The number of whatever is being measured increases with time. “Up and to the right” is the measure of success. We instinctively want to see our effort produce fruit. For most of us, results are an inherent motivator. With addition, we see tangible results for our efforts. The harder we work, the more fruitful the results appear to be.

Bill Hybels, founder and senior pastor of Willow Creek Community Church and the Global Leadership Summit, once told me that it gets harder and harder each year at the Leadership Summit to produce the same incremental increase in output quality. In other words, the “up and to the right curve” always wants to taper off to a lower level of production.

To sustain addition growth, we must continually look for new and innovative ways to overcome growth obstacles. New programs, new buildings, cool community centers, great marketing campaigns, new sites, the best worship in town, etc., are all input fuel for output results.

### **Reproducing**

Reproduction is a catalyst or mechanism for addition growth. It’s God’s natural or organic design for addition growth. We are guaranteed to add when we reproduce. One becomes two (or two become three). It’s the natural way families are built and the way God has designed the Church to function. We are to reproduce at all levels: disciples, artists, leaders, church planters, churches, etc.

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When we embed reproduction in our DNA and sustain it in our practices and behaviors, we get multiplication. You might say that reproduction is the natural building block from addition to multiplication.

### **Multiplication**

A more rapid form of addition: 1 increases to 2 then to 4 then to 8 and so on. Multiplication produces a steeper rise in output for a given level of effort. For example, a couple having twins gets double the output for the same initiating effort. Now imagine the impact to world population if children were always birthed as pairs! You might say that multiplication is “extreme or radical addition” (e.g., Acts 2:47: “... and God added about 3,000 to their numbers that day”). We instinctively love multiplication because the results of our efforts are more visibly fruitful.

### **Exponential (radical multiplication and movements)**

The phenomenon that occurs when multiplication hits a tipping point and becomes self-sustaining, even explosive, in its sustained outputs. Exponential multiplication and movements ebb and flow and don’t typically sustain themselves indefinitely. You might define “exponential” as exhibiting accelerating multiplication (or rapidly increasing multiplication and thus, “radical multiplication”).

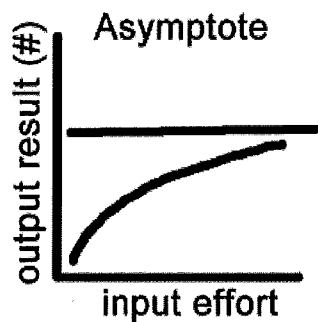
### **Multiplier**

An accelerator of results. From 1 to 2 to 4 to 8 to 16 to 32 represents a 2x (or “2 times” multiplier). With each successive cycle, the output increases by a factor of two times. Likewise, from 1 to 10 to 100 to 1,000 represents a 10x (or “10 times” multiplier). Addition-focused scorecards and cultures, however, constrain us to less abundant thinking that moves from 1 to 2 to 3 to 4, and so on. By embracing accumulation cultures, we miss the abundance Jesus intends for us through multiplication.

The best multipliers are leaders like you who surrender their personal addition-based scorecards to a far better scorecard using Jesus’ math.

### **Growth Barriers and Asymptote**

Let me introduce one last mathematical concept to help tie together several things in contrasting addition growth with multiplication growth. In nature, things don't naturally continue in a perpetual state of motion without resistance. A rolling ball eventually stops due to the friction it experiences with the ground, and an athlete loses his or her stamina with time. In a similar way, you don't steam through each successive church growth barrier with progressively easier effort. To the contrary, each growth barrier gets more difficult to conquer as you get closer to its summit. This physical phenomenon in nature is called "asymptotes."



An "asymptote" is like a limit or barrier. In the graph, notice that the start of the curve appears up and to the right like most addition curves. However, with each additional applied effort, the output appears to "slow" or become slightly less than the previous increment. As time goes on, the output results appear to become

constrained by and approach the asymptote. In nature, the "asymptote" (represented by the horizontal line in the graph) physically acts like a buffer or limit to suppress the output.

In a church context, this physical phenomenon explains why church leaders and growth experts often say, "there are a number of well-known natural growth barriers at 120, 200, 500, 800, 2,000, etc." In other words, what got us to where we are is not going to get us to where we need to go. To break the 500 barrier, we can't act like we did when we had 40 people. We need to change what we do to break through the current asymptote. Unfortunately, another asymptote a little higher up on the growth curve will be waiting for us.

This progression of conquered hills is also leaving a growing number of pastors questioning whether they've "put their ladder

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against the right wall”: *What if we climb the ladder of addition-growth success only to realize someday that we’ve had our ladder against the wrong wall?*

I still remember the first cohort of leaders in our Future Travelers initiative when Senior Pastor Steve Andrews said to the group, “I planted my church, and God grew it big. We’ve done externally focused, church planting, and multisite, and we’ll keep doing them. But there are not enough years left in my life to simply keep growing this thing bigger. I’m interested in something more viral. I’m interested in changing the conversation from ‘where is our next one?’ to ‘how do we release 250 of our members to take our city?’”

This continual challenge and struggle to conquer the next growth barrier can trap churches in an addition-constrained culture, keeping them from ever focusing on multiplication. Churches stuck in this endless game are never satisfied and never win, all the while remaining distracted from experiencing the more satisfying multiplication culture. Growth will always yield at least addition (and vice versa), but growth does not always produce multiplication. Thus, we can become satisfied with addition growth but fall far short of experiencing multiplication growth. Addition growth is good, but multiplication growth is even better.

The telling question we want to pose to Multipliers (regardless of context) comes down to what *type* of growth you’re pursuing or experiencing. Addition or multiplication? Possibly without consciously knowing it, you’ve embraced or have at least been captivated by an addition-growth scorecard for your measure of success.

Pause and think again about the culture you’re creating. If God answered all your prayers today and solved the church tensions you face and struggles that get you down, which mathematical result discussed above (subtraction, plateau, addition, reproduction or multiplication) would blossom into full bloom? Be honest. You probably want to say “multiplication,” but at this point you can’t.

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It's highly likely your scorecard for success is the best of the addition-growth paradigm. It's the prevailing scorecard we've embraced, and that has become part of our paradigm for success.

Multipliers throw off the captivity of addition-growth scorecards, opting instead to pursue multiplication and eternal legacy. But before you can pursue change in your church, you must take a good look at your personal scorecard!

### **Putting It into Practice**

- *How are you currently (or in the past) working to sustain addition-growth? What new initiatives, ideas or programs are you pursuing to keep your church growing?*
- *What type of growth are you pursuing or experiencing? Addition or multiplication?*
- *Do you agree that your sending capacity is your church's greatest asset? Why or why not?*
- *In what ways have you embraced accumulation and missed the abundance Jesus intends for us through multiplication?*
- *How has the ongoing challenge to conquer the next growth barrier kept you captive in a culture focused on accumulation?*

