
FROM GROWTH WITH GRUMBLING TO GROWTH WITHOUT GRUMBLING: THE ACTS 6 MODEL

Rabach Symon Odek, PhD

University of Eastern Africa, Baraton Eldoret, Kenya

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15518875>

Abstract

The church depicted in Acts 6 was bedevilled with grumblings and divisions occasioned by perceived racial discrimination. This study explores factors that facilitated the turnaround from grumblings to unity and a sense of belonging described later in the passage. A rhetorical analysis reveals a concentric structure with parallels corresponding inversely. The theme of growth sandwiches the appointment of the Seven, whose appointment significantly shifts the focus to the Gentile mission. The parallels indicate the centrality of a Spirit-filled leadership, a theology of mission that prioritizes the ministry of the word without neglecting the ministry of material needs. The result was a cohesive community of the faithful energized for further growth. The apostles reinvented themselves by adapting to new circumstances with unprecedented solutions to the challenge of disunity. The leadership was diversified, and members were enabled to access decision-making. Propelled by the promise of Acts 1:8 as a basis of their theology of mission, they mediated a vibrant cross-cultural community of faith. Luke uses the appointment of the Seven as a bridge in his narrative for the mission beyond Jerusalem. The progress report in Acts 6:1-7 shows the life of the community of faith influencing further growth. A model emerging from the study for application to contemporary growth challenges is Spirit-filled leadership. Anchored in the commission of Jesus, this model will mediate through preaching, prayer and ministering to the material needs of the members, thereby creating a cohesive cross-cultural community of faith which is a catalyst for wholistic church growth and expansion.

Keywords: Growth. Unity. Leadership. Mission. Cross-cultural community.

INTRODUCTION

The book of Acts of the Apostles is a narrative of how a small homogenous group grew to become a multi-ethnic, heterogeneous worldwide movement^{xxxv} within a generation. This has made the Acts one of the most used books for church planters, pastors, evangelists and theorists for practical models of church growth.^{xxxv} It modelled church growth for the early church as it interacted with a diverse mission field. It remains to us a reminder of what the church can be.^{xxxv} The growth motif in Acts is expressed in the recurring use of the terms grow and multiply, *auxano* and *plethuno* and their cognates in growth summaries in the book (6:7; 9:31; 12:24, 16:5; 19:20).^{xxxv} These summaries present transitions, reports of a remarkable expansion and the divine causation of the growth.^{xxxv} The growth was unhindered despite formidable challenges.^{xxxv} This article explores the first growth summary (6:1-7) and its ramifications on the growth motif in Acts. Attempts have been made to explore growth factors within the various growth summary sections.^{xxxv} Nevertheless, a further investigation into specific implications of rhetorical patterns in these growth summaries can help in appreciating how, in certain instances, growth challenges were surmounted. The text of Acts can speak to some contemporary church growth challenges.

Church Growth Challenges in Africa

There is a substantial numerical growth of the Christian church in sub-Saharan Africa.^{xxxv} A recent study places the annual membership growth rate of Christians in Africa at 2.27%.^{xxxv} This growth is projected to take the same trajectory in the foreseeable future.^{xxxv} Nevertheless, this enormous growth has come with some challenges. These are the challenges of poverty, lack of African Identity, lack of or low participation in civic space, and persecution.^{xxxv} The demographics of growth are skewed towards women and children.^{xxxv} African converts to Christianity still have a strong allegiance to African traditional beliefs and practices, which some resort to in times of crisis.^{xxxv} The numerical growth is not matched with financial growth.^{xxxv} Tribal affiliations are also stronger than Christian brotherhood or sisterhood among African Christians.^{xxxv} These are some of the challenges the Christian church in Africa faces despite its numerical growth. The unhindered growth in Acts despite formidable ethnic, relational, geographical and religious boundaries^{xxxv} can be a case study for growth in our contemporary settings.

Growth Motif in Acts

Luke uses the terms *auxano* and *plethuno* (grow and multiply) to describe the growth of the church in Acts.^{xxxv} These terms appear mostly in the growth summaries in Acts. The term *auxano* an agricultural term for growth and increase is used in the report summaries of 6:7; 12:24 and 19:20. The term *plethuno*, multiply, is used in the growth reports in 6:1,7; 9:31; 12:24. In two instances *auxano* and *plethuno* are combined (6:7; 12:24). This echoes the phrase “grow and multiply” in Gen 1:22 and 1:28, in the creation narratives.^{xxxv} In all the instances, except in 12:24 and 19:20, the growth is qualified with the word *arithmoi*, numbers, which shows a numerical aspect of growth. Nevertheless, the coupling of the words even in *auxano* and *plethuno* in 6:7 and 12:24 indicates that over and above numerical growth, there was a quantitative growth. In 6:7 the phrase “the word of God was growing” does not denote a territorial expansion of the word since the Christians were still in Jerusalem. This is a reference to the powerful influence of the word of God in fulfilling his promise.^{xxxv} The usage of *auxano* in reference to the growth in the increase of the number of Jews in Egypt (7:17) links the growth with divine involvement.^{xxxv} The growth in Acts is numerical, thus quantitative. However, it was also qualitative, a divinely driven growth as a result of the impact of the word of God on the life of the community of faith.^{xxxv} The term *plethuno* appears five times in the Acts out of the twelve occurrences in the New Testament. In all its occurrences, *plethuno* in the New Testament carries the nuance of

multiplying or increasing. The table below illustrates the context of the usage in Acts. It can be inferred from the table that the growth in Acts was numerical, transnational and divinely driven as a result of life in the community of faith.

| Text | Context | Territory |
|-------|---|------------------------------|
| 6:1 | Increase in numbers but with disharmony | Jerusalem |
| 6:7 | Harmony of believers and growth | Jerusalem |
| 7:17 | The number of Israelites grew in Egypt | Jerusalem (Stephen's speech) |
| 9:31 | Inclusion of Saul in the community | Judea, Galilee and Samaria |
| 12:24 | Community in the face of persecution | Caesarea |
| 16:5 | Growth report on work in the churches of Asia Minor | Derbe and Lystra |
| 19:20 | Growth report after the public burning of magic items | Ephesus |

Growth Report in Acts 6:1-7

The election of the “Seven” in Acts 6:1-7 is a watershed in the Lucan narrative of Acts. It marks the climax of the activities of the church at Jerusalem and ushers in the shift to the ministry in Samaria and, further, the ministry from Antioch.^{xxxv} This transition transformed the Christian church from a Palestinian outfit into a worldwide movement extending its influence both in Asia Minor and Europe. This is the first of the growth summaries, giving progress reports of the work in the early church. It introduces the climax of the three cycles of the Jerusalem narrative in Acts (1:12-4:32; 4:24-5:42; 6:1-8:4). These three cycles are meant to give a chance to people in Jerusalem to accept the Messiah. With the episode of the stoning of Stephen, the witness in Jerusalem is complete.^{xxxv} Several studies on Acts have perceived the passage as pervaded with ecclesiological and missiological themes.^{xxxv} A growth report envelops the passage.^{xxxv} This article seeks to explore the motif of growth from the perspective of a concentric literary feature of the passage. Acts 6:1-7 can be viewed as a concentric structure.^{xxxv} The structure indicates a reversal, a movement from tension to cohesion. The schema of the passage could be as follows:

And in those days, when the number of the disciples was **multiplied**, there arose a murmuring of the Grecians against the Hebrews, because their widows were neglected in the daily ministration. (6:1)

B Then the **twelve** called the **multitude** of the disciples unto them (6:2a)

C and said, It is not reasonable that we should **leave** the **word of God**, and serve tables. (6:2b)

D Wherefore, brethren, look ye out among you seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business. (6:3a)

C^l 4 But we will **give** ourselves continually to prayer, and the **ministry of the word**. (6:3b)

B^l And the saying pleased the **whole multitude**: and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Ghost, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolas a proselyte of Antioch: Whom they set before the **apostles**: and when they had prayed, they laid their hands on them. (6:5-6)

A^l 7 And the word of God **increased**; and the number of the disciples **multiplied** in Jerusalem greatly; and a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith. (6:7)

Summary of the Schema

A Growth with grumbling

B. The Twelve, and the multitude

C. Ministry of the Word and serving the tables

D. Appointment of the seven

C¹ Ministry of the Word

B¹ The multitude, the seven, and the twelve

A¹ Growth without grumbling

In the structure above, the report on growth at the beginning (6:1) is paralleled by another report on growth at the end (6:7). The interaction between the twelve (6:2) and the multitude is paralleled with a reference to multitude, the seven and the twelve (6:5-6). Focus on the ministry of the word (6:2b) in the first section is balanced with a devotion to the ministry of the word in the second (6:3b). The choice of the seven is at the center of the structure (6:3a). It is noteworthy that the motif of growth envelops the passage. This article seeks to observe how the reversal from growth with grumbling to growth without grumbling was achieved in the early church and its implications for the contemporary conversation on church growth.

Analysis of the Parallels

AA¹ Growth with Grumbling to Growth without Grumbling: The participle multiplying, *plethunonton* (6:1) is repeated at the end in an imperfect passive form, multiplied, *eplethuneto* (6:7). However, there are contrasts, growth at the beginning is with grumbling but growth at the end leads to the obedience of the faith. The multiplication or increase of the disciples at the end of the passage is used together with the word spread (*auxano*).^{xxxv} The usage of these words together echoes the usage in the Old Testament in the phrase “be fruitful and multiply”, where it denotes growth pegged on divine causation.^{xxxv} These two words are also used together in Acts 7:17 to describe the rapid growth of the Jews in Egypt, again, an emphasis on the divine causation of growth. This distinction marks the power of the witness of a multi-ethnic cohesive group. Growth in the context of the life of the community. The grumbling by the Grecian widows had ethnic undertones. They were unequally treated while their Hebraic counterparts were favoured.^{xxxv} The expansion of Christianity in the early church brought people from diverse backgrounds, whose outlook and perceptions brought tensions into the young church. The tension caused by cultural prejudice manifested itself in the distribution of the daily portions.^{xxxv} It is notable that at the end, the tension was diffused as the church moved on towards further evangelization.

BB¹ The Twelve, the Multitude, and the Seven: The interaction between the “twelve” and the “multitude” resulted in the election of the Seven. The term twelve, *dodeka*, is used specifically for the apostles in the Gospels and in the book of Acts.^{xxxv} The reference to the apostles as the twelve in this passage is because of the distinction Luke intends to make between them and the Christians, who, for the first time, he refers to as disciples. The Christians are referred to as “multitude of the disciples” (6:2b) and later on just as the multitude (6:5). There are different opinions on the usage of the term multitude.^{xxxv} The employment of the same root word *plethuno* for the great increase at the beginning of the passage and for those who were summoned by the apostles suggests that Luke may be referring to the group as a whole and as a multitude.^{xxxv} The apostles summoned the

multitude, who in turn presented the Seven to the apostles (6:5). They allowed the multitude to be involved, thus, they were given access to decision-making. This depicts a participatory interactive leadership approach by the disciples. The choice of the Seven brought a shift in the leadership of the early church. It became inclusive, and Hellenists were incorporated into the leadership. This matter pleased the multitude, and the tension was diffused.

CC' Ministry of the Word and Ministry of Serving the Tables: The verb *diakoneo*, to serve, is used in its infinitive form for the distribution of the daily portions. This is balanced with the use of the derivative noun phrase *diakonia* for the ministry of the word. The noun phrase had been used earlier for the daily distribution of portions to the widows (6:1). The fact that the apostles have been actively involved in the ministry of the tables (Acts 5:1-11) indicates that the ministry of the tables was not less honourable. Both ministries were equal. Luke uses the appointment of the Seven to introduce the ministry of Stephen and Philip, who were also actively involved in the ministry of the word (Acts 7-8). The phrase “ministry of the word” conveys the ministry of preaching, praying and praying. Serving the tables refers to taking care of the daily or weekly rations. It draws from the Hebrew practice of taking care of the less privileged in society.^{xxxv} The appointment of the Seven led to a two-pronged approach to witness in the early church as it prepared the church for the ministry to the Gentiles. The ministry of the word was now coupled with a “future worldly character of the church that focused on peace, unity, sharing and grace.”^{xxxv}

D. The Choice of the Seven: The choice of the Seven is the emphasis of the passage. The process of the choice and their composition was a new experience in the nascent church.^{xxxv} The passage does not spell out the process by which the choice was made. However, it was a departure from Acts 1, where lots were cast. The statement “seek out from among you” denotes a careful examination and rules out casting of lots. The apostles relied on the Old Testament formulae on the choice of leaders, which prescribed qualifications and the setting apart of those chosen.^{xxxv} There was an involvement of the multitude who, in turn, chose seven men whose names indicate that they were Hellenistic Jews and a proselyte. The selection of the Seven, who were full of Spirit and wisdom, was a departure from the election of Mattathias, where the criterion was association with Jesus. The multitude then brought the Seven to the apostles, who appointed them.^{xxxv} The crisis of skewed provisions was solved by the Apostles’ engagement with the multitude and by the appointment of the Seven, which diversified the leadership. The election of the Seven ushered in a shift to the gentile mission.^{xxxv}

The Concentric Structure and Growth: Facing Growth Challenges

The concentric structure reveals a progression from growth with grumbling to growth without grumbling. The appointment of the Seven brought about a transition from a small Palestinian outfit to a worldwide movement. The reversal from tension to cohesion was mediated by a leadership that reinvented itself as it encountered new challenges. The apostles reaffirmed their theology of mission, a focus on the ministry of the word coupled with “ministry of the tables,” meeting the material needs of the disciples. Finally, the result was a multi-ethnic, transnational, barrier-breaking, harmonious community of believers energized for further growth. The structure portrays how tension was diffused and cohesion achieved.

The Centrality of Leadership

The appointment of the Seven changed the trajectory of the mission in Acts.^{xxxv} There was a movement out of Jerusalem and a territorial expansion of the gospel. Apostolic leadership is a key motif in the Lucan narrative of Acts. It is raised at the very beginning of the narrative in the selection of Mattathias. It is also expressed in the aftermath of Pentecost in the type of community that was built around the teaching of the disciples. The appointment

of the Seven is critical in the transition chapters, 8-12, as the church prepares for the full-blown evangelism to the Gentiles.^{xxxv} Leadership is expressed in the church profile at Antioch in Acts 13. Surmounting the formidable challenges witnessed in Acts can largely be attributed to the quality of leadership in the early church. Several leadership qualities are expressed in the passage.

Spirit-Filled Leadership: The enablement by the Spirit was requisite for undertaking tasks in Acts. The apostles embarked on their mission after they were filled with the Holy Spirit. Acts paints the activities of the post-Pentecost period as driven by the Holy Spirit. In the appointment of the Seven, lots were abandoned for a Spirit-filled life. Being full of the Spirit means being under the control of the Holy Spirit. This requirement has an antecedent in the delegation of leadership by Moses and the call of Joshua.^{xxxv} Coupled with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the Seven were to be full of wisdom. They were to possess the ability to apply the truth of the word of God in the various details of their lives. Progress despite the ethnic divide in Acts was mediated by the spiritual leadership provided by the disciples and the Seven.

Participatory Leadership: The interaction between the twelve (leaders) and the multitude (laity) diffused the tension brewed by the unequal treatment of some members. The leadership involved the laity in conflict resolution. The laity was given access and participated in decision-making.^{xxxv} The laity made their selection and brought the seven to the Apostles for ordination. There was a free hand in the choice of those in leadership. The apostles provided the guidance required, and within those parameters, the choices were made. The results were immediate, the multitude was pleased, and the church grew. The leadership portrayed here allowed involvement of the laity.

A Reinvented Leadership: The leadership in Acts 6 reinvented itself in facing new challenges.^{xxxv} The church had no history to refer to in diffusing the cultural tensions. Nevertheless, their approach to this crisis manifests adaptation to new situations. The apostles used the Old Testament principles in appointing the supplementary leadership, but tailored them toward the new setting.^{xxxv} There is also a Jewish background to the number seven, probably patterned after the seven elders elected to take care of Jewish towns.^{xxxv} Nevertheless, there is a departure in the ethnicity of those elected. The Apostles were all of Jewish background from the Palestinian stock. The list of the seven is Hellenists from the Diaspora. The passage signals a shift in the leadership of the church, a leadership that incorporated the Hellenists. There was now a varied linguistic and ethnic composition of the leadership.

Reflecting on Mission: A Theology of Mission

The crisis in Acts 6 made the apostles reflect on their mission. Their reflection led to a two-pronged approach to ministry, the ministry of the word and the ministry of serving the tables. Luke presents in Acts 7-8 Stephen and Philip, ministers of the tables, as catalysts of the ministry beyond Jerusalem. The Jerusalem phase has gone full circle.^{xxxv} The other part of the promise of Acts 1:8, witnessing Judea, Samaria to the uttermost parts of the world, was now the unfulfilled task. The promise of Jesus echoes in the Apostles' response: "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God to wait on tables... we will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word" (6:2-4). They affirmed the theology of mission bequeathed to them by Jesus and constructed one for posterity.

Ministry of the Word: Reliving the Mission: The phrase 'ministry of the word' is used singularly in 6:2 but is coupled with prayer in 6:4. This coupling of the ministry of the word with prayer echoes the activities of the apostles after the experience of Pentecost.^{xxxv} These activities propelled the church to growth.^{xxxv} Notable is the comment before the unit of the Seven (6:1-7), which is a reference to the proclamation of the gospel.^{xxxv} In the appointment of the Seven, the apostles reaffirmed the priority of the proclamation of the

word in the context of the promise in Acts 1:8, whose fulfilment is Luke's agenda in Acts.^{xxxv} The crisis in Acts 6 enabled them to reflect on their mission as they transitioned to engage a wider world. The subsequent events (8-12) portray a revitalised group stepping out with the gospel to the world outside Jerusalem with an energized inclusive community of faith facing its mission beyond the Jewish borders. The mission from then onwards took a two-pronged approach to ministry, a ministry of the word and a ministry of works (serving the tables) as the church engaged the wider world.

Ministry of the Tables: Meeting the Material Needs: "Serving the tables" was not a practice invented by the apostles. It was a carry-over from the Jewish practice of ministering to the poor, adapted by the Christians in Jerusalem. The apostles formalized it as an integral part of ministry equal to the ministry of the word. The two-pronged approach to ministry elevated the ministry of material needs as a critical ministry in the early church. The profile of those in charge of the ministry of the tables denotes its place in the early church.^{xxxv} This two-pronged approach to mission should inform our biblical theology of mission. The summary on growth has reports about the ministry of the word; preaching, teaching, healing and praying, and notably a future *worldly character* of the church that is peace, unity, sharing and grace.^{xxxv} A theology of mission in Acts 6 is founded on the cross-cultural approach to mission that does not neglect the socio-economic needs of the community.^{xxxv}

A Cross-Cultural Cohesive Community of Faith

Cultural tensions provoked by prejudice threatened the unity of the community of faith in Jerusalem.^{xxxv} The old suspicions were carried over into Christianity. One group was openly contemptuous of the other and viewed itself as superior.^{xxxv} The sum effect of the activities in Acts 6:1-7 was the eradication of tension among the believers in Jerusalem and the creation of a cohesive community of faith.^{xxxv} Luke deliberately mentions the ethnic undertones of the tension. The diaspora Jewish women were overlooked in the distribution of the food, while those of the Palestinian stock were favoured. The seven deacons are also deliberately named to show their ethnicity. The passage closes with another identification of a group, "a large number of priests." A reference to the Jewish religious class affiliated with the temple. There is a diverse gender, linguistic, and ethnic composition of the community of believers presented. Despite the diverse composition of the group, the tone at the end (6:7) is one of unity. In a growing church of people from different nationalities and ethnic backgrounds, tensions are bound to arise. Communities engaged in tribal, economic and political conflicts may carry over these conflicts and age-old suspicions into the church. That these groups jell into a peaceful, harmonious community through their exposure to the gospel is the agenda of Luke in Acts. The proclamation of the gospel at Pentecost was in the hearing of people from various ethnic groups. The phenomenon of tongues in Acts is also manifested in different geographical regions. The growth summaries present growth in different geographical places and as a result of life in the community of faith. The powerful testimony of the disciples had transformed persons of diverse backgrounds into one cohesive community of the faithful. They were enabled to reach out to the "other" and build a community where love was displayed despite their otherness.

Theological Implications for the Church in Sub-Saharan Africa

A model of Spirit-filled leadership anchored in the commission of Jesus will mediate through preaching and prayer and ministering to the material needs of the members, a cohesive, cross-cultural community of faith with a multiplying effect. Can this model in Acts be replicated in Sub-Saharan Africa? The church growth challenges in Sub-Saharan Africa presented above *can* be surmounted if the principles the apostles employed in Acts

6 are applied. Challenges arising from the tribal tensions or socio-economic needs currently bedevilling many African Christian churches can be addressed by applying the Apostles' Act 6 model. While proclaiming the gospel, the Apostles were sensitive to the issues of inequality and poverty. Armed with Spirit-filled leadership, sound theology of the mission of word and works, they surmounted the challenges. Spirit-led leadership is requisite for any turnaround from church growth challenges. It has to be a leadership that would reinvent itself and adapt to new situations, offering innovative solutions. Such a leadership can mediate a multi-tribal cohesive community of believers energized for further growth of the church in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Conclusion

The study of the passage on the election of the Seven reveals a movement from growth with grumblings to one without. This reversal from tension to cohesion was mediated by Spirit-filled leaders who reinvented themselves and applied themselves to new circumstances with unprecedented solutions to the challenges. They were propelled by the commission of Jesus as they mediated a cohesive community of believers. The promise of Acts 1:8 was the theological basis of their mission. Luke uses Acts 6-8 as a bridge in his narrative for the further fulfilment of the promise of Jesus beyond Jerusalem. The progress entailed a two-pronged approach to ministry: ministry of prayer and preaching, and ministering to the material needs of the members. The result was a cohesive community of believers energized to reach out with the divine mission of soul-winning.