

Growing Pains. Acts 6:1-7

A Growing Movement

From 120 in an upper room [Acts 1:15] to, according to the Gordon Conwell International Bulletin of Mission Research Status of Global Christianity Report 2024 [Annual statistics - Center for the Study of Global Christianity \(gordonconwell.edu\)](https://www.gordonconwell.edu/annual-statistics)] 2.63 billion today.

To be a Christian is to be part of a growing movement. Sometimes we can lose sight of that, either because we think the decline in the number of those identifying as Christian in our census is indicative of what is happening around the world, or we think the decline of some denominations in the West reflects the circumstances of the church generally, including in the West. Neither is the case.

God is still saving people, adding numbers to His church, and will be every day until all His people are saved and the end comes. God is adding people to our church. I rarely talk about numbers for size is secondary to health, but this year, compared to 2023, average total attendance across all congregations has increased by 10% [462] and the increase in adults across all services is 7% [346] – and in some congregations and on some Sundays we notice that growth more. That is something to be thankful for, and we should want to see more and more people believing and joining us.

The Christian faith has been growing and spreading from the beginning, but as we heard in today's passage, growth brings problems. At the beginning of the church there was a problem in the distribution of support for widows, and that same growth still brings problems today, many and various. You may be aware of some of the challenges of growth for us – for example, parking at 11, finding places in and the size of our growth groups.

There is no effortless growth, no growth where the problems raised by more people and different people don't need to be addressed and solved.

But Acts 6 also firstly shows a way of addressing problems that occur in the Christian community with growth, Secondly points us to the provision of God for resolving those problems,

And thirdly encourages us to see that addressing the problems successfully helps the continuing growth of the church, helps more and more people come to find life in repentance and faith in Jesus.

And isn't that all the motivation any believer, anyone who has experienced the wonder of being forgiven and adopted as God's child, knowing His gracious love and the hope He gives, isn't that all the motivation any believer needs to be grateful for growth and determined to resolve the challenges it brings.

The Problems Growth brings

Acts 6: In those days, as the disciples were increasing in number,

Clearly the context for what follows is growth, an increasing number of believers, the growth that we have seen follow the preaching of the gospel from the beginning of Acts, Luke recording thousands, multitudes, being saved [Acts 2:41, 47, 5:14].

But that creates a problem

there arose a complaint by the Hellenistic Jews against the Hebraic Jews that their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution.

The word translated 'a complaint' can also be translated a murmuring, a whispering.

So don't think of a group lodging a formal complaint with the apostles and that was it. This is complaining, murmuring, whispering, going on amongst believers – and that is never good. You can imagine the comments

“That is so thoughtless”, “Can they really be followers of Jesus and treat our widows so badly”,

Perhaps, sadly, you have heard murmurings yourself, or even spoken it

‘Can’t they teach their kids to be more thoughtful’,

Complaining, murmuring – undermines trust in each other, alienates and separates, makes a Christian community an unwelcoming space.

It needs to be addressed

But how did the problem arise?

What’s the daily distribution?

And who are we talking about when we are talking about Hellenistic and Hebraic Jews?

Let’s start with the second question.

What distinguishes Hellenistic Jews and Hebraic Jews from each other is not faith – both groups are believers in Jesus, and both are from Jewish backgrounds.

It is language.

Hellenists are Jews who speak Greek. Greek was the common language of most of the Eastern Mediterranean at that time, a legacy of Alexander the Great’s conquests and trade. Hellenists are Jews who themselves came to Jerusalem from the surrounding Greek speaking countries, or whose family came from there, and who would have spoken Greek at home. They would have, even in Jerusalem, previously attended synagogues where Greek was the language of worship [e.g. 6:9, 9:29].

Hebraists are Jews who grew up in Judaea and Galilee where Aramaic, closely related to Hebrew, was the commonly spoken language at home and whose synagogues used a mixture of Hebrew and Aramaic for worship. They were the locals, whose resources – like wider family connections and property, would generally have been greater and nearer, and were in the majority.

So these are two groups of believers distinguished from each other by the language they used, but language often determines those you relate to are connected with.

And what, according to the Hellenists, is the problem raised by growth?

their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution.

Widows were a financially vulnerable group. After the death of their husbands they were dependent on their family, either adult sons or other members of their husbands family, for provision. Normally they would not have inherited property, and if they did most often it was administered by the male members of the family.

And there were a lot of widows in Jerusalem, for pious Jews wanted to come and die in Jerusalem. If the husband died there, the widow was often isolated from any family support and could become destitute.

There was no social security, no widow’s pension back then, and before she became a Christian a poor widow would have been dependent on the weekly or daily distribution of food made by the synagogue to which she was attached, for care of widows was something Jews did and still do take seriously for it is commanded in Scripture [Exodus 22:22, Deut. 14:28-29, 24:19-22, Ruth].

Care of widows was seen as a communal responsibility – everyone’s responsibility, and now that believing widows had joined themselves to community of believers it became the responsibility of the community of the followers of Jesus to provide for them.

The community had accepted that responsibility – there was a daily distribution - but the Hellenists widows are being neglected

We are not told how that neglect is happening.

It seems that up to now the provision of support had been pretty ad hoc Acts 4:35, not systematically organised

So the neglect may have been an organizational failure

Perhaps adequate notification was not being given about the where and the when of the distribution, or perhaps the directions were being given in Aramaic and not understood

Maybe those making the distribution were unaware of the Hellenistic widows because these widows didn't belong to their majority grouping

But whatever the reason, the Hellenist widows were being overlooked and that was giving rise to complaining, and the church was faced with a problem that needed to be resolved.

Now this is not the only problem associated with growth the early church will encounter. As we read on in Acts we will see others

Suspicion when previously hostile people like Paul converted and a reluctance to accept them [9:26-28] into the church

Problems with the incorporation of the gentiles, non-Jews, into the believing community, and debate about the provisions for common eating and fellowship [11:1-18, 15:1-35]

Misinformation and suspicion of mission work [Acts 21:20-22]

Even the angry reaction of non-believers in Ephesus at the impact of the growing numbers of believers on their trade [Acts 19:23-41]

But this is the first issue.

It is not a doctrinal issue. It is a community life issue, how Christians are treating each other issue.

But it is a sensitive and serious issue

Serious – because the widows depended on that distribution to eat

Sensitive – because it could suggest there were two classes of believers in Jesus, and that this community did not care about a duty that every Jew knew was a mark of piety, of genuine worship of God.

Unaddressed it would harm believers who were loved by Jesus, and it would damage the reputation of the Christian community amongst a significant section of the population of Jerusalem.

The Apostles' solution

How do the apostles' respond?

²The Twelve summoned the whole company of the disciples and said, "It would not be right for us to give up preaching the word of God to wait on tables. ³Brothers and sisters, select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and wisdom, whom we can appoint to this duty. ⁴But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word."

They didn't ignore it, hoping it would go away or just sort itself out

They didn't make those complaining the problem – disturbing the peace, damaging our reputation with your chatter

They didn't make growth itself a problem, didn't say

'It was so much easier when there were just the 120 of us and we knew everyone's names and situation'

They recognised there was a problem

But they didn't stop doing what they were doing either,

Didn't say – we will drop everything devote ourselves to sorting out our systems until the problem is solved.

No

Up front they said

"It would not be right for us to give up preaching the word of God to wait on tables.

A real problem, a serious problem, but not theirs personally to solve

What they did do was gather the community – the whole company, all of them - and suggest a way the community could solve the problem, for it was the whole community's problem. Care of widows was not just the apostle's responsibility, it was everyone's responsibility, a duty God had placed on everyone through His word.

³Brothers and sisters, select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and wisdom, whom we can appoint to this duty. ⁴But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word."

Select, in this case, seven suitable men to solve the problem, to accept responsibility to meet this need.

There is evidence of seven being a number employed by Jewish communities in this kind of commission

Not sure why they thought seven was the right number, but it was a task that needed the attention of a number of people - registering widows, keeping track of the distribution, making sure no-one fell through the cracks, looking after the money, perhaps operating from a number of locations, addressing the other needs that would arise in a needy group.

With the call to select these seven the apostles are suggesting a delegation of responsibility.

But it is not the apostles' delegating some of their work. The apostles have at this stage a general oversight of the community to make sure that Jesus rules in His church by His word, that it is Jesus' church. But the care of widows is not their responsibility alone, or their primary responsibility. It is the community's responsibility.

They are suggesting the community delegate to some of its members a leadership role in making sure the community's collective God given responsibility is met.

That is why these seven must be chosen by the community. It is the community that has to be confident that they will perform on the community's behalf the work that is the responsibility of the whole community, work which uses community's resources like money

And delegating to some this responsibility to care for all the widows in the community is sensible and necessary.

Sensible – for only some may have the gifts, life circumstances, the health to allow them to do the work effectively.

Necessary – for the job needs to be properly done, and if it is done by everyone they will get in each other's way, no-one will have a grasp of the whole, there may be duplication in one spot and others overlooked in another. When something is the responsibility of everyone it is easy to end up with no one doing it, for you can always think someone else has done it.

Let's just pause to recognise that there are also in our common life many things are everyone's responsibility

Provision at church for the care and nurture of children

Making our meetings a welcoming place

Maintenance of common property

Paying our workers

Caring for each other

In fact, most things in our common life are the believing community's common responsibility

And over the centuries the church as heirs of Acts 6 has developed settled ways of applying this principle of community delegation

That is why we have a Board of Management and a group of deacons both of whose members are elected by the congregation.

The board and the deacons are not helping the pastors, or session, with their work.

No. They are helping the congregation with its work. They are those to whom the congregation has delegated responsibility to make sure that what are the responsibilities of every believer are being discharged in the congregation effectively.

For example, have to meet, and God has entrusted to us a building. We all have a responsibility to make sure we can meet and to be good stewards of the meeting place God has entrusted to us – but we have as a community delegated oversight of that, the responsibility to make sure it happens that to the Board.

Every believer has a responsibility to ensure those who teach the word receive an adequate living and that the congregation's moneys are handled responsibly and honestly, but as a community we have also delegated that to the BOM.

We all have a responsibility to love practically our brothers and sisters, and so that is done effectively, and people don't fall through the cracks, we have delegated the responsibility to make sure that happens to the Deacons who are there to help us show real care to each other.

Delegating by the community to some the responsibility to make sure the community's responsibilities are being met is a model, taught by scripture, we already employ to meet some of our common responsibilities

And because of that we should pay attention to the guidance the apostles give to the Jerusalem church in selecting people for the task of ensuring that all the widows get their daily allowance.

Criteria of suitability

Select men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and wisdom,

They should only select people known to them.

Reputation is important. What has their past conduct shown to be true of them?

It is easy to be taken in where you rely on words alone, what people claim to be true of themselves.

Easy to be taken in by how you feel about someone, the impression they make on you.

When choosing for responsible roles of leadership in the church, believers must always look at fruit, what has been seen in their lives over time [cf 1 Tim. 3:1-13, Titus 1:5-9].

And what has to be seen is that they are *full of the Spirit and wisdom*,

Wisdom we get – the ability to make right choices, godly choices, when decisions have to be made, the choices that will make sure the responsibility is discharged well

But what does it look like for someone to be full of the Spirit?

How would those selecting have known their nominees are full of the Spirit?

We are not told here exactly, but Scripture suggests some indicators to look for.

Firstly a genuine confession of Jesus as Lord [1 Cor. 12:3]. Those who fulfil roles in the congregation must be genuine believers.

Then activity that shows their lives and words are directed by the Spirit. We see this in Stephen and Phillip, the two of the seven we know more about, who give themselves to testifying to Jesus, and in Stephen's case the performance of signs and wonders in Jesus' name.[Acts 6:8-10]

Thirdly, character, the fruit of the Spirit in their lives [Gal. 5:22-23].

So in this case you would expect those chosen by the congregation to have a reputation for being – honest – dealing with money, diligent – people depend on them, kind – dealing with vulnerable people

This first delegation of responsibility sets the standard that we should look for today in those filling any responsible role - people with a credible profession of faith, proven demonstrated godly character, wisdom, whose lives are directed to please God.

Choose suitable people to whom you can delegate this responsibility say the apostles to the disciples, *whom we can appoint to this duty*

they commit themselves to facilitating their ministry by appointing them to the task

Why the apostolic appointment? Why wasn't election by the members enough?

It is because the community of believers is from the first a community that had recognised leadership with authority and overall responsibility for its functioning, behaviour

Leadership appointed by Jesus, His apostles

Leadership through whom Christ exercised His authority over the church through the preaching and teaching of His word, whose ministry was foundational to the church, not just then but across the centuries

Where there is this existing leadership the appointment of the seven by the apostles is important for two reasons.

Firstly, it will facilitate the work of the seven by recognition of their suitability – both in terms of their character and process of appointment. It will help the seven in their ministry, and it will help the community in receiving their ministry, to know they are supported by the authority of the apostles in fulfilling their ministry.

Secondly, it makes it clear that those coming into other significant roles in the community are not be seen as a rival authority.

That is always possible, especially where there is community choice, election – and selfish ambition becomes a factor

Apostolic appointment shows that these seven, Spirit filled as they are, able as they are, work with and under the authority of the apostles, they work with the structure of existing authority.

There is, from the beginning, no place for self-appointed authority in Christian communities, that either usurps the responsibility of the congregation to choose those to whom it will delegate tasks, or the authority of those already appointed to maintain Jesus' rule amongst His people by teaching His word.

The Apostles' Priority

Having taught the congregation how they can resolve this important issue that was generating destructive complaining the apostles make their own priority clear,

⁴But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word."

This doesn't mean that they thought they were better or more important people and that caring for widows was beneath them. Caring for others is part of every believer's discipleship.

But it does mean they knew themselves to have been entrusted with another task by the Lord Jesus, a task for which all believers were not equipped – testifying to what they had seen and heard of Jesus, to His death and resurrection, His exaltation and His authority to forgive and judge, and this must have priority

They had been explicitly commissioned to this task by the Lord Jesus

John 20:²¹ Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, I also send you."

Acts 1:⁸ But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come on you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

It is through this gospel word that the community of believers was brought into existence, that people were saved, brought from the dominion of darkness into the Kingdom of the Son

And it is through the ministry of this word that others are equipped to use their gifts to build up God's people.

As Paul writes in Eph. 4

Ephesians 4:¹¹ And he himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, all word gifts,¹² to equip the saints for the work of ministry, to build up the body of Christ,¹³ until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of God's Son, growing into maturity with a stature measured by Christ's fullness.

The ministry of the word is foundational to the community's existence and continuing life and growth.

To neglect it, even for other worthy things, would be to harm the community, to stunt its growth to maturity

But before they say we must devote ourselves to the ministry of the word they speak of the need to pray.

That struck me, and rebuked me – and perhaps it is a rebuke for us all.

When you think about it, their need and our need to pray is obvious

When you consider the state of those to whom the gospel is preached – dead in sin, blinded by the devil’s lies, enslaved to rebellion against God

When you consider the scope of the task entrusted to the apostles and then to all disciples – to make disciples of all nations by taking the gospel to the ends of the earth

When you consider the powerful opposition to the gospel – the vested interests of human authorities who want to resist Jesus’ rule, the malice of a defeated devil, seen from the very beginning of the church

You see their and our need of prayer, for only God can raise the dead and make the blind see, and only God can sustain courage and give the right words in the face of opposition

And when you remember the apostles have been given such wonderful promises in prayer by the Lord as He prepared them for the task, promises we inherit as we share in that task

John 16:23 “In that day you will not ask me anything. Truly I tell you, anything you ask the Father in my name, he will give you. 24 Until now you have asked for nothing in my name. Ask and you will receive, so that your joy may be complete. 26 On that day you will ask in my name, and I am not telling you that I will ask the Father on your behalf. 27 For the Father himself loves you, because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God.

You see why they would devote themselves to prayer

How could they not pray, both in the gatherings of believers and in private

How could we not devote ourselves to prayer

The need for anyone entrusted with teaching and preaching the word is to pray

Prayer gets an equal billing here with the ministry of the word, but does it in our lives, in our ministry?

We emphasise being prepared to teach, whether that is in small groups or Sunday school or youth group – and we mention prayer, but not often with the same emphasis

In our prosperous society – our default is to rely on ourselves

You and I, all of us, need to give our praying equal billing with our devotion to God’s word if we want that Word to spread powerfully through our community, and to persevere in witness when opposed.

In suggesting a solution to the problem created by growth the apostles make clear their priorities, and in doing this they emphasise that it is the congregation’s responsibility to resolve the problem

The gathered disciples listened to the apostles and welcome their proposal

5 This proposal pleased the whole company. So they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a convert from Antioch. 6 They had them stand before the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.

They go ahead and choose seven men. We only know something of two of them, Stephen and Philip. But something stands out about them as a group. When you look at the names, they are all Greek names. That is the whole community has chosen people who belong to the Hellenistic believers.

What we see hear is the godly wisdom of the community. In their choice they have shown those who had the concern that they had heard them and reassured them of their determination to correct the neglect by entrusting the solution to representatives of the community most affected and aggrieved, those the Hellenists could have confidence in. The Hebraists have not acted defensively but generously, assuring the Hellenists of their love and respect in their choice, a choice that promotes unity.

And we also see the provision of God to resolve the problem – godly people willing to serve. The resources for solving the problem were already there in the community: people, people with the character needed, suitably gifted with wisdom, and transformed by their love of Jesus to love Jesus' people by giving of their time and energy, for this role would mean work, hours devoted not to their interests, but to the interests of the widows in the community.

The disciples choose, and the apostles do what they said they would

⁶*They had them stand before the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.*

Just as Moses commissioned Joshua and invested him with some of his authority by laying hands on him [Numbers 27:15-23], so the apostles recognise and give authority to the seven to do the work entrusted to them by prayer and the laying on of hands.

The apostles act both to facilitate their work and maintain the unity of the community under their leadership

Summary:

What is the way revealed here for addressing the problems of growth?

Gathering believers, having all recognise that the solution is everyone's responsibility

Then, guided by the word of the apostles, the community of disciples delegating the responsibility to ensure the community meets what is a community obligation to suitably qualified people, people of known godliness and wisdom..

And what is God's provision for resolution of the problem? It is not a blue print for effective mercy ministry, a divinely ordained system. It is people, suitably gifted people, who have the freedom to use the wisdom they have been given to meet that need at that time.

Gifted people working with and under the existing leadership of the church

And all without any interruption to the vital ministry of prayer and the word

And the effect of addressing the problem?

Effect

⁷*So the word of God spread, the disciples in Jerusalem increased greatly in number, and a large group of priests became obedient to the faith.*

Addressing the problems of growth facilitated the continuing spread of the gospel and the growth in the numbers of believers, that is of people saved from condemnation and hell.

Problems unaddressed undermine the gospel, for they speak of an absence of love, deny the power of the gospel to transform our relationships

And they make the community harder to belong to.

Problems unaddressed undermine the visible witness of a community life

Addressing the problems in the context of the truth and love the gospel brings facilitates growth

Facilitates, not causes.

Good Systems, good processes, a communal life that has integrity – doesn't cause growth

Growth comes only through the word

But making sure our life together conforms to the truth of the gospel can commend the gospel, remove barriers to it being heard and make it easier for people to join us.

And that is the encouragement we need to address our problems of growth

For we have, praise the Lord, problems of growth

And we want more – not because we want to be bigger, and not because we want problems, but we want more people to be saved

What are they? The ones at the top of my mind:

Struggling to follow up effectively, that is to make welcome, all who come

Difficulty in incorporating people into growth groups which are often quite big – we need more who will host and lead, for these groups are essential to our care for each other

Increased use of the building means increased wear and tear, increased maintenance

Sometimes it can be difficult to find a seat

Creating a sense of belonging among different groups

At 11, parking – especially for those who cannot walk far

At 11, lots of children of different ages and stages and not a lot of places for them to play after the service, with the possibility of collision

Some of these can be addressed through staffing, like growing our growth groups

Some of these can be addressed through our existing teams and structures like BOM and Deacons working on behalf of us all – like wear and tear, the financing of a growing ministry, provision of material support for a growing number of people

And it is good for us all to see the importance of those groups in helping us solve problems that are the responsibility of us all, problems that can become an irritant to us all if unaddressed

So that we Encourage, and don't take for granted, those who serve

So that we won't neglect your role in choosing/electing and only choosing believers of good reputation and proven character

Consider serving in them

Sharing in their work, whether it is responding to their requests for help, or cleaning the building or making meals, fulfilling our responsibilities under the leadership of those you have selected to be responsible for making sure what is the work of us all gets done

But not all issues of growth can be solved by our existing structures – particularly at 11

Parking, the issues associated with a lot of children in the building after the service in the context of lots of different parenting styles

And it may be that we need to get together at 11 and choose some suitable people to give their minds to those issues on our behalf

So watch this space

What we mustn't do is complain and not act, or think that growth is something to be resented or resisted

Instead we should prayerfully trust the Lord to provide for us in each other, in His people, the resources we need to solve the problems of growth, solving which will facilitate further growth

And be willing to serve ourselves if called upon

In our church's brief history we have the encouragement of having seen the Lord provide suitable brothers and sisters for specific needs before, whether it was when we needed to get and develop a building, or when we needed to develop an extra service

Our God is faithful, and it is He who is saving and adding people to His church through His gospel

It is because of His determination to save all His people we are part of a growing movement

Growth has created problems, issues, from the beginning

But from the beginning our Lord has also shown us how we can address them in ways that will strengthen our community and commend the gospel

Listen to Him

Accept our common responsibility to resolve the issues

Pray for suitably gifted people

While we continue to make sure those entrusted with the teaching and preaching of the Word can devote themselves to that task and prayer, for the good of us all and the glory of our Saviour as He saves through that gospel word