



multiplanting

A Vision for Growing Churches,
Leaders and Mission

COLIN BARON
with Tom O'Toole and Tim Simmonds

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PUBLISHING

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Dedication

It is often said that books are a team effort. This one definitely is. So I'd like to dedicate *Multiplanting* to the magnificent people of Christ Church Manchester who have lived out the contents of this book with faithfulness, generosity and a sense of humour.

I am also grateful to the following people for their help with bringing this book to life:

Jennie Pollock and Andy Wisdom for their reading and editing skills.

Ian Watson for designing diagrams.

Liam Thatcher for advice and feedback.

Mike Knight, Tim and Aimee Windsor Brown, for reading various drafts.

This book is published in the 40th year of my ministry and more importantly the 40th year of marriage to Mary, which has proved to be the best decision I have made.

Really, this whole book is for Jesus who saved me as a wayward teenager and set me on a different path.

Colin Baron

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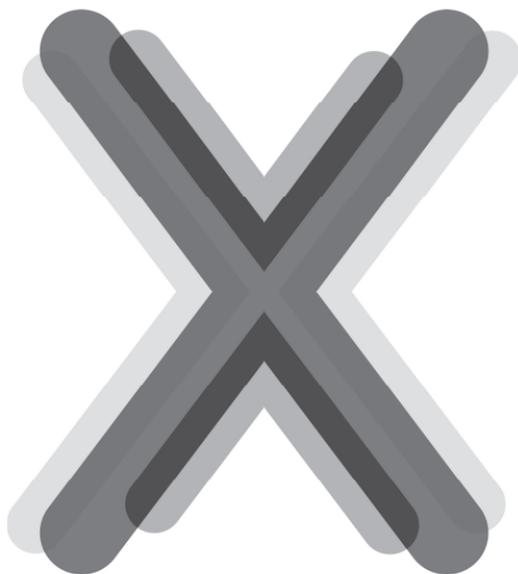
by David Devenish

I have had the pleasure of knowing and working with Colin Baron now for over 30 years. As well as Colin being one of my closest friends in ministry, I have learned over the years to admire his clarity of vision for the priority of church planting, both as an end in itself, and as a way of training leaders and thus fulfilling the Biblical mandate to make disciples. I have also grown to respect his wisdom and remarkable prophetic insight into issues affecting Christian leadership and his ability to get to the heart of both opportunities and problems that we are encountering. My own ministry has benefitted on numerous occasions from Colin's insightful remarks and his encouragement and frequent challenges to my own thinking in relation to my ministry in serving churches.

I am so glad that Colin has now decided to commit his insights into writing and the result is this excellent book *Multiplanting*. In it, these two particular qualities of Colin's ministry, vision for church planting and leadership wisdom, are combined to provoke much thought, prayer, inspiration and challenges to the traditional ways of doing ministry.

We need many more new churches and community based "sites" to be planted to reach this nation and other nations with the gospel. I therefore enthusiastically commend *Multiplanting* to you.

David Devenish – Team Leader, Newfrontiers Together Team.



**Part One:
Multiplanting and the
Big Church Dream**

A few years ago, one of the leaders on my team told me of a time when he was walking with his father, who is an apple farmer, along a path through one of his orchards. The path divided the orchard into two parts: In one section there were lots of very large apple trees, between fifteen and twenty feet tall with a twenty-four-foot span. My friend noticed that because the trees were so big, they had to be spaced quite far apart.

On the other side of the path were smaller apple trees, about a third of the size of the larger ones, but there were many more of them. My friend became curious and wanted to know why there was such a difference between the two sections of the orchard. He was told that in the past, the general consensus in the apple farming industry had been that the best way to get more apples was to plant big trees far apart, because big trees produce more fruit than small trees. However, in the 1990s this thinking changed as apple farmers began to realise that the best way to get the most apples was not to plant a few big trees far apart but instead to plant lots of smaller trees close together. Each tree on its own produced less fruit than a large one could, but in the space that was required for one large tree, up to eight small trees could grow, and together they produced way more fruit than a single large tree.

Not only was the total apple yield larger, the apples from the smaller trees were of a far higher quality than those grown on the big trees, and apples became easier to harvest as ladders were no longer needed. Hundreds more trees could be planted, and they could be planted right to the edge of the field and in all the awkward corners that were impossible for the big trees to reach.

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I believe that a time is coming when church leaders will have a similar mindset shift to the one experienced by those apple farmers. Many church leaders assume that the most effective path to fruitful kingdom ministry is growing a large church, but what if this big church dream is actually inhibiting us from seeing the quantity and quality of impact that we long for?

Over the last twenty-five years of ministry in Manchester, I have been pioneering a different approach; planting smaller, interconnected congregations throughout the city that operate together as one church. Strong enough together for each to survive and thrive, and yet small and dispersed enough to have a kind of reach that I would never have been able to have had I stayed in one place and grown big. I have called this approach ‘multiplanting’.



Chapter One: My Multiplanting Journey

Have you ever found yourself in a car, having a conversation with your stereo as if it were a real person? I have.

It was 1993, and I was on my way to Manchester to have coffee with a couple of people whom I had never met before. They were friends of friends who had agreed to meet up with me and help me get to know the city a bit. A few months earlier, my wife Mary and I had sensed God calling us to move our family north and plant a new church somewhere in Greater Manchester. On the journey I was listening to a message from a Vineyard pastor named Steve Nicholson, who was challenging his congregation to dream again. He said that people had lost the courage to dream big dreams, and I strangely found myself responding to him as though he was in the car. ‘My dream,’ I said, ‘is to plant twenty churches in Manchester.’ It was at this moment that a multiplanting dream was birthed within me.

What is Multiplanting?

Multiplanting is a hybrid way of building church that draws on the strengths of many different approaches. I have seen lots of my friends plant and lead thriving churches using a wide variety of different models, and I wanted to incorporate as many of the positives as I could from these different approaches into my own ministry.

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Big Churches or Small Churches?

Big churches have a lot going for them: By bringing a large number of people together, they have the resources to put on a comprehensive and varied ministry programme, the capacity to maximise the reach of their activities and the scale to have a genuine impact on a whole city or region.

Small churches also have a lot of advantages: It is much easier to foster a community feel in a smaller church, and there are opportunities for people to get involved quickly, and be entrusted with ministry responsibility that they would be unlikely to receive in a larger church.

Before coming to Manchester I had been involved in two church plants, and neither of them had been a roaring success! The first plant was in Buckinghamshire, and I naïvely thought that because we were a group of very motivated and talented people, as well as good friends, new people would flock to us in droves! Although we all worked hard and the fellowship was wonderful, growth was slow and not as I expected. The second church plant was in a very needy area of North Kent, planting with a much smaller team (albeit still of excellent people). In light of my previous experience, the smaller team and the much poorer community that I was planting into, I had much lower expectations this time around, and my main strategy was based around simply surviving. Not exactly an inspiring vision for the future!

Again, the team worked wholeheartedly, but it took several years before we succeeded in building a small – but growing – church. We then made the 250-mile journey north to start again in Greater Manchester. After the challenges of the first two plants, I was determined to come up with a strategic plan to build a church

that would see many people saved, God's kingdom breaking in and creation being restored. Like many church leaders, I was keen to build something of size and capacity. Although I don't like to admit it, numbers really mattered to me, and the fact that I had been unable to build anything with more than eighty members hurt. Over time, I realised that I was in the same boat as the overwhelming majority of church leaders in the West. Recent research from the Evangelical Alliance shows that the average congregation size of churches in the UK is eighty-four (the figure for the USA is similar),¹ and most of the leaders of these churches are desperate to see their churches grow, but have little idea how to get some momentum going.

As I began dreaming of planting in Manchester, I couldn't get away from the dream that I first vocalised during that car journey when I was listening to Steve Nicholson's message. I didn't just want to plant one church; I wanted to plant twenty! This led me to reset the parameters of how I saw myself and how I would build church. Instead of struggling against the eighty-member ceiling, I began to embrace it. I realised that I could look at Greater Manchester through the lens of not just a single church, but of multiple church plants. If I could get twenty churches started and they each grew to fifty, then that would be a thousand people. This felt to me much more achievable than gathering a thousand people in a single congregation.

If we could bring together a thousand people, we would be able to enjoy the benefits of big churches, with the resources and capacity to serve people in a wide variety of ways, and make a splash in the city. But by doing so as congregations of between fifty and eighty members, we would be able to tap into the advantages

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of smaller churches, creating communities where people could feel known, loved and at home, and given lots of opportunities to step up and have a go at using their gifts. Our multiplanting approach meant that we were able to get the best of both worlds.

City Churches or Community Churches?

City churches are churches that have a vision to reach a whole city. They are ambitious and bold, often located near the centre of a city, and they aim to gather people in from all across a city on a Sunday and then see those people influence their own communities in the week. City churches can often be influential and exciting. They have a lot going for them.

Community churches are also very exciting, though their form is very different to city churches. The idea is for a church to go deep within one particular community. This may be a village or small town, or may be a specific local area within a larger city. They can form strong relationships with people, businesses and organisations that are part of that community, and become a loved and respected part of community life.

Not too long after I arrived in Manchester, I was invited to attend a conference hosted by a church in Sale. A prophet named Bryn Franklin got up to speak, and he pointed to me and a friend who was sitting next to me. Bryn had never met us before, and knew nothing about us, but he spoke to my friend and described part of a conversation that we had had that afternoon, and even gave us the answer to the questions that we had been asking. I was amazed! He said to me, 'I don't know you, but you are a leader and you are a large stake in the ground firmly driven in. Around you I see lots of stakes and they are all webbed together.'

I knew this was part of the answer to how we build the twenty churches that I had been dreaming of. A web is strong and flexible. It is interlinked and has purpose. If we were to start a movement of churches, they could be linked together and provide strength, resources and support that no individual church could muster up on its own. Each of the stakes could engage deeply in its own local community, and yet through the web that formed we could also have city-wide impact.

Very quickly, we started churches in Bolton, Warrington, Oldham, Salford, Stockport and Macclesfield. Our approach was simple: we found a few people to get it started and then we commissioned them to gather and grow. The strength and flexibility of the web was key as it gave us lots of room to initiate new plants whilst still experiencing the security and fellowship of the whole. It also meant that rather than taking resource out of the centre, each new plant actually strengthened the whole. Both our city impact and local engagement increased with every new plant that we started. We were able to benefit from both the breadth of vision that is usually associated with a city church and the depth of vision that comes from a community church. Once again, our multiplanting approach meant that we were able to get the best of both worlds.

Church Planting or Multisite?

Church planting is adventurous and entrepreneurial. This pioneering endeavour creates an environment of faith, provides opportunities for new young leaders to step out and has been shown to result in tremendous kingdom growth.

Multisite is another way of expanding church into new areas. It offers more resources and stability than church planting, but also

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can reduce both the need for innovation and the opportunity for new people to step up and pioneer a way.

I have always been aware that pioneering is part of the ministry that God called me to, and I remember that as a young man at Bible college, I felt particularly stirred when I heard people talking about pioneering missionary work. My calling as a pioneer was confirmed when, in the first church I planted, my friend Terry Virgo came to appoint me as an elder in the church. Terry travelled to us with some prophets, and during the evening, prophetic words were given about me being a pioneer. As Terry got up to speak, he started by sharing that he thought that God had told him earlier in the day that he must change the talk from his usual eldership sermon to one about Joshua pioneering into the Promised Land. It was only when he had heard those prophetic words that he understood why God had given him that instruction. We had thought the evening would be all about 'praying in' a pastor, but in fact it felt more like commissioning a pioneer!

When I arrived in Manchester, and felt stirred by the dream of starting twenty churches and the picture I had been given of the stakes and the web, we quite quickly got a few congregations planted around Manchester that operated as a network together. These congregations were held together by common values, shared finances, and everybody celebrating what we were as a whole (including how many of us there were!). We made sure that all of the site leaders spent some of their time working on their site and other time helping another part of the larger church. We worked hard to find appropriate ways to express our togetherness. One of the most significant things we did together was to hold

nights of prayer three times a year. These were amazing gatherings where different worship bands and prophetic leaders would take sessions. We would worship our God together, intercede, eat food at midnight and share great camaraderie, in the knowledge that we were on an amazing journey together.

By the time we had started our eighth congregation in Tameside it was becoming clear that we needed to define more precisely what we were doing. Were we building one church that happened to have multiple congregations (which would today be known as a multisite church) or were we planting lots of churches that happened to be networked together? This was a difficult time for me personally, as I felt way more invested in the whole than in any one congregation, yet the trajectory that had been set was that we would move to each congregation being independent and self-governing. Having set this initial objective, it became clear in time that each of the congregations did need to forge its own identity. This, plus a door opening for my family to spend two years ministering in the north-eastern seaboard of the USA, eventually brought an end to the multicongregation and the start of a new season for everybody. Of the eight churches that we had planted, six have prospered and one has planted again. The other two folded, sadly, despite having experienced seasons of good growth.

My reflection on this first phase of planting in Manchester was mainly very positive. We had managed to get growth into the hundreds, with leaders who probably wouldn't have done so well on their own. It also helped me to realise how important the trajectory that you set from the start is for how things develop and grow. For example, you may have noticed that, as I have told

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the story so far, I have called the gatherings that we were planting ‘congregations.’ In those early days, we were not sure what terminology would be best to use, but because church planting was the goal, we felt that language that pointed in this direction (without going as far as explicitly calling them ‘churches’) was important, and so we settled on the term ‘congregations.’

Looking back, I can see that setting this trajectory and choosing this language ended up bringing to an end, probably earlier than would have been beneficial for some, our corporate journey and the sharing of resources that was possible when we operated as a single multicongregation church. This was definitely the case in one of the churches that closed, and also in the case of the last church that we started, late on in the journey. This church failed to gain traction in numerical growth when it was no longer a part of the whole. It was in this last of the churches, now called Christ Church Manchester (CCM), that the second phase of my ministry in Manchester began.

When we returned from the USA in 2006 we were invited to join this church, and I can honestly say that it was quite an emotional journey for the first few years. I loved America, and though we had known that we would only be there for a short time, I found it hard to adjust to being back; it was particularly hard to start again with just one location as I had so loved the buzz and vibe that had come with being part of something much bigger, both in the States and in my first spell in Manchester.

Building on the past, and having learned some important lessons from what happened the first time around, we now wanted to set a new trajectory that would maintain a much longer-term unity. One of the first decisions that we made was

to start thinking in terms of 'sites' rather than 'congregations'. We still wanted to keep a pioneering edge and to plant into new areas from scratch, rather than just hiving off subsets of our existing congregation, and we still wanted local leaders to be able to take leadership responsibility in their site and figure out how to reach their community in meaningful ways. Nevertheless, we felt that building something that would stay together as one church across all of these sites was the right trajectory for us, and so the strategic choices that we made and the language that we employed were all geared in this direction.

The other helpful ingredient was the geography that we covered. In the first phase, the congregations that we had planted covered an area of over forty miles, so it was understandable that they wanted to cultivate their own identity to reach the town or community in which they were based. In this new phase, however, our sites were much more tightly concentrated near the centre of Manchester. This has helped us to build unity in the church and create a feeling of shared ownership of the mission.

I mentioned earlier the prophetic word that I had been given just after I arrived in Manchester about the stakes that would be webbed together. Each of our sites is one of those stakes, but by keeping the connection and oneness between them, we find that the whole is both stronger and more flexible than the individual stakes could be on their own. Working this way means that a creative tension needs to be maintained. Each of the stakes needs to have its own strength, and a lot of my time is spent working with our site leaders, providing support and coaching, and I find myself getting involved in whichever sites could most benefit from my strengthening input. At the same time, we also need

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each site to appreciate the value of the whole and work hard on unity. I have found that when site leaders can only see a vision for their own site, they tend to struggle, but when site leaders lift their heads and engage with the bigger picture, this has brought strength both to the whole church and to the individual site that they lead.

In this second phase, we switched trajectories from something that would move towards independence to something that would maintain unity. In this sense, we could be described as multisite, but we are probably not what most people think of when they hear the phrase ‘multisite church’. At our heart we are still pioneers, and in the ten years that we have been on this journey with CCM we have planted five sites, with six meetings every Sunday. We are intending to plant many more, and we have developed a way of doing so that has been described as ‘lean and scalable’. We will talk about this more as the book goes on.

We have identified some important things that we believe need to be centrally owned (the name, the vision and culture, the eldership, the finances, and certain celebration events such as baptisms) and we work hard from the centre to communicate well and make life easy for people on the ground. Outside of these things, however, we try to devolve as much to the site level as possible. All our preaching and worship music is organised by the individual sites, and each site is empowered to develop whatever programming best serves its mission to reach its own community.

By continuing to pioneer, we have created the faith environment that comes with church planting, built a momentum that snowballs with every new plant, and made genuine space for young leaders to have a go and make a difference. At the same time, we have

My Multiplanting Journey

also found the strength, flexibility and unity that comes from a commitment to remain together as one group. Once again, our multiplanting approach means that we are able to get the best of both worlds.

At the time of writing, Christ Church Manchester currently has sites in Gorton, Fallowfield (two Sunday meetings), Withington, Burnage and our most recent plant into Manchester city centre. We also have people in a few different areas of the city starting to pray, gather and dream about what could be next for us. Altogether there are around 300 people in CCM, plus around 500 in the previous multicongregation that we planted. The original dream of getting twenty churches started, and reaching a thousand people fifty to eighty at a time, is not very far way at all. And the journey is only just beginning.