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Sports Ministry and Evangelism

How an incarnational and service emphasis underpins effective evangelism

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Rev Samuel Ashe, an 18th century English clergyman, clearly saw the need for interaction between church and sport. He used to spend his Sunday afternoons hiding in the trees by the local sports field. He would bide his time until the football came near him when he would catch the ball and pierce it with a pin. He could then go home pleased to have stopped his parishioners from sinning! Hopefully, in this article we can identify more constructive ways of engaging with the world of sport.

No reasonable person can deny the importance of sport in the modern world:

- The FIFA Football World Cup takes place in Brazil in June-July this year.
- The 2010 World Cup was shown on TV in every single country and territory on earth, with 3.2 billion people around the world, or 46.4% of the global population, watching at least part of it.²

Theological catch-up

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Christian ministry to sport largely began in the 1950s but has grown exponentially to the point where there are currently over 50 ministries with a specific engagement with sport in the UK alone. Some form of Christian ministry to sport exists in 180 countries of the world. However, the growth has been spontaneous and often uncoordinated. This process has had certain consequences, for example, in terms of theology.

Jim Mathisen, from Wheaton College, has written, ‘The fact that the current [sports ministry] movement still operates in the absence of any clearly articulated theology of sport is troubling . . . no theology or hermeneutics is broadly shared within the movement’.³ While Mathisen’s comment remains true in the sense that sports ministry still operates from no generally accepted common theological foundation, more and more material on sport and Christianity is being published at an academically respectable level.⁴

Broad scope

Sports ministry broadly falls into two categories—ministry to sport and ministry through sport:

- Ministry to sport means serving sport in the name of Jesus; sports chaplaincy⁵ is a good example of this. The term ‘serving the people of sport’ is also used. This is helping the (often) elite sportsperson to practise their sport Christianly as well bringing church to them when competition stops them getting to a local Sunday service.
- Ministry through sport is seeing sport as an evangelistic opportunity. This might involve running sports events with an evangelistic purpose, starting a church sports team to draw in outsiders, operating a fitness centre for the community as part of the church’s programme, or distributing leaflets or video material with a gospel message in the language of sport, often using the testimony of high-profile Christian athletes.

Sports ministry works at all levels and age groups. The following vision statement of one UK ministry summarizes well the task that the majority of Christian sports ministry organizations are engaged in:

- **Christians everywhere** living out their faith in sports clubs and teams.
- **Churches everywhere** engaging with their local sports communities.
- **Sportspeople everywhere** having the opportunity to hear the good news of Jesus Christ.⁶

Major event ministry

In recent years, Christians have seen the potential of a major event in their country or city as an opportunity for service and witness. This type of ministry began in the 1990s and has grown significantly over the years, particularly at the Olympics and football World Cups:

- A £2 million campaign around the 2012 London Olympics and Paralympics involved over 2,000 volunteers from 40 countries serving on mission teams, the production and sale of 500,000 Christian resources and the distribution of half a million free bottles of water.
- The athlete family homestay programme hosted 280 guests from 20 nations for 2,000 nights of free accommodation.
- Church-organized events attracted over 500,000 people.⁷

Major event ministry has often been very effective but can sometimes lead to problems with the event organizing committee. They may feel that a particular Christian publication conflicts with official publications or could mislead the public into believing that there is an official relationship between the publisher and the organising committee.

A ministry report on a recent major sports event referred to a plan to distribute over 500,000 pieces of spiritual literature with testimonies of faith at three community fan zones in the city. While one may rejoice at this evangelistic enterprise, one might also question how the city authorities view the task of picking up the discarded leaflets and whether the reputation of the Christian community has been enhanced by this exercise—or the reverse.

One may also ask how the organizers of a Christian conference would feel if a commercial or political organization were to leaflet delegates to their event. The potential longer-term effects of a major event evangelistic bombardment and the effectiveness of, say, handing out ‘tracts’ to people who are just wanting to have a fun day out at a sporting event, need to be considered.

Sports chaplaincy

The chaplaincy programme at the London Olympics was arguably the most comprehensive ever conducted at an Olympic Games, with 162 chaplains accredited in three separate categories to serve the athletes and others in the Olympic Village, the workforce and volunteers and the media. This was an excellent example of servant-hearted Christians working with the Olympic organizing committee to add value to the event.

The chaplaincy opportunity was created by the foresight of the Bishop of Barking who had created the post of ‘Church of England Olympics Executive Coordinator’ five years previously. The person appointed, Duncan Green, describes his journey of service to the organizing committee in a forthcoming book.⁸

Sports outreach

At the grassroots level, some Christian-based sports outreach projects are being recognised by secular sporting networks as valid forms of engagement through sport to tackle problems in society. A good example is the Ambassadors Fathers’ Football project, which won the Beyond London 2012 Innovation award for reaching out to support poor, marginalised immigrant fathers in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets.⁹

When the Africa Cup of Nations was held in Egypt in 2006, the organizing committee was short of volunteers. The Christian community rallied round and recruited the required help. A Christian leader was given the role of Head of Volunteers and a place on the organizing committee.

He said afterwards, ‘It was an incredible opportunity that God gave to the sports ministry in Egypt, to be at the heart of such a big sports event. Ninety percent of the people I was working with—volunteers, organizing committee, government—were not Christians. But all of them knew I was from a Christian church. I believe this is real sports ministry—not just working in the church but taking the church outside’.

The London 2012 and Egypt 2006 experiences show how an attitude of servant-hearted support for the organizing committee of a major sports event is often appreciated and can build bridges between the Christian community and the sports administrators.

Disability sport

If the theological reflection on sport has been sparse, the Christian thinking about disability sport has been almost non-existent.

At the 1992 Paralympics, admission was free, as the organizing committee did not think that anyone would pay to watch disability sport. In 2012 in London the Paralympics were virtually sold out for every event. The quality and the profile of disability sport have increased dramatically over the past few years. However, the Christian community has largely ignored disability sport. In the UK perhaps 2 of the 50 sports ministries explicitly include disability sport within their programme of activities.

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Prophetic engagement

Christians have been criticized for failing to have any prophetic engagement with sport. Tom Krattenmaker,¹¹ for example, has lamented the lack of interest in issues like racism, exploitation of women, financial corruption, or excessive violence in sport. When the 2014 Winter Olympics in Russia brought Russia's anti-gay legislation into world spotlight, there seemed to be silence from the Christian sports ministry community.

Theological implications

The increased application of theological reflection to sport is to be welcomed. However, it must be recognized that the process has only just begun:

- Ministry underpinned by a sound theological base will be stronger and hopefully more effective.
- Greater theological understanding will help Christians to interact positively with sports' governing bodies and to serve them rather than appearing simply to want to use the sports event for their own purposes.
- It will also help Christians address and give leadership in relation to the ethical issues which pervade sport.
- Ministry which respects the integrity of sport without compromising the integrity of the gospel is likely to reap long-term fruit.

Lessons and suggested responses

The incarnational model emphasis of sports ministry, where Christians enter the world of sportspeople, reflects the Pauline emphasis in 1 Corinthians 9:19-23 with a playing, participating, and supporting level of involvement that requires a huge commitment in terms of time, vulnerability, and intentionality in relationships. This is a lesson for other spheres of evangelism that can sometimes emphasise a programme/event/'come to us' approach.

Being open to supporting an incarnational approach in evangelism, and in envisioning, equipping, and supporting any sportspeople in the congregation to be the church's evangelists to their sports friends and local sports club, can be an effective strategy to help the church engage with its local sports community. Supporting Christian parents of sporty children as

they engage with others around their child's sport, through alternative church meetings and visiting children at their sports activities, for example, is also essential.

Another lesson applicable to other spheres of evangelism is that the serving emphasis within sports evangelism can break down many barriers and open up doors for other evangelism opportunities. Such an approach may not yield short-term results but the long-term favour that emerges (*eg* through sports chaplaincy) can lead to real growth of influence for the gospel.

Churches should also be open to serve in the community in and through sport, for example, in providing volunteers, coaches, pastoral care, or a meeting place for a local sports club, school, or college. There should be a conscious decision to value and prioritise disability sport more than has happened up to this point.

Seeing sport as a gift from God, valuing it, and seeking to engage with sport as those who care about it, must represent a fundamental part of how Christians see the world of sport in future. Let us get involved in the world of sport and win it for Christ!

Endnotes

¹ Richard Holt, *Sport and the British* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p 39.

² www.fifa.com

³ Jim Mathisen, *A Brief History of Christianity and Sport* in Deardorff II, Donald, and John White (eds), *The Image of God in the Human Body* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 2008), p 34.

⁴ For a list of the main books, see <http://www.veritesport.org/index.php?page=topten>.

⁵ For more details of sports chaplaincy, see Andrew Parker, Nick Watson, and John White, *Sports Chaplaincy: Trends, Issues and Debates* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014). To be published late 2014.

⁶ www.christiansinsport.org.uk

⁷ *More than Gold*, London 2012 report.

⁸ Duncan Green, 'Sports Chaplaincy at the Olympics and Paralympics: Reflections on London 2012' in Andrew Parker, Nick Watson, and John White, *Sports Chaplaincy: Trends, Issues and Debates* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014). To be published late 2014.

⁹ <http://www.beyondsport.org/the-awards/entries/view.php?Id=2226> and <https://witness.theguardian.com/assignment/51d59f4fe4b07c36b3600238/433744>. I am grateful to my friend Davis Oakley, Ambassadors in Football, for this material and other help with the article.

¹⁰ Andrew Parker and Nick Watson (eds), *Sports, Religion and Disability* (London: Routledge, 2014).

¹¹ Tom Krattenmaker, *Onward Christian Athletes (Turning Ballparks into Pulpits and Players into Preachers)* (Lanham: Rowan & Littlefield, 2009).

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