

# **Sports Chaplaincy**

## **A pastoral and theological exploration**

B Grant Stewart  
Chaplain: Melbourne Storm

### **In At The Deep End**

It was a typically warm February Monday morning in the year 2000 when I stood in front of two dozen hard-nosed NRL *Melbourne Storm* team players gathered downstairs in their club rooms at the abandoned Greyhound Racing Track. Many appeared tired and distracted, some were distraught. Etched on their faces were the vivid memories of the traumatic events of the past 48 hours. The weekend had not begun well when they suffered defeat at the hands of the Auckland Warriors - their arch rivals from across the Tasman Sea and compatriots of seven of the ex-pat Kiwis in the Storm Squad. That night catastrophe was added to misery when their popular team manager, Mick Moore, was tragically drowned - accidentally falling to his death while he and other team members drowned their sorrows at a waterfront restaurant.

I was there that Monday morning, I thought, to meet with the coach and discuss the possibility of a role as a team chaplain. Instead he proceeded to introduce me as the person whom the club had asked to come and help them work through this crisis.

I wondered what on earth I had let myself in for - and what was I going to say to these guys? The coach, Chris Anderson, introduced me to the group of assembled players with the words - "we pride ourselves on being a 'hard' club, but we've got a soft side too... This is the bloke who has come to help us get through this together..."

What does one say in these kind of tragic settings? What would my role be and where would I find the resources and wisdom and even courage to know how to minister to these professional Rugby League players who were known as a ‘tight’ group, protective of their privacy, closed to outsiders and ‘hard-nosed’ to boot.

I mumbled through a few words of introduction about who I was and said I’d be around if any of them wanted to come and have a chat. Twenty minutes later I was to repeat the same words to the entire staff gathered in the club’s boardroom. Half an hour after that, kitted out in training gear, I was peddling flat out in a stationary bike ‘Spin-session’ alongside a very muscular and heavily sweating Papua New Guinean winger - the coach had informed me that the best way to get to know the team and to be accepted was to join in a few training sessions with them. I was already thinking ahead and hoping he didn’t want me to act as the tackle-bag for several of the larger forwards with no necks!

### **How did I get involved?**

Several years previously, in mid-1997, one of the Sydney-based sports chaplains who was connected with an organisation called SLM - Sports and Leisure Oriented Ministries, approached me. SLM was largely the brainchild of Dr. Mark Tronson, who, after attending a 1982 sports ministry conference in Hong Kong then spent two years researching chaplaincy's local potential before becoming chaplain to the Australian Test Cricket team. His vision for the establishment of sports-chaplaincy

had grown to the extent that by the year 2000 there were more than 140 chaplains in all areas of sport and in other related fields.

I'd arrived in Australia from New Zealand earlier that year, called to be the Senior Pastor of a mid-sized Baptist Church in the suburbs. I'd previously been involved in sports ministries through my own interest and participation in Rugby Union, triathlons and athletics over the years. In 1990 I'd helped to establish a chaplaincy at the Auckland-based Commonwealth Games and continued to be interested in the intersection of sport, contemporary culture and the Christian Gospel.

Coming from the familiar environs of my somewhat comfortable middle-class suburban church setting, I was forced to grapple with quite complex issues that faced me as a Christian minister seeking to serve in what was at times a very secular and 'different' environment. The experience forced me to rethink not only my own role as a pastor, but to grapple with questions such as 'Where does the Gospel fit here?' 'How can I best communicate the love of God in Christ to these players and staff members?' 'Should I, and the church, be involved here at all?' 'Does the Gospel, which tells of the humble One who "came not to be served but to serve"<sup>1</sup> have anything to say to these high profile sometimes 'heroes' who are paid to play?

## **The unique place of sport in Australian culture**

---

<sup>1</sup> Mark 10:45

To the outsider, Australian culture offers a unique perspective and world view. Coming from a diverse and colourful background that includes convicts and indigenous aborigines, its people embody something of the ‘larrikin’ and carefree nature that has earned Australia an international reputation as the ‘Lucky Country.’ This often misappropriated malapropism is thought by some (especially those across the ‘ditch’ in New Zealand) to refer to a country that seems to enjoy a lucky knack of coming out on top, especially in sporting contests! However it is more appropriately used to refer to a people who rely on luck or good fortune to ‘get by’, rather than bother to seriously study or understand. The expression “I’m sweet” or even the ubiquitous “no worries” are prime examples of this kind of approach to life.

Two forms of excellence are commonly admired in Australians (by Australians!): Those who have made lots of money (it doesn’t seem to matter how this happened...) and sporting heroes. Yet within the Australian culture lie some major issues. These have been identified as

- A search for identity and a sense of belonging i.e.: Who are we?
- A longing for Freedom and responsibility i.e.: What are we to do?
- A desire for Meaning and Value i.e.: What is life for? <sup>2</sup>

## **1. The Phenomenon of Sport**

As the Yale University philosopher Paul Weiss notes in his 1969 study, *Sport: A Philosophic Inquiry*,

Both when participated in and when watched, sport quickly works on the emotions, it wins men's allegiance readily and often to a degree nothing else is able to do. Mankind's enthusiasm and devotion to it is remarkable and deserves to be remarked upon... Art, science, and philosophy, surely, make larger contributions to civilisation than sport does... but rarely do these other human enterprises 'enter into men's daily disputes or lay claim to basic loyalties in the way or to the degree that sport does.'<sup>3</sup>

Some have seen in sport a useful catharsis for innate aggressive instincts, a kind of moral equivalent of war.

A common claim made is that participation in sport builds human character and tests it, on a small scale, to prepare a person for larger tests and crises later in life. Yet stories about the illegal use by athletes of drugs and steroids (further scandals have erupted again in recent days regarding the widespread use of new designer steroids such as THG) or of gambling scandals involving payoffs to throw a match (recent accusations have arisen in cricket and tennis arenas), tend to raise some serious questions about whether there is in fact an inevitable nexus between sport and the building of character.<sup>4</sup>

## **2. The Place of Sport in Australian Society**

One of the first questions that any newcomer/immigrant to Australia is asked is:

"Who do you go for?" At first this question may be completely baffling and totally

---

<sup>2</sup> Frank Rees, *Beating Around in the Bush: Methodological Directions for Australian Theology*, *Pacifica* No.15 (October 2002) 286

<sup>3</sup> Paul Weiss, *Sport: A Philosophic Inquiry* (London, 1969) cited by Gregory Baum and John Coleman, (eds) "Sport, Society and Religion" *Concilium*, Sport (1989) 3

<sup>4</sup> Baum & Coleman, "Sport", 4

disorientating. What should one say? Am I being asked about my preference for Prime Minister, political party, denominational affiliation or merely being asked what kind of people provoke my subterranean tendencies of aggression? Enlightenment comes as we realise that the all-important interrogative is being directed toward my AFL team preference/obsession. Very quickly one learns that to have a team to 'barrack' for is akin to having a tribal affiliation, an affiliation that demands loyalty and support, bordering for many, on fanaticism. Devotees appear to be possessed of a strange mixture of pride of their team's prowess and intolerance for failure - team performance is evaluated and dissected with many supporters who are familiar not only with players names but their preference for breakfast cereal and brand of underwear. Surely, to the objective outsider, this is zeal bordering on obsession!

If the same questions were to be asked in Sydney or Brisbane, the answers would be similar, but the codes and teams would likely to be from the ranks of Rugby League or Rugby Union.

Australians are not unique in our obsession with sport, and not all Australians are obsessed. Even though it appears that only a minority % of the population is obsessed about sport, yet sport has a pivotal role in Australian society. It has been described as the largest of our subcultures.

The fervour and depth of sporting conversations, especially in Melbourne, can sometimes take on the appearance of religion. We have in the depth of culture surrounding sport a history of involvement, which makes Australia unusual... in 1888

the Melbourne Cup established a world first in attracting 100,000 people. It needed 84 special trains to transport spectators to the racecourse. Two years later an Australian Rules football match attracted a crowd of 32,600. It was said to be the largest crowd recorded for a football match. Certainly Europe had seen nothing like it. Today the game still attracts a staggering degree of devotion from its followers.<sup>5</sup>

*The time I commit to sports is one thing, the emotional toll it takes on me is quite another. Sport does not matter as much as it did in childhood, but it matters more than I can explain... So what is it - aside perhaps from arrested development - that accounts for such disproportionate emotional investment in the ultimately insignificant... Sports is simply a grace: a minor grace, but a grace nonetheless... Sports relieves the weight of life. It satisfies, in an innocent way, our competitive urges. It reminds us, precisely in its absurd elevation of the trivial, not to take ourselves so seriously. There are those, it is true, whose preoccupation with sports becomes so all-consuming as to constitute a moral disorder... but for the great majority of us, sports provide a pleasurable interlude in life for which we not only need not repent, but for which we should offer continuing prayers of gratitude.<sup>6</sup>*

When people express an extraordinary concern and involvement with sport beyond what might be considered ordinary, we often resort to religious terms such as “devotion”, “sacred”, and “transcendent” in order to characterise what is happening... However there is more than an analogical connection. Sport's potential for evoking complete devotion in its disciples is like that of religion. It was scholar Joachim

---

<sup>5</sup> Millikan, *The Sunburnt Soul*, 8

Wach who suggested that religion is the most intense experience of which humanity is capable.<sup>7</sup> Nearly fifty years later, Hoffman suggests that religion must now share the honour with sport.<sup>8</sup>

The intensity of attraction sport holds for people is one way in which it lends itself to a comparison with religion. But there are some (such as Novak *et al*) who would make an even bolder and outrageous claim, which is that "sport not only shares some of the characteristics of religion but *is* religion as that term is defined by those who use it."<sup>9</sup>

Two of the key aspects of sport that enable us to compare sport with religion are the intense excitement and the spirit of community which sport generates.

Sport has a body of formally stated beliefs, accepted on faith by great masses of people. . . . Sport also has its "saints" - those departed souls who in their lives exemplified and made manifest the prescriptions of the dogmas of sport. . . . Sport also has its ruling patriarchs, a prestigious group of coaches, managers, and sportsmen who exercise a controlling influence over national sports organisations. . . . Sport has its own "gods" - star and superstar athletes who, though powerless to alter their own situations, wield great influence and charisma over the masses of fans. . . . Sport has its shrines - the national

---

<sup>6</sup> James Nuechterlein, "The Weird World of Sports," *First Things* 84 (1998) 11-12

<sup>7</sup> Joachim Wach, "Universals in Religion" in *Religion, Culture and Society*, edited by L Schneider, (New York: Wiley, 1964) 38-52 cited by S J Hoffman (ed), *Sport and Religion*, (Champaign IL: Human Kinetics, 1992) 2

<sup>8</sup> Hoffman, *Sport and Religion*, 2

<sup>9</sup> Hoffman, *Sport and Religion*, 2

halls of fame and thousands of trophy rooms and cases. . . . Sport also has its “houses of worship” spread across the land where millions congregate to bear witness to the manifestations of their faith.<sup>10</sup>

Thomas Ryan supports a contemplative attitude towards sport and maintains that “The more attuned we become (through sports) to the flesh God embraced and in which God dwells, exulting in its harmony, strength and flexibility, learning how to bear its tensions and sufferings gracefully, the more we glorify its Creator, the One who also chose to call it (the body) ‘Home.’”<sup>11</sup>

Even to the most avowed atheist, sports can take on the mantra of a religious obsession. Novak notes that the rituals of sport can feed a deep human hunger and provide a rudimentary experience of at least a pagan sense of godliness.<sup>12</sup>

In some strands of Christian spirituality there has been an emphasis on the sinfulness of the body, i.e., as carnal, fleshly, un-spiritual. In the nineteenth century, however, the ‘body’ had begun to be seen in a different light. Rising middle-class sons joined upper-class sons in ‘public’ schools where rugby union had begun to develop. Headmasters like Thomas Arnold of Rugby School in England saw physical exercise as a way of keeping control. Sport began to take on a new acceptability, a new sense of morality expressed in sayings such as ‘It’s just not cricket’). Sport began to be associated with such themes as God, Nation, patriotism, Empire and masculinity. This time also saw a strong allegiance to what was seen as

---

<sup>10</sup> Harry Edwards, *Sociology of Sport*, (1973), 261-262, cited by Hoffman, *Sport & Religion*, 7

<sup>11</sup> Thomas Ryan, “Towards a Spirituality for Sports,” *Concilium Sport* (1989) 117

<sup>12</sup> Hoffman, *Sport and Religion*, 288

a highly moral concept of ‘amateurism’, where it was wrong to receive payment to play

## **1. The Place of the Gospel in Australian Culture**

One of the major implications and in fact a rationale for the place of sports chaplaincy is the increasing reluctance of Australians in general to search for and find spiritual meaning and significance within the institutional structures of the Church. For increasing numbers of Australians, including sports people, the church and its culture has become a foreign place. For the Gospel to be heard by these Australians, it means that those who believe its message and desire to be involved in evangelism or outreach, must look beyond the world of the institution and be willing to enter the world and marketplace where people live.

A recent article by Kevin Ward comments that in New Zealand and Australia, like all western countries, involvement in institutional religion, measured by such figures as church attendance, has been showing a steady and fairly relentless decline since the beginning of the 1960s. In Australia 40% of the population in 1961 claimed to attend church at least monthly, a figure which had declined to 24% by 1980 and 20% by 1991. Weekly church attendance was calculated at 10%.<sup>13</sup>

Ward concludes that what has emerged in more recent research carried out in western countries is that despite the fact that many churches have been

---

<sup>12</sup> Novak, "The Natural Religion", 36

experiencing serious decline, by and large people have continued to remain overwhelmingly religious.

## 2. Dangers of a preoccupation with Sport

- Who are the best **Role-models** for ourselves, our children and (sometimes) the Christian community? The kind of people we are encouraged to admire are those who are able to win and succeed, whose feats of sporting prowess cause us to marvel. Somewhat paradoxically, biblical heroes and heroines have sometimes been those who have achieved great things (Moses, Joshua, David, Daniel, Deborah etc..), but there have equally been others who have ‘blown it’ (David [again!], Abraham, Peter, etc.) only to find in the midst of their frailty and sinfulness the forgiveness of God.
- We focus on “**Citius, Altius, Fortius**” (Faster, Higher, Stronger) rather than the arguably more biblical motifs of “**Retardius, Demittius, Debilitius**”; (Slower, Lower and Weaker). Yancey reminds us that when the apostle Paul hears from God, “My [God’s] power is made perfect in weakness,” and then concludes about himself, “When I am weak, then I am strong.” “That is why,” he added, “I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties.” He was pointing to a mystery that goes several steps beyond the ‘normal’ way of coming to terms with suffering and hardship. Yancey concludes that Paul speaks not of resignation but transformation. In other words, “the very things that make us feel

---

<sup>13</sup> Kevin Ward, *Christendom, Clericalism, Church and Context: Finding Categories of Connection in a Culture without a Christian Memory: Implications of New Zealand Research*. (unpublished article, June 2001)

inadequate, the very things that plunder hope, these are what (and who!) God uses to accomplish his work. For proof, we look at the cross.”<sup>14</sup>

- There is something **uniquely Australian** in our identification with the ‘underdog’; for example, the accolades given to Eric “The Eel” Moussanbani in the swimming at the 2000 Sydney Olympics, where he received a standing ovation and immense press coverage for his ‘just-barely’ completion of the 100 metres.
- Is the God-given gift of **‘Play’** and the celebration of physical ability coupled with the pleasure of ‘taking part’ being side-tracked with the increasingly professional and corporate nature of sport? Sport has become much more focused on entertainment than enjoyment through participation. Many more watch than do play. Yet spectating too has changed its nature: it may be done in leisure time, but it is a consumer activity as a consequence of corporatisation.<sup>1589</sup> With the increasing influence of sponsors and the ever-present expectations of corporate owners, players and individuals face mounting pressure to ‘come up with the goods’, to play through ‘niggling’ injuries, to put aside ethical or moral questions (not to mention medical issues connected with drug-taking, blood doping and the like) and *perform* no matter what!
- The whole focus on being valued for what we can achieve rather than for who we are is a message strongly promoted at a professional sporting level. The value given to physical prowess appears to greatly exceed that given to other abilities or achievements. The question can validly be raised: Are we in danger of

---

<sup>14</sup>Philip Yancey *The Jesus I Never Knew* (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan 1995) 273

<sup>1589</sup> Much of what takes place in terms of spectating would appear to happen increasingly through the medium of television. This change in recent times could well lend itself to further study in the area of Communication theory and its relationship to attendance and participation in sporting activities.

subcontracting our significance that is, our worth becomes derivative rather than inherent in our existence as human beings? As Christians we may well maintain that in Christ we are loved and valued for who we are, yet still tend to allow society and even ourselves to define significance by performance evaluation. Is there a more 'appropriate' successfulness that we can give assent to? In 2000, the editor of the *Sunday Age* criticised Australia's unhealthy obsession with errant icons, and wondered about the cult that admires these 'elite' players who don't live in anything resembling the 'real world.'<sup>16</sup>

## **Connections: Sport and Worship**

One of the common observations heard of the move toward professionalism in elite sport is that has become to like a business. Sport, it is lamented, is not so much about "fun" these days as at is about finance, not so much about how to play as what the participants are paid! Harking back to the nostalgic days of strictly amateur sporting codes, for many there seems to have been in the past a greater emphasis on the enjoyment of the game and the thrill of the contest.

In times past sport and leisure were often synonymous. Leisure and sport were equated with recreation and fun. We participated purely for the pleasure, the engagement with others and the enjoyment of the 'game.' Arguably amateur sport

---

<sup>16</sup> Editorial, "Our Unhealthy Obsession with Errant Icons," *Sunday Age*, (16/07/2000) 18  
The article goes on to ask why, in too many of our senior schools does the prevailing ethos continue to endorse the "sporting jocks" in their position at the top of the internal pecking order while the bespectacled "intellectual" types languish at the bottom?

also served other functions such as the formation of a 'team spirit' and opportunities for socialisation and the development of friendships and a sense of camaraderie. In the 'professionalisation' of sport something seems to have been lost. The lines between work and leisure, business and sport have been blurred and almost obscured. Today's athletes are commodities to be marketed, entertainers who must perform, investments from whom a return is expected.

The first article of the Westminster Confession presents an alternate ontology:

"Humanity's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever." Here our humanity is defined in relationship with the divine. We have value because of relationship and connectedness, not because of function and performance. No doubt the majority of Christians would agree, yet in truth few of us succeed, consigning ourselves to the "real world" of function and playing out our faith within that framework.<sup>17</sup>

## **Connections: Church and Culture**

Since the time of Constantine until the Reformation or at least the Enlightenment the church has been seen, symbolically, to be at the centre of society. This perspective was reflected in the style and place of church buildings, which were often given great importance in the centre of town. Their architectural style reflected this dominance and they were often quite intimidating in height and design. The steeple of the church was likely to be the highest point in any town.

Hammond writes that for many centuries, State and Church coexisted as equals crossing over into each other's realms through politics and the government of the

---

<sup>17</sup> Flett, 'The Workaday World' 10

day. There was not only a blurred edge between clerical power and paid political rule, but many of those clergy were in official positions of political power.<sup>18</sup> Yet Christianity was not birthed this way. In the early years, it was considered a Jewish cult, was a grass roots movement, met in homes and often underground and its people were marginalised and even martyred on a consistent basis. The Roman government of the first century specialised in this persecution of Christians and many more thousands were tortured and killed in the first three hundred years after the birth of Jesus.<sup>19</sup>

It has become obvious in recent years that the Church as a whole is struggling to know where it 'fits' in the 21st century culture. Increasingly the church is perceived to be 'irrelevant' and anachronistic, out of step with the pluralistic post-modernist who believes they are in control of a destiny of their own choosing. The Church itself has, in some instances fallen prey to a consumer mentality that seeks to find satisfaction and have its needs met with little reference or thought as selfless service or being there for the good of others.

We have become strongly inward in the language and content of our services. Nowadays it is even more true that only people familiar to the Christian culture would understand the majority of what is said and sung. To those outside the church

---

<sup>18</sup> Ken Hammond, *Characteristics of a Missional Church*, [http://www.phuture.org/s01\\_Articles/article.asp?ArticleID=101](http://www.phuture.org/s01_Articles/article.asp?ArticleID=101) 1-2

<sup>19</sup> Hammond *Characteristics*

culture, the style and language is unfamiliar and can be quite isolating. On the other hand, Churches try all kinds of ways to attract new people, from fairs to fetes to coffee lounges to visitor corners; they attempt to bring "the worldly person" into the church. No matter how well we greet and guide people, the cultural gap between the average person and the church remains enormous.<sup>20</sup> The western Church simply believes the average unchurched person wants their Message.<sup>21</sup> Yet for many in our community, the Church is (literally) the last place they would want to be seen dead in! There seems to be too much of a gap between their world and the world inside the church doors.

In contrast to those models of mission which focus on recruiting people into churches, there to experience God, sports chaplaincy relies on the presence of God beyond the church. This is the good news to be expressed, in a ministry of presence. Thus a strong theme in the responses of the chaplains was that blurring of the traditional distinctions between the secular and the sacred, that our world indeed has an inherent spirituality and God is present in the world beyond the walls of the churches

## **1. Effective Mission/Sports Chaplaincy is a ministry of Presence**

Jesus chose twelve disciples in order that they might follow him, that he might teach them to 'fish for people'. In doing so he was not, I believe, enrolling them as

---

<sup>20</sup>106 Ward, "Religion in a Postquarian Age"

<sup>21</sup> Ken Hammond, *Characteristics of a Missional Church*, [http://www.phuture.org/s01\\_Articles/article.asp?ArticleID=101](http://www.phuture.org/s01_Articles/article.asp?ArticleID=101) 1-2

peripatetic pupils in a didactic discipleship school, but rather wanted them to “come and see” where (and how) he lived.<sup>22</sup> His was a school where one learned of the Ministry of Presence rather than how to Minister with Power, where one learned to be a servant before one learned how to be a saint!<sup>23</sup>

A constant refrain that echoes through the responses in the interviews with the sports chaplains is the importance of just “being there”, the ministry of presence. We know something of the nature of God because of God’s willingness to enter into our world through God’s son Jesus Christ. We know of the extent and quality of God’s love because of God’s willingness to identify with a fallen, sinful humanity, to be one like us (Phil 2:5-8). This emptying, ‘kenotic’ identification with humankind shows not only the willing obedience of the Son but also helps us to comprehend the compassion of the Father. Jesus entered our world not as one who demanded kingly rights and privileges but rather came as a servant, willing to empty himself and become obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

In entering the footy world (or any world!) We and the chaplain must also empty himself of the privileges and indeed the reputation that he may be accorded in the religious world from where he has come. He enters the world with empty hands - he has not the skill of a trainer or the inspirational techniques of a coach, nor the administrative methodology of a manager or CEO. He comes bearing the humble

---

<sup>22</sup> John 1:39

<sup>23</sup> Mark 10:45 “For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.” NRSV

mantle of one who comes to serve, who comes with the promise of care and compassion, who will listen without reproach or report to the coach!

This 'presence' model for sports chaplaincy appears to have some merit and can be an effective way to communicate the grace and compassion of Christ. At its best it seeks to imitate the cross-cultural missionary who immerses him or herself in the local culture and by a process of osmotic infiltration enters their world or kingdom and eventually earns the right to share something of God's kingdom. Through a process of genuine compassion and trust, friendships develop, confidences are exchanged and the good news of the gospel can often be applied to a variety of situations which are shared.

Barely a week goes by when I have failed to have significant conversations about such matters of faith, the purpose of life or relationships. The staff and players know who I am and most know of my 'day job' as a local church pastor. It inhibits them not the slightest from conversations of depth and significance. They know from experience that I will neither preach at them nor seek to morally judge them. Yet they, I hope, know something of my convictions on matters of Christian faith and discovering life in its fullness. I believe that this privilege is one afforded to those who are willing to take the time to gain the trust and confidence of a group of (often!) thick-necked, hard-nosed, egocentric footy players by gently and intentionally drawing their attention to the very real presence of the Risen Christ who is already at work amongst them.

## **2. Sports chaplaincy/effdective mission is Holistic ministry, challenging the false dichotomy of Secular and Sacred**

Growing up in the 1960s, there were several occasions when I made the choice (or the choice was parentally made for me!) not to play sport on a Sunday. Today's generation seldom face that kind of dilemma - it is taken for granted that sport has a legitimate place on a Sunday, and so Church is seen as merely one of a long list of alternative leisure activities. The sports grounds and amphitheatres of competition have become the temples and meeting-halls for today's society.

For many centuries the religious world has taken its lead from such texts as Romans 12:1 where the follower of Christ is urged not to be conformed to this world but to “be transformed by the renewing of your mind”, or, as JB Phillips translates the phrase “Don't let the world squeeze you into its own mould...”

These and other verses have been interpreted in some parts of the Christian church to mean keeping as far away from temptation and bad influences as possible - especially if it involved anything to do with pleasure, or the gratification of earthy desires!

This somewhat loose allegiance to a Holy remnant theology where a person is kept pure and unsullied by keeping well apart from the influence of the 'world' has found reinforcement in the example of various notable Christian sports people who have refused to compete on a Sunday (e.g., Eric Liddell of “Chariots of Fire” fame, New Zealand Rugby Union Allblacks Michael Jones).

In support of this understanding of faith we read Paul's admonition to the believers to keep themselves separate:

*Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God. As God has said: "I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people." "Therefore come out from them and be separate, says the Lord. Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you." "I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters says the Lord Almighty." <sup>24</sup>*

Such an attitude has contributed to a kind of fortress mentality in the church, where evangelism and mission are seen as forays into foreign territory where enemies lurk to catch out the unwary pilgrim.

On the other hand, if we accept that God has created us as creatures with the capacity for play and that there is a holistic harmony between body and soul, then sport itself can serve as a window into a transcendent world and can actually be a means by which people may find fulfilment and engage in a search for meaning in their everyday world, the means by which contemplative experience and the thrill of sport can be integrated. I believe that sport and the capacity to achieve and compete is a God-given gift that can be celebrated and taken delight in. God has made us holistic creatures of body, mind and spirit.

---

<sup>24</sup> 2 Cor 6:14-16

The role of sports chaplaincy opens another door, and offers a glimpse of a world beyond the chaplain's normal sphere of influence and habitation.

It seems to me that it is precisely this kind of world that Jesus came to inhabit and in which he pursued God's purposes. He spent little of his time identifying with the religious establishment, and much of his time with those on the fringes, with those whom God the Spirit was connecting. Jesus' ministry on earth involved connecting with people where they were, in their everyday world. Jesus knew that God was already at work in their lives and spoke truth and life-giving words into their world that convicted and convinced them toward God's kingdom.

### **3. Sports Chaplaincy is Incarnational and acknowledges that Christ is already present**

I've already mentioned the importance of a sports chaplaincy as a ministry of presence. We can seek to demonstrate by our willingness to serve and to listen something of the life of Christ. Yet this noble vision of the 'God-botherer' or 'God-person' in the midst of an alien world is not the whole picture. The flaw in this model is in the assumption that the chaplain somehow brings God with him/her into a situation or place where God was not formerly present. Examples of this model for ministry or mission has been clearly seen over the centuries in the largely western-based missionary endeavours to the 'heathen' lands of darkness. Little heed was given to the ways God may have actually already been at work in these countries.

We must not bring that same patronising attitude when we enter the sporting arena. I have already mentioned ways that I believe God is already at work in all the arenas of God's world - including those of sport.

The chaplain's ministry of presence is into a world where God is already present and at work through God's Spirit. The chaplain does not need to go into the world of sport with a kind of crusading zeal intent on *bringing* Christ into the situation.. The sports chaplain has the immense privilege to enter such a world with a divinely-tuned discerning eye that seeks to discern how and where and with whom God is already at work. The chaplain's role is not to bring all wisdom and counsel to bear, but with patience and compassion enable those God-connections for those who are already seeking.

In Mark 16 we read the fascinating story of the discovery of the empty tomb by the two Mary's and Salome who had returned to anoint Jesus' body only to find an empty tomb and a messenger who said to them:

*Don't be alarmed, you are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.'*

The genius of sports chaplaincy is seen in the recognition that the risen Christ is already present in our world through the work and ministry of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of the Risen Christ who goes before us and with us.

There is a temptation for those of us involved in Christian ministry, whether it be in the local church pastorate or other areas, to think that we bring the presence of Christ somehow mystically into the arena when we arrive. I believe that this kind of thinking is ultimately flawed. Yes, the risen Christ is present with us as we go and can work in us and through us, but the same risen Christ is also already present in the sporting arena as He is present in all of God's world. Our role is to help people recognise and acknowledge that presence, not to think that we are the only conduit through whom the presence flows!

### **Sports Chaplaincy: A missional/Incarnational model for ministry**

I believe we can look to the life and example of Jesus for a Missional or Incarnational model for sports chaplaincy. Accepting such a model for ministry means that a sports chaplain seeks to immerse her or himself in the culture he or she is seeking to reach with the Gospel. That may mean a long period of learning and waiting. An incarnational understanding of mission means that those who advocate such an approach will be willing to walk and wait with those they seek to reach and serve. An incarnational advocate is prepared to listen before they speak, to want to know what makes those in the community 'tick'. They know that the

Gospel has more resonance as an adjective and verb than it does as a noun. The Gospel we seek to share can only be good news when we are prepared to listen for how that Gospel can be good news for those to whom we seek to minister. The Gospel became good news when God entered our world, 'kenotically' identifying with humanity. It becomes good news for us when we discover that we are loved, accepted and forgiven. An incarnational approach to sports chaplaincy necessitates owning a perspective that acknowledges the reality of God's Spirit already at work. We need to be prepared to listen first, hear people's stories, trusting God to be there and to be at work in their midst. It means we draw back from imposing our own theology or evangelistic methodology. We need to hear what is the Gospel for these players and workers. What does good news sound like or look like for sportsmen and women? We need to discover how that good news can be heard and recognised in their lives, to meet people where they are, to be a facilitator, a catalyst rather than arrive as one who has all the answers. Jesus did not provide his disciples with a template but rather a relationship. We need to do the same. In short, we need to be prepared to share our own vulnerability and our own experience of God's grace, mercy and forgiveness, confident that in this relationship, sharing and vulnerability God is at work.

A missional organisation understands that it is primarily a missional community of people being trained and equipped to live among the world as missionaries. The same cross-cultural principle as that of oversees missions is applied in the first

world. We speak the language, wear the clothes and submerge into the culture we want to Reach.<sup>25</sup>

Jesus did not construct a building or start a (worship) service. Rather he walked among the poor and hurt and lost. He visited and dined with the wealthy and the social pariahs. He did not discriminate on the basis of status or social class. He was born poor and grew up in a despised town called Nazareth. He had a questionable birth and in all likelihood lost his earthly father at an early age. He became close friends of sinners and was accused of being a glutton and a drunkard.

26

This was the only model the early church knew - the example of Jesus.

Those that had been his disciples saw how he pulled away from the acclamation of the crowds - he wanted neither fame nor fortune for his ability to lead and heal. His purpose was to build his character and values of the Kingdom into the lives of a small group of people so that his mission to bring into being this Kingdom would be carried on their shoulders.

In Luke 17, when Jesus sought to help people understand what the coming kingdom would mean, he noted that the kingdom does not come with signs to be observed. Jesus was challenging the idea that the kingdom's coming was to be marked with some cosmic display. The Pharisees' expectations need changing. They will not

---

<sup>25</sup> Hammond *Characteristics*

need to point here and there and announce that they have found it, Jesus said, because the kingdom is “among you”. The kingdom was "in their midst" or "within their reach."

Our task on this planet is to be faithful followers of Jesus, helping see the reality of the presence of Jesus in our world, in our workplaces, in their very lives, the lives of people God loves and for whom Jesus died

---

<sup>26</sup> Luke 8:34