

Supervised Research Project Report

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REPORT TITLE:

*A Theological and Pastoral exploration
Of the Role of Sports Chaplains in Australia*

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As far as I can determine, I have tried to acknowledge the contributions of all authors where appropriate, and testify that this research is my own work.

Signed _____

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PREFACE:

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.

It was with some regret that, soon after arriving in Australia from New Zealand, I turned down the invitation to work as a chaplain with the inaugural NRL team in Melbourne - the demands of a new parish, a different culture and a young family seemed to be more pressing.

Two years on, in late 1999, the head coach was again looking for a chaplain (the first bloke only lasted a few weeks!) and I was approached again to reconsider.

The number of rugby-familiar pastors in Melbourne was apparently very limited! This invitation seemed to come at a more appropriate time and I accepted the offer to meet with the coach, little knowing that the morning of the appointment would prove to be such a significant encounter.

This project, then, is the culmination of many years of participation in sport as a Christian athlete and pastor, and more particularly the past six years of involvement as a sports chaplain with the *Melbourne Storm*. It grew out of the questions that arose from time spent in the somewhat cosseted and privileged environment of professional sports – which is a strange mix of corporate, professional and sporting worlds.

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”¹ have anything to say to these high profile sometimes ‘heroes’ who are paid to play?’

¹ Mark 10:45

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to the staff, coaches and players at the *Melbourne Storm* National Rugby League Team for their willingness to accept a 'God-botherer' in their midst and to graciously agree to taking part in this research project. Special thanks to John Ribot (Executive Director) who was not only willing to be interviewed as part of this project, but gave permission for me to spend time with other staff members along the way. Thanks must also go to Chris Anderson, former head coach, whose initial support and encouragement helped me discover a place and a role within the organisation. Thanks too for the players and staff who were willing to be interviewed and whose candour and insight helped me to understand something of the culture I was in, the relevance of the Gospel to that culture, and the place of sports chaplaincy. A note of thanks for my sports chaplaincy colleagues who were also willing to be interviewed, whose insights and reflections have helped shape these thoughts on the nature of the role sports chaplains play. Many have had significantly more experience than me in this area of ministry and they have added their considerable cumulative wisdom to these thoughts.

Thanks too for my church, Mitcham Baptist, who have supported, encouraged and prayed for me along the way. Some have struggled to see the need for a ministry amongst football players (especially Rugby League players in AFL territory), but others have taken a keen interest in my role and continue to pray for those I work amongst.

Thanks to Rev Dr. Frank Rees whose initial encouragement and support helped

me to persevere, to Rev Dr. Ian Hawley who provided some much needed help along the way, and then again to Frank who graciously encouraged me to see this project through to its conclusion.

I am also indebted to Lorraine Mitchell who has spent many hours correcting and locating references and her advice and support has been an invaluable part of this process.

A final note of thanks goes to my wife Catherine and my children, Amber, Brandon and Jonathan. Their support and love has encouraged me to continue in this often 'airy' work of ministry that seems at times to produce little in the way of tangible or measurable results, but, nonetheless is that to which the Lord Jesus Christ has gifted and continues to call me.

Ch 1. INTRODUCTION

My initial experience or encounter with the world of sports chaplaincy has provoked me to want to discover more about this distinctive role and its contribution to the field of pastoral ministry and mission. It was what I did not know, along with my own feelings of inadequacy for the task, that has provided me with the incentive and energy to pursue this area of study.

I was intrigued by the willingness of a professional sporting organisation, with no overt Christian basis or affiliation, to seek out the services of a local Christian pastor in order to provide them with something they believed was lacking in their organisation. Whether that lack was perceived to be in the area of pastoral care, counselling or welfare assistance was uncertain.

I wanted to explore these connections between local church ministry and sports chaplaincy. But I also wanted to explore my own personal role as pastor and what that meant outside the traditional church environment in another kind of community. What would pastoral care look like in that setting? How would my ministry have to change and adapt to be relevant and have impact? Where were the intersections for the Gospel with contemporary culture and sport?

In exploring these issues, I have not intended to locate this study in a detailed exploration of Australian cultural history. Rather my intention was to refer to some of the cultural background in order to give some reference points for our contemporary culture. A more in-depth analysis and comparison could well be a subject for further research and exploration.

In my original proposal I listed these following areas I wished to explore:

- The Historical reasons for the development of sports chaplaincy in Australia
- The role and goal of sports chaplains involved with NRL and AFL professional football teams in Australia.
- The nature and purpose of their sports chaplaincy.
- The distinctive contribution of a chaplain.
- A theological rationale for sports chaplaincy.
- The prophetic and incarnational dimensions of the role of a sports chaplain.
- The impact of sports chaplaincy on players, staff and management.
- The place of sport in relation to the Gospel, and the way that Gospel relates to the corporate aspects of the sporting world.

These broad areas were further refined into six more specific objectives, which will be discussed in Chapter 2.

Looking back, I can now see that the original intention to examine such a broad range of issues was somewhat optimistic! I found I was not able to cover all of these aspects fully, particularly some of the historical background. In particular the literature relating specifically to sports chaplaincy was relatively sparse. However, I will endeavour to touch on each of these objectives in Chapter Three where I will identify the key issues, and then again in Chapter Five where I seek to make some connections and reflect on what relevance my experiences and researched material might have both pastorally and theologically.

Much of what I have found and sought to understand has been intimately connected with my own journey of discovery into this realm of ministry. The impact of the experience has affected me personally and shaped my understanding what it means to be involved in pastoral ministry outside the bounds of the local church. Consequently, as the project has developed a number of these personal issues, relating to the identity and role of a chaplain and a local church pastor have needed to be addressed.

A question of identity

At the heart of my personal journey there has long been a core question of identity: Who am I and how does my calling relate to my identity in Christ?

Likewise, at the heart of human research is a core question... a question that has both social meaning and personal significance (as well as theological and pastoral dimensions!). Such a topic and question grows

out of an intense interest in a particular problem or topic... The researcher's excitement and curiosity inspire the search. Personal history brings the core of the problem into focus. As the fullness of the topic emerges, strands and tangents of it may complicate an articulation of a manageable and specific question ²

² Clarke Moustakas, *Phenomenological Research Methods* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1994) 104-105

I find an ally in Northcott when he states that “Qualitative research requires uncertainty.”³ Over the past twenty years of pastoral ministry I have certainly encountered times of doubt and a sometimes desperate desire for definitive discernment and direction. But in terms of research, I believe that Northcott is here encouraging the researcher to be willing to put his or her preconceptions aside and to allow unresolved tensions to coexist, to be willing to question without requiring definitive answers or certitude of response. For me, theological reflection happens at that intersection of Word and human spirit - the intuitive labyrinth that is connected within the parliament of my personality, an encounter with the living Word through the written word. The God who speaks through the written word into my world, my work and my witness is the same God who is present in the world around me.

In any area of human research, it is difficult to maintain distinctions between the ‘subjective’ and the ‘objective’. It may well be that the two continually merge, perhaps making it impossible to achieve complete objectivity. In a study such as this, however, where the researcher is self-consciously a participant in this activity being considered, there is a clear danger that the ‘objectivity’ of the data may be slanted or compromised. This is especially so when I have interviewed players about their impressions of my own role! I have sought to counter this potential distortion by also including data gathered from interviews with a number of other sports chaplains. This cross referencing of data should give some capacity for comparative analysis of my own experiences.

³ Michael S Northcott, "Research Methods in Practical Theology" *Contact* 106 (1991:3) 28

Where are the connections between contemporary culture, the church and its mission?

Northcott maintains that "... contemporary theological construction involves some kind of correlation between history, and traditional texts and stories, and the religious and social experience of contemporary humanity." ⁴ He also acknowledges that "researchers in practical theology... normally begin with a hunch, an intuition, a suspicion, an anomaly or a problem... or a distinctive issue in the development of pastoral care in a particular context" ⁵

Here we can identify a hunch or an intuition which has been further examined through this research: that God is not only present in the church but is also present in the 'world' of sport.

The outworking of my question of identity has an impact on my understanding of the Church and its Mission. For me there is no sharp distinction between secular and sacred, pious and profane. But there appear to be distinctions in whether the presence of God is perceived, recognised or acknowledged in the various spheres and avenues of God's world. The question of whether God is equally present in the locker rooms of sports teams as in the sanctuaries of local churches is worthy of further discussion. If we believe in the omnipresence of God's Spirit in God's world, then it may be assumed that God is not only present but indeed waiting to be recognised and acknowledged in all avenues, arena and aspects of society.

⁴ Northcott, "*Research Methods*" 25

⁵ Northcott, "*Research Methods*" 27-28

I am particularly interested in one of those areas of our society where God is seldom acknowledged or, if God is, it is in a superficial or individualistic way: namely, the Sporting Arena. And yet I believe that the same question Jesus asked of his disciples and that consequently has had centuries of Missional legitimacy, can also be posed in the locker rooms and training fields of our sports teams: But what about you? “*But who do you say that I Am?*”⁶

There is a widely accepted view amongst the secular media and corporate world that personal commitment to Christ and strong religious expressions of faith have little place in the modern professional world of sports. Whether it is by way of a cynical and deliberately derisory interviewing style, or an openly aggressive attitude by members of the press, the impression is often given that this person’s faith is open to question or disbelief.

Some recent examples evidence this view:

Aaron Baddley’s public acknowledgement of his gratitude to “his Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ” on winning the Australian Masters in 2001, was cynically edited out of the television coverage... only to have an unlikely advocate (Andrew Bolt, an avowed atheist and journalist!) take up the cause of unfair censorship on behalf of Christians.

Kangaroo and the NRL Cronulla Shark’s prop Jason Stevens went public when he co-authored a book promoting the movement “True love waits” outlining his

⁶ Matthew 16:15

commitment to abstain from sex before marriage. Grudging respect was granted to the 110 kg strongman of Rugby League by his contemporaries (perhaps as much due to his intimidating size and aggressive persona on the paddock!)

In 1987 I was involved in the proposal to establish a sports chaplaincy for the 1990 Commonwealth Games. Some members of the organising committee could not understand the need and attempted to block this endeavour. Yet such a service to athletes and officials alike was specified in the Games Charter and was seen by the IOC as an integral part of the support and welfare network, and we were eventually, and somewhat belatedly, welcomed as part of the support structure for athletes and team members alike.

What about the corporate sporting world? Should the church be involved? How can it?

Is God interested in this dimension of our lives? Is it a sin to play to win? Where did our competitive urge come from? Is it part of a created dimension of humanity or another by-product of our sinful, 'fallen' nature?

These and other related questions have intrigued me and led me to examine one particular dimension of this interface between faith and the footy. So I have chosen to explore from a theological and pastoral perspective the nature of a recent development on the pastoral care and mission interface - the role of sports chaplaincy.

The role of the Sports Chaplain

Some of the questions that arise from an initial encounter with this particular ministry focus on the nature of a sports chaplain's role. For example, is the chaplain's role that of a Prophet, Priest or Evangelist? Can a chaplain be both pastorally supportive of his or her sporting 'parishioners' and still speak a 'word of truth' into their busy and often hedonistic lifestyles or even into the strongly secularised world that is corporate, professional sports? Are there points of intersection for the Gospel and the church in the world of professional sports? What are the implications for mission in this cross-cultural interchange between church and corporate life? These kinds of questions intrigue me, not least because I have found that I don't fit easily into some of the stereotypical roles or expectations for those in ministry - the sometimes caricatured 'meek and mild-mannered' clergyman whose whole life and ministry is centred on local church life.

In my research I have used my experiences as a participant-observer in a sports chaplaincy context to explore the issues involved in ministry amongst the professional sporting corporations. I have used in-depth interviews with players, staff and management to identify common themes, then sought to codify these and crosscheck them with other chaplains. Out of the research I have explored models of ministry for sports chaplaincy and investigated a theological rationale for the ways of approaching this ministry that I believe are most appropriate.

This brings me back to my initial core question: Who am I in Christ and

therefore what is God calling me to be and do? More specifically, who am I and what is my role as a Christian minister in the context of voluntary sports chaplaincy within a professional, corporate football team?

Further, what are the implications for the future ministry of the church and its ability to significantly impact our world and its communities? In the increasingly global and technological world, are we going to be willing to enter the 'secular' market place to discover where the Spirit is or has been at work? Perhaps we will discover that Spirit's work even in the corporate world of professional bodies and corporations where the search for meaning and purpose, hope and love, is often obscured by avarice, adulation, activity and antipathy.

As a result of this experience and research I have come to believe that the Good News of Jesus Christ needs to be heard and incarnated in all our communities - not least the sporting ones, and that a sports chaplain can have a significant role in ensuring that voice is heard.

"Who do you say that I am?" is a core question worth a lifetime investment of discovery. It is a core question proposed by the One who made sense out of people's lives, and made sense of the world in which they lived - Jesus Christ our Lord! It is a question worthy of consideration by all those, who like myself, have entered a new arena of ministry. It is a question, I would suggest, that Jesus also asks of those in the sporting world to whom we are called to minister.

Ch 2. PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Objectives

In my original proposal presented in July 2001, I listed my Objectives as follows:

- To examine critically the distinctive contribution of sports chaplains involved with NRL and AFL professional football teams in Australia and their impact on players, coaching staff, other associated people (families of players, support staff, etc....)
- To examine how the role of the chaplain may fit with some of the concepts typically used in relation to ministry, such as 'wholeness', 'community', and 'incarnational ministry', 'presence versus prophetic', 'call to ministry', and 'power versus powerlessness'.
- To discover how these dimensions or roles challenge our church 'culture' and what constitutes ministry. How does involvement in chaplaincy impact chaplains who function as parish congregational ministers?
- To examine the place of sport in relation to the Gospel, and the intersection of the Gospel with the corporate world of professional sport and its culture.
- To reflect theologically upon the distinctive role of chaplains; the study will endeavour to provide a theological rationale for chaplaincy as a form of Christian ministry
- To consider a continuum of views of chaplaincy, ranging from the evangelistic to the pastoral care/welfare worker to the liturgical functionary;

and suggest a potential model(s) for ministry.

The study would be limited to sports chaplains who are currently working voluntarily with Professional Rugby League and AFL football teams, as representative of the overall field of sports chaplaincy in Australia.

These original objectives could well have been compressed for the purposes of this study project. One particular difficulty has been the length of time which had elapsed between the original planning and design, and the eventual completion of this project. In most part this was due to a serious illness suffered from the end of 2003 through to 2005. But other factors have included the rapid expansion of resources and literature which have been written in the past few years. For example, a new department of 'Sport and religion' has been established at York University, and a whole plethora of writing and interest in this area has been sparked since the Olympic Games in Sydney, 2004.

There have been many other issues which might have been considered, e.g., a more in-depth study of the history of chaplaincy as a whole in Australia; a deeper analysis of the cultural history relating to sport and religion; the connections with other areas of chaplaincy such as Industrial Chaplaincy and Hospital Chaplaincy.

Likewise, I have not majored on sports chaplaincy as it relates to other sports such as motor racing, gymnastics, athletics etc. As interesting as that would be, I have chosen to make my focus a more limited one.

Much of the impact of this research has been a deeply personal one, especially

as it relates to my own understanding of local church mission and the subsequent implications for pastoral and 'cross-cultural' evangelism outside the local church. This focus is deliberate as I have sought to integrate my own understanding of pastoral ministry within and through the local church community with a desire to 'carry' the Gospel beyond the church walls into the wider community.

The key issue for me has been in discovering the value of 'presence' - the presence of a God who is as much amongst the executives and players of the professional Sporting world, and the powerful ministry of presence which enables a sports chaplain to incarnate the Gospel in that world. This perspective on the role of a sports chaplain challenges the prophetic/evangelistic interpretation which has been promulgated as the primary *modus operandi* of a chaplain. These issues will be developed in more detail in the concluding theological reflection.

Developing a Design

A primary aspect forming part of my research required discovering how being involved as a participant/observer in a community affects research.

As a researcher I was involved in at least three different communities: the actual sporting organisation to which I ministered as a sports chaplain, the community of sporting chaplains who will in some ways become my co-researchers⁷ and the

⁷ Peter Reason and John Heron in their article entitled "Co-operative Inquiry" in J. Smith, R. Harre & L. Langenhove (eds.) *Rethinking Methods in Psychology*. (London: Sage, 1995) 123, maintain that all those involved in the research are both co-researchers, who generate ideas about its focus, design and

local church community of which I am a part, and perhaps also a fourth, the wider church community.

Rowling writes of the dilemma of the researcher, who is 'in' or 'out' of the research and identifies self-reflexivity as a key skill for researchers in the field of loss and grief, helping researchers to develop awareness of the predicaments.⁸

Punch further points out that "where you stand will doubtless help to determine not only what you will research but how you research it."⁹ It appears clear to me that part of the engagement in any research, and in particular in human science research where you are involved with a community, is to identify some of the dimensions of self-understanding and role perceptions that you bring with you as a researcher, and to seek to articulate these perceptions as part of the research report. In this way they are no longer covert influences on the research process, but can be recognised both by the researcher and by others.

Thus Lett maintains that:

Knowing oneself by researching one's process of self-experiencing, as distinct from introspecting, demands inventiveness in procedures and methodologies... how can we research knowing ourselves more?¹⁰

manage it; and also co-subjects, participating with awareness in the activity that is being researched. This would seem to be the case with the other sports chaplains I interviewed in the second part of the research process.

⁸ Louise Rowling, "Being In, Being Out, Being With: Affect and the Role of the Qualitative Researcher in Loss and Grief Research." *Mortality*, Vol. 4, No. 2, (1999) 167

⁹ M. Punch, "Politics and Ethics in Qualitative Research" in *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, N.K. Denzin & Y.S. Lincoln (eds.), (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1984.)⁹⁴, cited by Louise Rowling "Being In, being Out, being With", 167

¹⁰ Warren R Lett, "Researching Experiential Self-knowing" *The Art in Psychotherapy*, Vol. 25, No 5. (1988), 331

Kleinman acknowledges the impact of such factors when she conducted research into field-workers' feelings:

Maintaining relations in the field is more than learning how to get along with respondents. To stay in the field, we sometimes have to manage negative feelings towards participants that make it difficult for us to sustain close connections with them... Lofland and Lofland (1984) argue that it is fine to begin a study "where you are," to choose something of interest close to home. We also need to know who we are as we begin - which identities are central or problematic.¹¹

Stone and Duke remind us that Christians learn what faith is about from countless daily encounters, formal and informal, planned and unplanned. We have an embedded theology that is implicit in the way that we live out our daily lives. As they rightly observe, some of us find it easy to articulate this embedded theology that we carry with us, while others do not. Yet our day-to-day decisions are based upon it.¹²

For me that embeddedness - which is not a static thing - provokes in me an interrogative encounter that seeks to find answers - answers to questions which arise when seeking to minister outside the local church context in a secular sporting arena, such as a professional football club. What were the kinds of stories or narrative that would make connections for me with those players?

¹¹ Sherry L. Kleinman, "Field Workers' Feelings: What We Feel, Who We Are, How We Analyze" in *Experiencing Fieldwork: An Inside View of Qualitative Research*, W. Shaffir & R. Stebbins (eds.) (Newbury Park: Sage, 1991) 184-185.

¹² Howard W Stone & James O Duke, *How to Think Theologically* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996) 13-14

How could I articulate and demonstrate the Gospel in that environment in a way that would make sense for them? What kind of questions would they ask and could I frame the answers in language they could comprehend?

My own experience and involvement in various sporting organisations and contexts had indicated that the language and context of faith which suited the local church environment made little connection outside that environment and would need to be adapted and interpreted in a new context or culture in order to be understood. To a new generation of young people with no history of involvement with church through the traditional avenues of Sunday Schools or Youth groups, even the basics of the Bible or Gospel accounts are largely unknown. I can recall one of our young Melbourne Storm players expressing genuine amazement and even disbelief that the Jesus of history who we had been discussing could in fact be a Jew! He'd never made that connection.

In the introduction I mentioned Northcott's assertion that "researchers in practical theology... normally begin with a hunch, an intuition, a suspicion, an anomaly or a problem... or a distinctive issue in the development of pastoral care in a particular context."¹³

I was particularly interested in one such anomaly, namely why an otherwise secular organisation would so warmly embrace the involvement of a religious recruit in the area of pastoral care. Despite the previous history of church involvement and even initiative in the development of sporting teams and clubs, in more recent times the sporting arena has been seen as one area of society where God is not acknowledged or, if there is any such recognition, it is in a

¹³ Northcott, "Research Methods" 27

superficial or individualistic way amongst those who profess a personal faith. The question and theological challenge I faced, then, in developing this ministry and research concerned the role of sports chaplains: does the role relate only to the 'private' or individual lives of the players, officials etc., or is there also some more comprehensive relationship between the Christian Gospel itself and the 'world' of sport? If there is such a relationship, in what ways does this characterise the role of the Sports Chaplain?

How the data was collected: A Qualitative Methodology with a Phenomenological Component

In this project I used a qualitative methodology, beginning with a phenomenological approach involving personal reflection, using my 'lived experience' as my primary source and method, and drawing on fifteen years of experience in sports chaplaincy. Data was collected for this project by a variety of methods. The initial observations and information were collated from my own reflections and experience over a period of several years. During this time, I was able both to observe the players and staff in their own environment and to interact with them outside the club precincts. Part of that experience involved training alongside the players and developing relationships of trust and, in some cases, a genuine friendship. Given this level of personal involvement, it could be argued that my own observations are perhaps too subjective to be valid,

The data was collected by the following methods:

1. My own observations and experiences as a participant in this ministry, to

provide an initial reflection and give background.

2. I then conducted in-depth interviews with players, staff and management from the *Melbourne Storm* NRL organisation. These interviews were carried out in accordance with the instructions given by the Melbourne College of Divinity. Each interviewee was required to sign a document giving permission for the interview to take place and which outlined the standard conditions of such research including who would see the information, assurance confidentiality and disclosure, and what would the interviews be used for. These interviews were taped and then transcribed and the phenomenological analysis begun by carefully reading over the transcriptions numbers of times in order to begin to see a commonality of theme or result.

Leichtentritt and Rettig point out that the first step in a phenomenological analysis involves just such a reading of the interviews over and over again, in order to gain a sense of the participants' main ideas. A further aim is to recognise the connections and distinctions made between what it is you are trying to examine and other Phenomena.¹⁴

3. In formulating the questions to be used in this first stage of interviews, I sought to confine discussion to the specific areas highlighted which relate to chaplaincy ministry:

- Has having a chaplain at the club been helpful for you? In what ways has it been helpful for you personally or for the organisation?

¹⁴ Ronit Leichtentritt and Kathryn Rettig "The Good Death: Reaching an Inductive Understanding," in *Meeting the Needs of our Clients Creatively: The Impact of Art and Culture on Caregiving*, ed. John D Morgan (Amityville, NY: Baywood, 2000) 229

- Have you observed any significant difference between the time when there wasn't a chaplain at the club and now that there is?
- Have you had the need to speak to a chaplain at any time?
- Have you been involved with other clubs or teams that have had a chaplain? What was that like for you?
- What is your understanding of the role of a chaplain? What do you perceive it to be and what would you like that role to include?
- What are your expectations of a chaplain?
- Are there any particular issues or subjects about which you have sought or would seek to speak to a chaplain?

In my initial interviews with players and staff, and in my reflections and observations as a participant/observer, part of my task was to seek to recognise what were the issues, questions and significant ideas that were emerging from the process. What were the connections and distinctions that were worth exploring with the other chaplains in further interviews?

The responses to this first group of questions, together with my own reflections, would then provide the direction I would need for the second group of questions to be asked of other sports chaplains.

Gaining access to any new group, religious or otherwise, does raise some unique tactical and ethical questions. One of the obvious concerns is the degree of subjectivity or even partiality involved in interviewing players with whom you had an established relationship. Would they be able to answer questions

regarding the efficacy of sports chaplaincy with any degree of objectivity or impartiality? I believed that this was a risk worth taking. The players involved did not appear to suffer from any inhibitions in giving a forthright and honest opinion, in fact seemed to relish the opportunity with much adjectival enthusiasm! Having said that, I planned to check the accuracy of my own observations by also interviewing other sports chaplains and comparing their experience. For the same reasons I planned to include in my initial interviews several of the office staff, with whom there was a different kind of relationship than that which I had developed with the players.

Richardson highlights the benefits and pitfalls of a variety of approaches that can be used in participant/observer methodology, e.g., various covert, secret or more overt, open approaches. He further points out that although participant-observer research is crucial to finding out about a group's lifestyle, beliefs and practices, this single approach will not usually reveal all that is needed to be known about a group. A "triangulation" of approaches is most useful for gaining a full and accurate picture. "Researchers should study publications produced by the group, if any, including their "holy writings." (I'm not sure whether Rugby League almanacs qualify as "holy writings!"). "Researchers should also talk with outsiders who know something about the group, including critics, supporters and others..."¹⁵ He concludes that an open approach that treats the group members as persons (and allows the researcher to be perceived as a real person by the group members) may be the preferred way of doing things, thus maximising the

¹⁵ James T Richardson "Experiencing Research on New Religions and Cults: Practical and Ethical Considerations" in *Experiencing Fieldwork: an Inside view of Qualitative Research*. (eds.) W Shaffir & R Stebbins (Newbury Park, Sage: 1991) 62-64

information available to the researcher.¹⁶

It would appear that my introduction to the *Melbourne Storm* organisation at a time of crisis for the club, coupled with the encouragement of the coach to get in and train with the team, allowed me to develop the kind of rapport and acceptance that could otherwise have taken years to achieve. From the beginning, I was not just an observer who stood on the outside trying to find entry points for connecting with people, but became at once a co-participant and someone who was seen, in the words of the Executive Director, as “one of us.”

A potential difficulty as a participant-observer could have been in maintaining sufficient psychological ‘distance’ so as to enable an objective reflection on the whole process. Given my limited time commitment (3-5 hours per week) and the capacity this time constraint gave to form many close relationships, this should not prove to be a major issue. Another issue could have been the unwillingness for those who are interviewed to express their true thoughts and feelings in case they gave offence. I found, instead that those interviewed seemed to relish the opportunity to speak with someone in confidence. In fact, for some of those interviewed, conversations of any depth or even length were a rarity at the club.

As I have previously indicated, identification of key themes from the initial stage involving participant/observation provided direction and clearer establishment as to the shape and particular focus for future interviews with other chaplains.

¹⁶ Richardson, "Experiencing Research" 71

Further in-depth interviews were subsequently conducted with other chaplains involved as chaplains with professional NRL and AFL football teams. These interviews were also taped, transcribed and analysed to see what common themes occurred and if there were links and connections with my own experiences and initial interviews.

The second group of questions which were used with other sports chaplains by way of in-depth interviews included:

- How did you first become involved in sports chaplaincy, and what keeps you involved?
- How would you describe the relationships that have developed through your chaplaincy?
- How were these relationships established?
- From your perspective, are there recurring themes in your ministry with sports people?
- How do you limit your chaplaincy role (given the voluntary and part-time nature of the role)?
- Have you reflected on the efficacy of your ministry? If so, what criteria did you use?
- How did you feel starting out in sports chaplaincy? And how do you feel now?
- Has your experience of sports chaplaincy had an impact on your overall view of ministry and your calling?
- How do you think those for whom you care perceive you?

- Has this experience of chaplaincy had any effect on your view of the relationship between Gospel and culture?
- How do you understand sports chaplaincy in a theological context

These interviews then formed part of the raw data for an examination of those issues as outlined at the beginning of this chapter.

The complexities of sports chaplaincy

In many ways the easy approach to sports chaplaincy would be to merely focus on the personal support of sports people, just as the easy way to do health care chaplaincy is to stick to issues of individual patients, school chaplaincy to stay with individual student's problems, etc. But chaplaincy per se also involves mediating cultures, confronting the spiritualities of organisations, and contributing to the formation of healthy/humane policy. In other words there are wider community issues of justice, reconciliation and confrontation that bring a prophetic dimension to such a role. Without these and other theological dimensions, it remains largely the sort of work any skilled volunteer or social worker might do.

Clearly there are pastoral issues that are focused by - although not unique to - professional sports people.

- For many athletes their identity - even their ontological security - is invested and defined by their physical capacity and performance. They become

defined by their prowess (“He’s a good winger, he’s got great defence”) and they come to believe their own press! Their professional role both elevates and risks this identity.

- For others, suffering injuries or being dropped from the starting line up can raise issues that are vocational, economic and spiritual. Am I still needed at the club? What does my future now hold?
- Some face difficulties in coping with the increasing demands placed on their time and the pressure this places on their relationships. Many of the partners or families of players who come to Melbourne struggle to fit in or make new friends. The players have a ready-made team environment and training schedule to occupy their time, but their partners are often left to their own devices.
- Still others face the difficulty of unresolved anger and conflict in their relationships with team mates and staff/management. The intense competition for places in the starting line-up can force a myopic focus on a player's own needs at the expense of team relationships etc.

However, there were still wider issues of sports chaplaincy that begged to be addressed! These have more to do with helping these sporting organisations understand how their sporting culture negotiates issues which shape the spirituality of people and communities, and to help communities to understand how sport contributes to leisure and culture. E.g. Some of my role has included encouraging and enabling *Melbourne Storm* players to work with community groups such as Whitelion, an organisation that seeks to find mentors or role models for at risk young offenders in the Juvenile Justice System.

Hence, a further phase in my research necessitated exploring the experience and thoughts of other sports chaplains - not just their experiences of pastoral care or their successes/failures, but what the experience has meant in their understanding of the Gospel-church-sports-culture interface, and what this has meant in their understanding of their role and their own identity as ministers of the Gospel. This for me was a key issue.

So, although I was interested in exploring how other chaplains have experienced this dimension of pastoral care and interaction in the sporting arena, I was also keen to engage them in theological reflection. What was it that stimulated other chaplains to be involved in this area of ministry? What kept them involved? What were the feelings that were generated? Has their experience in sports chaplaincy changed the way they perceived their pastoral role and the role of the church?

Ch 3. IDENTIFYING THE KEY ISSUES

There are a number of areas connected with sport, religion and sports chaplaincy which I will identify, but I intend to explore more fully three key areas in particular. I believe this exploration will provide the context from which the data collected and my own observations can be examined.

Further theological reflection is made in Chapter Five “Making Connections” where I seek to answer the questions posed in the project description.

However, the three key issues identified here are:

- **the unique place of sport in Australian culture**
- **the connections between sport and religion**
- **The implications of these connections for those involved in sports chaplaincy**

The unique place of sport in Australian culture

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? ¹⁷

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

¹⁷ Frank Rees, *Beating Around in the Bush: Methodological Directions for Australian Theology*, Pacifica No.15 (October 2002) 286

claim to basic loyalties in the way or to the degree that sport does.¹⁸

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.¹⁹

The editors of the issue of *Concilium* which focuses on sport are convinced that Max Scheler's words of over sixty years ago still hold true. "Scarcely an international phenomenon of the day deserves social and psychological study to the degree that sport does. Sport has grown immeasurably in scope and social importance, but the meaning of sport has received little in the way of serious attention."²⁰

Throughout the mid 1960s and on into the eighties, the scholarly literature on the sociology of sport has proliferated in many countries (e.g.: Jeffre Dumazedier in France; Eric Dunning in England; Gregory Stone and Harry Edwards in the USA)

¹⁸ Paul Weiss, *Sport: A Philosophic Inquiry* (London, 1969) cited by Gregory Baum and John Coleman, (eds) "Sport, Society and Religion" *Concilium*, Sport (1989) 3

¹⁹ Baum & Coleman, "Sport", 4

²⁰ Baum & Coleman, "Sport" 4

"but one looks almost in vain for any more serious spiritual and theological assessment of this important topic." ²¹

According to Baum and Coleman, sport represents an important human good, an anthropological universal found in almost every known human society. Sport involves both contest and play. For the participant, it represents a test of bodily excellence, speed, endurance, strength, accuracy, co-ordination, skill and gracefulness. Our human love for skilled exertion, movement and bodily grace, our delight in stretching the human boundaries and in spontaneity, our intense interest in the drama of sports contests - these embodied, almost erotic, qualities lend sport its capacity for human excellence and delight. For the spectator, sport provides aesthetic pleasure, bonding between fans and team, human diversion in watching a game where skill and chance merge to form human (and divine?) drama.²² As Guttman notes, sport provides a kind of ecstasis from the mundane. "In sport we can discover the euphoric sense of wholeness, autonomy and potency which is often denied us in the dreary rounds of routinised work that are the fate of most men and women." ²³

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 disorientating. What should one say? Am I being asked about my preference

²¹ Baum & Coleman, "Sport" 4

²² Baum & Coleman, "Sport" 4-5

²³ Allan Guttman, *From Ritual to Record* (New York: 1978) 157, cited by Gregory Baum and John Coleman, "Sport, Society and Religion" *Concilium*, Sport (1989) 5

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. There are benefits in sport contributing to a sense of community, national pride and the forming of tribal instincts. Sport reflects society but is also a social, active agent within society.²⁴

During the late 1800's a number of parsons, such as Rev Henry Giraleston who came to St Peters School in Adelaide, emigrated from Britain to take up posts as

²⁴ Philip Mosley, "Sport and Religion", lecture notes *The Gospel and Australian Culture*, 12/5/2000

headmasters. A variety of Associations began to be formed - e.g.: Marist brothers, Boys Brigades etc., and many sports teams centred around Churches or Church Schools. As is still the case today, Rugby League was the sport of choice in mainly working class Catholic areas and Rugby Union became more centered around a Private School system.²⁷ People found a sense of identity through church sport - it not only kept the flock together with a sense of unity (especially among the youth), but also provided a conscious field for mission.²⁸ People centred their lives around the church for social purposes. Back then it was the pub, dance hall, Mechanics Institute and the church. Now we are in an era of mass entertainment, greater access to transport (hence increased mobility), and recreational venues of all kinds - many more options. Church has become another one of many leisure activities. League clubs have become centred around Pokies and liquor licenses. The Church has started to lose its social function in society.

What lies behind the fervour with which many Australians follow sport?

Why do a significant proportion of Australians have such a sporting obsession?

What are its origins? Is it a healthy fixation or compulsive obsession that bears

²⁷ Mosley, "Sport and religion"

²⁸ Space does not permit here, but it is important to note the range of literature (some of which has been published in more recent years since this research was originally conducted) which examines the various concepts such as 'muscular Christianity', the role of the greater Public Schools and the gender debates (e.g. Between Marilyn Lake and Anne O'Brien) and other aspects of Australian cultural history. These include such authors as Donald Hall, ed. *Muscular Christianity: Embodying the Victorian Age*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994; Robert Higgs, *God in the Stadium: Sports and Religion in America*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1995; Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*. New York: Free Press, 1996; Tony Ladd, and James Mathisen. *Muscular Christianity: Evangelical Protestants and the development of American Sport*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1999; Martin Crotty, *Making the Australian male: Middle-Class Masculinity 1870-1920*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 2001; Anne O'Brien, *God's willing workers: women and religion in Australia*, Sydney: UNSW Press, 2005

witness to a competitive maniacal fetish that sees in the pursuit of the 'game' a metaphor for the struggle and battles of life. Perhaps part of the answer lies in this statement by Donald Horne back in 1970:

*Sport was the first form of Australian foreign policy. Until the British got into some wars to which the Australians could send volunteers, it was the only way in which Australians could prove they were best.*²⁷

Sport has long been a central feature of Australian culture - so much so that enthusiasm for sport has been described widely as a characteristic of *being* Australian.

*The image of the bronzed Aussie may be a myth. But there is nothing fictitious about the importance of sport as a way of life in Australia: it promotes health as well as competitive spirit. We may stop just short of obsessed, but sport is as available to all Australians - and as necessary - as meat pies, kangaroos and Holden cars.*²⁸

But contrary to popular belief, Anglo-Celtic settlers were not responsible for the genesis of sport in the continent we now know as Australia. Sporting activities began here at least 40,000 years ago with the arrival of the Aborigines. There is evidence of games of strategy and chance which promoted intellectual skills,

²⁷ Donald Horne, *The Next Australia*, (Sydney, 1970), 156, cited by Daryl Adair & Wray Vamplew, *Sport in Australian History*, Melbourne: OUP, 1997) 1

²⁸ Quote from a *Bulletin* article, 24 October 1989, cited by Adair and Vamplew, *Sport in Australian History*, 1

and games of endurance, physical strength and dexterity which maximised athletic abilities. Indeed as a consequence of the regular activity involved in food-gathering and sports, Aborigines were very fit and athletic.²⁹

David Millikan maintains that in Australia sport is a common means by which strangers meeting in pubs, trains and offices can actually communicate. It gives to us a sublime mix of passion, intrigue and inside information (and that's only the footy tipping competition!). The sporting world is a whole world in itself, with its own heroes, saints and villains - and yet, in the end, it is still just a game. Though some fanatical fans may think otherwise, when the game is over the success or failure of their team (usually!) has no lasting effect on their lives. We are able to return to our homes, families and jobs, and life pretty much goes on.³⁰

Some of the dominance of sport and its associated impact on Australian culture is seen in the extent to which many intellectuals have resented it. Novelist Thomas Keneally writes of the resentment often shown by the Australian arts community in general toward the dominance of sport in Australian culture.³¹ Historian Beverly Kingston has consistently argued that the rise of organised or professional sport has made Australia a much more conservative, philistine and sexually aggressive society.³²

²⁹ R.A. Howell and M.L. Howell, *The Genesis of Sport in Queensland*, (Brisbane: 1992) cited by Adair & Vamplew, *Sport in Australian History*, 1

³⁰ David Millikan *The Sunburnt Soul: Christianity in Search of an Australian Identity* (Homebush West: Anzea Publications, 1981) 8

³¹ Richard Cashman, *Paradise of Sport: The Rise of Organised Sport in Australia*, (Melbourne: OUP, 1995) 206

³² Cashman, *Paradise*, 207

Other influences on Australian sporting development have been groups of incoming migrants (e.g., the shape of the National Soccer competition) who use sport to create a niche within an alien and sometimes hostile environment and to maintain their culture. Although sport has been said by some to have oppressed women, in more recent years some women have used sport to challenge restricting gender boundaries (e.g., The Matildas, Australia's Women's Hockey Team, Karrie Webb - of whom a national golf publication recently asked "Is she Australia's best ever golfer?")

Many Australians, (or so it would seem from the pages of the daily papers and the nature of Monday morning conversations at work) follow sport, any sport, with great passion; the Melbourne-based *Herald Sun* devotes a huge percentage of its pages to sporting 'news' and commentaries.³³

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

³³ Evidence of the place of sport in Australian culture could be seen when revelations in the cricket arena, resulting in the now infamous "I have not been completely honest with you" statement from Hanse Cronje, saw a massive outpouring of conjecture and widespread condemnation. World disasters and political intrigue was banished to the inside pages as the local media emblazoned their headlines of amazement across the front pages of local (and national) papers.

devotion from its followers.³⁴

3. Unique features of Australian Sport

Adair has commented that blood, sweat and tears were spilled in settling Australia, and that this process resulted in the brutalisation of many colonists, who then transferred their violent behaviour into sporting or organised leisure activities.³⁵ Cashman traces the links between the European colonisation of Australia which coincided with the reshaping of sporting culture in Britain and the emergence of organised sport proper in the second half of the twentieth century.³⁶

Sport was certainly prominent at this stage of Australian cultural formation. Land was set aside in new developments and dedicated to sporting facilities. Large stadiums became 'Cathedrals of Sport', reinforcing the central place and status of sport. Cashman goes on to remind us that although Australia might have inherited or borrowed much of its sporting culture, this culture has since been changed and transformed to become distinctly Australian. In other words, the whole sporting culture - the character of play, the place of 'sledding', the aggressive nature of players and even spectators, distinctive language (e.g. the cry of "Ball!"), and club identity - has become recognisably Australian and heavily male-dominated (at least at an administrative level).³⁷ It is significant that the influence of Australian sporting culture, unlike Britain and the United

³⁴ Millikan, *The Sunburnt Soul*, 8

³⁵ Adair et al, *Sport in Australian History*, 139

³⁶ Cashman. *Paradise of Sport*, 205ff

³⁷ Cashman, *Paradise of Sport*, 205-206

States, has largely remained domestic. Australians have rarely spread their own sports around the world (with the exception perhaps of surf lifesaving and the extraordinary influence of businessmen/media moguls Rupert Murdoch and Kerry Packer).³⁸

Over the years, however, Australian sport has developed its own *distinctive* features. These include such unique characteristics as:

- One-day cricket matches,
- the custom of barracking amongst spectators,
- a reputation as relentless and aggressive competitors,
- verbal ‘encouragement’ on the field, a.k.a. ‘Sledging’ ,
- the tendency for even professional sports clubs to be comprised of a board of salaried directors and fee-paying members rather than privately owned,
- a contribution to sport at an international level disproportionate to the nation’s small population.³⁹

Some would say that there has been a marked shift in recent years from British to American tradition (i.e.: a paradigm shift from Olympic ideals of participation and honour etc. to professionalism and commercialism). This is evident in the shift from amateurism to professionalism which has come to sports such as Rugby Union (in 1996). Increasingly players are being paid huge sums of

³⁸ Adair, *Sport in Australian History*, xi Murdoch is one of a select handful of media mega-moguls whose name is a household word. As Chairman and CEO of News Corporation Ltd., he oversees a diverse global media empire with a net worth in the multi-billions. Kerry Packer was the richest man in Australia. His personal wealth has been estimated in the billions of dollars. It's again the media industry that made Kerry Packer both wealthy and powerful. He was the owner of the Channel Nine television network and had interests in Pay TV.

³⁹ Adair, *Sport in Australian History*, xi-xiii

money in endorsements and appearance fees.

In modern society, sport represents more than the spontaneous eruption of playful energy. Sport, as John Coleman points out, is sponsored and underwritten by businesses, inculcated in schools, regulated by sports commissions and even overseen by the State itself (e.g.: Victorian Institute of Sport etc.) Agencies of society and corporations alike allocate money for sport and determine whether budgets reflect sports for all or only sports for the athletic elite. Sport seems to be the regular theatre for ordinary Australians, or as historian Manning Clarke put it, when referring to Aussie Rules football, "it is the ballet for the ordinary person."⁴⁰

In my observation, sport for many Australians has become a way of life and the major topic of conversation in pubs and trains, offices and work-sites (especially around finals time!). For others, such as the professional sports person and their associated teams, trainers, coaches and managers etc., sport has become much more than casual conversation - it is their source of income, identity and in many cases immense popular acclaim (or public scrutiny!). Sporting heroes command immense media attention and corresponding interest from all and sundry into all aspects of their lives. One has only to think of the intensity of the Sydney Olympics and the weight of expectation on Cathy Freeman's shoulders, or the bizarre attention accorded cricketer Shane Warne's dietary needs or mobile phone habits.

For better or worse, sport has become central to Australian life and the business

⁴⁰ Cashman, *Paradise of Sport*, 208

of being Australian. Sporting culture is accessible and provides continuing satisfaction for many Australians. It is immensely popular and appears at least to address the central issues of Australian life. Keneally has written, that "sport mimics life and is a 'paradigm for war, the family, real estate, politics,'" adding that "the arts and sport are akin in many aspects - in both, talent expresses itself through instinct rather than through rational thought. Both of them, at their best, possess an unconscious yet divine Grace."⁴¹

Coleman picks up on this theme and asks the question: "Were people created ultimately to work or to play?"⁴² Play and sport, in particular, originated in sacred festivals and continued throughout much of recorded history to have religious connotations and connections. Sport, he says, draws beyond itself to sacred groundings. Coleman quotes J.H. Huizinga from his classic book *Homo Ludens*, that the myth of a primordial character to play is rooted in the notion of divinity. "With a word whose depth surpasses all logical understanding, Plato once called men the playthings of the gods. Today one might say that man everywhere uses the world as his plaything."⁴³

⁴¹ Thomas Keneally, "Good weekend", *Sydney Morning Herald*, (5 March 1988.) 31, cited by Cashman, *Paradise of Sport*, 208

⁴² John Coleman, "Sport and the Contradictions of Society" in *Concilium*, Sport (1989), 23

⁴³ Coleman, "Sport and the Contradictions", 23

Religion and Sport

1. The links between Religion and Sport - Making Connections

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.⁴⁴

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 Wach who suggested that religion is the most intense

⁴⁴ James Nuechterlein, “The Weird World of Sports,” *First Things* 84 (1998) 11-12

experience of which humanity is capable.⁴⁵ Nearly fifty years later, Hoffman suggests that religion must now share the honour with sport.⁴⁶

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."⁴⁷

Paul Tillich defines religion as "the state of being grasped by an ultimate concern, a concern which qualifies all other concerns as preliminary and which itself contains the answer to the question of meaning and of our life. Therefore this concern is unconditionally serious and shows a willingness to sacrifice any finite concern which is in conflict with it."⁴⁸

Frederick Steng defined religion as a "means toward ultimate transformation" and went on to identify eight ways of being religious, ranging from the traditional Western or evangelical notions of being spiritually reborn, to contemporary and somewhat more humanistic ways of enjoying a full life through sensuous experiences.⁴⁹ Social scientist Emile Durkheim, among others, argue that every stable society holds sacred a set of shared beliefs. These beliefs, when

⁴⁵ 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

⁴⁶ Hoffman, *Sport and Religion*, 2

⁴⁷ Hoffman, *Sport and Religion*, 2

⁴⁸ Paul Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations*, (1948) 6, cited by Hoffman, *Sport and Religion*, 3

⁴⁹ Steng, Lloyd and Allen, *Ways of Being Religious*, (1973), cited by Hoffman, *Sport and Religion*, 4

regularly celebrated in sacred rites, help to increase social cohesion and ultimately ensure the survival of the community.⁵⁰

Certainly religion appears to provide a sense of integration for some societies on the basis of shared beliefs, beliefs that are commonly reinforced through rituals. These in turn help to reaffirm the significance of the group and to give it a special identity.⁵¹ It is this kind of latent social function that some have identified as being present in sport, thus giving sport some shared commonality with religion.⁵²

Even the most rudimentary study of sport in society will disclose some key functions it shares with religion. For example, sport has long been regarded as a shaper and reinforcer of values deemed critical to the maintenance of Western society, such as development of character, habits of hard work, perseverance, competitive edge, teamwork, etc. Sports events can at times take on the appearance of a ritual and, like the rituals of religion, may in fact help to reinforce the particular community's commitment to the society's core values. Participation in sporting activity can also provide a controlled environment in which to express emotion, whether it is jubilation or desolation, the emotional responses can mirror those normally attributed to religion.⁵³

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.

⁵⁰ Hoffman, *Sport & Religion*, 4

⁵¹ Hoffman, *Sport & Religion*, 5

⁵² Hoffman, *Sport & Religion*, 4

⁵³ Hoffman, *Sport & Religion*, 7

Hoffman cites Durkheim, who believed that the collective excitement (what he called “effervescence”) generated through religious ceremonies was the basis for the collective notion of the sacred. Knowing this, Elias and Dunning have made the suggestion that it is not unreasonable that the same generation of ‘collective effervescence in sport’ is what lies at the heart of the tendency to refer to football and cricket pitches in Britain as ‘sacred’ or ‘hallowed’. In fact for some people sport ‘has become their religion and engaging in sport, whether as a participant on the field or as a spectator in the stands, it is for them a ‘quasi-religious activity.’⁵⁴

Sociologist Harry Edwards reveals some interesting similarities between the forms of religion and sport when he identifies the following:

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 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.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Hoffman, *Sport & Religion*, 7

⁵⁵ Harry Edwards, *Sociology of Sport*, (1973), 261-262, cited by Hoffman, *Sport & Religion*, 7

Religious Studies scholar Catherine Albanese adds that both sport and religion have marked out a separate locale for their activities - a 'playground' or sacred space. She maintains that both sports and religious rituals, through their performances, create an other world of meaning. So, whether it is in play or in ritual, to participate is satisfying for its own sake. Both ritual and play are activities in which we all may engage merely because of the pleasure they offer in themselves.⁵⁶ Albanese goes on to grant sport status as a "cultural religion" on the grounds that sport can offer what she calls 'symbolic vehicles', which give us windows into a 'transcendent world' and even more, give people a means by which to order their lives and search for a sense of meaning in the everyday world.⁵⁷

Scholars who study sport are, however, far from unanimous in reaching agreement on its religious significance. Some, like Snyder and Spreitzer, have an optimistic characterisation of sport as having "intimations of the sacred, ultimacy and a quest for perfection (kicking that one perfect 'torpey'! to win the Grand-final after the full-time siren...) and instilling "quasi-religious qualities of heart and soul."⁵⁸ These perspectives need to "be balanced against more pessimistic views contending that sports focuses on the secular, material, and profane world" (witness the language in the dressing room before a game!) While Coakley believes that religion deals with the sacred and the

⁵⁶ Catherine Albanese, "America, Religious and Religion", (1981) 321-322, cited by Hoffman, *Sport & Religion*, 7-8

⁵⁷ Hoffman, *Sport & Religion*, 8

⁵⁸ E E Snyder and E A Spreitzer, *Social Aspects of Sport*, (1983), 277 cited by Hoffman, *Sport & Religion*, 8

supernatural,⁵⁹ philosopher George Santayana gives sport a religious cloak by seeing the sporting contests as soul-stirring spectacles that represent the basis of life.⁶⁰ These perspectives should share the stage with Professor Jack Higg's assertion that sports "belong to the realm of the beautiful and play to the world of nature, but neither to the holy."⁶¹

Michael Novak argues that sport can at times perform a kind of public function that enables us to have a more elevated experience and has in fact usurped the place of private, sectarian religion. For Novak sport is a human response to a natural, godly impulse. What seems to interest Novak is not similarity in form between sport and religion, but rather the impact that sports can have, whether as a spectator or as a participant, on the human spirit. In some way sports helps us to discover something deep in the ontological reality of our being and enables us, by our very participation, to extrapolate that experience into other dimensions of our lives. Giving your heart to the rituals of sport, says Novak, is very much like giving your heart to Baptism or the Eucharist.⁶²

Agreeing with Streng's definition, that "any human activity one undertakes with hopes of moving toward the ultimate has the potential to be religious," and combined with the extraordinary powers of attraction sport possesses, Hoffman maintains it is not unreasonable to admit sport to the realm of the religious.⁶³

⁵⁹ J J Coakley, *Sport and Society: Issues and Controversies*, (1986), cited by Hoffman, *Sport & Religion*, 8

⁶⁰ George Santayana, "Philosophy on the Bleachers" in E W Gerber and W J Morgan (eds) *Sport and the Body: a Philosophical Symposium*, (1979), 222-226 cited by Hoffman, *Sport & Religion* 8

⁶¹ R J Higgs, "Muscular Christianity; Holy Play and Spiritual Exercises: Confusion about Christ in Sport and Religion, *Arete* 1 (1), 65, cited by Hoffman, *Sport and Religion*, 8

⁶² Michael Novak, *The Joy of Sport*, (1976), cited by Hoffman, *Sport & Religion*, 8

⁶³ Hoffman, *Sport and Religion*, 10

Hoffman would admit that not all social scientists or theologians would agree with such broad-based definitions. Researchers such as Rodney Stark and William Bainbridge have found it necessary to define religion and religious beliefs operationally in much more concrete and objective terms.⁶⁴

An alternative perspective is that of Joan Chandler who wants to get back to basics by seeking to examine sport more from the inside out.⁶⁵ She maintains that sport's status as a religion is not to be determined by analysing its observable characteristics but by taking into account the reasons people give for participating in sport and for participating in religion. It is on this basis that Chandler proclaims sport to lie far outside the realm of the religious."⁶⁶

While there may have been closer overt links in the past between religion and sport or between Church and Club, it would appear that something of a 'disenchantment' for sports has occurred in modernity. As sport has become more professional and connected with sponsors and dollars (or pounds!), so the secular has overtaken the sacred. Yet some of the bonds between religion and sports remain. For example, during the 2003 "World Series" of baseball in USA between the Florida Marlins and the New York Yankees, a stained-glass window in the Anglican cathedral of St John the Divine in New York City was commissioned which depicted players of American Baseball and other modern sports. Indeed, a few theologians have even postulated the notion of a Deus Ludens (a God who plays) to ground a connection between God and games.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Hoffman, *Sport and Religion*, 4

⁶⁵ Joan Chandler, "Sport is not a Religion" in Shirl J Hoffman, *Sport and Religion*, 55-61

⁶⁶ Hoffman, *Sport and Religion*, 10

⁶⁷ David Miller, *Gods and Game: Toward a theology of play*, (1970) 7 cited by Higgs "Muscular

Others, such as Higgs, maintain that spiritual exercises are closer to the idea of holiness than are 'Muscular Christianity' and 'holy play.' In other words, for Higgs both *ludus* (effort, patience, skill, ingenuity) and *paida* (gaiety, capriciousness, spontaneity) are entirely profane.⁶⁸

Modern sport spectacles can function, sometimes, as an *alternative* form of religion. Sport represents, like religion, an appeal to ritual. The use of ceremony inaugurates a sporting event (an anthem is played or sung) to represent a break from the mundane, profane time and space. Like religious ritual, sport presents us with a bounded time-space field, i.e., overlaying the sacred cycle of mythic time to provide a much-needed psychic relief from the tedium of western linear time.

There is a danger in assigning to sport the dimension of a religion, but some have argued that sport can also take on a religious meaning that is authentic. Freyne draws out the earliest Christian reactions to sport to conclude: 'There is nothing in the authentic Christian tradition that is negative to sport as such, but there is much there to warn us to be constantly critical of its abuse.'⁶⁹ Jurgen Moltmann's study of the Olympic ideals of a *religio-athleticae* warns against the dangerous idea of sport as Religion.⁷⁰

By contrast, Thomas Ryan supports a contemplative attitude towards sport and maintains that "The more attuned we become (through sports) to the flesh God

Christianity" 93

⁶⁸ Higgs "Muscular Christianity" 91

⁶⁹ Sean Freyne, "Early Christianity and the Greek Athletic Ideal", *Concilium*, Sport. (1989) 99

⁷⁰ Jurgen Moltmann, "Olympia Between Politics and Religion," *Concilium*, Sport (1989) 108

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.’”⁷¹

Hoffman quotes theologian Hugo Rahner, who maintains our task is to regain this “free unfettered, eager harmony between body and soul” through human activity that “engages of necessity both soul and body” and in which the (human) “spirit plays itself into the body of which it is a part.” So it is that play, as sport can be “the expression of an inward spiritual skill, successfully realised with the aid of a physically visible gesture, audible sound and tangible matter” but only when the body is accorded this sacramental status.⁷²

2. Sport as Religion

Theologian Michael Novak has described how what he refers to as the “folk religion” of sport operates for Americans.

“For quite sophisticated and agnostic persons, the rituals of sport really work.... [to] provide an experience of at least a pagan sense of godliness. Among the god-ward signs in contemporary life, sports may be the single most powerful manifestation ... Sports constitute the primary lived world of the vast majority of Americans.”⁷³

⁷¹ Thomas Ryan, "Towards a Spirituality for Sports," *Concilium Sport* (1989) 117

⁷² Hoffman, *Sport and Religion*, 288

⁷³ Michael Novak, "The Natural Religion", in Hoffman, *Sport and Religion*, 36

Writer John F. Wilson maintains that “the world of sports has become central to American popular culture ...the emphasis upon success, closely identified with money, derived from brute power melded with technical expertise, is perhaps the most direct and telling dramatisation of the content of American culture ...This culture created and sustained through the modern means is linked to public religion in America.”⁷⁴ Mathison asserts that sport exists as a dominant, religious-like part of many American lives, yet sport gives rise to its own values and myths which in turn are projected onto the culture with what he calls a normative certitude. His contention is that this authority emphatically characterises sport as a folk religion.⁷⁵

In her work on the role of soccer in Brazilian society, Lever describes the effect of sport and suggests that:

Sport spectacles belong to the world of the sacred rather than the profane; fans who say sport provides an escape from “real life” in effect sustain this religious distinction ... Like the effect of a religious celebration, sport fosters a sense of identification with others who shared the experience.⁷⁶

Novak maintains that sports are religions in the sense that they are organised institutions, disciplines, and liturgies; and also in the sense that they teach religious qualities of heart and soul. They are not merely games or recreative pastimes, but are symbolic of the cosmic struggle, in which our survival and

⁷⁴ James A Mathisen, "From Civil Religion to Folk Religion", in Hoffman, *Sport and Religion*, 21

⁷⁵ Mathisen, "From Civil Religion" 21-22

⁷⁶ J Lever, *Soccer Madness* (1983) 15, cited by Mathisen, in Hoffman, *Sport and Religion*, 23

moral courage are not guaranteed. Their power to take us to the heights of ecstasy or the depths of despair are not to be underestimated. The compensatory remark, "It's only a game," merely serves as a defensive reaction for the psyche against the deeper cosmic symbolic meaning of sports events. Novak sees sports flowing outward into action from a deeper natural impulse that is radically religious. Other motivational factors for such a strong commitment to sports include an impulse of freedom, respect for ritual limits, a zest for symbolic meaning, and a longing for perfection. 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.⁷⁷

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 a highly moral concept of 'amateurism', where it was wrong to receive payment to play. You competed solely for the honour of representing your team/town/country. I.e. This ethic was communal rather than individual and the focus was on the appeal to the 'spirit' of a place or country.

⁷⁷ Novak, "The Natural Religion", 36

There was a belief in the value of sport and masculinity; to give and take the knocks builds character, so football came to be seen as a kind of moral agent. This persisted in some of the codes, e.g., Rugby Union right up to the mid 1990s, where the change was finally made from what many saw as “shamateurism” to an openly professional game.

The implications of the connections between Religion and Sport for Sports Chaplaincy

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%.⁷⁸ Ward goes on to point out that for a considerable period of time this decline was explained by the secularisation thesis which, under the influence of leading sociologists, declared that as society became increasingly modernised religion would eventually disappear. However the thesis has had a hard time of it over the past 20 years, and Peter Berger, one of the leading proponents, said in 1998 that this was the one big 'mistake' that he made. Rodney Stark and Roger Finke in their recent book, *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion* title one of their chapters, "Secularisation, R.I.P." and it is now hard to find sociologists who still hold to the secularisation thesis in the sense of the ultimate demise of religion.⁷⁹

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 experiencing serious decline, by and large people have continued to remain overwhelmingly religious. He quotes an article in *American Demographics* on religion which concludes that "amid the crumbling foundations of organised religion, the spiritual supermarket is on the rise." In America and in Canada surveys continue to show that people are as religious as ever. Ward compares the situation in Canada, where church attendance is at levels much closer to that in New Zealand while in the US, the leading researcher of religious trends declares that "Belief in a supernatural dimension of reality is widespread... and shows no sign of abating."⁸⁰ Likewise in Australia, Ward finds researchers who

⁷⁸ 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)

⁷⁹ Ward, *Christendom*, 1

⁸⁰ Ward, *Christendom*, 1

state that "the myth of Australia the secular society needs to be put aside" when 85% believe in God and two thirds say they pray, half that number once a week or more."⁸¹

In the March 2000 bulletin of the Christian Research Association, Philip Hughes points out that "of 15 million Australian adults, 5 million consider a spiritual life as important and another 5 million as very important or the most important part of life. People of all ages and a variety of backgrounds value spirituality... but only 3 million of those who value spirituality attend a church monthly or more often."⁸²

In an earlier article, Ward examines what he calls 'Religion in a Post-Aquarian Age' and notes that what is common across all Western countries since the middle of the 1960s is that mainline Protestant denominations have seen significant declines in numbers involved. He asks the question:

*... What are we witnessing? Not the death of spirituality, nor the death of belief, nor the death of meaning, but the death of religious institutions, the death of organised religion, the erosion of Christianity's historical core, its hold on the heart of the West... it is the death of Christendom says theologian Lloyd Geering.*⁸³

Others such as Bouma and Dixon claim in *The Religious Factor in Australian*

Life:

⁸¹ Ward, *Christendom*, 1

⁸² Philip Hughes, "Spirituality" *Pointers: Bulletin of the Christian Research Association*, vol 10, no 1 (March 2000) 1

⁸³ Kevin Ward, "Religion in a Postaquarian Age" *Stimulus: The New Zealand Journal of Christian Thought and Practice*, Vol. 9, Issue 1.(2001) 12

“The facts indicate that the myth of Australia the secular society needs to be put aside. Australians are far from secularists according to the data provided by this study.”⁸⁴

It is clearly apparent that increasing numbers of Australians are searching for significance outside the traditional religious institutions. Ironically, it is the sporting heroes who are now subject to the moralising expectations that formerly applied to clergy and other civic leaders, while sporting teams are expected to demonstrate a moral culture that was once expected of religious groups.⁸⁵

2. Dangers of a preoccupation with Sport

The issues raised by the preoccupation with sporting achievement in our society have some relevance for Christians and for those involved in Sports Chaplaincy. Some of those concern such things as wholeness and faith, finding a balance in life, the place of the church in culture, and the danger of a preoccupation with one dimension of life. Some of these issues I want to address in Chapter Five - “Making Connections”, but several other issues can be noted as follows:

- 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

⁸⁴ G.D. Bouma and B.R. Dixon, *The Religious Factor in Australian Life* Australia, 1986), 167 cited by Ward “Religion” 13

⁸⁵ Witness the recent (19/7/01) demise of the coaching career of Malcolm Blight, formerly of St. Kilda, Adelaide and Geelong Football Clubs... and no small critic of the ‘culture’ of the St. Kilda club that he maintained was “500 times worse” than any previously encountered!

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 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.”⁸⁶
- 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

⁸⁶ Philip Yancey *The Jesus I Never Knew* (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan 1995) 273

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.⁸⁹ 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 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.'⁸⁸

⁸⁹ 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.

⁸⁸ 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?

3. Corporate Sport and the Sports Chaplaincy

The involvement of the business world in sport has produced a different kind of pressure for the sports person. Not only is there a great deal of money to be made, but the endorsed athlete becomes a commodity to be used and utilised to give the best return. The temptations that come with the availability of a hitherto unimagined lifestyle of privilege and luxury have at times corrupted even those with the staunchest of morals.⁸⁹

The reality is that sport has become big business. Athletes who do well know the rewards for their efforts can be measured not only by the cash incentives offered by their eager governments, but that success on the track or in the pool can launch lucrative endorsement careers measured in the millions. The corporate world and its sponsorship has seemingly been embraced by sports people of all races and ages.

In a *Sunday Age* article, Richard Webb writes that Corporate Australia spends a larger proportion of its advertising money on sports branding than any other country. More than 60 cents in every advertising dollar goes into sport. That is ten times the amount business expends on the arts and seven times that on supporting education. That spending was expected to grow by 44% over the next three years. Potential benefits for companies include national exposure, potential image enhancement, "feel good" factor, conveying a positive message and cutting out the competition.⁹⁰

⁸⁹ Hanse Cronje was surely the most surprising 'victim' of corruption in recent years.

⁹⁰ Richard Webb, "Corporates Opt for a Sporting Life" *The Sunday Age*, (16/7/00) 17

If Christ came to the Olympics, He would be impressed with the grandeur and even the splendour of the event, especially the quasi-religious atmosphere engendered... however he might remind us that splendour does not necessarily rhyme with spender, and that gaudiness is not godliness. ⁹¹

My own experiences as Chaplain with the *Melbourne Storm* NRL team have been eye-opening in discerning the links between the corporate world and the game itself. Incredible expectations are placed on coaches, players and staff by the sponsors and their powerful dollars. Endorsements, appearances and privileges all contribute toward the blurring of the distinction between what is sport and what is entertainment. The players and even the game itself become secondary to the vehicle they provide for the promotion of products and services.

In many ways, sport is no longer simply an opportunity for leisure, play or relaxation. It is certainly not merely 'leisure' for those involved in professional sport - it is work. Their pursuit of excellence and their demeanour, their performance on and off the field is all subject to intense scrutiny by media and the public alike. Sponsors too require standards of behaviour and even dress that will reflect favourably upon their corporate images.

In this chapter we have sought to identify a number of distinctive issues arising

⁹¹ William Baker, *If Christ Came to the Olympics*, cited by the author of "The Olympic Movement was Religious", *The Victorian Baptist Witness*, (October 2000) 3

in the close interface between sport, religious experience and the Christian faith in Australian society.

In the next chapter we will present the results of the interviews exploring these issues with players, club officials and other Sports Chaplains.

Ch 4 INTERVIEW MATERIAL

Phase One - My Personal Observations and Experience

Bone Crunching Ministry

As I have indicated at the beginning of this report, that first experience meeting the *Melbourne Storm* players nearly six years ago was for me one of the most difficult experiences I have had in pastoral ministry. What does one say as a Christian minister to a group of blokes who pride themselves on their hardness and their ability to tackle challenges head on? How could I as a local church pastor connect with these elite athletes? Where were the connecting points for the Gospel?

Over the next few weeks and months I gradually got to know names and faces - training and fitness work with the team helped give me some credibility and provided opportunities to build relationships. I got to know those players and staff members, office staff and management who in many ways were seeking someone 'safe' who they could talk to about issues in their lives with which they struggled. Often there would be questions about the Bible or God - but sometimes the questions would be on other issues: "How come you are a priest but are married?" Or "Hey Rev, what does 'Shalom' mean?" Or "Rev, what can you do when someone you've hurt won't forgive you?" Several of the senior players sought me out to discuss the difficulties they were experiencing in their relationships - others kept their distance and were wary of this new stranger in

their midst.

Looking back over these past years I have begun to recognise a number of ways that effective ministry can occur in these kinds of settings (see Ch. 5 - making connections). But it takes a combination of patience and a willingness to set aside the familiar concepts of what constitutes pastoral ministry in a local church or community. For this is in many ways a closed community and the way to acceptance and inclusion is not an easy one.

In many ways I was fortunate to be asked at such a time of crisis for the club. Immediately my role as a helper/counselor/pastoral carer was legitimised and given the imprimatur of the coach and club. My task then was to win the trust and confidence of both the playing group and the staff.

Elite athletes are wary of 'outsiders.' They spend a good deal of their time responding to either the adulation of fans or the demands of coaching staff, management and sponsors. Everyone they seem to deal with wants 'a piece of them.' There is an understandable reluctance to 'bare their souls' and run the risk of being seen as vulnerable or weak. Very early on I recognised the necessity to not be 'a fan,' but to be someone with whom things could be shared in confidence and not passed on to coaching staff or others.

In many ways the chaplain's role is unique in this sense. We are the neutral person. We are not employed by the CEO or the coach, not reporting to any level of management. We are not even concerned with the players' skill

development or physical condition, nor how they perform each week 'on the paddock.' These things may interest us and provide starting places for conversations, but our concern is for them as persons. Sports chaplaincy represents a holistic approach that acknowledges the importance of the spiritual as well as the physical, emotional and mental for balance in life.

I can remember being invited to join in a game of 'Offside Touch" as part of a training session. I was somewhat nervous and anxious not to prove the "weakest link!" After about ten minutes of trying to keep up with the rapid pace of play (and realising that these blokes were younger and fitter than I was), I was passed the ball and set off down field only to run into what felt like a brick wall! I turned to see one of the senior players (a 105 kg forward) sprawled on the ground clutching his side and moaning "Oh, Rev!" - only to jump to his feet grinning when he knew he had me worried!

Another memorable session occurred when I was directed by the coach to form part of the defensive line which the attacking players would seek to breach... Fortunately (I thought) I was marking one of the younger, smaller players (who has since played for Australia!). I crouched in anticipation as he approached only to find myself moments later flat on my back wondering how such an apparently compact frame could feel so solid.

Final Team Meeting 2001

Having been summarily dumped from the Finals by unexpected losses and the inability to 'find the extra gear', the players, coaching staff and executive management met for the final time, this particular afternoon.

I had requested that they let me know when they were meeting as I had wanted to say a thanks to the team for allowing me to be involved this year and to give them each a gift of the 'Toward the Goal' New Testament especially produced for the Olympics by the Bible Society. Was I being presumptuous in doing so, inflicting my religious views upon unwilling recipients?

With heart in mouth, I was invited to address the players by the coach. I began by expressing my thanks for the opportunity to be involved with the team this year - for putting up with my attempts at training as one who "can't kick, can't tackle...!"

I then proceeded to make the following comments :

- “On any given Sunday” ... you are going to win or you are going to lose - the point is... As the film says - can you win or lose like a man?
- Raising a boy with a disability, as we have, teaches you about what is important in life. Most of you have met our Johnny who was born with an extra chromosome and so struggles to achieve what to others comes naturally. At first we found this hard to come to terms with - you have dreams and desires for what your kids will do. After a long time I began to understand something of the way that God sees all of us - we are all

retarded in some way, none of us is able to achieve all that we or others believe we should. But God loves us anyway for who we are - not for what we can do.

- In the book "What's so Amazing about Grace?" the author writes - We're all bastards, but God loves us anyway. That really about sums up the way God sees each of you guys.

- Life is all about choosing the right models. Who we choose to imitate can have a bearing on the kind of person we develop into. " Character is more important than personality." Who you really are inside will eventually shine through who you appear to others to be.

I then read some verses from the New Testament:

Do you not know that in a race the runners all compete, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win it. Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable one. So I do not run aimlessly, nor do I box as though beating the air; but I punish my body and enslave it, so that after proclaiming to others I myself should not be disqualified.⁹²

I asked if they minded if I prayed a Prayer of Thanksgiving, and prayed something like this:

"Heavenly Father, you are the giver of all good gifts and we thank you for this year. That tough as it has been, there were still some good things

⁹² 1 Cor 9:24-27

that have happened. We thank you for the ability to compete and play hard. For the friendships that have been formed and developed. We thank you for team-mates and the ability to enjoy each other's company. We would also pause to remember Mick Moore and Bullfrog who have passed away. We continue to pray for the family and friends they left behind, especially pray for Tracy and the kids as they rebuild their lives. And now give us the **courage, strength and the wisdom** to be all you intended us to be.”

There was a kind of stunned silence afterwards - not even any smart remarks from the usual suspects!

Several players came and thanked me individually and one in particular, talked for about 15 minutes about his struggle with self-esteem, forgiveness and guilt.

I have included these examples here to share some of my own experiences and give some shape to my observations regarding the relationships which can develop between a sports chaplain and the players and staff. Many of those who were there in those early days subsequently have set the tone with new and younger players as to how I was accepted within the club. I felt that in taking a risk to talk at a heart level, there had been an acceptance and even an encouragement for some of the other staff there to do the same.

The Challenge of Sports Chaplaincy

As already observed, in many ways the club is like a closed system, with limited entry points and a wariness of outsiders. The demands on players are constant, with coaches, management, sponsors and fans all wanting and demanding their 'pound of flesh'. The players become commodities, to be used and traded to the highest bidder. A cynical wariness envelopes the squad as they see promises made and broken, contracts offered and refused. Into this pressured and 'dog-eat-dog' world steps the chaplain - seeking to be one who will be both a prophet and a priest in a mission field of a different hue, to raise the awareness of the gracious and often unseen work of God's Spirit in the midst of the macho machinations that is the footy player's world, to be the God-person there. Yet the chaplain comes also to be the one who is not beholden to any one person or organisation, who retains the ability and indeed the opportunity to 'speak the truth in love' into a world where artifice and deception can be an art form. The chaplain comes to be one who is willing to challenge the prevailing world view that in its public persona at least purports to be blind to the activity and reality of God's persistence presence and to raise the bar of integrity, honesty and justice in a world where the gods of profit, self-centredness and expediency often reign unchallenged.

Over the past six years I have sought to discover and explore the meaning of this ministry in the marketplace - what place does the Gospel have in the corporate world of professional sports? Why do supposedly 'secular' organisations such as the *Melbourne Storm* see the need and seek out a

Christian chaplain? What are the implications for the church as we seek to discover our place in and our mission amongst this increasingly 'church-unaware' society in which we live? As the coach said at my introduction: "We pride ourselves on being a tough club - the Rev's here because at times we need to acknowledge there's a soft side too."

Phase Two: Results of Interviews with *Melbourne Storm* (10 Players and 5 office/coaching staff members)

- **Has having a chaplain at the club been helpful for you? In what ways has it been helpful for you personally or for the organisation?**

By far the most common theme emerging from this question is the recognition that it is important for a chaplain to just "be there", to be available and have a "presence". 80 % of respondents acknowledged that they had found it helpful for a chaplain to be available, to "have someone who is there" to talk to. In a similar response, a third of those interviewed, (33%) mentioned the importance of having someone as a "presence". 6/15 (40%) mentioned the importance of having someone who could provide an impartiality or confidentiality of conversation. In a similar response 5/15 (33%) mentioned the value of having someone available who was "outside the system"

I was interested to see if the interviewees found any distinction between having a chaplain at the club as helpful for them personally or for the club as a whole. 11/15 (73%) indicated that they thought having a chaplain had been helpful for

the club/organisation, and 13/15 (86%) thought that having a chaplain at the club had been helpful for them personally. As I mentioned earlier, there is a degree of risk involved in asking this kind of question when the subject of the question is the interviewer. However, I believe that there was a fair degree of honesty displayed in the responses. Rugby League players have a reputation for not mincing their words and several were upfront in suggesting they had not found a chaplain personally helpful, yet had observed others who had benefited.

It certainly seems that there is a clear recognition that a primary function of a chaplain has to do with “presence” and being available. A total of 11/15 (73%) also recognised the importance of having someone there who was not only “outside the system”, but who could be approached with confidence knowing that what was said would remain in confidence.

An emerging theme of **"being"** rather than **"doing"** is indicated at this early stage. That is, it was not wise advice or helpful actions that were indicated, but rather just having someone there and available to listen.

Another theme to be explored in Phase Two interviews could be the direction of pastoral care, i.e., does the kind of pastoral care exercised by the chaplain within the sports organisation have any impact on his or her understanding of what constitutes pastoral care within the Church? Does the model of pastoral care typically practised within a local church need significant adjustment to be effective in the sporting arena?

- **Have you observed any significant difference between the time when there wasn't a chaplain at the club and now that there is?**

6/15 (40%) responded positively that they had observed a significant difference between the time when there wasn't a chaplain at the club and now that there is. 2/15 (13%) indicated no observable difference, and 7/15 (47%) said that they weren't sure or had not been there long enough.

At the time of analysing the data, this was the fifth year that the club had been in existence (founded 1998), and the club has had a chaplain for the past 3 years. Of those interviewed, 9/15 (60%) had been with the organisation since its inception. Of those nine, 6/9 (66%) indicated that they had noticed a significant difference between the time when there wasn't a chaplain and now that there is, though it is difficult to determine from the responses the quality of that difference.

Some of the responses indicated that it had made a difference having a chaplain around when the team manager died (early 2000). Several indicated the helpfulness of having a chaplain to help with 'communication' or with religious issues/questions. To "know there was someone there" was also indicated several times.

One of the kinds of responses I was interested in was that which indicated I was 'part of the show' yet not a part of it, i.e., connected with but not beholden to the organisation! Of those who responded positively, 3/9 (33%) indicated such an understanding.

This concept of being somewhat 'independent' and yet connected with the organisation is one of the factors I believe that distinguishes this role from that of pastoral ministry in the local church. A chaplain is there as a volunteer and at the "sufferance" of the club or organisation. At best he/she is *seen* as an integral part of the team, one of the support staff or volunteers, and yet not entirely as part of the organisation. At worst she/he is on the 'fringe' or hovering around the edges of the club trying to find a way in or avenues for effective ministry.

I have personally found it to be more of a help than a hindrance to ministry, knowing that, as a volunteer not employed by the club, I retain some independence and objectivity. The downside is the uncertainty of where I fit into the overall organisational structures and expectations of various staff and personnel.

- **Have you had the need to speak to a chaplain at any time?**

11/15 (73%) indicated that they had felt the need to speak to a chaplain at some time. Some of the reasons mentioned included the issue of MM's death, religious matters, personal issues etc.

This question was designed to gain an indication of the level of apparent need for pastoral care and/or a 'listening ear.' This question also sought to determine the willingness of players and staff to feel like they could approach the chaplain to speak to about issues or matters that concerned them.

Indications are that a majority of those interviewed (73%) were comfortable in doing so.

A follow up for the Phase Two interviews could explore the role of a chaplain as being someone who is only there in times of difficulty or trouble (rather than around at other times). What about the view of management that sports chaplains are part of the curative process designed to enhance the players performance? What kind of issues emerge here - life issues, performance concerns, relationships etc.?

- **Have you been involved with other clubs or teams that have had a chaplain? What was that like for you?**

This question was designed to get an indication whether the earlier responses were based purely on their present experience at Melbourne, or whether there had been other experiences of sports chaplaincy in other clubs.

Of the fifteen respondents, 7/15 (47%) had been at other clubs/organisations which had chaplains. 6/15 indicated they hadn't been at another club before which had a chaplain, and 2/15 (13%) had only been involved with Melbourne.

Of the seven who replied that they had been at other clubs where a chaplain had been present, 5/7 (72%) indicated that it had been helpful or a positive experience for them. Responses included "good to talk to with problems", "just

there, nice bloke to chat to”, “approachable and available”.

2/7 indicated that they never used chaplains at other clubs, “didn’t feel I needed to”.

- **What is your understanding of the role of a chaplain? What do you perceive it to be and what would you like that role to include?**

This question was included partly because my way of being a chaplain would be the only way that many of the respondents would have experienced. I was therefore interested to see if their understanding of the role of a chaplain was aligned with the role I myself perceived it to be, i.e., more concerned with “being” than “doing”.

I was also interested to see later on, in Phase Two, whether being a co-participant (i.e., training with the team) has any bearing on their perception of the role, and whether this approach has some connections with local church pastoral ministry (player-coach). Another question could be whether any aspects of my own experience are a result of my own personal style, and what are common to other chaplains; e.g., ITIM chaplains who actually work on the floor of a factory. Does identifying (i.e., training) with the players have an impact on their view of my role - i.e., not part of the management or staff?

Of the responses, 7/15 indicated that they thought the role should include a “presence”, someone to be there. Another 9 responses included the concept of

a chaplain as a “listener”, being someone they felt that they could talk to. In a similar way, a chaplain as a “counsellor” from whom advice could be sought was mentioned by two thirds of respondents (10/150). Other important aspects of the chaplains role included someone who was “neutral” or could hold things in confidence (6/15) and someone who was an example or role model (4/15).

Mentioned less often, but still significantly, were other aspects of the role such as being “part of the club/team” (3/15), someone who had “warmth” or was approachable (3/15) and a “shoulder to lean on” (3/15). Other aspects mentioned more than once were having “good people/communication skills (2/15), and being “accessible to all players” (2/15).

Most of these responses line up with the responses to question one (“ways in which having a chaplain has been helpful to you”).

Some of the more specific responses indicated here in terms of perception of role, focus strongly on the need for a chaplain to be a good listener or counsellor. In some ways this is a stronger response, though similar to that indicated in the first question.

- **Any other comments or questions?**

This question proved to be somewhat redundant, in fact only three people chose to add anything to their previous comments. Perhaps one of the more significant responses came from a senior players who said: “If you weren’t here, there

would be something missing. I don't relate the chaplain to football so much, more to life." I found this to be a very affirming statement of my role and function within the team.

Another significant comment, almost a throwaway line, was made by one of the senior (female) staff who said: "This is a very chauvinistic culture!". One of the very obvious distinctives of Rugby League is its identification with the working class and a "pub" culture. Part of that culture is a very male-orientated world-view, a "macho" perspective that prides itself on "toughness" and being hard (as opposed to being a "soft-cock"). The danger for a sports chaplain could well be in appearing to be 'soft'; or alternatively striving so hard to be accepted by buying into that macho culture and perhaps compromising the truth of the Gospel in the process. Having said that, I never found individual players to ridicule my Christian stance or perspective, though some would delight to 'take the mickey' out of me when they were blessed with an audience! This hard-line, male-dominated perspective is slowly changing and increasing numbers of women are being employed in positions of leadership within clubs.

Phase Three : Results of Interviews with other Sports Chaplains (5 NRL chaplains and 5 AFL chaplains)

The intention of this evaluation is twofold:

- To describe and examine emerging themes
- To compare these emerging themes with the results of my own experience and Phase Two interviews

Interviews

In this stage of the research, in-depth interviews were conducted with 10 sports chaplains (5 NRL and 5 AFL) affiliated with the two major professional football codes in Melbourne and Sydney. The NRL chaplains were all associated with Sydney-based National Rugby League teams, and the AFL chaplains with Melbourne-based AFL Australian Rules Football teams.

- **How did you first become involved in sports chaplaincy and what keeps you involved?**

The three most common reasons expressed for being involved in sports chaplaincy were:

- A sense of **call/ministry** opportunity (60% of those interviewed)

- **Mission** outside the church culture (70% of those interviewed)
- Enjoy the **relationships** established (50% of those interviewed)

A danger for those of us involved in pastoral ministry can be to use the cachet of sport to reinforce our own vocations which have been somewhat marginalised in Australian culture. Thus, the sporting arena can be a place where you are seen as the 'man of God' and accorded at least some margin of prestige and influence perhaps not available outside that environment. Some of those I spoke to seemed to spend an inordinate amount of time (sometimes amount to several days a week) involved in what really was a ministry considered to be secondary to their primary employment or ministry role in the local church.

All of the above responses resonate with my own experience of what led me into this ministry and what keeps me involved. The ministry opportunity was by invitation and was accompanied by a strong sense of God's timing and call into the situation. I too, have needed to be careful to keep such a role and invitation in perspective and not allow it to consume too much of my time. What keeps me and others involved is that here is an opportunity to minister and be involved in mission outside the church culture, in the 'outside-the-church world' of corporate sports. Two of the AFL chaplains spoke of how they enjoyed giving input into people's lives, to help them deal with life issues etc. Half of the respondents indicated that the relationships established were an enjoyable part of their ministry - they genuinely liked the environment.

There was evidence that the ministry opportunity that sports chaplaincy has

provided is by and large a rewarding one on both a professional and personal level for the majority of those chaplains interviewed.

- **How would you describe the relationships that have developed through your chaplaincy?**

Half of those interviewed (5/10) spoke of a gradual acceptance or feeling of inclusion, though some noted the lengthy time involved for this to happen (3-5 years). Several mentioned the need to hang in there and get past initial feelings of nonacceptance or suspicion.

A third of responses indicated that the relationships established were not necessarily deep or close relationships, but in many ways resembled work relationships that weren't necessarily personal or intimate.

40% of responses spoke of the sense of friendship that characterised a relationship that also involved a strong element of respect.

By and large there doesn't seem to be a significant difference between the respective codes (NRL or AFL).

These reflections mirror closely my own experience and observations. A significant difference in my experience was that the immediate injection into a crisis situation gave me a role - a role that was more clearly defined. I was there by invitation to perform a specific task. Having said that, time constraints over

the years have necessitated often quite brief contact with players and staff. Some of those whom I interviewed were able to give considerably more time to their role as a sports chaplain (i.e., some 1-2 days as opposed to my 2-5 hrs) and I suspect that this extra time available would have a positive benefit in the formation of trusting relationships.

- **How were these relationships established?**

Every one of those interviewed (10/10) spoke of the importance of 'presence', of 'just being around' as the key to the establishment of good relationships. It takes time and can't be hurried.

Some of the other ways that these relationships were established were doing some training with the guys (2/10), for others it was in the more classical areas of pastoral ministry such as conducting weddings or funerals (3/10), hospital visits or hospitality (2/10).

Some significant differences occurred in this question between the codes. Several AFL chaplains (3/5) mentioned the importance of getting 'in' with senior players as one of the keys to establishing good relationships. 2/5 AFL chaplains also mentioned the importance of "going out on a limb", being somewhat "in their face" in the sense of being willing to challenge behaviour or moral choices. Finding entry points in conversations in the everyday 'stuff' of life was also considered important.

- **From your perspective, are there recurring themes in your ministry with sports people?**

A large majority of responses from both codes (7/10) indicated recurring themes which were specifically sport-related (e.g.: Performance, injuries, non-selection etc.)

Another large group of responses indicated themes that were relationally centred: e.g., relationship/marriage/family issues (6/10), depression/grief (3/10), feeling vulnerable/marginalised (3/10).

A distinct group of responses centred around issues that appeared specific to those in elite sports: e.g., dealing with the fame/false life etc. (4/10), life after football, homesickness, not connecting.

In terms of spiritual issues, although only 4/10 chaplains indicated that this was a recurring theme in their ministry as a chaplain, nearly all (8/10) indicated that they dealt with related issues concerning progress of maturity or wanting to understand what life was about.

- **How do you limit your chaplaincy role (given the voluntary and part-time nature of the role)?**

A majority of respondents indicated they endeavoured to attend a minimum of 1 training session and the home games (6/10) while a couple said that they “take it

as it comes” in terms of involvement. 70% of those responding recognised that other commitments “limit my time” and that they had to “make time for it”. Two of the chaplains flagged potential conflict with their church involvement (as clergy) and warned of using sports chaplaincy as an “escape” from other commitments.

It seems that sports chaplaincy is a ministry that has the potential to absorb a great deal of time, if that time was available. More than one chaplain recognised that sports chaplaincy had the potential to be a full-time job.

The responses mirrored my own perception of time involvement with sports chaplaincy. It is the kind of ‘ministry’ that would probably have a direct correlation with the time invested. The more time you could ‘be around’, the more time could be given to building relationships. As a corollary to that, my own experience has shown that if I am there more often than normal (say twice in a week on occasions), I tend to get ‘ribbed’ about neglecting my church ministry - the guys are very aware that this is for me an ‘add-on’ in relation to my full-time employment. Nonetheless it can be frustrating in the initial stages when wanting to build friendships with the players in particular, time limitations of necessity mean that these take a long time.

• How did you feel starting out in sports chaplaincy? And how do you feel now?

9/10 responses showed that the common feelings starting out included fear,

anxiety, apprehension and feeling overwhelmed. Feelings of inexperience, inadequacy and a sense of 'how am I ever going to do this' were the norm.

Another common scenario, especially among the AFL chaplains (4/5) mentioned coming out of their "comfort-zone" and stepping into a new culture. One indicated that it was like "stepping into a new kind of sacred-space". They had to learn a new language (or new and various use of adjectives!) and in a sense become part of a "new society."

The feelings experienced now were quite varied. Although 90% of responses indicated they felt part of the team and accepted with a "developed sense of competence", some of the chaplains also indicated mixed feelings with "good one week, nothing the next", constantly changing, "Can't take anything for granted" and even "disillusioned", demonstrating that there were still some dimensions of sports chaplaincy that continued to challenge.

I can certainly identify with an initial feeling of terror and of being an 'outsider'. The players especially are very wary of who they trust and take into their confidence. Many of the people on the periphery (and even within) the clubs want something from the players. The players are very quick to spot those who want to 'rub shoulders' with their heroes, or have ulterior motives for their friendship. It is very much a case of closing ranks against outsiders.

- **Have you reflected on the effectiveness of your ministry? If so, what criteria did you use?**

In reflecting on the effectiveness of their ministry, 40% of chaplains saw their ministry as “fruitful”, “effective and significant”, or “lives changed and helped”. 30% were more equivocal as they saw a tension between “results” and ongoing ministry, with effectiveness “hard to quantify or judge”.⁹⁵

The building of relationships and credibility was linked closely together with acceptance and being included as a measure of effectiveness by 40% of respondents, though three out of ten wondered about the effectiveness of what they did.

4/10 measured effectiveness by the fact that they were still in touch with players even after they had finished their playing days.

Only one of the sports chaplains thought that in some ways his ministry was ineffective as he was not seeing players “come to Christ.”

Effectiveness is a difficult factor to quantify, and by its very nature subjective. However, for most of us there needs to be some kind of analysis of the worth of what we are doing given the time and energy invested! Two of the responses referred to the ‘servant’ nature of the ministry and the privilege of being involved, that they were involved in a ministry and a subculture that was worth the ministry time invested.

⁹⁵ These responses are by nature subjective and difficult to quantify. Perhaps these ‘criteria’ for measuring effectiveness could have been compared by having the respondents rate these according to a range of chaplaincy functions.

For me, it was very much a relationally based evaluation of effectiveness - have I been able to build sufficient levels of trust and confidence, that when there were issues or crises the players or staff would feel they could come to me with confidence?

- **Has your experience of sports chaplaincy had an impact on your overall view of ministry and your calling?**

30% indicated that their sense of call had been confirmed or reinforced by their role as a sports chaplain. 3 others were satisfied that they had proved they could be comfortable being "themselves" or the "odd-man out" in a different environment.

By far the majority (8/10) had found the biggest impact of their involvement had been on their view of life "outside the walls" of the church. It had helped "deconstruct their 'Churchy' view of life" and helped them to confront the issues non-church people were facing, to "interface with people in a far better way", to get "beyond the walls of the church".

Three others said that the experience had helped hone their "evangelistic skills", "forced me to explain my faith in a way 'they' can understand", to "deconstruct a lot of religious jargon and mindsets".

Though there was a recognition of sports chaplaincy as an "extension of my call into ministry" by some, several others recognised that parts of sports chaplaincy

“don't intersect at all with what I do in church life”, that you can't 'influence' your world the way you do in church on Sunday.

Two responded that sports chaplaincy had “broadened/put more flesh on their view of the Gospel” and had made them a more “rounded, mature person.”

Other responses observed that we are called to be “faithful” and that there was more “sowing than reaping”

- **How do you think those for whom you care perceive you?**

The responses fell into two broad categories:

- 9/10 felt they were accepted, held in good regard. Other comments included being seen as “genuine friend”, as a “good bloke” and someone who cares “without strings attached”.
- 8/10 also responded that the response varied, some were positive and some were negative. It often appeared to depend on how well they were known or knew those players or staff.
- **In your context, have you been able to observe a significant difference between the time when there wasn't a chaplain and now that there is?**

Only six of the chaplains responded to this question (the other four were unaware of the previous - if any - chaplaincy).

Of these six, four observed a significant difference with responses including “brought a ‘steadiness’ to the players”, the players “care more for one another”, with one indicating that the previous chaplain “didn’t work”.

This question was asked in the light of my own experience as coming in as the first real sports chaplain in the organisation, and trying to determine if there had been any observable impact.

- **Has this experience of chaplaincy had any effect on your view of the Gospel and culture?**

Three sports chaplains said that their experience had reinforced their view of others’ need for the Gospel. Others indicated a shift in their awareness of what constituted the application of the Gospel by their responses of “just be there and the opportunities come” and “can’t use a ‘hard sell’, not contrived.”

Other responses indicated that sports chaplaincy had “helped me understand the Christian Gospel as good news- grace”.

A strong leaning toward an incarnational understanding of the Gospel was indicated by several responses including:

- Just be there and the opportunities come
- Need to learn their culture
- Find common ground and share
- Made me more aware of how others think

- We have to be 'out there' - be Christ in the 'marketplace'

Still others indicated the need to disavow the separation between secular and sacred, that our culture has an "inherent spirituality", and that Christianity sees its world as pure and clean, but Christ was more concerned with the real world which has a "darker and murkier view of relationships".

- **How do you understand sports chaplaincy in a theological context?**

A wide range of responses indicated a diversity of opinion and understanding of where sports chaplain 'fits' in a theological context.

- Half the respondents (5/10) indicated that they saw sports chaplaincy as an outworking of their calling to share the love of God in Christ with people, to share the 'good news.' To see people 'come to faith' was seen as helping fulfil God's purposes.
- Aligned with that response were those (3/10) who understood the nature of the role to include a teaching or information sharing dimension, either by "making relevant Christian truths" or helping people to "see that they have a spiritual dimension to their lives." One person indicated that theology for them is "telling people that God loves them and has a plan for them."
- An incarnational approach to the ministry of sports chaplaincy was strongly reflected in many of the responses which included such statements as: "To be Jesus in this place", or "to reproduce Jesus' life and ministry in this world" - a suitably lofty goal! Another mentioned the goal of "living out an incarnational theology of Christ in a sinful world." Several responses indicated that they saw the role in a servant context, with responses such as

“(it is) part of my responsibility as a member of society to other members of society,” or “being a servant in a context where sport is a religion.”

- Some of the more interesting responses maintained that sports chaplaincy fits in a theological context “because it is already there... God created us with the ability to recreate, to play, to have leisure... We need to break down the false dichotomy of body/soul, secular/sacred.” It was added that for many Australians sport has become a diversion therapy!
- Some of the other responses indicated an awareness of the divide that can sometimes exist between church and culture. One indicated that he felt that he was like a “bridge builder... crossing cultures.”
- **What are the similarities/differences in your role as a sports chaplain and your role in a congregational or pastoral setting?**

Some of similarities noted by the interviewees were the importance of being available, that both contexts have their political dimensions, and both are distinct communities. Several (3/10) agreed that their role was defined very pastorally in the football setting - that mission took place in the context of pastoral care.

The differences were somewhat more defined and obvious to most of the chaplains. Several noted the importance of credibility - the need to “walk the talk” and “model what I say”. The players were looking for genuineness and honesty was expected, there was “more pressure to be authentic.” One of the challenges noted was whether the message that was promoted in a church setting would actually ‘hold water’ in the sports chaplaincy arena. Another

difference noted was the non-denominational nature of sports chaplaincy ministry and that it was more of a challenge to be involved in this arena - it was less comfortable and familiar than the church culture where typically the pastor had more of a central role. The sports chaplain role was seen as more openly evangelistic, with a stronger distinction between 'Christian' and 'Non-Christian'. The final comment was that the language is very different in the different settings!

- **Has sports chaplaincy changed your view of these roles and/or the way you now minister in the local church?**

The two most common responses by all chaplains (4/10) centred around the recognition of the need for genuineness and integrity in building relationships with those outside the church, i.e., in redefining what the 'good news' was in terms that were able to be understood, but even more of the value in meeting needs without strings attached. Others referred to the challenge to be more "people-focused" and accepting. Several mentioned a heightened awareness of the struggles Christians face in living their faith in other contexts (i.e., outside the church), while another mentioned the challenge this ministry had been to the assumptions which he operated under in the local church, e.g., traditional family unit, standards of morality etc. It raised for some the issue of the relevance of the local church to where 'these guys' are at - that the church is still wanting people to come to us, physically and morally, rather than us going to them. Overall the challenge seems to have included being more accepting of people for who they are, to relate to those outside the church in a more inclusive way.

One of the interesting observations of the responses emerging from the two sets of chaplains interviewed was the paucity of their theological understanding of their role. Of those interviewed, 3/5 NRL = theologically trained, 4/5 AFL = theologically trained, yet few of these chaplains seemed to have reflected deeply on the connections between their role as a local church pastor and that as a sports chaplain. Some appeared to have taken the opportunity to rub shoulders with sports people they have admired or even adulated with little intentionality or purpose beyond seeking to gain 'decisions for Christ'. The notion of connections or contrast between their local church pastoral ministry and their sports chaplaincy seems to be likewise largely ignored or unexplored.

It appears that no real criteria have been developed within Sports chaplaincy or SLM for measuring effectiveness. How can we know or measure whether a ministry has proven effective or even defective? Where are the categories that could help develop more role-specific training opportunities or even standards of skill-development or knowledge? This lack of a cohesive framework and rationale for sports chaplaincy promotes the need for a competent model which should include both pastoral and theological dimensions.

In the following chapter, I will explore some of the theological issues which arise from this research including the connections between sport and worship, sport and culture and how the Christian Gospel connects into the sporting professional's world. I will then seek to provide a theological and pastorally appropriate model for sports chaplaincy.

Chapter 5 Making Connections

In Chapter Three I identified three key areas which relate to this project and the place of Sports Chaplaincy in the midst of Australian Sporting culture. These were:

- The unique place of Sport in Australian Culture
- Religion and Sport
- The implications of these connections for those involved in Sports Chaplaincy

It is not necessary for the purposes of this project to discuss further either the unique place of sport in Australian culture, nor the connections between religion and sport. These have been explored in previous chapters.

In this chapter, I will seek to connect the questions posed in the project description and the results of the interviews made with my own experiences these past years as local pastor and sports chaplain. These include the connections between sport, leisure and worship, the church and culture, and how the gospel connects into the sporting professional's world.

In doing so I intend to focus more specifically on the relationships between the Gospel and sports chaplaincy. Having done that, I will endeavour to reflect not only on the role of a chaplain but will explore an incarnational/missional model for ministry. Finally I will consider the impact that a sports chaplain's experience can have on an understanding of ministry and mission.

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 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.

In 1947 a German Catholic philosopher named Joseph Pieper published *Leisure the Basis of Culture*.⁹⁴ Flett in his 'Workaday World' notes that Pieper was reacting to a "...great subterranean change in our scale of values, and in the meaning of value..." In his publication, Pieper warned of an emerging "world of

⁹⁴ Josef Pieper, *Leisure, the Basis of Culture*. (n.d.) cited by John Flett, "The Workaday World and its Implications for Lay-Theology", *Stimulus* Volume 8 No 2 (2000), 8

total work". We would have to be careful or human meaning would become synonymous with individual occupation. Nearly sixty years later, in a world preoccupied with globalization and maintaining economic growth, one cannot doubt the prescience of Pieper's diagnosis. Our first question beyond the exchange of names is still: "And what do you do?"⁹⁵

By way of contrast, Pieper sees leisure as a "mental and spiritual attitude," one of inward calm. It is a receptive and contemplative attitude that "recognises the mysteriousness of our universe and our incapacity to understand it."⁹⁶ Leisure somehow encapsulates the ability of humanity to "rise above the level of a thing to be used and enter the realm where he [sic] can be at home with the potentialities of his own nature, where, with no concern for doing, no ties to the immediate, the particular, and the practical, he... can begin leading a truly human Life."⁹⁷

Work often seems to define us according to efficiency and function – we are what we can produce and perform. As an ontological statement this appears to set some boundaries and requirements for living our lives. This understanding of humanity seems to be dominant in our world, orienting our social institutions,

⁹⁵ Flett, "The Workaday World" 8-9

⁹⁶ Pieper uses the term 'worker' in an ontological sense; in that it characterises humanity. The worker embodies "the very meaning of human existence". This person is one who has accepted, whether consciously or not, the ideals and tenants of a world consumed by work. According to Pieper, three principal traits characterise the worker: He or she has supreme confidence in activity. Nothing, not even abstract human knowledge is achieved without "intense effort". i.e.: If you want something you must work for it, and nothing exists which is not due to human effort. Difficulty becomes a criterion for the value of human behaviour. Hard work and toil constitute work. Humanity seems to mistrust anything that is effortless, only enjoying with a good conscience that acquired with toil and trouble. The third trait of the worker is function. i.e.: every sphere of human existence requires justification; every activity should be useful and oriented toward the common good.

⁹⁷ Pieper *Leisure*, cited by Flett "Workaday World" 8

such as the government, education, and even culture itself, toward function.⁹⁸ It determines the value given to the disabled and the handicapped, those in aged care and those unable to 'contribute' to society in some way. We become entirely defined by our productive capacity and ability to make a tangible and measurable contribution.

So what happens when the lines between 'work' and sport become blurred? This, I believe, is the dilemma that often faces the professional athlete. What constitutes work has morphed into a strange mixture of what they once knew as a leisure activity and that which constitutes their livelihood. They struggle to determine or even remember why they are playing this 'game.' In fact it doesn't seem so much a game any more as it is providing entertainment or a spectacle for the paying customer.

Surely the role of a chaplain here is to be a reminder that sport is not the 'whole of life', or even needs to be that which defines a player's worth.

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.⁹⁹

⁹⁸ Flett, 'The Workaday World' 10

⁹⁹ Flett, 'The Workaday World' 10

For Pieper the solution is real leisure. Not a Sunday afternoon idyll, but an attitude of mind, a condition of the spirit which overcomes an individual's inner impoverishment, involving them personally and responsibly with their Environment.¹⁰⁰ Leisure, therefore, is rooted both in the concept of sabbath and divine worship (as is the concept of 'play'), providing us with both the context (a holy separation from utilitarian usefulness), and the content (a reconciled perception of life). Such worship should create space, enough to provide new horizons - an interpretation of history, a reorganisation of values, and an eschatological assessment of social function; in short a world-view.

Sports Chaplains seek to challenge the world view that would leave God out of the picture. We hope somehow to somehow bring about a renaissance in the recognition that our very ability to play and achieve sporting excellence comes as a gift from our creator, and to remind the players (and the fans!) that to participate in sport is to celebrate with the physical gifts and capacity with we have been graced. We can be there for the player who struggles deep in the ontological reality of his or her being with questions of personal worth and value.

¹⁰⁰ Pieper, *Leisure*, 33 cited by Flett "Workaday World" 10

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 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.¹⁰¹ 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.¹⁰²

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

¹⁰¹ Ken Hammond, *Characteristics of a Missional Church*, http://www.phuture.org/s01_Articles/article.asp?ArticleID=101 1-2

¹⁰² Hammond *Characteristics*

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. Hammond maintains that today most of the church acts as if it is still under Constantine's influence. It aims to construct large buildings where it conducts services that represent the spirituality of the church. It is true that, particularly in western society, Sunday morning services have become for many the unchangeable icon of the modern church. Whether it is in Melbourne or Montreal, Pretoria or Portsmouth you are likely to find a universal format of singing and preaching as the fundamental cornerstones of the content of these services. It would appear that these churches' main goal is to conduct the kind of service that will attract visitors to their building and then give them a chance to be assimilated into the life of the church and its programmes. It is very much a consumer-based response to the perceived needs of a Chartered population that goes where they either have their needs met or that place which provides the best divine-entertainment package. Some large churches do this incredibly well and provide excellent services. From the moment when people enter the car park to when they leave they are inundated with a host of volunteers who will greet them, show them to a chair, teach or baby-sit their children, sing to them and then provide a reasonable amount of entertainment from Power Point to skits, dramas and items. So we have a significant group of people who go from one large church to another enjoying good preaching and music. The pressure is on many of the smaller churches to have the same style and

production as the larger churches, but they do not have the facilities, resources and volunteers to provide the same 'quality product'. Many will have attended the large church services and even a yearly conference hosted by the large church where they were encouraged to adopt the sure-fire strategies for success and yet they find such experiences not only irreproducible but often irrelevant to their own settings.¹⁰³

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 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.

The western Church simply believes the average unchurched person wants their Message.¹⁰⁵ 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.

The very nature of sports chaplaincy heads in another direction from traditional notions of outreach or evangelism. The goal is not to recruit more members for the local church, but rather to be the incarnate presence of Christ in that part of

¹⁰³ Hammond *Characteristics*

¹⁰⁶ Ward, "Religion in a Postaquarian Age"

¹⁰⁵ Ken Hammond, *Characteristics of a Missional Church*,
http://www.phuture.org/s01_Articles/article.asp?ArticleID=101 1-2

God's world that is the sporting club. The nature of sports chaplaincy challenges our traditional models of what constitutes church and mission. As one of the chaplains succinctly put it, being a chaplain "helped me to understand the Gospel as good news - grace."

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.

What have I learned about how the Gospel connects into the sporting professional's world?

How can sports chaplains seek to communicate the Gospel in to the sporting world? What are some of the connections that could be made? Arising from the preceding study of sports chaplaincy, there seem to be at least four areas where chaplains can focus.

1. Identifying value in persons not possessions or prowess

Jesus' words in the Gospels speak of the potential difficulty for a young, rich man seeking to enter into the kingdom of God, urging him to sell his possessions and give the money to the poor.

When the young man heard this word, he went away grieving, for he had many possessions. Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Truly I tell you, it will be hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astounded and said, "Then who can be saved?" But Jesus looked at them and said, "For mortals it is impossible, but for God all things are possible."¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁶ Matthew 19:22-26 NRSV

One of the real struggles in the corporate professional world of football is the early and easy nature of the wealth that is placed into the hands of young men with no real comprehension or understanding of the pitfalls and privileges that such wealth brings. On a starting salary of more than \$50,000 per annum, these 19 or 20 year olds are expected to manage their personal lives as competently as they exhibit their ball skills on the playing field. And sadly, most don't. With team managers, agents, coaches and advisors planning, demanding and organising their lives, many of the players struggle to grasp a mature understanding of responsibility and their place in society. When this immaturity is placed in tandem with a kind of hero worship and the high performance expectations from fans and corporate sponsors alike, the pressures can become overwhelming. A chaplain can play an important 'grounding' role where the players can find a listening ear and someone who accepts them for who they are and not for the role they perform. Likewise, when a player is injured or fails to perform, a chaplain is able to reassure them of their value and worth.

2. Life is more than just footy!

The Gospel speaks of the holistic life that comes from aligning oneself with a Saviour who specialised in making sense out of people's lives and their world view. Sports chaplains have an important missional role in bringing such good news of a holistic dimension into the footy world (as every Christian does into the world they inhabit).

As Jesus entered Jerusalem, even those who opposed him were forced to

acknowledge that indeed it appeared that the “whole world has gone after him.” Jesus somehow seemed to make sense out of their world and their own lives. He assigned value to those society had marginalised and challenged the ‘powerful’ to consider who had made them stewards of their wealth and position. With privilege comes responsibility.

Many footballers struggle to keep ‘their feet on the ground’ and remain connected to the world outside the football arena. One of the real opportunities for chaplains is to help these players connect with those marginalised or needing help. Many of the chaplains spoke of the importance of their role in co-ordinating and assisting in the welfare work undertaken by players. Whether it was being a role model for juvenile offenders or visiting isolated stations in the Northern territories, the players could be encouraged to be good examples and encouragers.

If we believe that the Gospel speaks into all our worlds, (including the new church models!) then that same Gospel has such a place in the world that is professional, corporate sport. Though at first glance it appears that those who inhabit such a world are numbered among the ‘haves’ rather than the ‘have-nots, it has been my experience (and is confirmed by other sports chaplain responses) that these young men and their supporters are just as open and responsive to a genuine expression of Christian love and pastoral care as any other group - it just takes a while to ‘earn your stripes’! You have to be there long enough, so they can know you are not numbered among the many who demand to touch the hem of their Guernsey, but rather you are there to

genuinely care for them as people, not as halfbacks or wings or ruck-rovers!

3. Of Heroes and Mates

One of the most pervasive and fundamental aspects of Australian culture is also embedded in the football world: the mateship myth. Terry Collings argues that Aussie men are unclear about who they are and how they are meant to be, act and feel.¹⁰⁷ "...because Australia's early history was harsh and difficult, the first European men who came here had to adapt to their new lives and environment in specific ways... (which led to) Australian styles of behaviour, summarised as 'mateship'".

Donald Horne, a frequent commentator on Australian culture, has said that there is a wider sense in which mateship is simply comradeship within the whole male fraternity. His perspective is that men, in fact, often long for the kind of friendships that they believe women have with one another, but their competitive drive gets in the way¹⁰⁸

Some important questions can be asked that have an application in the sporting arena: e.g.: Can Heroes be mates? Can a mate be my leader?

More importantly, is the mateship theme a part of an Australian Christology? Is faith in Christ the life Aussie males are seeking? Is a Christology of Christ the 'battler', who is with us and for us a rich and inclusive image that we might be

¹⁰⁷ Terry Colling, *Beyond Mateship: Understanding Australian Men* (NSW: Simon and Schuster, 1992), x, ff.

¹⁰⁸ Referred to in lecture notes *The Gospel and Australian Culture* April 7, 2000

able to use? These questions, which cannot be explored here, provide further challenge to the role of a chaplain who seeks to express or incarnate the nature and presence of Christ within the Australian sports culture.

Can a chaplain be a mate? Can he portray the Christ who was known as the “friend of sinners” as one worthy of mateship? The danger of course in such an approach is that a ‘mate’ has his or her own restrictions - such as not challenging the culture of mateship. Jesus, the friend of sinners, was not averse to challenging those, such as the rich young ruler, who needed to be challenged about who or what was Lord in his life. Neither was Jesus hesitant in admonishing his disciples when he saw the need. Those chaplains who seek to be a ‘mate’ at the cost of a distinctiveness and Christian integrity may well find that their effectiveness as an ambassador of Christ is blunted.

These are important issues for a chaplain to be aware of, if they are seeking to be accepted and to have an impact amongst some of the sporting heroes of Australian culture and society. I believe that we can legitimately challenge the kind of macho culture that only takes pride in being ‘hard’ or ‘tough.’ In my first introduction to the club, the coach wisely said that I was the bloke who was there because we all have a ‘soft’ side - this, in a culture where the worst insult seems to be the accusation of a ‘soft-cock.’ The question here is whether ‘mateship’ always involves the ‘macho’ role or whether chaplains can model and encourage a more holistic - and Christ-like - form of mateship.

During my time at the club these past years, I have seen the beginnings of

change within the 'hard' culture of Rugby League. No longer are 'bonding' (a.k.a. binge drinking) sessions seen as necessary or even culturally acceptable by many within the League. Many teams are now foregoing the end of season trip in exchange for a work project in a needy area of the world.

Women are increasingly being accepted into leadership roles. Clubs, associations and national leadership are committed to change and education with regard to what are now seen as poor attitudes toward women, inappropriate behaviour and excessive drinking.

4. The chaplain as one who serves

Jesus spoke to his disciples, as recorded in Mark 10:45, as one who did not come to be served but to serve (and give his life as a ransom for many). He proceeded to demonstrate what that would mean by washing his disciples feet, seeking those on the margins of society and refusing the accolades of the crowds who wished to place on him their own preconceptions of messiahship.

In the Gospel according to Matthew, Jesus also responded to his disciples questioning about who was the greatest in the kingdom of heaven by advising them to humble themselves and become like a child saying ...whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and that the greatest among them should be the one who is willing to serve; and all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.

In the world of professional sport, there are not too many who are willing to play the role of a servant. The voluntary chaplain has the opportunity to humbly demonstrate the servant-hood of Jesus amongst the many who are well-rewarded and adulated. Chaplains have the capacity to be 'behind-the-scenes' workers who give of their time and care without thought of reward or recognition, to give a cup of cold water (or a drink of electrolyte!) and to be willing to serve and help as a follower of the One who came to serve.

What then of the role of the chaplain? How could we define it?

In a paper presented to the management of the *Melbourne Storm* NRL club in July 2000, I sought to address these and other issues concerning roles and expectations and presented a paper entitled "*Why have a Chaplain*", outlining why I saw the need for pastoral care. In this paper, I emphasised that:

*A chaplain can help reinforce an **Holistic approach**: To acknowledge that there is a link between body, mind, soul and spirit and to recognise the need for wholeness and balance in all athletes, perhaps particularly with elite athletes who face considerable demands and stresses in their careers.*

Much of the sports chaplain's time is taken up dealing with issues related to relationships, marriage and family, struggles with self-esteem, depression, grief and loss, feeling marginalised or vulnerable (see p.86 above). Nearly all the chaplains (80%) indicated that they "dealt with issues concerning progress of

maturity or with those wanting to understand what 'life' was about (see p.87)

*A chaplain can help athletes understand that here is a thin line between **success and failure**. For many, failure is a crisis that can result in an inability to cope with the pressure that is experienced. These pressures and expectations can spill over into the player's performance on the field as well as off it.*

A distinct group of responses to the interviews centered around issues that appeared to be specific to those in elite sports: e.g., dealing with fame, life after football, coping with injuries or being dropped from the team. (see p.86)

*We know that **Risk** is ever present in life and sport is no exception. Chaplains can be there at moments of crisis and can be part of the care and support that is offered. They are an integral part of a welfare network.*

My own introduction to the Melbourne Storm came at a time of crisis for them as they sought to deal with the death of their Team Manager. Their acceptance and integration of the role of chaplain highlighted the importance such a role is perceived to have in moments of crisis or need.

*Chaplains can also remind athletes and administrators alike that it's "**more than a game**". Ultimately, sport is a diversion - a part of and not the whole of life! There is a difference between what we are and what we*

do.

Many of the chaplains spoke of the opportunities which were afforded them to speak the gospel into the lives of players at appropriate times. I can remember one of our senior players saying that “if you weren’t here, there would be something missing. I don’t relate the chaplain to football so much, more to life.” (see p.82)

*Elite athletes are **ordinary people** not super-humans! They can possess exceptional physical abilities and gifts, but like most of us, can struggle in dealing with the everyday issues of life. Chaplains can assist the athletes and staff in their understanding of who they are apart from what they do .*

I then outlined what I saw as the potential benefits of sports chaplaincy for the club/team/staff/players. A chaplain can be:

A listening ear/ confidante for the athletes: Many chaplains are also qualified counsellors and pastoral care workers, who are available to be someone who can be approached in confidence.

A confidante for the coach and staff: As someone who can be approached with the assurance that the content of discussions will go no further. The chaplains role can be a life saver in the pressured world of elite sport.

An ‘independent’ person who does not have a vested interest! The chaplain is someone who can recognise and firm the ‘ordinary bloke’

inside the superstar!

It is reasonable for the club to ask what they can expect from the Chaplain. The following qualities and traits can be expected from someone appointed to be a chaplain, i.e., that they would be:

A person of integrity: The chaplain must keep confidences and not share information or betray trust.

A Helper: The chaplain must be someone who has a Servant-attitude, prepared to be there and be willing to serve without expectation of 'reward' or payment.

A willing Listener: It is crucial that the chaplain does not force their opinions or convictions on others but is willing to listen in a non-judgemental manner.

A person with limited time commitment: Most chaplains work in other roles such as ministers in local churches, which does mean the time available is somewhat restricted (e.g.: they will generally not be available at times of Sunday services, funerals, weddings etc.!).)

Finally, what could the Chaplain expect/anticipate from the Club? In order to fulfil the expectations just listed, it is important to acknowledge that:

The chaplain needs to have access to players at appropriate times in order to gain the confidence and respect of players and staff.

The chaplain needs to be accepted as a part of the whole 'team' that cares for the players' welfare and other needs.

The chaplain can be available and contacted where appropriate, when a need arises (e.g., personal crisis, hospitalisation etc.). Some chaplains have been involved in other significant occasions such as Weddings, Baptisms and Funerals.

All sports chaplains are expected to be affiliated with SLM (Sports and Leisure Ministry). SLM are the co-ordinating body for sports chaplaincy in Australia. Over 100 chaplains serve sports organisations including Rugby League, Test and Shield Cricket, Motor Racing, AFL, Tennis, Basketball, Baseball, Soccer, Golf, Yachting, Athletics, Australian Institutes of Sport and State Sport Academies. Most Professional sports/teams in Australia now have Christian chaplains

In Australia sports chaplaincy is relatively new and inherits a history (and a theology to some extent) that comes out of North America where the majority of professional sporting teams are 'serviced' by chaplains who are seen as an integral member of the staff. The philosophy seems to be that sports people have needs like everyone else that encompass the intellectual, social, physical and spiritual dimensions and that one of the roles of a chaplain is to help

athletes to work toward integration and balance in their lives. Some of the other arguments presented that give support to the role of a chaplain are outlined in a paper presented by Rev David Waters, co-ordinating chaplain for the Victorian Institute of Sport to the 1997 Inaugural Conference run by the National Institutes of Sport, Canberra.¹⁰⁹

In his paper, Waters highlights the following:

- There is a link between Body and Spirit - the athlete who has an inner life that is integrated and balanced will often perform better.
- There is a thin line between success and failure
- Risk is ever present - sport is risk, not only in the competition itself but the life that goes along with it
- Ultimately, sport is a diversion
- Elite athletes are ordinary people - chaplains have an opportunity to assist the athlete in their search for their being. To help them discover who they are.
- A partnership exists between sports bodies who provide athletes with greater physical, mental, financial and social rewards for their talents and SLM which helps them to develop the previously missing spiritual links that hold things together. It goes towards helping Australian sports heroes to become more effective role models for young supporters and for future champions.
- Chaplains can help elite athletes who are so focused on the pursuit of peak performance that it can cause them to lose touch with who they are underneath their number or position.
- Making a game your profession means being at the top too young. From

¹⁰⁹ David Waters *The Role of the Chaplain in Pastoral Care for Elite Athletes* A Paper delivered at the 1997 Inaugural Conference run by the National Institutes of Sport, Canberra 2-4

there it's a gentle slide down, and sometimes not so gentle if you are cut from the list. It can make you feel old and useless.

- Chaplaincy in Australia keeps in step with the growth of professionalism amongst sports organisation. Chaplains are on the spot to build personal, confidential relationships with those whose fame restricts their privacy in dealing with personal challenges. Some players ask chaplains for prayer, not necessarily for a win, rather that they will play to their potential and be free of injury or ill will.
- Players appreciate that chaplains are there regardless of the sports scores, so they open up to someone who cares about them as individuals, not just as performers.

Sports chaplaincy is:

In light of my own experience and the results of my research, I believe that we can summarise Sports chaplaincy under three headings: Sports chaplaincy is a ministry of presence; sports chaplaincy is holistic, challenging the false dichotomy between secular and sacred; sports chaplaincy is incarnational, acknowledging that Christ is present.

1. 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 peripatetic pupils in a didactic discipleship school, but rather wanted them to “come and see” where (and how) he lived.¹¹⁰ 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!¹¹¹

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. Even in my preliminary research with office staff and player alike, when asked what they saw as the most important thing a chaplain could do, their responses indicated the need and the value of someone who was there, just being around - again the ministry of presence. The following examples from the interview material illustrate these responses:

...It’s been helpful for the club, in particular because of the timing... everyone needed support. It was good to have that ‘figure’ (of a chaplain) around, it was a hard time for everyone.

...When we lost Mick Moore... having a presence here (for me and the club) – not sure how it helped, but it seemed to, having someone as part of the organisation. Not talking to people if they don’t want to... losing someone, nothing comes close to it. Having a chaplain just adds a ‘freshness’ to the organisation, it just rubs off. It’s been good for the young players, coming to a new town, and for the players’ wives.

I... recognise people have needs, they know you are there ...With the death of M.M. I’ve never had to address death before... It’s been good to have someone around for even the day to day stuff: e.g., “Rev, can we have a chat?”.

...personally we haven’t talked about religion, but it’s important to have someone who you can discuss anything with, important that it is someone who everyone can have confidence in. For the organisation, you are one of the few people who can be “considered entirely impartial” - where impartiality is uncommon within the organisation. You are not a member

¹¹⁰ John 1:39

¹¹¹ 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

of staff or the 'footy' department. Your presence here has helped us get through the situation with MM (his death) - "just the fact that you were there."

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 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 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!

As such the chaplain appears to come as something of a Christ figure, not with divine delusions, but with the imprimatur of one who has gone before, who for the joy set before him endured the cross. He comes as one who knows he is surrounded not by the crowds of a Grand Final, but as one surrounded by a

great cloud of witnesses who encourage him to endure. He comes as one who seeks not the accolades of acerbic and fickle fans but rather the approbation of the Almighty.¹¹²

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. This, then, is the ministry of presence.

¹¹² Hebrews 12:1-2

2. Sports chaplaincy is Holistic ministry, challenging the false dichotomy of Secular and Sacred

The nature of sports chaplaincy can be further enhanced by an exploration of the commonly perceived difference between secular and sacred.

Earlier on, I have sought to emphasise the importance of leisure and play in helping contribute to a holistic understanding of a divinely ordained capacity possessed by humanity to experience play as a collective celebration of being alive. Indeed, when one reflects on the preoccupation of many Australians with regard to sport, it has usurped for many a place that the church has held for previous generations.

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." ¹¹³

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

¹¹³ 2 Cor 6:14-16

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.

Even the early ascetics and hermits of the deserts knew something of the power that disciplining the body gave in connecting with the soul, power to strip away the baggage of what could distract and to help discern the inner voice of the Divine on the pathway to self-understanding and spiritual enlightenment. They knew, before the days of fitness coaches and trainers, of the benefits from discipline and deprivation; they learned the hard lessons from failure about finitude; discovered the joys and satisfaction of solace long before the loneliness of the long-distance runner; knew the challenges of isolation and acclamation.

In terms of connectivity, the sports chaplain enters a world that apparently has no immediate or obvious connection with the 'religious' world in which he is engaged a day to day basis. In the so-called 'sacred' world of Church and religious life, much of the sports chaplain's/local church pastor's world centres on issues of faith and discipleship and is overtly God-focused. Much of his or her time is spent in the preparation of sermons and worship services, the pastoral care of parishioners or the conducting of church-based weddings and funerals. In the 'normal' life of a Christian ministry, the local pastor can spend

nearly all of her or his time with those who already are connected with the Church. 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.

The concept of sports chaplaincy can help us to see another way of understanding the world and the church as being part of the same sacred space inhabited by saints and sinners alike - a 'world' or arena where there are those who recognise their need for God's grace and forgiveness and those who have not yet understood nor have even become aware of the love of God as seen in Christ.

Perhaps it is the direction one is facing rather than any perceived proximity to piety that has more relevance in the journey toward faith. Paul recognised the aptness of an athletic analogy when he wrote to the church at Philippi:

Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is

ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. All of us who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. Only let us live up to what we have already attained.¹¹⁴

Athletes know of the importance of pressing toward a goal and having a myopic focus that eliminates distractions and allows a clarity of purpose. In the world of sport, chaplains have the opportunity to lift the eyes of athletes beyond the temporal goals of winning a competition to the ultimate goal of discovering the reality of a life in God.

Having a holistic understanding of ministry enables the chaplain to enter the world of the sporting arena unafraid and with a clear knowledge that this sporting world is also home to the divine.

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

¹¹⁴ Phil 3:12-16

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 overseas missions is applied in the first world. We speak the language, wear the clothes and submerge into the culture we want to reach.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁵ Hammond *Characteristics*

Ken Hammond writes of the need for such missional communities:

My premise is there is an emerging community rising or breaking away from Christendom and they have some distinct values that characterise them. We are in that place between two eras or times. Where new things are birthed and the future is unshaped. Some are calling this the second reformation. I call it a revolution. It's about a loving missionary God incarnating the world to save it. It's about mission being at the heart of the Trinity, and many in the church have forgotten it. The Missional church is about getting back to the great commission and the great commandment. To go into the entire world while loving our neighbours as ourselves. (Matthew 28:19. 19:19) The Missional church has the advantage of leaving behind traditions and politics however it must learn from its history that all new things can become old. It must keep asking; what does it mean to be the "called out community" to our Culture? ¹¹⁶

Many of the responses by the sports chaplains to the question, "Has this experience of chaplaincy had any effect on your view of the Gospel and culture?" indicated the profound impact of their ministry experience on both their understanding and their ministry style. Most significant perhaps was the perception of the need for genuineness and integrity in their relationships, that not only did they have to earn the 'right' to share the Gospel, but that the most effective ministry resulted from an incarnational approach that involved a living out of their faith more than a programmatic evangelistic 'hard-sell.'

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

¹¹⁶ Hammond *Characteristics*, 9

drunkard.¹¹⁷

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 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." It could be that Jesus means, as the NIV translates, that the Kingdom was "inside you". Seeing that Jesus was in fact addressing the Pharisees at this point, it does not seem likely that Jesus would be indicating that the kingdom was located inside his opponents! Others have argued that the Greek present tense *erchetai* ("does ... come," v. 20) is really a futuristic present, a position that at least is grammatically possible. This view takes the meaning that the kingdom will come in their midst, since so much of what Jesus goes on to say is about the future. However, the term *entos* can mean "in your midst," "in your grasp," or "within your reach," a sense

¹¹⁷ Luke 8:34

that seems to fit here since Jesus and his message are all the sign they need. Jesus is saying that the kingdom has come in and through him. In other words, neither the Pharisees nor the crowds need look for the kingdom's coming in the sky, because it is already here in him.

As I have already elucidated, this understanding of the kingdom inaugurated in the person and ministry of Jesus encourages us toward a ministry of presence, living out the life of Jesus and demonstrating his love and compassion toward others. This same understanding of the kingdom being present in the person of Jesus means that this Risen Christ, who indwells His people through His Spirit, also indwells the world in which we live. Christ goes with us because Christ is in us. Christ goes before us because Christ is in the world.

In this chapter, I have sought to connect the questions posed in the project description and the results of the interviews with my own experiences these past years as local pastor and sports chaplain. These have included the connections between sport, leisure and worship, the church and culture, and how the gospel connects into the sporting professional's world. In doing so I have focused deliberately on the relationship between the Gospel and sports chaplaincy. I have considered the impact that a sports chaplain's experience can have on an understanding of ministry and mission. Having done that, I have endeavoured to reflect not only on the role of a chaplain but have explored an incarnational/missional model for ministry.

CONCLUSION

In the introduction I wrote that I wanted to discover more about the distinctive role of sports chaplaincy and its contribution to the field of pastoral ministry and mission.

Sports chaplaincy is a fairly recent phenomena in Australia, tracing its origin back less than 20 years, though historically some sporting organisations have had links with churches or particular priests/ministers in years gone by. I have noted how in more recent years, professional and corporate organisations have begun to recognise the role of spiritual health in well-being. Many such organisations and businesses have appointed chaplains as part of their welfare team to manage pastoral care of workers and staff within the organisation.

However, as I have discovered, sports chaplaincy and sports chaplains have a unique role to play in the milieu of pastoral care and mission .

As sports chaplains we are called to be part of the incarnational ministry of the church in mission to this world. As such we are called to be amongst those who serve at all levels and strata of society, including the elite sports people in our community. Sports chaplaincy offers a unique opportunity to be one of the “called out community” to our culture - in particular the sporting culture that is so pervasive in Australian society. We who are chaplains are called to incarnate the presence of Christ and to be willing to exhibit a servant ministry that demonstrates the heart of God for all God’s people.

I have touched on some of the unique aspects of sports chaplaincy which include:

- Seeking to provide pastoral care in the midst of a corporate, professional, sporting environment
- Dealing with elite athletes who are subject to a plethora of demands and expectations
- Working within a culture that is far removed from the customary local church culture

What are the learning outcomes from this research?

As I look back at the broad objectives I set out at the beginning of this research project, some of the learning outcomes are as follows:

Sport has a unique place in relation to the Gospel, especially if we acknowledge an artificiality of division between secular and sacred. Jesus was intimately concerned with the nitty-gritty of people's lives and wanted them to know God was interested in them as whole people, not as mere disembodied souls. We too need to recognise that God has created these athletes with not only the capacity to play but to compete and in doing so, display the giftedness of their creator. There is a holistic harmony heard between body and soul that sounds out a divinely inspired symphony of the glory of God's creation. God has created and is delighted in creatures that play! God is, and we as the church can unashamedly be, involved in the arena of sports and recognise the validity

and indeed the necessity of helping those who inhabit that world understand the fullness of the love of God in Christ.

There is no doubt that sports chaplains make a distinctive contribution amongst those to whom they seek to minister. The impact on the lives of players, staff and other associates is largely unheralded and unseen. Yet the 'behind-the-scenes' nature of such ministry is acknowledged by clubs and players alike to be of significance and greatly appreciated.

The role of the chaplain does at times fit with some of the typical concepts used in relation to ministry, such as 'wholeness', 'community', incarnational ministry', 'ministry of presence verses prophetic', and 'power verses powerlessness'. I have not been able within the scope of this research project to examine all of these concepts, but have focused particularly on the concepts of presence, incarnation and mission in relation to the role of sports chaplaincy. Yet all of these concepts deserve reinterpretation when transferred out of the local church ministry and the assumptions of that community into other dimensions of our culture.

In this project I have focused particularly on the sporting arena where there is a challenge for sports chaplains to unlearn the 'Churchy' language, set aside the false dichotomy of what constitutes secular or sacred and be much more ready to listen and be present. We need to be wary of too narrow a concept of what constitutes salvation and the pathway toward faith that people can follow. We need to allow the God who delights in surprises to work his serendipitous grace

in others and in us! Then we will recognise that God is already there and that the Holy Spirit is indeed at work - in us, through us and around us.

Sports chaplaincy has challenged me in terms of what constitutes Christian ministry. It has challenged me to work outside my comfort zone. Where the nature of my role and even status as a local church pastor in the church is more clearly defined, the nature of my role as a sports chaplain is much more indistinct. Yet the challenge has been at once exciting and a little daunting. There is the reality of having to earn the respect of players and staff before they will allow you to get close to them. They are much more wary of the 'outsider' and what this person may want from them. There has been a learning curve that has worked both ways. From my experiences as a sports chaplain I have learned to be much more aware in my local church ministry how God is at work in all kinds of ways and circumstances and people. I have learned to be more tolerant of diversity and to not worry so much about the overt displays of conformity to either doctrine or desirable behaviour. The profundity of the language of the locker room means nothing I hear locally offends or surprises! I am much more willing to accept people for who they are and not expect them to conform to my own concepts of what constitutes Christian maturity.

Theologically I have sought to examine some of the distinctiveness of the sports chaplain's role. I have explored the distinctive nature of a ministry that incorporates a ministry of presence with a sense of incarnational mission. I have come to recognise that we who are privileged to be invited into this Sporting world can contribute to the overall health and well-being both of individuals and

the organisation as a whole. Yet more than that, we incarnate the Gospel with a servant attitude and a willingness to be bridges for the Gospel into the world of corporate sport.

In exploring a model for sports chaplaincy, I have stated that I believe we need to go right back to the life and example of Jesus for a Missional or Incarnational model for sports chaplaincy. This model means that sports chaplaincy ministry submerges itself into the culture it is reaching, incarnating itself in that world in the role of a servant. I've also said that as an organisation of sports chaplains we need to understand that we are primarily a Missional community of people who need to be trained and equipped to live among the sporting world as missionaries. That means learning about the culture, understanding the specific nuances and needs of its constituents, and being willing to take the time to be integrated into that culture. We need to earn the trust and confidence of those whom we serve, those sportsmen and sportswomen who are part of the world which Christ loves and for which he died.

I began this research project by posing a question of identity - who am I in Christ? Who am I as a local Christian pastor when I seek to minister in the arena of sports chaplaincy? What have I learned?

I have learned something about **myself**. As an athlete, chaplain, pastor, husband and father, I have sought to be the same person in each of these dimensions of my life. Athletes are often very adept at picking up any dissonance between what is claimed and what they perceive to be real. Elite

sports people are very wary of those who they perceive as non-genuine or having a hidden agenda. I have had to learn to be vulnerable and in turn have been privileged to share the hearts of those I have sought to serve. I have learned and continue to learn of the amazing grace of God who accepts me in my failure and fears and continues to love me into wholeness. I have been humbled to see my disabled son accepted and treated with dignity and love by the athletes I have sought to reach with the accepting love of Christ. They have shown me something of the face of Jesus.

I have learned something about **Mission** and the meaning of faith. I have learned to be patient and wait for God to set the agenda or prepare the heart. I have learned to be ready to 'give a defence for the hope that is in me'. I have learned that genuine evangelism means much more listening and a lot less talking. I have learned that I need to find other ways of expressing the concepts of salvation I learned in church if I want to be able the gospel to be heard outside my church culture, let alone understood. I have discovered a more holistic vision of faith, life and the reality of God's presence in unexpected places. I have learned that sowing seeds is more important than claiming scalps. I have learned that ministry is a privilege and that God wants me to be present in this part of his world as a sports chaplain - and God will give me the grace I need.

I have learned something about **ministry**. In many ways the chaplain does come into the sporting arena wearing any number of hats. As prophet some have sought to speak a word of truth into hearts and lives, to be the

spokesperson for God and to remind those who will listen that God is active in their world. As priest the chaplain's role can include that of a liturgical functionary, helping perform weddings and funerals, baptisms and infant dedications. As pastor the chaplain seeks to listen, care and demonstrate the compassion of Christ amongst the people. The sports chaplain has a unique opportunity which incorporates yet transcends these typical models for Christian ministry. Sports chaplaincy provides the potential for the Gospel to be incarnated and demonstrated in an arena not obviously inhabited by the Church. It provides the opportunity for men and women to make real the 'already-there' presence of Jesus Christ.

Finally, I have learned something about **God** and God's grace. I believe that God has created us as human beings with the capacity to enjoy our creativity and sense of play. I believe that God is present in the arenas and locker rooms, playing fields and stadiums. Present with God's people as they recreate and even as they compete. If God is present we can go into these places unafraid and with enthusiasm. We can celebrate with those who achieve fame and acclamation. We can be present to remind them that God is also present, whether they win or lose they are loved and are of value.

Limitations of this study

Most of this research was undertaken from 2000 through 2003. At the end of 2003 I was forced to set it aside due to health reasons (I required major open-heart surgery) and consequently was unable to complete the writing until late 2005. Over these past two years, I have discovered that much more material has been written exploring the links between sport and religion and sports chaplaincy. I have chosen to exclude this newer material and restrict the study to that encompassed by the original time period envisioned.

Potential for future research

There is great potential for further exploration, and indeed it seems like I have barely scratched the surface of this important area of pastoral care and mission. I would anticipate that a comparative study which included sports chaplaincy in America and Britain would be of significant benefit in further refining the role and goal of sports chaplaincy and its place in the continuum of pastoral care.

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