

Sports Ministry and Fresh Expressions

“When I run
I worship God”

Eric Liddel in the film, Chariots of Fire

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a huge crowd of witnesses to the life of faith, let us strip off every weight that slows us down, especially the sin that so easily trips us up. And let us run with endurance the race God has set before us Heb 12.1

This leaflet is for people exploring sports ministry of any kind, whether with a Fresh Expression in mind or as a missional activity of an existing worshipping community. By sports we mean:

- » team games such as rugby or netball
- » slower activities such as a gentle stroll or walking football
- » individual sports, health and fitness
- » outdoor activities such as hiking and climbing

We aim to be inclusive: this isn't something just for the sporting elite but something with the potential to engage anyone and everyone. We understand sport as a spectrum of activities, running from informal 'play', through 'games' where a little more structure is added in the form of rules, through to competitive sports.

As Christians, our understanding of God shapes how we respond to opportunities around us. The hope is that in developing sports ministries we will be engaging deeply with God's purposes in and through sport rather than adding Christianity as an extra to a sporting activity. This leaflet aims to begin the conversation.

Theology and sports

Any culture or subculture, including the sporting community, includes aspects that clearly indicate God's presence within all creation, which are healthy and life-giving, as well as aspects that are out of line with God's ideal. A church in this context will appreciate those things which are already healthy. It will also notice those things which are not life-giving, and gently exploring options that might be more positive. The starting point is always celebrating the connections, with the critique not following until there is an established relationship of trust. These are good questions to be exploring:

- » What motivates people to do sports?
- » Where is God already at work?
- » How can we speak Good News in a way that connects?

The following are some aspects of the Good News of Christ that we think might connect well in conversations around sports, using a shared love of sports as a common language.

Being embodied

At the heart of the Christian faith is the incarnation, God in human form in the person of Jesus. God created a physical world and it was good; God came in Jesus to be a part of the physical world; God is present in and through all that has been made. Our bodies are a part of how God has made us and paying attention to physicality, looking after the bodies God has give us, is significant within our faith.



Playfulness

The starting point is creation, the playfulness of the act of creation and the fun and play involved in the variety of the created order. In the stories where Jesus puts children in the centre, part of what he is appreciating and encouraging is the sense of fun, joy and play which is sometimes pushed to the side by adult life. Sport becomes unhealthy when it stops being fun, there is something important and biblically rooted in retaining the sense of fun even when it being very competitive.

Community

Sport is something done together, in relationship with others. A community forms around individual sports as well as team sports. God has made us to be relational, it is part of being in the image of a relational God. This is rooted in our understanding of God as Trinity, with the interaction between Father, Son and Spirit at the heart of our faith. We are, in Christ, drawn into relationship with one another and with God.

Nature

Caving, kayaking, climbing a mountain and other outdoor sports have in common a reconnection with nature. The natural world is part of God's creation; all creation praises (psalm 148); all creation is held in Christ and redeemed through the cross (Colossians 1); there is a connection between human salvation and that of all creation (Romans 8). Jesus connection with the natural world is illustrated in how often he used nature in his parables, and his retreating to quiet spaces in nature.

Competition and inclusion

Sport, and everything this encompasses, has often been described as a universal language for the world. Its very nature means that there are opportunities for everyone to grow and develop holistically through sport regardless of who they are. Understanding the nature of competition as seeking to bring out the best in each other applies to everyone regardless of physical ability or skill. Motivations for involvement in sport are wide ranging. There is room for the individual seeking to maximise physical performance and compete on a world stage as much as there is for a person to learn and skill for the first time and enjoy the challenges this presents and enjoyment it brings.

Idolatry

As with any human activity, sports can fall into bad habits. Sport can become an idol, taking more than its due space and pushing other aspects of life out of balance. The balance is more healthy when God is given the proper place—if sport isn't taking the place of God but is celebrated as part of our life in God bearing in mind the above then the negatives fall away.

Getting started with Fresh Expressions

The three minute guides available on the Fresh Expressions section of the website are essential reading for those exploring possibilities around sports and Fresh Expressions. The starting point is always listening to God and community: listening to the concerns, possibilities and passions of a community and asking God to give wisdom about the right place to focus.

Resources to get started are linked from the Diocesan website pioneering pages.

Further reading on theology of sports

Greg Smith, *Sports theology: playing inside out*

Jeremy Treat, More than a game: <http://themelios.thegospelcoalition.org/article/more-than-a-game-theology-of-sport>

Robert Ellis, *The games people play*

