

Incarnational Ministry in sport by Stuart Weir at Regent's Park College, 20 April 2015

Martin of Tours

Martin of Tours lived from 316 to 397. While Martin was a soldier in the Roman army and stationed in Gaul, one day as he was approaching the gates of the city of Amiens, he met a scantily clad beggar. He impulsively cut his military cloak in half and gave half to the beggar. The part kept by Martin was preserved as a famous relic. Now as you may know the Latin for cloak is *cappa*. The priest who cared for the cloak as a relic was called a *cappellanu*, and ultimately all priests who served the military were called *cappellani*, from which we get the English word chaplain.

Origins of chaplaincy

Prison chaplaincy seems to have existed from the 17th century as in 1677 a local clergyman was instructed to hold Services in Newgate Prison Chapel and in 1771 an Act "providing for Clergymen to Officiate in jails within that Part of Great Britain called England" was passed. During the eighteenth century hospitals appointed chaplains. For example, St. Thomas' Hospital appointed its first chaplain in 1726 and London Hospital appointed a local minister in 1741. The first record of a military chaplain I am aware of is the U.S. Army Chaplain Corps established in 1775.

Origins of sports chaplaincy

I could talk a lot about the origins of sports chaplaincy as I have a forthcoming publication on the subject¹. For our purposes today, it is sufficient to give you three dates. In the USA NFL chaplaincy started in the late 1960s with baseball chaplaincy about the same time. Ice Hockey and NBA basketball chaplaincy developed in the 1970s. In the UK John Jackson was appointed chaplain to Leeds United in 1962 and Michael Chantry to Oxford United the same year. Chaplaincy to the Olympics in anything like the form that we now know it can be traced back to 1956 – although it has not been continuous since then.

Since about 1990 there has been an organization which promotes sports chaplaincy in the UK, originally called SCORE and now known as Sports Chaplaincy UK. However, most of the sports chaplaincy developments have been local initiatives. EG St James Road Watford....

Church and Sport

One final word of introduction as we look at how Christians can engage with sport through chaplaincy. We need to recognize that Christians have often taken a negative or at best a utilitarian view of sport:

When the church has chosen to engage with sport, it has generally been in one of three ways:

- (i) To condemn the perceived sinful nature of sport (promoting an undesirable spirit of competition as well as its association with drink and gambling not to mention the Sunday sport issue);
- (ii) To see sport as an ally in the church's ministry or a "tool for evangelism" in the modern evangelical jargon; most of modern sports ministry fits into this category.
- (iii) And to a must lesser extent to follow the original pioneers of the Muscular Christianity movement who wished to encourage the development of sport because they felt that the spiritual life might develop better in a healthy body.

Types of sports chaplaincy

There are perhaps five people in the UK who might be regarded as full-time sports chaplains, in the sense that it is their main job and they earn their living doing it. The vast majority of sports chaplain in the UK – and there are over 300 of them – do it perhaps one day a week being released from their main job to do it. There is no one model of sports chaplaincy as will become apparent as I continue. I have identified at least six types of sports chaplaincy.

Team or club

This is the most common type of sports chaplaincy in the UK with around 300 chaplains associated with a club. There is a full-time employed chaplain at Bolton Wanderers but 99% of chaplains are voluntary, perhaps doing a day a week on top of the day job. That involves doing to training once a week, having lunch with players, going to some games, ministry of presence – conducting funerals and weddings. Scattering ashes of supporters. Occasionally writing an article for programme, perhaps leading a Christmas Carol service – whether public for fans or just for club staff.

A Premier League club will employ 100s of admin staff – the chaplain is chaplain to them as well. A League 2 or Conference club will have very few admin staff and no budget. The role of the chaplain there will be totally different.

An American chaplain to an NBA, NFL or other professional team will probably conduct a match-day chapel service that up to half the players will attend. A chaplain to a Premier League club in England may be lucky to have one Christian player – so the role is totally different.

Sport

Professional tennis players or tournament golfers play in a different venue – possibly different country – every week. A chaplain to the golf tour will travel with the tour perhaps 25-35 weeks of the year.

National team

The vicar of St Andrew's Church Oxford, Andrew Wingfield Digby, was chaplain to the England cricket team for a number of years, attending all test matches in England and going on a winter tour.

Venue Chaplain

The idea is being a chaplain at an elite training centre. In the days when the Crystal Palace National Sports Centre was in its heyday, a local Baptist minister served as chaplain. I often meet athletes at the Lea Valley Elite Athletes Centre in North London. I often think that it has enormous sports chaplaincy potential.

College Chaplaincy

This is much more common in the US, where university teams would have a team chaplain. I know of no UK example of this. However, a chaplain at a university such as Loughborough where around 50 elite athletes train, where the England cricket team often train, where the HQ of British Swimming is to be found (to name but three) – would afford great opportunities for a sports minded university chaplain.

Major event chaplaincy

There were 190 chaplains working at the London Olympics, divided into three teams

- Village chaplains serving the Olympians - athletes, coaches, administrators etc;
- Media chaplains serving the 1000s of press;
- Workforce serving the staff and volunteers.

Being a chaplain to athletes is very prestigious and a sought after appointment. Generally those who are selected – and those who are effective – are those who have year-round relationships with sportspeople. If you turn up at the Olympics, not knowing anyone in team GB you are unlikely to have a fruitful ministry.

Detached Youth Work

My next heading is “Detached Youth Work” as I think that is a helpful model to explain what a sports chaplain does. Often there is no job description and no defined role. It is just a case of being there, being available and serving.

Characteristics of a sports chaplain

- Patient;
- People person;
- Comfortable in sports environment;
- Endless capacity for disappointment;
- Servant-hearted;
- “I like to go when people don’t expect the vicar to be” former football chaplain.

APPROACHES

How would you define the role of the sports chaplain? There is no one answer. Those who appoint chaplains may have a particular role in mind; each chaplain will have their own opinion too.

Golf tour chaplains are traditionally called “**Bible Study Leader**” – an indication of the emphasis of the role. Most American sports chaplains are called chaplains because they lead a **chapel** service for athletes. Some chaplains see themselves as **evangelists** and are seeking a chance to “share the evangelical gospel” with people they encounter. It has been suggested that evangelism was the motivation of sports-minded evangelical Christians in America who sought to convert athletes and leverage their influence to spread the Gospel to the wider sports-loving American public. And as I said earlier the majority of sports ministry probably fits into this category of wanting to use famous sportspeople to reach the nation. Whether is a good or effective strategy is another matter.

The most common approach to chaplaincy would be **pastoral**. The chaplain is there to give a word of encouragement, to be a listening ear. Within a football club there are perhaps 30 players. 11 are in the starting line-up, 7 are on the bench, 5 are injured and 7 have not been picked. 11 are happy and 19 are frustrated. The chaplain will probably spend more time with the 19 than the 11.

I go to about 14 athletics events a year in the UK and abroad. I go with a media accreditation but I go to serve. My model is based on **prayer**. I am seeking to serve something like 50 Christian athletes. I try to pray for them every day. I write a weekly devotional email to them. I send personal emails, I meet them at training – if they are based

in the UK. I meet them 1-2-1 at events and pray for and with them. I may lead an athletes' Bible Study. I may lead a Sunday service for team GB or I may just meet athletes informally.

Moscow

- 1 prayed for the 34 athletes and told them that I was praying for them;
- 2 I do a weekly devotion - a Bible verse applied to sport. In Moscow I did a daily devotion which I emailed to the 34 athletes, or to all whose email addresses I had.
- 3 when appropriate I prayed with athletes.
- 4 I kept in touch by text and personal email.
- 5 because of my journalistic accreditation I have access to the mixed zone [where athletes meet press after a race] and spoke to more than 20 athletes after they finished races.
- 6 I spent hours sitting around in hotel lobbies for the opportunity to snatch a quick word or prayer or greeting with an athlete.

How to engage with sport

What I am presenting to you today will almost certainly not become a career. It is something which you might undertake as an extension of local church ministry. To quote the Minister in Watford, "If we see the hospital as part of our parish, why should we not see the football club as part of the parish?"

An interesting question is whether it is of benefit to your church? All churches are different some church leaderships will see it as engaging with the community. Others will see it as a distraction from your real job. Some churches will happily release the minister to go on a chaplaincy trip – and even cover the costs. Other chaplains have to use their holidays and cover the costs themselves.

Incarnational Ministry

If you want to engage with the world of sport in the name of Jesus, being a chaplain is one way. There are others which might come under the umbrella of "Incarnational ministry".

Ongoing

Do you play tennis or golf? Join a club where you will meet non-Christians who also play in a natural way, built on a common interest. Stand for the committee, find a way of being of service. Vicar playing in weekly competition, signing up with people he did not know

One-offs

When I was working at the European Indoor Athletics Championships in Prague in March this year, the person who did my registration was a missionary to the Czech Republic was a sports missionary. He had volunteered to serve the events and make contacts.

Duncan Green

Duncan Green was appointed Church of England Olympics Executive Co-ordinator in November 2007 – nearly 5 years before the 2012 Olympics. It was a full-time job but Duncan would tell you that in the early days he was lucky to have half a day a week's work. By 2012 he was lucky to have less than 9 days work a week!!

From being appointed to a post in the Church of England. Duncan finished up with an office in LOCOG – the Olympic organizing committee – with the title of firstly "Multi Faith Advisor" and later "Head of Multi Faith Chaplaincy Services". And he achieved it through service – through doing the things no one else wanted to do.

Laura Kyte de Gonzalez

Laura from Birmingham, has taken incarnation ministry to a new level. She went to Argentina to work with athletes – and finished up marrying one! Laura is a runner who has a passion for serving the athletic community in Argentina and for sharing the love of Jesus with them. She does this not so much as a ‘traditional missionary’ but as a fellow runner living out the Great Commission. Athletes know her mainly as someone they train with or compete against. By being part of a club, competing and training with athletes, she is part of their world in a way that a chaplain or more traditional foreign missionary never could be.

Motivation

Working in elite sport brings unique challenges. I know and have contact details for some of the world’s top athletes – Olympic Gold Medallists, World Champions etc. I have been to four football World Cups, two Olympics, two Commonwealth Games etc. It is a glamorous world. You have constantly to check your motivation. The temptation to name drop is always present.

I would say that anyone who works in elite sport and who tells that they are unaffected by top sports people knowing their name – is lying!

Ethical issues

Tom Krattenmakerⁱⁱ is critical of American Sports Chaplains for failing to have any prophetic ministry. He argues that as one observes American sport one sees an obsession with winning, racial and gender discrimination, salaries out of all proportion, gratuitous violence, serious injuries, the titillating exploitation of sex and at times the unacceptable face of capitalism. Yet when does one hear a chaplain speak out prophetically against these evils and injustices?

Krattenmaker argues that chaplains are simply reluctant to rock the boat by criticizing their team or sport. They turn a blind eye to these moral issues in order to preserve their evangelistic opportunity.

Another American observer, Frank Defordⁱⁱⁱ has written “sport has had a greater impact upon religion than the other way around”.

Chaplaincy in multicultural setting

Chaplaincy are there to meet the spiritual needs of a the group of players they serve. Some may be Baptists. Some will be nominal Anglicans or Catholics, many will have no faith at all and some will probably be muslims. It can be a challenge for a Christian chaplain to work in such an environment. In London 2012 the chaplains were divided into three teams to work different shifts – all multi-faith.

Minority Groups

Finally I just want to mention two area of sport where chaplaincy is greatly under-represented: disability sport and women's sport. I am sure that there are reasons for this but whether they are convincing reasons is another matter.

ⁱ Weir, J Stuart *Sports chaplaincy: A global overview*, in Parker, A., Watson, N.J. and White, J.B. *Sports Chaplaincy: Trends, Issues and Debates*, Farnham, Ashgate, forthcoming 2015

ⁱⁱ Krattenmaker, Tom (2010), *Onward Christian Athletes (Turning Ballparks into pulpits and players into Preachers)*, Rowman & Littlefield. 2010, Page 103

ⁱⁱⁱ Deford, Frank(1976), *Reaching for the Stars* 44(18), (May 3, 1976): Page,60.