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Exploring Sports Ministry in the UK

National Trends and Local Expressions

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Abstract

In recent years, sport has grown exponentially as a major economic force in the UK, and historically speaking has flourished in both faith-based and secular environments. Building on the “muscular Christian” pedigree of British Victorian society, the sport-faith interface has gained increasing momentum over the past three decades. Yet, despite these developments, to date, there has been relatively little empirical research carried out on the nature and effectiveness of sports ministry (including sports chaplaincy) organizations in the UK and the challenges which they face. Even less attention has been paid to the role of sports ministry within the Church of England.¹ This small-scale study examines the factors affecting the growth of sports ministry within the context of one Church of England diocese. Utilizing evidence from focus group discussions with key stakeholders, findings demonstrate that external perceptions, resource implications, and communication strategies all impacted the advancement of sports ministry provision across the geographical region concerned. Research participants believed that the sport-faith relationship had the potential to enhance the attractiveness of church but that long-standing assumptions concerning the “spiritual value” of the sporting endeavor still held sway. The article concludes by suggesting that whilst sports

¹ For the purposes of the present discussion, we use the term “sports ministry” to refer to any faith-related venture (formal or informal) that engages individuals, groups and/or communities (churched or otherwise) in anything that might be broadly considered sport and/or physical activity.

ministry provision is heavily dependent both on organizational and individual resourcing, such activity has the potential to facilitate the emergence of new worshipping communities.

Keywords: Sport, Christianity, sports ministry, qualitative research, Church of England.

Introduction

As an industry, sport has grown exponentially in recent years, becoming a major economic force in the UK, and historically speaking has flourished in both faith-based and secular environments. It has been well documented, for example, that sporting pastimes were a staple of British Victorian society, especially in churches and their schools, and in early 20th century youth work. Many churches had their own sports teams, clubs, and facilities, and churches perceived organized physical activity as health-giving and character-building, qualities which came to collectively comprise the “muscular Christian” ideology (see, for example, Mangan 1981; Parry et al. 2007; Parker and Weir 2012). A key aspect of the early development of modern sport in Britain was the way in which its newly codified forms served an integrative role amidst the social tensions of industrialization (Holt 1991). Since that time, assumptions surrounding the integrative value of sport have often constituted a central facet of state policy where issues of religious difference have been prevalent (see, for example, Kuper 1994; Sugden and Bairner 1993). The subsequent growth of public, voluntary, and commercial sport in an increasingly secular(ized) society has been accompanied by a decline and aging among church congregations, many of which often see relatively little value in sport and physical activity. This would seem to represent something of a missed opportunity given that 46.8% (3.3 million) children and young people and 63.3% (28.6 million) adults are meeting current UK government guidelines for taking part in sport and physical activity (see Sport England 2019; 2020). In contrast, estimates suggest that only around 3-6% of people regularly attend church in Britain. This paper argues that sports ministry provides a way for churches to connect with a wider audience – especially young people – and with mainstream policy debates around sport, health, and wellbeing.

Since 1997 the UK government has sought to use sport to service a variety of wider social outcomes, e.g., to aid regeneration, facilitate lifelong learning, improve health, reduce violent crime, and, perhaps most significantly, to facilitate social cohesion (see, for example, HM Government 2015). Faith groups have not played a major role in such schemes to date. Of late, however, a number of UK-based para-church organizations have attested that churches are showing renewed interest in sport as a vehicle for involving and socializing both young and old, all of which sits comfortably with contemporary government objectives relating to the relationship between sport, physical activity and public health. In turn, recent government agendas around social cohesion and community development have emphasized the important role and contribution of faith-based organizations to civil society, especially in terms of social outcomes concerning health and wellbeing (see Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government 2018). In this sense, churches have the potential to be places where such outcomes can be met (see, for example, Meyer and White 2016). One example of this is the way in which a number of churches and para-church organizations have worked with local government and/or other partners to convert premises for sport and physical activity and such

pursuits have been increasingly promoted by church-based outreach workers (i.e., volunteers and full-time youth/community personnel).

Further evidence of the growing momentum around sport as a form of outreach and ministry is the Church of England's recently launched 'Sport and Wellbeing' initiative. Viewing sport and wellbeing as central to its wider missional strategy (i.e., to be a church for "all people in every place"), this venture aims to locate the Church as a legitimate contributor to wider debates (faith-based and secular) in this area whilst, at the same time, promoting sport and physical activity as a key component of diocesan plans for mission, evangelism, and church planting. Such initiatives provide evidence of the use of sport as a vehicle through which religious values and practices might be promoted and resulting discussions have brought to the surface questions around the amount of sports ministry/outreach that is on-going in the UK. However, there is little available evidence of the extent, strength, demographics, meaning, or social value of sporting activities in faith-based organizations. Likewise, faith agencies and forums in various geographical regions facilitate all kinds of social welfare ventures, but often make little, if any, mention of sport, save occasional references to its role in youth work, this despite government encouragements regarding school sport and community clubs and the establishment of links to promote the multiple benefits of sport. This scenario is of both theoretical and practical interest given current UK government attempts to involve faith movements in social inclusion, cohesion, and the regeneration of communities, and evidence is required to assess which networks and methods of sports ministry are effective in achieving their desired outcomes. Thus, there is a strong case for exploratory research in this area.

It is within this wider context that the present research is located with the aim of seeking to reveal the way in which sport and wellbeing agendas might be promoted through sports ministry at the diocesan level. The overall aim of the research was to benchmark sports ministry provision (as well as more general youth outreach) within and across one specific diocese by investigating the perceptions and attitudes of stakeholders towards the development of related activities.

Sport, Church, and Ministry in the UK

Connections between the sacred and sport have long been acknowledged, and recent years have witnessed an increasing amount of discussion and debate around the sport-religion interface.² In turn, a significant body of related scholarly work has emerged mapping these connections across a range of geographical and religious landscapes (see, for example, Watson and Parker 2013; 2014; Parker, Watson, and White 2016; Adogame, Watson, and Parker 2017; Hemmings, Watson, and Parker 2019; Hoven, Parker, and Watson 2019).³ These accounts provide useful insight into the different ways in which sport (and physical activity) has been

² The word "sport" is used here in its widest sense in accordance with the definition provided by The Council of Europe Charter on Sport: "Sport means all forms of physical activity, which through casual or organised participation, aim at expressing or improving physical fitness and mental well-being, forming social relationships or obtaining results in competition at all levels" (Council of Europe, 2021).

³ For further insight see Parker et al. 2019; Watson and Parker 2015; 2017a; 2017b; Watson et al. 2020; Twietmeyer et al. 2018.

appropriated by specific belief systems and the challenges and responses that such practices have encountered both in sporting and religious locales.

During the same period, the UK government has sought to promote sport as a central means by which to aid regeneration, facilitate lifelong learning, improve health, reduce violent crime, and, perhaps most significantly, to facilitate social cohesion (see, for example, Her Majesty's Government 2015). To date, faith groups have played a relatively minor role in such schemes. More recently, however, a number of church-based organizations have attested that churches are demonstrating renewed interest in sport as a vehicle for involving and socializing people of varying ages, all of which sits comfortably with long-standing (and renewed) government objectives around sport, physical activity and public health. For example, in the case of Christian organizations such as Scripture Union, Youth for Christ, Ambassadors Football GB and Kick (formerly Kick London), sport is used as an evangelical tool to attract people to hear the Christian message.⁴ Alternatively, for organizations such as Christians in Sport, it can be viewed as an avenue to mission, with Christian sports players being encouraged to “pray” for their team-mates, “play” in ways that honor God, and “say” something of the good news of Jesus (see Christians in Sport 2019). In turn, Sports Chaplaincy UK utilizes a Christian faith platform to provide spiritual and pastoral care across a range of sports from grass roots to elite level (see Chawner 2009; Boyers 2016).⁵ Between them, these organizations cover a plethora of ministerial and missional objectives and serve a wide range of sporting personnel (e.g., participants, spectators/fans, officials, and coaches) of all ages. A number of churches have worked with local government and other partners to convert some of their premises for sport. Such initiatives have allowed key stakeholders and agencies to come together to discuss the potential opportunities in the area of sport and faith.

Sport and the Church of England

This growing momentum around sport as a form of outreach and ministry has been accompanied by the Church of England's recently launched “Sport and Wellbeing” initiative. Announced in February 2020 alongside the appointment of a designated bishop for sport, a national project officer, and the selection of seven (out of a total of 42) dioceses as pilot implementation sites, the initiative operates under the auspices of the Church of England's broader “Evangelism and Discipleship” strategy to expand the outward facing profile of the Church, to see the growth and development of younger congregations,⁶ and to create

⁴ Alongside these larger organizations are a number of smaller providers many of which identify with the UK Sports Ministries network (see UK Sports Ministries n.d.).

⁵ For specific examples of how chaplaincy takes place in elite sports settings see Gamble et al. 2013; Roe and Parker 2016; King, Parker, and Hemmings 2020; and Whitmore and Parker 2020.

⁶ For further information see: Archbishop of Canterbury's Quinquennial Goals of growing the church and contributing to the common good, Renewal and Reform's emphasis on “a growing Church for all people and for all places” (Church of England 2021a) and the House of Bishop's focus on “Growing Faith” in young people (Church of England 2021b). The “Sport and Wellbeing” National Project Officer role is a three-year, full-time position (2020–2023) funded by the Laing Trust. The Bishop of Derby (UK), Bishop Libby Lane, was announced as the newly designated lead Bishop for Sport at Church of England Synod in February 2020 taking over from the previous incumbent Bishop Tony Porter (Bishop of Sherwood, Diocese of Southwell and Nottingham, UK, 2006–2020).

innovative ways of mission and evangelism by meeting the needs of local communities (e.g., mental health, physical health, loneliness, youth violence, etc.) through sport and physical activity.⁷ In terms of society at large, it is widely accepted that sport can serve as a transformational tool with the potential to change individual lives and communities (see Morgan and Parker 2017; Morgan, Parker, and Roberts 2019; Morgan et al. 2020; Morgan, Parker, and Marturano 2020; Parker et al. 2019). By the same token, the Church of England recognizes that these transformational processes can be harnessed and mobilized within the context of the sport/faith relationship. These objectives clearly align with current government agendas around health and wellbeing and are perhaps particularly pertinent in a post-pandemic age. Moreover, the nature and timing of this strategy represents an explicit statement by the Church about the way in which it wishes to position itself within local communities as an organization which influences and delivers a range social benefits and outcomes in this area.

Of course, within the UK context, connections between sport and the Church are nothing new. It is widely accepted, for example, that Britain was a central player in the establishment of the sport/Christianity relationship during the Victorian era via the “muscular Christian” ethos (see, for example, Collins and Parker 2010; Parker and Weir 2012; Parker et al. 2019). How then, we might ask, do more recent developments compare? One of the ways in which the work currently being undertaken by the Church of England differs from that of the nineteenth century muscular Christians is that it comprises a national strategy intentionally aimed at all ages and all socio-economic groups whilst recognizing that sport is an effective way of engaging young people with wider faith narratives (see Graveling, Collins, and Parker 2014). To this end, although part of the Church of England’s work is for the “common good,” sports ministers are primarily seen as a way of reaching out to those who have never before attended church through a shared passion and interest (e.g., sport). In contrast, much of the work of the Victorians around sport had its roots in the English public schools and was part of wider debates concerning social stability and public health (Erdozain 2010; Parker and Watson 2013; 2017b).

In terms of coordinated scope and reach, it would be fair to say that sports ministry has made considerable progress since these pioneering years. Yet, vestiges of this era remain and present-day initiatives face enduring barriers. One on-going challenge is the way in which a focus on sport is often perceived as being in opposition to the Church by diverting people away from Sunday worship. This has certainly become more of an issue in the UK since the transition of youth sport from Saturday to Sunday competition during the 1990s. Indeed, integral to any such discussions is the decline in church attendance in post-war Britain. Recent estimates suggest that in England only around 3% of the population attend a church service each month, this against an overall drop of 6% in UK church membership between 2005 and 2010 (Davie 2013; Graham 2013). Youth engagement is often seen as particularly difficult to maintain, hence, ministry-based organizations routinely attempt to find new ways of attracting young people (Smith and Walton 2012; Goodhew, Roberts, and Volland 2012; Male and Weston 2019; Diocese of London 2020). The facilitation or provision of sport and physical activity is one possible way in which the Church may be proactively involved in the lives of a

⁷ The initiative is chaired by the Reverend Canon Dave Male, director of the Church of England’s evangelism and discipleship strategy (see Church of England 2020).

significant proportion of the population. Such activity will lead some people to their local parish church; however, for the Church of England initiative to be successful new and creative forms of worship will need to be developed.

Another explicit difference between historic and present-day collaborations between sport and the Church in the UK is the popularity of sport as a social pastime. Wider statistics on sporting participation bear testament to this. In June 2017, Sport England reported that 16 million adults in the UK were playing sport on a weekly basis in comparison to fewer than one million attending Anglican churches. Recent figures from Sport England's (2020) *Active Lives Adult Survey* show that six in 10 adults (28.6 million people – 63.3% of the 16+ population in England) are “active.” This means that they meet the government's chief medical officer's guidelines by undertaking at least 150 minutes of moderate intensity activity each week. Those regularly playing sport are also the groups which the Church in general has struggled to meaningfully engage with: 37.5% of the Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) community are play sport weekly, 55% of 16-25-year-olds take part in one sports session weekly (compared to 32% of older adults 26+), 1.6 million disabled people play sport weekly, and 46.8% (3.3 million) of children and young people (aged 5-16) meet the most recent government guidelines of taking part in sport and physical activity for an average of 60 minutes or more every day (Sport England 2019).⁸

How then does the Church of England intend to capitalize on sport as a modern-day mission field? Certainly, there are question marks here around why people would choose to participate in sporting activities in churches as opposed to wider, non-church provision, and it would be fair to say that, at a general level, current sports ministry and outreach in the UK caters more readily for those already engaged in faith contexts and conversations. However, the longer-term vision is for these activities to align more closely with mainstream sporting provision so that faith-based offerings around sport become part of the wider sport for development landscape. Models of good practice already exist. Dioceses such as London, Norwich, and Gloucester are developing work in this area and several national para-church organizations (including Sports Chaplaincy UK, Kick, Ambassadors Football GB, and Scripture Union) have expressed a desire to partner with dioceses in order to share expertise and experience.⁹ As noted above, these para-church organizations already oversee numerous sports-based programs that allow the Church to connect with different parts of society through, for example, schools, communities, churches, and new worshipping communities (i.e., there are several Fresh Expressions and other forms of church beginning to operate around sport, such as Sweaty Church).¹⁰ By working in close collaboration with others, the Church of England Sport and Wellbeing strategy aims bring together the resources of dioceses and the expertise of sporting organizations - both faith-based and secular.

⁸ For a comprehensive overview of the UK Chief Medical Officers' current guidelines see Department of Health and Social Care 2019.

⁹ The Church of England comprises 42 dioceses each covering a designated geographical area.

¹⁰ We derive the term “Fresh Expressions” here from a report by the Church of England (2004), which promoted the emergence of new and innovative worshipping communities in line with changing cultural trends. For more on the concept of “Sweaty Church,” see www.sweatychurch.co.uk.

Sports Ministry Research

This initiative is encouraging in the sense that it marks something of a sea-change in the Church of England's commitment to the sport and wellbeing agenda. In turn, it heralds a clear intention to bring greater transparency to the way in which sports ministry processes and practices are monitored and evaluated both at the local and national level. To date, there has been relatively little empirical research carried out into the nature and effectiveness of sports ministry organizations in the UK and this is one way in which the sector has differed markedly from wider secular work around sport for development. One of the few research projects to have addressed sports ministry provision is that which was commissioned by the Diocese of London in 2015 as part of their Capital Vision 2020 initiative (see Crabbe, McGee, and Dash 2015). Framed within the context of the Church in London's commitment to better meet the needs of local communities in relation to poverty, disadvantage, health, wellbeing, and integration, a key priority for Capital Vision 2020 was to "engage more deeply with sport and the creative arts to reach new people and places by opening up church buildings, strengthening the links between schools and their local community and getting more young people involved in the local Christian community" (Crabbe, McGee, and Dash 2015, 3). Commissioned by the Diocese of London in collaboration with Sport England, the overall aim of the research was to "enhance understandings of the potential assets of the Church for sport in terms of places, opportunities and community reach" (Sport England 2015).¹¹ The central objectives of the study were three-fold: to conduct an audit of the stock of places and opportunities for sport provided by churches in London, to review the reach of churches within their local communities to identify which audiences they were engaged with, and to assess the potential for delivering more sport through Diocese of London premises and activity.

Based on a mixed methods design, the research was carried out via a parish survey of all known contacts responsible for church facilities and sporting provision across the diocese. Church schools were also surveyed. In addition, field visits and interviews were conducted at 10 geographical locations.¹² From the quantitative and qualitative data gleaned, findings revealed that across the Diocese: 40,000–50,000 individuals attended church or church school hosted/led sports sessions each week (average attendance 45,805); that people from age groups across the life spectrum took part in related activities, and that groups who have traditionally proved difficult to reach (e.g., women and older people) felt comfortable being active in church environments. Moreover, the majority of respondents to the parish survey (who expressed a view) reported that over 75% of those involved in sporting activities were not involved with the church as practicing Christians (see Crabbe, McGee, and Dash 2015).

At a more detailed level, data revealed that there was considerable potential and enthusiasm from churches for the expansion of the dioceses' sporting offer and 46% of

¹¹ Sport England is a non-departmental public body which operates under the auspices of the UK government's Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport. Its purpose is: "to build the foundations of a community sport system by working with national governing bodies of sport, and other funded partners, to grow the number of people doing sport; sustain participation levels; and help more talented people from all diverse backgrounds excel by identifying them early, nurturing them, and helping them move up to the elite level" (see Sport England 2021).

¹² The church/parish survey generated a 54% response rate (n=347) and the school survey a 29% response rate (n=136).

schools indicated that they would be interested in working with a local church. In terms of facilities and resources, data also showed that 365 church-based facilities were being utilized for sport and physical activity (with provision consisting largely of indoor, hard floor spaces suitable for hall and gym-based activities as well as table sports and gentle exercise), 299 churches and church buildings had the potential for use for sport and physical activity, and 371 church school-based facilities were being utilized for sport and physical activity. Findings also demonstrated that activity sessions featured above average engagement by girls and women and that intergenerational engagement was commonplace. There are vestiges here of the muscular Christian movement in terms of the way in which churches were engaging with sport and physical activity through their facilities and programming. In turn, the research revealed that there was significant spare capacity at both church and school sites evidencing potential for the future expansion of provision as well as shared use of facilities, and that there was widespread engagement of non-congregational and multi-faith groups at church facilities.

In terms of how respondents viewed sports ministry per se, only 10% reported that they had any direct experience of running a sports ministry initiative with 22% having used sport as part of any of community engagement activities. Of those who had, 69% reported that it had been successful with 13% indicating that they were “definitely interested” in the idea of engaging in such activity in the future, 28% indicating that they were “potentially interested,” and 19% indicating that they were “mildly interested.” There was a perception amongst respondents of lower-than-average engagement of Black and minority ethnic groups in sporting activities, and findings also suggested that less than 6% of identified church-based or organized sports activities incorporated specific Christian messaging. In turn, only a relatively small number of respondents (n=11) were aware of the work of the “best known” UK sports ministry (parachurch) organizations (Crabbe, McGee, and Dash 2015, 27). The research concluded by suggesting that there were clear synergies between the Diocese of London and the objectives of Sport England especially given the role and commitment of the church in building and influencing local communities.

Following on from this ground-breaking work, Cameron and Balcar (2018, 6) have more recently critiqued the reluctance of the church to champion issues relating to physical activity, health, and wellbeing, arguing that a passion and appreciation for physical health should be “a central concern of Christian mission at [a] personal, parish and local community and diocesan level.” Framed as a development of the findings of Crabbe, McGee, and Dash (2015), the objectives of this work were similarly three-fold, namely to explore the theological, societal, and wider public policy context of physical activity, health, and wellbeing; to begin to scope how the Diocese of London might further engage with physical activity; and to reflect on how the diocese might seek to integrate physical activity health and wellbeing into the broader Capital Vision 2020 initiative.

Focusing primarily on secondary source materials, Cameron and Balcar (2018, 9) adopt an altogether more dialogical frame of reference bringing together broader social issues (e.g., the health implications of physical inactivity), government policy agendas, and theological reflection to propose what they see as a “new approach” to the relationship between faith, health and wellbeing whereby the church serves as “a significant force for promoting physical, emotional and spiritual health and healing whilst fulfilling the churches traditional enthusiasm and action to tackle social justice and inequalities.” Such engagement, they argue, has benefits

both for Christians themselves (in relation to their own lives and ministries) and for their communities (both inside and outside of the church). In addition, they offer case study examples of best practice highlighting ways in which parishes might engage with broader health and wellbeing agendas. Cameron and Balcar (2018) conclude that in order to facilitate the potential of sport as an effective tool of community engagement and mission, the church must embrace more intentionally the broader physical activity agenda at a personal, parish/community and diocesan/regional level.

It against this wider backdrop that the present research sought to reveal the ways in which sport and well-being agendas might be promoted through sports ministry at the diocesan level by investigating the perceptions and attitudes of stakeholders towards the development of related activities.

Methods

The overall aim of the present research was to benchmark sports ministry provision (as well as more general youth outreach) within and across the Diocese of Charlesford¹³ and to explore opportunities for future developments. A mixed methods research model was deployed involving both quantitative and qualitative elements, and data was collected between November 2017 and August 2018. The quantitative element of the study comprised a questionnaire survey which was designed in conjunction with key stakeholders and administered by post, online, and in person during various formal meetings across the diocese, and which sought to assess the nature and prevalence of existing sports ministry provision and the appetite amongst clergy for its expansion.¹⁴ The qualitative element of the research comprised two focus groups conducted with a total of 11 participants (n=5) and n=6). These participants were volunteers drawn from a pool of local church and parachurch leaders within the diocese and comprised those individuals who had responded affirmatively to a request for focus group participants on the initial questionnaire survey. Some had connections with local and national sports ministry organizations. Focus group participants were encouraged to explore the two key themes: (i) how sport and wellbeing agendas might best be promoted in and through faith-based locations and activities at the diocesan level, and (ii) how sports ministry delivery might be enhanced through the availability of diocesan resources and facilities. These themes were identified as representative of the main issues emanating from questionnaire responses. The present discussion is based on the focus group data.

Qualitative data generated via focus groups was analyzed using a grounded theory approach whereby respondent perceptions and experiences were explored in detail as were their related meanings (see Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss and Corbin 1998; Bryman 2016). The questioning style during interview was open-ended and, where necessary, further probing took place to clarify responses (see Hammersley and Atkinson 2011). Interviews and focus

¹³ In the interests of anonymity, pseudonyms have been used throughout. The Diocese of Charlesford commissioned the research as part of an evaluation of sports ministry provision among its church communities.

¹⁴ Participants were given the opportunity to choose whether to complete a paper-based or online version of the questionnaire. The Diocese of Charlesford was responsible for identifying the research sites and distributing the questionnaire in person. Of the 202 questionnaires distributed, a total of 82 were completed equating to an overall response rate of 41%.

groups lasted approximately 55 minutes and were recorded digitally and transcribed verbatim. Grounded theory methodology allows for the systematic analysis of data through a process of open, axial, and selective coding and the formation of a conceptual narrative that explains the experiences of participants from their perspective (Charmaz 2014). Data was coded, managed, and organized manually and subsequently analyzed in four stages (Giorgi and Giorgi 2008). First, the transcripts were read in full to gain an overview of the data. Second, each transcript was individually coded and indexed allowing the different aspects of participant experience to be captured. Third, these experiences were clustered and inductively rationalized into a number of over-arching topics. The final stage of analysis involved the formal deductive organization of these topics into generic themes in line with which the following data narrative is presented. These themes provide the framework around which we structure our findings and comprise (i) advantages of sports ministry, (ii) resourcing sports ministry and (iii) promoting sports ministry.

Advantages of Sports Ministry

Building upon the notion that sport and physical activity is one possible way to establish relationships within local communities, focus group discussion identified a number of advantages of sports ministry and, in particular, the way in which it may be used as a platform for community engagement. For participants, the main advantage of sports ministry was the fact that sport is something that, at the popular cultural level, many people enjoy and participate in and, therefore, that has the potential to be a mechanism by which the scope and reach of missional activity might be extended:

Kevin: “I see it [sport] as an opportunity to bridge between the community that is not church and introduce them to Jesus and hopefully to some sort of faith in Jesus and it’s a bridge that wouldn’t otherwise exist. So it’s a way of reaching these people. It’s a conduit, that’s what it is. And you meet with these people in a totally different way. So the beginning part is simply playing sport with them and getting to know them and building relationships and, as in all relationships, as a relationship develops you begin to explore deeper and deeper things with the people you have that relationship with. And part of that exploration is to lead them to an understanding of who you are, what floats your boat, what makes you who you are, the faith you have.”

Gregg: “Some of the difficulties there are, particularly with young people relating to church . . . on the church side of the equation is often [that] the language isn’t accessible and the people within church actually make so many assumptions about prior knowledge and almost unconsciously use words and do things that are really strange and unusual. So, if there’s sort of like a bridge, a common area where relationships can develop and sport provides that common area, I think it’s a very fertile bridging point.”

Notwithstanding the wider criticism that has been aimed at faith-based organizations for their use of sport as a “platform” for sharing the Gospel (see Hoffman 2010; Krattenmaker 2010; Feezell 2013), in these two data extracts we see a typical example of how the sports ministry sector might operate in terms of initial engagement, e.g., as a “hook” into personal interaction where individuals find common ground.

For many sports ministry organizations, the motive here is not to convert but simply to connect. Jonathan and Harry elaborated further:

Jonathan: “[Sport] gives an opportunity to start things where . . . there’s not church at all. So, an activity going on in the centre of a community that don’t in general do church . . . Week after week after week of doing that you can develop relationships with a group of people who would never do Sunday church at all.”

Harry: “I think if you say “church” to people, that . . . is quite a scary concept whereas “sports ministry” allows you to do church . . . in a non-church context and share the Bible and share faith that isn’t in a scary environment.”

In order to successfully utilize sport in building relationships with local communities some respondents were of the view that churches should “reach out to” and “come alongside” non-Christians. For example, a number of focus group participants highlighted the parallels between sport and religion as cultural entities, noting that for many people supporting their favorite sports club or team was a form of “worship” (see Higgs and Brasswell 1994; Parker and Watson 2013; 2015). Thus, it was felt that sport provided a common language which could portray church as more accessible:

Irene: “You know people speak the language of sport but actually people understand worship. People understand to have a passion and a focus that is a football team or a rugby team so actually that language is there but it’s engaging [and] connecting [with] that isn’t it? . . . I mean, I’ve seen rugby matches and I’ve seen football [soccer] matches . . . and watched the experience of those people cheering their teams and we could have been in a big church . . . it was just extraordinary, so people get [understand] worship, they speak the language.”

Religious studies scholars and theologians exploring the relationship between religion (especially Christianity) and popular culture have acknowledged the significance of sports as a dominant cultural form (see Andrews 2011; Parker and Watson 2015; Scholes and Sassower 2013). Indeed, a prominent view in the academic discussion surrounding the sport-religion interface is that sport has become a religion in and of itself and that its rituals and practices help fill a spiritual void in western culture – a void in which celebrity athletes may be looked upon as figures to be worshipped (see Smart 2005; Ward 2011).

Many have adopted the standpoint that when a cultural activity takes on the form of religion (Forbes and Mahan 2000), it provides existential meaning and a sense of identity for the participant, fan, parent, or practitioner (e.g., coach or manager). This, of course, is just one way of thinking about the sport-Christianity relationship in which sport is the dominant narrative. An alternative way is to locate faith as the proactive entity thereby changing perceptions of religion through sport. Some focus group participants felt that the church becoming more active in sporting events and activities could bring the added advantage of helping to change people’s perceptions of what it means to be religious:

Chris: “It’s people’s mind-set and their image of Christianity and religious people [is] that we’re all kind of old or fuddy-duddy . . . Actually, the church

can be fun and we're fun people who can have a laugh and run around a bit . . . you know, and it's not just standing there singing and keeping quiet and sitting on a pew."

Harry: "It's how we shift perception and I think sports ministry is part of that because it presents a different way of communicating with people as well as engaging with people and I think that's really exciting. I think every time you get a group of people and you do something and they go 'If only I'd known church was like this,' it's amazing!"

These extracts are indicative of the general tenor of focus group discussion in that they purvey a positive view of sports ministry as a way of promoting faith-based attributes and connecting with new communities. However, a further issue raised by participants was that of resourcing and practical implementation and it is to some of these challenges that we now turn.

Resourcing Sports Ministry

As noted by Crabbe, McGee, and Dash (2015), resourcing is a key part of successful sports ministry especially in terms of engaging non-church audiences of varying age and socio-economic background. One of the most significant barriers to sports ministry to emerge from focus group discussion was that of human resources. Participants highlighted that many of the people within their Christian networks who may be interested in getting involved with sports ministry were already heavily involved in church, dedicating much of their week to various activities in addition to work and family life. In order to circumvent this barrier, participants felt that churches needed to actively seek to remove some of these pressures by allowing their members to replace one area of congregational activity or responsibility with another – rather than expecting members to continually take on additional commitments:

Kevin: "I think we've got to release people from the church because if they're going to church once on a Sunday [and] maybe serving at the other service on a Sunday, they've got . . . [something] on a Tuesday or a Wednesday and they're also involved in a ministry and then you're also asking them to join a club and play sport or help out at an after school club, it's just extra, extra stuff all the time . . . But if we said we're not having services on Sunday once a month, or we're only going to have one service now on a Sunday but we'd like you to come to something in the mid-week and help or participate . . . People are burdened; people don't even want to go out in the evenings that much anymore."

Irene: "Picking up on that . . . church is not very good at stopping doing things and letting things go and allowing people to put their energy into something new without the expectation [that] they've got to carry on doing everything that they're doing at the moment. I think that's a real barrier."

A key issue identified by the Diocese of London (2020) in their report into sport and wellbeing ministry was that of human resource sustainability and, in particular, the additional burden that such outreach work may place on already over-committed churchgoers (volunteers).

Participants also noted that they would need to provide volunteers with the necessary training and materials and have the appropriate facilities available to them if they were to pursue sports ministry initiatives:

Thomas: “I think very specifically, sometimes just the lack of skills within the church; nobody has any sporting skills whatsoever, they’re willing but they haven’t a clue and I think that can be a real barrier . . . which is where organisations like FaithSport [local parachurch sports ministry] and outside [secular] organisations partnering can make a massive difference . . . Another potential barrier is lack of facilities; a lack of premises; a lack of place to do it whatever it is.”

As Crabbe, McGee, and Dash (2015) highlight, despite an enthusiasm to develop sports ministry within a locality, it may well be that church members have little, if any, direct experience of running such initiatives and this necessarily presents challenges. In order to solve some of the issues surrounding this skills deficit, focus group participants felt that churches would benefit from forming partnerships with other (sports-based) organizations thereby working together in a more cohesive way:

Simon: “I think we need to see the church, rather than as separate parishes as a united resource . . . if you have a decent sized church or a church that’s well-resourced . . . if they can be generous and say “It doesn’t matter which church you go to, where you live, this is a gathering spot for young people” that’s going to be a real strength for us.”

Kevin: “It feels like there’s a momentum building and . . . there’s all these organisations . . . [and] we could put these groups together, not because they all have to be the same but connected and then work together to do that wider work.”

Promoting Sports Ministry

A further issue identified by focus group participants in relation to resourcing was that of communication. In the past, sports ministry activities had not always been well promoted within the Diocese of Charlesford and this, it seemed, had led to poor attendance at related events. In order for future activities to be more successful it was suggested that better communication was needed, in particular, improved use of social media:

Harry: “I love my church, it’s fantastic . . . but there isn’t that youth element there at all . . . I wonder how many people there are out there like me who take their kids to churches like Westley which is fantastic for what it stands for but [who are] missing out on other opportunities because of the lack of communication.”

Pete: “Over the summer we did some [sports-based] events that were quite well organised, we got leaders to do it but the numbers coming through weren’t as big as we’d hoped for and I think taking a step back . . . a barrier was the church hasn’t engaged with the use of Facebook and Twitter and so on which is the way most people use to gather and come together and whilst we can use

schools [as a way of] advertising . . . I think we've got to create our own group of followers and build it up that way as well."

It is clear from the above comments that resourcing was a key barrier to the practical implementation of sports ministry within the diocese and that this included both staffing and logistical issues.

In addition, participants highlighted the challenges presented to churches in trying to balance more traditional forms of church with the promotion of new initiatives such as sports ministry:

Claire: "Now one of the problems . . . is [that] we've got an aging population – which isn't a problem it's actually a resource I think – but it means, for the first time really in the history of [our] church, [that] we have got a lot of different desires and needs. You know, we've got four generations now of expressions of how they [congregational members] see church that we want to accommodate and that's why we haven't been able to let some things die."

Irene: "If you're trying to organise something new and fresh that's different, that's not about the Communion Service and you want to go somewhere else to do that you've got to work out how you cover that thing happening . . . I think stuff is going to have to shift, things are going to have to change otherwise we're never going to be able to move forward and do things differently. If we always have to do the same thing we've always done and do more, it's not going to happen."

Despite these concerns, it was clear that some focus group participants had experienced an increase in non-traditional ways of doing church within the Diocese in recent years:

David: "From my recent experience in parish ministry and also in projects that I'm currently working with, traditional building-based church, I would say, is . . . quite considerably in decline . . . But what I do see is good signs that other forms of church outside of traditional buildings and traditional ways of doing things are on the increase and people are getting more and more excited about that and that's quite good. So, it's early days . . . there's not a lot of it going on but there is some going on and that's encouraging."

This discussion is important because it demonstrates two of the central challenges facing clergy and diocesan staff in relation to the development of new worshipping communities in the present climate. The first is that of generational spread: how might churches and church leaders meet the needs of a diverse, ageing, and declining church community whilst at the same time proactively initiate new ways of "doing" church (in this instance around sport)? The second is that of equipping and resourcing: how might churches and church leaders embark on such initiatives when church resources (i.e., finances, volunteers) are already stretched and when there is a perceived skills deficit in relation to project delivery?

It is clear from these data extracts that there was an appetite and enthusiasm for sports ministry within the diocese and this was at least partly a reflection of financial investment made in this area in recent years. It is also clear that those concerned were open to exploring at the

strategic level the wider use of facilities for the expansion of sports ministry projects. Further discussion revealed that a key driver in this respect was the continuation and extension of partnership working between the diocese and external (including parachurch) organizations not simply in terms of the delivery of sport and wellbeing initiatives but also in relation to the mobilization of a volunteer workforce and the training and equipping of church leaders and congregations. What this discussion also brings to the fore is a clear recognition of the desire to promote a different mindset across the diocese about what new “sport and wellbeing” worshipping communities might look like thereby affirming the existence of traditional forms of church alongside new initiatives and ideas.

Conclusions

The aim of this paper has been to present the qualitative findings of a small-scale research project into sports ministry provision within one Church of England diocese. More specifically, the paper has sought to provide an analysis of the potential needs of stakeholders in relation to their ambitions to explore, develop and extend sports ministry opportunities within the local church. Building upon and extending previous research within this area (see Crabbe, McGee, and Dash 2015; Cameron and Balcar 2018), these findings provide the insights and thoughts of a group of individuals involved in sport ministry within one geographical region whilst at the same time mapping something of the social and cultural landscape across which related activities took place.

Findings suggest that whilst the advantages of sports ministry were widely recognized by participants in terms of “common ground” engagement with non-church communities, key barriers frequently arose in relation to the resourcing of sports ministry events, primarily over-committed congregational members, limited access to facilities, and a lack of training and expertise. Respondents argued that one possible solution to these problems was the establishment of partnerships with wider sports-based, parachurch organizations. That said, it was not simply human resourcing which presented a barrier to the furtherance of sports ministry activity but communication also. Here two main issues stood out, first the need for a more strategic approach to event promotion (especially via the use of social media), and second, the need to better negotiate the balance between providing more traditional forms of church (for those who were accustomed to these – primarily older congregational members) with the promotion of new initiatives such as sports ministry.

Of course, there were a number of broader narratives in play. For example, despite the historical pedigree of the UK church in its use of sporting endeavor as a means of mission, ministry, and outreach, it has been noted that an element of resistance can often be found in relation to the promotion of sport and physical activity across a range of faith-based organizations and contexts. Central here are a series of assumptions about the ‘irrelevant’ nature of sporting pursuit and the distraction that this might present in terms of peoples’ spiritual lives. These findings go some way to dismissing such assumptions by locating sports ministry as a valuable and legitimate way in which the church can promote and enhance the physical, emotional, and spiritual wellbeing of individuals and communities thereby speaking further into issues of social justice and inequality. Moreover, they provide practical suggestions as to the way in which the Church of England might look to support and resource sports

ministry, and how diocesan, parachurch, and wider sporting organizations might work together to achieve these ends.

The study was not without its limitations. Sample size is commonly accepted as a point of contention within the context of qualitative research yet when considered alongside the quantitative element of the project the research team was assured that data saturation had been achieved. Notwithstanding these limitations and the lack of generalizability on offer, it is suggested that these findings raise a series of further questions in relation to sports ministry policy and practice which are pertinent to the promotion of the faith-sport relationship in the UK. For example, what evidence does the church need to convince itself and others of the power of sport to transform lives both physically/emotionally and spiritually? Moreover, how severe will the decline in church attendance need to become before the church turns to sport as a possible remedy for sustainability? There are questions here also for those leading church and para-church organizations and how they might work together more closely to make these changes a reality. Further, to what extent do church and para-church organizations wish to intentionally engage with broader policy agendas and contribute to mainstream debate in the area of sport and wellbeing? These questions present a series of challenges to existing debates surrounding UK sports ministry and it is only through the pursuit of these challenges that the sector will achieve its potential as an influential voice within the broader context of modern-day sport.

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