

Keynote to Ministry of Sport Conference

History has been in the news a lot recently so let me start with a history question. Why was there no revolution in 18th and 19th century Great Britain? Everyone else had one. The French had at least a revolution a month for years. In Great Britain we had all the pre-requisites for a revolution – a corrupt aristocracy, the impoverished urban poor, slum dwellings in the new cities, a lazy Church, an out of touch monarchy. Why was there no revolution to clean it all out?

According to sports historian Professor Tony Collins, the answer was cricket. Cricket was a sport that grew massively in this country during the years of European revolutionary fervour in the eighteenth century and yet remained unknown in other parts of Europe. On the cricket pitch, rich and poor met on equal terms. The rural peasant would be bowling at the aristocrat. The parson would be batting with the farrier. How can you guillotine someone if two days before you were playing sport and laughing together? How can you go on oppressing someone if you have just put on 50 runs in a ninth wicket partnership together? Sport was the social leveller, it became a place to form relationships that crossed class boundaries and so a place where social justice could be built.

And what was true in 18th century is the same today. We live in an age of incredible social stratification. Wealth disparities between rich and poor are widening fast. 1 million people a year are dependent on foodbanks whilst the incomes of wealthiest continue to grow. I used to minister in Camden Town, a place where the richest of the rich and the poorest of the poor lived parallel lives. They may have been geographically in the same communities, but they had different jobs, went to different shops, sent their children to different schools, frequented different cafes and used different health facilities.

Where do you go where rich and poor find equality and meet on an equal basis? I can think of only a few places, amongst them the sports field and the church. Just as it did in the eighteenth century, sport still has an incredible capacity to break down the barriers of culture, class and wealth. That is a massive reason why as Christians we need to be engaged with sports ministry and why your work is so important. If we are serious about sharing in the work of the Jesus who tells us he comes to proclaim Good News to the poor, we need to be present and active in the world of sport.

It is an odd phenomenon that from time to time the Church forgets its call to put the poor first. It is almost as if a part of the scripture is for a while blanked out for us and there is a distinct risk that the big push on church growth does that to us in the contemporary Church of England. Adrian Newman in his report 'So Yesterday' asks why the Church has taken its eye off the ball in terms of ministering to areas of poverty after all the activity of Faith in the City. One big reason he gives is the triumph of the growth agenda. If we are going solely for growth, if we are quite rightly passionate about making new disciples, very easy to forget those areas where growth is hardest to achieve.

Yet if we are serious about growth, rather than forgetting them we need to start with the poor, and it is not hard to find the proof for this. For three decades the Church has focussed strongly on the ministry of evangelism. We have had the decade of evangelism, Springboard, Fresh Expressions, Renewal and Reform, countless evangelism resources and strategies, and today almost every Diocese has a strong growth strategy in place. The result? Ever increasing rates of decline, averaging out at about 2% per year. The problem is that we have forgotten what Jesus taught us. In Luke 4 Jesus says 'I have come to proclaim Good News to the poor.' And he spent the rest of his life authenticating his teaching in his daily life. In order to bring about transformation, he went not to the wealthy and the powerful, but the forgotten and the voiceless and the oppressed. It was by identifying with the powerless that he undid the powers of this world and worked redemption.

So for us today. We will renew the church not from areas of wealth and power, but from the margins, the outer estates, the forgotten inner cities, from the poor and the addicted and lonely, from the places where life is hardest. When you proclaim good news to the poor, that's when everyone wakes up and listens.

So if we are serious about the renewal of our nation for Christ, we need first to stop years of slow erosion and decline in church life in our urban areas. Instead we need to commit ourselves afresh to presence, service and proclamation in the areas of greatest social deprivation. We need to do so because these are the people who most need to hear the message of hope the Gospel brings.

It is great to see that things are happening and people are waking up to this. Archbishop Justin's Evangelism Task Group has made the urban estates one of its top priorities. Soon after that the Church of England set up the Renewal and Reform Estates Evangelism Task Group. A few weeks ago at Launde Abbey there was a big gathering of partners committed to the renewal of the estates churches and they have agreed together a Commitment to Action, a comprehensive plan that commits us afresh to the nation's poorest areas. This comes under four headings. Championing estates ministry (this poses challenge to church to commit itself afresh to the estates and seeks to pioneer new forms of church life). Theology and public voice (This invites us to ask the question 'What is the good news on the estates? It also talks about the importance of both serving and confidently proclaiming, because you can't have one without the other). Leadership (This aspect is vital and commits us to raising up lay and ordained leaders in, from and for the estates). Resources (which is all about finding the people, the money and the materials we need to enable estates churches to flourish). What we need now is committed partners who will lead a revolution whereby we seek the transformation of a nation under Christ by putting the poor first.

It seems to me that sport could play a vital role in this work and that those involved in sports ministry could be key partners as we seek the renewal the urban church. How might that be? Let me suggest three things that sport can offer:

First, sport is **a place to build relationships**. Former Pastoral Assistant called Peter after his Ordination to a Parish in Sunderland joined a local football team. He was amazed at the people this at once put him in contact with – some hard, tough men, many of them unemployed, many of them involved in the grey economy, most from broken families, some in and out of prison. Where else would he, an Oxford educated middle class graduate, have been able to form such good friendships with people so different from himself? Sport bridged a huge gulf, and very quickly he found that really deep friendships had formed. They called him Vic, they took the mick, then they shared their problems, they asked him to baptise their children, he visited them in prison, they talked about things that mattered to them and he could bear witness to Jesus in a very natural and unforced way.

Sport gives a place of meeting, a place where unlikely encounters can happen. The Church of England invested hugely recently in online communications. It is a brilliant project, some great work is being done to use new technology to proclaim the Gospel. But the stats interesting. One third of world's population has access to internet. But two thirds of world's population engage in sport – playing or spectating. The ministry you are involved in offers a fantastic place of encounter and relationship building.

Sport gives us a common language. When I first went to the North East, felt culturally way out of my depth. Did I need to change the way I talked, dressed, related? Did I belong there at all? The common ground was football. Soon all round Parish everyone knew that new curate was an Arsenal fan. They could tease me, chat to me, talk to me. I became a little bit more real to them. Sport gave us a common language and thus the gateway to deeper relationship.

What's more the engagements that sport can offer are ones of genuine equality. I have massive addiction to football phone-ins. No radio show better reflects the social make-up of the nation than 606. The first caller will speak in such broad Newcastle accent that no one understand a word, then next a nicely spoken prep school boy will show up to praise the virtues of Chelsea, then next an Eastend matriarch will call to demand that West Ham sack their latest manager. All of life is there and there on equal terms. Sport has a capacity to dissolve class and provide places of equal encounter. It gives a common framework to people who may never otherwise engage with each other.

In our urban areas, the church is failing to connect with large sections of population, especially working class teenagers and men. Sport can provide these places of encounter, and when we encounter each other, that's when the Gospel work can be done. Any strategy to renew urban church is doomed to failure if we can't engage with people and speak a language they can understand. Sport gives us a place of engagement and a common language.

When I go round local churches in Blackburn, people complain about the struggles they have in Parish ministry because of competition from Sunday sport. Frankly if I were a 12 year old boy, given the choice between playing football with my mates and sitting still and quietly in church, it would be a complete no brainer. This is not a competition we are going to win. So instead of competing, let's use sport as the place of encounter. Let's use it as the shared space where we can engage.

Second, **sport can be a model for Gospel living.** A massive challenge for urban practitioner is how we speak good news in a way that answers questions on people's hearts. How do we put into words the pearl without price? This one of questions the Estates Evangelism Commitment to Action raises. It invites reflection on the content of our proclamation. Sport can give an answer.

There is a growing tendency to think of Gospel as little more than a bolt-on to basically secular lives. Churchgoing is sometimes seen as just another activity, one that deals with the spiritual aspect of our lives, or as a social club that gives you friendship, or as a support group that helps us behave a bit better. But Gospel comprises a vast, all-encompassing, expansive vision for whole of human life and flourishing, a vision of humanity set free, of life in all its fullness. There is no aspect of our lives that the Gospel does not touch and change.

As we all know it is very hard to communicate this, especially in such a secular, post-Christian culture and especially amongst people for whom poverty has made life hard. Sport can help. Obviously it can't do whole job, but can help with some starting points and illustrations.

For example Christians have a vision of human health and healing, of the mind and body made whole through the saving work of Christ. We all know that an issue for many urban people is mental health, especially low level depressions and anxiety. The impact of sport and exercise on mental wellbeing is well established. If I feel run down, a forty minute spin on a bike has an almost magical impact on me. So sport can give us some sense of what it means to be well, what it means to be whole. It is one way of pointing us to the work of God in our lives.

Or again, one aspect of the Christian life is that it gives us a way of living together in community, of co-relating on the basis not of selfishness but of self-sacrificial love. This is an important message in an increasingly atomised, consumer society in which people look at things in terms of how they can benefit personally. The sports field can be an illustration of a Christian way of thinking about healthy human relationship. In a team game we rely completely on each other, just as people are co-dependent and are nothing without networks of relationships. On the sports field we play to a set of rules just as people need shared moral standards in order to be at harmony with each other.

Or again, Christians have a vision of human aspiration which is about fulfilling our potential as those gifted by God as we use those gifts for the benefit of the world. Low aspiration, a lack of ambition, limited horizons are things which blight the lives of many inner city dwellers, especially young people. Sport is almost unique in its capacity to raise aspiration and unlock gifts. In one of my former parishes there was a girl called Vicky who came from a really poor home. She lacked confidence, her behaviour was poor and she was really struggling. But then at school she discovered she had an amazing gift for trampolining. It was fantastic to see her grow in confidence as she joined a club and represented her school and county. This is not some fairy-tale story where she ended up with Olympic gold and that makes it even more special. Vicky was a normal girl for whom sport made a difference to her life. Her school work went better, she settled down as a person. Through sport she glimpsed something of her God-given potential. There are countless similar stories where sport has broken the link between poverty and low aspiration. Easy to rant about the wages of footballers, but where else can working class boys, especially black working class boys, break out of the cycles of mediocrity that damage life on so many of our estates?

If redemption is about realising the full potential of our human life, there is a redemptive aspect to sport. So as Christians engage with sport, we are communicating something of the saving work of God. And in mission events and in our teaching and preaching, we can use sport to illustrate God's purpose in our lives. We can use it to get across something of the ineffable mystery of the Gospel.

And thirdly, **sport is place where we can grow teams and develop leaders**. As anyone who has worked in an urban parish knows, the secret of sustainable growth is raising up good quality local leaders. So leadership lies at heart of the strategy to renew estates churches.

Over the years we have stripped urban areas of their local leaders. I saw this in the northeast where bit by bit the indigenous leadership of local people had been taken

away from them and given to middle class people who lived away from the estate, leaving those communities with an ingrained culture of dependency. It is really hard to recover that sort of local leadership. It can take as much as 6 years to grow a local lay leader. Again sport can play a part in resolving this problem.

On the sports field, all have a part to play. That points us to Paul's description of Body of Christ in which all have a role and all have gifts from God to perform it. A good sports team is therefore a model of a healthy local church in which everyone is called and everyone participates.

And in particular sport is one of the few places where we still raise up local, indigenous leadership. In Hartlepool I worked on an estate where we developed our ministry to men by starting a football team. We only played a few games a year but the results were way beyond what I was expecting. I thought it would just be a bit of fun. Actually it not only grew the faith of one or two of those who played, it also formed leaders. People gained confidence on the football field which somehow transferred over to church life. If we are serious about raising up a new generation of lay leaders for the urban church, then sport could well have a role to play in their formation.

Three ways then in which sports ministry can contribute to the renewal of the church amongst the poor. It can be a place to build relationships. It can be a model for Gospel living. It can build teams and help raise up local leaders.

During the day you will hear many practical ways in which sport can be used to enhance the ministry of the church: from big ambitious projects to small scale mission events, from local church teams to big screen events, from sermon illustrations to major teaching programmes. Through sport we can reach out to people we would not meet in any other way.

And that means that sports ministry can make a real difference in renewing the urban church. Christians can use sport to fight poverty, to unlock potential, to spark unlikely relationships, to grow leaders and to speak a language of hope on the estates. The opportunity is there, and it's there for every local church. Let's be bold and imaginative in grabbing hold of it.

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