

THE WHEEL TURNS: SPORT AND FAITH COMMUNITIES IN THE UK

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Christian churches made major contributions to the growth of sport in the UK, Europe and the USA in the 19th century - a movement labelled 'muscular Christianity' (MacAloon, 2007). Almost one third of the Premier League soccer clubs grew out of church football teams (Lupson, 2006). Then, as secular forces grew, membership declined, especially amongst young people, and associated tennis courts and pitches and halls were closed or sold off. An era seemed to have ended. Now, flourishing churches are seeing a resurgence of interest, among youth in particular sport being their most popular leisure pastime. This is attested by organisations like Christians in Sport, active in most universities, and Youth for Christ (see also Hoffman, 1992; Magdalinski and Chandler, 2002). While there are score of courses for sports workers in the USA, none is offered in the UK. With a Christian basis in its formation and strategy, it seemed to staff at the University of Gloucestershire that a new course was timely.

METHODS

Consultations were held with nearly 100 people in youth sport, youth work and the churches and all agreed that the venture was worthwhile because active churches were once again increasingly involved in sport.

RESULTS

So a sequence of courses was constructed, a Certificate (aimed mainly at already graduate volunteers) and a Diploma and a Masters, aimed mainly at professional workers in faith communities, initially Christian ones.

The paper will lay out the rational and content of the courses, to be delivered in association with Redcliffe College, a nearby specialist college in mission studies.

Delivery will be by a mixture of full-time, block, summer school and distance learning modes, appropriate to candidates' job and volunteering situations.

The course is supported by a new Professor/Readership, granted-aided by the All Churches Trust, a schemes of bursaries for workers for 5 years supported by the Joseph Rank Trust and a skilled Advisory Group chaired by the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Lord George Carey of Clifton.

DISCUSSION

It will be interesting to see how the take up goes. A recent regional conference run by Sport England was very well supported. There is potential in developing course for sports chaplains who advise coaches and players in professional clubs and .of course, elite events like London 2012 (Haskins and Baker, 2006). There is also a great potential for serving other faith communities, especially Jewish and Islamic.

Despite recognition of the contribution faith communities can make in community development (CUF, 2006, Furbey et al, 2006), HM government has yet to offer more than exhortation. Harder evidence of these contributions from case studies of the bursar's projects would be of value to urban and rural policy.

The authors would also welcome contact with anyone, especially in Europe, running such courses.

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