

Sport & Faith: A New Initiative in a Secular Society

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Abstract

Background

Post-industrial and secularisation forces, and aging and dwindling of congregations have led to a great diminution of involvement of churches in sport compared to the turn of the 20th century, many professional soccer clubs started by or in association with churches (see Lupson, 2006). But revival in interest can be attested to by organisations like youth for Christ and Christians in Sport (see also, for example, Hoffman, 1992, Magdalinski and Chandler, 2002, Patmore and Hoare, 2000). This paper will describe the genesis, rationale and content of initiatives at the University of Gloucestershire to support volunteers and professionals working in youth and community development sphere using sport via a new Cert HE/Dip HE/MA strand in Sport and Christian Outreach of teaching focussed initially on working with Christian groups, but there will be need to work with other faiths too in temples, mosques, synagogues and gurdwaras, as soon as possible. This is supported by an advisory group chaired by former Archbishop Lord Carey, and grant aid for schemes and workers aided by the Joseph Rank Trust. There is also a need for better support for the growing number sports chaplains (eg Haskins and Baker, 2006), including the opportunities of supporting athletes and coaches for London 2012.

A case study of Psalms – a sport-based outreach project in Gloucestershire will be described.

But, despite the Blair government wanting action in community cohesion, inclusion, and regeneration by faith communities and evidence that this has social capital benefits (eg Furbey et al, 2006), there is huge ignorance about the scale and nature of involvement of any of them, even mainstream Christian denominations like Anglicanism and Methodism (see CUF, 2006). The new Society and Religion research programme 2007-12 by the Arts & Humanities and Economic and social Research Councils mentions culture but not sport as part of that. There is a substantial research agenda for work to map the scale and nature of this involvement, to understand what sports participation via faith organisations means to individuals compared to that via schools, clubs or public and commercial facilities, and to see how partnerships can work effectively between faith and public or voluntary groups in sports development.

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