

# Escalating the Role of Sport and Wellbeing in Faith Communities: Strategic Approaches for Ministry and Community Engagement

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper explains the role of sport and well-being in faith communities, focusing on the Church of England's national strategy for integrating sports into ministry and community engagement. The initiative, launched in 2020, seeks to promote physical and mental well-being, enhance community connections, and address social challenges such as loneliness and health disparities. The Church aims to embed sports ministry within its diocesan structures, develop partnerships with secular and faith-based organizations, and establish sustainable funding sources. Key findings from the three-year project highlight the importance of leadership, strategic alignment, volunteer engagement, and structured training programs for sports ministers. Challenges such as post-COVID church disengagement and competing social priorities are addressed, emphasizing the need for innovative outreach strategies. The presentation underscores the transformative potential of sports in fostering holistic well-being and community development within faith-based settings.*

## INTRODUCTION

On behalf of the organizers, welcome to the Second Africa Congress on Christianity and Sports. It is an honour to be here, and I sincerely thank the organising committee for the invitation to speak once again. Having had the privilege of participating in the inaugural event last year, I am truly grateful for the opportunity to return. For the past twenty-five years, I have worked as a full-time academic in British universities, dedicating the last fifteen years to studying the relationship between sport and Christianity. My research focuses on theological colleges and para-church organizations engaged in sports ministry and chaplaincy, with an emphasis on training and equipping the next generation of sports ministers and chaplains. Alongside this, I have collaborated with various organizations conducting research in this field.

This paper presents findings from a Church of England project on sport and well-being at a national level, conducted in partnership with my colleagues Mark Balsar and Natalie Andrews. This initiative represents a significant step, as it marks the first time the Church of England has developed a formal, nationwide strategy to promote sport and well-being across its diocesan contexts. While the Church has engaged in numerous initiatives related to sport and physical activity over the years, this research aims to establish a structured and sustainable approach to integrating sport into its broader mission.

## THE CHURCH'S ROLE IN SPORT, PHYSICAL ACTIVITY, AND WELL-BEING

The Church of England recognizes its potential to play a significant role not only in building communities but also in assisting policymakers, government officials, and local authorities in addressing pressing social issues. These issues include physical inactivity, loneliness, isolation, mental and physical health concerns, and community integration, while also tackling poverty and social inequalities. It is evident that these challenges have intensified in the post-COVID era. As a result, the Church is increasingly committed to extending its reach beyond the walls of its churches to support communities in all aspects of well-being—not just in sports but in holistic well-being. This has become a key driver of the Church's mission (Coakley, 2021).

A conservative estimate values the time and services contributed by churches and other faith-

based organizations to UK communities at over £3 billion annually (approximately \$5 billion). However, faith communities and organizations are often undervalued, particularly regarding their contributions to public health and individual well-being (Guest & Schneider, 2022).

An important takeaway: churches engage in extensive community work, serving people selflessly. Yet, their impact is not always recognized explicitly by policymakers, local governments, and public institutions. It is essential to acknowledge and highlight these contributions. I want to take this moment to thank all of you for the work you do—it is invaluable. Serving communities, especially in terms of well-being, is crucial in today's world.

Churches and faith-based organizations facilitate numerous health-related activities within their communities. However, these efforts are rarely recognized as formal interventions or evaluated systematically. A 2015 study commissioned by the Church of England in the Diocese of London found that between 40,000 and 50,000 people participated in sport and physical activity sessions in church buildings every week.

This is a remarkable figure, demonstrating the impact that churches can have on their communities. Importantly, these participants were not necessarily Christians; they came from diverse local backgrounds. This highlights the power of simply opening church spaces for physical activity—something that can foster connection and well-being.

## **A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE CHURCH'S ENGAGEMENT WITH SPORT**

The Church of England has a long history of involvement in sport and physical activity, dating back to the 19th century. During that period, vicars in the UK often used sports as a means to engage disillusioned and disadvantaged young men, establishing soccer and rugby teams, particularly in economically deprived areas emerging from the Industrial Revolution. However, despite this legacy, the Church of England had never developed a formalized sports ministry strategy—until recently (Edwards & Rowe, 2019).

Following extensive consultation, the Church of England launched its National Sport and Well-being Project in July 2020. This initiative was designed to achieve two key objectives:

1. To strategically develop sport and well-being as a core area for church engagement in evangelism.
2. To help dioceses use sport and well-being programmes as tools to reach, engage, and strengthen local communities, thereby improving health and well-being at a grassroots level.

To lead this initiative, in July 2020, the Church of England appointed a Lead Bishop for Sport under the authority of the Archbishop of Canterbury. This marked a significant milestone, demonstrating a structured leadership approach to sports and well-being at a national level.

For the first time in its history, the Church of England embarked on a three-year strategic project dedicated to sports and well-being. Now, in terms of the details of the strategy itself, there are four main strands that the strategy aims to focus on.

First and foremost, the goal is to embed sport and well-being approaches within the church nationally. This means moving away from one-off or stand-alone projects to ensure that sport and well-being become a strategic component of diocesan life. To clarify, the church in this country—both the Church of England and non-denominational churches—already has numerous sports, physical activity, and well-being initiatives running continuously.

There are approximately 50 sports ministry organizations in the UK, all doing valuable work. However, much of this work appears to be one-off or stand-alone events. The Church of England aimed to consolidate these efforts by conducting an audit of existing initiatives, identifying successful programs, and integrating them into a coherent strategy. This would allow people to see that all these efforts are interconnected and recognize the best practices that could be shared and replicated (Ladd, 2018).

The second part of the strategy was to evaluate successful models and examples of strategic thinking around sport and well-being at the diocesan level. This involved assessing how these models were operationalized and facilitating the sharing of insights and best practices.

The third component of the strategy was to encourage the multiplication of best practices. This included examining how dioceses were effectively collaborating with local churches, parachurch organizations, and secular sport and well-being organizations. Multiplication is a key principle of God's kingdom, and the strategy aimed to reflect this by expanding successful initiatives.

Finally, the strategy sought to resource this area more effectively to ensure its long-term development and sustainability. It is important to note that this initiative was not about directly funding dioceses. Instead, the first three years of the project focused on auditing existing programs, identifying best practices, and training diocesan and local church leaders to expand sport and well-being efforts within their communities (Parker & Watson, 2019).

## PRACTICAL OBJECTIVES OF THE STRATEGY

Five key objectives were established:

1. **Pilot Dioceses:** Eight out of the 42 dioceses in England were selected to serve as pilot sport and well-being hubs. These dioceses volunteered to participate in efforts to assess and improve sport and well-being initiatives.
2. **Partnership Development:** The strategy aimed to build new working relationships between dioceses, parachurch organizations, and community sport organizations. A key focus was on helping dioceses establish better connections with secular community sport organizations, which many had not engaged with before.
3. **National Partnerships and Policy Alignment:** Another objective was to integrate faith-based and secular organizations into broader public policy and funding frameworks. After diocesan staff began forming partnerships with parachurch and community sports organizations, the next step was aligning with government policies and identifying funding opportunities. The strategy sought to position the church as a credible provider of sport and well-being services, making it a potential partner for government agencies and other organizations.
4. **Creating an Evidence Base:** The project also aimed to establish a robust evidence base to identify successful models, best practices, and scalable initiatives. While many local efforts were effective, the goal was to assess how these successes could be replicated and expanded. This would enable the church to engage in wider-scale transformation in sport and well-being services.
5. **Training and Capacity Building:** Finally, the strategy focused on training a new generation of sports ministers. To sustain this work, it was essential to equip ordained and lay leaders with relevant sport and well-being ministry training. The project collaborated with theological colleges to develop appropriate training programs (Sport England, 2020).

## PROJECT TIMELINE AND CHALLENGES

The project was ambitious, with a lot to accomplish within three years. Anyone experienced in project management knows that a three-year timeline often follows a predictable pattern:

- **Year 1:** Understanding the landscape—identifying existing initiatives and establishing the groundwork.
- **Year 2:** Implementing and scaling successful initiatives.
- **Year 3:** Securing funding to sustain and expand the project.

Three years is a short period for systemic change, but the goal was to move from a starting point of minimal engagement in some dioceses to developing structured sport and well-being initiatives and training leaders to implement them.

## KEY LEARNINGS FROM THE PROJECT

Throughout the three-year period, continuous monitoring and evaluation were conducted. The research gathered insights from three key groups:

1. **Senior diocesan staff** involved at the strategic level in the eight pilot dioceses.
2. **Diocesan staff** working as sports and well-being missionaries, champions, or advocates.
3. **Church leaders** and senior figures within the Church of England who oversee broader church strategies or have been engaged in its long-term development.

So, let's reflect on the learning and insights gained so far. The project is ongoing and has a few months left.

### **1. Engagement**

One key observation is that among the eight pilot dioceses, each was at a different stage of development. Some were actively engaged in sport and well-being activities, while others had no prior experience but were eager to develop that aspect of their work.

A critical finding was that all dioceses and their members shared a strong belief in the church's role in promoting sport and well-being within local communities. While this may seem like a simple statement, achieving meaningful engagement from key stakeholders—whether within the church or the broader community—is essential. Without engagement, we know it is difficult to make real progress.

### **2. Funding**

Funding was undoubtedly crucial to the success of sport and well-being initiatives in these dioceses. However, it was not the only significant factor in enabling these programs to take off. Equally important was the alignment and shared vision of whether this was a worthwhile endeavour.

More than just financial resources, what truly made a difference was having people on the ground willing to take initiative—often volunteers in churches who had never engaged in such activities before. With the right encouragement and training, they stepped up despite having no prior experience. While funding is critical, it is not as vital as the momentum, passion, and interest of individuals in making these initiatives happen.

### **3. Investment and Alignment**

Investment and alignment among diocesan staff were essential. Ideally, this project—or rather, this alignment and investment—was led by a bishop or senior diocesan staff member. Their role was to actively promote sport and well-being as an integral part of diocesan activities, rather than treating it as an isolated or secondary initiative.

For sport and well-being to be effective, it needed to be embedded within diocesan strategy. It had to be written into official plans, ensuring accountability and continuity, even when leadership changed. In dioceses where development stalled, it was often due to transitions in leadership—such as a bishop or senior official leaving—resulting in a lack of advocacy. To sustain progress, it was crucial to embed sport and well-being within diocesan strategy so that its implementation continued, regardless of personnel changes.

### **4. Partnerships**

Building partnerships was another critical factor. Collaboration with other churches engaged in sport and well-being, parachurch organizations, and secular community groups created stronger, more effective interventions.

It is well understood that achieving meaningful outcomes is difficult when working in isolation. In the UK, there is increasing recognition of the importance of well-being, particularly mental health, in the post-COVID era. The government acknowledges that young people have been significantly affected, and this has opened up opportunities for partnerships with organizations that are already active in this area.



## 5. Challenges: Competing Demands

Two major challenges have become apparent throughout the project. The first is what I would call **competing demands**. The COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath have led to numerous competing priorities within diocesan life and local churches. Many issues—such as the cost-of-living crisis and financial struggles—are perceived as more urgent than sport and well-being.

Churches and dioceses are under immense pressure to address pressing social needs, which often seem more critical than sport and well-being. However, well-being is a broad concept, and our approach has been to encourage dioceses and churches to connect with people based on their specific needs. If, at a given time, broader well-being concerns take precedence over physical activity, then that is where efforts should be directed.

Additionally, many church leaders are exhausted. Across different denominations, leaders have worked tirelessly through the challenges of COVID-19, transitioning churches to online services, developing hybrid models, and supporting their congregations in countless ways. Understandably, the prospect of taking on a new initiative—such as sport and well-being—can feel overwhelming.

This presents a significant challenge: how do we integrate sport and well-being into church life in a way that does not add to leaders' workloads but instead makes their roles easier and more impactful?

## 6. Post-COVID Church Crisis

The second challenge is what I would term the **post-COVID church crisis**. The pandemic has fundamentally altered traditional perceptions of church in the UK. Many people have chosen to disengage from church participation, and congregations continue to shrink in many areas.

A striking statistic is that one-third of Church of England churches have no young people in attendance. This reality has created an urgent need to rethink traditional church models and adopt a more mission-focused approach.

One positive outcome of this shift is that it has encouraged churches to explore new ways to engage with their communities. Sport and physical activity have emerged as viable solutions to the challenge of declining youth engagement. Since sports naturally attract young people, many churches are now approaching us, asking how they can use sport and physical activity to reconnect with younger generations.

The use of the word "sport" can still be an inhibitor for individuals and groups in faith circles. Even after all these years, I still talk to people in churches about sport and physical activity, and the word "sport" puts them off. They say to me, "But I'm not a sporty person." What we're trying to do now is broaden this terminology and definition. This is about sport and well-being. That was the whole point of the Church of England using that terminology.

It's about sport and well-being—it's a broader piece of work. Moving forward, particularly at the national level, we will begin to de-emphasize "sport" slightly to move away from the public perception that sports ministry is only about traditional team sports. This is about physical activity and health. This is about well-being.

That is one of the key insights I have gained from this research. Thirdly, there is a need to increase the provision of education and training around sport and well-being, particularly in two areas. First, theological training for a new generation of sport and well-being ministers. As some of you know, I am involved at Ridley Hall College in Cambridge, where we train Church of England vicars as well as lay ministers. One of the strands we run in lay ministry is focused on sports ministry.

We strongly believe that we need to equip and train a new generation—not necessarily young people alone—but individuals who will serve as sport and well-being ministers on the ground, advocating and championing this work. Secondly, we need practical training and resources for senior church staff and diocesan staff on how to integrate sport and well-being ministry within their strategic objec-

tives. It is not enough for me to ask senior church leaders to consider incorporating sport and well-being into their strategies; they need guidance on how to shape and implement it effectively.

Fourthly, we must increase support and infrastructure in this area. One key lesson we've learned is the value of our "learning community" for individuals in the eight pilot dioceses. This initiative allowed participants to meet every three months to discuss progress, implementation strategies, and challenges in their local churches and communities. We've recognized that having this kind of learning community for those leading this work is absolutely essential. Over the past three years, we've conducted these meetings both online and in person, and we now have a hybrid model. Bringing together individuals, pioneers, and leaders who are committed to advancing this work—whether from local churches or diocesan staff—is crucial.

The fifth recommendation is to enhance partnership development. This means not only encouraging partnerships between local churches, parachurch organizations, and secular community sports organizations but also strategically elevating these collaborations. We need to develop a mindset of interconnected thinking, looking beyond the church, parish, and diocese. We must consider what else is happening in our communities regarding sport and well-being—whether faith-based or not—and seek opportunities to engage and partner in ways that enhance community provisions.

The sixth recommendation concerns funding and identifying financial resources. Many people in the dioceses we've worked with have told us, "This is a great idea, but we simply don't have the money to implement it." Interestingly, the three-year project I am reporting on was funded by a grant-making body outside the Church of England. This highlights the reality that we cannot rely solely on the church to fund everything.

One of our responsibilities is to help people identify potential funding sources, such as grants, to support this work. The more we align with broader agendas related to sport, health, and well-being, the more eligible we become for funding opportunities. We must think beyond the traditional approach of seeking money solely from the church. Given the many financial commitments the church already has, we must adopt a smarter, more strategic approach to funding (Waller & Montgomery, 2020).

Finally, the seventh recommendation is to ensure that each diocese, local context, and parish appoints sport and well-being advocates, champions, or missionaries. Identifying the right person—someone passionate about this work—is essential. Once we have that individual, we must invest in them, equipping and training them properly (Church of England, 2021).

I firmly believe that leadership is about influence. If we identify the right people with the right passion—and, importantly, the right calling from God to do this work in their community, church, parish, or diocese—then we have an obligation to equip and support them. By doing so, we enable them to effectively carry out God's work in this area.

## CONCLUSION

The growing significance of sport and well-being in faith communities, particularly within the Church of England's mission to engage with society beyond traditional religious activities have been highlighted by this paper. The strategic initiative, launched in 2020, represents a landmark effort to integrate sports ministry as a core function within diocesan structures, reinforcing the Church's commitment to holistic well-being. The project findings reveal that sport and physical activity have immense potential to foster social cohesion, improve mental and physical health, and provide opportunities for meaningful community engagement. Despite historical involvement in sports, the Church of England had never developed a formalised strategy—until now. The initiative's structured approach, focusing on leadership, partnership development, evidence-based evaluation, and training, marks a significant shift toward institutionalising sports and well-being in the Church's mission. However, several challenges have emerged, including funding constraints, leadership transitions, and competing social priorities, particularly in a post-COVID era. The disengagement of youth from church activities and the broader church crisis necessitate a rethink of traditional outreach methods. The integration of sports

and well-being into church life presents a compelling strategy to bridge this gap, attracting new demographics while reinforcing the Church's role as a community anchor.

Ultimately, the initiative emphasises the importance of long-term sustainability, the need for continuous evaluation, and the vital role of passionate individuals committed to championing sports ministry. When these challenges with strategic planning, collaboration, and innovation are addressed, the Church can solidify its position as a key player in community development and public health initiatives.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Institutions such as the Church of England should integrate sports and well-being programmes into its official diocesan strategies to ensure long-term sustainability and prevent discontinuity due to leadership transitions. Sports and well-being initiatives should also be embedded in parish action plans, making them a core component of community engagement.
2. Each diocese should appoint a dedicated Sport and Well-being Missioner to oversee initiatives, ensuring consistent leadership and strategic alignment. Bishops and senior diocesan staff should actively promote and support these initiatives to enhance credibility and encourage participation at all levels.
3. Theological colleges should develop formal training programmes for clergy and lay leaders, equipping them with skills to integrate sport and well-being into their ministries. Church leaders should be provided with structured workshops and mentoring opportunities to effectively implement sports ministry programmes.
4. The Church should seek strategic partnerships with government agencies, non-profits, and community sports organizations to expand resources and impact. Greater collaboration with parachurch organizations and secular sports bodies can help integrate faith-based well-being programmes into national public health initiatives.
5. To encourage wider participation, the Church should shift its focus from traditional sports to include general physical activity and mental well-being programmes, making initiatives more inclusive. Programs should incorporate activities such as yoga, walking clubs, dance, and mindfulness sessions to attract a diverse range of participants.
6. The Church should explore external funding sources, including grants, charitable foundations, and government initiatives, rather than relying solely on internal resources.
7. Establishing a network of diocesan leaders and practitioners will facilitate knowledge sharing, improving the quality and effectiveness of sports ministry initiatives.
8. Given the decline in youth church participation, sports-based outreach programmes should be prioritized to reconnect young people with faith communities. The Church should develop faith-based sports leagues, mentorship programmes, and community tournaments to attract and engage young individuals.

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