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Sport, Christianity and Policy Making*Andrew Parker***INTRODUCTION**

Over the last 30-40 years there has been a significant increase in academic literature and wider debate surrounding sport and Christianity (see, for example, Adogame et al., 2017; Hemmings et al., 2019; Hoven et al., 2019; Parker et al., 2016; Watson and Parker, 2013, 2014, 2015; Watson et al., 2020).¹ In part, this is a reflection of the way in which practitioner work in this area has developed not least amongst para-church organisations. That said, the extent to which the sports ministry sector has had an influence on secular sport policy and practice during this period remains questionable and little, if any, impact seems to be evident at the national or international level.² This short paper aims to explore some of the reasons why a vibrant sports ministry sector appears to lack impact in relation to broader sports policy and proposes a number of ways in which the sector might seek to establish greater engagement and influence within the context of mainstream sporting debate.³

SPORT, CHURCH AND SOCIETY

As an industry sport has grown exponentially in recent years becoming a major economic force at the global level and historically speaking it has flourished in both faith-based and secular environments. Yet the growth of public, voluntary and commercial sport in an increasingly secular(ized) world has been accompanied by a decline and aging among church congregations in some regions and nations, many of which often see relatively little value in sport and physical activity. In the UK, for example, recent estimates suggest that only around 3-6% of people regularly attend church and these figures have been further impacted by the COVID pandemic (Davie, 2013; Graham, 2013). Youth engagement is often seen as particularly difficult to maintain and ministry-based organisations routinely attempt to find new ways to attract young people (Smith and Walton, 2012; Goodhew, Roberts and Volland, 2012; Male and Weston, 2019; Diocese of London, 2020). Hence, it would appear timely for those of us working in and around sports ministry to re-consider how the sector might provide a way for the church to connect with a wider audience - especially youth - 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 organisations have attested that churches are showing renewed interest in sport as a vehicle for involving and socialising 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 UK government agendas around social cohesion and community development have emphasised the important role and contribution of faith-based organisations to civil society especially in terms of social outcomes concerning health and wellbeing (see Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG), 2018). In this sense, churches have the potential to be places where wider social 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 organisations have worked with local government and/

1 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" (see: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/sport/europeansports-charter>).

2 For the purposes of the present discussion, I am using 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.

3 For further discussion of a number of the issues raised within this paper, see Parker et al (2021).

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 in the UK 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 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 organisations. Likewise, faith agencies and forums in various geographical regions and locales facilitate all kinds of social welfare ventures, but often make little mention of sport, save occasional references to its role in youth work, this despite government encouragements regarding school and community sport and the establishment of links to promote the multiple benefits of physical activity.

SPORT, CHURCH AND MINISTRY

Of course, connections between the sacred and sport have long since been acknowledged and recent years have witnessed an increasing amount of discussion and debate around the sport-religion interface. In turn, a significant body of related scholarly work has emerged mapping these connections across a range of geographical and religious landscapes. These accounts provide useful insight into the different ways in which sport (and physical activity) has been appropriated by specific belief systems. However, they offer little in terms of recommendations or practical advice on the relationship between sport, Christianity and government policy.

In terms of broader academic debate and, indeed, society at large, it is widely accepted that sport can serve as a transformational tool with the potential to change individual lives and communities – and the sport for development and peace movement routinely provides evidence of this (see, for example, Morgan and Parker, 2017; Morgan et al., 2019a, 2019b, 2020; Parker et al., 2019). By the same token, the Church of England recognises that these transformational processes can be harnessed within the context of the sport/faith relationship. These objectives of the Church of England clearly align with current UK government agendas around health and wellbeing and are perhaps particularly pertinent in a post-pandemic age. Moreover, the nature and timing of the Church of England's strategy represents an explicit statement by church about the way in which it sees itself as being well positioned within local communities to influence and deliver a range social benefits and outcomes around public health and wellbeing (mental and physical). Hence, at its heart, part of the Church of England's work in this area is for the 'common good', and sports ministers (those who work in and around church settings with a specific brief and remit around sport and physical activity) are primarily seen as a way of reaching out to those who have never before attended church through a shared passion and interest in sport.

SPORT, MINISTRY AND SPORT POLICY

So, how, if at all is any of this connected to wider sport policy? I have argued that the work of sports ministry easily aligns with broader sport for development and peace values and initiatives. That said, the extent to which the sports ministry sector has had an influence on secular sport policy remains questionable. Why, we might ask, is this the case? Perhaps it is because sports ministry activity is not coordinated or managed in a formalised or strategic enough way, especially in relation to the availability of data on the impact of its initiatives? Perhaps it is because much of the good work undertaken by sports ministries is undervalued or not communicated well enough at the public level? Perhaps, for some organisations, there are wider issues in play around cultural and/or political sensitivities?

As a sector, sports ministry aligns well with government policies and agendas around sport, physical activity and wellbeing, but appears to lack impact in relation to engagement within the context of mainstream sporting debate and, as a consequence, to broader sports policy making. In closing, it is my belief that a reasonable aspiration for the sports ministry community (both nationally and internationally) is to mobilise in a more strategic and coherent way thereby being better placed to influence wider sporting debates and mainstream policymaking.

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