

Sports Chaplaincy: Reflections on Being a Sports Chaplain

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The Origin of Chaplaincy and its Relevance for Sports Chaplaincy

Christian chaplaincy has its origins in the life and service of St Martin of Tours (316 – 397). After Martin joined the Roman army, legend has it that he cut off half his cape to clothe a naked beggar. Sometime later, Christ appeared to him in a dream wearing the half-cape given to the beggar. Martin was baptised soon after and began to reach the people around him with the love and gospel of Christ. What remained of Martin's cape was preserved in a church which became known by the Latin name *cappella*. The term *capellanus*, from which we derive "chaplain," was the title given to the priest whose special ministry it was to protect the cape.²

Later, the title "chaplain" was given to Christian ministers who once had charge of a chapel but were reassigned to special ministries *outside the church*. Many of these *cappella* served monarchs as advisers in matters both sacred and secular. More recently, the title "*Chaplain*" has been used for Christians serving God and people in a wide range of special ministries outside the church; including the armed forces, emergency services, schools, hospitals, prisons, embassies and sports clubs.³

In the arena of sports, chaplaincy is gaining stature. Over the last thirty years, Christians have been making a growing contribution in the world of sport, from local club level to professional sporting organisations.⁴ In keeping with the historic context of chaplaincy, this ministry predominately takes place outside the church. The locker rooms and playing fields of sports clubs are becoming increasingly accessible to chaplains.

In the case of the National Rugby League, currently thirteen of the sixteen clubs have a chaplain. In recent years, this openness has been heightened by the growing percentage of Islander or Polynesian players across the NRL Competition. These players, it is often assumed, are Christians – or at least people with strong church links – and Chaplains are considered to be club representatives in spiritual matters for them. This specific, perceived need accompanies a general openness to care that is of a spiritual nature for all NRL players and staff. As Chaplain for the North Queensland Cowboys, I was expected to offer support both sacred and secular. I would help out wherever possible, in ways fitting to my skills. I filled a lot of water bottles! I would work cooperatively with all the club's support staff. Indeed, in the exercise of my chaplaincy responsibilities I sometimes worked alongside the club's Sports

¹ Warren was the Chaplain of the North Queensland Cowboys NRL (2009 – 2014), and is currently chaplain for the Norths Devils QRL team and a registered member of Sports Chaplaincy Australia.

² Michael Gladwin, *Captains of the Soul* (Newport: Big Sky Publishing, 2013), 23.

³ E. A. Livingstone, "Chaplain," in *Oxford Concise Dictionary of the Christian Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 110.

⁴ Stephen Reid and Philip Hughes, "Christian Research Association Research Paper No. 13: The Values and Benefits of Sports Chaplaincy in Australia," (2013): 2.

Psychologist. This opened the way for conversations about life, sport and spirituality. Happily, I discovered that the club's psychologist genuinely appreciated and valued the spiritual dimensions of elite athletes. Mark Nesti, a sports psychologist, has advocated that the spiritual dimensions should be considered as part of the discipline of sport psychology. He is promoting "an acceptance of the idea of a person as an embodied spiritual being."⁵ Perhaps, within elite sports clubs, there is a growing recognition of spirituality and the way that it impacts on player performance.

There is a correlation between the current practice of Sports Chaplaincy and the historic roots of chaplaincy - the ministry takes place outside the church and offers support in matters that might be considered sacred or secular. Sports Chaplaincy's growth appears to coincide with a growing recognition of athletes as spiritual beings.

An Approach to Sports Chaplaincy and its Theological Grounding

The following is a personal reflection on my approach to sports chaplaincy and how it has been theologically grounded. I have distilled my methodology into the eight attitudes and approaches:

- Commissioned by God
- Holistic Ministry
- Ambassador for Christ
- Prepared to Share Hope
- Leverage Relationship for Good
- Anticipate Antagonism
- Intercede Continuously, and
- Incremental Progression toward Jesus.

For me, the primary, guiding, biblical passage comes from 1 Peter. This letter is addressed to the scattered and pilgrim, pre-Christendom church. These early believers had no political power. They could not insist, but only invite. Their lives were to be oriented towards doing good to all, in Jesus' name, and to be poised and prepared to share the reason for their Christian faith. The Apostle Peter wrote:

Whoever would love life and see good days must keep his tongue from evil and his lips from deceitful speech. He must turn from evil and do good; he must seek peace and pursue it. For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their prayer, but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil. Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good? But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear; do not be frightened. But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behaviour in Christ may be ashamed of their slander (1 Pet. 3:10-16).

⁵ Jim Parry et al., "Existential Psychology and Sport," in *Sport and Spirituality: An Introduction*, ed. Jim Parry, et al. (London: Routledge, 2007), 117.

In many ways, the pre-Christendom context is similar to our contemporary, post-Christian, chaplaincy setting. We are servants who cannot insist on anything, but hope and pray for opportunities to minister in Jesus' name.

Commissioned by God

Joelle Kambamba, author of "The Chaplaincy Phenomena," describes her foray into school chaplaincy as, "my response to God's call."⁶ She felt personally commissioned by God for this ministry. The Bible records many occasions of commissioning. In the Old Testament, prophets, priests and kings were set apart for special service (1 Sam. 3; 16:1-13). In the New Testament, apostles and missionaries were endorsed and deployed by way of ceremonies of spiritual significance (Acts 1:1-8; 13:1-3). For sports chaplains, there is usually no special ceremony initiating you into service. Nevertheless, it's a sense of spiritual commissioning is what matters most.

Over the course of my chaplaincy ministry to the North Queensland Cowboys, I often needed to remind myself of my calling to this role. This was because, particularly in the early days, the role of a chaplain was not understood or readily accepted. Indeed this appears to be a common experience. The Christian Research Association observed that sports chaplains are often dealing with acceptance, loneliness and "things can get tough at times."⁷ In my first three seasons as chaplain for the North Queensland Cowboys, I was, to my knowledge, the only professing, practicing Christian at the club. Again, this is not uncommon.⁸ This exaggerates the challenges of acceptance and loneliness. Further, when I was approached by a player or staff member, the meeting and matter often needed to be confidential. Consequently and necessarily, the club was not always aware of my ministry. Only God knew. For reasons like these, one naval chaplain christened the Chaplaincy Branch of the Royal Australian Navy 'the Silent Service.' This is the affectionate epithet for the submarine branch.⁹ The point is that chaplaincy work often goes on unseen. In my experience, a lot of sports chaplaincy work goes on below the surface. There is little or no recognition. The good news is that our Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward us (Matt. 6:4)!

A sense of being spiritually commissioned sustained me in the early days when I was very much on the outer. In order to fortify my spirit, I created the following prayer which I've prayed regularly since. It encapsulates each element of my chaplaincy methodology, beginning with a recognition of my calling.

⁶ Joelle Kabamba, *The Chaplaincy Phenomenon* (Brisbane: Spencer Publishing), 2.

⁷ Reid and Hughes, "Christian Research Association Research Paper No. 13: The Values and Benefits of Sports Chaplaincy in Australia," 10.

⁸ Reid and Hughes, "Christian Research Association Research Paper No. 13: The Values and Benefits of Sports Chaplaincy in Australia," 8.

⁹ Rowan Strong, *Chaplains in the Royal Australian Navy* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2012), vi.

The prayer goes:

Heavenly Father,

Today, I am commissioned to do good to the people around me.

If someone has a need I can meet, enable me to see it and meet it.

Help me be a credible ambassador for Christ who serves diligently and models integrity.

May I always be prepared to share my faith and hope in simple, appropriate ways.

Help my relationships deepen and my spiritual influence increase as I invest time in people.

Give me the strength to accept antagonism and respond with a blessing.

Stir me, Holy Spirit, to pray *for* people privately and *with* them opportunistically.

Today, Lord, help me nudge someone in your direction.

A conviction that we have been commissioned by God for chaplaincy ministry provides spiritual support for a Sports Chaplain when the going gets tough and when our contribution at club-level goes unnoticed.

Holistic Ministry

Sports Chaplains care for the people that they serve holistically.¹⁰ Their spiritual ministry encompasses the whole of life. If there is any need that can be practically met – be it physical, emotional, relational, spiritual – a chaplain will endeavour, with God's help, to meet it. This was reflected in the compassionate actions of Jesus who fed the hungry, freed the oppressed, healed the sick, offered hope to people in trouble and comforted those who were grieving. Sports Chaplains are charged to "do good," whatever form that may take (1 Pet. 3:11).

The holistic nature of spiritual ministry has a culinary connection. Monks made minestrone. *Minestrone* is an Italian word derived from the Latin *ministrare*. The English words *minister* and *ministry* are sourced from there. At the heart of these words is the notion of simple service. All kinds of service. Minestrone soups were prepared by monks and kept warm on fires, always ready to be served up to weary travelers. This was a pressing physical need. Their primary response was a practical one. They made nourishing soup. Their spiritual service encompassed care for the whole person, whatever the need might have been. When they saw a need they could meet, they met it.

From early times, chaplains were also advisers. They would help people, as best they could, make sense of life. They would also encourage good decision-making. While chaplains did not possess all

¹⁰ Reid and Hughes, "Christian Research Association Research Paper No. 13: The Values and Benefits of Sports Chaplaincy in Australia," 2.

wisdom, they had this advantage: they thought deeply about God and life. Consequently, they often had insights that were helpful to those unprepared for life's tragedies and spiritual possibilities. Critical incident ministry, while infrequent, is often where sports chaplains can prove their worth. Former Port Adelaide Power (AFL) captain Warren Tredera has written recently of the importance of chaplains in crisis situations.¹¹ His reflections follow the tragic passing of coach, Phil Walsh. The value of my role with the North Queensland Cowboys became especially apparent around the time of the death of player, Alex Elisala. I was able to help players and staff grieve, be a listening ear and a shoulder to cry on, pray with the team and conduct a Memorial Service for the club. These gestures of care were very much appreciated and paved the way for a far greater acceptance of my role as sports chaplain.

Sports Chaplains provide holistic care without discrimination. They serve the people around them regardless of race or religion. We don't require any religious or spiritual commitment from the people we care for.¹² In the course of my chaplaincy, I have offered low level pastoral care to a Muslim, a bisexual person, Atheists and many lapsed Catholics. The parable of the Good Samaritan has helped shape my ministry as a Good Chaplain (Luke 10:25-37). My charge is to do my best to alleviate suffering irrespective of the spiritual status of those affected. For Sports Chaplains, our acts of mercy should be provided without prejudice.

Sports Chaplains serve people holistically and without discrimination. In doing so, we mirror the ministry of Jesus and apply the basic principle taught in the Parable of the Good Samaritan.

Ambassador for Christ

In his Foreword to the book, *The Chaplaincy Phenomenon*, Tim Mander remarked, "These men and women of God are Christ's ambassadors on the frontline of ministry."¹³ As Colonel Brewer told his chaplains, "An Army chaplain is first and foremost an example, not only to those personnel of his faith, but to all...He will be watched carefully."¹⁴ The same can be said of sports chaplains. Chaplains represent God to the people around them. Often, as Reid and Hughes have observed, "they may be the only Christian in that context."¹⁵ The role is an ambassadorial one; our lives and ministry should point people towards Christ (2 Cor. 5:20). People expect this of chaplains. They do not expect them to be absolutely faultless but they *do* expect them to be consistently faithful. So we need to "be wise in the way you act toward outsiders" and "make the most of every opportunity" (Col. 4:5). Of course, we will not be perfect. Chaplains get it wrong. Nevertheless, even when we sin or misrepresent Christ, the way

¹¹ SCA Facebook post, 'TREDREA: Why hardworking chaplain can be a blessing at an under-pressure football club', 21st August 2015, sportschaplaincy.com.au

¹² Reid and Hughes, "Christian Research Association Research Paper No. 13: The Values and Benefits of Sports Chaplaincy in Australia," 2.

¹³ Foreword Tim Mander, Kabamba, *The Chaplaincy Phenomenon*, 8.

¹⁴ Colonel C. J. Brewer, AM Chief of Staff 2nd Division; 'Opening Address – Chaplains Conference – Nov 93'.

¹⁵ Reid and Hughes, "Christian Research Association Research Paper No. 13: The Values and Benefits of Sports Chaplaincy in Australia," 2.

we repent and respond in the aftermath of our sins and mistakes can bear witness to God's goodness and grace.

Sports chaplains aim to imitate Christ and live lives worthy of imitation (1 Thess. 1:6). This is no easy calling given the complexity of the challenges around us. Nevertheless, our charge is to respond as we believe Jesus would. This ability to discern what Jesus would do flows from a deep commitment to his Lordship in your life. The Bible says, "In your hearts set apart Christ as Lord" (1 Pet. 3:15). Here, "the sense of fear or reverence for the Lord rather than the fear of men is reinforced."¹⁶ The implication is a "constant willingness to speak up for him, to confess one's allegiance to him, and to witness fearlessly to his saving grace."¹⁷

This 'set-apartness' means that a chaplain's life will probably stand out from the crowd. Our ambassadorship takes precedence over peer acceptance. Sadly, Colonel Brewer had come across chaplains "who strove so hard for acceptance that they became the hardest drinkers and cursers in the unit."¹⁸ This indictment lists a tiny sample of the kinds of compromises that drag the Gospel into disrepute and our chaplaincy to disdain. Better the example of a World War I chaplain, William McKenzie, who sought to keep a conscience, "void of offence towards God and towards man."¹⁹ Consequently, people said of him, "No man ever did more to uplift Christianity."²⁰ In a sense, a chaplain's life should be prophetic in that it points people upward to Christ, to the kingdom of God, and to a new and abundant lifestyle. In my experience, this goes a long way towards creating the right conditions for spiritual conversations.

Sports chaplaincy ministry is ambassadorial in nature. We are conscious that the people we serve are forming an opinion about Christ and his Gospel as they interact with us.

Prepared to Share Hope

The Apostle Peter instructed the recipients of his letter to always be prepared to share the reason for their hope (1 Pet. 3:15). For Sports Teams, the horizon of hope can be the next game or the next season. Sports Chaplains offer the lasting hope of life with Jesus Christ. As the National Director of Sports Chaplaincy Australia, Cameron Butler, wrote in the Foreword of *Our Daily Bread – Sports Chaplaincy Edition*, "We desperately need hope and...hope is sure for anyone when they are in a personal relationship with Jesus Christ."²¹

Preparation requires forethought. Sports chaplains endeavour to know how to respond when life and faith questions are posed. Hopefully, our ambassadorial lifestyle has raised people's curiosity. People

¹⁶ Wayne Grudem, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: 1 Peter* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 152..

¹⁷ Scot McKnight, *The New Application Commentary: 1 Peter* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 213.

¹⁸ Colonel C. J. Brewer, AM Chief of Staff 2nd Division; 'Opening Address – Chaplains Conference – Nov 93'.

¹⁹ Col Stringer, *'Fighting' McKenzie: Anzac Chaplain* (Robina: Col Stringer Ministries, 2002), 41.

²⁰ Stringer, *'Fighting' McKenzie: Anzac Chaplain*, 93.

²¹ Cameron Butler, *'It Matters' (Our Daily Bread - Sports Chaplaincy Edition)* (Grand Rapids: RBC Ministries, 2014), 3.

will want to know the reasons why. While the Bible predicts that Christians will face interrogation at formal trials on account of their faith, there is also an expectation that they will frequently be asked questions in informal, spontaneous and ordinary conversations.²² “Christians are, in other words, expected to be prepared to speak at any moment about God’s salvation of his people through Jesus Christ and how this salvation manifests itself at the end of history.”²³

For me, part of this preparation involves understanding what Australians generally think about Christianity and the Church. Anecdotally, the vast majority of players and staff that I’ve been involved with already have some ideas and opinions about these. Recent Australian research reveals there are nine common obstacles that people have to accepting the Christian faith.²⁴ They are problems related to suffering, the Bible, the supernatural, religious violence, exclusive faith, church abuse, science and God, homosexuality, and the church. I, therefore, anticipate that these issues will be raised and I try to ensure that I can give a helpful and meaningful response, always pointing to Jesus.

Of course, sports chaplains must be prepared to respond in the right way. It is very easy to get defensive, aggressive or dismissive when sharing or upholding the Christian faith. This is especially true when objections are framed in belligerent or condescending ways. Therefore, chaplains need to be open-hearted and relationally generous when answering faith-questions or objections. The Bible says, “Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone” (Col. 4:6), and, “do this [give an answer] with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behaviour in Christ may be ashamed of their slander” (1 Pet. 3:15-16). The manner in which we give our answers often determines the receptiveness of the enquirer.

As sports chaplains, we offer hope, especially *eternal* hope in Jesus Christ. To do this well, we should be prepared. We need to anticipate and understand the questions we could be asked and provide a meaningful response in an appropriate manner.

Leverage Relationships for Good

Chaplaincy is a ministry of interpersonal connectivity. This is the essence of the Peter Laughlin’s article, “A Trinitarian Ministry of Presence” which also appears in this edition of *Crucible*. Very little happens without building relationships. Reid and Hughes noted that much of the content of interviews with chaplains, “suggested that in order for opportunities to present themselves the chaplains first had to build rapport and develop their role so that they were fully accepted by players, families and other people around the club.”²⁵ This is certainly my experience. To quote Colonel Brewer again: “Respect

²² A. M. Stibbs and A. F. Walls, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: 1 Peter* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1983). 135.

²³ McKnight, *The New Application Commentary: 1 Peter*, 214.

²⁴ Karl Faase, *Towards Belief DVD and Discussion Guide* (Sydney: Olive Tree Media, 2013).

²⁵ Reid and Hughes, “Christian Research Association Research Paper No. 13: The Values and Benefits of Sports Chaplaincy in Australia,” 5.

must be earned and nurtured carefully...A chaplain must participate and be involved in as many unit activities as possible...His commitment and sharing of demanding activities will do more for his acceptance as a worthy team member than most other endeavours combined.”²⁶

There is an undeniable correlation between the level of trust and acceptance, and the potential for ministry and influence. Once earned, this relational leverage can be used for good and godly purposes. In my experience, there are three identifiable, ascending levels of influence in the exercise of chaplaincy ministry. They are outlined below.

First level

Firstly, people at the club need to become confident that you are a decent, trustworthy human being. They need to get to know you and feel comfortable around you. People will evaluate you. This all takes time. It certainly helps if they end up liking you. Your usual interactions ought to inspire confidence and earn you a good reputation. This happens when you:

- attend training regularly;
- fill water bottles, go get the strapping tape and things like that;
- hang around after games (and especially losses when the locker room can be lonely);
- have fun on social occasions.

Second level

Relationships deepen when you connect with people outside of the usual, everyday context. When you spend time with people “after-hours,” friendships reach a new level. I call them “second level” relationships. In my role as sports chaplain, I will:

- catch up for coffee with a player or staff member;
- invite them over to my house for a meal;
- have a quick chat if I bump into them shopping or down the street.

This relational bridge-building encourages genuine relationships and increases the likelihood of openness to talk about deeper things, including spirituality. It also opens doors for ministry during times of crisis.

Third level

Some relationships will turn into spiritual friendships. I call them “third level” relationships. As sports chaplain, I have guided people toward faith in Christ. During this exciting stage, I’m ready to answer all the questions I can, as well as share what I have learned along the way. By this time, it’s the right time

²⁶ Colonel C. J. Brewer, AM Chief of Staff 2nd Division; ‘Opening Address – Chaplains Conference – Nov 93’.

to introduce the player or staff member to a wider circle of Christians including, if appropriate, my local church. The following is an example from my chaplaincy journey.

Chaplaincy Story

Aaron [not the player's real name] came to the Footy club as an 18 year old. I used to fill his water bottle at training and we'd have short talks. He was homesick, so after a while I invited him over for a meal with my family. Over time we got to know each other more. Aaron had a church background and, because he showed interest, we started meeting to study the Bible together when his training and travel schedule allowed. It became a "third level" relationship. Some months later, he committed his life to Christ. It was my privilege to help him learn to pray and to connect with a local church. He has since been signed with another club and moved on. I still think of him regularly and continue to pray for him.

My prayerful goal is that some of my chaplaincy relationships will become spiritual friendships as the people I serve come to know Christ as Saviour. As a sports chaplain, I genuinely love and serve people while consciously leveraging my relationships for good.

Anticipate Antagonism

Most sports chaplains in the group interviewed by Reid and Hughes, indicated that there was "some hesitation" and "occasional rejection" of them in their role. The work of a chaplain is not always appreciated or welcomed. The Bible anticipates that we will sometimes suffer for doing good (1 Pet. 3:14). Chaplains should, therefore, expect some level of opposition and resolve to conduct ourselves in a manner worthy of our commissioning and ambassadorial role.

I have experienced rejection in the course of my sports chaplaincy ministry. For a variety of reasons, not everyone is open to receive care from a chaplain-type person. Some people have a strictly secular view of life and see religious leanings as a form of delusion. Others have a strong commitment to a different religion. Consequently, sports chaplaincy might be considered an unwelcome intrusion. Some chaplains have experienced considerable rejection. A World War I chaplain wrote of being barely tolerated and given the "cold shoulder."²⁷ The challenge then was to "maintain a cheerful and gracious attitude, together with a deep spirituality."²⁸

²⁷ Michael Petras, *Letters from the Front: Australian Baptists and World War I* (Sydney: Baptist Historical Society of N.S.W., 2009), 78.

²⁸ Petras, *Letters from the Front: Australian Baptists and World War I*, 78.

So, rather than shrinking back from our calling, sports chaplains need to accept rejection as the inevitable reaction of some and respond in the right way. Here are some ways I have chosen to respond to rejection, based directly on biblical advice:

- 1) Seek peace and pursue it (1 Pet. 3:11). This requires creative exploration of possible solutions. This requires constant exertion of spiritual strength. The Bible says, "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone" (Rom. 12:8). Chaplains need to model peacemaking.
- 2) Love your enemies and do good to those who hate you (Luk. 6:27). This command from Jesus requires more than displaying restraint. It demands that we actively bless those who reject us. The application means that we don't antagonise those who oppose our ministry. Instead, we find ways to add value to their lives.
- 3) Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you (Mat. 5:44). Jesus prayed for those who crucified him asking, "Father, forgive them" (Luk. 23:34). He blessed those who cursed him. No one at the club has ever "persecuted" me. But I have experienced sneers and been ridiculed. I have prayed strenuously for the people who have resented my chaplaincy ministry most.
- 4) Entrust yourself and the circumstances "to him who judges justly" (1 Pet. 2:23). Christ did not retaliate. He did not even raise his voice in his own defence. His life was lived openly before friend and foe. People could evaluate the evidence. I try to let my good reputation speak for itself and give God room to respond as he sees fit, and, let your conduct be such "that those who speak maliciously against [my] good behaviour in Christ may be ashamed of their slander" (1 Pet. 3:16). [*Personal pronoun added for emphasis.*]

Not everyone at the Cowboys was positive about my presence at the club. Nevertheless, after a player tragically suicided, I was heavily involved in team and staff welfare. It was then that a high profile player commented, "I used to wonder why #@%* we had a chaplain. Now I think I know." Opinions can change, so we hope for the best!

Some antagonism towards sports chaplaincy ministry is inevitable. Rather than shrink back or counter-attack, sports chaplains need to respond positively and graciously.

Intercede Continuously

Chaplains should be people who pray. They should intercede on behalf of the people they serve. In the Bible, intercession is the form of prayer on behalf of another with a view to obtaining help for that other.²⁹ This is a major duty of chaplaincy ministry, and, we should pray in faith believing that "the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their prayer" (1 Pet. 3:12).

²⁹ R. S. Wallace, "Intercession," in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Vol 2* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), 858.

As a sports chaplain, I pray regularly *for* the players and staff. I pray for them by name and bring to God their problems and aspirations. The deeper the relationship that I have, the more informed my prayers will be. I ask God to open the door of their hearts to Jesus Christ. I pray against the dark plans of our spiritual enemies.

As a sports chaplain, I pray *with* the people I serve when appropriate opportunities arise. I look for opportunities to pray with people when they share their deep concerns. I make the prayer short, simple and sincere. As chaplain, I have prayed in front of thirty hardened sportsmen when news of a tragedy broke. No one resisted it. Many were helped by it and thanked me for it. When a chaplain prays aloud with someone experiencing trauma, God is openly invited into the situation.

Sometimes, sports chaplains *teach* people to pray. This can be part of our role in supporting Christians in the club. This is the kind of spiritual coaching that happens in “third level” relationships when you function as a spiritual friend and coach. Jesus’ disciples asked if he could teach them to pray (Luk. 11:1). While Jesus passionately interceded for them (Jn. 17:6-19), he also encouraged them in their own prayer life. A chaplain will do the same. For me, it was so powerful to hear “Aaron” (mentioned above) praying for the first time. It was a hesitant, mumbled prayer for sure, but a real breakthrough for him! He started to pray regularly at home and more confidently when we met. To my great surprise, he even turned up to a church prayer meeting! I’ll never forget him praying aloud in a circle of people that night. I was so amazed and pleased and felt that God was smiling on the whole situation.

Chaplain Oswald Chambers wrote: “Jesus Christ carries on intercession for us in heaven; the Holy Ghost carries on intercession in us on earth; and we the saints have to carry on intercession for all men.”³⁰ This intercessory role is vital in Sports Chaplaincy.

Incremental Progression toward Jesus

The Apostle Paul relentlessly encouraged people to accept Christ and his Gospel. While he had this main goal, his approach took into account the starting point of his listeners. In the case of the Jews, he reasoned directly from the scriptures (Acts 17:2). To the pagan Athenians, he began with their spiritual symbols (Acts 17:23) and poets (Acts 17:28). From this starting point, he progressively introduced them to Jesus (Acts 17:31). His methodology of persuasion acknowledged that his hearers were at different stages of understanding and that it might take time. Paul’s hopes for Agrippa are illustrative of this point. The Bible records:

Agrippa said to Paul, “Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?” Paul replied, “Short time or long - I pray to God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am...” (Acts 26: 28-29).

³⁰ Quoted by Frank Abrahamsen, *A Study on Prayer: Prayer is Power* (Raleigh: Lulu, 2011), 105.

Chaplains recognise that there are often many incremental steps in a person's journey to Jesus. The people we serve are at different stages of spiritual understanding and openness. Our role is to gently and opportunely turn people's attention towards God and the Gospel. There are a number of ways that a chaplain can encourage spiritual progress towards Jesus. Below are some of them.

- 1) Our own example should get people's attention. The way we live should preach the Gospel. As Australian soldiers said of Chaplain McKenzie, "He made religion live and lived it himself, never ramming it down tired men's throat[s]."³¹
- 2) Displaying courage under pressure gets people's attention. This is especially true when you are elbow to elbow in the trenches of a crisis. In a World War I letter from the frontline, a chaplain wrote: "A thousand eyes are on the [chaplain], to see whether his bearing is as bold and fearless when Death is reaching out his bony hand...Should he shrink or fail in the test, then where, think you, will his influence be?"³² Showing good courage elevates people's perception of you and the faith that you profess.
- 3) Humble service gets people's attention. The Christian faith is founded on simple service. When you do the grimy, inconvenient jobs that no one else wants to do and look after the interests of others, you imitate Christ's loving humility and personify the grace of the Gospel (Phil. 2:1-8).
- 4) Invite people to investigate the Christian faith for themselves. I meet with people who show genuine interest in spiritual things and we study the Bible together. I try not to miss the opportunity to foster potential 'third level' relationships. In the case of at least one NRL club, the chaplain hosts a Bible study at the club with the coach's endorsement.

Sports chaplains work the "Engels." James F. Engel developed a simple scale as a way of representing the sometimes long journey from knowing little or nothing about God through to Christian maturity. The model illustrates the *process* of conversion that usually involves various decision-making steps along the way to becoming a Christian. It also demonstrates the accumulative value of little nudges in the right direction.

Conclusion

"A good chaplain is a priceless asset and the spiritual reward from doing a job well done, must be profound."³³ That's how Colonel Brewer concluded his talk to military Chaplains. When sports chaplains persist in their ministry, it precipitates moments when players and staff gain an appreciation for the role we play in their lives. After the memorial service for a player who passed away in tragic circumstances, a senior club official wrote me this email:

³¹ Stringer, *'Fighting' McKenzie: Anzac Chaplain*: 93.

³² Petras, *Letters from the Front: Australian Baptists and World War I*.

³³ Colonel C. J. Brewer, AM Chief of Staff 2nd Division; 'Opening Address – Chaplains Conference – Nov 93'.

I cannot thank you enough for what you have done for our club and its players this week. Mate, your friendship, compassion, leadership and support were of the highest quality and something we will always treasure. On behalf of me and the players please accept our deepest thanks.

My role as a sports chaplain has been a very rewarding experience. Over five seasons, I have forged the eight attitudes and approaches above. Each is grounded by theological insights from the Bible, especially 1 Peter 3:10-16. This theological reflection, field-tested in my role as chaplain for the North Queensland Cowboys, has shaped my chaplaincy methodology. My hope is that this article contributes to this growing arena of mission, that predominately takes place outside the church.

[This material is copyright and is an adaptation of my future book Unofficial Chaplain to be published by City Harvest International.]