

# **A Strategy for Developing a Sustainable Sports Ministry through Soccer Evangelism in the Local Churches in Tshwane Using Browning's Multidisciplinary Model**

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## **Abstract**

Due to the recent participation of numerous South African churches in various outreach programmes during the 2010 FIFA World Cup™, there has been renewed focus on the opportunities available for sports ministries in local churches today. The aim of this article is to present a strategy for developing a sustainable sports ministry through soccer evangelism in the local churches in Tshwane, using Browning's multidisciplinary model with its four sub-movements: descriptive theology, historical theology, systematic theology, and strategic practical theology.

## **Introduction**

South African churches remain largely disengaged from sport. However, in the past thirty years, there has been a gradual re-engagement between Christians and sport in South Africa. However, this has been largely led by para-church and mission organisations, such as Sport for Christ Action South Africa (SCAS), and Athletes in Action

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<sup>1</sup> The views expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the beliefs of the South African Theological Seminary.

(AIA). Both of these organisations (formed in the 1980s), and others like them, largely worked within the world of student and professional sports, rather than through local churches. Some churches have formed sports teams and play within so-called 'Christian Leagues', while other churches provide opportunities for recreational sport. However, it is still quite rare today to find a church with a specialised sports ministry department.

The aim of this article is to present a strategy for developing a sustainable sports ministry through soccer evangelism in the local churches in Tshwane, using Browning's multidisciplinary model.

## **1. The Current Situation (Descriptive Theology)**

The first sub-movement in Browning's model is what he calls 'descriptive theology'. In terms of this sub-movement, all of the practices of a religious community are 'theory-laden' (Browning 1991:6). Descriptive theology involves an in-depth description of these practices in order to uncover the various meanings present in the current situation. It asks the basic question: how do we understand this concrete situation in which we must act? (Browning 1991:55).

The question arises: what is the current situation of sports ministry in South African churches? Due to the recent focus on the 2010 FIFA World Cup™ in South Africa, a re-engagement between church and sport is occurring as more and more churches are developing sports outreach programmes. For this reason, it is vital that a theological framework for the re-engagement of the church with sport should be developed in order to ensure that there is a lasting Christian presence and influence within the world of sport in South Africa.

Tim Tucker (2011:128–149) conducted an empirical survey (using questionnaires) amongst selected church leaders in Tshwane, South Africa, to ascertain their perceptions regarding sports ministry. The survey indicated a fairly low level of engagement between churches in Tshwane, and sport.

A total of thirty-two church leaders from a wide variety of denominational and cultural backgrounds participated in the survey. Of the thirty-two respondents, twelve indicated that they had an existing sports ministry in their church. However, of these twelve, eight had begun their sports ministry in the past two years. Therefore, only four of the thirty-two church leaders had, what may be considered as, an established sports ministry. This finding supports the view that churches are re-engaging in sports ministry, and that the FIFA World Cup™ was a factor in this renewed re-engagement with sport. This is confirmed by the fact that twenty-three of the thirty-two church leaders indicated that they intended to participate in some form of outreach during the 2010 FIFA World Cup™ itself.

In the survey, the church leaders indicated that the main hindrance to getting involved in sports ministry was the pressure to participate on a Sunday. They expressed their concern for the protection of the ‘Sabbath’, and the paramount importance of attending Sunday worship services. The second main concern was the threat that football could become an idol in the life of the participant. Of the twenty churches without a sports ministry, thirteen of the leaders highlighted a lack of resources (volunteers, time, facilities, and training) as being a significant factor that was preventing them from pursuing sports ministry.

The survey also provided insight into the main reasons why churches develop a sports ministry—based upon the work of Rodger Oswald

(2002:2). Of the ten listed reasons (motivations) for developing a sports ministry, the church leaders selected the following as being the most important:

- Sports ministry can assist the church in fulfilling the Great Commission.
- Sports ministry can help churches to cross cultural barriers, thereby extending greater influence in their community and engaging in mission.

Both of these motives are highly evangelistic in nature and, therefore, demonstrate that the church leaders believe that sports ministry is essentially evangelistic and missional in nature.

## **2. An Examination of the Historical Relationship between Christianity and Sport in the West (Historical Theology)**

The second sub-movement in Browning's model is 'historical theology.' It examines the texts of given communities and means putting 'theory-laden questions that emerge from contemporary practices to the great religious monuments of the religious tradition' (Browning 1991:175). It asks the basic question: what do the normative texts that are already part of our effective history really imply for our praxis when they are confronted as honestly as possible? (Browning 1991:49)

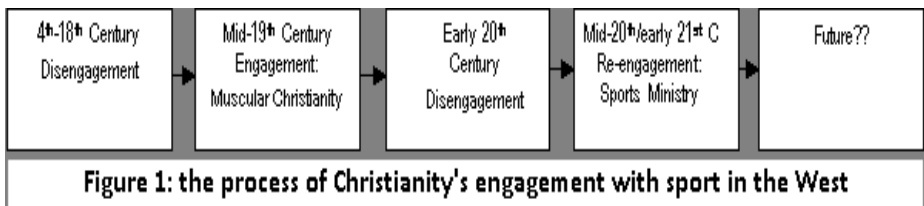
In the context of sports ministry: what is the historical relationship between the church and sport in the West? In their comprehensive study of the Muscular Christianity movement, Ladd and Mathisen (1999:20) indicate that, in the West, trends fluctuating between engagement and

disengagement can be detected in the relationship between the church and sport. According to Ladd and Mathisen (1999:20):

- The term ‘engagement’ is a term used to define a period in history when the church, in a particular country or culture, was actively supportive of Christian involvement in, and interaction with, the world of sport.
- The term ‘disengagement’ is used to define a period in history, when the church, in a particular country or culture, was not supportive of Christian involvement in, and interaction with, the world of sport.

In each period of engagement and disengagement different theological emphases can be discerned that influenced the church’s interaction with sport. Doctrines, such as dualism, have been documented as being an underlying influence during periods of disengagement.

The historical relationship between Christianity and sport in the West can be illustrated as follows:



## 2.1. Early Church: from engagement to disengagement

The history of the relationship between Christianity and sport goes back to the early church. Sport played an important role in both Greek and Roman cultures, with the Apostle Paul drawing analogies from the world of sport to illustrate Christian principles. However, as Roman

sport began to become more gruesome, and the Coliseum became a venue for sporting atrocities, the church understandably distanced itself from sport (Garner 2003:39).

## **2.2. Middle Ages: disengagement**

The church remained largely disengaged from the world of sport throughout the time of the early church and into the Middle Ages. In Britain, the role of sport in society was largely controlled by the preferences of the monarchy, although the church attempted to control leisure practices that were deemed unacceptable on holy days (Tyndall 2004:10). The majority of clergy considered sport a distraction that took people's mind and attention away from the things of God (Garner 2003:39).

## **2.3. The Reformation: disengagement, but changing attitudes**

It was through the Reformation that the door opened for Christians to return to a more biblical view of the relationship between the body, mind, and spirit. Luther was a leading light in this regard (Garner 2003:40). Ultimately, this would lead to the establishment of a biblical foundation for the church to re-engage in sport. As the Puritans were persecuted in England and made their way to the United States, their doctrines greatly influenced the Founding Fathers, who saw little value in sports (Price 2001:15). Despite the emergence of a more holistic theology during this period, the church, as a whole, remained disengaged from sport.

## **2.4. Nineteenth-century: engagement through Muscular Christianity**

The attitude of the church towards sport changed drastically in the nineteenth-century. Putney gives a very succinct definition of muscular Christianity, as simply being ‘a Christian commitment to health and manliness’ (Putney 2003:11). After many centuries of Christians being disassociated from and disinterested in sport (Garner 2003:39), the doctrine of Muscular Christianity brought about a new era of engagement between Christianity and sport. The Muscular Christianity movement, in turn, greatly influenced world mission, and Muscular Missionaries travelled to Africa and beyond with a Bible in one hand, and a ball in the other (Armstrong and Giulianotti 2004:8).

## **2.5. Early twentieth-century: from engagement to disengagement**

At the end of the nineteenth-century, sports ministry was growing and playing a vital and vibrant role in churches in Western countries, and through missionaries entering into foreign nations. However, the momentum slowed down and Christians began to turn their backs on sports ministry—even becoming overtly critical of Christians participating in sport. As the twentieth-century dawned, sport became even more popular and powerful. As sports stars gained fame and fortune, the church began to turn its back on what it had previously embraced. The church viewed its embracing of sport as having backfired. Sport was becoming popular at the expense of faith, with sport becoming a religion in and of itself (Connor 2003:4, 32).

## **2.6. Mid-twentieth-century to current: re-engagement through sports ministry**

In the mid-twentieth-century, with the U.S.A. leading the way, the church started to re-engage with the world of sport, recognising the potential of impacting the world for Christ through sports outreach. This rebirth gave rise to the term 'Sports Ministry' (Mason 2003:20). Factors that led to this re-engagement include the following: church-based sports and recreation ministries, celebrity sports people being used to attract a crowd at crusades, sports mission teams travelling from the U.S.A. to other countries, specialised sports ministries being established to reach sports people with the gospel, and outreach taking place at major sporting events, such as the Olympic Games and the FIFA World Cups.

In Africa, the re-engagement process is presently underway, as full-time sports ministries view the sports field as an opportunity to reap a harvest of souls. Although 'para-church' ministries are taking the lead in this re-engagement, many churches are re-evaluating ways in which to influence the world of sport for Christ.

## **3. Biblical Themes in Sports Ministry (Systematic Theology)**

The third sub-movement in Browning's model is 'systematic theology.' It is the task of systematic theology to identify these 'common issues', and then, to search the normative Christian texts for 'general themes' that will address these practical issues and questions of the culture. It asks the basic question: how do we critically defend the norms of our praxis in this concrete situation? (Browning 1991:51, 52–53)



The question arises: what normative Christian texts can be used to address the practical issues relating to sports ministry in the South African context? A growing number of sports ministry practitioners are presenting theological models as a framework for sports ministry. In this section, three of these models will be examined; key components of each will be highlighted. These models are all presented in books that have been written for the general Christian market and, therefore, they are perhaps not fully developed. However, they nevertheless provide very useful frameworks for the development of a theological basis for sports evangelism and ministry.

### 3.1. Steve Connor

Steve Connor (2003:49) proposes five ‘unique but interrelated’ principles as a theological basis for sports ministry. From these foundational principles, he proposes a methodology for fulfilling the Great Commission of ‘making disciples’:

**Proclamation:** Connor’s foundational verse for his principle of proclamation is Romans 10:14–15. He believes that ‘verbalisation of the truth’ (2003:53) is an essential component of evangelism, which is the core of sports ministry. The ‘transmission of truth’ is vital in the Christian’s evangelistic task.

**Demonstration:** For Connor, demonstration entails the ‘visualisation of truth’; the physical embodiment of Christ’s command to love God and love people. A key verse is Romans 5:8 (Connor 2002:65).

**Maturation:** Connor proposes the following formula: incubation + education + application = maturation (Connor 2003:74). The process of maturation involves the cultivation of truth in the life of believers until

they, 'become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ' (Eph 4:1).

**Reproduction:** 2 Timothy 2:2 is Connor's key verse in his emphasis of the need to 'reproduce reproducers.' Here, Paul instructs Timothy to entrust his teachings to 'reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others.' Connor advocates a strategic approach of 'training others to reproduce.' He believes that, 'the key to cohesive sports ministry in the local church is leadership training' (Connor 2003:85, 87, 88).

**Sportsmanship:** The final principle in Connor's model is sportsmanship; encouraging a Christian sports culture. Connor recognises that the world of sport itself needs to be influenced and transformed by the way Christians compete (Connor 2003:93, 94). Titus 2:6–8 gives a mandate to Christian sports people to be 'self-controlled' and to set a 'good example'.

### 3.2. Rodger Oswald

Rodger Oswald has written a number of publications on a theological and biblical framework for sports ministry. His target audience is principally the church. His main theological emphasis centres on the mandate, means, and methodology for sports evangelism. Using these three pillars of sports ministry, he exhorts the church to consider sport as a key field of evangelism in the world today.

**The mandate:** Rodger Oswald's launching point for his theological framework for sports ministry is the general biblical mandate for evangelism. 'The mandate is clear: Jesus is to be proclaimed. Jesus is to be preached. Christians are to have a testimony. We are to be witnesses of Jesus Christ into the entire world' (Garner 2003:27). He underlines that it is a contradiction to be a follower of Christ and not make his

message known to others; therefore, the mandate of Christ is applicable to all believers in all walks of life, including the world of sport (Oswald 2002:9).

**The means:** Oswald indicates that the means through which God will reach sports people with the gospel would be through Christian sports people with a specific call to utilise their sporting gift and passion in the service of Christ (Garner 2003:29). Oswald (2002:9) elaborates:

As one who serves the Lord and the gospel message, we often find that we have a special gift, ability or even the uniqueness of where we are born and the things we have accomplished that makes our proclamation more poignant ... perhaps even the distinctive of being an athlete or athletically inclined for the sake of the gospel.

**The methodology:** Oswald underlines the importance of the following: any culturally relevant method of evangelism should be tested against scripture, ‘to determine a biblical pattern for carrying out the mandate.’ In his writings, Oswald provides scriptural principles, which he believes ‘create an apologetic that endorses, liberates, and compels one to consider where this unique ministry ought to fit into one’s life or into the ministry life of the church’ (Garner 2003:30). He believes that these biblical principles provide ‘clear latitude for the employment of methodology (even in sports ministry) for the sake of the gospel’ (Oswald 2002:10).

### 3.3. Graham Daniels and Stuart Weir

Graham Daniels and Stuart Weir have written a number of articles and books geared towards mobilising Christian sports people towards evangelism. Through the ministry of Christians in Sport in the U.K., Daniels and Weir have developed a practical theological framework for

sports evangelism based upon Colossians 4:2–6. They state that, 'It can be argued that the mission of the Christian in the world of sport is summed up by the three words pray, play and say' (Daniels and Weir 2008:§2¶7). The following is a summary of the key points of their model.

**Pray:** Paul writes in Colossians 4:2–3, 'Devote yourselves to prayer ... And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message.' For Paul, it is critical that believers pray both for openings to explain the good news of Jesus Christ, and to clarify the explanation when that opportunity arises (Daniels and Weir 2005:8). The challenge to Christians in the world of sport is to pray for those with whom they interact on the sports field, so that opportunities to share Christ's love might emerge.

**Play:** Daniels and Weir contend that opportunities to share Christ's love will emerge only in proportion to how Christians demonstrate Christ's love through their sporting participations. They elaborate as follows: 'It's the way we play, both on and off the field that will earn us the right to speak of Christ'. Christian sports people should always be aware of the fact that they are always 'Christ's ambassadors' (2 Cor 5:20). Those who have sporting gifts need to recognise that they are living out their faith in a public arena, and that the effectiveness of their testimony is directly linked to the way they play. Christian sports people need to be actively seeking opportunities to impact the culture of sport with the gospel as they seek 'greater opportunities to represent Christ in word and deed' (Daniels and Weir 2005:9, 10).

**Say:** In this regard, the Apostle Paul says: 'Make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone' (Col 4:5b–6). Daniels and Weir contend that as Christians pray for opportunities to

share their faith, and as they live lives which actively demonstrate the love of Christ, so opportunities to verbally proclaim the gospel will transpire. This principle can be summarised as follows: ‘Those who pray are more likely to get to say!’ Through active participation in a godly manner, friendships can be formed, which can lead to openings to share the gospel with other sports people (Daniels and Weir 2005:10, 11).

#### **4. A Strategy for Developing a Sustainable Sports Ministry using the PRIOR Model (Strategic Practical Theology)**

The fourth sub-movement of theology, ‘strategic practical theology’, is a microcosm of the greater four sub-movement paradigm of ‘fundamental practical theology’. The first three sub-movements of a fundamental practical theology prepare the researcher for a discussion of the structure and methods of a strategic practical theology (Browning 1991:54). It asks the following basic questions: what should be our praxis in this concrete situation? What means, strategies, and rhetorics should one use in this concrete situation? (Browning 1991:55, 56).

The basic question in the context of sports ministry in South Africa is: what strategy should be used in South Africa for developing a sustainable sports ministry in local churches? The authors propose a strategy for a sustainable sports ministry in the form of five basic principles of evangelism through sports ministry. These principles have been derived from the previous three sub-movements of Browning’s multidisciplinary model, especially the third sub-movement relating to the biblical themes of sports ministry. The researchers have joined together these five basic principles to form the PRIOR model:

Proclamation, Reconciliation, Incarnation, Organisation, and Reproduction.

#### **4.1. Proclamation: the message**

Evangelism, by definition, requires the public proclamation of the gospel; 'evangelism itself is the proclamation of the historical, biblical Christ as Saviour and Lord, with a view to persuading people to come to him personally and so be reconciled to God' (Taken from the Lausanne Covenant 1974, quoted in Elwell 1993:166).

Jesus himself commissioned his disciples to take the gospel to the ends of the earth (Matt 28:18–20), and the New Testament consistently teaches that the followers of Christ are to proclaim the message (e.g. 2 Tim 4:2–5). Within today's sports-mad society, the challenge of the church is to find effective means to proclaim the unchanging message in a relevant way within the world of sport. The focus of proclamation is to accurately share the gospel message as revealed in scripture. Connor (2003:55) contends that the message should not be changed or compromised, even if the methods of evangelism are adapted for the sporting context.

#### **4.2. Reconciliation: the motive**

Reconciliation is a key biblical principle and serves as the motive for evangelism through sports ministry. In 2 Corinthians 5:18, the Apostle Paul states that we have been given the 'ministry of reconciliation' by Christ.

In a divided world, sport provides a practical medium through which to proclaim the message of reconciliation. In particular, the continent of Africa has found a shared identity through the game of football

(Hawkey 2009:5). This message of reconciliation provides a powerful metaphor for sports ministers to utilise when sharing the gospel. It has also helped them to sensitise football players in Africa to the concept of reconciliation.

In South Africa, the general public is very aware of the concept of reconciliation, and the power that sport can play in facilitating reconciliation between peoples of different races and backgrounds. This was clearly demonstrated during the 1995 Rugby World Cup, which was hosted in South Africa, when the process of reconciliation was spurred on by the person of Nelson Mandela (Carlin 2008:203). More recently, the 2010 FIFA World Cup™ contributed greatly towards the process of national reconciliation and the concept of nation building.

### **4.3. Incarnation: the means**

An incarnational approach to ministry is the means through which the gospel message should be proclaimed in the world of sport. The Lausanne Covenant clearly stated that, ‘Our Christian presence in the world is indispensable to evangelism, and so is that kind of dialogue whose purpose is to listen sensitively in order to understand’ (Taken from the Lausanne Covenant 1974 quoted in Elwell 1993:166). Mason (2003:42) argues that, ‘For society to be transformed by the Word of God it has to be first of all penetrated by the people of God.’ The doctrine of the incarnation of Christ is central to Christian belief, and is therefore a powerful model for ministry (Weir 2000:105). Tredway (2006:62) elaborates: ‘The incarnational strategy in soccer [or sport] is simple as it only requires the Christian soccer persons to be themselves.’

An incarnational approach to ministry is modelled on Christ who, being God himself, took on the nature of a servant in human form (Phil 2:6–8)

in order to practically demonstrate the love of God to mankind. The Apostle Paul also used the incarnational strategy in his evangelism. In 1 Corinthians 9:21, he states emphatically, 'I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I may save some.' This means that he became like those he was trying to reach in order to more effectively connect and share the gospel with them. It can therefore be argued that, in order to reach sports people for Christ, one should actively participate in sport, so as to build a bridge for the gospel message. In the language of Daniels and Weir (2005:10), it is through actively playing alongside non-believers that will earn Christians the right to 'say' the message.

#### **4.4. Organisation: the medium**

Since the 1950s, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of registered sports ministries. This has been termed as the 'institutionalisation of muscular Christianity' (Ladd and Mathisen 1999:160). However, the researchers are not here referring to the Organisations (capital 'O'), but rather, to the strategic organisation (small 'o') of evangelism through sport that needs to occur for the ultimate effectiveness of sports ministry (in which Organisations may play a part).

The Apostle Paul was clearly led by the Holy Spirit in his life, calling and ministry (e.g. Acts 13:1–3 and 16:6–10). However, this did not mean that he was haphazard and spontaneous in his ministry. Rather, he was both intentional and strategic in his evangelism (Rom 15:17–21). In the same way, today's sports ministry and evangelism through sport need to be intentional and organised. Hence, in order to increase the impact of the church in the world of sport, effective organisation needs to occur. This organisation is part of what John Garner (2003:69) terms



‘Kingdom planning’, and applies to all individuals, churches and other institutions seeking to engage in evangelism through sport.

Organisation is a means to effective sports ministry and it can look different in different contexts. However, intentional sports ministry involves strategic planning and a solid structure, all in submission to the Holy Spirit’s leading in order to be fruitful and effective. Yet organisation within sports needs to spark creativity, rather than simply seek to dictate programmes (Garner 2003:121).

#### **4.5. Reproduction: the maturation**

Jesus reproduced his ministry through his disciples, who served as his witnesses to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). His command to the Twelve was to ‘make disciples’ (Matt 28:19), not to merely proclaim the message. The Apostle Paul recognised the importance of reproducing himself in others, as he did with Timothy, and instructed Timothy to do likewise (2 Tim 2). Reproduction demonstrates maturity.

If the church is to continue to be engaged with the world of sport in South Africa and elsewhere, then, there should be a process whereby those involved in sports ministry can reproduce themselves in others. According to Connor (2003:88), this involves the processes of discipleship and leadership training.

The challenge to make disciples is extremely relevant within the South African and African context, where much emphasis is given to evangelism through proclamation, but much less emphasis on discipleship. A true understanding of evangelism will always include discipleship (1 Cor 3:6–9). Rick Warren (1995:107) states that, ‘Discipleship is the process of helping people become more like Christ in their thoughts, feelings, and actions. This process begins when a

person is born again and continues throughout the rest of his life.' In making disciples, the fruitfulness of ministry is multiplied because reproducers are being reproduced.

## Conclusion

This article examined the challenges and opportunities facing sports ministry in South African churches today in the aftermath of the 2010 FIFA World Cup™, with special reference to the local churches in Tshwane. The research methodology was based on Browning's multidisciplinary theological research model. From the research findings obtained from the first three sub-movements of Browning's model, the researchers presented the PRIOR model, as a strategy for developing a sustainable sports ministry through soccer evangelism in the local churches in Tshwane today. This strategy could very well be applied to other local churches in South Africa.

The PRIOR model integrates the material derived from Browning's first three sub-movements, drawing extensively from the models of other sports ministry practitioners. It is hoped that the PRIOR model, when implemented, will go a long way towards helping the local churches in South Africa, especially in Tshwane, to develop a sustainable sports ministry through soccer evangelism. If successfully applied, the lessons learned by South African churches, as a result of their participation in outreach programmes during the 2010 FIFA World Cup™, would culminate in a more effective sports ministry in the context of the local church.

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