The Values and Benefits of Sports Chaplaincy in Australia

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Introduction

Australians love sport. Over a span of two centuries, much has been written about how this love affair has shaped the national identity. In Australia's history, sport has played an important role in the good and the bad times. It is recorded, for example, that Australians played Aussie Rules and cricket on the battlefields of Gallipoli. Australians pride themselves on their reputation to compete on the international stage. Australia is one of only a handful of countries to have participated in every Summer Olympic Games. It has been argued that Australians regard sport as sacred to their way of life, an obsession that contributes to a collective sense of meaning in life, an “essential component that contributes to their story” (Cheong, pp.237-238). In this regard, sport has sometimes been referred to as the Australian religion. At other times, it has been suggested that sport provides an alternative to religion in providing identity, meaning and belonging.

In late 2012 and early 2013, the Christian Research Association, in a jointly funded venture with MCD University of Divinity, and supported by Sports Chaplaincy Australia, undertook a pilot research project investigating chaplaincy in sport.

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Introduction

The general manager of a rural football league has his office in his house, which was originally the manse to one of the churches in the town. The church buildings and manse were sold off many years earlier as the rural community saw increasing numbers of people moving out of the town to the regional centres and cities. Making a living was not easy in that rural town. Some may say that one religion, which had become outdated and largely irrelevant to a lot of people, had been replaced by another, the football league, which provided community and support for people in the area.

Where once the church was the hub of community and social life in many Australian suburbs and towns, the sporting clubs have become vital in linking a community. For many people, sport provides an environment where they can connect with people with similar interests. For some, sport is one of their commitments in life and also provides meaning and focus.

In the last few decades, Christians in Australia have provided a unique contribution to people in the world of sport, from grass roots clubs to professional sporting organisations, through sports chaplaincy. It is a growing form of ministry. Chaplaincy in general is very good at providing low level pastoral care, primarily through building supportive relationships. For sports chaplains, sport is the primary context in which they build their relationships and offer pastoral care.

Other forms of chaplaincy have also grown in the past few decades. There are chaplains in schools, industries, prisons, hospitals, and some have even been employed by local councils. Apart from the military, some hospitals and some schools, chaplaincy is usually non-denominational. It is generally non-demanding of the people it ministers to. That is, chaplains do not generally require a religious or spiritual commitment from the people to whom they offer pastoral care. In a variety of contexts chaplaincy provides low level care and friendship to people in need. Research into chaplaincy in different contexts in Australia has provided evidence of its positive effects.

In a study of clinical staff from the Royal Children’s Hospital in Melbourne, researchers found that health professionals valued having resident hospital chaplains because they provided assistance to medical staff with teamwork, religious and psycho-social support to patients and staff, and specialist support to families and staff at difficult times. The study also found that chaplains provided input into ethical decision-making, community networking, and communication and emotional comfort within a world which patients often found complex and sometimes frightening (Carey, 2000). The majority of heath care chaplains considered decision-making assistance an important aspect of their role (Carey & Cohen, 2009). Other studies have shown there are cost benefits of hospital chaplaincy, high level satisfaction by patients, and widespread affirmation of a chaplain’s role in hospitals (Carey, 2000).

Research undertaken by Edith Cowan University into the effectiveness of government-funded school chaplains (Hughes & Sims, 2009) found that chaplaincy in schools offered a special contribution to school welfare in the following ways:

- chaplains were proactive in their approach to welfare;
- they were readily accessible to all students and teachers;
- they were unaligned to a particular church and, because they were not employed by the school, were seen as ‘neutral’ within the school administrative structure;
- they could offer holistic support;
- they were flexible in their roles;
- they offered a values-based approach to pastoral care; and,
- they had important networks of support through local church connections.

Because of these characteristics, chaplains were making a significant impact within their schools.

In some schools, chaplains use sport as a means of building relationships with students and their families. For example, chaplains played football with students at lunchtime. They took part in school sports days. They got involved in coaching school sporting teams. Sport is one of many possible avenues through which a chaplain gets to know students outside of the context of particular problems (Hughes & Sims, 2009).

For sports chaplains, however, sport is the primary context in which they build their relationships.

Current literature and research

While there is a lot of literature covering sport, spirituality and chaplaincy in Australia, there is little literature specifically addressing the subject of chaplaincy within the sporting context.

Roger Lipe, an American sports chaplain, offers a succinct introduction to sports chaplaincy in his short workbook for sports chaplains, Transforming Lives in Sport (2006). Although written in the American context, there are some useful insights for chaplains which could be applied to Australia. Particularly helpful is his discussion around the term ‘sports chaplain’, suggesting that other terms, such as Evangelist Chaplain, Pastoral Chaplain, Sport Mentor, could be used in different settings, depending upon the approach being used.
The Pontifical Council for the Laity of the Catholic Church has published an informative book based on seminars given at a conference dedicated to the theme of sports chaplaincy, from a Catholic and mainly European perspective. Its contributors offer insightful theological and practical reflections on the ‘pastoral ministry of sport’. The authors argue for the Church’s (Catholic Church) serious involvement in the world of sport through education and pastoral ministry. They see benefits and potential for engagement, and align many of their reflections with teachings and papal encyclicals. Much of the information is relevant to sports chaplaincy in Australia, and indeed many other countries. Specific themes around the importance of lay involvement in sports ministries, and chaplains working collaboratively with each other, they fit well with the sports chaplaincy model currently used in Australia.

In addition to published material, a handful of studies of sports chaplaincy have been undertaken in the Australian context.

In 2005, the chaplain to the Melbourne Storm NRL club, Grant Stewart, completed his Master’s thesis: *A Theological and Pastoral Exploration of the Role of Sports Chaplains in Australia*. It was summarised as an occasional paper in Zadok (Stewart, 2012). The thesis provides a positive contribution to research in the area. Stewart argues that the role of the chaplain fits into some of the concepts used in church ministry, and that sports chaplains need to “unlearn the ‘churchy’ language, set aside the false dichotomy of secular and sacred and be more ready to listen and be present” (Stewart, 2012, p.14). Speaking from a personal perspective as a chaplain, he has found that sports chaplaincy has challenged him to re-imagine Christian ministry, to work outside personal comfort zones, and to see that God is just as much present in the “locker rooms, playing fields and stadiums” as in a church community (Stewart, 2012, p.14).

In his doctoral thesis, David Tyndall (2004) explores the evangelical church’s relationship with sport in *Evangelicalism, Sport and the Australian Olympics*. Although his thesis focuses on the evangelical church’s involvement in sport in Australia, he dedicates some of it to the history of sports chaplaincy in Australia, particularly the development of Sports and Leisure Ministries (now Sports Chaplaincy Australia) in the 1980s, and the use of chaplains at sporting events, such as the Olympic Games. He provides a thorough historical account of Christian chaplaincy in Australia, and uses examples of Christian chaplaincies in various contexts, including within the sporting environment. The thesis sheds light on the struggle of the evangelical church in Australia to ‘forge a link’ between religion and sport. Tyndall suggests that it has now become a growing movement within Australian Christianity (Tydall, p.365). He points to the success of the church’s involvement at the Sydney Olympic Games – the ‘largest evangelistic sports outreach in Australia’ – and attributes that success to the leaders of the sports ministries which emerged in the 1980s.

**Models of chaplaincy in sport**

Elite sportswomen and sportsmen are popular role models. They have a unique – often unwarranted, and sometimes unwanted – duty to perform as role models off the field. While they are human beings with incredible skills in the sporting arena, often they are not so different from the rest of the population in other aspects of life. This is the context out of which which Sports Chaplaincy Australia (SCA), formerly Sports and Leisure Ministries (SLM), arose. There was a need to provide a ministry to professional sports people, taking into account their specific situation and needs. SCA has evolved into an organisation offering support to a much broader range of levels, across numerous sports.

The director of SCA has identified three styles of sports chaplaincy:

- traditional (denominational),
- professional (paid), and,
- volunteer (relational).

An intentional policy of SCA is that their chaplains use the volunteer style, and so all its chaplains serve in an honorary and casual capacity. SCA chaplains are appointed to a club, and yet are not part of that club’s staff, management or governing structures. SCA represents around 300 chaplains in all states, across more than 20 sports as diverse as clay target shooting, table tennis, croquet, Formula One, watersports and horse racing. SCA has strong links with other sport-specific chaplaincy organisations, such as Australian Racing Christian Chaplaincy and Life Saving Chaplaincy Australia.

In a similar model to that of Sports Chaplaincy Australia, Sports Chaplaincy UK (formerly known as SCORE) represents over 220 sports chaplains in the United Kingdom and Ireland, providing spiritual and pastoral care to professional and amateur sporting clubs, as well as providing chaplains for major sporting events, such as the Olympic and Commonwealth Games. Sports Chaplaincy UK also sees itself as providing a support network and training for its chaplains. As a registered charity, the organisation is financially supported by a number of professional sporting codes in the UK and Ireland (http://www.sportschaplaincy.org.uk).

The German Catholic Bishops Conference has a work group under its organisational structure titled ‘The Scientific Commission for Church and Sport in Germany’. All 27 dioceses in Germany have a
dedicated representative for ‘Church and Sport’, who meet at least once a year to exchange initiatives and to broaden their general knowledge of sports (Paas, in Sport: An Educational and Pastoral Challenge, p.64). While the commission covers broad aspects of the church and sport, one aspect is the pastoral care offered by priests and lay persons to athletes.

The predominant model of chaplaincy in the United States is the provision of paid chaplains to various sports at collegiate and professional levels. Most of the national league sporting clubs in the US, in sports such as baseball, football, basketball and soccer, have chaplains, as do the representative teams to international competitions, such as the Olympic Games or World Championships.

Canada and New Zealand have similar models of sports chaplaincy to that of Sports Chaplaincy Australia and Sports Chaplaincy UK.

The research

The research conducted by the Christian Research Association in relation to sports chaplaincy had a number of aims:

1. to understand the values and the benefits sports chaplaincy adds to the Australian sporting culture;
2. to identify the contribution chaplains make to the Christian faith in Australia and society in general;
3. to explore the link between sports chaplaincy programs, sporting organisations, local churches and the local community;
4. to identify the best methods used in chaplaincy training and ministry in sport;
5. to examine the ecumenical nature of sports chaplaincy; and,
6. to explore the implications of this style of ministry for contemporary pastoral theology and the shaping of ministry in contemporary Australia.

The investigative aspect of the project used a qualitative case-study approach. Three case studies were chosen after consultation with Sports Chaplaincy Australia (SCA) to provide insights into how sports chaplaincy was operating in a range of contexts.

- **Case study 1** – a premier division women’s sport in suburban Melbourne.
- **Case study 2** – a sports chaplaincy network within a local government area in Sydney.
- **Case study 3** – a Victorian rural sporting club.

Overall, the sports represented by the eight chaplains interviewed were: AFL (men’s and women’s), cricket, rugby league, rugby union, soccer, and boxing. A number of chaplains were serving multiple sports through chaplaincies in universities and local secondary schools. A further five players and 13 other people, referred to as ‘stakeholders’, were interviewed. The stakeholders held various positions within the clubs they represented. Some stakeholders were also representatives of the larger associations of which their clubs were a part, and some held multiple roles. One was the parent of a player. Some of the players also held additional roles, such as committee member. Two chaplaincy network coordinators, responsible for coordinating and supporting the network of chaplains in a local government area, were also interviewed. In total, 28 people were interviewed.

**Background of the chaplains**

The professional and religious backgrounds of the chaplains varied. Of the eight chaplains interviewed, five were full or part-time pastors of local churches. Two others had chaplaincy roles in universities or secondary schools. Another was involved in private industry, and was involved voluntarily in leadership in a local church. The part-time pastors held other positions in private industry or tertiary institutions.

Four of the chaplains were aged between 59 and 61, two were aged in their early fifties, one was aged 40, and one was 30 years of age. Five of the chaplains had held a chaplaincy position for between two and five years, two had been involved for between six and nine years, and one had spent more than ten years in sports chaplaincy roles. Some of them had been chaplains in more than one club during their involvement.
Seven of the chaplains were male and one was female. The network coordinators were female and male.

All of the chaplains and the network coordinators interviewed were involved in local churches. One was involved with an Anglican church, four with Baptist churches, two with Congregational churches, one with a Pentecostal church, and two with the Uniting Church.

**The main roles chaplains undertake**

The major role of sports chaplains is being available for people. How this occurs may vary from one season to another, and from chaplain to chaplain. There is rarely a ‘typical week’ for chaplains, and the challenges and opportunities vary from week to week.

Most chaplains see their role as primarily being present for people in the club. They are intentional in making themselves available. Hence, members of the club are able to turn to them when they feel they need to. A number of terms were used by the chaplains themselves to describe their aim: creative loitering, intentional loitering, lingering with intent. Another chaplain described his role as being a positive presence around the club.

Much of the content in the interviews 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.

One example of this was a chaplain who wrote a brief weekly “chaplains’ article” in the local sporting news during the season. The article received widespread readership throughout the town and wider region, and as a result created opportunities for the chaplain to connect with people. He would just stand on the sidelines and people would come up to him and want to talk to him about this or that. Those opportunities would not have arisen if he had not first developed a reputation for care and confidentiality.

Another chaplain built rapport through offering practical support. For example, he had assisted with preparing the food for players lunches when another person had not arrived. On numerous occasions he had also visited player’s family members who were ill. However, he saw that it was important to be careful not to impose himself, or ‘tread on people’s toes’.

The network coordinators suggested that a chaplain’s main job should be to provide a listening ear to people. They should always be approachable, and around the club, but not within it or a part of it. Chaplains have the benefit that, because they are not employed by a club, they can be neutral, and not ‘take sides’.

However, the female chaplain has taken on a leadership role at the club, which seems to work well, as she has clear leadership attributes. An example of this has been her ability to run meetings at the club. She has set down clear boundaries around what she will and will not do, and considers it important that her role is not abused, and that she sticks within her boundaries. A number of the players interviewed, too, suggested that their chaplain played a supportive role in the club. The chaplain was an independent person who worked alongside the committee and leadership group.

Stakeholders said that their chaplains’ role involved being a support for anyone within the club, particularly players. Some of the day-to-day things the chaplains were involved with included: attending training and games, running information sessions (for example, on grief or suicide), and generally being around the club at events or functions.

A parent of a teenage footballer said that the chaplain had strong relationships with the young ones in the club: “The players are quite relaxed around him. He has a mentor role. He is non-threatening, and the kids love that”.

**Activities through which chaplains feel they are most effective**

Chaplains were asked about the activities in which they considered they were most effective.

Two chaplains mentioned that being one-on-one with people was when they were most effective. Others mentioned their ability to listen well and to talk to others at their level. Simply making oneself available for people was important for one chaplain who felt that having a low profile presence was important. Another chaplain thought he could be most effective by building long-term relationships. When positive long-term relationships are built, the chaplain is seen to be credible, reliable and confidential.

An AFL football chaplain stated that he thought he was blessed to have the gift of intuition, and that because of it he was effective in understanding people’s needs and recognising where people were at.

Critical incidents occurred infrequently, but when they did, the role of the chaplain was crucial for clubs. This aspect of chaplaincy was much appreciated by stakeholders within the clubs, who saw it as vital, not just for players, but everyone around the club to have someone who could offer pastoral care at the time of critical incidents. Many
chaplains also worked with families of players through these incidents by visiting homes or hospitals.

Not all chaplains interviewed had experienced a critical incident. One of those who had noted that such incidents often provided opportunities for chaplains to work with players and families in the weeks and months afterwards. In a rural setting, stakeholders interviewed had witnessed first-hand the effectiveness of their chaplain during a number of crises within the club and in the wider communities of which they were a part.

A general manager of a large rugby league club was sure that because of the chaplain’s effectiveness, being seen to have a chaplain added value to the club: the chaplaincy was seen as an additional resource for players. He saw it as an incentive for potential players.

**Relationships with others, acceptance of role, expectations**

All chaplains thought their relationships with the majority of people around their clubs were generally good and their roles widely accepted, although almost all said that it had taken time to build those relationships.

Only one chaplain said that the role was positively received by the club from the outset. He said that the management fully endorsed it and the starting point at the club was a high level of respect for chaplains. However, most other chaplains spoke about the wariness of people at the start: the negativity of some and the fearfulness of others about the ‘religious stuff’. One chaplain knew that, of him, people probably asked, ‘are you here for another agenda?’ Some clubs were a lot more open to chaplaincy than others. For example, a chaplain to university sporting clubs reflected on the difference between his experience of acceptance into cricket and rugby. One was much easier to move into than the other, and he was accepted a lot quicker.

One chaplain spoke of a small number of conservative ‘knockers’ and ‘dissenters’ he had come up against during his time in the role. He described them as the entrenched club people who saw no need for chaplains, because they had never needed them before. However, the stakeholder interviews confirmed that many club officials, as well as players and parents, view the chaplain’s role very positively.

One chaplain shared an example of how the coach was very negative towards chaplaincy initially, but had witnessed the positive influence of the chaplain on the players. Over time, he had become very positive about chaplaincy.

The network coordinators interviewed, who have the advantage of assessing chaplains over a period of time, suggested that sports chaplaincy is a long-term commitment. Sometimes it can take months, but usually years, before a chaplain is really accepted around a club. Obviously, this depends a lot on the circumstances and the setting the chaplain walks into. One chaplain was confronted with a critical incident shortly after starting in the role, and acceptance for that aspect of the chaplain’s role was quick. However, for all chaplains, trust needs to be built and that usually takes time.

For one long-term chaplain that feeling of being part of the club varied from time to time and year to year. He suggested that the role was not as integrated as it could be, although that could be seen as a positive thing as it allowed flexibility.

**Factors contributing to a chaplain’s effectiveness**

Stakeholders and players were asked what they considered to be contributing factors to their chaplain’s effectiveness or ineffectiveness. All responses were positive, and not one respondent mentioned any factors that made chaplains ineffective.

The team manager of a women’s club thought their chaplain was inspiring because she knew her role and her boundaries, and was able to put things into perspective. An ex-player of the same club pointed to her training as being a factor, although acknowledged that her astuteness and her conversational personality were also key. The players also acknowledged that their chaplain was effective because of her personality, her training, and her approachability. These factors contributed to the respect she had earned from everyone in the club. One of the players, who was a regular church attender, recognised the chaplain’s wisdom and knowledge from the church perspective which she brought to the club.

Respect for differing views about life was a chaplain’s key contributing factor for the general manager of another club. The chaplain’s unassuming nature was also something that he said he could not more highly.

Effective factors for stakeholders in other clubs were that their chaplains liked to talk to people, they communicated well, they had an ability to counsel people, they were ready to assist when needed, and they usually had a good sense of humour. Having a knowledge of the sport in which they were chaplains was considered an important factor by the president of one club. A rural chaplain was acknowledged for his networking ability, so important in country areas.
Specific skills and personal attributes

Chaplains were asked specifically what skills and personal attributes they brought to their role. Some spoke of their pastoring experience, their ways of building community with people, and their ability to listen deeply to people.

One chaplain, who had a self-described passion for sport, thought it important that chaplains have a keen interest in, or had played, some sport. Another chaplain suggested that, because he had played amateur sport, he knew what it was like to some degree for those he ministered to in his chaplaincy role. For another chaplain, having played and coached sport at an elite level meant that he understood the intricacies of how things operated in his sport, and that was of immense value in his chaplaincy role at the club.

One chaplain with a business background said that many skills learned in the business world were transferable to the sporting world. Human resources skills were one example. The same chaplain suggested that sports chaplains needed to have some life experience before coming into their role.

According to players, the strongest attributes their female chaplain brought to the club was her ability to bring people together in a ‘non-pushy’ way, her positiveness and happiness, and her approachable manner. These attributes were confirmed by two stakeholders within the club, but who added that the chaplain had a genuine care for people, a willingness to help others, and possessed strong leadership and listening skills.

Stakeholders in other contexts saw their chaplain’s attributes as strongest in the area of listening, friendliness, approachability, availability, bringing people together, and being able to communicate well to a range of people.

As an overall general observation of the chaplains, it would be apt to describe all of them as ‘people persons’. All of the chaplains had a desire to be available to people, no matter who they were, or what their problems were.

Training

Most, but not all, of the chaplains interviewed had completed the SCA Certificate in Sports Chaplaincy. As many of the chaplains were ordained church leaders, most had also undertaken substantial pastoral study. One chaplain, who was not ordained, had completed a Certificate IV in Pastoral Care. Another chaplain had completed general chaplaincy training as part of ministry study.

One ordained male chaplain had undertaken specific courses as part of ministry training, such as clinical pastoral education, grief training and suicide awareness. He said the courses were most relevant for his ministry in the sporting club.

Another chaplain, who was also an associate pastor of a local church, had received training in management skills as part of his family business, and saw that training as beneficial to his chaplaincy.

Prior to the last ten years, there was no specific training for potential chaplains. Most chaplains were clergy who already had a background of ministry to people in a variety of settings. The sports arena was considered just another of those settings. One long-term chaplain suggested that in the early years the national sports chaplaincy conferences were times of training for chaplains in Australia.

Relevance of training

So how did those chaplains who had undertaken the Certificate II in Sports Chaplaincy training find it?

A male chaplain, who has been working across multiple sports for the last four years, reflected that the training he received provided the foundation for everything he has built upon in the clubs since then.

One chaplain suggested that the practical things taught, such as confidentiality or dealing with elite sports-people, were beneficial. Another suggested that, because the Australian model of chaplaincy in sport is quite different to that in most other countries, the uniqueness of the training to the Australian context was quite helpful.

Another chaplain reflected on the Gospel aspect of the training:

How the Gospel fits into the role of sports chaplaincy was very worthwhile – it was helpful to understand that the sports chaplain’s role is not about ‘saving’ people, but about presenting oneself as the Gospel in that role.

Ongoing training

At a national level, SCA is continually developing its training for chaplains. Its minimum level training for chaplains is a Level 2 Certificate in Sports Chaplaincy, a three day course run by sports chaplains and sports industry personnel. The course covers the foundations and fundamentals of sports chaplaincy in Australia, and introduces participants to pastoral care skills, issues specific to sports people, and professional conduct.

National conferences often provide opportunities for additional training, although, as one chaplain mentioned, they can be hard to get to and sometimes occur at inopportune times. In NSW, an annual training day is held, which allows participants to be involved without the extra
expense of travelling interstate. One chaplain suggested that regular training locally would be good.

One chaplain working in a rural setting suggested that rural chaplains should receive extra training to deal with the many issues which arise in non-suburban areas.

**Issues sports chaplains address**

According to chaplains, the issues which arise in their roles are quite diverse. Many chaplains assist people who are having relationship problems, whether they be family, marriage, or work colleague related issues. Other issues which had arisen for chaplains included grief, employment assistance, bullying, depression, support for players during injury, family abuse, self esteem, drug and alcohol abuse, and racial vilification.

Two chaplains specifically mentioned that they often referred people to appropriate counsellors or professionals. As a number of the other chaplains were trained in pastoral care or counselling, they may informally do some counselling within their role, but it was important to be able to recognise when specialist psychological assistance was needed.

One chaplain had assisted some players who had health issues. While some of the players just needed someone to talk to about their issue in confidence, other issues were referred on to relevant professionals.

A number of chaplains had dealt with death within their clubs, either of a club member, or family members of players or club officials. As some of the chaplains were ordained clergy they had performed funerals. Two chaplains mentioned they had also conducted weddings of players from their clubs.

At least three of the chaplains mentioned that their assistance was broader than just those within their clubs, and that they were more than happy for that to happen.

The issues varied between sports, level of sport, geographic location, and whether females or males participated. For example, an elite level chaplain had to assist players who had been subjected to public humiliation. A rural chaplain had to come up with ways of tackling social issues arising from drought. The female chaplain had to deal with lesbian relationship breakdowns. A chaplain to teenage players had addressed peer group pressure issues.

**Other support staff**

Many chaplains, particularly those involved in grass-roots level and amateur sports, become the support person within the club for many of the issues that arise.

Semi-professional and elite level clubs have the capacity to employ support staff, and chaplains work within that structure, as “one part of the jigsaw within the club.” One chaplain said that it was the club’s intent to work alongside the welfare officers, although he was uncertain of the effectiveness of the arrangement.

**Challenges chaplains face**

According to two network coordinators, one of the big challenges faced by new chaplains is finding acceptance at the beginning of a placement at a club. There is frequently little understanding of the role of chaplains in the clubs. There can also be a lot of loneliness for chaplains. Often they may be the only Christian in that context. A spouse of the chaplain may share that feeling of isolation also.

One chaplain who felt isolated said part of the issue was knowing what to do and say when you don’t have anyone on hand to consult with, or any guide book to follow. The same chaplain said that it is important to have boundaries, but understanding the boundaries of the role can be a challenge in itself.

Another chaplain suggested that society, and more specifically, the general nature of sporting clubs in Australia and their acceptance of spirituality, faith and religion was a big challenge. It can be hard work building up relationships with people in that context. It is also important but challenging to strike the right balance between being just another part of the club and a chaplain.
Two chaplains suggested that time is an issue when the role is unpaid, particularly when one juggles family and work commitments on top of it. However, the female chaplain who spends up to an hour travelling to the club for training once a week, reflected that this time commitment had had a positive spin to it: the club recognised her dedication very early on and saw her as someone who was serious about being there for people.

Some chaplains noted that it can be hard to get to know everyone, especially when a chaplain is involved with a sport which has a number of grades, such as juniors and seniors.

Although seemingly rare, one chaplain recognised (and with much forethought) that he had not experienced major challenges at his club: “I don’t say that lightly. It is a great club and quite established, so my role is endorsed, which makes it easier”.

**Successes and effectiveness**

Many of the chaplains interviewed saw ‘success’ and ‘effectiveness’ separately. For the female chaplain, a major success was overcoming a crisis within the club, which meant changing the culture from a negative one to a positive one. Through that ‘success’ the chaplain had become effective in involvement with player issues when they occurred. The initial ‘little things’ she had done had had a huge impact on the players, she said.

Another chaplain said that, because of his involvement with young people in a number of different sporting clubs, people now had a very different perspective of chaplaincy. He measured his in relationships, and noted that many of those relationships had continued, even as the chaplain had moved clubs. He said he was regularly called upon to assist with pastoral care. He suggested that he is ‘doing life with people’, and because it is life, any successes cannot really be measured for perhaps 20 years – chaplaincy is long-term. The chaplain is also striving to build a strong foundation for the future of chaplaincy in the local area. The idea of the acceptance of chaplaincy being measured in the long-term was confirmed by another chaplain who suggested that the culture towards chaplains will change over time.

One aspect of a chaplain’s role involves encouraging other Christians within the club, and this mentoring has been an important contribution, suggested one elite-level chaplain. It also assists in dissolving views of faith – often negative – within the culture of the club. Another chaplain, whom players considered to be a strong positive role model, shared that sentiment: “I am perhaps the only Christian that a lot of [the players] know”.

A practical example of a successful initiative by a chaplain (and the club’s trainer) was running a breakfast club on game days. Many of the younger players often slept in and skipped breakfast, which affected their on-field performance. The chaplain saw the initiative as focusing on the whole well-being of the players. The time together was an important part of building relationships and establishing a rapport with the players in addition to preparing the players physically for the game ahead. The club also runs a meal mid-week to select teams for the weekend games, and the chaplain sees this as an important opportunity for connecting with people.

Another chaplain had perceived a success through gradual change in the culture of the club, and noted how drinking at functions had decreased, and how members were now more accepting of others.

The network coordinators suggested that circumstances can often dictate what success there is in a particular context. For example, a critical incident early in an appointment may lead more quickly to building effective relationships. Alternatively, if a chaplain commences in a context which has a strong negative attitude towards chaplaincy, ‘successes’ will take time.

**The unique contribution of sports chaplains**

In response to the effectiveness of sports chaplains, players and stakeholders were also asked if they thought chaplaincy made a unique contribution to their club. All of the responses were affirmative, and positively so.

“Chaplaincy is more broadly-based – it is more concerned about overall well-being.

A player has someone to go to who isn’t part of the club. The chaplain is unbiased, independent, unprejudiced. He is teaching people to be good people, not just soccer players. The role is holistic.

Yes it’s unique. It’s great to have. There were lots of questions at the start because of the term [“chaplain”]. Now it’s very different.

The role understands people at a deeper level. Mainly off-field, but also on-field issues for players.

One club’s team manager suggested that the term ‘chaplain’ comes with spiritual tones to it, and as such some may still be ignorant about the role. However, another stakeholder of a different club saw the title as an attractive addition to the club’s support staff.

The general manager of an AFL regional football league was adamant that chaplaincy was different:
Yes, [the club] is unique because of chaplaincy. They are very fortunate. He can deal with issues that no one else has had training in. I know that anything that comes up I can refer on to him confidentially. He is very handy at dealing with anything.

Of the same chaplain, a club supporter suggested: “It must work – all the other clubs in the league want one”.

One stakeholder suggested of the uniqueness of his club’s chaplain that in critical times “…he is like that oxy-reviver in a surf-life-saving club: you need to have it, but hope that you’ll never need to use it”.

**Support and accountability**

Sports chaplains are often dealing with acceptance, loneliness, critical incident, and other issues unique to their contexts, and things can get tough at times. A question was asked about where they received their support from, if they had any supervision, and if there was any accountability in their role.

A rural chaplain suggested that some supervision in the role is very important, so there is recognition that “you are not trying to do things on your own”.

All of the chaplains interviewed said their spouses were a source of immense support to them, providing encouragement, giving informal counselling, or just being a ‘sounding-board’ for ideas and issues the chaplains were facing. Many of the chaplains utilised other sports chaplains or chaplains in other areas.

Some of the chaplains specifically indicated that they felt incredibly supported by SCA and their network of chaplains. Some ordained chaplains called upon other clergy within their church or denomination for support.

One chaplain indicated that his home church was very supportive of his role, although it took a while for them to recognise the role within a missional context. He suggested that churches can be interested and supportive in the practical sense, but interest often drops off.

Where chaplains have access to a chaplaincy coordinator, they are appreciated and utilised. Coordinators in New South Wales have recognised the need for chaplains to keep in touch with each other, and have organised a regular state sports chaplaincy newsletter. As well as keeping chaplains informed, the newsletter serves to provide assurance that other chaplains are ‘out there’.

Most of the chaplains indicated that they had not had a formal evaluation or were not accountable to anyone directly. Most chaplains stated that they did utilise other chaplains to provide them with evaluation, or as a way of informal accountability.

Two chaplains stated that they have an evaluation process within their club, usually once or twice a year. One of them, a rugby chaplain, said that annually he ‘touched base’ with the Football Manager at the club, and that he also had accountability with other rugby chaplains. The other chaplain, at a rural AFL club, said he undergoes an evaluation with the club President and the Head Trainer.

The female chaplain reflected that evaluating chaplains could prove difficult. Where does the evaluation come from? Who does the evaluation? However, she saw the importance of matching chaplains to the appropriate contexts: “We need to make sure we have the right people in the right situation”.

**How local churches see sport**

Sports chaplains are well placed to reflect on real and perceived tensions between the world of sport and the church or congregations. As such, in the interviews, they were asked directly how they thought local churches and congregations see sport.

The female chaplain thought that people in churches see sport as a selfish thing, nothing to do with religion. However, she reflected that there seems to be more understanding nowadays that the two can and should mix. A male chaplain thought that people in the church see sports as separate from the church: “They still don’t get that you need to go to where people are. Sport is very much detached from the local church”.

A long-term chaplain suggested that churches are struggling with sport in terms of a mission area: 

> I think sport is just one of those areas of the world that church has yet to acknowledge actually exists and might be a place of ministry. Our biggest struggle in sports chaplaincy is convincing churches. Not convincing sporting communities. It’s churches! One of the reasons, I think, that lies behind that is
Another male chaplain thought the same and suggested that people in churches see sport as a threat, something that will take people away from Sunday services. He thought some people in churches see sport as an ‘idol’ for people, whereas a few see it as an opportunity. This view was partly endorsed by another chaplain who similarly reflected that many congregations don’t see it as a ministry – they participate, but that’s all. However, he thought, some see it as a real ministry, a mission field.

Two chaplains, in different states and in different contexts, shared similarly about the possibilities which churches see in sports ministries, such as chaplaincy. One of the chaplains said: “...churches are starting to see that church is going outside the four walls of the building.” The other chaplain expanded slightly: “Congregations are starting to see church is outside the four walls; church is community in the world”.

A chaplain to a university sporting club challenged people in churches to see the positive side of sport in the community:

> Perhaps it would be great if the culture shifted slightly as far as the education of churches to see how influential and how powerful [sport] can be to impact a community.

**Connections with local churches**

Most of the chaplains had connections with churches, either through their own church or through visiting other local churches. Some of the chaplains had received invitations to speak about their role at church services or other events.

One of the chaplains, who had responsibility for pastoral roles in a local church, mentioned the need to balance his role in sports chaplaincy with the pastoral responsibilities of his church and hospital chaplaincy. He did not regularly talk about his sports chaplaincy as there was a perception among some in his congregation that it was detracting from his duties in the church. Another chaplain said he sometimes mentioned his sports chaplaincy when preaching at different churches, although he also recognised the need to not give it too much ‘air-time’ for the same reason.

A suburban chaplain indicated that he used to have strong connections with churches in his local area, although the connections had slipped. However, he was about to re-engage with the church network again.

Overall, chaplains did not do as much with local churches as they would like to do. It was also suggested that new chaplains needed to regularly visit local churches as a way of getting churches involved. Chaplains need to work hard to get – and keep – churches onside.

**The spiritual side of sports chaplaincy**

Although not common, many chaplains do get questions from people around their clubs about the ‘big questions’ in life. However, as one chaplain noted, people are more interested in you having solutions to their problems – they want someone to not judge them. That in itself can lead to other questions about religion and spirituality.

Occasionally they are asked to pray for someone or with someone. One chaplain, who also has responsibility as a school chaplain, leads prayer, but said he does not push it too much.

One chaplain mentioned that a few of the players in the club had started going back to church after many years away from it. Ironically for the chaplain, one of the players had had such a change in her perspectives on life that she had stopped playing sport to attend church. However, the chaplain saw her role not about getting people to go to church, but about being genuine and committed to the well-being of people: “I don't have to convince them of anything, I have to show them that God is love”. This sentiment was confirmed by another chaplain who did not see his role as ‘putting bums on seats’ for the church. For him, chaplaincy was not about being religious, but “about having a religious background and understanding why we do what we do”. He said it was uncommon for people to ask about the ‘bigger questions of life’, although, “people can have conversations with me that they will have with no one else”.

Another aspect of the chaplain’s role is encouraging and mentoring Christians within their context. One chaplain said he talked about ‘bigger issues’ with the Christian players. Another chaplain saw it as a blessing that there were some committed Christians at the club, and that they can encourage each other.

In a number of the interviews, chaplains indicated that it was extremely important not to push the religious side of their chaplaincy work. One long-term chaplain expressed concern for potential sports chaplains who might be interested in pushing religion too much:

> I'm concerned that some people coming into chaplaincy come in as Evangelical Christians, who think they're going to save the world, and go out there and get converts for God. And that might happen, but you don't go out there and bang them about the head with the Bible!
His advice for all chaplains who have such an agenda:

- **What we have to do is present ourselves in a way that people see us in a way that is non-threatening, and that we really do care about them as individuals, no matter what background they come from.**

This attitude was reinforced by the responses of the vast majority of stakeholders and players.

- **He leaves things open only if they are interested – if he was too pushy they wouldn’t open up to him.**

- **I am sure if they ask for it he would give. He certainly wouldn’t be in their face.**

- **It is about helping people in the club, not about ramming it down their throats.**

Occasionally religious and spiritual aspects are picked up by people within the clubs, although it was commonly noted that much of it goes unnoticed because of the confidential way chaplains go about their business. When asked about the religious aspect of chaplaincy, one club official said: “Haven’t witnessed that. Perhaps lightly. I’m not privy to other people’s conversations, so I wouldn’t know”.

One player said that her chaplain does use quotes from the Bible occasionally in team meetings, “but in a very respectful way.” Another player from the same club said, “She has never hidden her beliefs. She doesn’t publicly offer it, but helps in that area if asked.”

**Diversity of religious backgrounds**

Although SCA chaplains are Christian chaplains, they are in environments and have to manage situations where there are people from other religious backgrounds and from no religious background at all. None of the chaplains saw it as an issue.

One chaplain takes a proactive approach to diversity of beliefs by openly, but respectfully, asking those of other religions about their own faith. Another chaplain, who frequently connects with a Muslim and an atheist in his chaplaincy, concurs with that approach and suggests it is about respect for every person you meet.

Another chaplain stated that it is important not to put anyone’s beliefs down, but talk about common ground through shared experiences.

One chaplain, from a club where people are mainly no faith, says it is about engaging with people where they are at, and says that it is important to “not try to impose my own views”.

A university chaplain, who has many people from non-Christian faiths in the club, enjoys building relationship with anyone, regardless of their faith background. He has in fact developed a good relationship with a Buddhist, whom he now sees as a friend. That same chaplain is mindful that he does not spend all the time with the few Christians around the club, but sees his role as “being Jesus to anyone who wants to talk”.

For one rural chaplain, whose context sees very few from non-Christian backgrounds, the role is to be seen as independent. The chaplain is someone who is neutral and available to all, regardless of faith – or no faith, he suggested.

The responses of the chaplains were confirmed by players and stakeholders in the clubs.

As one club administrator stated about their chaplain: “There is no discrimination. He’d pick up anyone”. And another in the same club: “He doesn’t push his beliefs – he will work with anyone”.

A player in another club, which has a multicultural make up within it, said of the female chaplain’s ability to connect with people from all faiths: “You don’t notice it at all. She gets along with the Sikhs and Muslims in the club just the same as others”. The team manager in the same club agreed by saying that the chaplain was respectful of everyone.

Of their chaplain, one parent of a player of an AFL grass-roots club suggested that the “people who don’t have a faith are the ones that come to him. A lot of barriers have been broken down [because of him]”.

The general manager of a semi-professional rugby league club said the chaplain really got on well with everyone, observing that “he wouldn’t care who they are, he deals with the person as an individual”.

**The future of sports chaplaincy in Australia**

Stakeholders and players were asked about whether they thought it important to continue with chaplaincy in the future and if they would recommend it to others. They were also asked to rate their current chaplaincy in their clubs. All of the players and stakeholders said that they would recommend chaplaincy to others, with at least two saying they had already done so.

One stakeholder suggested that such a support role in a club is important, even if it is not a chaplain. Another stakeholder with strong connections to many other clubs had made recommendations for chaplaincy, which had resulted in chaplaincy appointments in at least two other clubs.
A number of the players interviewed recommended chaplaincy to other clubs, but mentioned the need to have the right person for the right club. Overall, they said, a chaplain provides another outlook on things, it is someone who is independent, and someone who supports everyone.

A soccer club president highly recommended chaplaincy, and added: “Any club that doesn’t take the opportunity for a chaplain is mad”.

One rugby league club has made the strongest recommendation for chaplaincy by promoting their chaplain as a ‘selling point’ for potential players.

An AFL country league president had only positive recommendations and would not hesitate to recommend chaplaincy: “Yes, definitely. I know what he has done and the impact he has had in various incidents”.

Another stakeholder endorsed chaplaincy in sporting clubs “if done the right way, and with the right person”. He warned that the chaplain’s role has to have a holistic approach to it.

A female player of one club said, “I would encourage all clubs to access one [a chaplain]. There are so many issues she helps out with”.

One club committee president, who is also a school principal, saw the potential of chaplaincy and the benefits to a club and local community:

There is a real need in every club. It is very smart to do things through the sporting club – that is the community. Every club would benefit from having someone.

Overall, stakeholders and players were positive about continuing chaplaincy at their club. Some stakeholders suggested that the role was more than just about the individual who filled the position. At least two of them said that they would seek another chaplain if their present chaplain finished up.

The head trainer of a football club recognised the Christian values which were being espoused through the chaplain:

The basis of Christianity is a good thing – there are a lot of people [around the club] who have those values, but who don’t have anything to do with the church. It’s a good basis for the example of Christianity in society today. There’s a Christian presence throughout the club.

Of the importance of continuing chaplaincy, one player stated: “Definitely. It has made a very big difference to the club”.

Players and stakeholders of clubs were asked, on a scale of one to ten, to rate their chaplain. Overall, chaplains were rated highly with an average score of 8.9 out of ten.

Many of the respondents also made additional comments about the basis for their rating:

If all hell broke loose it’s a damn good thing to have one. In a perfect world we wouldn’t need one, but we don’t live in a perfect world!

You don’t realise until the wheels come off how valuable it is.

It’s good to know that it’s there – it would be a real shame to lose it.

We are very happy with what he does. As a league we are very happy to have someone like him. He is a special person suited to the community. There is a definite place for the role in rural communities.

Concluding comments

The chaplaincy role

To a certain extent it is hard to ascertain the full effectiveness of the chaplaincy role, as many of the issues that chaplains address are dealt with confidentially. However, what is more evident is the fact that all of the chaplains chosen for the case-studies were widely accepted by those involved with the clubs they ministered within. Although all eight of the chaplains who were interviewed were quite different in their personalities, their backgrounds, and in their experience they brought to their chaplaincy roles, all of them were well suited to their individual sporting contexts.

The chaplains in general have been well received by the majority in their clubs. However, most of the chaplains indicated that there was some hesitation, occasionally rejection, for them early in their role. It can take time for chaplains to build rapport with people, particularly if there is that initial hesitation from people within a club. Some chaplains indicated that they had found ways of connecting with people more quickly. For example, one chaplain trained with the players for the first few months, and felt that rapport was built quickly as a result. Other chaplains had found acceptance quickly after critical incidents, which thrust them into situations where they had visible opportunities to offer pastoral care.

For the most part, the honorary nature of sports chaplaincy in Australia is working well. Chaplains are seen to be independent from the club they minister within, a positive of not being employed by the club. Neither are they employed by a church in their chaplaincy role, nor do they wear any clothing which associates them to any particular Christian denomination. From this perspective, chaplains see the volunteer nature of their position as extremely
important, as they are more approachable by athletes or players. Additionally, because a chaplain is not ‘on the payroll’ their position is not exposed to the ups and downs of the club’s finances.

On the other hand, there is a serious time commitment by chaplains to the people in the clubs they minister to. Chaplains need to balance their time appropriately, and chaplains indicated that this was not always easy to do, particularly when there were competing demands from paid employment or family commitments. This was also important for the chaplains who held full-time clergy positions. They recognised the need to balance their sporting ministry with their paid church ministry.

Overall, chaplains recognised that their role was extremely diverse and that flexibility was a key component in any ‘success’ they had. Because a chaplain’s role is not clearly defined, they are in a unique position to ‘make the role their own’. Chaplains are able to use their strengths in personality, experience or training to identify the best methodology for their own context. Many chaplains saw building relationships as the important ingredient in their role. Additionally, chaplains also facilitated the building of stronger relationships amongst people within their clubs. For example, a player of one club saw her chaplain as one who brought out the best in others, and that rubbed off. Another person from the same club spoke of the chaplain’s influence on the culture of the club:

The way [the chaplain] has rubbed off on everyone else. So everyone else takes a little bit more time to actually make sure that, even if someone seems really happy, that they ask how things are going and seeing if they’re okay with everything.

Chaplains, stakeholders and players saw the chaplaincy role as unique, both as a specific role within the club, and from the perspective of other clubs who had no such role.

Many of the characteristics of school chaplaincy which contributed to its effectiveness were evident in sports chaplaincy:

- a proactive approach in building relationships;
- being readily accessible through regular involvement with clubs;
- being unaligned with the administration and not being paid by the clubs, meaning that chaplains could readily and effectively offer support to individuals and contribute to building club culture.

Unlike others who provide counselling, chaplains provide support for individuals and for the clubs themselves in flexible and holistic ways, sometimes extending that support beyond the club to the members’ families. At the same time, very few chaplains are professionally trained as psychologists. They must recognise the limits of the counselling they offer and refer people on to other professionals when that is needed.

Connections with churches

Many of the chaplains felt that there was a strong disconnect between local churches and sports chaplaincy, and sport in general. A number of questions arose in discussion with the chaplains: How can local churches better assist in the support of chaplains? In what ways can sports chaplaincy be recognised as a ministry within the local church context instead of a separate ministry outside of a church community?

There is a real need for closer connections between sporting clubs through their chaplains and local churches. There are mutual benefits for clubs and churches. The sporting clubs benefit through increased pastoral care and practical support, and the churches benefit from the connections they make with clubs as they seek to serve in the local community.

Some churches are already proactively reaching out to the community through sport. For example,

- Lakeside Baptist Church, in the southern suburbs of Perth, serves the community through a recreation centre, which doubles as the area for worship services on a Sunday.
- Just outside the Brisbane CBD, a Salvation Army corps runs weekly worship services with a sports theme and focus. Dubbed ‘God’s Sports Arena’, it meets in an Anglican Church opposite Suncorp Stadium, the home of the Brisbane Broncos Rugby League Club and Brisbane Roar Soccer Club.
- The Uniting Church of Donald and St Arnaud, situated in rural north-west Victoria, sponsors the local AFL teams. The Uniting Church logo can be seen on players jumpers as well as on club and league websites.
Other churches throughout Australia conduct regular recreational activities which aim to connect regular attenders with people in the community. Many churches enter teams in local sporting competitions under their name. For example, in a local netball league in the eastern suburbs of Melbourne, six of the sixteen clubs originated out of and retain links with local Catholic and Uniting churches.

In research conducted with a sample of more than 4,000 students in Catholic schools it was found that 1,457 (35%) were involved in sporting clubs associated with local churches. Of these young people, 31 per cent never attended services of worship, and thus the sporting club was their only connection with the local church (Christian Research Association, 2011).

However, chaplains to sporting clubs see their role as not about getting more people into church, although occasionally that does happen. Most chaplains felt that people in the churches need to widen their definition of church to encompass an outward looking ‘going out’ to the people theology, rather than an inward looking ‘bums on seats’ theology. As one chaplain stated: “[People in the church] still don’t get that you need to go to where people are”.

**Training for sports chaplaincy**

All of the chaplains who were interviewed had received at least some training in chaplaincy or pastoral care, and most had undertaken a Certificate in Sports Chaplaincy. A number of them were ordained clergy, so had received training in pastoral care as part of their ministry training. Previously, mostly ordained clergy were involved in sports chaplaincy as part of their local church ministry. Some clergy no doubt undertook the chaplaincy role ‘on the side’, perhaps to the disappointment of the parishioners who saw sport as a distraction from church on Sunday. However, the last decade has witnessed an increase in the number of lay people involved in sports chaplaincy in Australia.

Though Euro-centric and observed through a Catholic perspective, the Pontifical Council for the Laity document on sport highlights the importance of recruiting and training lay women and men to an ‘apostolic engagement’ with the world of sport. The Council argues that,

> It is therefore necessary and urgent to invest in the laity at all levels of the ‘sport system’ since the response to the pastoral challenge of the world of sport is mostly up to them . . . . The pastoral ministry of sport must concern itself with the training of the laity, above all, lay ‘volunteers’ in order to equip, educate and assist them with knowledge and prudence, with far-sightedness and clarity, through appropriate stages of formation, through the sharing of valuable experiences and with adequate facilities. (Pontifical Council for the Laity, 2008, pp.57-58).

In the Australian context, an increase in lay involvement in sports chaplaincy brings with it the possibility that they will be under-trained, or lack the specific pastoral training that clergy undertake in the course of their ordination. As more and more lay people are recruited to sports chaplaincy positions there will be a need for more rigorous training, and extra context or sport specific training for chaplains working in unique settings, such as in rural towns, with elite sports-people, or with disabled athletes. Previous qualifications or training of potential chaplains should be recognised, as many have life skills and experience appropriate to the setting. Training and equipping of sports chaplains for the future is important to accommodate the changes occurring in recruitment.

One of those changes is the increase in the number of women becoming chaplains over the last few years. A training course for potential sports chaplains held in NSW in February 2013 was the first in which there were more female than male participants. According to some long-term chaplains, sports chaplaincy has long been a male-dominated field of ministry. As women in sport in Australia search for better recognition and become mor prominent in the elite areas, so the need for more female sports chaplains will become even more apparent.

**Structural issues in sports chaplaincy**

As changes occur other structures will also need to be addressed.

One such structure is its voluntary and casual nature, part of the uniqueness of sports chaplaincy. Many stakeholders and players stated that their honorary status was highly respected and contributed to the effectiveness of sports chaplaincy. However, one could ask the question ‘how do you truly value a person’s role if that position requires an extensive time commitment and yet is unpaid?’ Additionally, if sports chaplaincy moved from honorary to paid, where would the funds come from, and who would administer them? On the other hand, would such a change mean a devaluing of the commitment of those who feel called to serve sport in an honorary capacity? As one chaplain declared: “Time is an issue when the role is unpaid. You just can’t work for peanuts forever. That’s the biggest problem”.

One might also ask whether a variety of models need to be developed. Is it appropriate, for example, to have paid chaplains in professional sporting clubs?
Another structure of sports chaplaincy has to do with the accountability of chaplains. Very few of the chaplains who were interviewed undertook any formal evaluation from Sports Chaplaincy Australia or the clubs they served within. There also appeared to be no formal structures of accountability in place in most situations, apart from the requirement of having police checks for working with children. While chaplains receive some training in professional conduct, how are they held accountable for their ethical responsibilities? Are there structures in place for complaints against chaplains, and if so, what are they? How can chaplains be accountable whilst remaining confidential? There need to be appropriate accountability procedures in place between the chaplain and the club, and between both parties to Sports Chaplaincy Australia.

In equipping sports chaplains for the future it is important that their role is fully understood from both a theological and a pastoral perspective. None of the chaplains interviewed saw their role as evangelists or preachers. They were there to be available to provide pastoral care to those who needed it, without any strings attached. While some chaplains encountered people of non-Christian faiths within their clubs, they treated them no differently from anyone else. However, primarily chaplains were ministering to people who saw themselves as having no identification with any religion.

However, some of the chaplains had offered ‘spiritual’ advice or guidance when asked. Some had helped to ‘bridge the gap’ between the church and ‘un-churched’ people in their clubs. Others had been available to provide religious rituals, such as funerals or weddings, and this is also an important role that chaplains undertake.

This pilot research project has examined how the ecumenical nature of sports chaplaincy has had a positive influence through providing low level pastoral care of people in sporting clubs. This project has identified that there is a need for further research in the area of chaplaincy within sport in Australia. Further research should address key areas of sports chaplaincy, such as selection, training, role evaluation, accountability, and the volunteer nature of the ministry.

In sports chaplaincy, a real need has been identified within an important aspect of Australian society. For many Australians the church has largely been irrelevant for them, while sport has provided meaning and community. Overall, sports chaplains, as representatives of the Christian faith in Australia, are responding to that need and finding an opportunity for re-shaping Christian ministry in contemporary Australia.

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