

# **Ministry on Their Turf: The Roles and Functions of Christian Sports Chaplains in Contemporary Australian Society**

*Stephen Reid*

[S.Reid@cra.org.au](mailto:S.Reid@cra.org.au)

Dr Stephen Reid is currently the Senior Research Officer with the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference National Centre for Pastoral Research and the Research Coordinator with the Christian Research Association, where he has worked concurrently since 2007. His doctoral studies investigated the roles and functions of Christian sports chaplains in Australia. He holds additional qualifications in Theology and Applied Social Research. Stephen is an Honorary Research Fellow with Australian Catholic University and with Sports Chaplaincy Australia. He has been married to Jane for 26 years and they have three children aged 23, 20 and 18.

### **Abstract**

While the Australian population has a passionate obsession with sport, there continues to be a significant decline in religious activities and beliefs, as well as negatively changing attitudes towards Christianity. However, over recent years, there has been an increased demand from sporting clubs for Christian chaplains.

Using a mixed methods research approach involving case studies, interviews and surveys, this research explored what clubs seek in the roles and functions of Christian sports chaplains in contemporary Australian society, and how chaplaincy is perceived by the chaplains themselves and by church members. It gathered qualitative and quantitative information about how effective chaplains were in their various roles.

Four major dimensions to a sports chaplain's role were identified. The chaplains saw themselves as involved in the mission of God and the ministry of the churches, expressed primarily through caring for individuals and contributing to the clubs by building morale and culture. For sporting clubs, the care for individuals and building of team morale were of paramount importance. Through these roles, sports chaplains are seen to be highly effective, and are providing a genuine connection between the secular world of sport and spirituality.

### **Introduction**

It is often stated that sport plays a significant role in Australian society and its historical and continuing influence cannot be understated. Though large in geographical size yet relatively small in population, Australia has ‘punched above its weight’ on the international sporting stage (Toohey & Taylor, 2009, p. 387). While Australian’s indigenous population has inhabited the country for tens of thousands of years, Australia as a federated nation is relatively young. However, though young, sport has long played a role in shaping the Australian psyche. As Tyndall has noted, there was a national cricket team before Australia even became a federation (Tyndall, 2004, p. 91), and Australia’s involvement in the modern Olympic Games pre-dates its proclamation as a Commonwealth nation (Howell & Howell, 1988, pp. 5-12).

Juxtaposed against the population’s passionate involvement in sport, recent Australian social indicators provide evidence that Christian identification and practices are in decline. Many Australians who once identified as ‘Christian’ no longer do so and most of those now claim to have ‘no religion’ (Hughes, 2017; Hughes et al., 2012, pp. 5-7). Trust in churches and in Christian institutes more broadly is waning (Reid, 2020b). Regular and occasional church attendance across many Christian denominations has been in decline for some years (Dantis et al.,

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2020; Powell et al., 2018, p. 5; Reid, 2020a). For many Australians today, Christian churches are seen to be irrelevant, outdated, and “out of step with the pluralistic post-modernists who believe they are in control of a destiny of their own choosing” (Stewart, 2012, p. 10).

However, in contrast to evident decline in Christian identification and church attendance amongst Australians, the demand for Christian chaplaincy in various settings has seen a steady increase in recent years. One such form of chaplaincy which has seen significant growth in demand in Australia is sports chaplaincy. In Australia, more than 500 honorary sports chaplains are now represented in a wide array of sports and leisure activities, and at all levels, from grass-roots local sporting clubs to semi-professional teams, to state and national institutes, to fully professional national sporting clubs (Butler & Mitaxa, 2016). Indeed, sports chaplaincy can now arguably be seen as a growing phenomenon not just in Australia but in various parts of the world (Parker & Watson, 2014, pp. 74-76; Weir, 2016, pp. 1-2).

One may well ask, as Slater has of chaplaincy in the United Kingdom (Slater, 2012, pp. 307-308), what is it about the current religious and social climate in Australia which appears to be rejecting many aspects of organised Christianity, but is open to the often unstructured role of a Christian chaplain – in this context a sports chaplain? In Australia, the demand for chaplains to

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sporting clubs has been strong, prompting one to ask why are those sporting clubs calling out for Christian chaplains while so many local churches are witnessing a decline in involvement? What is it about the ministry of sports chaplaincy – a Christian ministry which most commonly takes place beyond the ‘four walls’ of a local church building – that is so compelling for people in mainly quite secular sporting clubs? And why is there such demand at a time when identification of and involvement in Christian practices is in such decline?

Certainly, only just a few decades ago, it was not uncommon to see many church teams playing in local sporting leagues, while there were also many Christian sporting associations, usually made up of individuals connected with local church communities. However, although many church sporting clubs still exist, the role of the local church in sport has much diminished. Has this decline of church involvement in sport meant that chaplaincy to secular clubs has become more relevant? Or, relatedly, is sports chaplaincy one successful undertaking the churches have embarked on due to an ever-increasing secular society?

With those broader questions in mind, this research project principally sought to identify the roles and functions of Christian sports chaplains in contemporary Australian society as chaplains, church members, sporting club administrators and sporting club

members perceive them. It asked how effective Christian sports chaplains are seen to be in those roles and functions.

### **Understanding sports chaplaincy**

In order to examine the ministry and mission of sports chaplaincy, one must explore further the definitional understanding of chaplaincy and how it relates to sport. That is, how can one, with an underlying theological basis, clearly define what a sports chaplain is and does in relationship to the mission of the church? Such an exploration is important if one is to investigate a theological framework in which sports chaplaincy works.

Theologically, Steddon described chaplaincy as “guest” theology in contrast to “host” theology. According to Steddon, guest theology asks, “Please may I come to your place and be part of what you do?”, while host theology says, “Come to our place and do as we do” (Steddon, 2010, pp. 11–12). Steddon’s description as it relates to sports chaplaincy provides a firm contention that doing theology in the world of sport must always be invitational.

Waller et al. succinctly defined the sports chaplain as “a lay or ordained member of the clergy who provides spiritual care for athletes” (2010, p. 17). This definition may be an accurate account within the United States sports chaplaincy context, in which Waller et al. wrote, but it is far from extensive enough for

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the Australian context and omits many of the complexities of chaplaincy.

The Global Sports Chaplaincy Association, a movement of sports ministries and sports chaplaincy associations from around the world, provided a succinct definition: “Sports Chaplaincy is the provision of ongoing pastoral and spiritual care, by permission, to those of faith or no faith, for the holistic well-being of all involved in the community of sport” (Global Sports Chaplaincy Association, 2021). However, the succinctness in this definition does leave many questions unanswered. Is sports chaplaincy solely about the provision of care? Who is responsible for giving and receiving permission for a chaplain to be involved? What is ‘holistic well-being’?

Rather than discussing a definition for sports chaplaincy, Weir simply placed sports chaplaincy in its rather youthful historical setting by acknowledging the well-established Christian ministries of hospital, military and prison chaplaincy, and suggested that sports chaplaincy developed by adopting and adapting approaches used by these church ministries, often by trial and error, until they found what worked (Weir, 2016, pp. 9–18). Furthermore, the model of sports chaplaincy in Australia was based on industrial and hospital chaplaincy, in which the early founders of sports chaplaincy in Australia, Tronson and Tyndall, were heavily involved; Tronson at the Shell Oil refinery and Tyndall

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as a hospital chaplain (D. Tyndall, personal communication, November 12, 2021).

Holm (2009) provided a general, but nonetheless quite helpful, definition of chaplaincy which helps to provide a slightly more extensive position for developing a specific working definition for sports chaplaincy. He stated:

Chaplaincy is a service or ministry offered in secular settings that are outside normal places of worship, such as a university, hospital, prison, school, or workplace. Although broad in scope, chaplaincy services centre on the intellectual, emotional, social, interpersonal, and spiritual dimensions of life and they seek to assist personal awareness, understanding, growth and integration (Holm, 2009, p. 7).

Sports chaplaincy sits well within Holm's definition of chaplaincy. The ministry generally takes place outside the context of church, although not always. In Australia, sports chaplaincy is broad in scope, and different chaplains adapt their position to suit their talents and skills and their individual sporting contexts (Reid & Hughes, 2013). It can provide many of the services listed by



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Holm, although, as will be explored shortly, there are some services offered by sports chaplains not included in this definition.

While one might envisage a sports chaplain doing a variety of tasks in a sporting club, her or his functional role may be quite enigmatic. On the one hand the sports chaplain has a role in the club, yet on the other hand that role can be quite fluid or nondescript. In one context the sports chaplain may be in a role where there are prescribed fundamental tasks, even prior to taking on the role. But in another context the chaplain may shape the role to suit their training, their skills and their personality (Reid & Hughes, 2013, pp. 5–7). Additionally, as Ryan has pointed out, the chaplain’s role simultaneously operates as a partnership between “two different organisational structures”, that of the organisation they serve and the faith group of which they are a part of (Ryan, 2015, p. 32).

With that in mind, aside from the behavioural aspects of the role, what are the major dimensions of sports chaplaincy in relation to God’s mission, in relation to the churches, in relation to the individuals within the club, and in relation to the sporting clubs themselves? How does the chaplain operate within such an ambiguous context, and how can her or his effectiveness be achieved whilst fulfilling the role in relation to each of those major dimensions?

### **Methodology**

In order to maximise the relevance, quality and breadth of data collected pertaining to the roles and functions of sports chaplains, the research was carried out using a mixed methods approach. By utilising both qualitative and quantitative components in the research, the aim was to present a broad and general picture of the extent to which sports chaplaincy is or is not an effective Christian ministry in Australia, as well as provide the more detailed stories about the extent and nature of any such claimed effectiveness.

The data collection was carried out in two sequential stages.

In the first stage, in order to determine the range of issues within sports chaplaincy in Australia, an exploratory qualitative case study approach using semi-structured interviews was conducted. To ensure a broad representation from across the various sporting contexts and locations throughout Australia, a diversity of participants was sought, as it was expected that chaplaincy might vary in each of the contexts. It was anticipated that, in general, sporting clubs in regional and rural areas operate and function differently from those in more urban areas, while it was expected that there would also be diversities in clubs from different states. Furthermore, different sports also operate and function in a variety of ways, while some sports attract more ethnically diverse players than other sports. As such, a diversity of sports, locations

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or demographics may reveal a slightly different approach to chaplaincy.

In the second stage, an on-line survey was conducted which targeted sports chaplains, people in sporting clubs in which chaplains served (e.g., athletes, players), key representatives of the sporting clubs and organisations (e.g., coaches, administrators), and people in churches where the chaplains had a connection. A survey methodology was chosen to complement the interviews as it was anticipated that surveys would allow for a much broader account of the sports chaplaincy contexts from around Australia and would provide a deeper investigation of some of the issues arising from the interviews conducted during the first stage of the research.

To ensure there was access to a wide range of chaplains and people in sporting clubs, and to abide by ethics protocols, the researcher collaborated with a number of key leaders at Sports Chaplaincy Australia (SCA), the organisation responsible for the vast majority of sporting chaplains in Australia. As well as being the main connection point for interview participants, SCA assisted with reviewing the online survey and distributing it amongst its network of chaplains and sporting clubs using their contact database.

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Overall, 46 separate interviews were carried out, with 49 individuals involved, of whom two-thirds were or had been chaplains. The majority of interviews were conducted between mid-2017 and late 2019, with two carried out in 2020. The interviews were recorded and the data was transcribed verbatim by the researcher. The transcriptions were imported into qualitative analysis software *QSR NVivo*. Very general thematic categories were designed based on the initial interview data. Content analysis of the interview transcripts was then undertaken to identify similar themes arising from each of the participant's interviews. A more detailed analysis of the data using a coding structure was subsequently carried out.

Using the themes developed during the stage one analysis, a survey questionnaire was created. A combination of 'closed-end' questions, 'all-that-apply' questions, 'rating' questions and 'open-ended' questions was used throughout the survey. In an attempt to minimise the administrative work involved in sending out different surveys to different groups of respondents, and to ensure each respondent was asked the most relevant questions according to their individual situation, question 'branching' was utilised in the survey. Data for the survey was collected over 12 weeks during mid-2020. In the end, around 250 responses were received, of whom 85 per cent were current, previous or expected soon to be chaplains, or SCA staff. It is estimated there were

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approximately 2,000 email contacts, meaning if all were sent the survey link that there was a response rate of around 12.5 per cent, underwhelming somewhat yet adequate to complement the interview data. Statistical analysis of the quantitative survey data was carried out in *IBM SPSS Statistics* using univariate, bivariate and principal component analysis.

### **Major roles and functions**

In order to investigate the roles and functions of chaplains in sporting clubs, a series of questions in the survey and interviews firstly sought to explore the extent to which people in the clubs valued the chaplaincy.

In the survey of non-chaplains, 90 per cent of respondents agreed to some extent with the statement that 'It is important for sporting clubs to have a chaplain'.

Many of the non-chaplain interview participants emphasised the importance of having a chaplain in sporting clubs, and many had recommended and promoted it to other clubs. They suggested that often it was after the chaplain had been there a while that they realised the importance of her or his role. On other occasions, such as when a chaplain had come in to assist a club after a critical incident, club personnel realised in hindsight the importance of appointing a chaplain before such incidents occur.

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In the same way, a few participants spoke of the importance of the chaplain as being linked to a sporting club's duty of care to provide a safe place for a player or athlete.

For many of the survey respondents and interview participants, the importance and the value of the chaplain was linked to the roles she or he played in their club, which varied from chaplain to chaplain depending on the individual, their level of experience, or the type or level of the sport. For example, an administrator at one club noted the importance of their chaplain's role in the area of player welfare:

I believe sports chaplaincy plays a pivotal role in player welfare and wellbeing, especially in times where players are at high risk of depression, online bullying and experimenting with drugs. The chaplain is able to walk that line between trying to get the best out of players on the field, by ensuring they are receiving the necessary support off the field.

In both the survey and the interviews, chaplains were asked how they saw their role within the club and the extent to which they spent time undertaking the various functions of that role. The survey questions specifically asked them to identify, over the

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course of a regular month, such as during a sporting season, how often they spent time at the club, or with someone associated with the club, doing various activities. Another question in the survey related to the various issues the chaplains addressed. They were asked, again, over the course of a regular month, the extent to which they addressed various issues in their chaplaincy role. The different activities and issues were identified by interview participants as common activities undertaken and issues addressed as part of a chaplaincy role.

Table 1 shows the frequency with which chaplains reported that various pastoral care and club morale and culture issues had been addressed in their role over the course of a regular month.

In regard to pastoral care issues, chaplains noted that over the course of a regular month, they had most regularly addressed issues related to injury or on-field performance issues, with 27 per cent regularly or very regularly involved, and relationship issues, with one-quarter involved at least regularly. Between 14 and 17 per cent of chaplains had at least regularly addressed mental health issues (17%), grief or loss issues (14%) and self-esteem or personal image issues (14%). They had least addressed issues related to racism, physical violence and sexism in their clubs.

In terms of activities related to club morale and culture, chaplains said they most frequently provided practical support around the

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club with just over half (51%) doing so regularly or very regularly. Activities related to community building within the club was something that almost one-quarter (24%) of chaplains said they did regularly or very regularly. Building club morale, matters related to club structure or organisation and legal issues were activities which many chaplains found themselves involved in less frequently, although the interview participants suggested that such activities were nonetheless important for the influence the chaplains had within the club community.

Table 1. The frequency chaplains reported that various issues had been addressed or activities they had been involved with over the course of a regular month (percentage for each issue)

<b>Issue or activity</b>	<b>Not at all</b>	<b>Rarely or occasionally</b>	<b>Regularly or very regularly</b>
<b>Pastoral care issues</b>			
Injury or on-field performance issues	18	55	27
Relationship issues	6	69	25
Mental health	6	77	17
Grief or loss	4	81	14
Self-esteem or personal image issues	11	76	14
Conflict resolution	17	74	9



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Alcohol or drug related issues	20	73	8
Bullying or harassment	34	63	3
Sexism	42	56	2
Physical violence	43	55	2
Racism	47	51	2
<b>Club morale and culture activities</b>			
Practical support (i.e. help out around the club)	7	41	51
Community building	15	62	24
Club morale	14	73	13
Club structural or organisational matters	41	50	10
Legal issues	52	47	1

**Source:** Reid, 2020, *Survey of chaplains and people in sporting clubs*.

Principal component analysis of the survey data identified that the roles and functions of chaplains could be broadly grouped into three separate categories as follows:

1. contributing to club morale and culture
2. providing pastoral care
3. providing spiritual care.

**Table 2. How surveyed chaplains considered the effectiveness of the activities in their role (factor loading for each of the principal components)**

Rotated Component Matrix	Component		
	1	2	3
<b>Contributing to club morale and culture</b>			
Providing practical on-field assistance	0.645	0.351	-0.017
Contributing to the morale of the club	0.850	0.221	0.328
Building a positive culture within the club	0.859	0.214	0.345
Building community within the club	0.861	0.245	0.236
Helping to set the moral tone of the club	0.840	0.114	0.268
<b>Providing spiritual care</b>			
Referring people to appropriate specialists	0.169	0.659	0.179
Providing spiritual care for people	0.186	0.703	0.306
Mentoring	0.334	0.683	0.285
Helping people think about 'big picture' issues of life	0.353	0.649	0.312
Grief counselling	0.090	0.794	0.211
Debriefing after an incident	0.233	0.667	0.305
<b>Providing pastoral care</b>			
One-on-one pastoral care	0.208	0.261	0.758
Building strong relationships with people	0.248	0.214	0.805
Providing a listening ear for people	0.257	0.487	0.639
Encouraging people	0.272	0.296	0.755
Being the 'presence of Christ' at the club	0.162	0.420	0.625

*Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.*

*Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.*

**Source:** Reid, 2020, *Survey of chaplains and people in sporting clubs*.

Table 2 shows the factor loading for each of the principal components using a rotated component matrix. The factor loading represents the size of the relationship with a component, and ranges from -1.000 to 1.000 (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007, p. 608).

Further reliability analysis of scales created from these items showed that each of the three identified components scored highly, as indicated by the following Cronbach's Alpha scores:

1. club morale and culture - 0.898
2. spiritual care - 0.857
3. pastoral care - 0.871.

Whilst the three categories have clear distinctions at a theoretical level, often the distinctions between different roles and functions were not quite so clear at the practical level, and there was an interconnectivity between many of the roles which chaplains addressed. So, for example, many chaplains suggested that a common function was to develop rapport and to build strong relationships with those in the clubs. However, many chaplains also noted that it was only after such relationships were developed that they could also start to provide aspects of spiritual care, such as assisting people to think about the bigger issues of

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life. As one chaplain reflected: “You’ve got to earn your stripes. You can’t just walk in and say, ‘Well I’m here now and you blokes . . .’ No. They’ve got to see if you’re fair dinkum, or what you’re about.”

It is somewhat curious that in the principal component analysis, some of the items which seemingly had a pastoral care dimension to them, such as referring, mentoring and grief counselling, had a higher loading within the spiritual care component than within the pastoral care component. This may be because chaplains considered these items as part of the spiritual dimension of their role. So, for example, in grief counselling, as individuals reflect on death and life issues, chaplains may implicitly take on the role of spiritual ‘pastor’, similar to that most commonly provided by an ordained minister, priest or other religious ‘grief expert’. Similarly, mentoring may have been considered spiritual mentoring, rather than pastoral mentoring.

Nonetheless, the three categories provide a robust framework to understand how chaplains and people in clubs perceive the various roles and functions of chaplaincy. Along with additional research findings about the chaplain’s role in relation to mission and ministry, the three categories in the framework above appropriately align with the four major dimensions of a sports chaplain’s role.

## **The Chaplain's Contribution to Mission**

The mission of sports chaplaincy, according to SCA, sees the chaplains as having the role of a spiritual presence in the sporting clubs. However, the spiritual presence function of the role was not interpreted in an evangelistic sense; rather chaplains were there to represent God in the many, many sporting clubs and teams scattered around Australia, “demonstrating Christ’s love and hope to them” (Sports Chaplaincy Australia, 2021a).

While some chaplains were particularly apprehensive about their perception as a spiritual presence in their clubs, others were very much aware of the subtleties of the missional aspect of demonstrating Christ’s love and hope through the various functions of their roles. This was often framed by chaplains within the rubric of the sharing of their faith, and the many ways in which that was carried out as part of their role.

On the other hand, one of the SCA leaders noted such nuances in the chaplains’ roles and the often-misunderstood ways in which they interpreted the sharing of their faith:

One of the things that marks sports chaplaincy . . . is that it is Gospel-oriented. We do have a commitment to talk about Jesus. It’s Jesus-centric. So that then puts a different spin on it because effective

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chaplains will have an opportunity to minister both in deed and word with people, so it's both grace and truth. And I think that some of our chaplains would say that they never get an opportunity to share their faith, but they did 13 funerals last year!

From a public perspective, SCA overtly promotes the fact that the organisation and their chaplains are Christian, although they additionally note the inclusiveness of serving people of any faith or worldview.

When asked, most chaplains were very happy to reflect on how they understood the missional aspect of their role, and how or if they applied it to the various aspects of their role. Often the missional and spiritual terminology was used interchangeably to reflect what chaplains considered they were 'called' to do and be as Christians.

Most chaplains were conscious of overtly advocating the missional or spiritual aspect of their role, although most were not discreet about it either, given that the title and terminology suggested a spiritual or religious dimension to it. Accordingly, there was a fine line for chaplains between making people aware of the spiritual dimension of their role and being seen to be pushing that aspect

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of the role too much. Chaplains were much more likely to err on the side of caution and follow the former rather than the latter.

The spiritual dimension became more visible to those in the clubs at certain times, such as when a critical incident occurred, and people reflected on the 'bigger things in life', perhaps during a grieving process or at a funeral. Those chaplains who had been through such occasions suggested those times were important moments in connecting with those in the clubs. Many of them noted that through those times, people in the clubs became much more aware of, and positive towards, the missional aspect of the chaplain's role.

Some chaplains were acutely aware that they were involved in sporting clubs which had members from a variety of religious traditions. A few chaplains indicated they had a small number of Christians in their clubs, while a few others noted they had people from other faith backgrounds. Some of the newer chaplains said they did not know. However, most commonly chaplains observed the lack of any religiosity within the clubs they were involved in.

Within such disparate contexts, in religiously diverse and non-religious clubs, chaplains stressed the importance of ensuring they did not overstep the mark in regard to the missional aspect and spiritual functions of their role. For most chaplains, their role was not to be an evangelist, 'Bible-basher' or to push religion.

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Many felt that their acceptance would be in jeopardy if they did cross the 'fine line'.

Overall, there were various ways in which stakeholders perceived the missional aspect of the chaplain's role. Through undertaking the various aspects of their role, chaplains demonstrated their mission of sharing Christ's love and hope to anyone they met in the clubs, without partiality and with respect to the religiously and non-religiously diverse individuals they encountered. Some chaplains were explicit in acknowledging that they were responding to God's call in their lives or as their personal way of fulfilling Christian discipleship. Most saw this as involving a sense of presence in the name of God, rather than being overly evangelistic.

### **The Chaplain's Contribution to Ministry**

In the interviews and in some of the open-ended questions in the survey, chaplains were asked about how they saw their role as a sports chaplain within the context of the church in Australia and if they saw themselves as having a role in relation to the churches.

Many chaplains saw their role as an important link in bringing the church community and the local community together, which they understood as fulfilling the ministry of the church to the local community. On the other hand, some of the chaplains suggested



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there was a disconnection between church and community, and consequently a lack of appreciation for the role of chaplains, which stemmed from a misunderstanding or misinterpretation of the Church's mission in the world.

Additionally, some chaplains noted, in general, that those in local churches perceived their role as some sort of an 'evangelist', a person who could bring people from the sporting club into the life of the church, thereby building up the church. There was almost an unspoken expectation amongst people in churches that the chaplain - or their role - was ineffective unless such overt evangelism could be measured. As one long-serving chaplain said:

And I know some pastors who well expect that if I go to the chaplain, I get a lot more people who come to church! No! Probably none! Maybe one family! Some have seen a few families come to their church. Some have seen people come to Christ. But basically, they're not suddenly going to be coming in, because most of the sport's happening on Sundays anyway.

A number of chaplains discussed their understanding of chaplaincy as a ministry of the local church, and many felt churches were missing an opportunity to engage with local

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communities through their sporting clubs in this way because of their limited sense of ministry. Conversely, some chaplains did feel supported by their church, evidenced in practical assistance provided to their clubs when a need arose.

In general, then, sports chaplains saw their role as a ministry of the local church extending out into the local community. However, there were different perceptions of how the ministry of the church should be fulfilled. Many in the churches believed that fulfilment is seen as effective only through being present at worship services on a weekend, while the fact that someone is helped through experiences of trauma or grief is considered less effective particularly if the former is not occurring.

### **The Chaplain's Contribution to the Provision of Care**

According to SCA's public documents and its website, the role of chaplains in the clubs are to "invest in the lives of people: mind, body and soul" through various activities, such as pastoral care, personal support, crisis management, bereavement care, critical incident debriefing and delivery, and referral support (Sports Chaplaincy Australia, 2021b). SCA make it clear that their chaplains are not professional counsellors and that their role is primarily to provide pastoral care around the clubs they served, and many of the other functions they fulfilled extended out from

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that main role. However, this main role of sports chaplains is actually seen as the practical expression of the previous two major roles: being the presence of God in the clubs and representing the ministry of the churches.

Chaplains detailed the pastoral care issues they addressed, and often provided the background for how they responded to the various issues. The most common pastoral issues addressed were grief and loss, including illnesses, relationship issues and road accidents or other trauma events.

According to many of the chaplains interviewed, providing pastoral care through visiting people in hospital or at home, or generally caring for injured players or people who were sick, although relatively irregular, was nonetheless, over the course of a year or season, a common and important part of a chaplain's role. Providing such pastoral care was, however, more prevalent in some sports than others. For example, many motorsports have a high level of risk, and accidents at events can be relatively common. Hence, chaplains in motorsports talked more regularly than chaplains in other sports about the pastoral care they provided during and after such accidents.

Being able to care pastorally for people often meant firstly building relationships. Having in-depth conversations, that is,

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more than just greeting someone, was one of the most common relationship-building activities chaplains undertook.

Chaplains indicated there were many other pastoral care activities which they undertook in their roles. Some of them were relatively explicit activities, such as being present at games or club functions, providing low-level counselling or connecting with people through social media, while there were other informal activities associated with building relationships. In the interviews, when asked about the main activity of their role, nearly all of the chaplains said that an informal, though significant, part of their role was simply being a presence to those in the club. For some chaplains, there was an intentionality about being available for those around the club by 'loitering with intent' and being available through a 'ministry of presence'. For other chaplains, being present was less intentional, but rather part of being in a role that required you to be a 'people person'.

In general, the athletes and players, and often other non-administrators within a club, such as club supporters or family members, perceived the chaplain as someone who could provide off-field care and support for them when they needed it. Thus, the chaplain's effectiveness was linked to whether she or he could provide that care, and indeed, in most of the interviews, provision of support was noted frequently as a significant function of the chaplain's role.

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Many of the chaplains, though, talked more implicitly about their role as pastoral carers. For example, one basketball chaplain understood his role within a Gospel framework: “To me it’s about sharing the good news of Jesus. We do that primarily by loving people well. And that’s what my role is.”

One netball chaplain had reflected on the terminology around pastoral care:

I am not surprised that non-Christian people . . . they don’t understand the word pastoral care, they understand volunteer carer. So, they understand care. And some of them would do it naturally themselves based on their personality without being Christian. So, they know what caring for someone looks like. And my role gives them a framework.

Another major function chaplains provided as part of their role was in the area of spiritual care. To some extent, spiritual care is an extension of pastoral care and theologically one could argue that there is little distinction between the practical outworkings within a chaplaincy role. However, there were clear distinctions between pastoral and spiritual care in the types of activities chaplain were required or asked to undertake. A number of

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aspects of a chaplain's spiritual care role centred around spirituality or religious activities, the most common being prayer with another person.

In some semi-professional or professional sporting contexts which attracted overseas players, such as in rugby league (which frequently recruit Pacific Islander players) or basketball and baseball (which commonly recruit American athletes), there was a general expectation that a chaplain would provide liturgies, Bible studies or prayer for players, as is common in many of the elite level clubs in those countries. As one female chaplain to a semi-professional basketball team stated:

I thought if I'm going to be a chaplain, everyone knows a chaplain is sort of religious, and even though we don't talk about anything like that, people sort of expect that. And so, the girls all waited for me to give this little prayer before they went out on the court. [But], if they didn't want me to do it, I wouldn't do it.

In a number of contexts, for example in motorsports or Surf Life Saving, it was accepted practice to commence the season with a special liturgical event which included a blessing or a prayer. Sometimes a local priest or pastor would perform such a ritual,

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and sometimes the chaplain undertook that role. Moreover, in various motorsports events, whether local or national events, it was common to have a public prayer before each event.

Many of the chaplains indicated they had officiated at, or assisted with, religious ceremonies of people in the club they served, such as baptisms, weddings or funerals, and a number of the chaplains explicitly noted the privilege of being asked to undertake such ceremonies. Although performing ceremonies with those associated with the clubs was mostly an irregular activity as part of their role, chaplains nonetheless understood their involvement in them as indicators of their effectiveness in building relationships.

Many chaplains noted that there was a distinct role for chaplains in sporting clubs which was different from that of experts from other fields, such as psychologists, counsellors or other health professionals, although in some of the contexts the chaplain worked alongside specific health or wellbeing professionals. A few chaplains suggested that, at the grass-roots, community level of sport, most clubs did not have the resources to access professional health experts, so welcomed someone who could perform similar functions for their club members. In fact, many chaplains did have qualifications or experience in pastoral care, counselling or psychology, such as those who were clergy, but

fulfilled such functions in their chaplaincy role in an honorary capacity.

### **The Chaplain's Contribution to the Prophetic**

The church has a prophetic role to play in the world by pointing to the message of Christ in the words it proffers, but also in its transforming actions as it “responds in service, welfare, and the seeking of justice” (Langmead, 2004, p. 234). The Catholic Church understands a lay person’s prophetic mission by evangelisation in the proclamation of Christ not just in words but in the testimony of life in the “ordinary circumstances of the world” (Catholic Church, 1993, #905). Similarly, within a sporting club, a chaplain’s care of individuals was shown to have a transformational effect on that sporting community as the chaplain’s influence often changed it into a caring community.

This ‘prophetic’ aspect of the sports chaplain’s role was understood more generally by the way in which chaplains were able to contribute to building club morale and enhancing the culture of the club in positive ways.

According to the research participants, culture within a sporting club manifested itself in various ways. For some clubs, the chaplain’s role was about improving a lack of positive culture which was linked to how people related to or treated each other.



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For other clubs, the chaplain's role was to intentionally develop what was already happening in the club, and to raise the profile "about healthy community and what that looks like".

Practical assistance was the most common activity undertaken in this regard, although such assistance took many and diverse forms and was expressed in different ways. For some in the clubs, the chaplain's prophetic contribution was witnessed in the positive ways in which people treated one another. For others, it was demonstrated in the positive values and morality the chaplain had shown and had helped instil in the club, such as assisting the club to adopt more family-friendly attitudes and practices.

One club administrator noted the gentle way the chaplain had influenced the club's culture in relation to mental health and inclusivity, and the positive wider consequences it had brought for the club and the local community.

But we're really happy with where we're going in this space with [the chaplain], as far as our culture and stuff like that. We're a bit more inclusive now. And it broadens our reach in the community, and our ability to get new players, but also help people in the community. We're very happy with it.

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A few of the interview participants from historically male-dominated sports, such as cricket, AFL and rugby league, highlighted the importance of the chaplain's role in transitioning clubs to be much more family-oriented and particularly the inclusiveness of females now playing in many of the clubs. While the chaplains may not have always instigated such changes, club administrators appreciated the positive influence chaplains could add.

Overall, many in the clubs acknowledged that a chaplain added value by their practical contribution, but some explicitly suggested there were additional important benefits in the perception of a chaplain addressing the cultural and wellbeing functions at a club.

### **Discussion and Conclusions**

The practical outworkings and perceptions of a sports chaplain's roles differed for each of the participant groups involved in the research. The lived experience, the research findings indicate, is that the issues pertaining to the chaplain's role are very much shaped by the sporting clubs and how their members perceive and relate to the individual chaplain.

Generally, from a missional perspective, chaplains understood their role as providing a Christian presence and care within a

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sporting club. The majority did not see their role as promulgating their Christian beliefs, although most were happy to share them if they were asked. This understanding of their role was closely aligned to the role outlined by SCA, which was not surprising given SCA had responsibility for the recruitment and training of the chaplains.

To some extent there was consensus amongst the different stakeholders in relation to the chaplain's roles and functions, although those roles and functions differed somewhat depending on the type of sporting context. Commonly, the understanding of the chaplaincy role for each of the participant groups in the research was directly related to the actual role the chaplain played and the function she or he provided in the club. It was usual for the initial perception of a chaplain's role to change once an individual witnessed the chaplain 'at work' or became directly involved with the chaplain. In that sense, the change in perception became more closely aligned to the reality of the day-to-day role of the chaplain, which most often led to a more accurate understanding of her or his role.

There were different perceptions between chaplains and those in the clubs as to the main issues addressed by chaplains in their role. While chaplains indicated that they felt most effective in providing low-level pastoral care, people in the clubs indicated that the chaplain's role was similarly effective in addressing

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pastoral care issues but also in building club morale and attending to club cultural issues.

Addressing issues to do with spirituality or religion was seen by most as the least effective, although also one of the least regularly addressed functions, of the role. On the other hand, a relatively common related function for a small proportion of chaplains in their role, particularly longer-term chaplains, was to officiate or assist club members with weddings, funerals and other typically religious-type rituals, such as child baptisms or child naming ceremonies.

Overall, the range of pastoral and cultural issues addressed by chaplains was dependent on an array of other factors, and it was difficult to identify which issues were most effective given they were sometimes closely related to other issues. For example, only a few chaplains indicated that they had dealt with problems to do with physical violence, sexism or racism, yet those issues often surfaced through other associated concerns which chaplains dealt with much more regularly, such as mental health troubles or alcohol and drug abuse.

However, whilst occasionally responding to certain issues as part of a chaplain's role can be highly effective, the regularity and mundanity of a chaplain providing practical assistance can be a slow but important key to ensuring a chaplain builds relationships

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and develops rapport with those in the club. The practical assistance a chaplain provides, whatever that may be, can often be the necessary connection point which allows players, athletes and others in a club to see a chaplain's role as there to serve without underlying agendas.

Where sports chaplaincy was working at its best, there was a collaboration between the sporting club and the local church, with the chaplain providing the link between the two. Or to use an alternative analogy, the chaplain provided a bridge between two often quite different worlds: the sporting club and the local church. While SCA provides the initial placement of the chaplain, and indeed the training, its ongoing role in the club/church collaboration is solely to provide ongoing support, accountability and development, if and when needed. In that sense, SCA takes a 'back seat' and allows the chaplain to 'drive' the collaborative endeavour.

Certainly, there were contexts in which such collaborative models between sporting clubs and churches existed, and all groups involved benefited from it. In such contexts, the sporting club not only had the chaplain providing the various functions of the role, but also members of the church, who often provided practical support in various circumstances. The church understood its mission as serving the local community, and its members had the

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opportunity to truly serve. And the chaplain felt supported by the church and club to positively fulfil her or his role.

Then again, there were numerous examples where such collaboration did not exist, sometimes despite the effort of the chaplain in providing opportunities to make it so. One basketball chaplain, also a church pastor, suggested that it was not necessarily sports chaplaincy that some churches and denominations had an issue with, it was a broader lack of engagement by local churches with their wider communities:

Being able to be involved [in the local community] is where the church ought to be . . . I think our churches have got a fortress mentality. That's what I'd say. And it's sad to say that. And the pastors especially, but most of the people - because of the pastors - have not got a clue on how to engage with people outside in the community.

Sports chaplaincy in Australia is an example of a chaplaincy ministry which has adapted to operate and grow in a society which has steadily experienced a decline in religious affiliation and activity. Through its inception and its development over the past 40 years, it has understood the important role sport plays in

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the lives of many Australians, and it has understood the importance and impact of the Christian faith to society as a whole, even as many may disregard such historical or current influence. In a broad range of communities and contexts throughout Australia, sports chaplains offer an authentic Christian witness and seek to minister to people on “their turf” (Tyndall, 2004, p. 161) by positively contributing to the morale and culture in sporting communities and by providing genuine pastoral and spiritual care to any who may need or call for it, no matter what their religious or spiritual beliefs. At their best, sports chaplains are “culture brokers”, bridging a gap between the two very different cultures of sport and church (Swinton, 2016). Although often tenuous, chaplains provide a link, otherwise broken, between two vital local communities: the local church and the local sporting club.

Whilst at first glance there is an apparent paradox in the fact that very secular sporting clubs are seeking Christian chaplains, the findings of this research somewhat resolve such ambiguity. The demand for Christian chaplains actually offers an insight into contemporary Australian spirituality which shows that people want care and community but do not want it connected with restrictive doctrines nor out-of-date institutional structures which they no longer have confidence in. Leaders in sporting clubs want someone to come into their midst who can care for their

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community in ways that they themselves cannot. The people who are currently responding to that demand are Christian chaplains, although clubs might also be open to non-Christians fulfilling that role should the opportunity arise. The paradox, though, also offers an insight into the theological understanding some Christians have towards mission in contemporary Australian society. Such Christians understand that the model of chaplaincy needs to fit the way sporting clubs operate, rather than applying a model of how Christian churches might wish chaplaincy to be. Those chaplains recognise that in order to be accepted within a secular community they must leave their doctrinal beliefs at the door.

If the church is to be a credible and valued institution in Australian society, there is an obligation for it to take its ministries from the 'four walls' of its internal and inward-focused structures out into the every-day world in which its members live. Churches can use the model of sports chaplaincy to ensure their own mission is outward focused and Gospel-centric.

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