

Christianity and Football – a History

As football fever grips the nation before the 2024 Euros, what role has the Church played in the history of the beautiful game?

In the beginning

It all started with the Sunday School movement. With as many as 85% of children attending Sunday School in the latter part of the 19th century, the Church was in constant dialogue with the community that surrounded it. Britain was, in the estimate of many, the most religious nation in the world at that time.

Outside of the context of Sunday, the Church was the main provider of activity for children and young people, whose numbers in society were at record levels. As people moved from an agriculture-based existence towards living in the most basic of accommodation in large cities, they often sought solace in a 'third place'. That was usually the public house.

In reaction, vicars, priests and ministers pioneered new sporting diversions to save young people from earthly temptations. These Church leaders were deeply averse to the idea of sport on Sunday, and had a very distinct temperance agenda. With the advent of the 5½-day week, Saturday afternoon drunkenness was becoming a problem, and the 3pm kick-off was partly a result of the desire of church leaders to keep men from spending an afternoon drinking their wages away. Christianised sportsmanship, with its emphasis on bravery, modesty, forbearance and friendship, enabled sports like football to emerge as national pastimes.

A growing influence

Christians were able to influence these decisions because as organised football grew throughout the 1860s and 1870s, as many as 25% of all the teams playing in a league would have some form of church affiliation. It was this church-based group of teams which took the initiative to form the Football League in 1886. Tired of friendlies against inferior local opposition and the occasional thrill of the cup, William McGregor of the Aston Villa (Wesleyan) Football Club decided to see if there was interest in a league structure. Ten of

the other teams joining Villa during that first decade of the league were church affiliated, with Methodists and Anglicans at the fore.

Many of the church teams had grown out of cricket teams. The Aston Villa Wesleyan Chapel had more than 300 children in its Sunday School, and a significant number of young men in a Bible class especially for them. Six young men from this Bible class started a mission in nearby Portchester Street that grew from 12 members in 1878 to nearly 1,200 by 1888. One of the founders, HS Yoxall, found large numbers of young men playing football on Sundays. He persuaded them to come to Bible class and provided a field for them to play on, on Saturdays. Then he discovered that they were using the changing rooms for drinking on non-match days. Undaunted, he joined the team in order to keep an eye on them, but so impressed them with his skill that they eventually came to trust him, joined the Bible class and gave up drinking.

As this distinctive mission work went on, the Aston Villa (Wesleyan) Football Club was gathering pace and grew from its humble beginnings in 1874 to the point where they won the FA Cup in 1887. McGregor had worked hard to curb the drinking of team members, and called a team meeting every Monday in a local coffee shop to help the players discover other social outlets.

On a mission

Again and again as you study the origins of many of the leading clubs in the land, you discover that the church that sponsored a team was itself a 'mission' church planted out as the cities and towns grew at breakneck speed. The formation of a football team was part of a commitment to every aspect of the life of the local community.

William Baker Pitt, who started the process that gave us Swindon Town, was noted as a champion of the poor. In the early years, their star player and England international was Harold Fleming. He was famous for refusing to play on Good Friday and for his unwavering sportsmanship. He was also a key youth worker in his church.

With many of the players in their mid to late teens, football was a place to learn about teamwork, responsibility and administration. John Henry Cardwell, the vicar of St Andrews in Fulham, turned to the then 15-year-old

Tom Norman to recruit the players for what became Fulham FC. Over the years, teachers from the Bible classes – and one very able local vicar – stepped out for Fulham

Cardwell believed that the Church often ‘drove the children from our doors’ when they were young, and was determined to reverse the trend. He also felt that people needed to belong before they believed, and was wary of ‘aggressive propaganda’, preferring a policy of ‘making friends first and converts after’. The church fed as many as 160 children daily with free hot dinners. He was joined in his endeavours with the football team by Peregrine Propert, who had been deeply affected by the witness of cricketing legend CT Studd and his friends in the Cambridge Seven. He turned his back on a career in law and politics, and instead came to work in a new mission church in the Fulham area, St Augustine’s.

The church opened a gym, and the genial manner, genuine friendship and sporting abilities of Propert soon won him respect among those whose foul language, unkempt appearance and lack of education was an offence to more class-conscious churchgoers. Propert had to defend himself against those who told the Bishop of London that he ‘was not fit to be a clergyman’. Propert told the bishop that he believed in applied religion, and that he stood by the precedent set by Jesus who said that he ‘came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance’ (Matthew 9:13, KJV).

Some saw themselves as being in a battle, with football being one of the social institutions that could build community and help the Church find a voice among the local people. Basil Wilberforce, grandson of the anti-slavery campaigner, was determined to ‘plunge into God’s battle’. He started night schools, soup kitchens, clubs for young men and young mothers, and gave his approval to a project of one of his curates – St Mary’s Association Football Club. The team that was to become Southampton FC were keen to aid the ‘spiritual life’ without ‘omitting the many exercises of the physical life’.

Two other teams founded as part of a response to great social need, and because the people involved wanted to enable people to hear the message of ‘Christ, and him crucified’, were Barnsley and Manchester City. Vicar’s daughter Anna Connell started a men’s club as one of her and her father’s many projects at St Mark’s in West Gorton. The area knew great poverty and violence, with organised fights involving up to 500 young men – a practice

known as 'scuttling'. Soon 100 men were attending the men's club, and a football team was formed to help 'deepen the bonds' between them. The first match in 1880 for the team that would become Manchester City was against Macclesfield Baptist.

St Peter's in Barnsley was a socially innovative church, and deeply involved in the education of the poor and advocacy on their behalf. Their new vicar, Tiverton Preedy, was keen to be involved in sports and to get to know local people, so he joined a local rugby club. He walked out after a while when he discovered they were going to play on Good Friday. Making his way home after this disquieting revelation, he chanced upon a group of young men outside a pub talking about forming a football team.

From that conversation, and despite the disapproval of those who felt that football was a poor man's game, Tiverton persevered in his quest for sports that would through 'manliness and fair play' be a 'force for moral good in the education of young people'. Barnsley St Peter's Football Club would later become the Barnsley FC we know today.

Sobering up society

Facing the challenge of heavy drinking in society was never far from the early 'sports friendly' minister's mind. One largescale response was the building of model communities that had adequate housing and proper local facilities. Several of these projects sprung up around London, including the Queens Park estate in West London. Tenants found drunk could be evicted from the estate!

Churches were aware that they should seek to provide social and cultural alternatives for those they were calling away from the public house door. St Jude's Institute on the estate provided a range of activities, and soon had a football team. Following an amalgamation with another local team, Christ Church Rangers, a compromise name was needed. The suggestion from their curate and centre forward – Queens Park Rangers – won the day. Teetotal Everton players and officials also helped provoke the formation of Liverpool FC. Everton was rooted in the St Domingo Methodist Chapel. The chapel influenced the club and the Football League until the Second World War. The Liverpool split was precipitated when an early patron of the club, John Houlding, a local brewer, sought to raise the rent of the ground,

amongst other things. A St Domingo member and key figure in the club, George Mahon, challenged him at a 500-strong club meeting, and carried the day with all but a handful of the crowd. A disgusted Houlding formed a new club, Liverpool FC, using Everton's old ground at Anfield.

Tottenham Hotspur grew out of the young men's Bible class at All Hallows. John Ripsher, their Bible class teacher, protected them when the wrath of the church fell on them for card playing during church services. He also actively sought out social space where they could read, play games and relax in an alcohol free context on week nights.

So, as some of you immerse yourself in the forthcoming feast of football, perhaps you might like to ponder what the Church's role in the roots of the game says to us about identification with the poor, the Church as a community hub, male spirituality, and the discipleship impact of the pastor/leader who participates in the mundane life of his or her community.

Article adapted from one originally published on the Premier Christianity website.
