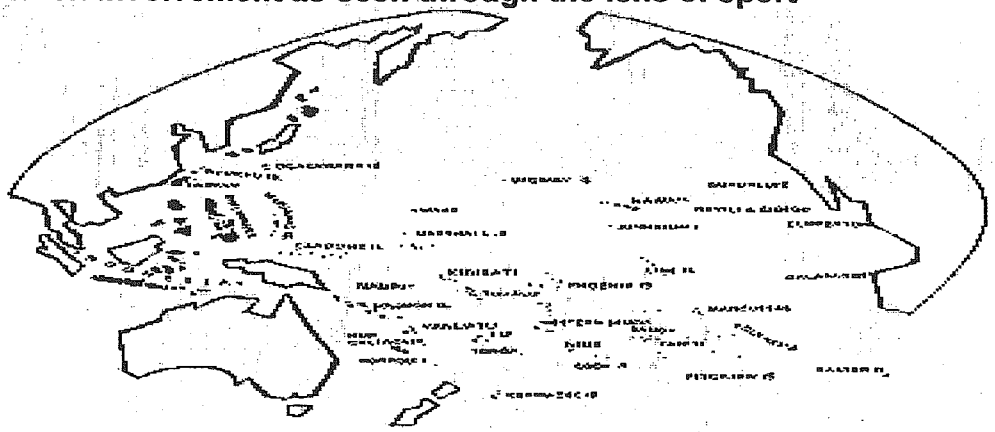
Social change and church involvement as seen through the lens of sport

by Kevin Ward



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It is often observed that the true religion of New Zealanders is the game of rugby football.[1] While that observation may be less true now than it was thirty years ago[2], there is still enough truth in it to suggest that changes in people's involvement in rugby may give some helpful insights into changes in society as they affect their involvement in other forms of religion, such as the Christian church.

That new and very different forms of church are developing in countries like New Zealand and Australia can be seen everywhere by those willing to step outside the existing institutional church. A major challenge for the church today is whether it is able to embrace and resource these new forms or whether it continues to see them as not being real church, a threat to the existing form and in effect to 'dechurch' them.

Thirty years ago when I was a young Christian I had two major passions in life, the church and rugby. They seemed to occupy very different worlds and as I became more and more involved in the world of rugby, playing at senior club level, coaching a High School First XV and being on the local Union, it became often difficult to reconcile the two, and for a period the world of rugby won out.

My difficulties did not just relate to the issue of playing and practising on Sunday, although that was an issue. They seemed to represent two very different cultural worlds. The argument of this article is that in fact they have a considerable amount in common and today are struggling to come to grips with similar issues as a consequence of the significant social and cultural changes that have occurred over that period.

Reliable statistics on church involvement in New Zealand are difficult to come by, making research on what has been happening in the church in New Zealand as much an art as a science. From what I can cull from the data that is available it seems that about 20% of New Zealanders were in church on any given Sunday in 1960, a figure not markedly dissimilar from what it had been for most of the previous one hundred years. Those who attended at least once a month may have made up 40% of the population. By 2000 those figures had halved to 10% [3] and 20% [4] respectively, although I suspect the real figure for individuals in church may be nearer the British figure of 8%, as the 10% figure is simply the cumulative total from church returns, which does not take into account those attending twice, often at different churches.

For many years the favoured explanation of this decline was what became known as the secularisation thesis. This argued that as modern knowledge and technology advanced people would give up believing in religion, because the world and how it operated could be explained and managed without recourse to God or religion. This explanation has now been almost completely abandoned by sociologists, as religious believing has proved remarkably resilient.

Indeed the signs are it may have increased over the past two decades. In Britain, research through Cambridge University by David Hay, on the spirituality of non-churchgoers found in 1987 that 48% admitted to a form of religious spiritual

experience.[5] In 2000 his ***Soul of Britain Survey*** found it had increased to 76%.[6] In New Zealand the number of people indicating they prayed several times a week increased from 22% in 1991 to 30% in 1998.[7] A powerful indicator of the return of the religious consciousness can be seen in the world of movies, perhaps the most powerful medium in our culture, where strong spiritual themes can be found in movies such as *Contact, Matrix, Keeping the Faith, Sixth Sense, Stigmata, Signs* and, in particular, the phenomena of *Harry Potter* and *Lord of the Rings*.

Spirituality is important – why church decline?

If spirituality is still important to people, and perhaps becoming more so, why is the church continuing to decline? Why does *religious believing* no longer produce strong links with *religious belonging*?"[8]

One helpful way of looking at this is to look at what is happening in other forms of organisation in our society. One British researcher writes:

> *The important observation that religious believing seems to have become detached from religious belonging should be understood in relation to the parallel observation that virtually all voluntary associations have been finding it difficult in the last few decades to attract and retain members. In other words* ***belonging*** *has been simultaneously losing its popularity in religion and in other fields as well. The split between believing and belonging is therefore part of a broader pattern of change which happens to affect religious organisations amongst others. It is not a problem unique to religion and does not necessarily arise from the inner dynamics of religious organisations alone.*[9]

I recently heard an address by that great populist Tim Shadbolt,[10] who has a remarkably keen insight into New Zealand culture. He was speaking on the topic of social change in New Zealand over the past thirty years, and observed with a number of illustrations, the marked decline in the numbers of people wanting to be involved in voluntary organisations, whether it was Rotary, the squash club, political parties or ratepayers association (at which he was speaking).

An article in ***Metro*** magazine, in March 2001, outlined the decline in all kinds of voluntary organisations in New Zealand. Rowan Brassey reported that two thirds of Auckland's lawn bowling clubs will need to close in the next 5 years. One of the most interesting and significant studies in this area of change is by a Harvard Professor, Robert Putnam, called ***Bowling Alone***,[11] which examines the decline in people's commitment to organised social structures. The title comes from the area of life, ten pin bowling, that Putnam uses to illustrate his argument. In the United States more people are bowling than ever before, but the numbers in organised bowling leagues have plummeted to their lowest level ever. If we select the sporting sector there is all kinds of evidence that sport remains a significant, perhaps even an increasing, value in our society, but that across the board organised team sports clubs and organisations are in decline and struggling for survival.

Because it has been so central an element in New Zealand's culture and life, rugby is an interesting area of study. While the decline of church *belonging* can bring on great despair among churchgoers, the figures quoted above look pretty good alongside those for rugby. Although no annual figures were kept the number of those playing in the 1970s are estimated at 400,000. This number had plummeted to below 100,000 in the early 1990s. The decline was arrested and the figure now sits at about 125,000, with the last two years showing a slight decline again.[12]

Needless to say this massive decline has led to many clubs closing and others merging in order to survive. While over this period of time the involvement of people watching the game held up reasonably well, signs of a decline in even this level of involvement have been indicated over the past few years.

Crowds at Super 12 matches were down on average in 2001,[13] and while we hear a lot about the great absence of spectators at Eden Park, even in Canterbury, that last remaining citadel of rugby culture in New Zealand, the Union expressed considerable concern at the small crowds for the end of season Ranfurly Shield games, with even a partially demolished stadium being only half full.

A number of reports have consistently indicated that numbers watching games on television have begun to decline[14] leading to television companies being unwilling to chase high figures to gain contracts. Of particular concern on the playing field is the huge fall off in those playing rugby between the ages of 15 and 19. While there is concern that soccer is already the most popular sport for children between the ages of 5 and 17 (114,000 compared with 98,000) there is particular concern that 60% of those playing rugby at 15 have stopped playing by the time they are 19.[15]

Why a decline in Rugby Union?

I recently spent some time talking with a researcher who had been employed by the Canterbury Rugby Union to try and find out why this is happening (yes they are worried even in heartland NZ). This, as well as my own anecdotal research and general reading of cultural changes, indicates a combination of factors in rugby's decline: rugby's hierarchical structure and organisation; the authoritarian and

controlling environment of clubs; rigid codes of protocol, dress and obligation; a highly conformist and tightly structured culture; high institutional costs; high time demands over which the individual has no say; lack of choices over who you play with or even which position you play; lack of choice about when you play or practice; a culture that demands loyalty instead of individual freedom; a repression of individual expression for the good of the team. These are values that increasingly are at odds with the more permissive, individualistic, personal choice orientation of the wider culture.

While they are seen as good things for children to learn, and hence children are encouraged into team sports like rugby by parents and educators, as soon as they get to the age of personal choice (about 15 years of age), if they wish to remain involved they do so through more individualistic sports. Sociologist Geoff Fougere claims that: "It's new vulnerability stemmed from changes in social context which meant that for increasing numbers of New Zealanders, the values and practices embodied in rugby were felt to be at odds with patterns newly emerging in New Zealand culture".[16]

With an increasingly wide variety of other leisure options available, rugby participation is becoming a less popular choice, as indeed are other highly structured team sports. A report on a research project by the Christchurch City Council found that "Christchurch sports clubs are struggling to stay afloat ... [71%] had a shortage of volunteers - particularly those aged under 40".[17] Interestingly when I talked about these trends with a small group of American and Australian researchers, they said that description fitted what was happening in team sports (such as basketball and football) in their countries.

What interests me is that I suspect these are similar to the reasons why, in increasing numbers, the younger generations of New Zealanders are turning off church. They see it as hierarchical, authoritarian, controlling, conformist, highly structured, demanding of time, lacking in variety and choices, and demanding their exclusive loyalty.

There are some even closer parallels between the two.

The first is that while a lot of parents encourage their children into church, Sunday School or youth group, as being places where they can learn good values and make good friends, the drop out rate when they get to make their own choices (from 15 onwards) appears to be similar. Those aged over 50 make up 32% of the general population in New Zealand but 58% of those in churches. Those 40 to 49 are 18% of the population and 16% of the church attenders. Those aged 20 to 39 are 42% of the population but only 21% of church attenders.[18] While the general population's involvement in formally organised religion is probably somewhere between 10% and 15%, a recent survey amongst Dunedin students indicated only 3.2% were involved in formally organised religious groups of any kind.

A second factor shows an even more remarkable similarity. Several reports recently have talked about a *white flight* from rugby. In Auckland, of 445 senior rugby players only 30 are of European descent. The Auckland rugby team in 2001 had only two players of European descent, Australian Steve Devine and Frenchman Christian Califano.

In representative sides outside of Canterbury and Otago the numbers of Maori and Polynesian players are out of all proportion to their numbers in the general population. Many high school First XVs are almost completely dominated by players from those ethnic groups, even in communities where they are not an especially high percentage of the population. If it was not for the continuing attraction of rugby in those groupings then the situation in the rugby kingdom would certainly be even more alarming than it already is.

If we dig below the surface in New Zealand church figures a similar picture exists. If it was not for the large number of new Polynesian congregations (and, over recent years, Asian as well) then the figures for church attendance would carry even more cause for concern than they already do. This applies, for instance, to the Catholic church, the Presbyterian church and the Assemblies of God (and I suspect some other Pentecostal groupings as well) particularly in Auckland.

But it also applies to my own denomination, the Baptists, who feel rather self-satisfied that in the latter half of the 1990s we have staved off the decline of previous years, and even shown a slight increase. However if you take out the figures for new ethnically-based congregations (let alone non-Pakeha people who have come into mainly Pakeha congregations) then our figures would show an overall decline.

The common factor in this attraction to rugby and to the church is that these are cultures that still value those qualities mentioned above: hierarchical organisation, leadership with strong authority figures, conformity, group loyalty above individual freedoms, structured environments, and personal identity arising from group involvement. A similar pattern is found in Britain, where Peter Brierly, the key researcher on the church there, told me that if I wanted to know where the church was growing the answer was simple: "among the black communities".

Before we take too much comfort from this, and hope as some do that from these communities, the Pakeha sector will discover again the importance of

church for their own lives, the research among blacks in Britain provides a caution. It indicates that among third generation blacks, who have grown up entirely in Britain, exposed to the dominant western cultural values around them, there is considerable decline in churchgoing. Some initial studies done among Polynesians in Auckland indicate similar trends. It seems that both the traditional game of rugby and its organisation, as well as the traditional approach to church life and its organisation, do not have much appeal for the under 35s in mainstream Pakeha Kiwi culture.

Referring again to Putnam's work mentioned earlier, his basic thesis is that traditional structures that depend on broad-based, long term and exclusive loyalties are giving way to single-strand, less formal, smaller groups that engage only part of your life and are easy to enter and leave.

I believe an interesting phenomenon to place alongside rugby that illustrates this is touch football (no tackling). This only began in an organised sense in 1990, but by 2000 touch football had 272,000 registered participants. This represents an increase that is quite phenomenal, especially alongside the decline in rugby. Among 18-24 year olds it is the most popular form of sporting involvement, and among 25-34 year olds second.[19] What are the contrasting qualities that make it so attractive?

These are fairly self evident. Touch competition is minimalist in terms of structure and cost. Individuals choose their own teams and who they will play with. They choose their own name and uniforms as well as the competition they will play in. It is a limited time commitment (for a period and then evaluated). Individuals can be involved in multiple teams and competitions.

It is gender inclusive. There is usually a high value placed on socialising and fun. No one minds too much if you miss a game or two. There is often a close connection between work place and involvement, with teams frequently being fellow employees, although open to others being included. Commitment is much looser. Rather than being mainly focussed on one time block each week, Saturday afternoon, it takes place at a wide variety of times, as much during the week as on the weekend. In other words touch is not just another form of rugby, a repackaging of the same product. Although some of the same skills are involved, it is a very different game that has evolved.

Non-playing participation

One final observation on the way rugby has developed comes from looking at how those who are not playing participate. In a previous age people used to go to the game to watch, usually as individuals, or with a mate or family member. This was either at the local club or at the stadium where they merged indistinguishably into the mass crowd. Now very few people are at club games and numbers at representative games seem to be declining all around the country. (This is not a phenomenon unique to New Zealand rugby. Grace Davie notes that "the fall in attendance at professional football matches in Britain ... more or less mirrors the decline in religious practice".[20]

Most people watch games in small groups with their friends either in the comfort of the lounge or a bar somewhere. Occasionally they might go along to the big game, but when they do, especially among the under 35s, they tend to go as a group, often costumed and painted up to indicate their group identity. In other words the small group is primary; the mass crowd is secondary.

Church implications

I believe the implications for the church in this comparison are both interesting and significant. It is not that people are no longer interested in sport. But the way they want to participate in that with others in an organised form has significantly changed. Likewise it is not that people are no longer interested in spirituality or religion, but the way they want to participate with others in an organised form has markedly changed.

If the church continues to function with forms that are marked by the cultural values of a world increasingly disconnected from that in which most people live, then like rugby one can only see a continuing pattern of declining participation

A few years ago an article appeared in a New Zealand Christian magazine pointing out "what the church can learn from the sporting revolution", in particular in rugby, then riding on a high in the media. Time has shown however that the revolution in rugby was not a real revolution but merely a repackaging that pumped new life into the upper levels of the game for a few years, without ever dealing with the deeper issues impinging on the game at a grassroots level.[21] Likewise, most apparent change in the church over the past few years has merely been a repackaging of the product rather than dealing with the deeper issues impacting it at a grassroots level. Eddie Gibbs, professor of church growth at Fuller, claims that "the popular models of church today ... are only tactical attempts to breathe new life into old structures".[22]

One of the great points of hope for the church is that sociologists suggest we are moving away from an era of rampant individualism into a new communitarian era. However, it will be a very different form of communitarianism than existed in a previous era, where it was marked by conformity, control and hierarchies. Rather it will be one into

which people bring a strong sense of individuality and therefore is marked by a high degree of diversity. We urgently need to find forms of church life that resemble much more a community of touch teams than the local rugby club. This will mean a community which is much less tightly controlled, more eclectic and varied in the ways it expresses itself, much less of a centralised organisational structure, more tolerant of diversity, offering more choices, run at much lower cost, less demanding of people's loyalty and time and more connected to their places of work. It will mean the small group is the primary form of Christian belonging and the large gathering, whether on Sunday morning, Sunday evening or at another time, is secondary and, for many, occasional. It will certainly mean the end of our preoccupation with the Sunday time slot.

I believe there is one final important lesson to learn from these changes in rugby. When touch first evolved into an organised sport it was out of rugby. It had developed as a non-contact form of training for players. The first tournaments were organised by people in rugby clubs as a way of keeping fit over summer and the sport was known as touch rugby. It could have been part of rugby in New Zealand. However, the New Zealand Rugby Football Union decided not to accept this new form as part of its game.

Thus a separate code was developed and the name changed from *touch rugby* to just *touch*. This now has almost three times as many participants as rugby. A parallel to this experience can be seen in the emergence of the Wesleyan small-group movement in eighteenth century England. The Anglican Church, to which Wesley and his followers belonged, was unwilling to embrace this and so a whole new form of church emerged, the Methodists, quite separate from the established church.

That new and very different forms of church are developing in countries like New Zealand and Australia can be seen everywhere by those willing to step outside the existing institutional church. A major challenge for the church today is whether it is able to embrace and resource these new forms or whether it continues to see them as not being *real church*, a threat to the existing form and in effect to *dechurch* them.

Whether we can learn from history and manage to embrace and foster these new forms will be a significant factor in determining the future effectiveness of the church in mission. If we are willing to enable this kind of evolution to occur we may find not only a form of church life that actually engages with and incarnates the gospel into the very different culture in which we are now placed, but also, surprisingly, one that more resembles in essence the church we find in the pages of the New Testament ■

1. **Hugh MacKay** makes a similar point about Australia. "If you really want to hear Australians - especially Australian men - getting excited about ritual, doctrine and tradition; if you really want to see a congregation of Australians standing and singing with passion and commitment; if you really want to understand how intensely Australians can debate a moral issue ... listen to them talking about sport, or go and watch a major sporting contest." MACKAY, Hugh, **Turning Point: Australians Choosing Their Future**, Sydney: Macmillan, 1999, p232.
2. Sociologist **Geoff Fougere** notes that "the place of rugby in New Zealand society has changed. Increasingly it is just another sport, important, but no longer central. In a more sophisticated, more diverse society, it no longer serves as a mirror, reflecting its particular image of New Zealand society". FOUGERE, Geoff, *Sport, Culture and Identity*, in **Culture and Identity in New Zealand**; NOVITZ, D. and WILLMOTT, B. [Eds], Wellington, Government Printing, 1989, p120.
3. This figure is supplied by both the Alan Webster, Director of the New Zealand Values Study, (WEBSTER, Alan, *New Day Dawning: God's Not Dead - Just Changing Gear*, **Grace**, May 2000, p67) and Gordon Miller, World Vision church consultant (MILLER, Gordon, ***Evening Post***, 5 June 2000, p5).
4. Massey ISSP Survey 1998.
5. HAY, David, **Religious Experience Today**, London: Mowbray, 1990.
6. HAY, David and HUNT, Kate, **The Spirituality of People Who Don't Go to Church: A Report on the Findings of the Adults' Spirituality Project at the University of Nottingham**. Available at <www.cbti.org.uk>.
7. Massey ISSP Survey 1998. 60% indicated they prayed on occasions.
8. For further explanation of this terminology see WARD, Kevin, *Believing without Belonging*, ***Reality*** 43, February/March 2001, pp19-24.
9. J. Beckworth, quoted in DAVIES, G., **Religion in Postwar Britain**, Oxford: Blackwell, 1994, p19.
10. Tim Shadbolt was a very significant student leader and protestor in the heady days of the late 1960s and 1970s. He remained a veteran protestor over the years. In the 1980s he re-emerged as the Mayor of Waitemata City in Auckland. After a controversial mayoralty he was defeated, but then turned up at the other end of the country to become a highly successful, and popular mayor, of Invercargill, one of New Zealand's most conservative centres. He is now in his fourth term.
11. PUTNAM, Robert D. **Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revial of American Community**, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999.
12. *State of the Union: Part 2*, ***NZ Herald***, 19 May 2001.
13. *State of the Union: Part 3*, ***NZ Herald***, 19 May 2001.
14. Game Over, ***Listener***, 3 February 2001, p24.
15. *A Man for a Crisis* **NZ Rugby World**, February 2001, p98.
16. Fougere, ***Sport, Culture and Identity***, p120.
17. *Sports clubs struggling*, **The Christchurch Press**, 6 August 2002, A4.
18. KALDOR, Peter, et al, **Shaping a Future: Characteristics of Vital Congregations**, Adelaide: Open Book, 1998, A1-A2.
19. www.hillarysport.org.nz
20. DAVIE, **Religion in Modern Europe**, Oxford: Blackwell, 2000, p112. She also notes interestingly that "in both activities what might be called the top divisions continue to flourish; the lower divisions (or average parish church) very much less so."
21. HAWKE, M. *What the church can learn from the current sports' revolution in New Zealand*, **Affirm** 5/2, 1997.
22. GIBBS, E. and COFFEY, I. **Church Next: Quantum Changes in Christian Ministry**, Leceister: IVP, 2000, pp168-9.