

## **New Zealand Church, Sport and PFG's**

It is interesting that there are more people engaged in 10 pin bowling than ever before, but the numbers in organised bowling competitions are at their lowest level ever. The number of Rugby players in the 1970s in NZ were around 400,000. In 2005 there are about 125,000. Many clubs have closed or merged. 60% of those playing rugby at 15 have stopped playing at 19.<sup>8</sup>

The reasons suggested for this are that the age group that would play these sports (Generation Y and X) react against authoritarian environments and hierarchical structure and organization. They are not attracted by rigid codes of protocol, dress and obligation or a highly structured culture that is often present in clubs. Organised competition places high demands on time which is not attractive in an already busy lifestyle. These competitions also limit choices over who you play with, when you play or if and when you practice. These organizations are part of a culture that requests loyalty ahead of individual freedom and is at odds with the more permissive, individualistic, personal choice orientation of the wider culture today.

This attitude is reflected by these younger Generations in regard to the church. Surveys report that they often perceive churches as hierarchical, controlling, conformist, demanding of their time, lacking in variety, limited in choices and demanding of their loyalty. At the last census, the New Zealand general population's involvement in formally organised religion was 10-15%. Among Dunedin university students only 3.2% were involved in formally organised religious groups of any kind.

In 2001 of 445 senior rugby players in Auckland, only 30 were of European descent. The percentage of Maori and Polynesian players in the listed squad for the 2006 Super 14 competition is out of all proportion to their numbers in the general population. Many High School 1st XV's are almost completely dominated by players from those ethnic groups.

New Zealand church figures show a similar pattern. The common factor in the attraction these cultures have to rugby and to the church, is that they still value hierarchical organisation, authoritarian leadership, conformity, group loyalty above individual freedoms, structured environments, and personal identity being secondary to group involvement. Perhaps as younger Polynesian and Pacific islander Generation Y's enter this different world, they too will be affected by the wider culture. In the general population traditional structures that depend on broad-based, long term and exclusive loyalty are giving way to single stream, less formal, smaller groups that engage only a part of a person's life and are easy to join and easy to leave.

Touch rugby grew in popularity in Australia in the 1970's and only began in an organised sense in New Zealand in 1990, but among 18-24 year olds it is the most popular form of sporting involvement, and among 25-34 year olds it is second most popular. Seven a side soccer is also on the rise and only golf has greater popularity among the latter age group and much of the reason would be that it mirrors the attractions of 'touch' to other sports.

The game is minimalist in terms of structure and cost. It is gender inclusive. Individuals choose their own teams and with whom they will play. Teams choose their own name and uniforms as well as the competition they will play in. The time commitment is limited (two 20 minute halves) and the seasons are brief. Individuals can be involved in multiple teams and multiple competitions. There is usually a high value placed on socialising and fun. No one minds too much if a player misses a game or two. Teams are frequently comprised of fellow employees of either sex, although others can be included. Commitment is much looser than that expected by rugby teams. Although some of the same skills of Rugby are involved, it is a very different game that has evolved.

The participation of those who are not playing sport has changed. In a previous age, people used to go to watch a game - usually as individuals, or with a mate or family member. They did this either at the local club or at the stadium where they merged into the mass crowd. Now very few people are at club games and the numbers at representative games seem to be declining everywhere. Stadiums cater for corporate people and television.

Most people now watch games in small groups, with their friends, either in the comfort of their lounge, or in a bar somewhere. Occasionally they might go to a big game such as a Super 12 or test match, but when they do (and this is especially true of those under 35) 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, while the mass crowd is secondary. Many one day cricket spectators do not attend on account of the cricket, but for the spectacle and the entertainment.

Given these realities, 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 community to that which 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 will therefore be marked by a high degree of diversity and variety.

We need to find forms of church life that resemble a community of touch teams more than they resemble the local rugby club. This will mean a community which is more diverse and varied in the ways it expresses itself, is less demanding of people's loyalty and time and perhaps more connected where they spend most of their time (for some this is their place of work). Unless people can belong or attend church with a small group they know, expecting them to attend on their own as part of a big crowd seems unlikely for the majority Of Generation Y's at this time.

PFG's may need to adapt our expectations and be less worried about people not attending 'every month'. Many of the Generation X's and Y's will not commit themselves to an activity a month in advance, let alone months in advance. They have grown up knowing that something better may come along!

*Appreciation for much of this material to Kevin Ward, a South Island Baptist minister*