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At first blush, church and sport seem to have little to do with the other. Sport is a field of endeavour that matters so much because it counts for so little. Conversely, I wonder if religion counts for so little because few want to think about the high stakes involved.

We can see how one causes people to shuffle their feet uncomfortably while the other prompts them to rise in jubilation. One draws in people regardless of their background while the other divides between participants and spectators. Even their hallowed grounds are polar opposites made from either hard stone or soft turf.

Yet I'm struck at how the spirit of our sporting preferences informs the character of our churches, often in barely perceptible ways. If missiologists are right to encourage us to consider the influence of culture on the ways we do church, I wonder what we'd see if we consider the harvest that emerges from the soil of cricket or baseball?

Consider the soil that gave rise to Anglicanism and cricket. Both events last for days and often end with uncertain results. Everyone wears white even though they're playing for different teams. Wickets are guarded while careful strokes are played as those in the hushed members and ladies stands nod appreciatively and clap politely. Paradoxically, it is also game that many people follow but few attend with the exception of Boxing Day.

What of those churches that have grown up in the soil of baseball? American churches are loud and filled with entertaining antics like the those that occurs mid innings. The only thing more prolific than specialist pitchers and hitters are the statistics that are kept, discussed and analysed on every aspect from runs to errors. No one worries about getting out much, after all there are nine innings to be played. Avoiding dismissal takes a backseat to getting on base and driving runners home.

For all their differences in batting shapes and method of ball delivery, both games have five things in common. Both games are easy to learn but difficult to master. Love for the game is always bigger than the end of season results. Both games are continually reinventing themselves to appeal to new generations who have more summertime activities to choose from than ever before. Each game has also transcended unbelievable social barriers whether between rich and poor, Christian and Muslim, free market or communist. Finally, no sooner are the stumps and bases put away than people start dreaming about the boundless possibilities of next season.

Christians have often lamented how many more Australians consider the SCG to be their place of religious identity than their local congregation. Perhaps, it's because most struggle to see how the same drama of a last day finish or the clutch hit that turns the game plays out in the life of Christ. Maybe they're transfixed by what has passed and just don't see that it's

the next pitch or delivery that really counts. Maybe they just struggle to believe that in Jesus we have a captain and coach who stands by us whether we're dismissed early or deceived by a fast one.

Maybe the church and sport are closer than we realise.

*In the interests of full disclosure, Wayne is a baseball tragic and a lover of test cricket, especially when painting his house over summer holidays.*

By Archdeacon **Wayne Brighton**