

## THE PURLEY CIRCUIT



### **FOOTBALL for FUN**

Robert Gamble from the Purley Circuit tells this story of a highly creative, brilliantly simple and very challenging project.

*'You will have noticed the large numbers of children participating in sport on Sunday mornings while the numbers attending church activities have seriously declined.*

*Football in particular continues as a major national preoccupation for many of us, young and old, male and female. This interest can of course be quite healthy and there is nothing new about an association between churches and football. Southampton FC are known as the Saints because the club began at St. Mary's Church; Methodism claims to have spawned one of our most famous teams - it is believed that a chance observance of a football match in a Birmingham meadow in 1874 led four members of the Villa Cross Wesleyan Chapel cricket team to start a football club (Aston Villa); and, of course, churches and church affiliated organisations have long been represented by football teams.*

*Sadly, however, football, with its icons, shrines and "immortal" heroes serves as a shallow substitute for religion for many in this country.*

*As a small local challenge to this state of affairs my son Charlie and I decided in 2001 to organise fortnightly coaching sessions for boys and girls at Sanderstead and Warlingham Methodist Churches. The sessions are held from 1130 to 1300 so as to allow children to attend Junior Church. Fortunately Charlie is a talented coach (unlike me!).*

*Modest efforts were made to publicise the sessions locally and soon numbers increased with children of other denominations and, indeed, faiths appearing. Most parents were prepared to donate £2-00 a session and the money raised paid for essential equipment. As well as the parents the churches themselves were supportive and formally recognised the activity as an outreach (this is also important when attending to insurance cover).*

*After two years I decided to try and extend the concept to other churches in the Croydon area. I wrote to over 200 people, received about a dozen positive responses from churches, half of them were represented at a meeting early in 2004, which agreed aims and values. The main aims can be summarised as follows:*

- *Develop skill and confidence in the children*
- *Develop community among the families*
- *Develop an association in the minds of children and their parents between the provision of sport and churches*

- *Provide an alternative to the over-competitive and elitist approach of many soccer clubs*

*The motto chosen for **FOOTBALL for FUN** was a deliberate reversal of that of a local professional team: “Winning **isn’t** everything.” The inaugural meeting also decided to organise a **FOOTBALL FUN DAY** in August. This took the form of a 5-a-side tournament for different age groups and its success exceeded all expectations, with 11 churches represented. A year later 22 teams representing 14 churches took part.*

*There are times when one is discouraged, however; individuals and groups drift away from the fortnightly sessions, churches fail to respond to overtures, the sessions in themselves do not necessarily attract families to one’s church. It is not up to us, however, to ordain how the Holy Spirit should move among us. **FOOTBALL for FUN** has spawned or encouraged other initiatives. A new churches league has started in South London.*

*Other people independently are thinking along similar lines. This year **Kick London**, another Christian initiative with similar aims and values, but with London and nation wide backing is being resourcefully developed in Croydon. **FOOTBALL for FUN** has now subsumed its activities under those of **Kick London Croydon (KLC)**, although the fortnightly sessions continue.*

*The good news is that, by means of **KLC’s** after school activities, summer camps, Sunday academies and contributions to the school curriculum, Christians in the Croydon area will be reaching children and young people by tapping their enthusiasm for football, but not letting it serve as their religion.’*

#### QUESTIONS:

- What are your reactions to this story? What are ‘secrets’ of the success that has been achieved?
- Why do you think sport, especially football, appeals so much to young people? (It may be worth chatting to some of them to find out for sure!) What are its values? What can we learn from the appeal of such values about today’s world and how as a church we can reach out to people?
- Which of the ‘main aims’ would you say is of the greatest value ... and why? Are there any other ways that you know of, or can think of, in which such aims might be developed in the lives of young people?
- ‘Winning **isn’t** everything’ – how far is the over-competitiveness of soccer clubs reflected in wider society? How might we as a church respond?
- Apart from prayer, what can church members who may have little contact with children and no interest in sport do to encourage such projects? How can the church best offer support to people involved in such projects in times of discouragement?

**Bible Study:** the passage that Robert suggested might go with this story is a very challenging one – Matthew 18:1-7. The challenge is that as a church we should never

put a 'stumbling block' in the way of young people developing into faith. The dreadful threats in the following verses show the seriousness of doing so.

- In your experience what sorts of 'stumbling blocks' might the church be putting in the way of young people? What is there about the church that might prove a 'stumbling block' to people of other age groups?
- What do you think we might do about these 'stumbling blocks'?
- The parable of the Lost Sheep follows quickly after this passage in verses 10-14. What would you say its message is to the church in this context? What do you think it has to say to us about priorities in church work?