

JUST SPORTS

Program/Event Title: Just Sports

(so called because we 'just' play sport with those who are vulnerable, but also 'Just' in the sense of the justice issue being addressed by the program)

Background: Just Sports was inspired by the Australian Catholic Bishops 2014-2015 Social Justice Sunday Statement 'A Crown for Australia: Striving for the best in our Sporting Nation'. This statement highlighted the significant cultural role sport plays in the contemporary Australian context. In it the Bishops called the faithful to consider the positive elements of sport in assisting to build God's Kingdom on earth within the current cultural context: inclusivity (especially to those on the fringes) was a main component, as well as developing positive social values, team work, positive goal setting, personal development, leadership, community spirit, social networks and more.

This appeared as a most significant and appropriate challenge for young people who (for a great majority) thrive on both sport and social justice. The bringing of the two together in living discipleship for our young people just made sense, and so Just Sports was born in answer to the invitation of the Bishops to utilise the positive aspects of our sporting culture to bring about God's Kingdom.

Initially the vision was to identify various groups within the community where isolated young people are found in order to use sport to reach out to young people on the fringes of society. The first stop was a conversation with Ashley Youth Detention Centre in Deloraine, Tasmania. There was a more substantial need here than originally anticipated and so the program developed solely with Ashley Youth Detention Centre.

Purpose: The purpose of Just Sports is two-fold. On one hand the purpose is to engage the movement of the Holy Spirit in those young people who are passionate about sport and social justice to encourage their continued development as disciples of Christ in living the invitation of the Bishops to utilise sport to be positive Christian role models in outreach, friendship and inclusion of isolated young people in our community (in this instance, those young people at Ashley Youth Detention Centre). It also continues to develop in them the values of the Kingdom.

On the other hand, the purpose is also to reach out to a group of young people who are isolated and vulnerable in the community (in this instance those young people at Ashley Youth Detention Centre) in a spirit of friendship, comradery, inclusivity and community. The positive role modelling of the young volunteers who visit, and play sport with, the young people at Ashley assists in developing Kingdom values in all participants.

Brief outline of program/event: Young Adult volunteers attend Sunday morning Mass together in the Meander Valley Parish (the parish in which Ashley Youth Detention Centre lies). The Eucharist is the source and summit of our faith and a critical starting point for our interaction with the young people at Ashley. In this way our young volunteers are an integral witness to the local parishioners and gain a greater understanding of the Eucharist we share and response to 'going to share the good news'.

Young Adult volunteers then spend two hours playing sport with the young people at Ashley Youth Detention Centre. The program happens once a month and each month we play a different sport and a different young adult volunteer takes on the responsibility of running the sport. We begin with some warm-up/ice breaker games, followed by some basic skills of the sport we are about to play and some basic drills, followed by a game of the sport.

We have played: Basketball, Soccer, Ultimate Frisbee, Dodgeball, Football, and Gaelic Football. We have had an 'Olympic themed' day and a Christmas themed 'Minute-to-win-it' session.

Following our time at Ashley Youth Detention Centre, the volunteers gather at a nearby café for a shared lunch and debrief before heading home.

Who is it aimed at?: Engaged & semi-engaged young adult volunteers aged 18 – 30 and isolated young people at Ashley Youth Detention Centre

How often is it run?: Once a month, usually on the third Sunday of the month

How do you believe this program/event responds to Pope Francis' call to follow the Lord of risk, strap on our boots, get off our comfy sofa and seek new horizons for spreading joy?

Involvement in this program for our volunteers certainly involves moving beyond their own community, their own friends, and their own known surroundings. Entering a detention centre is quite daunting and it takes a certain courage and trust to take the step to volunteer and 'be bothered' to drive to a regional area on a Sunday for the short period of time they get to spend with the young people there.

Some of our volunteers drive 2.5 hours there and back (5 hours just driving) on their Sunday in order to be involved, so they are certainly getting off the sofa and out of their comfort zone!

This is an attempt to spread joy in a new community, a new horizon, which previously we (and most in the Tasmanian community) have not attempted. There is a high level of risk. Obviously there is an element of risk to personal safety which needs to be very carefully considered and mitigated. But there is also risk in that the message, the extended hand of friendship, may not be accepted by this particular group of isolated and vulnerable young people, in a constantly changing environment.

This program has had immense success in spreading joy in this new horizon, and in encouraging discipleship from our volunteers in building the Kingdom of God in new ways in our community. The young people at Ashley have been asking for more frequent visits, have generally engaged well and positively, and thoroughly enjoy the opportunity to interact with other young people which is not a luxury often afforded to them. Visiting the young people at Ashley has also brought so much joy to our volunteers. The young people at Ashley have asked on numerous occasions why we would give up our Sunday to spend time with them – the significance of this simple act of spending time and spreading joy beyond the confines of our comfy sofa is not lost on them!

Other thoughts, considerations, advice?: This program could be run with any group of isolated and vulnerable young people on the periphery of society: New Entrants; Refugees; Homeless; Sick; Disenfranchised; those from low socio-economic areas etc. Be sure to consider the age and training of your volunteers. This can be a paper heavy program for the coordinator with police checks, working with vulnerable people checks, risk management, volunteer forms etc. But it is well worth it, so stick with it! Have Fun!