

Working hand in hand to build God's Kingdom through the medium of sport

SPORT

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Do you ever feel as if you are just plodding along? Do you sometimes look at one of your friends in amazement at what they do and, if you are at all like me, have a little sense of envy? Does the success of that person you admire, no matter how much you are pleased for them, make you think you could and should do more – be a little better, work harder to contribute to society, play your part in making the world a better place?

Well, all of those thoughts came tumbling through my mind after I got a call from a friend of mine, David Geldart. Some of you might not have heard of him, but all of you should. Not for who he is, which is impressive enough, and he is certainly too modest to talk about it, but for what he has done and is doing in the service of Catholic education.

Let us be honest: it is sometimes hard to be a Catholic. I am not referring to the dogma and teachings of the Church, but rather the fact that some people are ambivalent at best, and hostile at worst, to those who profess the faith and who put it into action. David's transformational work began almost 20 years ago with the creation of the Bambisanani Partnership, a collaboration developed by St Mary's Menston Catholic Voluntary Academy in Menston in West Yorkshire, and Mnyakanya School in Nkandla, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa.

'Bambisanani' is the Zulu word for "working hand in hand".

The partnership uses sport as a catalyst to develop international understanding, education, health, and leadership.

The initiative has the University of Leeds and Leeds Trinity University as members. Together, with St. Mary's School, they regularly send students to South Africa to extend the work of the partnership, which has, as its core aim, to create genuine 'two way' learning between both countries – with a key focus on 'working together and learning together'.

The Bambisanani story is testimony of the power of sport to change lives. Over the past 15 years, more than 10,000 students from the UK and South Africa have participated in various projects and programmes, including 'Leadership through Sport', 'Sports Festivals', 'Cycling to Success', 'Literacy through Sport', 'Numeracy through



A member of the 'Bambisanani' team teaches a young South African how to ride a bike – a simple skill that could transform their life as it will make accessing school easier

Sport' 'Art through Sport', 'Learning through Football', 'International Athletics Challenge' and the joint training of Physical Education teachers and Sports Coaches.

The statistics behind the charity are astonishing and inspirational. Since its foundation, it has raised £630,000, an amount which has resulted in 15,672 students from Africa and the UK benefiting from the partnership, 1,135 South African students have gained Sports

Leadership awards and 14,280 South African students have taken part in coaching and sporting festivals. One interesting statistic is that 1,325 South African students have learned to ride and maintain a bike. You might not think that this is significant, but some children live up to two hours walk away from the school, so to be able to have and ride a bicycle is life changing.

You might ask: "What practical educational difference has this

actually made?" Well, the attendance and number on roll at Mnyakanya School has gone up by 26 per cent in the last four years, with a 56 per cent improvement in examination results. This means that more children from one of the most deprived areas of South Africa are using the power of sport to climb the ladder of educational achievement to have a better life.

Six students have received university bursaries, which means they will graduate and be able to play their part in giving back to society.

Work like this cannot go unnoticed. The partnership has won nine international awards on three continents and was invited to the Vatican's Sport for All summit in October. The main purpose of the summit was to urge sports and politics to embrace the Declaration by committing to work for the integration of people in society through sports, especially those with physical, intellectual, and relational disabilities, migrants, and refugees.

During the conference, David met with Pope Francis. Afterwards he said: "To meet Pope Francis has been the greatest honour of my career. On behalf of the entire Bambisanani Partnership team I was delighted to be able to speak about our work in South Africa, using the power of sport to promote education, health, global citizenship, and leadership.

"Throughout the summit's varied activities, I worked with some of the most remarkable people that I have ever met – people that clearly got great things done – all had tremendous vision, positivity, faith, and determination – people using the power of value driven sport in every corner of the earth to make a difference for both individuals and communities. The consensus gained during summit enabled us to unveil the most significant of Declarations on Sport for All."

It is unlikely that you or I will get to meet the Pope. It is unlikely that you or I will establish an award-winning international charity that receives global recognition. It is unlikely that anyone will notice at us at all, but that is not important. What is important is that we do the right thing. It is not about being the best, it is about being the best that we can be. You, me, anyone, everyone can make a difference. It does not matter where. It does not matter how. It does not matter who. It does not matter when. What does matter is that we try.

When asked what was the greatest commandment, Jesus said: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and most important commandment. The second is like it: Love your neighbour as yourself" (Matthew 22:37-40).

I know that not everyone who is reading this article is a Catholic – either lapsed or practising. That is for them, but in this world of war, misery and hardship in Israel, Gaza, Ukraine and elsewhere, is not a little more humanity a good thing? Should we not learn to love our neighbour as ourselves? Should we not strive to do whatever we can to make the world a kinder, fairer, place, where we can try to build a better tomorrow? Should we not recognise and use the power of sport to try and do this?

I think we should, and that is why, for the work he does for the Bambisanani Partnership, among other things, I am proud to call David Geldart a friend of mine.



David Geldart meets Pope Francis

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