

## Article

# Betwixt and Between: Chaplaincy, Liminality and Elite Sport

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**Abstract:** It is often assumed that chaplains who serve in elite sports settings inhabit a position which facilitates a significant level of influence. Yet, in reality, sports chaplains routinely experience a sense of marginality within their host organizations, which is commonly perceived (both by themselves and others) as highly restrictive and constraining. Drawing upon the findings of a small-scale, qualitative study of chaplaincy within the US-based National Football League (NFL) and the English Premier League (EPL), this paper explores the contribution that a sports chaplain might make to their host organizations irrespective of the marginal position which they inhabit. Utilizing the anthropological work of Van Gennep (1960) and Turner (1969) on rites of passage, findings illustrate the level of ambiguity which often accompanies the ‘liminal’ role of the sports chaplain and the freedoms which this might afforded in terms of organizational impact. This paper concludes by suggesting that, whilst it is often viewed in a negative light, the sense of marginality which commonly characterizes chaplaincy has the potential to be re-configured as an opportunity to positively impact workplace relationships and organizational cultures.

**Keywords:** chaplaincy; sport; marginality; liminality; qualitative research



**Citation:** Whitmore, William, and Andrew Parker. 2023. Betwixt and Between: Chaplaincy, Liminality and Elite Sport. *Religions* 14: 1288. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14101288>

Academic Editor: Robert Ellis

Received: 5 July 2023

Revised: 25 September 2023

Accepted: 5 October 2023

Published: 13 October 2023



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## 1. Introduction

Whilst academic literature surrounding the sport–Christianity interface has increased markedly in recent years (see, for example, Ellis 2014; Watson and Parker 2014; Adogame et al. 2017; Hemmings et al. 2019; Hoven et al. 2019), relatively little has been written on the practicalities of chaplaincy within elite sport. Indeed, to date, the only real insights offered with regard to the day-to-day impact of chaplaincy within professional sport have emanated from the biographical accounts of chaplains themselves (see, for example, Boyers 2000, 2006; Heskins and Baker 2006; Wood 2011a, 2011b) and emerging critiques from within the social sciences (see Jones et al. 2020). In turn, despite an increased interest in the outworkings of sports chaplaincy both practically (see Parker et al. 2016; Waller et al. 2008) and theologically (see Whitmore and Parker 2020), there remains a dearth of rigorous scholarly work in this area. Likewise, although there has been an increased focus on spirituality and wellbeing in professional sport in recent years (Mosley et al. 2015; Sarkar et al. 2014; Watson 2011), little empirical research has been forthcoming regarding those who provide athlete support in these areas. Accordingly, the nature and extent of the services provided by sports chaplains to professional sport has yet to be explored to any significant degree. The aim of the present paper is to act as some form of corrective in this respect by comparing and contrasting the role of sports chaplain in the US-based National Football League (NFL) and the English Premier League (EPL). The small-scale, qualitative study on which the paper draws sought to expand contemporary understandings of chaplaincy via three key research questions: (i) what are the generic roles and skills required for elite sports chaplaincy, (ii) what are the governance and accountability structures within which sports chaplains operate, and (iii) what kinds of theological and missiological approaches are common to this particular form of ministry?

It is often assumed that sports chaplains who serve in elite sports settings inhabit a position which facilitates a significant level of influence and access. However, in reality, sports chaplains routinely experience a sense of marginality within their host organizations. Pattison (2015) contends that as a vocation, chaplaincy is an inherently marginal venture given that its incumbents are seldom critical to the central tasks of the organizations which they serve. The role of sports chaplains affirms this notion in that their purpose is not seen as essential to athlete performance or long-term organizational viability. Like chaplains in other sectors, they often go unnoticed in their everyday work, slipping between the structures and hierarchies of organizational life, facilitating conversations, building relationships, and providing spiritual and emotional safe havens. This paper reveals the contribution that sports chaplains might make to their host organizations irrespective of the position of marginality which they inhabit.

In his analysis of African tribal ritual, Turner (1969) draws upon the work of Van Gennep (1960) on rites of passage to further explore the notion of liminality. Turner contends that liminality is a role which lies 'betwixt and between' social and/or organizational hierarchies, allowing for individuals to oscillate or transition between what he calls '*communitas*' and a 'structure'. It is our contention within this paper that Turner's depiction of liminality provides a useful framework via which we might better understand the role of the chaplain within elite sports settings and the marginality of chaplaincy as a vocation *per se*. Using Turner's work as a foundation, we argue that the sports chaplain is a marginal or liminal figure who can bring about *communitas* in a group which is otherwise defined by structure. We begin by addressing the arguments of Van Gennep (1960) and Turner (1969) in relation to rites of passage, liminality, and their function within society. We demonstrate how chaplains are often perceived (both by themselves and others) as liminal entities within their respective locales, yet whose presence can serve to bring about *communitas*. The paper concludes by suggesting that, whilst often viewed in a negative light, the sense of marginality which commonly characterizes chaplaincy has the potential to be re-configured as an opportunity to positively impact workplace relationships and organizational cultures.

## 2. Rites of Passage

In his seminal work, entitled *Rites of Passage*, Van Gennep (1960) argues that there are three stages to any rite, and one of the ways in which he illustrates this is through his analysis of 'border crossings'. Van Gennep describes how tribal societies often have physical borders that are either permanent or natural and that specific forms of ritual practice accompany the transgression of these borders. In the first instance, the individual or group undergoing any cross-border transition experiences a rite of separation (the pre-liminal rite), i.e., the removal of those undergoing the rite from their previous social state or norm. To depart from a physical or geographical locale, those concerned may need to perform certain rituals and/or undergo specific cultural or ritual procedures. This leads to the second phase of the process, the liminal or transitory stage, where the individual or group move from one territory to another. This stage is one of ambiguity, whereby those undergoing the rite physically separate from one setting or entity, but are not yet incorporated into the next. After the individual or group have passed through the transitory phase, the process concludes with the rite of incorporation (the post-liminal rite). This final phase comprises the subject(s) being incorporated, or reincorporated, into societal structures having undergone some form of transformation. Van Gennep argues that once those concerned have entered into the new context or territory, they often undergo further rites of incorporation as a form of 'welcome', and these commonly mirror 'exit' rites. Van Gennep also argues that certain rites of passage may emphasize one of these three phases more than others. For example, a funeral primarily centers on the third stage of exit rites. For the purposes of the present discussion, it is Van Gennep's second phase, the liminal or transitory stage, that is most pertinent to our analysis of sports chaplaincy, and it is to the work of Turner (1969) that we initially turn in order to explore further how liminality may manifest itself within everyday societal structures.

### 3. Liminality and *Communitas*

In his study of African rites of passage and tribal ritual, Turner (1969) adopts the work of Van Gennep (1960) in order to analyze the role of rites in processes of social change. While he addresses all three elements of the rites of passage framework, he focuses particularly on the second stage, liminality and transition. Turner (1969, p. 95) notes:

The attributes of liminality or of liminal *personae* ('threshold people') are necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space. Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between.

Turner broadens our understanding of liminality to incorporate entities that are outside of a specific rite, seeing the concept as a necessary element of a functioning society. This entity could be an individual being, a festival or event, a specific space, or another agreed-upon occurrence or context. For Turner, liminality provides the connection between the two poles of society: *communitas* and structure.

According to Turner, *communitas* is a relational state of equality, where the structures and hierarchies typically upheld in a society are suspended. In this view, *communitas* and structure are polar opposites. For Turner, structure is hierarchal, separating people between socio-economic, political or other classifications. Structure within a society defines individuals by one or more of these categories, deeming them more or less important than others. That said, Turner also argues that no society is based on these extremes. Rather, in order to function in a healthy and harmonious way, societies must continually oscillate between *communitas* and structure.

Whilst Turner (1969, p. 107) sees *communitas* as temporal, he views liminality as a potentially permeant condition for specific groups or individuals, arguing that "... what was in tribal society principally a set of transitional qualities 'betwixt and between' defined states of culture and society has become itself an institutionalized state". He goes on to argue that while differing in context, those occupying a liminal state have common characteristics: "... they are persons or principles that (1) fall in the interstices of social structure, (2) are on its margins, or (3) occupy its lowest rungs" (p. 125). While such characteristics may not be the most desirable within the context of formal structures and hierarchies, Turner argues that it is the marginal person, who the wider society deems insignificant, who has the potential to shift a community to a place of equality. In this sense, liminality becomes a strength simply because it creates the conditions under which its inhabitants can move from structure to *communitas*. Before exploring further how these concepts and ideas might be practically applied to the working lives of sports chaplains, we turn to consider research context and method.

### 4. Context and Method

As noted above, the data featured here derive from a small-scale, qualitative study of sports chaplains within the National Football League (NFL) and the English Premier League (EPL), and in this sense, the research was inherently cross-national, seeking to understand sports chaplaincy in two different geographical contexts (the US and the UK). More specifically, the study sought to understand the commonalities and differences between chaplains in these two elite sport settings and the role of chaplains within their host organizations. The NFL and EPL feature prominently in contemporary sports culture and are marketed to large domestic and international audience; hence, the two research contexts are comparable.

Research participants were sought from both larger and smaller teams/clubs (in terms of financial circumstance, notoriety, and levels of success) and were recruited using purposive sampling (Bryman 2016). Both authors had pre-existing relationships with a small number of chaplains across the two leagues, which helped facilitate respondent contacts, as did assistance from para-church organizations specializing in sports chaplaincy. A total of eight participants, four from each league, took part in the study, and their experience

in sports chaplaincy settings ranged from 2–28 years. Three of the eight had served more than one club or sport as a chaplain. Only one chaplain had previous experience as a professional athlete, playing in the NFL for five seasons and appearing on the active roster of his respective teams for three seasons. All but two chaplains were involved in other forms of ministry, primarily in local parishes and ecclesiastical outreach initiatives. The two chaplains who considered sports chaplaincy to be their primary vocation were staff with Athletes in Action (AIA), a large para-church organization based in the US. Though their denominational backgrounds differed, all chaplains identified as Protestant Christians.

Prior to the onset of the research, ethical approval was granted by the University of Gloucestershire, UK. The primary method of data collection was semi-structured interviews, which took place by telephone, via Skype, or via e-mail correspondence. A small amount of in-person data collection was undertaken but this was limited in both settings. All respondents were contacted directly via email in the first instance, and each was issued with an information sheet and consent form regarding the collection of data prior to interviews taking place. Interviews were carried out between July 2016 and March 2018 and lasted between 60 and 90 min. Of the 34 interviews conducted, four were held in-person and two were conducted via Skype. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed in full. Interview questions were derived from related academic and policy literature and framed in line with the specific focus of the research topic. In the interests of anonymity, pseudonyms have been used throughout.

Following [Strauss and Corbin \(1998\)](#), a grounded theory approach to data analysis was deployed. Grounded theory allows for the systematic analysis of data through a process of open, axial, and selective coding and the formation of a conceptual framework that facilitates the presentation of participants' experiences from their own perspective (see [Charmaz 2014](#)). All data indexing, coding, and analysis was undertaken manually, and a deductive lens was used throughout, thereby allowing the specific dimensions of the research questions to be explored. Data analysis took place in four stages. First, transcripts were read in full to gain a comprehensive overview of the data. Second, each transcript was re-read, with over-arching themes being identified in relation to respondent experience. Third, these identified passages of text were coded and indexed in line with the specific nuances of the research questions, creating a series of sub-themes. The kinds of codes utilized, for example, included 'roles and skills', 'governance', 'accountability', 'theology', and 'missiology' ([Braun et al. 2016](#); [Bryman 2016](#)). These sub-themes were then refined into a number of key investigative areas (topics) by reviewing and categorizing similar extracts from across the data-set. The final stage of analysis involved the formal organization of these topics into indicative data themes, three of which provide the focus for the remainder of our discussion. The first highlights the kind of organizational structures which chaplains found themselves working within, the second explores how chaplains navigated and negotiated their marginal positions within these organizations, and the third outlines how and to what extent this sense of marginality facilitated the creation of *communitas* amidst the organizational structures in play.

By way of backdrop to the data findings, it is pertinent at this stage to consider the overall positioning of respondents within their host organizations. Since they often sit outside of formal hierarchies and structures, liminal roles are inherently ambiguous. For the chaplains in this study, this ambiguity was demonstrated most notably through the lack of specified duties and responsibilities attributed to their position. The majority of respondents were comfortable with this and regarded it as a benefit. Some openly articulated that the informality and vagueness surrounding their everyday work often reflected the fact that those around them simply did not understand what they did. This sense of opaqueness is affirmed by [Pattison \(2015\)](#) who argues that the symbolic presence of the chaplain is commonly enhanced when there is a degree of mystery surrounding their role. In turn, such ambiguity allowed respondents to prioritize the pastoral and relational aspects of their work, engaging with athletes and coaches in an intentional manner that was not judged or predicated upon the fulfilment of specified tasks. Hence, role ambiguity

afforded chaplains the freedom to respond intuitively to the needs of those around them and to prioritize pastoral presence over other routine duties. With these issues in mind, it is to a more in-depth analysis of the working lives of NFL and EPL chaplains that we now turn.

### 5. Sport Chaplaincy and Organizational Structure

In terms of organizational status, respondents commonly described their position as ‘informal’ or ‘honorary’ given that the majority did not have formal job descriptions and did not receive financial remuneration for their work. As a consequence, they were often overlooked by those within their host clubs, as EPL chaplain, Duncan Murray, explained:

I think that what happens is it is very, very easy to get forgotten about. I think that probably most people are assuming that somebody else is kind of, you know, working with me. Whereas the reality is that the person you assume is working with me doesn't exist... It can be really frustrating at times, because [of] the culture in football. I remember going to the training ground for a meeting with one of the coaching staff. I am standing watching them train, waiting for the training session to finish, I am soaked to the skin, and the training session finishes and the coach looks over and you can see the cogs go round and he is thinking, ‘Oh no, I was supposed to have a meeting with the Rev (chaplain) but I can't do that now. So I don't want to go over and say I'm really sorry but I can't make our meeting because that will make me feel awkward so I'll just ignore him.’ [Laughs]. That's common.

Murray's comments emphasize the challenge of being an informal and ambiguous individual within an elite sports setting. Not only did he readily accept that he was routinely overlooked by colleagues, but he also recognized that there was a general lack of oversight from the club regarding his role. This included not having a Line Manager or Direct Report.

Such a scenario was not uncommon. Indeed, chaplains in both leagues consistently spoke of a lack of formal oversight from their host clubs. Falling through the cracks of organizational life seemed something of an occupational necessity in terms of accountability. For the purposes of the present discussion, we take accountability to mean a broad sense of oversight, both formal (i.e., structured processes of appraisal and evaluation) and informal (i.e., brief check-ins and other relational forms of support). Chaplains sensed a lack of accountability when there was a lack of engagement with their work from the host organization. When asked about oversight within the context of his own role, NFL chaplain, Steve Smith, said that he was unaware of any formal appraisal or evaluation processes in place at his host club:

[The organization] know that I provide Chapel for the guys on the night before the game, and then we have a coaches' and players' Bible study, but nobody monitors it, nobody oversees it. I am sure in the past some guys have kept an eye on me to make sure I handle myself appropriately. But once the guys realize [what I am doing] and have a comfort level with me, nobody even pays any attention to me that I know of.

According to Smith, as long as the minimum requirements of his role were met, there was little, if any, sense of accountability in play. Such comments reflect Pattison's (2015, p. 26) observation that “as long as chaplains do not obstruct the main aims of the organization and are occasionally specifically helpful, they will be welcome”. Smith's fulfillment of his club's specific expectations, in terms of facilitating chapel and Bible study, and his avoidance of activity that might hinder on-field performance and results, meant that he was largely left to his own devices. This highlights some of the benefits of ambiguity; chaplains, it seems, were afforded a certain level of organizational freedom simply because of the opaqueness of their position. However, this also posed something of a challenge in the sense that a lack of engagement by those within these organization raised questions



about their level of interest and investment in chaplaincy. For some respondents, this deficiency in oversight was an indication that their work was misunderstood or undervalued. EPL chaplain, Alastair McDaniel, suggested during one email exchange that such deficiencies came from a lack of understanding of chaplaincy:

Accountability in this role is difficult to describe. Essentially, I don't think the club know what they need a chaplain for, especially in the new world of being a global aspirational football club. Therefore, because the role is voluntary (not paid), and is categorized with 'external contractors', no one really needs to own or oversee the position.

McDaniel's use of the term 'external contractors' here refers to those who operate as non-normative figures within occupational environments, and both he and Duncan Murray felt as if their roles sat outside of the accountability structures of their respective clubs. [Pattison \(2015\)](#) argues that if chaplains faced more stringent methods of evaluation and scrutiny, they may lose their ambiguity within the organization. And herein lies a dilemma: not enough accountability may be perceived by chaplains as negative, yet too much scrutiny may limit the effectiveness of their ministry. In sum, while a lack of accountability brought with it a number of benefits in terms of ministerial freedoms, it also had the potential to decrease chaplains' sense of self-worth, which often resulted in a heightened sense of marginality.

## 6. Sports Chaplaincy and Marginality

Five of the eight chaplains within the study articulated the feeling that they were consistently marginalized by their host clubs. Alastair McDaniel and Steve Smith explained their marginalization as a consequence of the size of the organizations in which they served. Both clubs boasted support structures that addressed a wide range of personal and professional issues and this left them, as chaplains, feeling marginalized and under-utilized. Smith commented:

...for the most part they know I exist but I am totally out of sight, out of mind. They just kind of trust that I am doing the right things and leave me on my own and there is no consideration for me that I know of from the club's perspective. ... If a guy gets arrested at one in the morning [and] they throw him in jail, the organization doesn't call me. If they hear of a couple that there has been some abuse or there is some tension in the relationship, they don't call me. They have specialists on hand, they have a sports psychologist, they have a motivational coach, they have counselors that they send people to so I don't think the organization looks at me [as someone who would assist in these situations].

While Smith felt that he could genuinely contribute in these kinds of circumstances, the club did not always utilize his services when such issues arose. Alastair McDaniel's found himself in a similar situation at EPL club, Oakhill FC. He had tried, on numerous occasions, to demonstrate his benefit to the organization, but they did not take him up on this: "I don't get referrals and I don't know whether that's because the club don't think about it, it's too big, they don't see the chaplaincy as important; I never really got ... to the bottom of them using ... chaplaincy as a pastoral support." The experiences of McDaniel and Smith add further insights to [Pattison's \(2015\)](#) contention that chaplains are marginalized figures within their host organizations on account of the fact that they do not have the same focus or goals as those around them. For both McDaniel and Smith, the size and scope of the organizations in which they served meant that the kind of pastoral care they offered was also provided by others. As a result, they found themselves on the margins of their respective clubs. One figure who could aid or hinder the work of a chaplain within an organization was the head coach/first team manager.

In his analysis of African tribal initiation rites, [Turner \(1969, pp. 99–100\)](#) argues that: ... between instructors and neophytes there is often complete authority and complete submission [...]. The authority of the elders is absolute, because it

represents the absolute, the axiomatic values of society in which are expressed the ‘common good’ and the common interest.

While the context which Turner describes is markedly different to that of elite sports, in the latter, the team manager or head coach, is seen as a figure of ‘complete authority’, whereas chaplains identify with the liminal figure of neophyte. Findings suggested that the managers and head coaches of the teams concerned had the most significant influence on the sense of marginality surrounding chaplains. This affirms previous studies that highlight the importance of such authority figures in the work of the sports chaplain (see [Gamble et al. 2013](#); [Roe and Parker 2016](#)). Moreover, [Turner’s \(1969\)](#) work on the hierarchy of ritual inadvertently provides insight into the power dynamics evident in the manager–chaplain relationship. At times, respondents articulated their level of marginality in relation to their access and ability to engage with wider members of the organization. Chaplains in both leagues recognized the importance of authority figures in determining how marginal they were particularly around the time of managerial and staffing changes. EPL chaplain, Peter Monahan, served under five different managers in seven seasons, with a new manager being appointed at the beginning of the season when interviews took place. According to Monahan, the incoming manager had no experience with chaplaincy, and this led to feelings of uncertainty:

... for the chaplain [the changing of managers] has a knock-on in that every time there is a new manager I am going in and thinking, ‘Well OK do they still want this kind of service? What sort of access are they going to give me? Are they going to be helpful or a hindrance?’.

Even though Monahan was an established presence within his club, he recognized that his levels of access and engagement could change with the appointment of a new manager. Changes to coaching staff also required chaplains to build new relationships and establish trust, often with people they had never met.

Chaplains who did not feel marginalized were quick to point out how fortunate they were and the extent to which they recognized that their access and status within their respective clubs could easily be withdrawn. Reflecting on his own access in light of these experiences, NFL chaplain, Todd Dempsey, said that he was “dumbfounded” by how fortunate he was in terms of the organizational access he enjoyed, which included pastoral conversations with athletes, coaches, and executives. Dempsey’s terminology attests to the fact that being utilized and trusted within elite sporting environments is atypical for the chaplain. Lewis Sherwood believed that he had the best access in the EPL, but recognized that this could disappear at any moment. Such collective recognition around the fragility of access emphasized the marginality of respondents. Moreover, Dempsey and Sherwood credited authority figures within their respective clubs for their ability to be present, demonstrating the importance of relationship building at all levels.

Combined with the lack of accountability in play, the need to submit to these authority figures served to continually re-emphasize for respondents the marginality of their role. Perhaps not surprisingly, the majority of chaplains did not regard marginality as a benefit, but as an on-going challenge which required skillful negotiation. Finding themselves on the bottom rung of the organizational ladder, the key here was to perceive their marginal status as a gateway to influence, and to view ambiguity as an opportunity to convey *communitas*.

## 7. Sports Chaplaincy and *Communitas*

[Turner \(1969\)](#) speaks about the power of the symbolic figure who occupies a lesser position within the structure of a society, yet still conveys deep wisdom and insights. He sees their role as vital within the overall narrative of a situation because they are the ones who convey *communitas*, the bringing together of others in relational equality. This same notion can be applied to the NFL and EPL chaplains in this study. During interview, respondents regularly recounted providing pastoral care and relational support for those

within their club settings, bringing *communitas* to the structure of the host organization at times of relational breakdowns, workplace conflicts, and personal bereavement.

Chaplains in both contexts described how opportunities for *communitas* occurred during times of death and loss with respondents often being asked to speak to the individual(s) effected. NFL chaplain, Steve Smith, had experienced numerous deaths of staff and athlete family members. During the data collection period, Smith attended two funerals as a representative of the organization, one in the same state where the club was located, and another on the opposite side of the country. In the case of the latter, the team had paid for his airfare to attend the funeral, and Smith had then returned home on a private jet, which the team had chartered so that the player concerned could be at practice the next day. While Smith often spoke of his marginality, this example demonstrates how club officials sought him out and financially supported him when his expertise was needed.

Likewise, EPL chaplain, Peter Monahan, described how he was regularly consulted on player issues. At the time of the research, there was an element of tension between some of the players and executives within his host club, and Monahan was asked to act as mediator simply because both parties trusted him. When speaking about the evolution of his role that lead to this opportunity, Monahan responded:

I am definitely seen as this kind of neutral, slightly un-pigeonholed or un-placeable person. So, I have very unusual access to the first team but also, I guess because I am that much older and in my life [and] I work at quite a senior level, I'm also quite happy to be with the kind of senior directors and I can be the same in both those settings. So, I guess it is partly the length of time I've been there it's partly that kind of neutral role.

The ambiguity of Monahan's position afforded him the opportunity to be something of a relational bridge between these opposing parties, allowing him to act as advocate and mediator and to embody *communitas* within this particular scenario. Indeed, it could be argued that the promotion of *communitas* is a necessary part of the sports chaplain's role, providing a caring and compassionate presence amidst the 'win at all costs' ethos of the modern-day sporting world (see [Jones et al. 2020](#)).

Throughout the interview process, Lewis Sherwood spoke of his relationship with the manager of EPL club, Wimfield United. Both men were long-term members of the organization and had formed a close working relationship. While the manager was not a Christian, Sherwood prayed with him and a small group of athletes regularly before games. However, contact between the two was not limited to matchdays. Throughout the season, Sherwood would meet weekly with the manager to work through a leadership book that contained Bible passages. Both had agreed that they were still growing as leaders and could grow together. Sherwood provided insight into the meetings between the two:

So I come in [to the club at] 7.00 a.m. [and] do half an hour, forty-five minutes with [the manager]. And I talk about family, talk about life, talk about anything but football because I can say 'I don't have a clue about tactics' and I would never dream of saying that [I do], 'but let's talk about life.' And we love it. So it's a real closeness, which is an absolute privilege.

Here, we have a clear example of the juxtaposition of *communitas* and liminality, where one of the highest paid and most powerful members of the structured group (the club) comes together with someone who is seen by many as inferior and marginal in order that they can engage as equals.

Just as [Turner \(1969\)](#) articulates the movement between *communitas* and structure, NFL chaplain, George Brown, spoke of knowing when to return to his 'lesser' position after being more visible in the club. During his tenure, Brown had been called upon twice to deal with the sudden deaths of family members of individuals within the organization. In both instances, his presence was requested by people in senior positions within the club, but Brown noted that this was not a permanent operational state and that once these specific duties had been fulfilled, he had gone back to laying low within the organization,



“I think sometimes it is easy for me to know when I am done. . . . I know when it is over.” Liminal entities can bring about *communitas*, but this is rarely a permanent position, and as the society or organization swings back towards an emphasis on structure, they return to the margins, awaiting further opportunities to provide the relational equality made possible by their role. Of course, it would be naive (and indeed, misguided) to assume that *communitas* is the sole preserve of chaplains. As previous research has identified, there is much cross-over between the work of a number of helping professionals within elite sport in terms of the bridging of structural hierarchies (see [Gamble et al. 2013](#); [Hemmings and Chawner 2019](#)). Hence, in the interests of alignment, it is incumbent upon chaplains to recognize and support those who may facilitate similar relational roles.

## 8. Conclusions

Our central argument in this paper has been that the sports chaplain represents a liminal figure amidst the structured surroundings of elite sports settings. [Turner’s \(1969\)](#) thesis surrounding the ambiguity of the liminal *personae* is supported by the experience of our respondents, particularly in the informal nature of their position. Comparable to other liminal entities, the chaplains in this study found themselves falling through the cracks of club hierarchies and structures, a situation most acutely demonstrated by the lack of intentionality by club members in relation to issues of accountability. In turn, chaplains articulated their sense of marginality in relation to the level of organizational access granted to them by authority figures, i.e., managers and head coaches. Perhaps not surprisingly, a sense of being overlooked and under-valued often left chaplains feeling that they were at the bottom of the organizational ladder. Whilst challenging, respondents also recognized that their liminal role afforded them a number of freedoms in terms of organizational impact, one of which was to be the purveyor of *communitas*.

Though chaplains did not routinely articulate marginality as a benefit, their experiences of bringing about *communitas* affirms [Pattison’s \(2015\)](#) argument that operating on the margins is one of the great strengths of the chaplain’s role. While our discussion has focused specifically on chaplains serving in sports settings, there are implications here for the wider field of chaplaincy per se. Indeed, we encourage academics and practitioners to build on this theoretical framework in order to assess how marginality is experienced in other sectors of chaplaincy. As liminal *personae*, chaplains are able to facilitate interactional dynamics in ways that others cannot by offering relational and pastoral support to all. That said, we acknowledge that our entire respondent cohort identified as male and that female-identifying chaplains may well experience marginality in very different ways within this particular context, especially given the traditionally masculinized nature of elite sport (see [Messner and Sabo 1990](#)).

Moreover, whilst we agree with [Pattison \(2015\)](#) that the marginality of the chaplain can be a strength, for many, this would seem counter-intuitive given that notions of marginalization are rarely seen in a positive light amidst the structures and hierarchies of organizational life. However, if chaplains are able to re-conceptualize their status as ‘liminal’ and view marginality as an inevitability, then they may be able to re-imagine the potential of their position. Though a sense of marginality may remain, prioritizing the benefits of liminality and *communitas* can create the conditions in which the chaplain might feel more empowered and more able to positively impact workplace relations and organizational culture. At the same time, chaplains must be careful not to let a more general perception of them as marginal figures outweigh the importance of their overall role. Needless to say, we encourage chaplains both in sport and in other sectors to holistically reflect on these concepts and to see liminality not as a hindrance to their work, but as a potential avenue for connection and service to those in their care.

Of course, because the present findings focus on a small number of respondents across a limited range of organizations, issues of representativeness arise. However, whilst recognizing these limitations, the study does identify a series of key issues in relation to the more general approach of EPL and NFL teams towards chaplaincy provision. In this

sense, there is a need for further research (qualitative, quantitative, and/or mixed methods) into the extent to which such issues are evident within other EPL and NFL teams and across other professional sports. In turn, there is a specific need to investigate the impact of marginality on the experiences of chaplains within a range of elite (professional and non-professional) sporting contexts.

**Author Contributions:** Conceptualization, W.W. and A.P.; methodology, W.W. and A.P.; formal analysis, W.W.; investigation, W.W.; data curation, W.W.; writing—original draft preparation, W.W.; writing—review and editing, A.P.; supervision, A.P.; project administration, W.W. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Ethical approval was granted by the University of Gloucestershire, UK in October 2015.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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