



DNA Football Church

Football church leading non-churched young men to faith

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It's 9 o'clock on a Saturday morning in the centre of Colchester. The smell of bacon wafts through the former office complex that serves as the home of DNA Networks church. 11 young men (plus substitutes) enter and noisily walk up the stairs into the meeting space. This is DNA Football Church.

The sending church, DNA Networks, uses the missional communities model pioneered by St Thomas Crookes. DNA Football Church is one of those

communities, focusing on a 'hard to reach' group.

The group doesn't aim to reinvent the wheel, with leader Daniel Layzell commenting:

“What we do here isn't rocket science.”

But their work has certainly proven effective.

This case study examines:

- The **simple approach to mission and discipleship** that could be reproduced in almost any context
- The importance of having **committed leaders**
- That **reaching out to non-churched young men from deprived backgrounds** may not be as difficult as perceived

Introducing DNA Football Church

Where: Colchester town centre and playing fields on the edge of town

Denomination: Church of England

Date started: September 2009

Target group: Anyone interested in playing football; has reached largely working class core group of young men

Number of people involved: 22, including team members.

Approximately 18 players, all of whom are 18-30.
Staffing / funding: 1 paid staff member employed by parent church, DNA Networks. Running costs covered by DNA Networks.

Premises: Uses DNA Networks building for pre-match breakfast and spiritual input. Matches played at local playing fields.

Webpage (part of the DNA Networks site): dnanetworks.org/community/dna-fc/



Mission at DNA Football Church

DNA Football Church had an unusual birth. In 2005, following the England cricket team's success in the Ashes, DNA Networks started a cricket team which competed in a local league. This cricket team drew in many young men from the area, some of whom had never played the sport before.

Three years later, in the summer of 2008, a leader of the local churches' football league contacted DNA Networks, knowing that they had a sporting focus, to see if they would be able to field a team in the football league. This proved a popular suggestion, and DNA Football Club was born, superseding the cricket club.

The following September, the team began meeting ahead of matches for breakfast and fellowship, and DNA Football Church in its current form was born.

Like many sports teams, DNA Football has seen a considerable turnover of players over the years. David Beales, leader of DNA Networks, identifies the current squad

as the 'third generation' of the team. There has been a consistent stream of new players each year, though, which has meant the team has continued to compete every season.



In terms of reaching out to new members, the leaders have found that the players themselves are often happy to invite their friends or other people they know along.

Daniel Layzell, the current leader has been encouraged that people have been keen to invite friends to experience DNA Football Church knowing that it is a team affiliated with a church and playing in a church league.

Before each home match, the team meet at the home of DNA Networks, a former office building in Colchester town centre, where they eat breakfast together and have some spiritual input and community time. Occasionally guest speakers are invited to share their experiences with the group.

The team are clear that they see this community time as being church. The vast majority of the team were not churchgoers when they started playing for DNA Football Church, and for just over half, this is the first connection with church they have ever had.

When asked about the values that underpin DNA Football Church's mission, Daniel reflects on his time as part of the Boys' Brigade growing up.

He recalls that on one occasion when he was misbehaving, the leader took him away from the group and rather than denigrating him or getting angry, he simply took him for a walk and had a conversation about why he acted in the way he did. Soon enough he was welcomed back into the group.

Consequently, Daniel identifies with a pastoral approach to leadership and has opened his home to many of the team over the years as an ongoing way of building relationships and engaging with discipleship.

Most of the lads that now play for the football team have not had a privileged upbringing and can be considered a 'hard to reach' group.



Difficult social issues faced by many of the team can raise questions for engagement with the Christian faith.

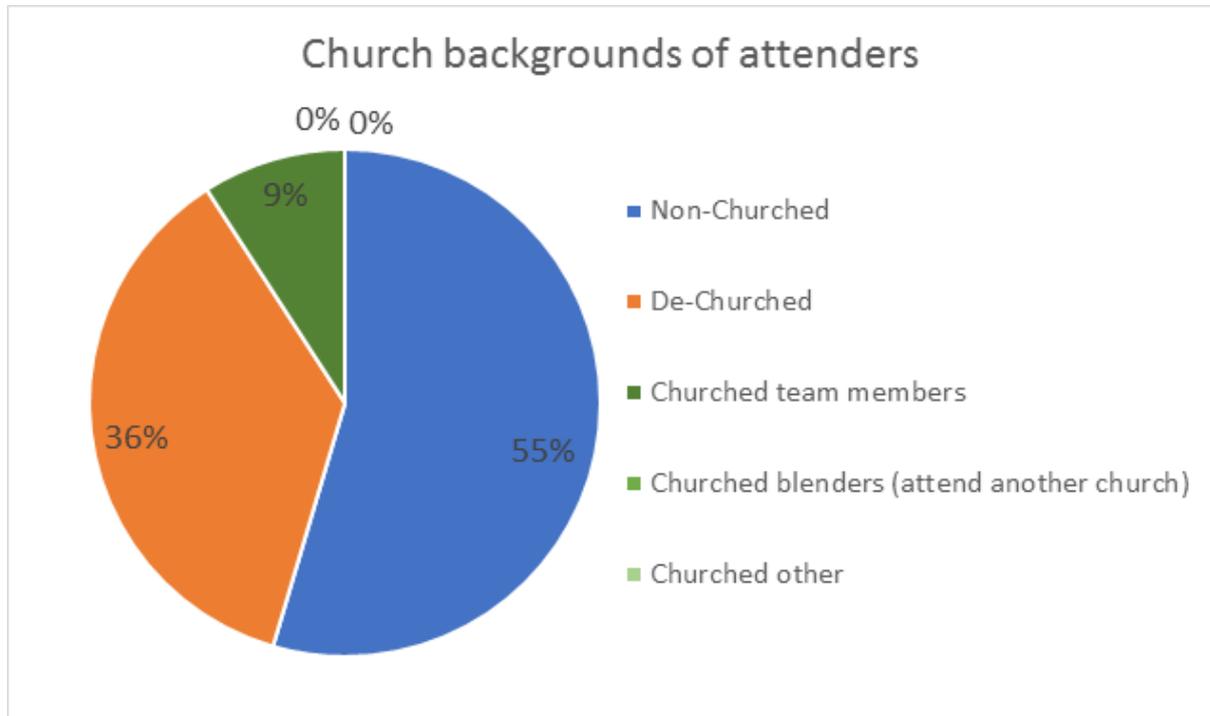
For example, how can you reconcile God being a provider when you or your family are long-term unemployed? How can you relate to God as a good father when your own father is absent or even in prison? And what does it mean to love your enemy when your ex-partner is preventing you from seeing your children?

Evidence of growth

Numbers have been stable since DNA Football Church was started 8 years ago.

This is to be expected given the nature of a football team requires only 11 players plus substitutes, though the team has recently started running 7-a-side training sessions on Monday evenings in addition to their usual 11-a-side Saturday morning league fixtures which have attracted some new players.

The vast majority of attenders had no previous church connection when they started attending DNA Football Church. In addition, 6 people report they had come to faith, or rediscovered faith through DNA Football Church. Five people have been baptised in the past three years.



For a further explanation of the categories in the pie chart above, please see our [summary report](#) (Appendix 2).

Daniel is well aware that numbers are only one indicator of missional impact and he may never truly know the fruit that will come from this ministry.

While numbers have been stable over time, there has been a considerable turnover of players, with many people moving on for employment or family reasons. Many former players came to faith and were baptised through the mission of DNA Football and have since moved elsewhere.

Most attenders have not attended university and the current group of players are exclusively White British. The latter should not come as a surprise given the demography of Colchester.

How have people come to faith?

“[One player] came to dinner at my house... we had a conversation later about jobs and how he was unemployed. We prayed for him and three days later he was offered a job... he is now keen to get baptised.”

The young adults who became Christians through DNA Football Church report that the following factors particularly influenced their faith journey:

- The **supportive community** that the football team provides
- The **spiritual input** at pre-match breakfasts
- Daniel’s **support and pastoral presence**

Liam’s Story



Liam got involved in DNA Football Church after a chance encounter at a local park.

He says: “One of my mates turned up to Castle Park and we went and watched DNA train. Me and him used to work at Chelsea FC and we’d done our coaching badges. I said, ‘Do you mind if we step in and have a proper training session?’ After that they said, ‘Do you mind helping us out?’”

Liam has been part of DNA Football Church ever since.

He had no previous experience of church community. Liam identifies “listening to the chats over breakfast and meeting up with Dave [Beales - leader of DNA Networks] every now and then” as key in his walk of faith, and in 2015 he was baptised.

While life has posed its challenges since, he has not looked back and now serves as DNA Football Church's manager. He says DNA Football Church is:

"...a lovely community, people are so easy to approach."

This togetherness helps sustain DNA Football Church, both as a group of people exploring faith and as a football team.

Conclusions

Not as difficult as you might think



Daniel firmly believes that the approach to mission that DNA Football Church employs is reproducible elsewhere. All you need is a local playing field, the courage to invite some friends along and a willingness to share faith from the outset.

It doesn't need to be about football either, almost any sport or activity can lend itself to evangelism. For example, a bike ride with friends can be supported

with a midway coffee and conversation about faith.

Many churches struggle to connect with non-churched young adults, particularly men. Engaging with them may not be as difficult as you think; it may just require the courage and initiative to meet them in a context they are comfortable with and share faith there.

Dan's advice is "make yourself accessible, practical and open" when trying to engage with new people. Are there opportunities in your context to engage with young people who don't have any church connections?

Committed team

For a model like DNA Football Church to work, it is essential to have a committed team who are willing to give up Saturday mornings (in this case) and be in it for the long haul. It helps to have a supportive church leader, and David Beales, who leads DNA Networks, often comes along on Saturday mornings to lend support and get to know the team.

Working with young adults from deprived backgrounds can be hard work but also incredibly rewarding.



The downside of this approach

DNA Football Church isn't as mature an expression of Church as most others covered in this research. Daniel readily admits DNA Football has only helped most lads that attend take 'small steps'. Still, the enthusiasm of some lads to be baptised is encouraging, though they may not in reality be at a stage to make that commitment.

It's worth reiterating that this is a 'tough to reach' group and a long-term commitment is needed to see potential benefits. The high turnover of players has also limited opportunities to expand and create other teams.

To find out more

For more about DNA Networks and DNA Football Church, visit

dnanetworks.org and dnanetworks.org/community/dna-fc/

You can also connect with DNA Networks on [Facebook](#).