

Faith and Fellowship: Exploring the intersection of Christianity and Sports

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ABSTRACT

The relationship between Christianity and sports goes beyond mere physical competition, delving into the realms of faith, community, and personal growth. The paper investigates how Christian principles and values intersect with the world of sport, examining the profound impact their faith can have on athletes, coaches and the communities alike. The paper also examines how sports serve as a platform for athletes to express and integrate their faith, often leading to enhanced mental resilience, ethical decision-making, and a sense of purpose both in and off the field. The qualitative paper will adopt comprehensive analysis of core studies, interviews, and scholarly research. This explanation sheds light on the symbiotic relationship between Christianity and sport, emphasizing how this intersection can improve individual, strengthen community and deepen spiritual connection.

Keywords: Christianity, Christian principles, sport, athletes, mental resilience

INTRODUCTION

Studying the relationship between Christianity and sports presents an opportunity to understand how these key aspects of society influence the lives of people and provide ways to understand human experience, its meaning and purpose. Very few institutions (if any) have the ability to bring people together the way sport does. This is because the popularity and acceptability of sport transcends religion, tribe, social class, gender and age barriers. For example, Nigerians, irrespective of tribe or religion, unite to support the national football team (the Super Eagles) and other sports teams, once there is any major competition. This underscores the argument that sports serve as a great unifier. EJ. Jeroh, (2008) commenting on this view, avers that “in spite of all the brouhaha in the country courtesy of deregulation of the downstream sector of the oil industry, the 8th All Africa Games “Abuja 2003” brought the nation together in unison to support Team Nigeria”.¹ Also, recent games, such as the 2022 NFL Championship, have showcased the power of faith in sports, with players from both teams sharing prayers and testimonies. Beyond individual athletes, Christian principles and values have significantly impacted sports communities. Organizations like the Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA) and Athletes in Action (AIA) provide platforms for athletes, coaches, and teams to integrate their faith with sports.² These initiatives foster a sense of community, accountability, and spiritual growth, often leading to enhanced mental resilience, ethical decision-making, and a deeper sense of purpose. Unity as a virtue is pivotal and essential to Christianity hence its adherents are encouraged to be united. Hence, it can be seen that there is a reciprocal relationship between Christianity and sports.

EVANGELISM AND SPORTS

Before Christ's ascension, He left the Church with a responsibility – the Great Commission. The Great Commission is about the mandate that Jesus Christ gave to his followers to make disciples of all people and show them all things that the Lord has charged them. Soul winning is the heart of Christianity as well as its core responsibility. According to the Gospel of Matthew, the Lord Jesus commanded his disciples to “go ye therefore, and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit and teach them to observe all things that Jesus has com-

1 E.J. Jeroh (2008). Sport as a Veritable Tool for Economic Empowerment and Elimination of Youth restiveness in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria. *Int. J. Sports Sci. Eng.*, 2(1): 62 – 64

2 E. Okocha, “Uniting Nigeria through Football”, Smart Cities Dive, www.smartcitiesdive.com, retrieved 14 September 2023.

manded them.” The church and sports seem to be interwoven one with another. The relationship between both appears cordial and bonded. The contemporary church has concerned herself with almost every of the societal activities with the aim of evangelizing the society through her services rendered unto the society.

Sports, therefore, serves as a tool and platform for Christians to showcase or advertise their faith. The use of sports by Christian leaders have therefore become common. Churches now incorporate sporting activities in their programmes and meetings, church leagues and tournaments have been established by different church groups, as well as various other sport, fitness and recreation programme and activities. Churches have employed the use of sports for evangelism, fellowship, and church growth. According to D. Hartzell (1996), sports in Christianity can serve as a means of winning the attention and interest of many un-churched people that might generally be reluctant to attend church, but may be much more open to sports³. Sports therefore serves as a vehicle to promote the gospel. This allows Christians to adapt to the people they aim to reach with the gospel. The content of the gospel is not changed, it is the approach or method that is different which ensures that people are reached with the gospel. The use of sports as a means for evangelism is therefore not the traditional way of sharing the gospel. Consequently, Sports is regarded as a platform to share the gospel.

Similarly, some Christian athletes have the name of “Jesus printed on their shirt, band, and tattoo”⁴. Accordingly, the name of Jesus on their shirt, band and tattoo is a Godly message that is potent to save sinners at the stadium, or viewing centres. Agreeing to this, the Holy Bible has it that “There is no one else who has the power to save us, for there is only one name to whom God has given authority by which we must experience salvation: the name of Jesus”⁵. Thus, the display and of Jesus’ name during games is an act of evangelism without disturbing the fun of any persons during games through preaching. Similarly, Emperor Constantine became a staunch and notable Christian due to his encounter with the name of Jesus. According to P. Eusebius (306-337 AD), in his work, says that Constantine “Saw with his own eyes the trophy of a cross of light in the heavens, above the sun, and bearing the inscription, CONQUER BY THIS.”⁶

In Nigeria, several denominations have through sports reached out to the unreached; saved the unsaved and remolded the unmolded lives. Since Jesus has commanded the church to preach the Good News unto the ends of the earth. Thus, the Church is using every platform available to preach the Gospel. Also, the incorporation of sports activities into the church’s activities has, indeed, resulted in a tremendous impact in the aspect of Soul Winning.

COMMONALITIES BETWEEN SPORTS AND CHRISTIANITY

From time immemorial, sports and Christianity has been closely connected. Like Christianity, sports convey vital lessons about principles as well as culturally appropriate conduct. The educations they educate are alike, and both sports and Christianity use symbols as their main means of message. In most of the present world, however, sports and Christianity occupy distinct but corresponding conceptual realms.”⁷ IN. Jona, and FT. Okou, (2013), write that both sport and religion materialize out of a parallel “quest for perfection in body, mind, and spirit”. The latter underline physical discipline and training ‘for physical development’, and the former emphasize mental discipline and physical control ‘for spiritual development’.⁸ Many sports emanated from religious festivals, as well as Christianity is a time communicated in athletic tongue. However, there are grounds where Christianity and sport intersect. These grounds give room for the latter and the former to relate smoothly, and benefit from each other in spite of the spiritual elements in

3 D. Hartzell (1996). Spiritual Application of Sports In Yessick, T. (Ed.). *Sports Ministry for Churches*. Nashville, TN: Convention Press, 7–12.

4 “Photos of top Footballers who have Jesus written on their shirt, band, and tattoo” Opera News, ng.opera.news/ng/en/, retrieved September 13, 2023.

5 The Holy Bible, Acts 4:12.

6 Eusebius Pamphilus. “The Life of the Blessed Emperor Constantine, In Four Books, From 306 to 337 A D.” London: Samuel Bagster and Sons, <https://books.google.com>, Chap Xxx, P. 27

7 Encyclopedea, “Sports and Religion” Cenage, <https://www.encyclopedia.com/environment/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/sports-and-religion>, retrieved 16 September 2023.

8 I. N. Jona, and F. T. Okou, (2013) “Sports and Religion” Asian Journal of Management Sciences and Education, ISSN: 2186-845, Vol. 2. No. 1, 51

Christianity and the secularization of sport. In addition, both sport and Christianity have places for special events and communal gathering, also “both have rituals before, during, and after major events as well as evoke intense emotions and give meaning to people’s lives” to mention but a few.

Prayer is a ground where Christianity and sports intersect. The physical world is controlled by the spiritual world, as the material realm depends on the immaterial for its continuity. According to Lee, the practice of prayer has been found throughout professional sports⁹. This is perhaps the most frequently and commonly employed use of religious tenets by sports men and women. The use of prayers by athletes take place in various contexts. Before a competition begins, members of a team, irrespective of the type of sports will be seen coming together to observe some moments of prayers. Individual prayers sometimes in-between games also make signs and gesticulations that are representative of prayer modes and signs. Likewise, the success of the game depends on the prayers of each team. Because it is culture in the national team that every nation should call upon whatever they believe in. This culture shows that faith is the principal factor that determines the victory of any game. Since a team or individuals in sports engage in competitions against an opposing team and there are uncertainties are part of sports, prayers are used as a means of asking for God’s intervention. Prayers are also used by athletes to ask for God’s protection, good performance and victory in such competitions. Prayer also serves as a means of building unity and cohesion among team mates.

Team sports promote dedication, accountability and leadership, among other traits. Sport is very relational; whether the sport is organized or competitive or recreational, it helps build relationships among participants. It equally breaks down every kind of barrier among athletes and among supporters, such as, colour, tribal, or religious barriers. Sports also helps reduce the amount of idle time that could get youths into trouble, because the idle hand is the devil’s workshop. Sports are an escape from peer pressure and a stress relief for some participants. The health gains include, giving strength and stamina, as well as, reducing body weight. And because Christian worship, for many Christians, is a response to what God has done and is doing. Likewise, Christian athletes regard their participation in sports as their response to the call of God. Sometimes, this is authenticated by the gifting of such athletes to compete. For such athletes therefore, this sense of sports as the response to a divine call is linked to the athletes’ understanding of the element of witness in their performance.

Shouting is another junction where Christianity and sports intersect. Sports, such as football is identified with shouting and screaming - this indicates victory. It communicates victory in sports. N. Dimengo, (2015), writes “Fans are often thought of as the ones who yell at the top of their lungs, players have done it just as often”.¹⁰ So is Christianity, the psalmist buttressed this fact, saying “Shouts of joy and victory resound in the tents of the righteous: “The Lord’s right hand has done mighty things (NIV, Psa. 118.15). Also, shouting indicates victory in the scripture as seen in the account of the Israelites and the inhabitants of Jericho. According to the account, the Israelites pulled down the wall of Jericho with a great shout (Joshua 6:16-20). Likewise, Christian players and fans still proclaim their faith during games through diverse mediums such as shouting the name of Jesus when their team scores or wins.

Additionally, sports and Christianity intersect in the area of prediction. Prediction is a common feature between the former and the latter. In sports, the managers, officials, players, and fans are known for match prediction. They predict every match like a prophet would predict through prophecies. However, some of their predictions might seem disappointing or encouraging. Similarly, prediction in Christianity is like prophesying or foretelling. All through the scriptures, men prophesied at different times. While some were divine, others were lies (Jer. 20; 6). A. Null, (2008) maintains that the faith of the Christian athlete is either predicated on being ‘driven’ or being ‘called’¹¹. Null argues that to be ‘driven’ is to fall into line with the typical and default perspective of sports athletes, whereby personal worth is achieved as a result of sporting performance. This manifests itself in the tendency of such Christian ath-

9 J.W. Lee (2004). An Overview of the Reciprocating Relationship Between Sport and religion. *Smart Online Journal*. Retrieved from <http://www.theSmartjournal.com> on 16/10/23, 26–28.

10 N. Dimengo (2015) “Sports Stars Screaming Maniacally” retrieved 16 September, 2023.

11 A. Null (2008). Finding the Right Place: Professional Sport as a Christian Vocation. In *The Image of God in the Human Body: Essays on Christianity and Sports*. Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 315–66.

letes to try to indicate their personal value to God through sporting success. This, Null maintains, is a tendency that is theologically inconsistent and needs to be challenged by advocating an alternative, 'called' relationship, with God, which is predicated on the belief that personal value is not found in one's sporting achievement, but in God's unconditional acceptance.

FORMATION OF CHURCH FOOTBALL CLUBS

In the contemporary world, the commitment of Christian bodies and church organizations to sports is actively gaining momentum. There are many of such church groups and organizations, and they are all aimed at making people able to establish contacts, get engaged actively in order to be empowered economically, be active athletes and not forget about God. Such church organizations are interested in sports and now promote sports among their members. In the past, the church was categorically against sports and any sporting events. The argument against the participation of Christians in sports was that sports distracted them from worshipping God and prayers.

As early as 19th century, Christianity has involved itself in sports activities with the goal of identifying itself with the society. In fact, history has it that many of the first football clubs were founded and formed by the Church. However, the goal of creating football clubs which is also known as "Muscular Christianity" was for 'bodily exercise' as mentioned by Apostle Paul in 1 Tim. 4:8, but it was countered by the Christian Puritans of England, in the 16th Century "due to its violence and its practice on Sunday, the Sabbath Day of rest". Nevertheless, in 19th century churches were fully involved in sport activities which resulted in the founding of several football clubs such as Everton, Celtic, Manchester City, Southampton, to mention but a few. Likewise, they were leagues carved out for the church apart from the normal football leagues.¹² Also, in some parts of Africa such as in Nigeria, and also in Ghana, football was introduced by Christian missionaries. In the words of F. Onojaria (2023), he says:

The coastal towns such as Lagos, Calabar, Warri, and Port Harcourt in Nigeria were the first to experience the game of football. This was through the activities of Europeans who came to the West Coast of Africa. Later the missionaries that came to churches and schools introduced the game to the schools they started. The game has become very popular in Nigeria today. It is played in all schools and both boys and girls participate. The Nigeria Football Association was formed in 1945. The Association is now known as Nigeria Football Association.¹³

For instance, Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries has through sports evangelized reasonable numbers of youths within her reach. She surnamed the football club "Mountain of Fire and Miracles Football Club" (MFMFC). Accordingly, "Mountain of Fire and Miracles Football Club" (MFMFC) like every other national club is nationally recognized. The club is made up of street boys as well as unemployed youths who were evangelized. As a result of the Great Commission given to the Church by the Lord Jesus Christ. The church embarked on street evangelism and evangelized some youth, afterwards formed a club in 1st June, 2007 with the aim of engaging and keeping the youth in the fold¹⁴ since an adage says "An idle mind is the devil's workshop." Also, David Ogbueli, of Dominion City, mentioned how he evangelized touts within his reach and empowered them by creating a football competition and at the end of the game, he preached to the folks and many of the touts accepted Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior (O. Adaku, 2018).¹⁵

Apostle Paul remarks:

¹² "The Role of the Church in Association Football", Joy Sports, 6 April, 2019, <https://www.modernghana.com/sports/924940/the-role-of-the-church-in-association-football.html>, retrieved 16 September 2023.

¹³ F. Onojaria "The History of Football in Nigeria (ptx)" https://www.academia.edu/7703911/THE_HISTORY_OF_FOOTBALL_IN_NIGERIA, 1-3

¹⁴ "MFM FC's history, nickname, owner, players, stadium, coach, rankings", Informant, <https://theinformant247.com/mfm-f-cs-history-nickname-owner-players-stadium-coach-rankings/>, retrieved 14 September 2023.

¹⁵ Pastor David Ogbueli of Dominion City at the Pastors Conference titled "Grow Your Church with Poju Oyemade" 11 April, 2023, information retrieved 16 September, 2023

For though I be free from all men, yet have I made myself servant unto all, that I might gain the more. And unto the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might gain the Jews; to them that are under the law, as under the law, that I might gain them that are under the law; To them that are without law, as without law, (being not without law to God, but under the law to Christ,) that I might gain them that are without law. To the weak became I as weak, that I might gain the weak: I am made all things to all men that I might by all means save some. And this I do for the gospel's sake, that I might be partaker thereof with you. (1Cor.9.19 - 23).

From the foregoing, it can be inferred that there is a reciprocal relationship between Christianity and sports and the two are major institutions that influence the social landscape in the lives of many. Consequently, religious values are inherent in sports, these includes character development, hard work, and perseverance¹⁶. According to A. Adogame, *et al*, (2018) religious figures used sports as a means of educating discipline and character¹⁷. However, the primary objective of incorporating football into ecclesiastical activities was in consonance with Apostle Paul's instruction to Timothy concerning the importance of bodily exercise.

CONCLUSION

Christianity and sports, are indeed, interwoven and interlinked. Consequently, the church cannot be against sports, even for the sake of recreation. The interplay between sports and worship can ensure positive impact on the lives of the participants, spectators, and people generally. Although, the former is spiritual, while the latter is secular. However, the church has been using sports as platforms to evangelized the unsaved, and spread the Good News to the ends of the earth. However, the church has through the activities draw countless souls to into the Kingdom of God. Therefore, the involvement of Christianity will definitely result in greater harvest field, although there are other platforms through which the Church can harvest more souls. Nevertheless, this paper encourages the introduction of new sporting activities in the church to help her reach out to more souls within and outside her sphere of influence.

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16 J.E. Bryant & M. McElroy (1997). *Sociological Dynamics of Sport and Exercise*. Englewood, CO: Morton Publishing Company, 55.

17 A. Adogame, N. Watson, and A. Parker (2018). *Global perspectives on sports and Christianity*. London: Routledge.