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Reaching the Youth through Sport: A Case Study of Scripture Union Oyo Area Community Game

Olanrewaju A. Ipinmoroti, PhD & Ayomide M. Balogun

ABSTRACT

There has been a lot of controversies about whether or not Christians should participate in sporting activities. Some even quote the scriptures which says 'for bodily exercise profiteth little: but godliness is profitable unto all things 1 Timothy 4:8 (KJV)' to buttress their stand against participation in sports as a waste of time. It is the view of the researchers that this assertion is not right. The use of sport in reaching youth cannot be neglected in the 21st century because many people prefer to be on the field of play on Sunday than to attend church services and also to watch football matches than to attend fellowship. It was in pursuance of this that the researchers embarked on examining the Scripture Union (Nigeria) Oyo Area Community game. The organisation of the game was x rayed, and Recommendations were made both for organisers and other churches and Christian organisations on the need to use sport as a means of evangelism and also encourage their members to participate in sporting activities to keep them fit and healthy where made.

INTRODUCTION

One of the challenges for the 21st century church is that we follow the example and teaching of Jesus Christ but we don't set our priorities right. Jesus Christ was fully engaged with the religious establishment of His day. He read the scrolls in the synagogue and attended all the religious festivals. But he also encouraged his disciples to make sure that they got their priorities right – "And He said unto them, The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27; KJV). He also said, "Let us go somewhere else to the nearby villages so I can preach there also. That is why I have come." (Mark 1:38; NIV)

What does that mean for us in the 21st Century? If we are involved in sport, it enables us to follow the greatest commandment and love God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength. According to Weir (Ermand, 1990) sport enables us to fulfil the great commission that Jesus Christ gave to His first disciples and by extension, all believers. Most importantly, sport enables the church to truly engage with the community in which they are placed.

It is a known fact that more people are on sports fields every Sunday than attending church services. Even though we know that worship and fellowship are vital and necessary but by limiting our concept of worship and when we can meet (to Sunday mornings), we inadvertently alienate a large proportion of society. Where can we best be salt and light, if not in all facets of life including the club houses and fields of our local sports clubs?

Sport offers us a chance to practice our beliefs in a very real way. A person's real character will not be seen when he is well dressed up and singing in the church, but when actively involved on the field of play. The true character is shown when a person is tackled dangerously on the field of play because he will react spontaneously without rehearsal. Plato said that you can discover more about a person in an hour of play than in a year of conversation. It is how act, or react in these situations that exposes our true Christian character. It is through these experiences that we grow in our faith.

The relationship that exists between sport and religion occurs in a variety of associations. As Hoffman (1992) stated, where the organized church is found, sport is also likely to be found. The "use" of sport by religious institutions and organizations, as well as the "use" of religion by sports organizations appear in various forms throughout contemporary sport (Coakley, 1998; Eitzen & Sage, 1992; 1997).

The phenomena of prevalence of churches providing sporting endeavors and facilities have really proliferated since the 1970's (Ladd & Mathisen, 1999). Churches and religious organization have made use of sport in the form of leagues, tournaments, facilities and so forth, for members and nonmembers alike.

Various studies have looked at the place of sport and recreation as used by churches to reach youth. The use of sport by church is a means of evangelism to both members and nonmembers of the church. Also, it was shown that recreation and sport activities were seen as making valuable contributions to church growth. (Adkins, 1987, Ermand, 1990; Ernce, 1987; and Ogden, 1978). Among the contributions that such activities brought include; providing an avenue for social connections (including personal connections, such as fellowship opportunities), outreach opportunities, and health aspects, and a non-threatening sport environment. (Ermand 1990)

SCRIPTURE UNION NIGERIA, OYO AREA COMMUNITY GAMES.

Scripture Union (SU) is an international, interdenominational Christian organization that works with churches and schools to make the gospel known. S.U has been in Nigeria for over 135 years. This Christian organisation is involved in children ministry, youth work especially in schools, in children and youth camping among others. It was on the basis of this that the researchers chose the organisation's community games as a case study.

The community game was organized by Scripture Union Nigeria, Oyo Area (covering Oyo state). This is an Area under Scripture Union Osogbo Region which is one of the 10 Regions under Scripture Union Nigeria.

THE ORIGIN OF THE COMMUNITY GAMES

As a youth oriented Christian organisation, SU Oyo Area is a registered member of National Youth Council of Nigeria, Oyo state chapter. One of the goals of National Youth Council of Nigeria is providing avenues for positively engaging youths. It is line with this that the leaders of SU Nigeria, Oyo Area charged the Schools' department to come up with a programme outside her traditional camping activities that will positively engage young people as well as providing an avenue for reaching them with the gospel. The Area School Implementation Committee (ASIC) then came up with the idea of a community game.

OBJECTIVES OF THE COMMUNITY GAMES

The Area school Implementation Committee (ASIC) came up with the following objectives:

- To provide a platform for youths, irrespective of their religious background, to converge for the purpose of engaging in sporting activities
- To create an avenue for the youths to display their God given talents
- To provide an avenue for the youths to positively expend their energy
- To provide opportunities for social integration irrespective of ethnic or religious differences
- To provide opportunity for the youths to engage in healthy competition
- To inculcate in the youths the need to display godly character while competing
- To establish that engaging in sports does not contradict the scriptures.

SPONSORSHIP OF SU COMMUNITY GAMES

Like sporting activities elsewhere, the community game required a lot of money for its successful execution. This was made possible through sponsorship from the following:

1. The pilgrims (the adult members of Scripture Union)
2. Some Christian organizations,
3. Individuals,
4. Churches and
5. Schools.
6. A token was charged as participation fees to augment the cost of feeding, gift, Christian material, accommodation and other logistics that where in place.

RECRUITMENT OF PARTICIPANTS

Flyers explaining the purpose of the games and eligibility were distributed to schools and religious houses. Interested individuals were expected to pre-register by filling a form attached to the flyers.

Those who submitted their form before the deadline were recruited for the community games. The consent of parents of these participants were officially sought via 'informed consent form' attached to the registration forms.

PARTICIPANTS

Participants were Christians from all denominations as well as those that are not Christians, and it serves as an opportunity of reaching them with the gospel, following up and nurturing them to become better persons in the community.

The participants of the game are the youth (male and female) of any category (Christian and non-Christian) who are ready to abide by the rules and regulation of the camp.

THE COMMUNITY GAMES

The venue for the Games was National Camp of Love, Kosobo, Oyo.

- The participants were camped for four full days excluding arrival and departure.
- They were divided into five groups according to some notable names in the Bible. Participants were also divided into hostels irrespective of their groups. This was to encourage more interactions outside their sports groups.
- Officials for the games were adults who volunteered to be part of the program.
- The first day was arrival, registration and opening formalities which included a welcome address by the Area Chairman, followed by rules and regulations to be observed throughout the period of the games by the Traveling Secretary of Oyo Area.
- The opening ceremony was witnessed by officials of Scripture Union Nigeria, Oyo Area and some church pastors. This included a colourful March Past by all the groups followed by the declaration of the games opened by the special guest of honour.
- The day's activities usually start with individual prayers by participants. This was followed by morning drills. The participants then went for general cleaning which was followed by breakfast.
- After breakfast, all participants converge for corporate prayers.
- Thereafter, the morning session of the games started.
- The morning session was followed by seminars after which participants went for their lunch and rest.
- Evening activities were majorly competitions organised in form of league among the groups.

FACILITIES FOR THE COMMUNITY GAMES

Facilities include open space for physical activities, a mini football pitch, indoor room that house table tennis, draft board, Ludo, Ayo Olopon, worth, Video game, Scrabble etc.

The Games included structured football league, table tennis, athletics and other activities which include; pick-up games, a variety of recreational sport, match past, indoor games (Ludo, Ayo Olopon, Worth, Scrabble).

Other activities include physical health related activities, such as body analysis and first aid training, aimed at reaching the youth.

Awards were issued to the best participant, trophies were awarded to the best football team, the best match past group, while individuals received medals. Gift like bibles, Christian literatures, pens, pencils, books and many other things were also given.

FEEDBACK FROM PARTICIPANTS

At the end of the community games, participants were asked to give their evaluation and their experiences during the camp.

Participants reported the occurrence of fellowship, which includes involvement and interaction with others in a joyous manner. The S.U Community games served as a site for individuals to spend time and interact with their friends.

They made new friends during the camp and they believed the friendship would continue after the community games.

In addition to social involvement, the participants also reported that they were able to realise in practical terms the connections between involvement sport activity and aspects of religion.

In addition to this, there were Bible study groups and youth group religious meetings that took place within the setting of the S.U. for interested participants.

Participants also reported that prayer sessions were held during evening league events (always before games and sometimes after). The prayers that were initiated at the league events were administered before the start of the matches. Players from both teams, as well as supervisors and/or officials also took part in the prayer time activity.

Issues such as safety, having fun, proper conduct, and Christian behavior (including attributes

such as glorifying God, being good examples, and exemplifying one's faith) were addressed at various times during the community games. During the camp instructors, coaches and group coordinators, were responsible for giving a time of devotion or Bible study.

Religious conversations included discussion of the Bible and theological issues pertaining to thoughts on salvation and denominational differences. Participants were exposed to counselling especially for people who, through bible study and/or group discussion, gave their lives to Christ and also for those that are in need of counselling.

It was noted, however, that not all sport participants took part in religious activities provided by the S.U. This is because the major reason for the camp was Sports.

DISCUSSION

Social involvement and connection came out very conspicuously as one of the benefits of the community games. This is agreement with the assertion of Garner (1999) that the presence of outreach has ties to personal connections and religious connection as well. According to him, churches should use sport as a tool for outreach. He further explained that a number of modifications can be made so that such outreaches can be aesthetically pleasing to guests and participants.

Ermand (1990) found that church programs can provide opportunities to a wide variety of people, both from the church as well as to people that are not church members or church regulars, especially when sporting activity is introduced.

It will be apt to observe that average religious bodies in Nigeria have negative inclination toward sport and participation in recreation, or even competitions. The use of sport to reaching youth by Scripture Union (Nigeria) in their community has shown that there are lots of positive relationships between Christianity and sporting activities. The study also showed that youths can be engaged in sporting activities and still be given the good news as stated in the SU aims. The initial skepticism about the sincerity of Scripture Union about organizing a sports-based camp was allayed when both participants and parents discovered that participation in the religious aspect of the programme was voluntary. It should be noted however, that quite a number of non-Christian participants voluntarily and enthusiastically participated the prayers and bible study activities.

Being the maiden edition, there were some lapses especially in the aspects of officiating officials. Volunteers were used as officials instead of those who are certified to officiate the different games. Also, participants were distributed arbitrarily into groups instead of according to their sports interest, this made it difficult for teams to be formed initially. However, this was eventually overcome by the second day. Award presentation and closing ceremony were done in-house, no parent or special guest was invited.

RECOMMENDATIONS

With the successful hosting of the Maiden edition of Scripture Union Community Games, it is crystal clear that sporting activity can be used by Christian organisations as a means of reaching out to the youths.

It is therefore recommended that:

1. That Christian organization in Nigeria should adopt the use of sport towards reaching the youth. People tends to be on the field than to be at the church and so, we should take the gospel to them 'out where they are'. In other word 'Take the word to them and take from them the world'.
2. Subsequent community games should be planned in collaboration with churches and other Christian organisations
3. The sports councils should be involved especially in the aspects of technical assistance.
4. More corporate organisations should be involved in sponsoring the games so that more participants can be accommodated.
5. Church members should be encouraged to engage themselves in physical activities and sporting activities to keep fit, stay healthy and to be able to reach young people in their environment.
6. Elaborate closing ceremony involving parents, church leaders and government officials should be included in subsequent editions. This will serve as publicity as well as sensitizing more churches to the viability of reaching out to youths through sports.

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