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The Church, Youth and Sports: Balancing Spirituality and Wellness

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ABSTRACT

Between sports and fervent Christian beliefs exist a close philosophical relationship, which began to exist in the middle of the nineteenth century. The relationship between sports and Christianity advanced increasingly during the latter part of the second half of the 19th century, sustaining a persuasive vision of how the Church and others viewed the relationship between sports, physical fitness and spirituality. This paper examines concepts associated with Christianity in relation with youth and sports as well as establishing a balance between spirituality and wellness within the context of Christianity.

Keywords: church, youth, sports, spirituality and wellness.

INTRODUCTION

Historically, when evaluating the relationship between the Church and sports, one is confronted with a seemingly wide range of mystifying positions, reactions and theological reflections. On one end of the spectrum, most notably with Tertullian, we are greeted with antagonism, as well as an irritable rejection as a result of the perceived idolatrous connotations with the games. However, on the other end of the spectrum, with examples from the modern versions of Muscular Christianity, there is in existence a unification, a tertium quid, as seen in what Frank Deford popularized as “Sportianity” (Deardorff & White, 2008). A close philosophical link between sports and devout Christian beliefs came into existence in the middle of the nineteenth century. Sports and Christianity (also referred to as ‘Muscular Christianity’) advanced increasingly during the latter part of the second half of the 19th century. Supporting a persuasive vision of how the Church and others viewed the relationship between sports, physical fitness and spirituality (Sung & Aplin, 2010).

The phrase ‘Muscular Christianity’ was perhaps adopted from the writings of Charles Kingsley and often from Thomas Hughes’ vivid portrayal of Tom Brown’s School days’ (1856), where the development of a strong, morally upright and masculine youth was depicted - a Protestant role model (Putney, 2001). An ideology, whose original purpose was very much to be applied as a disciplinary procedure to educate and mold Christian young men with the concept of Kingsleyan manliness (Mangan, 2006). Since the inception of *Muscular Christianity*, a close-fitting linkage has been forged between sport and Christianity (Crepeau, 2001). During the 20th century, Evangelist Billy Graham used athletes and coaches in his travelling ministry; founding sports ambassadors in groups such as ‘Youth for Christ’ (1950s), ‘The Fellowship of Christian Athletes’ (1954) and ‘Athletes in Action’ (1963), (Sung & Aplin, 2010). Subsequently, many other prominent athletes and coaches, such as James Naismith, created an alliance between Christianity and Sports. Thomas Arnold, a Rugby Coach believed that sport provided an impeccable method of dispersing uncouth behaviour. His revelation of using sport as a means of disciplining, training and adding spiritual growth to his unruly young men in school spread to many other schools which, used sport scientifically to keep the school in order and to provide the boys with a wide range of productive activities, which will in turn create a lifelong legacy for participants (Sung & Aplin, 2010).

THE CHURCH, YOUTH AND SPORT

In spite of how somewhat harmful following or practicing sport can be, based on a couple of examples given as to why the church should not be involved in sport and sporting activities, the challenge for the church is that it follows the example and teaching of Jesus. Historically, he was known to be fully engaged with the religious establishment of his day. However, he invigorated his devotees to ensure that they align their priorities correctly and come to the understanding of the fact that – “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath”. He also said, “Let us go somewhere else to the nearby villages so I can preach there also. That is why I have come” (Bateman, 2016).

In the 21st century sporting world, more young people are aligning with the existing alliance between sports and Christianity by infusing tenets of Muscular Christianity into their involvement. They redefine their association with sports to fit their definitions and convictions of the supposed 'being' and doing of a Christian sportsman. It was found that many young Christian athletes adopted two common strategies: First by defining their sport involvement as means of glorifying God, and second by defining sports involvement as a platform to spread the Gospel (Coakley, 2003). One of the most cherished tenets evangelicals promote in regard to sports involvement is the idea that when more young evangelicals flood the world of sports, they stand a greater chance to redeem it for Christ (Keener, 2010).

What is in sport for the 21st century church? Playing sport represents an avenue for acclaimed followers of Christ to align with the greatest commandment and love of God wholeheartedly. Sport enables us to fulfil the great commission that Christ gave to us and his first disciples. Most importantly, sport enables the church to truly engage with the community in which they are founded. More people are on sports fields every Sunday than attending church. Of course, corporate worship and fellowship are vital and necessary but by limiting our concept of worship and when we can meet (to Sunday mornings) we alienate a large proportion of society. The club houses and fields of our local sports clubs are surely places, where Christians can best be salt and light. Sport provides one of the best opportunities to bring together all sections of society. For instance, during the annual Genesis Christmas football tournament held in the shadow of Canary Wharf's skyscrapers in London, we see investment bankers contest in football against homeless young men. There is need to move away from traditional paradigms of Christian mission. The people are out there, majority of whom are young people – the church can't always wait for them to come into church. On the field of play, they are all equal. And that is where one is more likely to see a person's true character (Bateman, 2016).

Beyond being flaunted as a character-building institution, early 19th-century American Protestants decried sport as a temptation of the devil aimed at urging the athlete towards esteeming worldly success above matters of faith. Today, this point of view is less popular and many contemporary Christians are willing to absorb sport as a platform for promoting evangelical witnessing (Blazer, 2012). The church today has reached the realisation of the fact that religion and sport can become a duo more often in an effort to establish a nexus with the people within their local communities. In a study conducted to examine church youth club participation and its impact on continued church involvement, it was discovered that social activities are sacrosanct to continued church involvement based on the fact that the value of sport lies in its capacity to promote social interaction (Carpenter, 2001). Churches are beginning to move beyond the walls and into the community, utilizing sports as a catalyst. Many congregations are getting more and more involved with creating relevant sporting occasions that teach character development, hard work, determination and respect for fellow humans.

Mega and small church-affiliated higher education institutions, have exploited sports in various ways and degrees. Several institutions of higher learning, regardless of their denominational predilections, have allowed sports to establish diversity, thereby affecting positively its student body. Churches are exploring this process in their efforts to have unswerving impact in the communities they operate (Lee, 2004). Eitzen and Sage (2012) proposed that "religious values are inherent in sport ideology". As congregations consider the growth of the church and how the church can achieve the aims and objectives of evangelism and outreach, many church leaders are looking towards sport and recreation and creating a sport ministry which has a global appeal as well as the ability to connect and congregate people of diverse backgrounds (Blazer, 2012).

BALANCING SPIRITUALITY AND WELLNESS

Spirituality represents a dynamic and inherent facet of humanity, through which individuals seek ultimate meaning, purpose, and wholeness, and experience self actualisation, family, society, nature, and the sacred. Spirituality is by humans articulated through beliefs, values, traditions, and practices (Puchalski, Vitillo & Hull, 2014). According to Joseph, Ainsworth, Mathis, Hooker and Keller (2017), spirituality ought to be understood as "a wide-ranging, vague, personalized, and naturally occurring phenomenon, where human beings seek intimacy and/or connection between him/herself and a superior power or purpose." However, it must be understood that spirituality is an intricate construct and as such it is defined in various ways and measured with different paraphernalia (Lun & Bond, 2013). Spirituality has to do with deep, often religious, feelings and beliefs, including a person's sense of peace, purpose, connection to others, and beliefs about the meaning of life (Puchalski, 2001). Spirituality can be defined as "a belief system focusing on intangible elements that impart vitality and meaning to life's events" (Maugans, 1996). It may, or it may not be accompanied by a particular religion. In a broad sense,

spirituality describes an individual's relationship with what is transcendent and beyond the physical, an experience shared by both religious and nonreligious individuals (Sulmasy, 2009).

Wellness, amity and contentment are the messages delivered by the Almighty Creator to human beings for the realization of equilibrium and congruence in life. Human beings possess three well-unified indispensable components; spirit, soul/mind and body, which exist in a dynamic balance. Several external forces acting as multifaceted nature of existence, such as family ties, socioeconomic circumstances, community and cultural burdens, access to healthcare as well as health behaviour, either promote or interrupt the dynamic balance (Krobbuaban & Prompakping, 2011). Consciousness about wellness is a self-directed deliberate effort of lifelong learning and decision-making for optimum health and successful balanced existence (Loiselle & Laurretta, 2009). The concept of wellness provides awareness about quality life decisions and choosing to solve health and social problems, by taking care of; body (Physical wellness), mind (Emotional wellness), and values and beliefs (Spiritual wellness) (Cianciara & Wysocki, 2011).

Physical wellness is associated with physical health in terms of internal safety and involves understanding that good eating habit, physical activity and quality lifestyle choices are imperative (Hannon, Sawyer & Allman, 2011). Mental or emotional wellness is achieved by relaxation practices, meditation or reflection, yoga, and methods for refining relationships. Spiritual wellness is mainly concerned with the concept that human beings deserve to be valued, regarded as sacred and whole of the creations should be closely linked to the Almighty Creator by prayers and religion. The imperceptible spiritual universe and the perceptible material universe are not distinct entities; rather, the dominant spiritual influences in our society interact with all elements in the flow of physical life. Consequently, our spirituality is a vivacious element that permeates every aspect of life and influences deeply our physical and mental position (Loiselle & Laurretta, 2009). Lifestyle and lifestyle-related health behaviors are some of the determinants of health potential (Binkowska-Bury et al., 2010). An individual's health behavior is any activity he or she undertakes to prevent or detect disease or to improve their health and well-being (Conner & Norman, 1996).

Research has shown that religion and spirituality are associated positively with better health and psychological wellbeing. Similarly, results from a study of internal medicine residents at Yale University suggested that residents who place a high priority on healthful relationships, engage in an active spiritual life, and practice humility may have important personality traits that protect against burnout (Koenig, 2004).

Chronic disease carries high morbidity and mortality in the United States with large racial and ethnic disparities. Almost half of U.S. adults had one or more chronic conditions as of 2012 (Ward, Schiller & Goodman, 2014). Heart disease and cancer account for 46.5% of all deaths in 2012, and mortality data suggest the cardiovascular age-adjusted death rates are about 34% higher for blacks than the overall U.S. populations (Heron, 2015). Physical activity and its sense can be perceived as a topic of spirituality of movement and its process of cultivation (Lišková & Jirásek, 2013). The human body has a prodigious importance in the cycle of life and death – the body is simultaneously dying (extinct) and thus giving a chance for a new life (Oborný, 2015).

One may seek to really know for sure how spirituality is related to health. However, it has been established that the spirit, mind/soul and body are interconnected and linked. Thus, the health of any one of these elements is most likely to affect the others. Some research elicits a connection between spiritual/religious beliefs and a person's sense of wellness. Positive beliefs, comfort, and strength derived from religion, meditation, and prayer can contribute positively to wellbeing. It may even contribute immensely to healing. Improvement in your spiritual health may not directly cure an illness, but it may help you feel better. It also may prevent some health problems and help you cope better with illness, stress, or death (Robert, 2020).

Generally, human beings like to live a life with meaning and purpose. When these goals are met, it brings harmony to the individual's life, and the people they surround themselves with in the society. The question therefore is, what can you do to balance spirituality and wellness? It is encouraging to figure out what techniques work for you. Since spiritual wellness involves one's values, beliefs, and purpose, it can be achieved in several ways—both physically and mentally:

1. Digging deeper into one's spiritual core. By launching deeper into your spiritual core, you are simply asking yourself questions about who you are and what makes you unique and significant. Ask yourself: Who exactly am I? Is there a purpose to me? What's most valuable to me? These questions will direct you towards a point where you will think more thoroughly about yourself, analyse occurring patterns and allow you to identify things about yourself that can help you have control over your destiny, lead a healthful life and achieve fulfillment.

2. Engaging in meditation and prayer. It is crucial to dedicate time to connecting with yourself and then with your creator. Peradventure in the morning when you wake up, during lunch break, or before you go to sleep, five to 10 minutes can be taken to meditate and connect each day. Fusing mediation and relaxation into your lifestyle will free your mind and foster a stronger relationship with your spiritual and emotional wellness.
3. Yoga and physical activities. Yoga is a physical technique that can help improve wellness across different facets of your being by reducing emotional and physical strains on your mind and body. Yoga can help lower stress, boost the immune system, and lower blood pressure as well as reduce anxiety, depression, fatigue, and insomnia. While regular physical activities can improve your muscle strength, boost your endurance and keeps the cardiovascular system in shape.

CONCLUSION

Over the years, a close-fitting linkage has been forged between sport and Christianity as seen in the works of prominent athletes and coaches, such as James Naismith. It is believed that sport provides an impeccable method of dispersing uncouth behaviour among youth and can be employed as a means of disciplining, training and adding spiritual growth to unruly young men. The 21st century sporting world sees more young people aligning with the existing alliance between sports and Christianity by infusing its tenets into their involvement. They redefine their association with sports to fit their definitions and convictions of the supposed 'being' and doing of a Christian sportsman. What then is in sport for the 21st century church? It is evident that playing sport represents an avenue for acclaimed followers of Christ to align with the greatest commandment and love of God wholeheartedly. Sport provides an avenue for Christians to fulfil the great commission that Christ gave to them and his first devotees. And most importantly sport enables the church to truly engage with the community in which they are founded and avails the best opportunity to positively impact as many lives as possible, because more people are on sports fields every Sunday than attending church.

Spirituality is largely regarded as a wide-ranging, ambiguous, personalized, and naturally occurring phenomenon, where human beings who possess spirit, soul and body pursue intimacy between him and a superior power or purpose. It is observable that there are several multifaceted external forces, such as family ties, socioeconomic circumstances, community and cultural burdens, access to healthcare as well as health behaviour which either promote or interrupt the dynamic balance of the spirit, soul and body of humans especially when exposed to an adjustment. However, this distortion in balance can be ameliorated in the existence of a self-directed deliberate effort of lifelong learning and decision-making dovetailing and leading towards adopting strategies to cope with unfavourable circumstances and ultimately achieve optimum health and successful life balance.

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