

SPORTS EVANGELISM: A NEW TOOL TO MINISTER TO AFRICAN AMERICAN MEN
IN VARIOUS COMMUNITIES

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ABSTRACT

The number of African Americans attending traditional church services has severely decreased in the current era as compared to the attendance during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960's. The numbers are even more staggering when one compares the number of African-American men currently attending traditional churches.

In today's cultural context, many men, young and old, are tired of the traditional styles of worship service that have been in practice since the founding of the African Methodist Episcopal Church by Richard Allen and the Free African Society in 1816. As times change, there needs to be a change in how we minister to people. Sports and ministry, when coupled, can be that change. While there are many sports ministry programs throughout the world, these organizations cater to youth or athletes playing in organized sports. These are superb organizations, but they lack one thing to make them effective for evangelizing to African-American men in various communities. That missing link is outreach.

By convening a virtual focus group of African-American men, ranging in age, education and socioeconomic status, it was discovered that these man want to be loved and not judged. They want to go and participate in worship where they feel empowered and not preached to, or about. This empowerment, for this population, can come in the form of sports evangelism and will look like love, forgiveness, and hope. The church, following this new concept of evangelism, will be able to invite, and retain, African-American men in the body of Christ. God is ready to do a new thing in African-American communities, and that new thing **IS** Sports Evangelism.

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DEDICATION

This is dedicated to the four most influential women in my life: JoAnn (Ma) – For showing me what it is like to be a follower and lover of Christ. Miss you more each day! Have fun in Heaven until we meet again! Jocy (Ma 2) – for accepting me as your son and for the continued prayers for me and the ministry God laid upon me. Saniah – Not even two years old, but you are a bright light in all our lives. Farrah – My wonderful wife. Words can't express enough how much I appreciate your love and support through this process! With God on our side, the limit to where we go from here is beyond the depths of our imaginations! I love you more than I can put into words!

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CHAPTER ONE

“LET’S GET READY TO RUMBLE!”

The Narrative

Growing up in the small town of Inman, South Carolina, football and church were the only things that mattered most to people. Friday nights, Saturday afternoons and Sundays during the months from August to February were designated times for football. Nothing else, at all, happened during those hours. Sundays was always designated for church. In my community, and in many other African-American communities, that meant being at church all day long. Sunday school would start at 9 AM, followed by devotion starting at 10:30 AM. Worship would start at approximately 10:45 AM and would end between 1:00 – 2:00 PM, depending on how long the preacher preached and how many people spoke in tongues or “caught” the Holy Ghost. After a small repast, afternoon service would start approximately 4:00 and end around 7:30 – 8:00 PM.

After spending the weekend watching local football games and attending church, for anyone wanting to watch National Football League games, particularly the Carolina Panthers, Monday evenings was best bet with ABC Monday Night Football. Quite simply, where I grew up, in my rural southern African American community, God and church came first. There was no negotiation or option, at least not in my home. Missing church for any reason, especially a football game on television, was unacceptable. Football may have been the top priority in the secular world between

August and February on Fridays and Saturdays, but God and church were always top priority over football, and everything

else, every day.

In the church I was a member of as a child, there were a great number of African-American men that would attend church regularly. These men were highly respected in the community; both church and secular. As time went on and I grew older, I began to notice that these highly respected men would sometimes be absent from church or other Sunday activities that I was expected to attend. I began to wonder why I had to attend every single service on a Sunday but the men I loved did not. I also began to think about why sports was more important than Jesus.

Once I moved from South Carolina to New Jersey, I noticed that there were very few men in the church that my wife and I joined. I thought it was weird because we joined this church in April of 2011, so football season was long over and there were not any more Sunday sports to watch. (*Anecdotally, I did not realize then that baseball, soccer and basketball were so popular in New Jersey.*) I talked with my pastor, who is also a personal friend, and he informed me that men do not show up if there is any kind of sporting event going on. For me, this was a huge cultural shock. I was used to seeing dedicated men in the church on most Sundays regardless of what sport was on television or being played the area. From that point on, I began to wonder if there could be an intersection between sports and church. Could there be a way to bring men, specifically African American men to Christ using sports as a tool? I wanted to do whatever needed to be done to combine sports and Jesus. I want men to take Jesus with them to the stadiums, if that is where they choose to be, because Jesus is everywhere and there is nothing that says that a person cannot be saved in stadiums or auditoriums or other venues where sporting events are being played.

As I continue my ordination process, and after having completed seminary, I have made it my personal mission to give extra focus to the African American men in neighborhoods like mine where they are judged because of the way they look, behave, and talk. These men are fighting the dangerous stigma of being seen as uneducated, unfeeling thugs just because of the color of their skin. In this so-called post racial America, African American men, who look just like me when I am not wearing a suit, are being hunted for just being themselves. These men are targeted, jailed and killed at exponentially higher rates than their non-African American counterparts and I need to play a role in stopping this tragedy from continuing.¹

Historically, African American men have associated the Black Church with a place of refuge. During the Civil Rights movement, the Black Church was home to the disenfranchised and the down trodden.² After the Black Church gained momentum during the 1960's, a shift happened in the theology of the church. Black Churches went from places of refuge to places of deposit. African American men began to understand that value in the Black Church only happened when a person was able to make a donation; prosperity preaching was king.³ It did not matter to the Black Church if a man was recently released from incarceration, was unemployed or if he had multiple mouths to feed. If there was no donation, African American men were shunned. Additionally, the Black Church began to cater to women as women became more liberated. Women

¹ https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2017/11/16/black-men-sentenced-to-more-time-for-committing-the-exact-same-crime-as-a-white-person-study-finds/?utm_term=.1317764d1f70.

² "God In America," PBS, , accessed March 10, 2018, <http://www.pbs.org/godinamerica/black-church/>.

³ Anthony S. Davis and Anthony S. Davis, "Why Black Men Don't Like Church -," The Good Men Project, September 18, 2014, , accessed October 10, 2017, <https://goodmenproject.com/featured-content/why-brothers-dont-like-church-kerj/>.

began to take a forefront in the Church, pushing men out of the door. Men left churches hurting.

Many men have been feeling the sting of “church hurt” all their lives. It is because of “church hurt” that a good number of men have stopped trusting in Jesus and have stopped going to church altogether. It is important to understand that by nature, men seek a place to congregate where they will not feel judged. So, for many men, this has become stadiums, auditoriums or even a sports bar where they can talk, mingle and find fellowship with like-minded men. Sports was always a way for them to escape reality, either by watching or participating.

As I embarked on this journey of discovering the link between sports and evangelism, I was introduced to a new form of sports called eSports. ESports is a new phenomenon with a rapidly growing African-American population, particularly men. Although there are a lot of different communities within eSports genre, one of the more popular gaming communities seems to be the Fighting Game Community, or FGC. Many African-American men that are in the FGC also feel that the church does not understand or want them; they feel rejected by the people who they thought would love them as they are.

In many ways, men in the FGC are suffering like the rest of their counterparts that attend football games and other live sporting events from the sting of “church hurt,” but in a very different way. Men have revealed that when people hear the term ‘eSports’ they automatically think of on-line gambling or using electronic games (video games) as a means to replace Jesus. ESports players are automatically deemed heathens for choosing video games over joining a church that belittles their hobby instead of finding a way to

use their hobby as a bridge to Christ. This frame of thought has been positioned towards other men that have chosen sports over attending church. This project will juxtapose sports and the church and help determine if their merging will enhance the African American male experience with Christ.

The Concern

When thinking about the numbers of men attending church regularly dwindling each year along with the number of men seeking ordination shrinking within the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) denomination, it is a cause of concern. This is of a particular concern when you consider that 30 years ago there was a very healthy number of men that attended organized church services. Why are the numbers shrinking at such an alarming rate? Could it be because that men don't feel welcome or useful in the church? Could it also be that men are tired of the same order of service that has been in effect since the church's founding?

Some would say that it seems that the AME Church has forgotten its mission to "minister to the social, spiritual and physical development of all people".⁴ The AME Church has failed at ministering to African-American men that are unchurched or do not look, talk, think and act like "church people". Although, many people within the AME Church realize that this is a problem, the real question is what can the AME Church do to gain the trust of African-American men?

In full transparency, this is not just an AME problem. There are many black church denominations that can be, and have been, accused of turning their backs on

⁴ The Doctrine and Discipline of the African Methodist Episcopal Church 2012, p 13 (Nashville, TN: AMEC Sunday School Union, 2012).

African-American men for one reason or another. If a visitor to a city like Newark, New Jersey were to drive up and down the streets, they could easily assume that everyone in the City has been introduced, at a minimum, to Jesus. There are, literally, churches on every other block that claim to welcome everyone who enters their doors. However that is not the truth. The truth is, churches welcome people who they believe would fit in with their idea of Christianity.

Another question that I plan on looking at is how can sports be used as a tool to minister to African-American men? If I was a physicist, I would say that (Jesus + Sports + Ministry) x African-American Men = Increasing Number of African American Men Being Active in Black Churches, along with their families. I also wonder how does the concept of denominations play into this? Are men more apt to go and join a church that is non-denominational or Baptist or AME or United Methodist? Although that question does not have anything really to do with the forming of a sports ministry/evangelism program, it does address how some denominations see African-American men.

Another area of concern, and it will be repeated throughout the project, is how African-American men seem to be an afterthought in terms of ministry. There are men's ministries in various churches, but those are usually last resort ministries. Within the AME Church there are several ministries that are geared towards women such as Missionary Societies, Women's Ministries, Singles Ministries (yes, they are mainly aimed at women looking for their *Boaz*) and Women in Ministry. These are great programs, but for a man on the outside looking in, this can be a turnoff if there are not accompanying programs to attract the men to the church and to retain them.

While pondering the concerns for this project, there was a moment of disbelief. These thoughts could not be true. The church catered to me and my needs. I was an active member of my church before ordination. Maybe I was wrong. After doing some research, I found that I was all too right in my assumptions. In his book *Adam! Where Are You?: Why Most Black Men Don't Go To Church*, Dr. Jawanza Kunjufu explored the issues of African American men and the church. He created a questionnaire and then held a retreat with 75 African-American men trying to determine why they did not attend church.⁵ When the surveys were returned, 21 reasons were given as to why they do not go to church or do not like church. It must be noted that even though the book was written in the mid to late 1990's, the 21 reasons indicated in the book are still very relevant today. There were two particular reasons that resonated and drove home some points for me: Reason 10 and Reason 11. Reason 10 as to why most African-American men do not go to church is sports.⁶

With many men of color, sports are the one area where they do not feel judged and feel like they are worth something. This is an area where many churches have failed. Jesus has commanded us to love each other as ourselves. Part of that love is not to judge the people we come into contact with, especially if they're willing to show their vulnerability and come to the church for spiritual healing and to go to Jesus. Reason 11 is attire.⁷ Men feel judged when they do go to church and do not have a three-piece suit. Men feel that no consideration is given for their financial status or other issues. Appearance is everything in churches and African American men did not fit.

⁵ Jawanza Kunjufu, *Adam! Where Are You?: Why Most Black Men Don't Go to Church* (Chicago, IL: African American Images, 1994).

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

As my research continued, I kept finding books, articles and commentary about African American men and the church. While I was researching, I came upon a graduate thesis entitled “*An examination of the theology and methods of African American male discipleship*” by Eric Johnson.⁸ Mr. Johnson examined the methods of African-American discipleship and how the African-American church has failed, miserably, at reaching out and ministering to African American men. Mr. Johnson concluded that the church has taken an aggressive approach to inviting men to Christ but have become indifferent to making these men disciples.⁹ There is a vast difference between Christianity and discipleship. The church will reach out to men but how does the church retain them and escort them into true discipleship?

Continuing Mr. Johnson’s questions surrounding discipleship, George G. Hunter III address retention of people overall, but for this project we will say African American men in his book *Should We Change Our Game Plan?: From Traditional or Contemporary to Missional and Strategic*.¹⁰ Mr. Hunter explores the notion of strategically changing ministry to recruit and retain men. According to Mr. Hunter, the church needs to address the styles of worship including song choices, order of worship and style of dress.¹¹ Hunter went so far as to compare church leadership to athletic coaches; when coaches see a game going awry, they quickly check their playbooks and

⁸Eric Arnold Johnson, *An Examination of the Theology and Methods of African American Male Discipleship* (2001).

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ George G. Hunter, *Should We Change Our Game Plan?: From Traditional or Contemporary to Missional and Strategic*(Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2013).

¹¹ Ibid.

find new plays.¹² Church leadership must begin to understand that same methods of evangelism that worked in the 1900's does not work now.

The final reference that spoke to this project was *Holding Up Your Corner* by F. Willis Johnson.¹³ In this book, Dr. Johnson asserts that “[t]here are centers of faith in cities throughout this country and around the world that are beautiful places, but where ugly religion is practiced.”¹⁴ Time and time again there are beautiful houses of worship built in urban communities, but not everyone is welcome. Women and children, for the most part, are welcome. But a common African American man, off the street, coming into a house of worship by himself arouses security’s suspicions. The man is spoken to without a warm, welcoming tone and his presence is questioned. Is this how we are to act in the House of God? Is this how we are to react to our fellow brothers who come in off the street who only want to get warm or be in a safe place? Is it so foreign that a man would just want to get a good Word from God or to pour his heart and soul out on the altar for God to pick up and do what God does best? Is this the reason why African American men want no part of the church?

The Scope

This project is qualitative in nature and will address how sports and eSports can be used as a tool to evangelize to African American men. The information obtained will be used to develop an innovative and inspirational sports evangelism program. There is a dire need for more African American men in the Black church, however, the goal of this project is not entirely to get African American men to come back to church or organized

¹² Ibid.

¹³ F. Willis. Johnson, *Holding up Your Corner* , p48 (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2017).

¹⁴ Ibid.

religion. The main goal is to utilize sports and eSports to get African American men to come to Jesus.

I will be exploring the idea of sports ministry/evangelism with ministers and pastors in New Jersey, Maryland, Pennsylvania, Washington, D.C., Connecticut, and Virginia. It is imperative to determine how church leaders view this new tool and whether they believe it could be used to invite men to become a part of the body of Jesus Christ. I will also conduct a focus group of 12 men from all aspects of life and from different parts of the country. I will ask them, in great detail, how they view church, Christianity and discipleship. I will also endeavor to find out whether the church has done an adequate job in reaching out and ministering to these, and other African American men. Finally, I will explore the idea of sports ministry/evangelism with these men to determine if they believe this to be a viable tool for African American men to rediscover the church.

Finally, I am going to immerse myself in two distinct marginalized communities. Near my church in Newark, New Jersey is a basketball court that is a hub for tournaments, three games are played every Sunday morning from late April until early October. The men who attend these games range in age from 18 to late sixties. I will also attend an eSports tournament on a Sunday morning. I will speak to attendees at each event to determine if they have a religious affiliation and why they have chosen to attend the tournaments and not church.

Definition of Terms

Before delving into the project, it is important that all terms are defined and properly understood as they will appear several times throughout this paper:

- **Sports Ministry** – The act of using sports to administer the love of Christ to anyone. Sports ministry has a specific focus on youth and those engaged in organized sports.
- **Sports Evangelism** – According to Webster’s Dictionary¹⁵, evangelism, a noun, is the spreading of the Christian gospel by public preaching or personal witness. Sports evangelism is a new term that has been coined for this project. Therefore, as a working definition, sports evangelism is the spreading of the Christian gospel by use of sports. This use of sports goes beyond being an active participant in a particular sport. Additionally, sports evangelism, attempts to create disciples of Christ, no members of churches.
- **eSports** – competitive tournament of video games for spectators, usually between professional video game “athletes”. The rise in the number of eSports athletes has led to a significant number of amateur eSports athletes participating in tournaments and events.
- **Invitation** – The act of inviting one to become a part of the family/body of Christ regardless of their past, race, sexual identity or creed.
- **Retention** – The act of keeping the new member in the body/family of Christ.
- **Church Hurt** – The act of being hurt emotionally or spiritually by a group of people in a religious organization leading to the hurt individual no longer wanting anything to do with the church in any capacity.

¹⁵ "Evangelism," Merriam-Webster, , accessed February 20, 2018, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/evangelism?src=search-dict-hed>.

- **Urban Community** – A section of a neighborhood in which the vast majority of residents are African American or where the socioeconomic status is depressed as compared to their suburban counterparts and may have several public housing projects.
- **Fighting Game Community** – Also known as the FGC, is a subsection of the eSports community in which people in it are participants or fans of games such as Mortal Kombat, Killer Instinct, Street Fighter V: Arcade Edition, Guilty Gear XRD, Dragon Ball FighterZ, Injustice 2, Tekken 7, Soul Calibur, Marvel vs. Capcom: Infinite and many other games in which participants use characters to fight each other.
- **Discord** – a voice chat application, used frequently by the eSports community, that allows you to chat with multiple people at one time.
- **MMA** – Mixed Martial Arts. A combat sport in which the participants use various forms of martial arts or fighting styles such as karate, judo and jiu jitsu.
- **UFC** – Ultimate Fighting Championship is the premier mixed martial arts promotion in the world. UFC that hosts regular bouts between persons trained MMA.
- **DBFZ** – Dragon Ball FighterZ. A fighting game that was released in February of 2018 based on the popular Dragon Ball franchise created by Akira Toriyama.
- **T.O.** – Tournament Organizer. An official at a competitive sporting or gaming event, who typically performs a number of key functions such as declaring that competition may begin, refereeing game play and organization, elimination tournament brackets, or tournament pairings.

- **SFV:AE** – Street Fighter V: Arcade Edition. This is the latest installment of the Street Fighter franchise produced by Capcom. The company currently runs a tour that spans the globe and the world championships of this game is at the event, Capcom Cup in Las Vegas in December of every year.
- **ECT** – East Coast Throwdown. A major regional tournament in which many players participate in order to earn points towards their ranking in the Street Fighter standings in the Capcom Pro Tour. The event is organized by semi-retired fight game veteran, L.I. Joe, in October of every year.
- **CPT** – Capcom Pro Tour. Capcom’s competitive organization for the games they produce. Currently there are tournaments and rankings in their organization in Street Fighter: AE, Marvel vs Capcom: Infinite and Ultimate Capcom vs. Marvel 3.
- **AME** – African Methodist Episcopal. The first black denomination in America that was founded by the Free African Society and Richard Allen in 1816. Richard Allen was voted and consecrated the first Bishop of the AME denomination at the first General Conference held in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in 1816.

CHAPTER TWO

PROTECT YOURSELVES AT ALL TIMES!

Whenever an MMA fighter begins a match, or bout as it is termed in the sport, fighters hear the phrase “protect yourselves at all times” repeatedly. They hear this from their coaches, referees, families and cheering sections. This instruction simply means to use the weapons you have to protect yourself against your opponent. This same phrase, and its meaning in the MMA context, rings true when starting a ministry, especially a ministry that is unheard of in the Black Church. The new concept of sports evangelism seeks to minister in an urban setting where the men already feel that God has turned a blind eye to their situations and feel that the church does not want them. Therefore, protect yourself at all times is not merely an analogy that is popular in the world of gladiator sports, but it must become a way of life because the battle is beginning.

During every spiritual battle, Christians must put on the entire Armor of God as it has been described in Ephesians 6:10-18.¹ In Ephesians, the Apostle Paul charges the Church at Ephesus to clothe itself with the belt of truth, breastplate of righteousness shoes of the gospel of peace, shield of faith, the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit.² When looking at the different things that Christians are instructed to wear, the only thing that can be seen as an offensive weapon, one that carries honor and authority,

¹ Ephesians 6:10- 18 (NIV).

² Ibid

is the sword of the Spirit, the Bible. To combat the devil, and his minions, who are
always busy

with keeping people from cultivating a strong relationship with Christ, we are to use the Word of God. It is, therefore, imperative that you have the scriptures in hand, and heart, that will be the basis of the new ministry. According to Steve Connor, the author of *Sports Outreach: Principles + Practices for Successful Sports Ministry*, “many well-intentioned people start sports ministry from the paradigm of sports first and then try to relate it to the Scriptures”.¹ Connor believes, as I do, that God should lead, using sports as a tool to recruit and retain men.

In thinking about this fight to bring sports evangelism to life, and having no basis for the term in this framework, I had to meditate and let God lead me to the scriptures that would guide this work. As I meditated, not only was I led to three scriptures, I was given themes for growth that I believe will affect each man whose life will be affected by this ministry. Sports evangelism will be based on the following Judgement and Forgiveness, Luke 6:37; Hope, Philippians 4:13: and Helping your Fellow Brother/Sister, Luke 10:25-37.

Judgement & Forgiveness (Luke 6:37)

One of the saddest things I have seen in my short time in ministry is how black men are treated. I am not only talking about how black men have been treated in society, by police, by the criminal justice system or by other people of ethnicities. I am referring to the treatment of black men by our churches. I am almost always angry when I hear a church using slogans like “A Church Where Everybody is Everybody and Jesus Christ is Lord” or “Every saint has a past – every sinner has a future” or “This is a perfect church

¹ Steve Connor, *Sports Outreach: Principles Practice for Successful Sports Ministry*, p. 35 (Scotland: Christian Focus Pub., 2003).

for those who aren't". Churches proudly post these phrases and then proceed to not treat others with the love that was commanded of us in Leviticus 19:17² and later emphasized by Jesus Christ in Mark 12:31³. It is important that, when embarking on sports evangelism programs, that we heed the words of Nicholas Sparks in *The Rescue*. "You're going to come across people in your life who will say all the right words at all the right times. But in the end, it's always their actions you should judge them by. It's actions, not words, that matter."⁴

We must remember that men distrust church and the main reasons for the distrust are judgement and lack of forgiveness.⁵ There are accounts of men who have attempted to go to church however upon arrival, they were treated like outcasts. Men were given the look that quickly told them that they were not welcomed in that space. If a man said hello, he was not greeted with a response in return; no one welcomed him to the church. Even worse, men have been forced to sit through sermons where they are demonized for their mistakes but without any redeeming lesson of forgiveness. Men have been brought into churches and made to feel like they are the cause of the issues in the African American community. That model simply does not work. Judgement and forgiveness have to be offered to men when they are returning to communities of faith. Without either one of these precious gifts, men will leave before they even find out the wholeness that Jesus can provide.

² Leviticus 19:17 NIV.

³ Mark 12:31 NIV.

⁴ Nicholas Sparks and Mary Beth. Hurt, *The Rescue* (New York, NY: Hachette Audiobooks, 2015).

⁵ Jawanza Kunjufu, *Adam! Where Are You?: Why Most Black Men Don't Go to Church* (Chicago, IL: African American Images, 1994).

⁵ Ibid.

Luke 6:37 says “Judge not, and you shall not be judged. Condemn not, and you shall not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven.”⁶ This is one of the more popular scriptures in the entire Bible and it is often quoted throughout Christian circles. You will hear many people say the words, “Don’t judge me” or “you have no heaven or hell to put me in”. These phrases are both derivations from Luke 6:37 however while many people do not want to be judged but forgiven, the refuse to do the same for other people, particularly African American men.

Although Luke 6:37 is one of the key verses to understanding the concept of sports evangelism, it is important that the verses immediately before are also incorporated as they too impress upon us to live in love and forgiveness, judgement free. Luke tell us that the following must be a way of life and not merely lip service for those that profess a love of the Lord and want to do his will.

But I say to you who hear: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, and pray for those who spitefully use you. To him who strikes you on the *one* cheek, offer the other also. And from him who takes away your cloak, do not withhold *your* tunic either. Give to everyone who asks of you. And from him who takes away your goods do not ask *them* back. And just as you want men to do to you, you also do to them likewise. But if you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. And if you lend *to those* from whom you hope to receive back, what credit is that to you? For even sinners lend to sinners to receive as much back. But love your enemies, do good, and lend, hoping for nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High. For He is kind to the unthankful and evil. Therefore be merciful, just as your Father also is merciful.⁷

⁶ Luke 6:37 (NIV).

⁷ Luke 6:27-36 (NIV).

Those words seem to flow seamlessly into verse 37 and they give a picture of the direction of sports evangelism.

In the world of sports, I have witnessed Luke 6:27 at work. When I began to work in the world of sports entertainment, namely in professional wrestling, it was interesting for me to sit in a locker room and meet with the men I was going to have to battle in the arena. For a spectator, these men seemed like a bunch of miscreants who said vile things to each other and endeavored to do as much physical harm as they could. These men, some very prominent sports figures, were however much different in reality than their public personae would have suggested. They would give advice, encourage, and more importantly share life with each other. They were not in the locker room judging anyone's journey. Instead, they were forging relationships and offering forgiveness for mistakes made in the wrestling ring and in life. When these men entered the locker room, they opened themselves up to each other on levels that were unthinkable because judgement was gone. There was a spirit of comradery, somewhat like a fraternity, that made the athletes want to continue to return. This sentiment has been said to hold true for all sports, even with spectators.

Some scholars have called Luke's Gospel the Gospel of Christ. Many people involved in social advocacy and ministry turn to this book specifically to see how Christ would handle various situations that arise when working with others. The lack of African American men who have deep and meaningful relationships with Christ is just as critical as any other social advocacy issue and Luke can provide direction here as well. In *The Gospel of Luke: The Scholars Bible*, Richard Pervo explores the particulars of Luke. Pervo says that Luke is an ongoing discussion and "the discussion continues to expound

on love of others".⁸ This love that Luke proclaims and Pervo exalts is exactly the love that needs to be spread to men in the African American community. These men have been judged, not forgiven, for so long that the one thing they yearn for is love.

Why shouldn't we judge each other? Why shouldn't we condemn each other? Why should we forgive each other? The simple and easy answer to that is...Jesus said so! The real world, every day answer is that the world would ideally become a better place. The negative energy that comes with judging and condemning others would go away if we were to focus on becoming a community that is about the love that Christ have shown over and over again. Christ did not judge any of our sins when he went to the cross and died. He did not condemn us to death because of the things we did that we knew were sinful. Instead, Christ loved each of us enough to die for us and to forgive us.

Luke gives us a prime example of who Jesus is and his examples love in Luke 6. People gathered to see Jesus. The people not only wanted to hear what this great man was going to say, but they wanted to touch him. They wanted to be healed of their diseases, afflictions, psychological conditions, and pain. Jesus had authority and this authority in healing helped his authority to teach when the time came and how 'Luke's characterization of Jesus closely connects his roles as healer and teacher.'⁹ Jesus would go on and teach many things from the Beatitudes to loving one another unconditionally to not judging others. It's safe to say that Jesus taught a lot while on the Mount.

"The world can be healed of its cycle of violence only when a community is willing to abandon its claims to retribution, a prerogative reserved exclusively to God."¹⁰

⁸ Richard I. Pervo, *The Gospel of Luke*, p72 (Salem, OR: Polebridge Press, 2014).

⁹David A. Neale, *Luke 1-9: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition* p157, (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 2011).

¹⁰ Ibid.

Many times, we as human beings, tend to think that we can do it all without the help of God. As we will look into later on in this chapter, many of us only look at part of the passage, Philippians 4:13 that states “I can do all things through Christ that strengthens me.” Unfortunately, many people stop after “I can do all things.”

We, as humans, tend to think that we can judge and not think of the consequences of judging another human being. A wise scholar once said that only God has a heaven and hell to put people in, so we shouldn't go around judging people because of their decisions or mistakes they may or may not have made. We are also to remember that we are a half-step away from being in the same situation that we may be so quick to condemn in others.

African American men do not want to come into churches off the street and feel the steely eyes of judgment from people who may or may not want change. When an African American man walks into a house of worship, that man may be hurting spiritually. He may need a spiritual ear to hear him or just someone to make him feel like he is somebody and not judge him by his appearance, odor or lifestyle. At that moment, the man has let go of all pride and is open to have Christ to come into his life.

When these men enter houses of worship, time is of the essence. Unfortunately, this time is often squandered by not only members of churches, but by pastors as well. It may be unintentional, but once some men have been belittled and hurt by churches, or other faith communities, it is hard to get them back. This is why it is imperative that Luke 6:37 is a biblical pillar to this particular sports evangelism project. African American men, from all walks of life, want to feel loved, accepted and forgiven for any past transgressions. It is important to remember the part of verse 37 that says “forgive and you

shall be forgiven.”¹¹ In forgiving each other we do the one thing that God wants us to do that is like Him. In forgiving other people, we practice that unconditional love for each other that have been a running theme for Jesus Christ during his ministry.

Not only in sports evangelism is Luke 6:37 pivotal, but this verse is very important when ministering to African American men in its entirety. It is important to remember that in this particular ministry that the men that are being reached need not be judged for things they have or have not done, by what they wear or who they hang with, or where they live, nor by the color of their skin. It is important to remember that we should not condemn anyone; nor give complete disapproval publicly for anything they may have done in the past. In fact, Romans 8:1, Paul said “[t]here is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit.”¹²

Since there is no condemnation to those who are followers of Jesus Christ, why would we feel that we are good enough to condemn people for whatever reason? This is why we are to forgive each other and anyone that may have done something wrong to us.

The concept of forgiveness is such a pervasive theme in all of Christianity. So much so that Jesus even tells us how often we are to forgive one another in Matthew 18:21-22. “Then Peter came to Him and said, “Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?” Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven.”¹³ This is because one has to take into account how many times we have been forgiven by God in a regular day. This is something that Christ

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Romans 8:1 (NIV).

¹³ Matthew 18:21-22 (NIV).

has commanded us to do towards each other because God has forgiven us of our sins and dishonest deeds time and time again.

Throughout the Gospel of Luke, we have seen example after example of Jesus showing and teaching love, forgiveness and a non-judgmental attitude towards many different people. The problems here are the hypocritical judgment, short-sighted condemnation, and an unforgiving spirit.¹⁴ This is a huge problem in many faith communities and has kept many African-American men from coming through the doors of churches. As Dr. Kunjufu notes, hypocrisy is another one of the main reasons why African-American men don't come to church.¹⁵ Men have stated that they have witnessed the pastor or preacher preach one thing and do the complete opposite. Some have felt that the preacher preaches forgiveness and God's message of not being judgmental, but have witnessed those same preachers do the exact opposite.

Here is the thing: in sports, competitors may act like they hate their opponent in the ring, court, field, cage or wherever they are competing, but at the end of the day they show that non-judgmental love for each other. They may fight it out with all their might in the ring, cage or field and when it's over, it's left right there in the field of competition. They have forgiven each other for any animosity built up to that point. That may not be the case 100% of the time, but this is the kind of love that Jesus wants us to show towards each other.

In the social context of this scripture, we have to remember that Jesus came into contact with a lot of people that Rabbis, Pharisees and Sadducees would condemn. Worse

¹⁴ E. Ray Clendenen and Jeremy Royal Howard, *Holman Illustrated Bible Commentary*, p 1097, (Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing Group, 2015).

¹⁵ Jawanza Kunjufu, *Adam! Where Are You?*

yet, they would condemn Jesus for associating himself with these people. Jesus would often find himself with tax collectors, prostitutes, men who were deemed to be problematic troublemakers and men who would later betray him yet, not one time did Jesus judge them. Further, the men and women that came to Jesus wanting to be healed, wanting their sons and daughters to be healed or to have demonic spirits casted out of them were never judged either. Not only would Jesus tell them that their faith made them whole, but he would say that their sins had been forgiven. Even at the end of his life on earth, Jesus found the wherewithal to forgive one of the thieves he was between during crucifixion. In Luke 23:43 he would say to the thief, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.”¹⁶

Jesus has always been the perfect model for us to shape our lives after. He displayed wisdom that is still beyond our understanding today. Jesus also was not afraid to show his human side. Being the Son of God did not make him act like he was better than anyone. He showed compassion by not judging and not condemning, but by forgiving. One of the first steps in evangelizing to any person is to first rid ourselves of the notion of judging anyone and to practice, not preach, forgiveness. When sports is added to this scripture, and love flows, the only logical next step is to help your fellow brothers and sisters.

Helping Your Fellow Brother & Sister (Luke 10: 25-37)

As followers of Christ, one of the things that we tend to forget to do is to help our fellow brothers and sisters in need. There are some of us that will give food and clothes to the needy, homeless and downtrodden. We only do this, however, when the eyes are on

¹⁶ Luke 23:43 (NIV).

us. What happens when nobody is looking? Do we act like we do not see people in need? Do we thumb our noses at them and tell them to pick themselves up by their bootstraps? Or, do we offer them the helping hand they we would want?

One of the most powerful parables that Jesus told is found in Luke 10:25-37 when he tells the story of the Good Samaritan.

And behold, a certain lawyer stood up and tested Him, saying, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" He said to him, "What is written in the law? What is your reading *of it*?" So he answered and said, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind,' and 'your neighbor as yourself.'" And He said to him, "You have answered rightly; do this and you will live." But he, wanting to justify himself, said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" Then Jesus answered and said: "A certain *man* went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among thieves, who stripped him of his clothing, wounded *him*, and departed, leaving *him* half dead. Now by chance a certain priest came down that road. And when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. Likewise a Levite, when he arrived at the place, came and looked, and passed by on the other side. But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed, came where he was. And when he saw him, he had compassion. So he went to *him* and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine; and he set him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. On the next day, when he departed, he took out two denarii, gave *them* to the innkeeper, and said to him, 'Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, when I come again, I will repay you.' So which of these three do you think was neighbor to him who fell among the thieves?" **37** And he said, "He who showed mercy on him." Then Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."¹⁷

In "Luke 9-24: A Commentary in Wesleyan Tradition" David Neale points out that this parable is one of four "example parables" in the Gospel tradition.¹⁸ All four of

¹⁷ Luke 10: 25-37 (NIV).

¹⁸ David A. Neale, *Luke 9-24: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition*, p. 64 (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2013).

this particular type of parable are found only in Luke's interpretation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The other parables are: The Rich man and his Barns (12: 13-21), the Rich Man and Lazarus (16:19-31) and the Pharisee and the tax collector (18:9-14).¹⁹

The most ironic thing about this parable is the reason why Jesus told it. In verse 25 it is clear that Jesus was being tested by a lawyer in the crowd. This person is a detractor who wanted to see if he could catch Jesus unaware. Jesus asked the man if he understood what was written in the law. Jesus knew what was being asked of him and he made the man answer his own question. The lawyer's answer was that good Jews were to love the LORD with all their heart and to love your neighbor. Jesus gave the lawyer an imaginary pat on the back and told him that his answer was well conceived and what the law proscribed. The lawyer, not knowing when to leave well enough alone continued to test Jesus and ask who his neighbor was. Jesus could have ignored this test because the man was merely trying to distract him. However, in his wisdom, Jesus decided to show the lawyer how important helping your neighbor really is.

Jesus tells us of a man that was mugged and left for dead and how two righteous men ignored him. Not only did they ignore him as he lay in the street dying, they even crossed to the other side of the path to avoid him. A lowly Samaritan, a societal outcast, helped the hurt man, cleaned his wounds, put him up in an inn and took care of his bill. Again, read the story and notice it was a Samaritan that helped out this presumably Jewish man. The relationship between the Jews and the Samaritans was not really that great. In fact the Jews and Samaritans despised each other greatly. Yet, here we have a Samaritan helping out his "enemy" without giving a second thought.

¹⁹ Luke 18: 9-14 (NIV).

This is another thing that Sports Evangelism will do for African American men. It will be used as a tool to help regardless of what denomination, fraternity, or gang a person may be affiliated with. There are many ways that sports have been used to help people in various communities. There have been sporting events all around the world that have been put on to help raise money for various charities. Professional wrestling promotions on the independent scene have put on wrestling shows to help people locally as well. When sports organizations host charitable events, they are not concerned about who receives the money they raise; they just want to help a worthy cause.

In order to help someone, one has to get over being judgmental, building on Luke 6:37 that we have already discussed. We cannot really be helpful to someone if we are being judgmental and condemning them; unwilling to forgive them. This parable is the perfect lesson in how we are to treat each other regardless of race, gender or sexual orientation. We are to treat each other with the love of Christ.

One major question asked by the lawyer was how to inherit eternal life. The lawyer was not asking what do we all have to do to inherit eternal life, but he was asking for himself. He did not have a concern about his brothers or sisters. He wanted to secure his own future, if that was possible. The lawyer was, as modern colloquialisms would characterize it, hedging his bets. The notion of eternal life is not something that we see at all in the Old Testament, the theological base for the lawyer, so there is some indication that he was trying to make Jesus look like a fool.

Of course, Jesus has the lawyer answer his own question and then tells him about the Samaritan. This is how the church is supposed to be with everyone. There should not be one hungry, homeless or hurting person in this world because we are commended to

love, and help our neighbors. Unfortunately, not all churches have adopted this mode of thinking. In terms of African American men and their experience in the church, they do not feel that the church would help them without judging them and condemning them for past mistakes and decisions.

It is my hope and belief that with Sports Evangelism, sports is going to be the catalyst to help African American men come to Christ, feel like they belong in the body of Christ as well as to feel that they are not being judged. They should receive God's forgiveness in their hearts and minds, for all things and should know that God loves them. The men do not have to be physically beaten and left for dead like the man that was mugged in the "Good Samaritan" story, but for the most part, many African American men have been beaten up for much of their lives. This abuse has been physical, but this group of men has been beaten up on mentally, emotionally and spiritually as well. Men want help and have been raised to go to the church for help. Many have found help is only available for a select few, and when they do go for help, they're treated like third class citizens.

In sports and to an extent, eSports, everyone is on a level playing field. Of course, you have some players who have a higher skill level than others; they may have physical attributes that make them better at running, jumping or other areas necessary for sports. The thing is, after most sporting contests you see participants embrace each other, and when a player has been hurt, competitors from all sides attempt to help and show gestures of thankfulness when a hurt player stands up on his own. In eSports Fighting Game Tournaments, players exchange pleasantries after they win or lose and even ask for tips to make their game better. They have taken the lesson that Jesus was teaching literally. All

of these sports competitors have learned not to cross to the other path to avoid someone who may be in need. Instead, they go to the person who needs help, offering advice, love and support to their opponent.

In the context of sports evangelism as a tool to get African American men more engaged with Jesus Christ, we can say that African American men, in the story of the Good Samaritan, are in the role of the man that was mugged by robbers. The role of the priest and the Levite are being played by the church and a minister. In many instances, the church and the minister will cross the street when they see an African American man that has been attacked by life's circumstances. He is down and out, but here comes the mixture of sports and evangelism. It ministers to the African American man. It mends his spiritual wounds and bandages some of those emotional wounds. It ministers to the man all the while giving him something to make him feel like he is cared for.

At the end of the parable Jesus asked the lawyer who was the neighbor to the injured man and the lawyer answers the only way he can. He states that the Samaritan was the good neighbor. Jesus then commands him to go and do the same. One thing that Jesus teaches several times throughout his short ministry is that we are to do two things: first, that we must love the Lord God Almighty with our mind, might and soul and second, that we must love our neighbors as ourselves. This is not a new thing that Jesus sprang on people as it is found in Deuteronomy 6:5. Jesus was reminding them that God had given them that commandment many years before. The most troubling thing is that Jesus gave us those two commandments during his ministry and in the year 2018, we still have a hard time doing those two commandments.

Imagine what happens when you combine Luke 6:37 and Luke 10:25-37 with the prospect of sport evangelism ministering towards African American men with the mindset of not judging them or condemning them but forgiving them. There is no care as to whether or not they have done anything wrong to you. In addition, to the concept of forgiveness, should be added a willingness to help them no matter what their circumstances or situation may be and with no questions asked. All that matters is the man and his need. This approach to evangelizing to men gives birth to hope.

Hope (Philippians 4:13)

“I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.”²⁰ This scripture has always spoken to me. For as long as I can remember, I have held on to this scripture. When I read it, remember it or recite it, I have hope. I know that I can do anything because of He who lives in me. Not because of myself or anything that I have done but, I am able to accomplish any task because God wants me to be great!

This scripture has been the mantra for many preachers, believers, athletes and even companies, organizations, teams and ministries. Some athletes such as former UFC Light Heavyweight Champion of the World, Jon ‘Bones’ Jones have tattoos saying Philippians 4:13 on their chest right where their hearts are. During his playing days at the University of Florida, Tim Tebow would have Phil. 4:13 on his eye black during games. It can be said that Philippians 4:13 is about as popular as John 3:16²¹ as many people know the scripture by heart and even quote it once someone starts saying the word Philippians. There have been t-shirts, keychains, coffee mugs and countless other things

²⁰ Philippians 4:13 (NIV)..

²¹ John 3:16 (NIV).

manufactured with this scripture on it. The question about this scripture is ‘Why is it so popular in so many walks of life?’

The easy, and probably the most widely given, answer to this question about this scripture is because it gives the reader hope. Hope is a major thing in the life of an African American male. Without hope, a man will feel useless. If a man feels useless, a downward spiral of things can occur. As Jonathan Merritt mentions in his article, *Philippins 4:13: How many Christians misuse the iconic verse*, “Philippians 4:13 functions as a kind of mystical incantation for many Christians. They recite the passage when they need to draw power from another place to defeat an enemy or conquer a difficult task. It’s a talisman like Green Lantern’s ring or He-Man’s sword.”²²

In his article, Merritt goes on to say that we need to take into account verses 11 and 12 as well as the fact that the letter to the Philippian church was indeed a “prison epistle” as Paul was in prison while he was writing this. In fact some would say that when Paul penned this famous scripture it was to say that with God he could survive through the tough times he was having while in prison. This is what I gathered from the scripture. No matter the situation or circumstance, survival will happen because God will give strength.

Many other biblical scholars such as Dr. Eric Bargerhuff have called Philippians 4:13 one of the most misused verses in the Bible and in the context of a sports contest it is “not really about who has the strength to play to the best of their abilities in a sporting

²² Jonathan Merritt, "Philippians 4:13: How Many Christians Misuse the Iconic Verse," Religion News Service, January 16, 2014, , accessed February 20, 2018, <https://religionnews.com/2014/01/16/philippians-413-many-christians-misuse-iconic-verse/>.

contest...This verse is about having strength to be content when we are facing those moments in life when physical resources are minimal.”²³

I tend to agree with this line of thinking. I do feel that this scripture offers hope in spite of how Dr. Bargerhuff and Jonathan Merritt feel about the scripture. This scripture has given many people the strength to carry on and to make it to the next day when it seems bleak for them. To an African American man that looks to video games or a game of basketball to get them through to the next day, Philippians 4:13 does the same for believers and helps them get through the day. It is about finding hope and holding on to that thing that gives you hope and meaning in life.

To many African American males, their hope does not lie in the church. Their hope may not lie in a job that they feel trapped in with no way of elevating themselves. It may be on that football field or basketball court or video game room. Philippians 4:13 is not popular because it is easy to remember among athletes. It is popular because it gives the most hope to an athlete and in the right context, it can be used as a hope builder in the African American community.

Sports have been giving hope to dreams of many African American men since the inception of professional sports. Although the chances of making it to the professional level are very slim, it is the hope to get there that drives many men. Some men even use sports to help fund their education, as they may not be able to afford a good education otherwise. Some young men have used eSports as a way to make friends and make a decent living while doing it.

²³ Eric J. Bargerhuff, *The Most Misused Verses in the Bible: Surprising Ways Gods Word Is Misunderstood* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 2012).

Sports Evangelism, in my humble opinion, must include a component in it that gives the people being ministered to a sense of hope. Without that, there is no point in calling it a ministry. In a recent article, Monty Waldron says that this scripture is more powerful than what many athletes believe. Yet, if one reads his article, he sounds almost like Merritt and Hagerbuff. He starts off by saying how “Paul’s words are handled almost superstitiously – a spiritual rabbit’s foot – inscribed on skin or apparel with hopes of Divine favor.”²⁴ Walton goes on to say that when you look at verses 11 and 12 you see that Paul’s intent is not about achievement, but contentment. To be content with what God has given you. He even goes on to say what Paul may have written if he intended this particular verse to go towards athletes. “After training my guts out and giving my all on game day, I can live with the results. Regardless of what’s at stake, I can play by the rules. Win or lose. I can genuinely treat coaches, officials and fellow competitors with love and respect. I can express gratitude regardless of the outcome – all because of the strength I possess as a follower of Christ.”²⁵

Another scholar/author, Markus Bockmuehl joins in by saying that many Christians have taken what Paul said in Philippians 4:13 out of context. He also says that in this context, “I have the strength to do everything refers to the first instance of the apostle’s needs, to God-given contentment in both want and plenty. The power to cope with all circumstances resides in his union with Christ.”²⁶ Even with the thought that this

²⁴Monty Waldron and Oklahoma University, "Why Philippians 4:13 Doesn't Mean What You Think," *Athletes in Action*, accessed February 20, 2018, <https://athletesinaction.org/underreview/why-philipians-4-13-does-not-mean-what-you-think#.Woyr96jwY2w>.

²⁵ Ibid

²⁶ Markus N. A. Bockmuehl, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Philippians*, p. 262 (London: Continuum, 2014).

scripture has been taken out of context for many centuries, hope still resides there. When we use sports as a tool to evangelize to African American men, and to get them to come back to Christ, they have to know that there is hope when one puts all one's burdens and cares in the hands of Jesus Christ.

Luke 6:37, Luke 10:25-37 and Philippians 4:13 are all very different scriptures that tie directly into this type of Sports Evangelism, each building on the previous scripture. As commanded by Jesus in Luke 6:37, we must become less judgmental and condemning and we must be willing to help our fellow brother or sister in the context of this project, our African American brothers who may need our help but are willing to help out and not be like the priest and Pharisee and move to the other side of the street. We do not want to be like the lawyer who tried to test Jesus and only thought about himself in Luke 10:25-37. We want to offer any kind of hope that we can offer to anybody as Philippians 4:13 offers to many believers and athletes in the world today.

Again, as Scott Conner has pointed out, it is important to start with scripture and let God set the parameters of any new ministry/evangelism program. That is the case with this particular sports program. It will have the biblical standing that God demands and will be about serving his people while giving all the glory to God. It will reach out to those African American men who may have felt burned by the church, and it will invite them to come back to him and to become a bigger part in the body of Christ, which is bigger than any church in the world.

Chapter Three

“Fight!”

When I first contemplated, and then got admitted to, the Doctorate in Ministry program at Drew University, I would often ask myself what I was going to focus on. What would my project be? Was I going to be able to do something worthwhile that would be able to bring people to Christ? I knew it would have to do something with ministry but did not know where to go. Even though I have a sports background, I am a huge sports fanatic and have a love of sports, I knew I also had a love for disenfranchised people. I was advised by my former pastor, Reverend Robert Jackson, to stop thinking and God will place my project in my heart. God would show me what to do my project on. Within hours God revealed to me that I need to pursue ministry in a sports setting and that this should be the focus of this project.

Through this process, I would work, think and read articles on how to make this project make sense within this context. I initially thought that this project would just be sports focused and then maybe men focused however those ideas seemed too broad. I met with Dr. Lynne Westfield and took a class on Hip-Hop and Youth Activism with Dr. Elias Ortega-Aponte; the ideas began to flow. At this point, I was able to narrow the focus of this project to African American men.

As I would continue to research, read articles and books, watch documentaries, visit, and talk, with different church leaders, I would pray to God for guidance. I am of the sound belief that you can never have too much guidance and advice however I kept feeling in my spirit that I needed to stop looking for guidance because I would find it right when I least expected it. I found it in June of 2017. During this month, the AME

Church in the 1st Episcopal District would have their Planning Meeting in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, the birthplace of African Methodism. It was during this meeting that Bishop Gregory G.M. Ingram, Presiding Prelate of the 1st Episcopal District of the AME Church, unveiled his plan to 'Do A New Thing'. He used Isaiah 43:19 as his scripture reference which says "See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland."¹

It was at that moment when God said to me that he is going to do a new thing, not just for me, but for my ministry in sports. Many times sports has been used to retain people in the body of Christ, but how many times has it been used to invite people into the body of Christ? And how many of the people being invited or evangelized to are African American men between the ages 18 to 45? African American men have been excluded when conversations of evangelism occur in many African American churches, in various denominations. There are always talks about getting children into the church, and with good reason. The children ARE the future of the church. Also, in many churches, you will see that for every five women attending worship service there is only one man. Even in the ordination process that I am currently in there has been a serious decline of men. At the time of this writing, there are only three men in the process for Itinerant Elder in the New Jersey Conference of the AME Church, including myself.

The one thing that many African-American men have noticed about going through the ordination process is not the length of time it takes to be a fully ordained elder in the AME Church, nor is it the fact that in order to become an ordained deacon/elder on the Itinerant track you would have to graduate from an accredited

¹ Isaiah 43:19 (NIV).

seminary. No, the one thing that actually has turned away some African American men from ministry is the lack of support for African American men. The number of women compared to men in the ordination process is nearly 10 to 1. There are organizations geared specifically to women in ministry but the same type of parallel program is not available to men.

There are organizations all around the country that are sports ministries. Some are even sports leagues, but what do they do to reach out, or evangelize, to the person that is not a part of their church or church organization and invite them to be a part of the Body of Christ. Most organizations are geared to athletes that are already in organized sports either through their school, church (leagues) or even in the professional level. Not to be mistaken, organizations such as Athletes in Action (AIA) and Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA) are wonderful and do great work and ministries towards many athletes, with many of the participants being student-athletes with branches in high schools and college campuses around the country.

The mission statement for Athletes in Action, according to their website, is “to build spiritual movements everywhere through the platform of sports so that everyone knows someone who truly follows Jesus.”² The mission statement for the FCA is “to present to coaches and athletes, and all whom they influence, the challenge and adventure of receiving Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, serving Him in their relationships and in the fellowship of the church.”³ These statements are wonderful examples of using sports to minister to those who may already be in the communion with their fellow Christians and

² "GoAIA - GoAIA," AIA, , accessed February 28, 2018, <https://goaia.org/>.

³ "Vision & Mission," Fellowship of Christian Athletes, , accessed February 28, 2018, <http://www.fca.org/aboutus/who-we-are/vision-mission>.

play a sport. What happens to men who are not in communion, do not play a sport, or both? Also, where is the focus on African American men?

To me, an African American man, it is a problem that we are being murdered by police, are outcasts of society, are considered uneducated and yet there are no evangelism programs strictly geared towards us. Are African-American men a second thought when it comes to being evangelized to by the church? Are African-American men excluded from the Great Commission in Matthew 28:19-20a where Jesus command that his followers “[g]o 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, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you.”⁴

I am sure Jesus did not mean to exclude African American men, but that is really how it feels. Consider how it must feel for a man who does not know Christ and I am an ordained African American man in the first African American Christian denomination in the United States and I feel disconnected at times. How must they feel? That was just the tip of the iceberg when thinking about the availability of services, support and love to African American men.

Reverend Eric Mason said in his book *Manhood Restored*, says that “[t]he Bible both generally and specifically recognizes the fact that discipleship of different genders and ages will look differently. That is why these differences need to be taken into careful consideration as we build structures around the way each is executed.”⁵ The way men and women, boys and girls are evangelized to has to be different. Not only along the lines of a

⁴ Matthew 28:19-20a (NIV).

⁵ Eric Mason, Matt Chandler, and Tony Evans, *Manhood Restored: How the Gospel Makes Men Whole*, p.185 (Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing Group, 2013).

person's sex, but the way you evangelize to different races and ethnicities has to be carefully considered and thought.

One of the best way to evangelize to a group of people is to have them in a fellowship setting in which everyone is comfortable and therefore open to what is happening around them, as well as, to what is being said to them. With many African American men, that setting is a sports setting. In thinking about how to gather men together to talk about these issues, I had to come up with various ways to get information to see just how accepting African American men would be towards Sports Evangelism.

Gathering Data

What many thought would be a fairly easy process and project turned out to be harder than I could have ever imagines. One of the first things I wanted to do was observe various sports programs that were attached to churches. There are hundreds of churches in the United States that have a thriving sports ministry, but as I said earlier, there is a difference between ministry and evangelism.

One of the first things I did was that I contacted several churches to go and visit and observe. Victory Church in Rochester, New York, is a thriving congregation that has a strong mixed martial arts program named Victory Mixed Martial Arts. Victory Church opens each training session with a devotion and quick Bible lesson on how they can apply what they are learning biblically to their training, as well as, everyday life. I also reached out to other churches with a strong Men's Ministry program and other sports ministry programs. Many churches were skeptical about this project. Some programs thought this project was critical of their programs when on the contrary, I merely wanted to learn what their process was.

As another means of research, I wanted to experience a video game tournament/event. I attended a video game tournament in Fairfield, New Jersey. It was an experience that taught me more about myself and showed me what true fellowship and unity is. The community was very welcoming and I am excited about the possibilities that now exist in that area.

To continue my mission to understand the concept of sports evangelism, I reached out to a few ministers that were willing to sit down and discuss with me how sports can be used as a tool to evangelize to African American men. These ministers are former football players, professional wrestling fans and even pastor that is nearing retirement. Reverend A is a former football player and now pastors a church in Northern New Jersey. Reverend Montague is an Associate Pastor in Maryland who loves bowling and professional wrestling and feels that good sermons can be taught in wrestling matches. Then there is Reverend Jay. She is a prominent female pastor in Washington, DC, who is known for speaking her mind and doing it with love. She is also known as the pastor that will “keep it real” with her congregants and the community.

One other way I went about gathering data was to take a page out of Dr. Kunjufu’s book when he said that he would go to various places during church services to see what those men would be doing at that time. With the permission of my pastor, I took a couple of random Sundays and walked around the area (a five-block radius) where the church I serve, Israel Memorial AME Church. Israel is in the Central Ward of Newark, New Jersey, and it is an area that is on the rise via gentrification, but at the same time there are a lot of men and families suffering from being unemployed or priced out of the rental market or just plain not having any kind of hope.

Israel Memorial is not the only church in that five-block radius. Within that radius is St. James AME Church, Metropolitan Baptist, St. Luke AME Church, Newark Abbey Church, Union Gospel Tabernacle, and Christ Church-Newark. That is seven churches...in a five block radius! All are located in a predominantly African-American neighborhood yet I still came across dozens of men walking around and, some at a basketball court down the block from these great houses of worship. These men, however, are not members of any of these churches. In fact, they may not even know that membership is an option for them.

I also held an online focus group via a survey and Discord discussions that asked questions to the participants surrounding their involvement in church, if they grew up in church and what they think about sports being used to evangelize and minister to them. This was exhausting, yet fun and satisfying, as I got a wide array of African-American men from all walks of life to do this focus group/survey.

The answers I got from all of the men and ministers that I encountered floored me. I was able to have wonderful conversations, spirited debates, gained major insight, and now understand that sports evangelism was not just some creation of my warped brain. Sports evangelism is real, it is viable and it is the future of evangelism for African American men.

Church and Ministers

As I stated earlier in this chapter, I reached out to various churches that said that they had a sports ministry program on their site or I have met a product of their ministry. I also got a few ministers that were willing to sit down and talk about their views of the church using sports as a new tool to evangelize to African American men. It was

important to get the view of a female minister as well and I was blessed to get in touch with a couple of great female pastors and have talked to them at length about sports evangelism and the role it would play in getting African American men to come (and in some cases come back) to Christ.

When I started this project, the first church I reached out to was Victory Church in Rochester, New York. I first heard of this church while watching the documentary entitled *Fight Church* that was produced by Eben Kostbar and Joseph McKelheer and directed by Bryan Storkel and Daniel Junge. The documentary, released in 2014, follows various churches and ministers around the country that use mixed martial arts as a way to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ.

One officer of Victory Church stated that the MMA program has been very successful of having people to come in and join the church and to give their lives to Christ. It was great to hear that. When I asked him the percentage of men, as compared to the total population of the city, joining the program, and subsequently the church, to those of women and children because their program trains all who come, he told me 5%. That number was quite surprising, but then he said that of that 5%, one person is a minority that is not African-American. At first, I was not too shocked by that number. Then I took at the population number of the city. According to the site, suburbanstats.org the White and African American population are nearly equal with Whites comprising of 43% of the population with 91,951 residents and African Americans comprise of 41% of

the population with 87,897 residents.⁶ Of those 87,897 African-American residents only 40,880 are males per the 2017 census data.⁷

It is important to point out that Victory Church is not a “white” church. The congregation is very diverse, pretty much like the City of Rochester. I did ask how did they get word out about Victory MMA and I was pointed to their website which, for the most part, is out of date. One of the instructors stated that the people have to want to come to the ministry. A point I disagreed with; I believe that people need to know, and be invited to, a ministry. People just do not materialize because we start a program. People come to a place that wants them to come.

In getting the views of several other pastors and ministers, I asked them all the same questions but got various answers. One of the more important questions, in my opinion, is what biblical principles can be taught through sports? Reverend A said that forgiveness, reconciliation, love and compassion can be taught. He gave the example of how on the football field, it is the players’ jobs to hurt other people, same as in mixed martial arts and boxing. But soon as the game or match is over, the opponents embrace, laugh and in some cases make plans to go and fellowship together. He went on to say that by creating watch parties at different times outside of Sunday and have sports themed services is a great idea on getting African American men to come and fellowship with each other.

Another minister, who you’ll hear of more in the focus group study portion named Montague, said that along with forgiveness that Reverend A said, sports teaches that

⁶ <https://suburbanstats.org/population/new-york/how-many-people-live-in-rochester/> Accessed 03.05.2018

⁷ Ibid.

competition is not a bad thing, and submission. I asked him to elaborate on the submission point. The minister, Montague, said that in organized sports a player is taught by a coach. If that player wants to get better and eventually play in a game, they would have to yield their thinking and submit to what the coach is teaching them. He would go on to say how if we learn how to submit to coaches that have the best the players' best interest at heart, it won't be too hard to submit to Christ as that is who we truly should be submitting to.

Reverend Jay stated that African-American men want to feel loved and nurtured and that the black church have placed so much emphasis on children and women that African-American men have been left out in the cold spiritually, mentally and physically. "A lot of that has to do with the culture. Men are supposed to be hard and be the strong one. Plus, the church is not as strong today as it was during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960's. The church is a shell of itself today, and men in this area see the church as a place where weak people go."

Is this true? Has the church become a shell of itself and stopped ministering for all people and just focused on women and children? What can be done to improve man's view of the church? The pastor in Northern New Jersey said that his church began showing a series on manhood and having open discussions which dealt with the perceptions men have about the church. He notes that in order to get the men to open up and be truthful that one need to let them know up front that they won't be judged because of their thoughts and views and words.

When I talked to my father in ministry, who now pastors in Connecticut and also sits on the Board of Directors for a non-profit organization named Hoops 4 All, he said

that many men also suffer from church hurt. That raised the question: What is Church Hurt, and could a sports evangelistic program help alleviate that in men? Montague said that church hurt is when a person in church had an incident that have a negative effect on a person. He said that a good sports evangelism program can help reconnect the man back with another to spur in good work and forgiveness of past pains. Rev. A said that church hurt “is the pain people have experienced by church folk who are stuck in tradition and not guided by grace.” He would go on and say that sports evangelism can definitely alleviate church hurt as it can present a different paradigm of the church to the community and to African American men of the community.

Reverend Jay says that church hurt, for the most part, is an excuse people use when they don’t want to resolve the issues they have with their church or denomination. “Jesus had issues with how people was doing things in the temple and he showed them how He felt by flipping the tables over. There are always going to be issues in the church, but you can’t let those issues keep you down. If that was the case, Richard Allen and Absalom Jones would have walked out of Old St. George’s and kept walking away from Christ. Can sports help alleviate church hurt? Yes. Anything that can bring souls to Christ is a good thing. We, as a church, have to stop being so stuck on tradition that we miss out on new things and new ways to get God’s people to him. I don’t want to have to stand before God and have to answer the question: What have you done with my people?”

These ministers all agreed that something new must happen to reach African-American men in order to evangelize to them. First we must be earnest in reaching out to evangelize to them and use new tactics and tools. Sports is not new in ministry, but new as a tool or method of evangelizing to men that are not in the body of Christ.

East Coast Throwdown 2017

ECT is a video game tournament that happens yearly in the Metro New York/New Jersey area that showcases the best players from around the globe in various fighting games such as Street Fighter V, Injustice 2: Gods Among Us, Guilty Gear Revelator XRD 2, Tekken 7, Super Smash Brothers 4. The event helps pro players obtain points that goes toward their qualifying for the world championship tournament for those that play Street Fighter V on the CPT or Tekken on the Tekken World Tour and Burst League for Guilty Gear and Dragon Ball FighterZ.

I was invited by one of the young men I mentor at my church to attend the two-day event that started on October 7th. I was excited about the event, but did not know how it would open my eyes and make changes in my heart, and plans.

One of the first things I did after registration was get introduced to the TO. The TO explained to me that the FGC is just a small fraction of the gaming community, but events like this allow all kind of people to come and have fun. I admit that I did have fun at the two-day event. The first day, I went as a spectator and observed how much love everyone showed towards each other. There were black people, white people, Latinos, Asians, gay, straight, bisexuals, even a few transgender people. The amazing thing to witness was that everyone respected each other and showed love to each other.

The second day of the event fell on the first Sunday of October. I wore my collar because I helped with communion at my church and went straight to the event at the Crowne Plaza. I did not change clothes as I was seriously scared to miss out on some fighting game action. I was approached by many people who thought it was cool that a

minister would spend a Sunday with them and not judge them at all. I came across the TO again, who goes by the name L.I. Joe, and thanked him for having an event like this to teach a minister how a church is supposed to be and how the early church in Acts was: Loving, non-judgmental, and forgiving...a giant family. These are all the lessons I want to take with me when evangelizing to African American men.

Newark Recreation Park

On an unusually nice day in February, I embarked on a walk around Newark to get to see how many African American men do not attend any church service, especially with so many churches available for them to go to. It is very important to note that many people think that this area of Newark, is very dangerous to just walk up to anyone as someone could have a gun on themselves or they could be drug dealers. I could be caught in the wrong place at the wrong time by police that could be driving by.

I made sure that I did not dress up in a suit nor did I wear my collar. The only area I actually got to that day was the basketball park that is three blocks from Israel Memorial AME and just one block away from Metropolitan Baptist Church. There were three young men there playing basketball and upon walking onto the court they asked if I wanted to run with them.

I have not played basketball in years, but knew that if I wanted to get their trust to answer some questions I had to accept their invitation. We played 3 games of 21. The game 21 is a game in which everyone plays for themselves. First person to score 21 points win. After each basket is made, the person gets to add an extra point to their score by hitting free throws. The player keeps shooting until he/she misses or until another person challenges them by resetting the play to the top of the three-point line.

I did not win any games, but got some good cardio in. As we sat on the bleachers in the park, I simply asked why none of them go to any of the churches around the area.

The answers I got were:

“They’re scared of us.”

“They don’t want us.”

“If we don’t have money, they don’t want anything to do with us.”

“They only want to talk to us when their politic friends come.”

“The church people are mean!”

“The pastor only wants money and don’t care about us”

I sat there and was astonished at some of these answers, but truth be told, I should not have been surprised. I have heard these answers from my own close friends that are not in church. As I sat there saddened by these answers, the one answer that kept ringing in my head was “they don’t want us”. It is bad enough that society has made it seem that nobody wants African American men, but to hear that this is how men genuinely feel about people in churches hurt me to the deepest part of my soul.

I felt like a failure because I did not have it in me to let them know that I care about their souls and care about them having a closer relationship with God. These are the men that are crying out for something new to help them grab on to Jesus Christ and hold on. I did not get as much walking done as I wanted, but I had a good time fellowshiping with a few good young men that have deep feelings about the church and have a love of basketball.

12 Man Discord Focus Group

This part of the project was by far one of the most exhausting things I have done, but it was also one of the most fun and rewarding. This was a group of African-American men that randomly chose to do this focus group and survey via the internet as they heard about the project via Facebook and Twitter. After confirming that they were, in fact, African American, I would send the questionnaire out to them and would sit back and wait for their answers as well as schedule several conversations via email and Discord, the new Skype.

The 12 men agreed to let me use answers they gave as long as I did not use their real names in the publishing of this study. I agreed and they each gave me a name in which I call them throughout this study. Their names are changed, but their locations remain the same. You will find that list of names and locations later in this section.

In all, 11 African American men and 1 black male that lived in the US, but is now residing in The Netherlands, took this survey and participated in the Discord meeting. These men come from all walks of life and have different ideas and values. The ages of the men that participated in the focus/survey group varied from 18 to 54 with 50% of the 12 men total being in that 35-44 age range. That age range, for African-American men, is vital because it is at that point in life that men start to feel that life is starting to wind down for them in a country where many African American men feel they are being hunted down like wild animals.

As I stated earlier, all twelve of these men are from different walks of life. Some know each other, many did not know anyone and some found out that they have common friends and some have similar interests. One thing they all have in common here is that

they all have an earnest feel about how the church have seemingly mistreated African Americans and really want to see that changed.

Now, one of the main reasons as to why age was asked with this group is because the man's age also can lead to their method of thinking. Especially when it comes to church and ministry and life, overall. It can be said that men that are in the age bracket of 18-24 may live a little more haphazard and not think about things such as Christ and ministry. Also, at that point, some may start to feel that they're being phased out of the church due to their age and stereotypes that may or may not be placed on them by the media.

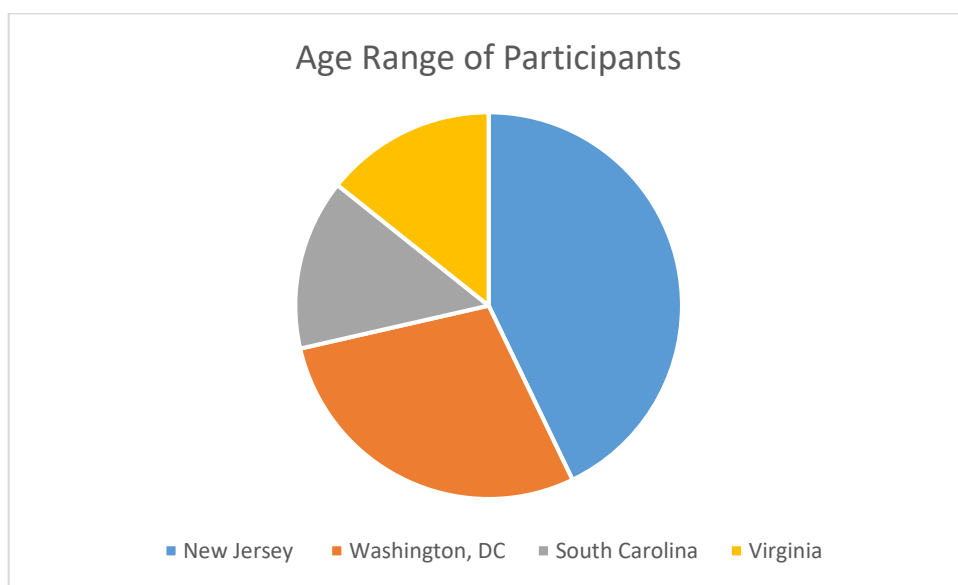


Fig. 1

The residencies of these men varied all over the east coast of the United States as 33% of the men involved in the group are currently living in New Jersey. 16% of the men involved in the group live in the District of Columbia. From there we have one man living in each of the following states: South Carolina, Virginia, Pennsylvania and Maryland. What I found very interesting was the fact that one man identified himself as

an African-American male and lives in the Netherlands. The breakdown of the names of the participants and their current locations is as follows:

From New Jersey: Que, Vondell, Sean and Will

From Washington, DC: Mil and Rich

From South Carolina: Linnie

From Virginia: Dre

From New Hampshire: Ken

From Pennsylvania: Ruckus

From Maryland: Montague

From the Netherlands: Zero

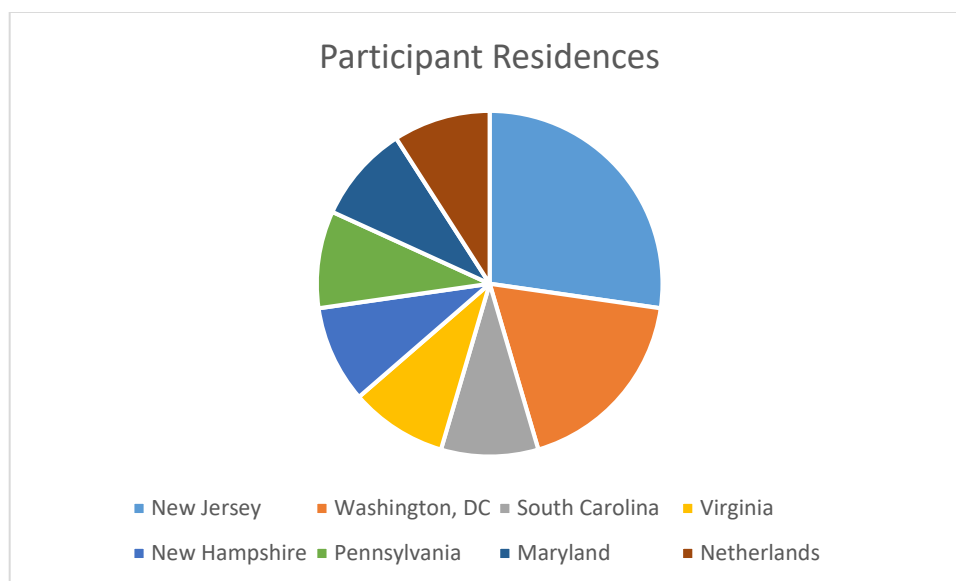


Fig. 2

Although many of these men do live far from each other and many have never met nor heard of some or their colleagues in this group study, it is very safe to say that these men also have overcome the stereotypes that churches and society have placed on them. Although 41.7 percent of the men in the group say they only have a college degree, all of them have been enrolled in college. One participant grew up in a violent

neighborhood and went on to graduate high school and enrolled in the Navy and has made a career out of being in the Navy. 16.7% of these men have earned professional degrees having earned Juris Doctorates (law degrees). One of them actually have become a judge and when sworn in, he was one of the youngest judges ever sworn in the state of South Carolina. Having an education is very important to many African-American men in the country. One of the men in the follow-up Discord session expressed that he got serious about his education when his church ‘turned their backs on me because I became a father before I got married.’

As you can see in the chart below, not all African-American men fit the stereotypes put out by the media and government and to a huge aspect, African American churches as well.

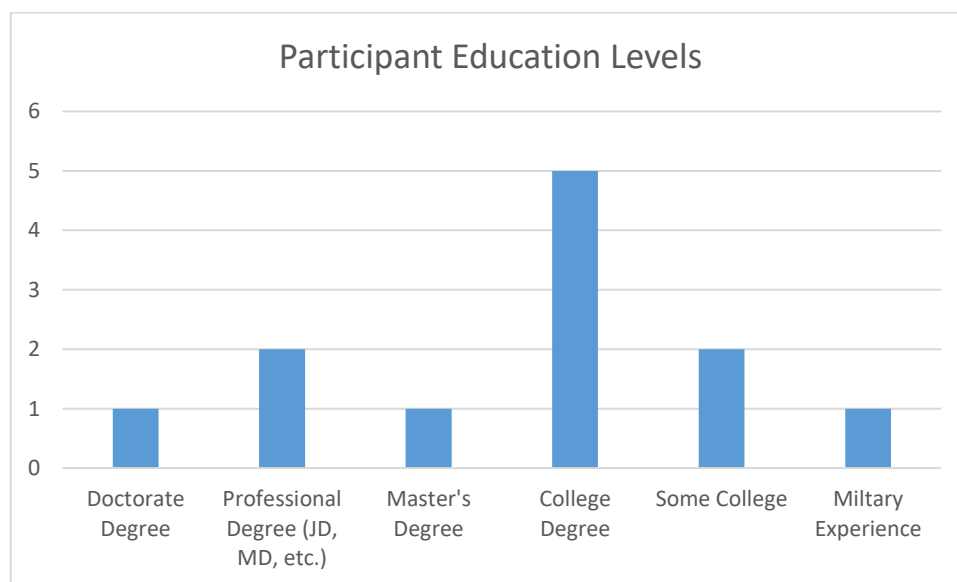


Fig. 3

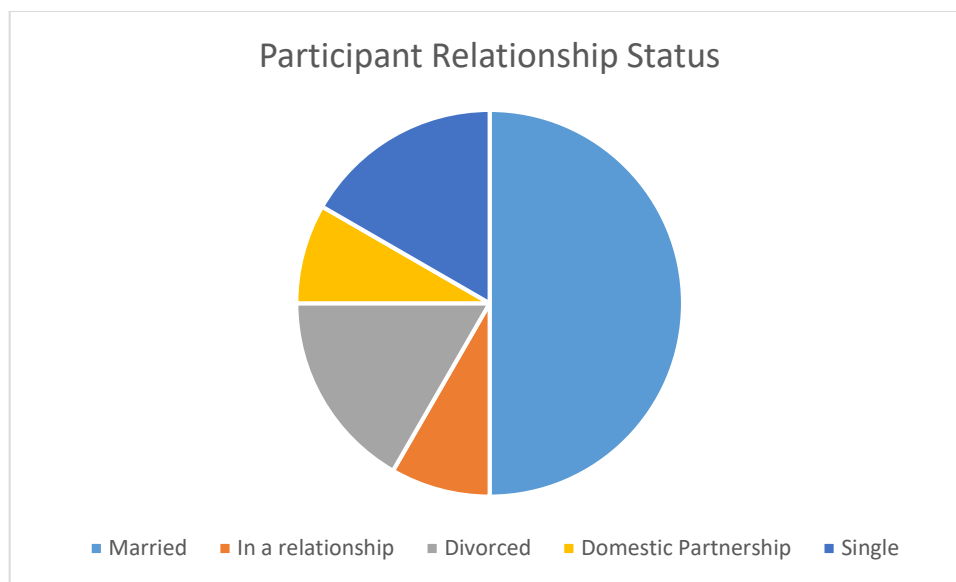


Fig. 4

One of the men in the group recently just graduated from a school in New Jersey with his Doctor of Education and is working in the school system. He was raised in the church as his mother who is a pastor, but he does not attend church services regularly. When asked why he said that in his life he has seen that many preachers/pastors/ministers as well as churches (the members) are quite hypocritical at times.

This started some great dialogue among the men as some started to express their displeasure in the church as of late. Dre, from Virginia, said that he is tired of hearing sermons from preachers all the time and then they go and do the exact opposite of what preachers are preaching against. “I can pull up YouTube and watch TD Jakes or John Gray or Steven Furtick as they have a strong online presence.”

It was at this point I asked “what would it take to get them as African American men to come to Christ?” This was the question that some of the men did not expect as they thought it was the mission to get people to go to church. I explained how it is my goal to get people to Christ and let Jesus lead them where to go as far as church memberships go.

Montague from Maryland stated that he feels that doing a sports evangelism program is probably the best way to get men, especially African American men, to come together on a common area and fellowship together and have fun without being judged. Rich chimed in that is a great idea on paper, but does not know if it would work because he has been judged by the church because of his lifestyle.

From there the talk did go in the direction of gays in the church and in sports. Will from New Jersey, who is also a musician for a prominent gospel singer who is also a pastor, said that the Bible tells us that we are not to judge anyone. What goes on in someone's bedroom is nobody's business but the people in that bedroom and God.

Ruckus, who also served in the Army, said he have no problems with gay men and women, especially in the field of battle, because at the end of the day they are all on the same side and that's how it is in sports and eSports. He mentioned that he is the General Manager of an eSports team and that Zero is one of the owners. He also said that he gave up on organized religion because he feels like the church gave up on him as a young man.

The following charts shows the percentage of men whose parents were active in church and how many of them were active in church as children.

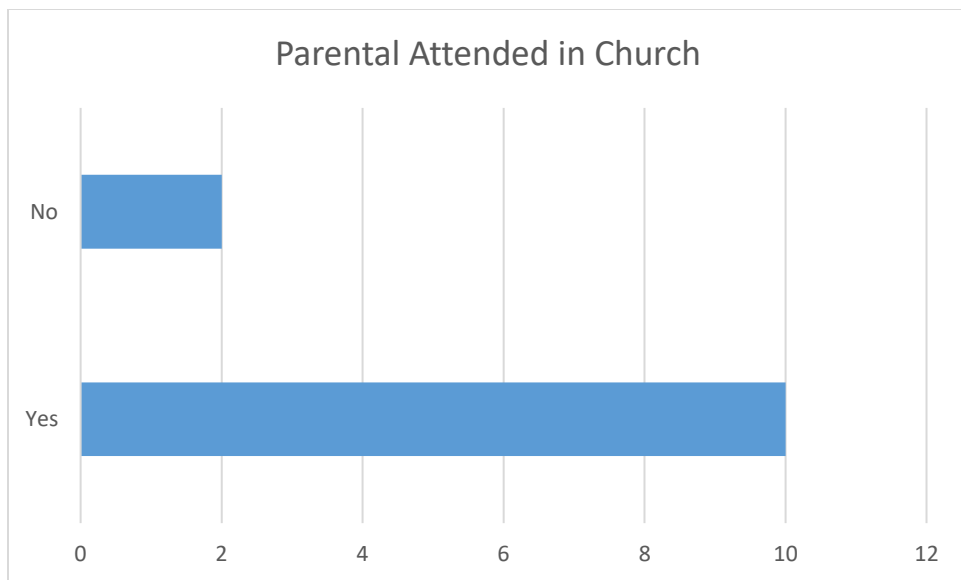


Fig. 5

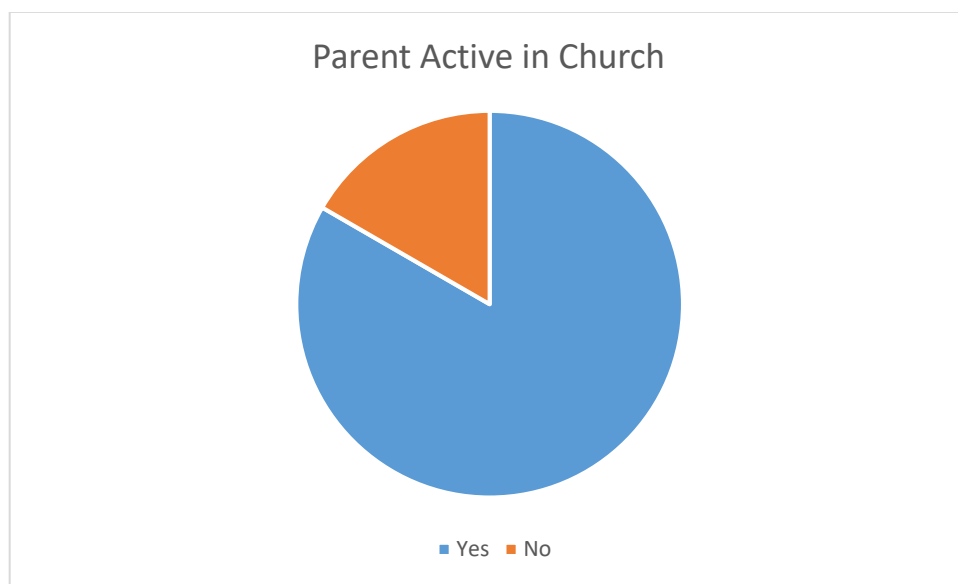


Fig. 6

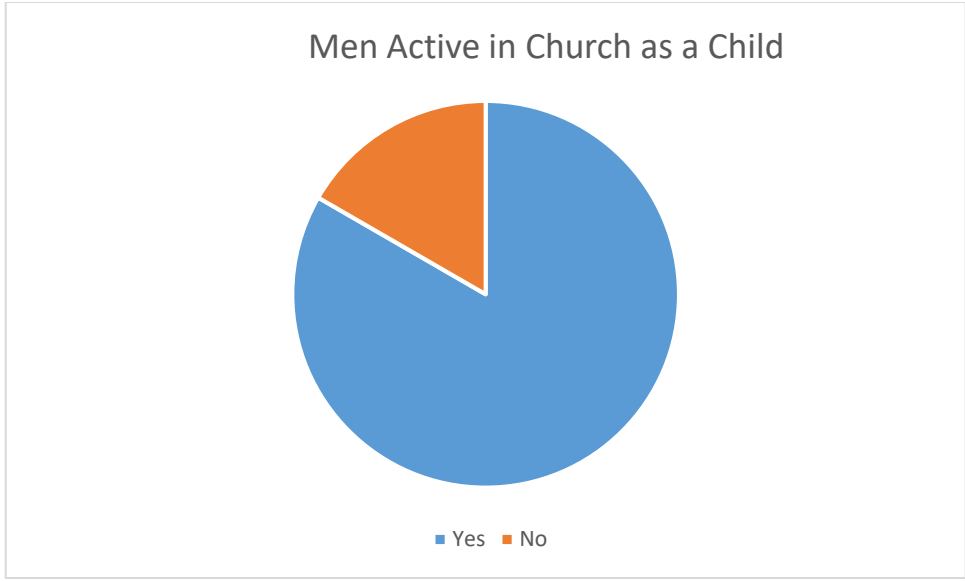


Fig. 7

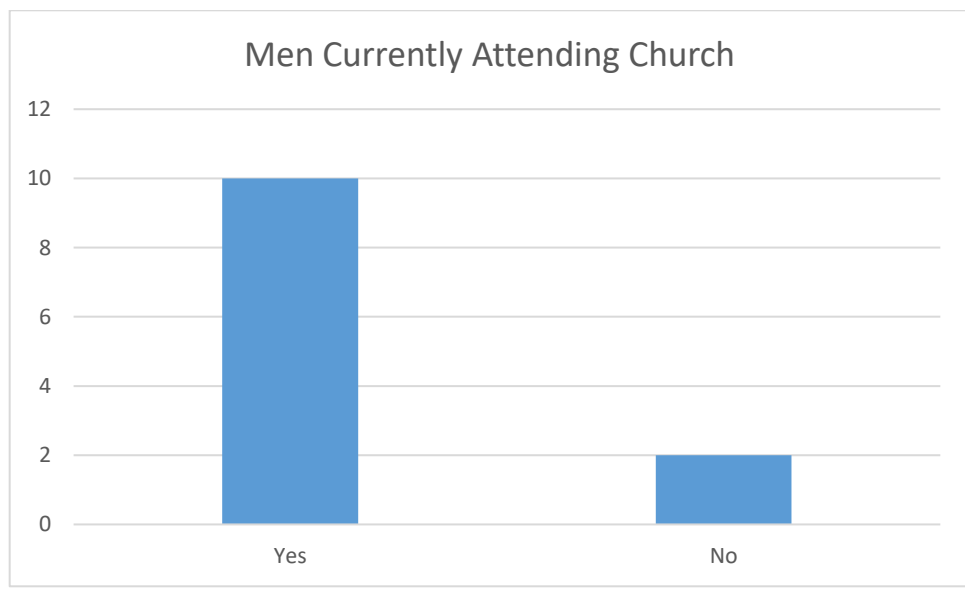


Fig. 8

As you can see, the percentages are the exact same in the two charts about parental activity in the church and the men being active in the church as a child, but when you get to the third chart that asks about whether or not they are active in a church or faith community now as an adult, those numbers are flipped. What happen? How and why did those numbers flip?

Dre from Virginia chimed in again saying that the church doesn't have anything for African American men to do which offended Montague who is also a minister in his church in Maryland. Dre would go on to say that he feels that many churches make it mandatory to pay tithes to be a member of the church and that if you cannot do that, then they do not want anything to do with you. "I do believe that you should train a child up in the church, but at the same time you have to show and lead by example. If all I hear from the preacher's mouth is, 'we need you to give this much money so you can be blessed' I'm going to start questioning how God chooses who He blesses."

Montague stressed that the Bible says that we are to tithe, and Dre agreed that the Bible does say that. Rich said almost without losing a beat, "But does it say that we are to pay for are the flyest car for the pastor? Many so-called pastors uses religion to get over on people and it is sickening. That is another reason why I do not go to church anymore."

I had to remind the men that this is not about getting them to join any church, but to become an active member within the body of Christ. Mil made a statement about why he currently does not attend a church, "I personally do not attend church anymore, because I feel that it has been a crutch for the black community. I would like to clarify that this not an admission that I do not believe in God or religion because I do. I feel that some people take religion too serious, to the point where I don't believe that in order to go to Heaven I have to go to church every Sunday. You would like to think that just living as a good and loving person would be enough. There were even times that I have felt like religion was trying to be forced on me. I do believe that faith and worship can be a powerful tool, but everyone worships differently, and for me it seems that churches don't seem to get that about black men."

Vondell said that this is the first time that he heard of anyone take a genuine interest in African American men getting more active in the body of Christ and wanting to do it through sports. “I have seen sports ministry programs, but they’re always geared towards little children. I just wondered if churches see African American men as a liability instead of family.”

I stressed that it is important to become a part of the body of Christ and to worship God as that is what Jesus commanded. To me, it is a fringe benefit to fellowship with like-minded people, but do not believe that you ‘have to be a member of a certain church’ in order to get into Heaven.

I looked at the answers to the following question in which the chart below will have the answer to: Do you believe that Churches and Faith Communities do an adequate job of reaching out to, and welcoming, African-American men?

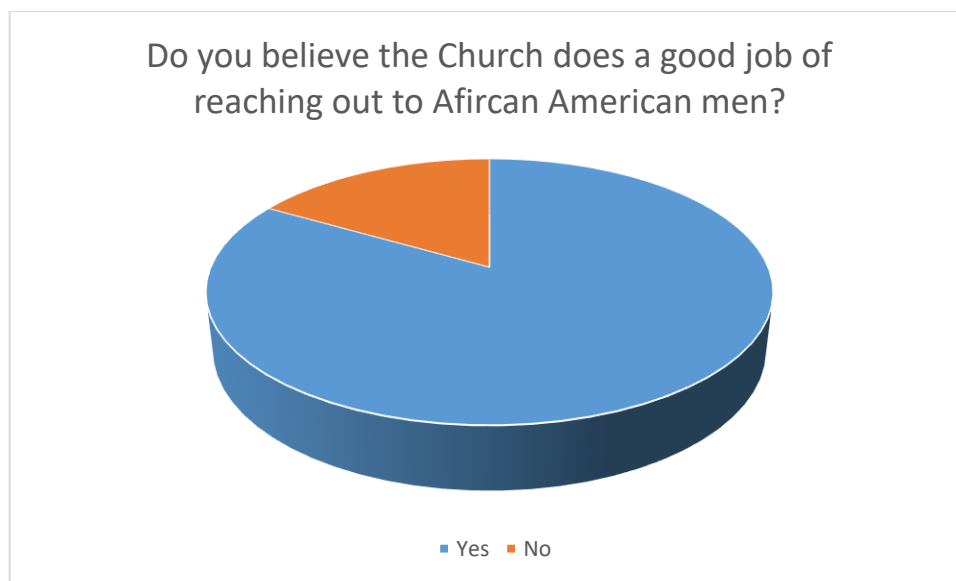


Fig. 9

This was an astonishing answer because I expected the answer to ‘No’ to be higher than the 66.7% that it received. One of the men that said yes was the minister, Montague, who lives in Maryland. He expressed that he leads the Men’s Ministry and

always fellowship with the men in his church and does his best to lead by example for men to look up to him and follow his example as the example he follows is Jesus Christ. Zero said that while he lived in the US for 10 years his church did everything he could think of to reach out to African-American men. Ken stated that there weren't too many African-American men in his area but did feel that churches could do a better job of reaching out to people in any community as a whole.

Linnie stated that with him being in South Carolina, he was surprised by how people in the church changed their views of him when he returned to South Carolina. He stated that he left South Carolina years ago to get his education and got his law degree and not one time did the people from his home church reach out to him or ask how he was doing. He said that they thought he was locked up in jail. He went back to SC after passing the South Carolina Bar and the people at his home church started coming up to him saying how he needs to do pro bono work for the church because that is where he came from and they always believed in him.

Ken asked what would make a sports evangelism program geared towards African American men different than any other church service. "Well," I started. "This would not be a church service. It would be evangelism through sports. I will be having sports programs and viewings that would invite African American men to come together and fellowship and have fun and be themselves. Too many times during church service we have to 'perform' in order to make people in the church happy. Even ministers. This evangelism is to say: Hey! I love you and care about your soul! I don't care what you did."

I explained that this particular sports evangelism would have 3 biblical pillars: Luke 6:37, Philippians 4:13 and Luke 10: 25-37. Once they heard what I was talking about, most of them articulated that that's the first time that they heard any minister use those 'sayings' in a manner to uplift the men.

Sports can be used to empower men and give them hope. Participants in sports and eSports, for the most part don't judge each other on or off the playing field, court or game. As I stated earlier, in Chapter 2, sports can give hope to its participants. Jesus gives us hope and even though Philippians 4:13 have been taken out of context throughout history, it does give hope. So why not let it continue to be a beacon of hope?

These men grew distant from the church for various reasons. I asked the question again, "If you don't attend any kind of worship service, why don't you?" The answers I got were very thoughtful.

Rich from DC reiterated that he's no longer a Christian and, "I know real history and the places Christianity took things from. I'm more inclined to pursue the spiritual practices of the ancestors."

Ruckus added that he does not attend any worship service because, "I do not feel safe when I go to houses of worship. I feel like everyone is staring at me and judging me. This is really the first time I felt safe to say what I want about religion and feel like nobody is going to judge me."

Hearing these answers made me feel happy that these men that don't know me trust me enough to open up their hearts and minds, but also saddened me because these are bright men. Educated men. Men that have carried around burdens of hurt in their hearts and have witnessed that the church have turned on them for one reason or another.

Zero mentioned that even though he feels the church has done a good job reaching out to African-American men that the church needs to do something more to get men involved that doesn't always have to be about raising money. Vondell chimed in with, "I guess that's the purpose of this group study. Would we be more inclined to be a working member in the body of Christ if there were a sports program that would minister to us and not judge us for loving sports or video games but use those means to enhance our experience in being in the body of Christ."

That was the response I was looking for. I explained that it is possible to love sports and love Christ at the same time. I gave the examples of Benson Henderson who is a former champion in the UFC and a top contender in Bellator Fighting. I also pointed out other people such as Tim Tebow, Steph Curry of the Golden State Warriors, Carson Wentz of the Philadelphia Eagles, the late great Reggie White who was nicknamed "The Minister of Defense" during his playing days with the Philadelphia Eagles, Mark Jackson who was the coach of the Golden State Warriors and is also a pastor.

I reiterated that God has called us all to do things differently. To reach out to our fellow brothers and that I didn't see that in the churches I have been associated with in my lifetime. Like God revealed to us in Isaiah 43:19 (NIV), "See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland." It's time we stop doing things the same old way. It's good to remember where we come from, but if we don't move on from there and do something new, we (the church) will not grow. Not only do we need our children in order to make sure the church have a bright future, but the African American church need its men to grow.

These men want to be loved unconditionally. They want to be felt useful, but many churches have made African American men feel as if they are useless and worthless. These men along with some of the men I met while walking around Newark that cold Sunday in late February 2018 want an experience that is out of the norm and feel that the church will not give that to them.

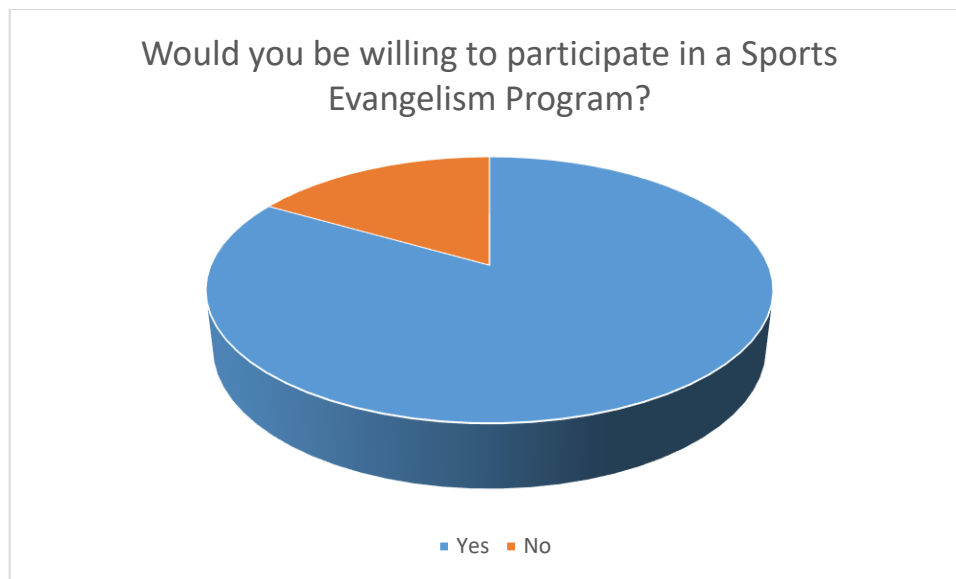


Fig. 10

As the discussion continued, I switched back to sports and evangelism. I asked if there was a church or evangelism program that is sports/eSports based would any of the attend or even participate in the program. As you will see in the chart above named *Men Willing To Participate in a Sports Evangelism/Ministry Program*, the resounding answer is 'yes'. The two men that said 'no' explained why they said no. Ruckus said no because of where he lives, he doesn't see that happening with the churches in his area. He added that if something like that happened his area in Philadelphia, he would attend regularly and probably bring his family soon as he feels safe.

Rich, on the other hand, stood firmly on his belief and feelings against Christianity and thought I or any of the other guys would be upset. When I told him that I

value his input and reminded him that this was a safe environment and wanted everyone to feel at home on the discussion he was relieved. Rich said that if a program like this began and would mentor to men and little boys, he would volunteer and even refer people if they are in the area.

The men then told me various sports they want to see this happen. I sat confused as I thought to myself this went from being a study of how African American men could be evangelized to through participating and attending sports and eSports events to starting to plan a sports evangelizing organization. The question went from ‘Would African American men participate in a Sports Evangelism program?’ to ‘What sports should be thought about in forming a sports evangelism program?’

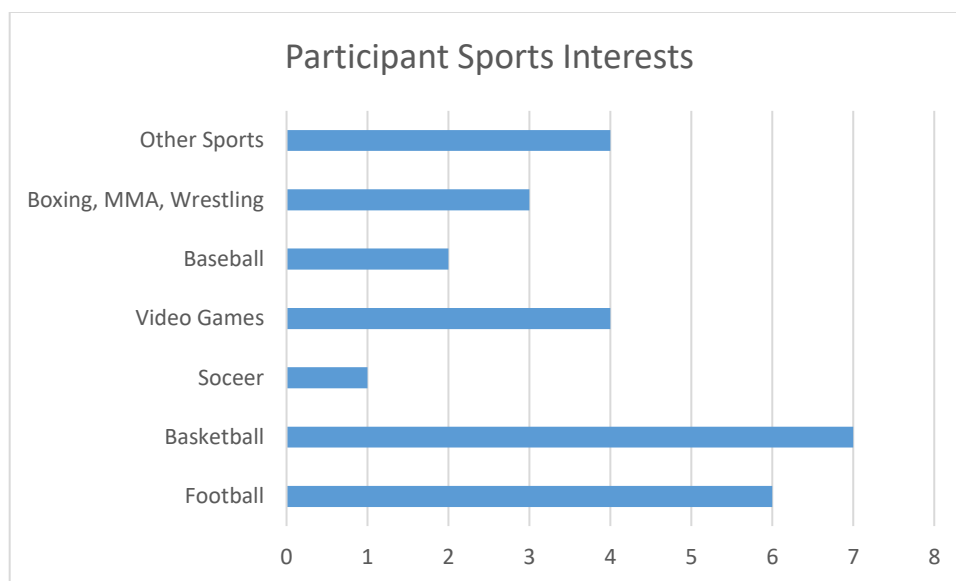


Fig. 11

The participants want to not only attend college and NBA games, but feel that a lot can be learned about Christ through football. Right after basketball, they feel that watch parties in a relaxed setting but have a biblical theme to it would be great with football. Two of the men said that if it was not for football, they may be at church more often. The surprising number of men that wanted video game events was astonishing to

the point where eSports can't be ignored. Video game tournaments in games such as NBA 2K, Madden, Street Fighter V: Arcade Edition (SFV:AE), Guilty Gear and even the new Dragon Ball FighterZ (DBFZ) are new ways to get people to come together and fellowship as I learned while at East Cost Throwdown2017 (ECT). Montague also suggested having some Christian pro wrestling companies come through and hold a few shows and use the ring as a pulpit and then have an altar call after the matches for people who want to give their lives to Christ as seen in the documentary, *Wrestling for Jesus: The Tale of T-Money*.

After two and a half hours talking on Discord the conversation started winding down and I had a slew of information and some new men to call family. I felt that God has led me to the point where it is time to get started on this new thing and target African-American men because for the most part, African-American men feels neglected by the black church. But in the words of World Wrestling Entertainment superstar, Big E (Langston), "It's a new day! Oh! Yes! It is!"

Three ministers, three men playing basketball in a park and 12 men, all who do not know each other at all, gave valid points and all agree that when trying to get men to come to Christ something new has to be done. Something has to be done to make them feel safe and feel loved and not judged. Sports/eSports is a new tool that is prime to evangelize to the African American men of not only urban communities, but the entire United States of America.

Chapter Four

“The Winner and NEW Champion of the World!”

The research, endless reading and daily time spent in the library was a labor of love. I enjoyed all that I learned about the concept of sports ministry, the men that shared in this work, and myself. However, as much fun as this project was, it did not get completed without its fair share of problems. I do know that whenever one tries to do good work, evil will raise its ugly head. In the past few months, I have had severe health and financial challenges. My family has been attacked on several levels and we had to move into a new apartment. Nonetheless, God is doing a great work and I now know, based on the research, that sports evangelism is a powerful tool to bring men to Christ.

After doing this project, I realized that in order for the institution of church to survive, it must be willing to do things differently. Churches may consider holding services on a different days other than Sundays. There definitely needs to be a change in how churches reach out to African American men, not just those in their neighboring communities, but all African American men. The men that are the subject of this research made it very clear. They must be approached with love. The love that Jesus has commanded all of us to have for our fellow brothers and sisters, a love that surpasses all of our understanding.

In the Old Testament there are over 600 commandments that were given the Jewish people by God through Moses. Yet, in the New Testament, Jesus said that there are two commandments. The first is to love the Lord our God with all our heart, mind and

soul. The second is to love our neighbor as ourselves. Upon hearing that, we are to look after and love our neighbor. We can no longer define our neighbors as the people who live next door to us. Our neighbors are everyone we come into contact with. Most churches actually preach this message and some follow it with action. There are, however, instances in which the church preaches this, but does not practice this at all. There are African American men that are hurting spiritually, physically and mentally. These men are looked down on by the church and are judged for past mistakes and decisions. These men are looking for the action that Jesus commended and as people of God, we must be able to show them love.

During this project, I got to encounter some very wise and powerful religious leaders, both male and female. These religious leaders taught me some very powerful lessons. First, I have to do what God has called me to do. There can be no hesitation when God has provided a vision. Sports evangelism, in this context, is a vision from God and a way to bring men to Christ. I must move it forward. Additionally, there is no harm in asking for help. When I began this project I wanted to do it all alone. I thought that I could be an island and God would just send me all that I needed. God did send everything I needed and it came in the form of wisdom from the religious leaders whom I encountered. They helped me flesh out ideas, provided encouragement, and shared stories of their own young ministries. Furthermore, I learned to enjoy the journey and not dwell on mistakes. The religious leaders I met all shared in this message. They told me to enjoy the journey the Lord was taking me on. They also told me that there will be many, many mistakes however those mistakes are about growth. The growth should be

celebrated and the mistake are a lesson. Finally, I learned about my responsibility as a leader in God's church.

While sitting at the feet of the religious leaders, I learned more about the responsibility of being a minister and just how great the weight ministers must bear. I learned that in order to be an effective minister in today's world, I have to be different. There cannot be a business as usual mindset. As a minister, I know that I am already set apart because God has called me to do His work, however, I need to be even more different from what the concept of a minister usually is defined as. Ministers, as I have learned, should follow the model that Jesus set before us. Jesus would always be found spending his time with the outcasts of society. He was told by the elders in his community that he should not be with those people. Jesus understood what his mission is. He would still hang out with people that the world said he shouldn't have hung out with. He was ministering to them in the only way Jesus could. That's a problem many ministers have today. They go by what people think they should or shouldn't do.

There are many pastors and preachers that love tradition, and there is nothing wrong with tradition. In many denominations, traditional services are a thing of beauty. An order of service in a traditional AME worship service is moving and I know God is there. An Episcopalian worship service, especially during Advent, with the chants, bells and hymns, makes it easy to understand why many people love to attend those service. As beautiful as these services are, we live in a time in where tradition may not be able to do what needs to be done. Throughout the Bible, God shows how being different is important. God would do different things, and use the least likely people, in order to save people and teach people. He spoke to Moses through a burning bush, Jonah encountered

God in the belly of a whale, and Ezekiel was led to the valley of dry bones. God even uses different authors to write his word because different writers have the ability to effect different people.

In doing this project, I had to realize, and overcome, being an introvert. I enjoy speaking to people that I know, and I am comfortable with, in small one on one interactions. In the past, I hid behind my wrestling persona, I was a professional wrestler from 2003 to 2005, when I had to speak to people. This research has made me actually speak to people as myself. I had to allow myself to be vulnerable, stop using that as a crutch and be totally genuine when speaking to people. I also realized that I use humor to try to break the uneasiness in new situations. I am learning to incorporate humor into my preaching style and my ministerial interactions. I feel that is what will work for me as I continue to work and develop.

I used to laugh at myself. How was I, the product of two cotton mill workers from South Carolina, becoming an ordained minister and a doctoral student? I was told in high school that I would not make it into college and that if I did get accepted into college, I would not last more than a year. The odds were stacked against me with every turn. Ironically, as I draft this summary of my research, I am finally seeing how God has used different ways to prepare me for a ministry such as this. As a professional wrestler, I experienced love and comrade; I had a place to genuinely be myself. When I began writing comic books, I was scared to begin working in a new industry that I loved but new very little about. I can see God's hand move in being lead to work in sports at ESPN and going to seminary to get a Master's in Divinity. To the natural eye, this was not supposed to happen but God made it so because he has a plan. The culminating event that

God has so knowingly led me to was this doctoral project on sports. My entire life has led me here so that I can, with God's grace, develop a tool to evangelize to African American men. This moment, here and now, is what I have been searching for all my life and now I am able to step into my destiny.

I must admit that there were times during this journey when I just wanted to stop. I was tired. I have been a student for a long time and I just want to go to work and not have to think about any more studying. However, I found inspiration at the movie theater. At the time of this writing, Marvel Studios just released Black Panther. Many people of color feel empowered seeing a super hero on the screen that looks like them and talks like them, and could be them. Black Panther represents, for people of color, a coming out of sorts. No longer are African American characters former convicts, alcoholics, sidekicks. The entire movie was about an advanced African civilization, albeit fictional. They were master warriors and masters of technology and the main hero is a king! Not just any king, but a black king! I was so inspired to finish this project because this is what our neighborhoods can become if we show people a different way to live.

I have taken a look in the ministerial mirror, so to speak, and looked at myself. I have noticed that I have become more passionate and aware of how African American men are treated by the Black church. I also have recognized that my ministry must become laser focused on bringing African American men to Christ. While I do not believe that black churches have turned their backs on African American men, I know there is so much more the church can do to evangelize to this group of people. African American men feel that the church is afraid of them and does not want them; the prevailing perception being that only women and children are welcomed. The future of

the black church is predicated upon African American men becoming a working cog in the body of Christ. I am clear, however, that my ministry is not about bringing men to a particular denomination. This project is entirely focused on encouraging African American men to come, or in some cases come back, to Christ and let Jesus lead them to a denominational church that will nurture and support their growth. This project is also about using sports as a means to provide a safe place where men can worship freely, be themselves and have fun with like-minded men.

As I talked with some of the other men from the focus group, off the record, they all encouraged me to keep going forward and to not let this just be a thought. The group pushed me to take this research far past a writing and make it a reality. They did not encourage me because this is merely a nice idea. They want this to happen, even though very few of them live in New Jersey and will probably not be a part of the initial program. They sincerely believe that African American men need this. Being evangelized to through sports will prove to be very energizing, empowering and inspirational experience for the men who are touched. It can have long term effects on the community as well because men who love Christ will have a different outlook on their families, their neighborhoods and our world.

While concluding my research, I began to meditate on how to carry this project from research to implementation. The biblical principles that are the underlying principles for this ministry will provide the strength for this battle. I know that it is God's will that I am building an evangelism program that will be rooted in love. We will teach about being nonjudgmental and how to forgive. We will show the importance of helping our fellow brother/sister and we will instill hope. Philippians 4:13 has served as an

anchor verse in my life. When I was unable to move, paralyzed by the fear of failure and hurt, I looked to He who made me and knew that I could draw strength from His love and would be able to succeed at ANYTHING! From this thought, the organization, 4:13 Sports Project was born.

4:13 Sports Project will host events that appeal to a wide range of African American men. We will host video game tournaments where men can come and fellowship with other men while being introduced to Jesus in a not so preachy manner. We will also host viewing parties for football, basketball and baseball games while supporting men who choose to stay sober and not submit to the traditional world view of major sporting events. Finally, we will provide a loving supportive environment that will mirror the love Christ has for each of us. The men who engage with 4:13 Sports Project will be able to present themselves as vessels to be filled with Christ, regardless of how broken the vessel may be. We will endeavor to provide a safe space open to all men, regardless of religious affiliation.

Finally, to quote the Declaration of Independence, “[w]e hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness...”¹ Every man is entitled to be happy. They are entitled to life. They are entitled to freedom. In Christ, there is joy that happiness cannot be compared to, there is life eternal, and there is a freedom unimaginable. In order for a new generation of African American men to see take part in these gifts, and for the body of Christ to grow, something new must happen. Sports evangelism is the something new to reach out to

¹ "The Declaration of Independence: Full Text," Ushistory.org, , accessed March 13, 2018, <http://www.ushistory.org/declaration/document/index.html>.

African American men. This is not a fad or fleeting idea. It is what men are yearning for and what our churches need to grow stronger.

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