

**FAITH, ACTIVISM, AND SPORTS:
BLACK ATHLETES OF FAITH ENGAGED IN UNITED STATES
PROFESSIONAL TEAM SPORTS**

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ABSTRACT

FAITH, ACTIVISM, AND SPORTS: BLACK ATHLETES OF FAITH ENGAGED IN UNITED STATES PROFESSIONAL TEAM SPORTS

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This project-thesis reflects upon the ways that the faith of Black athletes influences them to catalyze social change. It begins with a historical contextualization of faith, sports, and activism by peering through the lenses of Black athletes to explore the ways that their faith, sports, and activism have been experienced, shaped, and expressed over the years. Shifting from past to present, one-on-one interviews focus on contemporary Anti-Racist activism.¹ Recommendations are provided concerning what it will take to grow Anti-Racist activism in professional sports to the next level of influence and impact. As a next step, I propose the establishment of a membership network for Black athletes that supports and nurtures their faith-rooted activism.

My hypothesis assumes that the Anti-Racist, socially liberative activism of many Black professional athletes in the United States is animated by a faith that is rooted in

¹ The American Baptist Churches USA Anti-Racism Task Force, <https://www.abc-usa.org/2021/02/the-abcusa-anti-racism-task-force-a-call-to-just-action/> Dr. Kimberle' Crenshaw, leading scholar of critical race theory, defines Anti-Racism as the active dismantling of systems, privileges, and everyday practices that reinforce and normalize the contemporary dimensions of white dominance. Therefore, for the purposes of the Project, I define Anti-Racist Activism as seeking to identify and oppose racialized hatred, bias, systemic racism, white supremacy, and inequitable opportunities.

justice and embraces inclusion and unconditional love. Yet, faith is not a prominent part of their public messaging. I acknowledge that there are many Black athletes whose faith traditions embrace exclusive theologies, engender conditional inclusion, and eschew social justice as politics. In many instances, the beliefs of those in the latter faith traditions have been influenced by conservative, white, patriotic evangelicals.

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Introduction

Sport has the power to change the world. It has the power to inspire. It has the power to unite people in a way that little else does... It speaks to youth in a language they understand. Sport can create hope where once there was only despair. It is more powerful than government in breaking down racial barriers.²

- Nelson Mandela

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My hypothesis assumes that the Anti-Racist, socially liberative activism of many Black professional athletes in the United States is animated by a faith that is rooted in justice and embraces inclusion and unconditional love. Yet, faith is not a prominent part of their public messaging. I acknowledge that there are many Black athletes whose faith traditions embrace exclusive theologies, engender conditional inclusion, and eschew

² Busbee, Jay “Nelson Mandela: Sport has the power to change the world,” Yahoo!Sports, December 5, 2013,

³ The American Baptist Churches USA Anti-Racism Task Force, [https://www.abc-usa.org/2021/02/the-abcusa-anti-racism-task-force-a-call-to-just-action/Dr. Kimberle’ Crenshaw](https://www.abc-usa.org/2021/02/the-abcusa-anti-racism-task-force-a-call-to-just-action/Dr.Kimberle%20Crenshaw), leading scholar of critical race theory, defines Anti-Racism as the active dismantling of systems, privileges, and everyday practices that reinforce and normalize the contemporary dimensions of white dominance. Therefore, for the purposes of the Project, I define Anti-Racist Activism as seeking to identify and oppose racialized hatred, bias, systemic racism, white supremacy, and inequitable opportunities.

social justice as politics. In many instances, the beliefs of those in the latter faith traditions have been influenced by conservative, white, patriotic evangelicals.

In the United States professional sports are more than a series of events; rather, they are a web of phenomena at the core of national life and identity. The current era of the COVID-19 pandemic has brought this into stark focus. For instance, as the spread of COVID-19 was quickly becoming a national epidemic in March of 2020, there was a national negative reaction on campuses, among fan bases, and with national media over the cancellation of March Madness, the National Collegiate Athletic Association's (NCAA) annual college basketball tournament. A number of prominent news stories in the summer and fall of 2020 focused on the widespread desire for college football to begin in August as it would any other year. Advertisers, athletes, administrators and fans all pressured the NCAA's Big Ten Conference to start the football season on September 3, 2020.⁴ The National Basketball Association (NBA) and National Hockey League (NHL) went so far as to create bubbles, which meant that a small number of locations were selected for games to be played, to minimize contact and infection rates during the pandemic.⁵ Even with the growing national public health risks of rising COVID-19 infection rates there was such a strong national outcry from athletes and fans for sports to continue that Major League Baseball (MLB) and National Football League (NFL) games were played without fans for a period of time.

⁴ I am defining college sports as professional because of the amount of income that the major sports generate for colleges and universities, along with the professional-level support they receive from these institutions from apparel to travel.

⁵ ESPN, "Everything that Happened in the NBA Bubble," October 8, 2020, https://www.espn.com/nba/story/_/id/30055011/everything-happened-nba-bubble.

Cities, towns, and schools often show great passion for and loyalty to their teams. The commitment, fervor and emotional freedom when gathering for a team sporting event rivals and even surpasses what is experienced in many of the most ecstatic and charismatic worship services on Easter Sunday. Consider 25,000 to 100,000 fans chanting cheers in unison, the collective joy when one's team scores and anguish when that team is scored upon. In many regions during the weekend of a local college or professional football game, it is not unusual to see staff and patrons of local businesses wearing the jerseys of their favorite teams. When rap and hip-hop music exploded on the scene in the 1970s and '80s, many artists donned the jerseys and caps of their favorite players and teams. The winning of a college or professional championship in a major US sport such as baseball, basketball, football, or hockey will often lead to a hometown parade in the team's honor and an invitation to the White House for a photo opportunity with the President.

In places with championship victories in multiple major league sports, fans take pride in boasting that they are residents of a "city of champions."⁶ They somehow feel that the fortunes of their teams make their lives and locales better. In some cases, fans are so connected to their teams that they see themselves as essential members of the team. Witness their desires to have the home field advantage for games, as well as their lucky rituals. Fans are officially referred to as the "twelfth man" by Texas A&M University and the Seattle Seahawks of the NFL. During the summer and winter Olympics people who

⁶ In Boston: the Red Sox (MLB) have won four World Series since 2004; the Celtics (NBA) won the Championship in 2008; the New England Patriots (NFL) have won six Super Bowls since 2002; and the Bruins (NHL) won the Stanley Cup in 2011. In Pittsburgh: the Panthers (NCAA), Pirates (MLB), and Steelers (NFL) won multiple championships in the 1970s. In San Francisco: the Giants (MLB) won three World Series since 2010; and the Golden State Warriors (NBA) won three Championships since 2015.

are not ordinarily sports enthusiasts suddenly either get engaged or find themselves needing to know if the USA Swimming, Archery, Luge, and Curling teams won medals.

The passion of fans has also led to inappropriate language, behavior and sometimes fisticuffs. This negative behavior not only manifests at adult sporting events, but also at children and youth competitions. Parents can be seen attacking referees at youth basketball, football, and soccer games. Some of these outbursts have caused permanent injury and even loss of life. To mitigate this type of behavior, some franchises have created family-friendly seating sections to afford children and youth safe spaces to attend games. After a favorite team is defeated, a sense of collective sadness can be felt in certain homes and places of work. Conversations recount key moments of the game. The emotions of sports fans rise and fall like the lines on a Vital Signs monitor as they track the fortunes of their teams.

Star performers in professional sports become phenoms who have the power to catalyze cultural trends, promote brands and attain personal popularity that transcends their specific sport. The careers of Black professional athletes Michael Jordan and Serena Williams have catapulted them into the culture-shaping stratosphere. This mantle can be heavy at times. In 1990 and 1996, former Charlotte, North Carolina Democratic Mayor Harvey Gantt (a Black man) ran historic, yet unsuccessful campaigns to unseat then Republican Senator Jesse Helms (white man). Jordan, a North Carolinian, received much public scrutiny for not endorsing Gantt with the now infamous rationale that continues to follow him to this day, “Republicans buy sneakers too.”⁷ Both Senate races drew national

⁷ William Rhoden, *Forty Million Dollar Slaves: The Rise, Fall and Redemption of the Black Athlete*. New York: Three Rivers Press, 2006.

attention because the late Helms had once been a segregationist, and Gantt represented the pathway to new levels of power for Black people in North Carolina. At that time, Jordan was arguably the most popular and influential athlete, and possibly public personality, in the country. Given that Gantt lost his two runs for the United States Senate by relatively small margins, many wonder to this day if an endorsement from Jordan would have tipped the proverbial scales in Gantt's favor.⁸ Williams' dominance on the tennis court has provided a platform to launch her passion for fashion and design. Her fashion-forward tennis uniforms have led the way to more creative integration of design, color, and performance-friendly attire in her sport.

Since their inception, sports have been at the core of American identity and society. This country's deep passion for sports provides the platform for Black athletes to serve as catalysts for social justice and transformation. This project-thesis explores ways to elevate and enhance their impact while strengthening their souls. I believe sports hold the potential to craft and promote new narratives, (re)sign key images, and create greater equity that can lead to meaningful social change. Therefore, this project-thesis argues that America's deep passion for sports, as well as sports' ability to attract fans and followers across the spectrum of race, class and gender may hold a key to building bridges for truly caring, inter-dependent and healthy communities.

In what ways might the experience of bringing together a diverse group of men and women from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds to achieve a common goal have the potential to model a way forward to overcome the polarization of politics and

⁸ Gantt lost the 1990 election with 47% of the vote. In 1996, he received 46%. Sean Gregory, "Here's How Harvey Gantt Feels, 30 years Later, About Michael Jordan Refusing to Back Him," *Time*, May 4, 2010. <https://time.com/5831431/the-last-dance-michael-jordan-harvey-gantt/>.

theologies that amplify the inventions of race, class, and gender as dividing lines? How can the example of individual sacrifice for the collective success of a team show those in the privileged race, class, and gender categories to share their advantages so that all people might have equal access to opportunities? What would society look like if the practicing, breaking bread, fellowshiping, playing, and connecting with teammates and those who support sports franchises across dividing lines were to provide inspiration for our larger society to socialize beyond differences? In what ways can the history of players' collective bargaining to organize themselves and leverage their power to facilitate their ability to move among teams, increase their compensation (salaries, benefits, and retirement), negotiate their contracts, and improve their working conditions serve as an opportunity to juxtapose the structures of sports and society to achieve more equitable opportunities for all? How might we harness sports fans' passion for and commitment to their teams to teach new ways of bridging divides, developing deeper relationships, building stronger communities, and developing trust among those who have been pitted against one another?

Chapter One
Prophetic Fire, Pastoral Imagination and Pastoral Identity

*They have treated the wound of my people carelessly,
saying “peace, peace” when there is no peace.*
Jeremiah 6: 15 (NRSV)

*All who believed were together and had all things in common: they would sell
their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.
Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at
home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having
goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those
who were being saved.*
Acts 2: 44-47 (NRSV)

As a Black, Christian, athlete, fan, and sports dad, I have always practiced my religion and perceived my faith in action while participating in sporting events. Yet, I have not always had the ability to articulate my observances and experiences. The inextricably intertwined elements of spirituality and sports have been so familiar at times that they have been comforting. At other times, my inability to unravel the two has been unsettling.

Exploring the Interconnectedness of Religion and Sports

When former Negro League first baseman and manager turned first MLB coach, Buck O’Neil is asked if baseball is a religion during an interview with documentarian and filmmaker Ken Burns, O’Neil responds, “For me.”⁹ In his 1967 landmark article entitled *Civil Religion in America*, Robert Bellah states,

The God of the civil religion is not only rather “unitarian,” he is also on the austere side, much more related to order, law, and right than to salvation and love. Even though he is somewhat deist in cast, he is by no means simply a watchmaker God. He is actively interested and involved in history, with a special concern for

⁹ David Chidester, "The Church of Baseball, the Fetish of Coca-Cola, and the Potlatch of Rock 'n' Roll: Theoretical Models for the Study of Religion in American Popular Culture," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 64, no. 4 (Winter 1996): 743

America... What we have, then, from the earliest years of the republic is a collection of beliefs, symbols, and rituals with respect to sacred things and institutionalized in a collectivity. This religion – there seems no other word for it – while not antithetical to, and indeed sharing much in common with Christianity, was neither sectarian nor in any specific sense Christian.¹⁰

Civil religion is a brand of faith that worships a white, American God who privileges white Americans. It is a white-centered faith that is invested in homogeneity and embraces those who are willing to assimilate by sacrificing their own cultural norms and values. Evidence of the dichotomy can be seen in the way white evangelicals view America's war on drugs and what should happen to those who become addicted to drugs. On a world stage, George Floyd is being dehumanized and criminalized for drug use while those who vilify him recommend treatment for white drug users.

Sports are one of America's major liturgical expressions of Civil Religion. There are many public religious expressions in sports. Sporting arenas and stadia provide the venues for fans to practice their religious rituals with one another. They stand for the "opening hymn," the *Star-Spangled Banner*. In baseball, there is the seventh inning stretch song, *Take Me out to the Ball Game*. There is the religious garb of uniforms. Blessed, or lucky, signs and symbols are everywhere. Consider the iconography of mascot caricatures that adorn the field, stadium flags and players' uniforms. Every real Pittsburgh Steelers fan owns at least one Terrible Towel "prayer cloth."¹¹ Then, there is the prevalence of such faith-filled phrases as the "hail Mary pass" in football. Finally,

¹⁰ Bellah, Robert N. "Civil Religion in America." *Daedalus* 96, no. 1 (1967): 1-21. Accessed March 17, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20027022>.

¹¹ Arthur Remillard, "From Durkheim to Game Day: Sports as a Bridge for Introducing Religious Studies," *Religious Studies News*, October 27, 2016, <https://rsn.aarweb.org/spotlight-on/teaching/sports-religion/durkheim-game-day-sports>.

each team has a pastor in the person of the team chaplain who prays for victory. When all of this is coupled with the fact that every athlete and sports fan is familiar with hoping, wishing, and praying for success against the odds, a concept which is akin to the Black faith practice of praying for Jesus to make a way out of no way; the interconnectedness of faith and sports becomes apparent.

An additional layer of religious fervor in sports can be seen in the alliance forged with the “acolytes” in the United States Armed Forces. The architect of this allegiance was former NFL commissioner Pete Rozelle. A World War II Navy veteran, Rozelle laid the groundwork for connecting a certain brand of patriotism with sports. In the 1968 Super Bowl, he arranged for the first military flyover and established a formal relationship between the NFL and the Department of Defense.¹² In 2015, an oversight report by Senators Jeff Flake and John McCain of Arizona revealed the NFL as one of several leagues that accepted Department of Defense funds to stage military tributes, a practice frowned upon as paid patriotism. The league eventually gave back more than \$700,000.¹³ Nevertheless, the marriage between the military and professional sports had been cemented. Their union has given birth to the elevation of the American flag as a religious symbol of freedom.

There are now pre-game rituals in baseball and football where the flag covers the entire field. It is platformed in a way that is meant to stir a sense of reverence.

Representatives from all branches of the Armed Forces lead the assembly in standing to

¹² Adam Kilgore, “For Decades, the NFL Wrapped Itself in the Flag. Now, That’s Made Business Uneasy,” *Washington Post*, September 6, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/sports/for-decades-the-nfl-wrapped-itself-in-the-flag-now-thats-made-business-uneasy/2018/09/06/bc9aab64-b05d-11e8-9a6a-565d92a3585d_story.html.

¹³ *Ibid.*

salute this “sacred” symbol. Jet flyovers are added for special occasions. A most recent special touch to this solemn occasion has been to stage surprise reunions of soldiers who were deployed overseas with their families. The combination of flag and family is meant to trigger the emotions of even the most casual “witness.”

The NFL Super Bowl is one of the premier celebrations of American civil religion where all of the aforementioned elements come together “on steroids.” Its place in society as a celebration of America that is fueled by major levels of corporate sponsorship and advertising makes it one of the most watched television events each year. It is so transcendent that non-football fans regularly attend Super Bowl parties. The average ticket price to attend the annual championship game ranges between \$4,000 and \$5,000. The pageantry starts hours before the kickoff during the pre-game show on the television network that has paid billions of dollars for broadcast rights. Annual pre-game activities include field-sized American flags, military pageantry, fly over from Air Force jets, a famous recording artist singing or playing the national anthem, a coin toss at midfield that has honorary captains and utilizes a special coin made just for that occasion, a halftime show with its own corporate sponsor featuring a major concert, and a ticker tape parade after the game in the hometown stadium of the winning team.

CBS paid approximately \$1 billion to the NFL for broadcast rights of the 2020 football season, including Sunday afternoon games and the championship. Super Bowl commercials have become their own phenomenon. They are now specially developed and produced just for that game. The advertisements even command news stories with their own set of ratings and reviews. CBS opened the bidding for Super Bowl LV 30-second commercials at \$5.6 million. The NFL, the networks, the owners of the teams, the

athletes, the recording artists, the members of the armed services, and the advertisers all work together to provide patrons an experience that leaves them feeling inspired, proud to be Americans, and hopefully happy that their team won the game.

Each year, sports stadia become more expansive and expensive, state-of-the-art “cathedrals” that emphasize the grandeur and importance of sports within a community. Even with a growing body of research substantiating that the building of sports stadia results in an overall loss of regional income, due in major part to the public subsidies that the stadium owners receive, municipalities and regions continue to vie for the opportunity to become a city of champions. While the construction of stadia may provide the benefit of jobs, the public subsidies strain local government community development budgets, particularly services for vulnerable populations. In the cases of the 1962 building of Dodger Stadium in Los Angeles and the construction of Olympic Village for the 2016 Summer Olympics in Rio de Janeiro, long-term residents were displaced from their homes and communities. In addition to venue costs continuing to climb from the millions to the billions, those fans who enter these cathedrals with regularity, *give* more than a tithe. Season ticket prices are usually more than ten percent of their annual income, and their sacrificial offerings consist of the additional costs for parking, concessions, and swag.

Challenging Systems and Structures

While inspired and shaped by Christianity, American civil religion borrows religious language and imagery to perpetuate practices that are antithetical to Christ’s commandment to love one’s neighbor as oneself. Since sports promote the laudable tenets of teamwork, belief in each other, commitment to a higher purpose, self-sacrifice

for the greater good, and connection across differences; good sportsmanship strengthens individual character and has the potential to unite communities. All of that notwithstanding, Black professional athletes have been not so subtly sent signals that it is in their best interest to compartmentalize their concerns for the greater good of the Black community.

While diversity and inclusion are stated goals in the world of professional team sports, problems arise when Black players openly advocate causes outside of the confines determined by the predominantly white owners and power brokers in their respective sports. Throughout history, we have seen Anti-Racist activism adversely affecting the careers of the athletes who dared to champion the cause of their people.¹⁴ This type of hypocrisy is evidenced in the resistance of certain sports teams to retire and replace racist mascots. They are comfortable committing such acts of exclusion while at the same time expressing a universal acceptance of all people.

The three pronged vitriolic anger exhibited by many white sports fans when male and female athletes expressed their concerns about the killing of unarmed Black men and women by white vigilantes and law enforcement officers included fans': (1) desire not to mix sports and politics (more accurately, Black "right to life" politics); (2) disgust with what they perceived to be disrespect for the American flag; and (3) disdain for what they labeled as ingratitude for the munificence of the owners. This third prong of fury unmask a deep-seated comfort with the commodification of Black bodies. This duality – dependence on Black bodies and disdain for them – is undergirded by centuries of

¹⁴ After their iconic protest on the winner's podium at the 1968 Summer Olympics in Mexico City, Tommie Smith and John Carlos were suspended by both the International Olympic Committee and the United States Olympic & Paralympic Committee. They dealt with death threats for years to follow.

conditional acceptance of those who are willing to unify under the umbrella of racial hierarchy rather than strive toward “liberty and justice for all.”¹⁵

The stated belief in sports togetherness comes with a set of expectations and rules that do not allow for public expression of opinions that would disrupt the status quo. The message to Anti-Racist activists, whether Black or white, is to keep their opinions to themselves or, at the very least, to engage in activism on their own time. Such attitudes and actions are schizophrenic, at best, and de-humanizing, at worst.

Tension is created when a broader, more inclusive theology is introduced. As James Cone, the father of Black Liberation Theology puts it,

The true prophet of the gospel of God must be... ‘unpatriotic.’ It is impossible to confront a racist society, with the meaning of human existence grounded in a commitment to the divine, without at the same time challenging the very existence of the national structure of all its institutions, especially the established churches.¹⁶

When Black athletes assert their humanity and integrity, they challenge the systems and structures within which they live and work. The moment they decide to work toward equity and inclusion, to liberate Black people, they are met with resistance. This is what happened to Mahatma Gandhi when he led the freedom movement in India, and to Martin Luther King, Jr. when he led the Civil Rights Movement. In both cases, their commitment to liberation cost them their lives.

Prophetic Fire Disturbs False Peace

The Old Testament biblical prophet Jeremiah declares that God is aware of those who treat the wounds of God’s people carelessly, (Jeremiah 6:14). In recent years, with the advent of the internet and social media, the prophetic fire of Black professional

¹⁵ Francis Bellamy, *The Pledge of Allegiance*, Art Evans Productions, 1971.

¹⁶ James Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, (New York: Orbis Books, 1970), 55.

athletes' Anti-Racist activism has become much more visible. They have increasingly been willing to use their platforms to name and bring attention to injustices that many of their fans would prefer to ignore or to minimize. Regarding the lack of accountability concerning the killing of unarmed Black people by white vigilantes and law enforcement officers, many sports fans are willing to accept the preposterous narrative that these murders are unrelated incidents perpetrated by a handful of "bad apples." The flaw in their logic is that these alleged isolated incidents form a pattern. Each time one officer is acquitted, another is emboldened to do more of the same.

There is a prophetic calling to document America's long history of state sanctioned violence against Black and indigenous people of color (BIPOC). Anti-Racist activists remind people of the genocide perpetrated against Native Americans; the mass lynching of Black men and women during Jim and Jane Crow, a story that is movingly retold at the Peace and Justice Memorial in Montgomery, Alabama; the publication of the Kerner Commission Report in 1968 stating that police brutality and misconduct against Black people were major issues; and the most recent killings of unarmed Black men and women by white vigilantes and law enforcement officers. Prophetic fire shines a spotlight on patterns, policies, systems, and practices that perpetuate racism and dehumanize Black people.

Pastoral Identity and Creating Communities of Support

In the spirit of the early church when "all who believed were together and had all things in common," where "they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need;" pastoral imagination understands that as Black professional athletes become more prophetic, they will need communities of organized

support, (Acts 2:44, 45). Team owners' awareness that others in the community are standing in solidarity with Anti-Racist activists, ready to bring repercussions to bear, would cause them to think twice before penalizing those who dare to protest.

Anti-Racist activists Curt Flood and Colin Kaepernick could have benefited from an organized, faith-rooted network of support and power.¹⁷ That is why this project-thesis proposes the development of such a network. Pastoral imagination has empowered me to develop a funding proposal for the establishment of *Black Athletes Together: Faith in Action* (BATFA), a nonprofit network that will create partnerships with likely and unlikely allies to prepare Black professional athletes of faith from the inevitable backlash they will experience when they engage in Anti-Racist activism. Not only does it take courage for them to use their platforms to speak truth to power and to protest publicly against the implicit will of their employers; but these athletes must also be encouraged to sustain their activism over long periods of time.

Just as the faith and fortitude of first century believers was strengthened by fellowshiping together, there is a present day need for in-person and virtual spaces where Black professional athletes can gather to be affirmed and supported (spiritually, emotionally and in some instances financially) as they nurture and sustain an ongoing commitment to liberation and justice for BIPOC. Their peaceful protests cannot stop until oppression has been eradicated. It is critical that those supporting these Anti-Racist activist endeavors recognize and understand the paradoxes of life while being relentless in their commitment to love unconditionally. At a time when this nation is more polarized

¹⁷ Flood's baseball career was upended in 1968 when he dared to challenge the racist overtures in the MLB Reserve Clause. Kaepernick was blackballed by the NFL as a result of his 2016 decision to kneel during the singing of the national anthem. It was a gesture honoring the lives lost to unjust homicides by white vigilantes and police who are paid to protect and serve.

than it has ever been, Anti-Racist activism will only be successful if and when it acknowledges that no one is purely Liberal or Conservative, Progressive or Fundamentalist, Right or Left. Everyone harbors vestiges of some of each of the above ideologies. These complexities cause tension within individuals and among others. Cognizance of these facts enables activists to be gracious and merciful.

In my second year at the Pacific School of Religion, I accepted my call to ordained ministry. A discernment process called the Middler Review involves a student's faculty advisor, field education supervisor, and two peers. Together, these individuals conduct a mid-process assessment. In my meeting, my faculty advisor, Archie Smith, and field education supervisor, Steve Thompson, observed that I had a unique call to ministry to work across boundaries of race, religion, and community engagement. They saw me as a stabilizing force who could bring a range of people together. Years later, my pastoral identity as a convener and bridge-builder positions me to foster unity amidst polarization. Since Seminary, I have had many opportunities to provide a presence that sets the atmosphere for the emotions connected with passions to settle. I have discovered that knitting together disparate communities necessitates diffusing tensions, seeing the humanity within each individual, and setting a context that allows group members to see the humanity within each other.

The challenge for people at the nexus of sports, Christian faith, and activism is to resist the temptation to demonize, or marginalize anyone. As a pastor my aim is to model bridge-building behavior for others by intentionally and overtly affirming each person's humanity, including those who trigger anxiety and anger within me. This practice will enable me to train Black athletic bridge-builders. As Christians, Black professional

athletes engaged in Anti-Racist activism must remember that America's original sin of racism is essentially a spiritual problem. Therefore, politics will not solve it.

A Radically Inclusive Movement

The organizers of the dynamic Movement for Black Lives (M4BL) embrace an ethic of radical inclusion because they understand that unconditional love is the key to personal and communal transformation. During the Civil Rights Movement, Diane Nash, Ella Baker and Bayard Rustin made significant contributions. Yet, they were relegated to the background because of their age, gender, and sexual orientation.¹⁸ Today, the M4BL affirms the leadership of youth, women, and those in the LGBTQ+ community. In the past, identifiable leaders in the struggle for equal rights were spied on, subjected to intense government-sponsored misinformation campaigns, and ultimately killed. As a result, the M4BL has many leaders that operate as a collective. If one person is marginalized, for whatever reason, the movement will continue. Its fate is not in the hands of a few charismatic men or women. Historical Black leaders extolled the virtues of love, inclusion and Black pride while excluding certain leaders on the basis of gender and sexual orientation. The M4BL is committed to the liberation of all Black people, no matter their gender, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, geographic location, immigration status or complexion. Their *End the War on Black People* preamble reads:

We are a collective that centers, and is led by and rooted in, Black communities. And we recognize our shared struggle with all oppressed people: collective liberation will be a product of all of our work. We are intentional about amplifying the particular experiences of racial, economic, and gender-based state and interpersonal violence that Black women, queer, trans, gender nonconforming, intersex, and disabled people face. Cisheteropatriarchy and

¹⁸ Nash was one of the leading founders of the Student Nonviolent Coordination Committee (SNCC). Baker is known as the Mother of the Civil Rights Movement. Her career as an Anti-Racist activist spans five decades. She worked alongside W. E. B. DuBois and Martin Luther King, Jr. Rustin, a civil and gay rights activist, helped to organize the 1963 March on Washington.

ableism are central and instrumental to anti-Blackness and racial capitalism and have been internalized within our communities and movements.¹⁹

With its broad agenda, the M4BL is pushing Black churches, communities, and activists to love their neighbors unconditionally, and to include everyone in the fight for freedom, equality, and dignity. Jesus pushes a little farther. He commands, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,” (Matthew 5:44). Since the sports ritual of shaking the opponent’s hand after a game promotes the practice of peacemaking, sports have the *potential* to provide a path toward reconciliation that addresses some of the deeper, systemic challenges in society.

When faith and sports are intertwined, the prophetic fire of truth-telling and activism are interwoven with the pastoral imagination of love and encouragement to enhance the tenets of teamwork, togetherness, and trust. These elements, facilitated by a steady pastoral presence, are the essential ingredients for bridging divides and creating spaces where diversity is valued, and people are free to be who God created them to be without fear of persecution or condemnation.

¹⁹ Movement for Black Lives website. “Black Power Rising”. Accessed on November 7,2020 <https://m4bl.org/>

Chapter Two

Context Matters

One of the most important lessons I learned in my seminary education was the importance of context. As I began to discover the various contexts of the Biblical text, it opened my interpretation of the Bible in a way that gave me dynamic faith for everyday living. Understanding context helped me see the power of Jesus’s revolutionary words and actions in the shadow of Roman occupation. There are many levels of context to consider for this Project – context(s) within the sporting, faith-based and nonprofit industries, the institutional context of Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, and my personal context as participant-researcher.

Making a Difference

At a meeting of faith leaders, a pastor shared a story about a recent sermon illustration. It is known as *The Starfish Story* by Loren Eisely.

One day an old man was walking along the beach when he noticed a boy picking something up and gently throwing it into the ocean. Approaching the boy, he asked “What are you doing?” The youth replied, “Throwing starfish back into the ocean. The surf is up and the tide is going out. If I don’t throw them back, they will die.” “Son,” the man said. “Don’t you realize that there are miles and miles of beach and hundreds and hundreds of starfish? You can’t make a difference!” After listening politely, the boy bent down, picked up another starfish and threw it back into the surf. Then smiling at the man, he said... “I made a difference for that one.”²⁰

At the end of the worship service, in the greeting line, the pastor said he was met by a scientist who was complementary of the sermon but cautioned him about *The Starfish Story*. The scientist said one might find an abundance of starfish on a beach because

²⁰ Loren Eisely, “The Starfish Story,” November 2, 2009. <http://www.ataturksociety.org/the-starfish-story-original-story-by-loren-eisley/>.

something adverse was happening in the water. The water may have become toxic, or the starfish could have been escaping predators. Certain species of starfish can survive on the beach until the next high tide, when they can re-enter the water.

What was particularly poignant about this story is that the pastor shared it as part of a conversation about race. Specifically, he was referring to the paternalistic need some white congregations feel to *make a difference for* Black communities. Often times, when well-meaning white congregations want to help; rather than engage their neighbors of a darker hue as equal partners, they predetermine what they will do to serve *the least of these*. This approach taints the actions of the helpers with the implicit bias of racial hierarchy. Their service is demeaning rather than empowering. Without an understanding of context, the same thing can happen when professional athletes engage in Anti-Racist activism.

The preacher's story made me wonder, how often do well-intentioned people of faith believe they are making a positive difference when they may be unwittingly working against the best interest of those they are trying to help? When professional sports teams and/or leagues engage in highly publicized acts of community service, they start with their idea and look for ways and places to implement it. Whether it is running a weeklong sports camp, donating athletic equipment, food distribution, or serving hot meals to homeless men and women over the holidays; the difference makers tend to be athletes of all races, and the recipients are usually BIPOC. After the obligatory photo shoot, the athletes leave. A service has been provided and all parties may indeed feel good about the interaction. Nevertheless, little has changed about the recipients' circumstances because they were most likely not asked what they needed to experience

sustainable change. Whenever a contextual assessment is incomplete, the actions have limited impact. Societal obsession with sports and professional athletes tends to override any critical analysis of whether these acts of service are long and lasting.

Revolutionary Other-Oriented Love

To paraphrase Valarie Kaur, founder of the Revolutionary Love Project, the Golden Rule is nice: *In everything do to others as you would have them do to you*, (Matthew 7:12a). However, the reality is that this approach can be self-centered because the loving occurs through the lens of the lover. Instead, Kaur encourages loving others in the ways that they want or need to be loved.²¹

Such revolutionary love requires deep listening and discernment that only occur in the context of relationship. There are circumstances and contexts that require engagement with and intercession for others. In these situations, the prophet Jeremiah advises, “But seek the welfare of the city... and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare,” (Jeremiah 29:7). In other ephemeral contexts, humility and wonder are required. Yet, all too often, zeal turns presence into imposition. Such was the case on the Mount of Transfiguration. “Then Peter said to Jesus, ‘Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.’” (Matthew 17: 4). The challenge in faith-rooted activism is to develop the contextual intelligence to discern the best course of action.

My Formative Sports Context

As previously stated, my passion for sports started at an early age as an athlete and fan. My earliest memories as an athlete are from childhood in Worcester,

²¹ Permission to use this quote was given by Valarie Kaur via e-mail in May 2020.

Massachusetts. I played soccer in grammar school, hit and caught baseballs with my best friend and other neighbors in the middle of the street near my house, and was a member of our church's basketball team. Growing up my closest friendships were connected to sports. Sports were an integral part of my youth, where I experienced belonging and joy. I still have warm feelings about being an actual member of championship teams.

I remember listening to Boston Red Sox MLB games at night on the radio as I drifted off to sleep. On a clear night, I could pick-up a sports radio talk show in Cleveland, Ohio that featured local legend Pete Franklin yelling at every caller who dared to disagree with his analysis. The emotionally charged atmosphere of sports has also made them a place where I experienced hurt and frustration as a player. I can still recall the feelings of disappointing losses associated with times when I was unable to "come through" for my team.

I played on teams where athletic prowess was the determining factor of acceptance and affirmation. What mattered most in those contexts was me being a good goaltender in soccer, making a meaningful contribution in basketball, and holding my own in baseball. There was a degree of meritocracy at play in those settings. When I practiced hard and worked at getting better, I was rewarded with playing time. Conversely, there were other teams and times when I worked to improve my game and remained on the sideline for reasons that seemed beyond my athletic abilities. The unspoken cultural challenge of parallel play makes it possible for teammates to work together to achieve success on the field, or court, but never truly get to know or understand each other beyond athleticism. Growing up, I was rarely invited into the homes of my white teammates. They had no interest in me or my context.

The wide world of sports has exposed the underbelly of the depravity that is nurtured at the altar of American civil religion. I have consistently seen and heard evidence of this country's racialized divide when angry white fans express and act upon the tenets of their faith. The violent, degrading, and dehumanizing behavior directed toward Black sports pioneers over the years displays the hardened hearts of the perpetrators and engenders a deep sense of awe and respect for the resilience of those on the receiving end, who went on to define each sport they integrated. Consider the coded language of commentators who refer to players of color as athletic and white players as analytical. Most recently, radio talk shows are giving voice to veiled racist comments about Black athletes and their allies because they refuse to genuflect before the American flag.

Growing up, posters of the iconic moment when John Carlos and Tommy Smith stepped onto the victory stand in Mexico City at the 1968 Olympics with raised fists adorned in black gloves above their bowed heads to silently protest racial discrimination in the United States after winning the Gold and Bronze Medals for the American team graced the bedroom walls of many of my family members and friends. At that time, I did not know that Carlos and Smith mounted the podium shoeless and wore black socks with their gloves. In my youth, I was unaware of the complexities surrounding their protest. I simply admired their Black pride.

As an adult, I slowly became aware of the depth and breadth of Black athletes' Anti-Racist activism. I learned about Harry Edwards organizing behind the scenes that led to the 1968 worldwide protest moment. I discovered that some athletes, including basketball greats Lew Alcindor (who later became Kareem Abdul-Jabbar), Elvin Hayes

(The Big “E”), Bob Lanier and Wes Unseld, as well as others who did not become as famous, chose to boycott the 1968 Olympics as a direct result of Edwards’ organizing.²² I was encouraged by the knowledge that Peter Norman, the Australian Silver Medalist in those Olympic Games, was adorned with a badge that was given to him by a member of the US Rowing Team that read “Olympic Project for Human Rights” in an act of solidarity with Carlos and Smith.²³ It was disenchanting to discover that the Anti-Racist actions of Carlos, Smith and Norman costed all three men their professional athletic careers. Carlos and Smith were suspended by both the International and United States Olympic Committees and dealt with death threats for years to follow.

Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier in MLB in 1947 when he left the Negro League to play for the Brooklyn Dodgers. His is a story that has been commemorated and celebrated. As a young man, I knew he was vilified by many MLB players, even some of his own teammates, and fans. I did not know that Jackie Robinson had tryouts with other MLB teams, including my beloved, racist Red Sox. The religious aspects of Robinson’s life are often omitted from the retelling of his story. Many are unaware of the important role the church played in keeping him out of trouble as a young adult. No one told me that Robinson’s faith sustained him through some of the most challenging and harrowing

²² O’Neal, Lonnae. (2018). Harry Edwards, A Giant of Sports Activism, Still Has People Shook. Retrieved From: <https://theundefeated.com/features/harry-edwards-mexico-city-olympics-sports-activism-john-carlos-tommie-smith-1968/> Leading up to the 1968 Olympic Games, Harry Edwards was on the faculty of what was then called San Jose State College. He played a major role in founding the Olympic Project for Human Rights. As such, he was one of the central figures organizing behind the scenes to convince Black athletes to seriously consider boycotting the 1968 Olympics.

²³ James Montague, “The Third Man: The Forgotten Black Power Hero,” CNN, April 25, 2012, <https://www.cnn.com/2012/04/24/sport/olympics-norman-black-power/index.html>.

times of his journey. Although all of this can be found in various writings about his life, these were not the stories I heard as a child or a young adult.²⁴

As a religious leader with an increasing commitment to social justice, my excitement continues to grow as I unearth Black professional athletes' stories of protest, resilience, and courage. I am energized and inspired by the bravery of Black athletes who use their platforms to make things better for Black people and their communities.

Adaptive Activism in Rapidly Changing Contexts

As the adage goes, the only thing that is constant in our world is change, and it is coming at an even quicker pace than at any time in human history and will only increase. Therefore, to keep pace and not be left behind in any industry or institution – including sports, churches, and nonprofits – a constant state of learning and adaptation is necessary. One of example of this is the increased digitization of systems and processes in organizations and institutions of all sizes. Those who are unable to adapt to the electronic submission of forms could easily find themselves unemployed, unable to access healthcare, and unable to conduct certain types of commerce.

Along the sidelines of NFL games, quarterbacks are prominently pictured holding Microsoft Surface computers in their hands to review plays and discern patterns by their opponents that they can exploit.²⁵ Film study has always been an important element of the preparation process for many team sports. Historically, it took place in the locker

²⁴ Michael Long and Chris Lamb, *Jackie Robinson: A Spiritual Biography – The Faith of a Boundary-Breaking Hero*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017).

²⁵ The prominent product placement encourages viewers to acquire Microsoft products. BAFTA will explore the placement of their logo on participating players' uniforms or pre-game warm-up gear as a way to raise awareness and funds.

room. Today, it happens during the game in real time on the sidelines. There is no place for players or coaches who are unable to keep pace with technological advances.

All of this is spelled out in *When Corporations Rule the World* by David Korten and *Twenty-One Lessons for the Twenty-First Century* by Yuval Noah Harari. When I first read these books, I experienced waves of hopelessness. What both authors do quite well is clearly articulate the major contextual challenges facing humanity. Korten emphasizes the spread of corporate influence and control on all sectors of society.²⁶ Harari focuses on artificial intelligence and the need to understand its implications.²⁷ Both books provide valuable lessons on some of the major challenges that unfolding technology presents to various sectors of society.

The great challenge for religious organizations, including churches and seminaries, is that a majority of pastors and professors are behind the digital learning curve. For instance, the slowness of some seminaries to embrace online tools for teaching and learning had been eroding enrollment for years. The advent of COVID-19 has caused institutions of higher learning to fully embrace distance learning. The fact that those churches with streaming services and online giving platforms are thriving in the pandemic while those without digital technology are experiencing significant challenges with stewardship and pastoral care further illustrates the onslaught of digitization.

An Enduring Justice-Oriented Faith

Last February, I accepted the call to serve as the Executive Pastor at the historic Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta. Known as America's Freedom Church, it was once co-pastored by Martin Luther King Sr. and Martin Luther King Jr. As a result of its

²⁶ David Korten, *When Corporations Rule the World*, (West Hartford, CT: Kumarian Press, 1995).

²⁷ Yuval Noah Harari, *21 Lessons for the 21st Century*, (New York: Spiegel and Grau, 2018).

connection to King Jr., the Church is seen as a home of the Civil Rights Movement. What many people inside and outside of Atlanta do not realize is that social justice is in the DNA of Ebenezer Baptist Church.

Founded in 1886, nine years after the Reconstruction Era ended, Ebenezer was organized under the leadership of John A. Parker, who was a freedman. The second pastor, A. D. Williams, built on Parker's spirit of independence by promoting Black businesses, urging members to become homeowners, and battling for adequate public accommodations for Blacks, despite Jim Crow segregation laws. King, Sr. served as Assistant Pastor to Williams, who happened to be his father-in-law. In 1931, when Williams retired, King, Sr. became the next Senior Pastor. During his tenure he: encouraged Black homeownership; served as the head of the Atlanta NAACP; stressed the need for an educated, politically active ministerium; championed voting rights; and provided critical leadership in the ending of Jim Crow laws in Georgia.

King, Jr. was raised in the context of a justice-oriented, freedom-fighting church family. Thus, his championing of voting and civil rights, along with his brave articulation of the interconnectedness of militarism, poverty and racism were natural, authentic expressions of his faith.

In 1975, Joseph L. Roberts succeeded King, Sr. Roberts launched an extensive community outreach campaign that included a Teenage Mother's Ministry; tutoring and counseling programs; a food co-op; and an adult daycare center. Perhaps his most significant contribution was the construction of a new, state-of-the-art, Ethiopian-inspired home for the congregation across the street from its previous home.

Raphael G. Warnock has been the Senior Pastor since 2005. He has continued to build on Ebenezer's freedom-fighting legacy by supporting voter empowerment; fighting voter suppression; advocating for the end of mass incarceration; dismantling the school-to-prison pipeline; strengthening the poverty safety net; and championing universal access to health care. These public ministry initiatives have extended to Warnock's election to the United States Senate.

Ebenezer has survived and continues to thrive as a home for justice-oriented faith amidst shifting contexts. Prior to COVID-19, visitors from all over the world flocked to Ebenezer and its neighboring institutions –The King Center for Nonviolent Social Change and the Martin Luther King, Jr. National Historic Park. The fact that this part of the Sweet Auburn community is holy ground to a range of activists and justice seekers is best illustrated by a notable story that involves NBA players Malcom Brogdon and Jaylen Brown. After the killing of George Floyd and the first night of protest in Atlanta, Brogdon and Brown issued an invitation on social media for people to join them in the Ebenezer Baptist Church neighborhood at the burial place of King, Jr. and his wife Coretta Scott King. There they denounced acts of violence and encouraged protesters to engage in a peaceful march calling for police accountability. In this instance and in many others, Ebenezer embodied its name as a literal “stone of help” – a touchstone to help remember that non-violent protests are still one of the most powerful tools in freedom fighting.

About Atlanta

Historically, Atlanta has been a mecca for Black Americans. The Southern Christian Leadership Conference was headquartered here. Leaders of the civil rights

movement, including John Lewis, Andrew Young, C.T. Vivian, and Joseph Lowery, lived here. This city is perceived to be a seat of Black electoral power and leadership as evidenced by the many of Black mayors the city has had – from its first, Maynard Jackson to its current, Keisha Lance Bottoms.

Today, there is a solid and influential Black middle class. The median annual household income for African Americans here is nearly \$42,000 higher than most U.S. metropolitan areas.²⁸ Blacks represent 51% of Atlanta’s residents, which is almost two million people.²⁹ Sixteen Fortune 500 companies are headquartered here, the largest of these are Coca Cola and Delta Airlines. Employment with these institutions serves as a gateway to the middle class for many Blacks.

Five professional sports teams call Atlanta home.³⁰ Collegiate sports competitions are also popular with such local school teams as Georgia Tech, University of Georgia, Georgia State, Kennesaw State and Emory University making it to the playoffs. Though not as prominent in terms of sports, schools such as Morehouse College and Clark Atlanta University also engage in intercollegiate sports competition.

The interlocking contexts of American society, Atlanta, and this author lay the foundation for delving into the intersection of faith, sports, and Anti-Racist activism. This deeply personal project-thesis seeks to elevate the discourse among Black professional athletes of faith who are committed to calling for justice, equality, and freedom.

²⁸ Emily Sturgis, “Atlanta and Black Wealth: Success for Many, but Not for All,” *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, February 4, 2020.

²⁹ United States Census Bureau, July 1, 2018, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/atlantacitygeorgia>

³⁰ Braves (MLB), Dream (WNBA), Falcons (NFL), Hawks (NBA), and United FC (Major League Soccer - MLS)

Who is the Community for this Project?

The Ebenezer Baptist Church (EBC) of Atlanta is a global cathedral for Christians who are committed to social justice. At the same time, EBC serves as church home to a local, Black, Atlanta-based congregation. Non-Christians are familiar with Ebenezer's name and reputation. Therefore, the target audience for this Project is the Black, faith-rooted community for whom Ebenezer Baptist Church is both local congregation and national cathedral. As Black athletes have gained national and global prominence, there has been a yearning among Black community members committed to social justice for these leaders to mobilize the power of their brands, money, media access, and faith as a tool for social change. Ebenezer can serve as an accepting, nurturing, and empowering home to incubate and support this underutilized element of the Black community. EBC's reputation as church and cathedral provides Black athletes with the intimacy of a local community and a platform that can manage and amplify the breadth of national fame and impact.

My Nonprofit Context

During different seasons of my ministry, I worked in nonprofit organizations. One key tool used by these institutions is strategic planning. This is the exercise of creating a comprehensive, organizational plan for the next three-to-five years. It usually includes such items as vision, mission, needs statement, goals, objectives, required resources and assessment. There is usually a planning process of some type that involves board, staff, and constituents. The final plan is usually carefully worded, optimistic in tone and glossy in its presentation. Some organizations develop implementation plans that flow directly from their strategic plans. Others use their strategic plans for marketing and fundraising

purposes. A common joke and criticism in the nonprofit community is that once completed, many strategic plans remain on a shelf and collect dust because by the time the laborious process is complete, contexts have shifted, and changes must be made.

When I was working at Auburn Seminary, we started a different approach to strategic planning and created a process called strategic engagement. It was an attempt to simultaneously plan and set direction while action and implementation were happening. The hope was that each process would inform and be shaped by the other. It was an attempt to embrace the rapid change in contexts by making decisions about what the organization would and would not do in real time. It was a messy, non-linear process. Yet, it helped us figure out how to embrace the reality of rapidly changing contexts.

Shifting Contexts, Terroir, Relationships, and Faith

On March 25, 2019, I had major surgery and found myself at home in recovery for four-weeks. I engaged in the art of doing nothing. A lot of my time at home was spent streaming movies and television shows, which afforded me the opportunity to think a lot about context. In the stories being told, I saw the important role that context plays in decision-making. Sometimes, context is an active driver of decisions, while other times it sits quietly in the background. Timing and place often provide depth and meaning to the overall story. Some interesting insights into context emerged that inform my exploration of faith, sports, and activism for this Project.

First, I was struck by the number of shows and movies that engage the topic of time travel, where characters manage *shifting contexts*. I then started to wonder if this creative expression is a response to the quickness with which contexts change today. Like the characters in the time travel stories, twenty-first century citizens must be nimble,

flexible, and creative – traits that are not often characteristic of institutions. Professional sports organizations have done a better job adapting to technological innovations than faith-based ones. Access to capital plays a major part.

Second, much is made of terroir in the 2008 film *Bottle Shock*, which recounts the upset of northern California wines besting French wines in a blind taste test in 1974. In the book *So Beautiful*, Leonard Sweet explains that terroir is the uniqueness of soil in a geographic area.³¹ The quality or inequality of soil cannot be seen by the naked, untrained eye. It is the chemistry of an area that both contributes to and benefits from the earth in that specific location.

Terroir is a metaphor for the symbiotic relationship between organizations and the communities where they are located, whether they be corporations, sports teams, churches, or nonprofits. Part of the terroir at Auburn Seminary was a spirit of innovative entrepreneurship amidst a national culture of theological education that was largely stuck in old models. Auburn's terroir sprinkled what could have been mundane work with bright spots of originality. Upon joining the staff of the historic Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, I discovered that seeds of social justice and Black empowerment have been sprouting in its terroir since 1886. Ebenezer's terroir is made the richer by its location in one of the most historic Black neighborhoods in the City of Atlanta that is known for being a center for Black culture and strength.

Third, all good story telling is about relationships. While watching films and shows about relationships among human beings, animals, and the environment, I saw that relationships are both strong and fragile, often at the same time. It takes persistence, love,

³¹ Leonard Sweet, *So Beautiful: Divine Design for Life and the Church*, (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2009).

and hard work to build and maintain them. I reflected on the fact that relationships are part of the glue that holds sports teams together. Though the bond might be limited to the team and its performance on the field, those teams that intentionally nurture a sense of mutual understanding, connection and support exponentially improve their chances for collective success. One cannot have any success in any context without engaging in relationship building. Whenever I start work in any organization, one of my priorities is to engage in as many one-on-one and small group conversations as possible. This is an essential tool for mutual understanding.

Finally, I was pleasantly surprised to find faith and spirituality present in a lot of the stories I watched while convalescing. Sometimes these elements were overt. Other times, the undertone of faith in each other was embedded. Spiritual yearning in story telling takes the form of characters' deep desire for truth, redemption, and goodness to prevail. Sports have always called forth elements of faith in fairness and human ingenuity. Players and fans alike believe in and strive for something greater than themselves.

Essentially, a proper understanding of context in industries, institutions, and initiatives yields success in establishing mutually beneficial relationships and in achieving sustainable change. Context is about uniqueness and particularity. It includes strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities for alignment. When Anti-Racist activists take the time to comprehend context and allow themselves to be known, preconceived notions and stereotypes are replaced with respect for one another's individuality. One of the challenges facing Black professional athletes who engage in faith-rooted Anti-Racist activism is that they play and live in the context of sports that seek to minimize the

negative impact of the institutional racism that is present within the structures and systems of their teams, conferences, and leagues. In addition, many in the fan base are adherents of American civil religion, which is founded upon the interlocking myths of sports neutrality, racial hierarchy, and American exceptionalism. Making America all that she claims to be is an uphill battle in this context.

Chapter Three

Setting a Historical Context

On August 10, 1883, Cap Anson, the owner-manager-first baseman of the Chicago White Sox, took his team to Toledo, Ohio, to play an exhibition game. He demanded that the Blue Stockings not play Moses Fleetwood Walker, the African American catcher. Walker wasn't going to play anyway because he was injured, but when informed of Anson's demand, Toledo manager Charlie Morton took a stand and called his bluff, starting Walker in right field. Said Anson, "We'll play this here game, but won't play never no more with the n—." Toledo joined the American Association the next year, and on May 1, 1884, Walker became the first African American major leaguer when he took the field against Louisville. Three years later, Anson finally got his way when owners enacted a rule barring Black players from professional baseball.³²

Many in America gravitate toward the predominant narrative that sports are neutral and represent the ultimate meritocracy. The majority of those who care deeply about and are connected to sports choose this perspective. Yet, the reality is that sports have never been neutral.

The dogma of sports neutrality comes to the fore whenever anything challenges the structures and systems that affirm and reinforce the built-in bias that white athletes, coaches, owners, and league officials possess superior intelligence and wisdom. The idea of white supremacy permeates the culture and traditions of the sporting world. In keeping with American civil religion, those in charge adhere to values that consciously and unconsciously state that the United States is a homogeneous (white) country that others must assimilate into, a melting pot.

There are always biases and values operating within sports – some with which I agree and others that make my skin crawl. An example of both can be found in the 1936

³² Steve Wulf, "Athletes and Activism: The Long, Defiant History of Sports Protests," *The Undefeated*, January 30, 2019, <https://theundefeated.com/features/athletes-and-activism-the-long-defiant-history-of-sports-protests/>.

Olympics that were hosted in Berlin, Germany as a part of Adolph Hitler's strategy to use the worldwide platform to showcase Arian supremacy as he readied himself to aggressively occupy Europe. Hitler's plans were thwarted when Black athletes from the United States won fourteen medals — eight of them Gold. The most celebrated athlete that year was Jesse Owens, who won four Gold Medals. In the days of the Cold War, Soviet Bloc nations were so committed to excelling in sports on a global stage as a sign of international superiority that they engaged in an extensive program of administering performance enhancing drugs to their athletes from very young ages.

Racialized segregation was at the forefront upon the advent of American professional sports. In the world of baseball, as a result of Blacks being barred from participating in major league baseball, alternative opportunities were created for Black players to compete professionally. The most famous of these venues were the Negro Leagues.

Long after the color lines were broken in major league sports, rules discouraged any type of activism. In some leagues, any type of protest was subject to financial fines. In March 1996, former NBA guard Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf decided to stop standing for the national anthem stating his personal belief that the American flag represented global tyranny, oppression, and injustice. His actions caused a tremendous stir among the NBA's fan base and leadership. David Stern, commissioner at that time, fined Abdul-Rauf for not standing. Eventually he agreed to stand, close his eyes, and offer a Muslim prayer during the National Anthem.

In the summer of 2020, professional sports leagues and teams were forced to take a 180-degree turn away from the institutionalized practice of silencing the First

Amendment rights of players and sanctioning them for their justice-oriented activism. Catalyzed by the worldwide wave of protests when the murder of George Floyd served as the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back, the same NBA allowed players to kneel during the anthem and adorn the back of their jerseys with social justice-related slogans such as *Black Lives Matter* and *Freedom*. They even stenciled the phrase *Black Lives Matter* onto playing surfaces as a show of solidarity. The League recognized that most of its players are Black, and they needed an outlet to express how upset they were about what was happening in this country. It was a moment of reckoning between players' collective power and the league's need to either adapt or be on the wrong side of history.

In an era, where women are now having increased professional opportunities in such sports as basketball, soccer and softball, Black female athletes in the United States have become more visible and willing to engage in activism. Given the fact that they have been in a constant struggle for professional sports opportunities, the fight for equality and equity is in the DNA of women sports. The WNBA is a prime example. The founding of the league embodies a striving for gender equity for women to be professional athletes who are compensated for their services. Some have said that at its core, the WNBA is a movement for equity and equality, which might be why the league connects so easily with social justice matters. Its very existence is a protest against male-dominated sports chauvinism and the preposterous stereotypes that prevent female athletes from maximizing their basketball earning potential in America.³³

³³ Jerry Brewer, "Kelly Loeffler Chose Pandering over Principle, and WNBA Players Won't Forget," *The Washington Post*, July 10, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/sports/2020/07/10/kelly-loeffler-chose-pandering-over-principle-wnba-players-wont-forget/>.

Signs of a shift in the American zeitgeist of Anti-Racist athletic activism first appeared within the WNBA. After the July 6, 2016 death of Philando Castille at the hands of a Minneapolis, Minnesota police officer during a traffic stop, members of the Minnesota Lynx, led by their star player Maya Moore, along with the New York Liberty and Phoenix Mercury, began wearing Black Lives Matter t-shirts to games to protest the recent murders of unarmed Black men and women by police.³⁴ After initial pushback from the WNBA commissioner, the league became the first to support its athletes' Anti-Racist activism officially.

Given the historical context of racialized hierarchy in the United States, much of the activism that Black athletes engage in is related to Anti-Racism. All of the Black athletic pioneers who dared to cross the color line – golf and tennis pro Althea Gibson, tennis icon Arthur Ashe, the first Black man to play in the NBA Earl Francis Lloyd, the first female to play for the Harlem Globetrotters Lynette Woodard, as well as the first Black men to play in the NFL Fritz Pollard and Bobby Marshall – found themselves fighting uphill desegregation battles within contexts that were anything but neutral. History demonstrates that sports neutrality is a mythological invention. To hold onto it is to inhibit repentance, reconciliation, and positive innovation.

The Commodification of Black Bodies

Ethnic stereotypes have existed in this country since 1492. In the 1930s, basketball was deemed a Jewish sport because Jews were dominating it. The majority of the players were Jewish, and so were the best players. At that time, some argued that Jews had a genetic predisposition for the sport. Since it was easier for them to assimilate

³⁴ Ibid.

into white culture, Jewish basketball players moved up the socio-economic ladder and gradually gave up their spots on NBA teams. Blacks replaced them as the genetic heroes of basketball.³⁵

Sports served as a vehicle for upward mobility and social enhancement for Jews. However, the culturally embedded, unwritten rules of racialized hierarchy that privilege those who appear to be white and minimize the intellectual capacities of BIPOC have not provided the same escape hatch for African American athletes.

The perceived athletic superiority of Black men and women in certain types of sports such as basketball, football, and track and field, is rooted in the reality that large numbers of youth from these communities are excelling in these professional team sports. For many Black families, the engagement of their youth in the US sports pipeline is the equivalent of playing the lottery. The hope is that the uniquely gifted athlete might become the family's winning ticket into a world of wealth and prosperity. Such fantasies are fed by sentimental media stories about player "X" who is drafted by a major league team. One of the first things that he or she does is purchase a home for their mother and/or father. The challenge is that the media fails to communicate the large number of young people engaged in these sports, the expenses associated with them, and the extensive sacrifices that student-athletes and sports-parent make to present their children to recruiters. Consequently, there is an even larger number of young athletes who will not get drafted. Members of the media easily fall back into the narratives and stereotypes that have been ingrained in American culture for centuries.

³⁵ Brenda Dixon Gottschild, *The Black Dancing Body: A Geography from Coon to Cool*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 58.

Stereotyping supports the commodification of Black bodies. It allows the dominant culture to see athletic bodies in general, and Black bodies specifically, as objects for profit and pleasure.

That black bodies only exist to thrill and entertain a disaffected white populace is the story of America and its racial commodification of blacks. The white racial frame that black bodies are closer to nature and possess superior, genetically predetermined characteristics is still pervasive and very much alive in mainstream society today. Even people of color fall prey to dubious stereotypes that athletic ability is a matter of genetic inheritance, as these stereotypes play out in popular culture through multiple forms of media.³⁶

It is impossible to talk about sports in America without speaking about the historic and current stereotyping and exploitation of Black bodies for financial gain. The commodification of Black bodies continues to feed the capitalistic economic engine of the United States.

The roots of this date back to 1619 when the first enslaved Africans came to the soil of what eventually became the United States. What allows for this oppression and exploitation is the creation of stereotypes rooted in depicting Black people as members of another, inferior race. So-called race scientists determined that Black bodies were sub-human, and Black people were uncivilized. These capitalistic lies have been espoused and enacted upon for so long that they have become ingrained not just in certain whites but also in communities of color. When Black people buy into the idea of racialized hierarchy, they experience internalized oppression. “Too often stereotypes obstruct individual achievement and act as self-fulfilling prophecies.”³⁷ America’s commodification of Black bodies has resulted in, among other things, Black professional

³⁶ Darron T. Smith, *When Race, Religion, and Sport Collide: Black Athletes at BYU and Beyond*. London: Rowan and Littlefield, 2016, Page 39

³⁷ Gottschild, *The Black Dancing Body*, 59.

athletes “...laboring both discursively and physically for the welfare of others.”³⁸ Armed with the invention of racial superiority, whites created a system of forced labor and servitude that continues to haunt the American psyche to this present day.

On June 22, 1999, this conversation was at center stage of the NBA in the person of all-star forward for the New York Knicks, Larry Johnson. After being fined for not speaking to the media, his first public words were controversial, “What we have here is a lot of rebellious slaves on this team.”³⁹ Fans and non-fans of basketball were furious. They were asking how a player being paid millions of dollars to play a sport could speak of himself as being enslaved. The backlash centered around a sense that no one making *that much money* had the right to make such a statement. Some were outraged that he was ungrateful for his compensation. Anyone who was willing to take a closer look at the dynamics of the situation would have discovered that even in an era of multi-million-dollar salaries, the power relationships between athletes and team owners are tinged with vestiges of a racialized hierarchy. Bill Rhoden describes the power dynamic at play in *The Dilemma of Wealth without Control*.⁴⁰ Although the salaries of Black athletes may be increasing, the power is still in the hands of white team owners.

To underscore the attitude embedded in the conundrum of wealth without control, one can examine some of the pushback experienced by NBA superstar LeBron James. When he was vocal in terms of his support for issues of social justice, Fox News host Laura Ingraham stated that she was “not interested in political advice from someone who

³⁸ Anthony B. Pinn, *Embodiment and the New Shape of Black Theological Thought*. (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 65.

³⁹ Rhoden, *Forty Million Dollar Slaves*, 238.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 231.

gets paid \$100 million a year to bounce a ball."⁴¹ This was followed by Ingraham's social media post telling James to "Shut up and dribble."⁴² The post went viral because she articulated the sentiments of many, including some of James's fans, that all he and other Black professional athletes are good for is athleticism. Commodities, like children, should be seen and not heard.

Breaking Out of the Box

White America's desire to have Black professional athletes stay in their place becomes more evident when players exhibit their intellect and exercise control. On July 8, 2010, LeBron James starred in *The Decision*, an hour-long television special to announce and explain his decision to leave his hometown team, the Cleveland Cavaliers, to play for the Miami Heat. There were waves of angry fans throughout the country. One stream was from Ohio basketball fans who hated to see their hometown hero abandon them. Another flowed from those who were outraged by James's ability to command and exercise such a degree of power and control over his own destiny. The nation's top sports television network, ESPN, devoted an hour of primetime entertainment programming to the announcement. White radio talk show hosts and their callers were livid as they watched and bemoaned every minute. To add insult to injury, James used his power and influence to recruit another high-profile free agent, Chris Bosh, to join him in Miami.

⁴¹ Emily Sullivan, "Laura Ingraham told LeBron James to Shut Up and Dribble; He Went to the Hoop." National Public Radio, February 19, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwoway/2018/02/19/587097707/laura-ingraham-told-lebron-james-to-shutup-and-dribble-he-went-to-the-hoop>.

⁴² Ibid.

One of my interviewees shared that it is a common practice among Black NFL players to refer to the league as “the plantation.”⁴³ The Fritz Pollard Alliance (FPA) was created in 2001, to champion diversity in the NFL through education and provide its membership with resources that will help them succeed at every level of the game.⁴⁴ Named after the first African American to play and coach professional football, the FPA seeks to disrupt business as usual and advocate for an increased Black presence at all levels within the NFL. Its primary focus is on breaking an ingrained plantation mindset that sees Blacks more as commodities than it does as people. One of the FPA’s major victories was the successful establishment of the Rooney Rule in 2003. Named after Pittsburgh Steelers owner Dan Rooney, who was a tireless advocate for diversity and inclusion in all aspects of NFL operations, the Rooney Rule requires NFL teams to interview candidates of color for head coaching and senior football operations opportunities.⁴⁵

Even though Blacks make up seventy percent of NFL players, there are only three permanent Black head coaches and no Black team owners. What is especially troubling is that in 2011, there were seven Black head coaches in the league.⁴⁶ This downward trend demonstrates the fact that the Rooney Rule has not produced much progress. One bright spot was that for the first time in league history, an all-Black officiating crew served on November 23, 2020. While white head coaches come with a variety of previous experience; it seems that, for Blacks, the only path to the position begins with playing in

⁴³ Confidential project interview

⁴⁴ “History,” Fritz Pollard Alliance Foundation, accessed October 17, 2020, <https://www.fritzpollard.org/history>.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Sam Acho, “Upstairs and Downstairs,” *The Players’ Tribune*, June 4, 2020, <https://www.theplayerstribune.com/articles/sam-acho-upstairs-and-downstairs-nfl-rooney-rule>

the NFL. Such deeply embedded institutionalized disparities will not be undone without the commitment and intentionality of team owners and league leadership.

Muscular Christianity

Most historians have recognized the importance of biblical religion in American culture from the earliest colonization to the present. Few have put greater emphasis on the religious ‘point of departure’ of the American experiment than Alexis de Tocqueville, who went as far to say ‘I think I can see the whole destiny of America contained in the first Puritans who landed on those shores.’⁴⁷

Faith was an essential and integral part of the lives of Native Americans before the series of European conquests that began in 1492. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. asserts that free African Muslims arrived on American shores in the sixteenth century. When enslaved Africans were brought to the United States, they too brought religious practices.

Europeans used the idea of manifest destiny to justify othering BIPOC out of the human family. Their various distortions of Christianity were used to substantiate a brand of evangelism that was based on European supremacy and resulted in genocide. *Religion as a point of departure* was so much a part of the culture of the Dutch West India Company that when they established an outpost in New Amsterdam on the southern tip of Manhattan island in 1628, one of the first institutions established was a church. As Europeans *civilized* BIPOC by imposing their brands of Christianity on them, the BIPOC created their own ways of engaging religion. They fused elements of their own faith traditions and practices with the Christian gospel they were being taught.

Just as faith was present in the early days of the country, so were sports. Native Americans played lacrosse and engaged in other sports that resembled wrestling, football,

⁴⁷ Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (California: University of California Press, 1985), 28.

racing and hunting. These activities were part of religious ceremonies that served as methods of community training in agriculture and war.⁴⁸ There was some ambivalence among colonizers as to whether or not sports had a place within society. Northern Puritans were concerned that sports might lead to debauchery and idolatry. Whites in the South embraced horse racing and different types of hunting. They were particularly fond of cockfighting and bare-knuckled boxing. Among those who were enslaved, sports took the form of foot races. As capitalism gave birth to various socio-economic classes, sports became more aligned with social status. Brutal sports that depended on the development of physical stamina were most popular among the working class.

In the mid 1800's those in political and financial power became concerned about the possibility of a revolution led by BIPOC and discontented members of the lower classes. Their fear was based upon their observations of Black physical strength on display in athleticism. At the same time, male leaders within churches were dreading the day when women would eventually take over. Male clergy were fearful of what they perceived to be an increased feminization of the church due to its predominantly female membership. They believed this feminization was weakening the institution. Some white clergymen collaborated with businessmen and financiers to utilize church sports to develop manly strength within the church, and to attract men to the church. The term *Muscular Christianity* originated within the context of European intent to uphold white male strength and authority. It was coined for Charles Kingsley (1819-1875), a Victorian clergyman who wrote popular, mass produced novels for boys and young men with titles like *The Roman and the Teuton* and *Westward Ho!* Kingsley drew from various social

⁴⁸ Dave Zirin, *A People's History of Sports in the United States: 250 years of Politics, Protest, People and Play*, (New York: The New Press, 2008), e3.

Darwinisms and a sense of Anglican superiority to narrate and argue for a potent English Christianity.⁴⁹ *Muscular Christianity* attempted to re-assert manhood in all aspects of society and to reinforce men as the head of home. It offered a broad response to Christianity being referred to as an “effeminate” religion in the Victoria era.⁵⁰

United States Unitarian minister Thomas Wentworth Higginson picked up on these themes and penned “Saints and Their Bodies,” which became a highly influential article for *The Atlantic* in 1858. The article extols the virtues of health and manliness, two things that Higginson felt were lacking in US Churches.⁵¹ In addition to an expansive affirmation of a wide variety of sports from sailing and gymnastics to swimming and billiards, Higginson highlights the importance of physical vigor for both men and women. He states, “Physical health is a necessary condition of all permanent success.”⁵²

Some of those opposed to the manly movement saw it as a potential class divide within their churches. They observed that those who were higher on the socio-economic pyramid had a more passive relationship to sports. Certain wealthy Protestants went so far as to deem such activities as a waste of time.

White Protestant clergymen were proponents of Muscular Christianity in the United States because they were concerned about the fledgling women’s rights movement. There was also a sense among advocates that urban living was undermining the overall strength of men.

[They] hoped to energize the churches and counteract the supposedly enervating

⁴⁹ Amy Laura Hall, “No Shortcut to the Promised Land: The Fosdick Brothers and Muscular Christianity.” *Ex Auditu* 29, (2013): 161-177.

⁵⁰ S. Dube, “Muscular Christianity in Contemporary South Africa: The Case of the Might Men Conference,” *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theology Studies*, 71, no. 3 (March 2015): 9 <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v71i3.2945>.

⁵¹ Thomas Wentworth Higginson, *The Our-Door Papers*. (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1863). Page 7

⁵² *Ibid.* Page 10

effects of urban living. To realize their aims, they promulgated competitive sports, physical education, and other staples of modern-day life.⁵³

A key figure in promulgating Muscular Christianity among evangelicals was Dwight L. Moody. In 1885, he started convening clergy conferences in Northfield, Massachusetts. High profile professional athletes attended these gatherings. Not only did their presence go a long way in advancing the cause of Muscular Christianity, these athletes became ambassadors who saw religion and sports as compatible.

Champions of the Black version of Muscular Christianity, which emerged in the last 1800s, focused on prevention and protection. These Black men saw physical weakness as a barrier to their success in the struggle for social justice.⁵⁴ While the white men who started this movement were driven to preserve their own positions of power, the Black men who bought into it used sports to maintain strong bodies for the purpose of preventing the decline of their communities.

A major promoter of Muscular Christianity was the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA). The YMCA was established in 1854 in London. Its focus was evangelical in terms of connecting young men to a relationship with Christ. Their main tools at that time were Bible studies and small groups. To underscore their commitment to faith communities, one of the prerequisites for YMCA membership was church membership. As YMCAs grew in numbers and spread across countries, membership requirements began to vary. In 1855, the World Alliance of YMCAs met in Paris and developed what became known as the Paris Basis. One agreement was that differences of opinions that were emerging as they grew would not interfere with building harmony

⁵³ Clifford Putney, *Muscular Christianity: Manhood and Sports in Protestant America, 1880-1920*. (Cambridge, MA: The President and Fellows of Harvard College, 2001).Page 1

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

among local YMCAs. This was particularly important in the United States because of chattel slavery and the impending Civil War. Rallying around Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior to extend the Kingdom of God was the central organizing principle. All political issues were intentionally excluded.

In 1851, the first YMCA in the United States was established in Boston. The movement saw itself as non-doctrinal, non-ecclesiastical and non-political.⁵⁵ The number of YMCAs in the country grew exponentially from 20 in 1853 to 205 by 1860. By 1912, one out of every 181 Americans were either active or associate members of a YMCA.⁵⁶ The notion of unity amidst diversity set forth by the Paris Basis made it possible for there to be parallel Black and white YMCA movements in the United States. It created space for the existence of a Colored Men's Association within the YMCA movement. The two remained segregated until 1946.

Although the initial focus of YMCAs was Bible reading and prayer meetings, the gatherings quickly expanded to include other social activities. The YMCAs in the United States, specifically in New York City, began to address not just the spiritual but also the moral, social, and physical well-being of young men.⁵⁷ There was a growing belief that sports could contribute to their holistic well-being. Slowly sports were being integrated into local YMCAs throughout the United States as a vehicle for building physical strength to complement spiritual strength.

The link between physical and spiritual strength found lodging underneath the character-building umbrella. An influential proponent of this integration was Robert

⁵⁵ Kjetil Fretheim, "Whose Kingdom? Which Context? Ecumenical and Contextual Theology in the World Alliance of YMCAs," *International Review of Mission* 97, no. 384/385 (January – April 2008): 116-128.

⁵⁶ Putney, *Muscular Christianity*, 65.

⁵⁷ Fretheim, "Whose Kingdom?"

McBurney. In 1862, he transformed a struggling YMCA in New York City into a successful, athletic complex that focused on developing the physical, social, spiritual, and intellectual elements of young men. Another architect of the character-building initiative was a doctor named Luther Halsey Gulick. In 1887, while holding positions at Springfield College and the Springfield YMCA, Gulick asked James Naismith to help him develop an athletic program for the YMCA. In 1891, Naismith created basketball as an indoor substitute for football. Gulick is also the person who came up with the equilateral red triangle logo as a symbol of the integration of body, mind, and spirit.⁵⁸

A strand of theology and action that emphasizes God's kingdom as something to be realized on earth, the Social Gospel movement began to influence the YMCA in the early 1900s. It challenged the movement to address social problems. In the 1930s, a growing sensitivity to intergroup relations and community responsibilities caused YMCAs to drift away from Bible study, prayer service and evangelism. Following the 1939 international meeting of the World Alliance of YMCAs in Amsterdam, racial non-discrimination became a prerequisite for local membership.

Another influential ally of Muscular Christianity came from the political world, Theodore Roosevelt. He championed the notion that men needed to engage in a strenuous life by emphasizing, "duty, bodily vigor and action, over reflection; experience over book learning; and pragmatic idealism over romantic sentimentality."⁵⁹ President Roosevelt demonstrated this lifestyle in political board rooms, and through his conviction that war was an exercise in developing stronger men. It was also evidenced by his deep

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Putney, *Muscular Christianity*, 33.

commitment to the outdoors, where he said he felt a stronger connection to the Divine. His public commitment to physical prowess reinforced and aligned character-building sensibilities with strong, male-dominated institutions, including government and churches.

Muscular Christianity shifted sports away from genteel restraint to rough and tumble engagement. As contact sports grew through Christian movements, they became more reputable enterprises. In some Christian circles, sports continued to serve as a tool for evangelism. The primary focus was on character-building. Less emphasis was placed on church membership.

The character-building framework remains operative today, particularly in college athletic programs. Many of those interviewed for this Project talked about Bible studies, worship services, faith-based community service, and team prayers within their professional athletic programs. Faith, specifically Christianity, is an active element in sports with the intention of building cohesion, teamwork, and character. The influence of Muscular Christianity is still prevalent today.

Benchmarks in Integration

Jackie Robinson

One of the most important figures when talking about faith, activism and sports is Jackie Robinson. Sadly, the religious elements of his life are usually not part of the public narrative. To appreciate Robinson as a man of faith who broke the MLB color line in 1946, it is important to acknowledge the influence of two key people in his life – his mother, Mallie Robinson, and his high school pastor, Karl Downs. Both individuals exhibited strong faith throughout their own lives in ways that inspired and empowered Robinson to grow in his own faith journey. Robinson's faith in God, as he attested,

carried him not only through the torment of integrating the major leagues but also through the difficult years of advancing civil rights after he left the baseball diamond.⁶⁰

Robinson's mother was always clear about the centrality of her faith in God throughout her life. The Robinson family lived on a farm that was initially worked by Jackie's father, Mallie's husband. When Jackie and his siblings were young, their father abandoned the family leaving their mother to attend to the farm on her own with five children. Finding this an untenable situation, Mallie took a leap of faith and moved her young family from Cairo, Georgia to Pasadena, California. There she had the support of nearby family members. She demonstrated this proactive, courageous spirit throughout her life. Robinson's biographers report that his mother's firm belief that Jesus is deeply concerned about the here and now demonstrated an active faith that took its cues directly from the biblical Jesus who declared at the outset of his ministry that he had come to set the oppressed free. Mallie fervently believed that those who follow Jesus must act right here and now – that they must fight for the freedom and equality that God desires for everyone, even if doing so requires suffering along the way.⁶¹ Robinson's mother taught him that faith is about one's present reality and is to be lived out daily.

Downs was the young, Black pastor of Scott United Methodist Church. As Robinson's family attended, he noticed that Downs preached and lived a strong commitment to justice and was drawn to Downs' activist-oriented expression of faith. Steeped in a justice-rooted theology that fought for the freedom of Black people, Downs was only seven years older than the high school-age Robinson. With Downs leading the way, Robinson now understood that faith was not only about praying; it was also about

⁶⁰ Long and Lamb, *Jackie Robinson*, 10.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 15.

struggling daily to overcome social injustices and free the oppressed wherever they might be.⁶² Downs believed in and acted on behalf of a God who cared deeply about the well-being of Black communities and their equality. Robinson's mother and pastor unapologetically told him and showed him that being Black was a gift from God that should never be diminished. Their theology made a strong impression on young Jackie, which sustained him throughout his life.

When Robinson was offered a contract to play for the Brooklyn Dodgers, faith served as a meaningful connection point between him and team owner Branch Rickey. Both men's United Methodist roots laid the foundation for their eventual friendship. Robinson's Christianity played an important role in his ability to withstand the racist vitriol he experienced as MLB's first non-white player. He embodied a quiet faith that grounded him spirituality and shaped his interactions with others.

Cassius Clay

Cassius Clay was born and raised in Louisville, Kentucky. His father was a frustrated artist who made a living as a housepainter. His mother was a domestic worker in white households. Clay was raised in a home where he saw and experienced the indignities of segregation daily. His father regularly told stories that highlighted the challenges facing Black men. Black athletes born in segregation and who came of age during the civil rights era witnessed their parents struggle against second-class citizenship in a nation deeply divided by race.⁶³ Cassius Clay, Sr. told parables that taught young

⁶² Ibid., 34.

⁶³ Smith, *Race, Religion and Sport*, 141.

Cassius and his brother Rudy about the world. All the stories had the same general theme: black men die after seemingly harmless encounters with white men.⁶⁴

At a very early age, Clay discovered boxing as his avenue to success.⁶⁵ He gained worldwide notoriety when he won the gold medal for boxing in the light heavyweight division of the 1960 Olympics in Rome. As he traveled the world at the start of his professional career, his frustration regarding the state of Black people in America became more and more intense. As his professional boxing career gained momentum, he became acquainted with the Nation of Islam. In 1962, he was invited to attend a Savior's Day Rally in Chicago. It was there that he first heard Malcolm X speak. The minister's words and charisma had a profound impact on Clay. Afterward, believing that securing such a high-profile member would bring attention to the growing religious body, Malcolm X sought Clay out and befriended him. As their friendship grew, Clay was drawn to Malcolm X's critique of Black-led integration efforts and non-violent protest. In many ways, Clay saw someone who matched his own sense of public bravado and courage to push the envelope of what society deemed as acceptable, particularly for Black men in America. Both men were brash, outspoken, and confident. On February 6, 1964, Clay announced that he had become a member of the Nation of Islam and told sports reporters to call him Cassius X. Afraid that ticket sales would be adversely affected by any association with Malcolm X given his controversial critiques of the Civil Rights Movement and white society, boxing promoters begged the heavyweight champion to keep quiet about his faith.

⁶⁴ Randy Roberts and Johnny Smith, *Blood Brothers: The Fatal Friendship between Muhammad Ali and Malcom X*, (New York: Basic Books, 2016), xxi.

⁶⁵ My father, John Henry Vaughn, Sr., was also born and raised in Louisville. His youngest sister, my aunt Agnes, was one of Clay's classmates. This affords me some secondhand knowledge of Clay.

In March of 1964 – after defeating Sonny Liston – Cassius X was given the name Muhammad Ali by Elijah Muhammad, the founder and leader of the National of Islam. As a direct result of the growing rift between Malcolm X and Elijah Muhammad, Ali was ordered to distance himself from his friend. Shortly after that relationship deteriorated Malcolm X was assassinated. I wonder if, during this very public and controversial collision of faith, sports and activism, Clay recalled his father’s parables.

On April 28, 1967, the reigning heavyweight boxing champion refused to be drafted into the armed services. Faith was center stage as Ali informed the world that the tenets of Islam prevented him from entering the military and going to Vietnam to kill people he did not know. Activism stepped onto the platform as Ali went on to express his opposition of the war. Faith, activism, and sports were all wrapped up and tangled up together on June 20, 1967, when Ali was “convicted of draft evasion, sentenced to five years in prison, fined \$10,000, and banned from boxing for three years.”⁶⁶ He was publicly vilified as un-American and un-patriotic.⁶⁷ It was not until 1971, that a unanimous ruling by the US Supreme Court exonerated him.

One of the most significant demonstrations of public solidarity and justice shown by Black athletes occurred on June 4, 1967. Some of the most visible and successful Black athletes gathered with Ali in Cleveland to encourage him to change his mind about the draft. Organized by NFL Hall of Famer Jim Brown and catalyzed by boxing promoter Bob Arum, what became known as the Cleveland Summit brought together some of the

⁶⁶ History.com Editors, “Muhammad Ali Refuses Army Induction,” History, accessed March 17, 2021, <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/muhammad-ali-refuses-army-induction>.

⁶⁷ Ali took his courageous stance when the antiwar movement was in its infancy. His public position was extremely unpopular. It was just weeks after King, Jr. gave his infamous “Beyond Vietnam” speech, highlighting the interconnectedness of racism, militarism and poverty at Riverside Church. King was vilified by mainstream media, denounced by some of his political allies, and even shunned by certain members of the civil rights community.

most visible and influential Black athletes of that day: Alcindor, Walter Beach, Willie Davis, Curtis McClinton, Bobby Mitchell, Bill Russell, Jim Shorter, Carl Stokes, Sid Williams, and John Wooten. Though some in the group had serious reservations about the Nation of Islam, “When they recognized that they were not going to change Ali’s mind...they could have walked away. Instead, they used their collective power to support Ali. They sacrificed some of their own popularity to stand up for his religious freedom and to stand up to a government that seemed to be singling Ali out for punishment because he was black and outspoken.”⁶⁸

Robinson and Ali embraced different religious traditions and expressed their faith in their own unique ways. Yet, both of their lives exhibit the central role that faith played in shaping who they were and in grounding them as human beings amidst the vicissitudes of life. As Black professional athletes, who were Anti-Racist activists, they stood on the foundation of their faith as they used their fame to fight for justice.

Sports Ministries

My research reveals that sports ministries have played a formative role in the development of many Christian athletes in the United States. Many Black athletes have experienced disappointment and disenchantment when their Christian support networks have fallen short in the area of Anti-Racism on individual and institutional levels. All of the current and former athletes I interviewed for this Project, regardless of their ethnicity, told stories about participating in activities that were sponsored by sports ministries.

From Bible studies to community service, the character-building activities they engaged

⁶⁸ Jonathan Eig, “The Cleveland Summit and Muhammad Ali: The True Story,” *The Undefeated*, June 1, 2017, <https://theundefeated.com/features/the-cleveland-summit-muhammad-ali/>.

in were usually sponsored by Christian sports ministry organizations seeking to spread the Gospel of Christ.

Some the national ministry organizations that make up this faith-based infrastructure are Athletes in Action (founded in 1966), Sports Spectrum (founded in 1985), and Pro Athletes Outreach (founded in 1974). The oldest and most prominent of these organizations is Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA).

Since 1954, FCA has been challenging coaches and athletes on the professional, college, high school, junior high and youth levels to use the powerful platform of sport to reach every coach and every athlete with the transforming power of Jesus Christ.⁶⁹

FCA supports coaches and their families along their Christian journey. In turn, the coaches support the athletes they coach along their Christian journeys. Christian players are equipped to demonstrate what a committed and engaged Christian life looks like so that other players are encouraged to receive Christ and join the fellowship. At its core, FCA is a ministry of evangelism, support and character-building that started out focusing on college athletics.

FCA Founder Don McClanen tells the story of a scheduled five-minute meeting with Branch Rickey that ended up lasting five hours. In that meeting, McClanen shared his vision to create FCA and was encouraged by Rickey to do it. Rooted in white, evangelical Protestantism, FCA prides itself in affirming the human dignity of its members and seeing them as equal in the sight of God. From the beginning, Blacks were eligible for FCA membership and employment. With a strong Southern constituency amidst Jim and Jane Crow laws, many FCA coaches and athletes came from segregated

⁶⁹ “Vision and Mission,” Fellowship of Christian Athletes, accessed October 24, 2020, <https://www.fca.org/aboutus/who-we-are/vision-mission>.

contexts. This made the ministry's equal opportunity approach profoundly counter-cultural in the 1950s. FCA laudably refused to patronize retreat centers that would not welcome their Black staff and members through the main entrance or serve their Black constituents in the same spaces where they served the white ones.

The color line reared its head in FCA in the 1960s. Some Blacks saw fighting systemic racism through the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements as a logical extension of their Christian faith. FCA chose to maintain a relative silence on these issues stating a belief that "interracial relationships in sports, built around a shared love for Jesus, would eventually lead to a more just society."⁷⁰ FCA embraced a more gradual approach to integration. They continued to focus on coaches as the gateways and catalysts and did not actively engage in the larger social justice movements. The organization saw its approach as a type of activism that was causing integration to take place in the context of sports. Many white members and even some Black ones believed that sports integration would cause the rest of society to follow. "Not all were hostile, but most sided with former football player Dan Towler, a Methodist minister and Black FCA leader, who defended the place of sports as a force for racial progress."⁷¹

These were trying times for Calvin Jones, a Black student-athlete at the University of Iowa, and others like him.⁷² Though Jones was nurtured and supported by FCA, he saw his engagement in social justice movements as an extension of his Christian calling and witness. The conflict created by FCA's gradual versus his own activist

⁷⁰ Paul Putz, "The Role of Sports Ministries in the NFL Protests." *Religion and Politics*, October 17, 2017, <https://religionandpolitics.org/2017/10/17/the-role-of-sports-ministries-in-the-nfl-protests/>.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Calvin Jack Jones was an African American college football player for the University of Iowa in the 1950s. Jones is one of only two Iowa football players to have his jersey number retired by the school.

approach to racial equality caused a great deal of personal turmoil for Jones and many other justice-oriented Black, Christian athletes. Jones and other Black Christian athletes reported feeling as if their ties to predominately white, evangelical, Christian organizations were compromising their commitment to the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements.⁷³ Activists in the movements were suspicious of FCA and viewed the organization and its members as socially and politically conservative. At the same time, Black FCA members who dared to engage in the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements felt disconnected from their FCA colleagues when their actions were deemed to be too radical for an organization that was committed to being apolitical, colorblind, and content with a gradual approach to desegregation.

An inflection point was reached in 1968 when Olympians Smith and Carlos stood barefoot on the medal stand and raised their fists in solidarity with the Black Power Movement to protest racial discrimination in the United States. Their actions intensified FCA's internal racialized divide. NBA Hall of Famer and eventual United States Senator from New Jersey, Bill Bradley, who was a major leader within FCA during the 1960s and '70s, left the organization when he observed a large number of FCA members being "either indifferent or antagonistic toward the Civil Rights Movement."⁷⁴

More than half a century later, with sports teams being more ethnically and culturally diverse, the plethora of racialized injustices facing BIPOC is on the rise. The integration of sports teams did not cause society to follow suit. In *How to be an Antiracist*, Ibram X. Kendi says a racist is "one who is supporting a racist policy through

⁷³ Putz, "Sports Ministries."

⁷⁴ Ibid.

their actions or inaction or expressing a racist idea.”⁷⁵ When justice-oriented athletes began to fight systemic and institutionalized racism, FCA’s inactions and silence placed the organization in Kendi’s category of racist. Though this categorization may seem harsh, I believe it was uncomfortable for FCA to affirm the Black Power and Civil Rights movements because FCA’s ultimate aim was assimilation – unity on the terms set by the white majority – rather than unification. The affirmation of Black social movements was a bridge too far those seeking cultural homogeneity.

This country’s growing fear of Communism provides another layer of context to FCA’s refusal to support the Anti-Racist activism of justice-oriented athletes. The Cold War conflict between the United States and Russia was gaining steam amid rampant rumors of Russian influence and infiltration. National efforts to combat these fears resulted in public Congressional hearings that purported to uncover Communism in the United States. Under the leadership of Senator Joseph McCarthy, these hearings sought to identify and punish anyone who was perceived to be connected to the Communist Party or its ideals. When the FCA was established, this context had a clear influence on its founders. A 1955 program guidebook promised to help “guard against communism, decrease juvenile delinquency in America, and improve morals, integrity, worthy ideals, [and] good sportsmanship.”⁷⁶ As the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements were gaining momentum in the late 1950s and early 1960s, detractors labeled these efforts as Communist and radical. Certainly, this labeling concerned FCA.

⁷⁵ Kendi, Ibram X., How to be an Antiracist, New York, One World Random House, 2019

⁷⁶ Putz, “Sports Ministries.”

It is evident that FCA and other sports ministry organizations have played an important role in raising the visibility of faith, specifically Christianity, within the contexts of sports. My interviews, as well as public writing and messaging related to the engagement of Christianity in athletics, substantiate the fact that sports ministry organizations have been successful in the areas of evangelism, individual transformation, community service, spiritual engagement, and character-building.

It is also apparent that these networks have fallen short in their efforts to address racism and related social justice issues. Today a growing number of Christian athletes, Black and white, are engaged in Anti-Racist activism. They are lifting their voices across racialized lines. What is missing is an institutional infrastructure to support their engagement.

Chapter Four

Contemporary Anti-Racist Activism

White racism is an everyday reality for African Americans and other Americans of color and, therefore, must be understood as systemic and overarching, something very different from individual acts of meanness. It is the total domination and exploitation of African Americans and other Americans of color by whites in the economic, political and sociocultural spheres of US society.⁷⁷

With inequities stemming from embedded notions of racialized hierarchy permeating the world of sport, it is difficult to explore activism amongst Black professional athletes without focusing on racism. The color line continues to be one of America's greatest challenges.

Basketball Bias

In 1984, the menace of racism in professional basketball was evidenced when Donald Sterling, owner of the Los Angeles Clippers, was caught on audio tape making racist remarks about Black players in his skybox. After witnessing the hailstorm that rained down on Sterling, Atlanta Hawks owner Bruce Levenson combed back through two years of e-mails to see if he had used any racist language or made any ethnically insensitive remarks. His investigation revealed a strategically targeted marketing campaign to increase ticket sales amongst 40-year-old white males to guarantee profitability.⁷⁸ At that time, forty to seventy percent of those attending Hawks games were Black. The fan diversification strategy shows that Sterling, Levenson, and other NBA team owners place a premium value on white fans and take the Black men, women, and children who attend their games for granted. The BIPOC who purchase tickets also

⁷⁷ Smith, *Race, Religion, and Sport*, 2.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

pay for concessions and parking. What makes their green money of lesser value than that of white men?

Incidences of this type underscore why the activism of Black professional athletes focuses on dismantling racist systems and structures. Regardless of their stellar performance records, BIPOC consistently encounter discriminatory barriers to inclusion, equity, compensation, leadership, and ownership. Black athletes, in particular, are denied access to coaching, managing and owning teams. Of the thirty teams in the NBA, only eight Blacks serve in the roles of president and general manager.⁷⁹ Yet, roughly eighty percent of the NBA's players are Black. There is one Black owner, Michael Jordan.⁸⁰

As teams become more integrated, racism morphs and intersects with classism and sexism. The intersectionality of these isms shows up in the marginalizing behaviors and policies that the WNBA's A'ja Wilson of the Las Vegas Aces describes in an article she penned for the *Players' Tribune*. In laying out the ways that stereotyping ostracizes Black women, Wilson recounts a story from her childhood in South Carolina. As a fourth grader, she was invited to the birthday party of one of her white classmates and informed that if she attended, she might have to stay outside because the classmate's dad did not like Black people. While growing up and finding her voice, Wilson says she felt disregarded by those who called her "loud, ghetto, and angry."⁸¹ As a result of the

⁷⁹ Morten Jensen, "The NBA is Putting a New Priority on Diversifying its Executive Ranks," *Forbes*, August 21, 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/mortenjensen/2020/08/21/diversifying-executives-in-sports-has-become-prioritized-in-2020/?sh=4b49502d1db2>.

⁸⁰ It is important to note that Venus and Serena Williams became the first Black women to own a minority stake in an NFL franchise when they bought part of the Miami Dolphins in 2009. Jack Dougherty, "Venus and Serena Williams Made So Much Money in Tennis They Bought the Dolphins," *Sportscasting*, September 4, 2020, <https://www.sportscasting.com/venus-and-serena-williams-made-so-much-money-in-tennis-they-bought-the-dolphins/>.

⁸¹ Wilson, A'ja, "Dear Black Girls," *The Players' Tribune*, July 20, 2020, <https://www.theplayerstribune.com/articles/aja-wilson-dear-black-girls>.

prejudice that persisted throughout her life, Wilson's activism is related to fighting racism and sexism on and off the basketball court. She held her college signing day at her high school that rivaled the traditional practice for boys. As a college and WNBA player, she always been willing to publicly critique the gender and race double standards of sports and society.⁸²

Luisa Harris of Delta State University remains relatively unknown as a direct result of the double standard that renders Black women the lowest in terms of their level of public recognition. A uniquely powerful and talented basketball player, Harris led her university to three women's national championship basketball titles between 1974 and 1977. She was a once-in-a-generation player but the double-whammy of being Black and a woman rendered her invisible to most.

Before the 1999 Women's National Basketball League all-star game in New York, the league spent a week leading up to the game, heralding the dramatic strides women's basketball had made. On game day, the league celebrated the rich history of women's basketball by flashing a historical timeline. I was stunned....Luisa Harris' name was never mentioned. This was tantamount to talking baseball history and not mentioning Babe Ruth.⁸³

To add insult to the injury of not even being included in the highlight reel of the sport her dominant play helped to revolutionize, when Harris returned to her alma mater to serve on the basketball team's coaching staff, she was bypassed for the head coach vacancy as the university chose a white man. The experiences of Wilson, Harris and others are paving the way for the next generation of activist athletes who will fight on for equal access to leadership opportunities.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Rhoden, *Forty Million Dollar Slaves*, 220.

Kelly Loeffler, co-owner of the WNBA's Atlanta Dream, took offense when the team embraced the Black Lives Matter Movement. Loeffler, an appointed United States Senator at the time, said,

I adamantly oppose the Black Lives Matter political movement, which has advocated for the defunding of police, called for the removal of Jesus from churches and the disruption of the nuclear family structure, harbored anti-Semitic views, and promoted violence and destruction across the country. I believe it is totally misaligned with the values and goals of the WNBA and the Atlanta Dream, where we support tolerance and inclusion.⁸⁴

Her words were experienced as a betrayal of what the players stood for in terms of human dignity and gender equity. In response, before their next game, the players wore t-shirts adorned with the phrase "Vote Warnock," a reference to Loeffler's political opponent, Raphael G. Warnock. Warnock ultimately defeated Loeffler.

In 2019, while playing for the Milwaukee Bucks, NBA player Kyle Korver wrote about White Privilege in the *Players' Tribune*. The catalyst for his article was Thabo Sefolosha, the NBA's first born Swiss-born player. Sefolosha, who identifies strongly with his South African roots, had his leg broken by New York Police Officers during a wrongful arrest in 2015. In the article, Korver reflects on the evolution of his own thinking. He reports that he initially asked himself, "What was he (Thabo) doing there?"⁸⁵ Korver then realized that what he should have been thinking, "There is something wrong here."⁸⁶

⁸⁴ Brewer, "Kelly Loeffler."

⁸⁵ Kyle Korver, "Privileged," *The Players' Tribune*, April 8, 2019, <https://www.theplayerstribune.com/articles/kyle-korver-utah-jazz-nba>.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

Football's Fight for Fairness

Open critiques by Anti-Racist athletes are calling attention to individual biases as well as systemic racism. While playing for the NFL's Cleveland Browns in 2014, Andrew Hawkins wore a T-shirt that read "JUSTICE FOR TAMIR RICE - JOHN CRAWFORD" on the front and "THE REAL BATTLE OF OHIO" on the back before a game. Rice, just 12 years old, and Crawford, only 22, had recently been shot and killed by police in Ohio.⁸⁷

In 2016, Colin Kaepernick, the quarterback that led the NFL's San Francisco 49ers to Super Bowl XLVII, knelt during the National Anthem in support of the Black Lives Matter movement. His Anti-Racist activism transcended the world of sports. Kaepernick's intention was to use his platform to draw attention to racial injustice, police brutality, and systematic oppression. His actions drew a range of responses: red-hot anger from the 45th President of the United States and his patriotic evangelical followers; brotherly solidarity from players who knelt with him or stood and locked arms with him; and respect for his stance from a large number of fans, including a group of Black pastors who organized a mancott.⁸⁸ Right wing media outlets and conservative commentators publicly demonized Kaepernick by labeling him unpatriotic and anti-military.

Upon being informed that he was going to be released by the 49ers before the next season, Kaepernick chose to opt out of his contract at the beginning of the 2017 season. Despite having led his team to the Super Bowl and possessing more experience than others who have been hired as NFL quarterbacks, he has been unable to secure

⁸⁷ Brewer, "Kelly Loeffler."

⁸⁸ Nick Birdsong, "Black Pastors Release Video, Announce NFL Boycott in Support of Colin Kaepernick," *Sporting News*, August 19, 2019, <https://www.sportingnews.com/us/nfl/news/colin-kaepernick-nfl-boycott-black-pastors-charlottesville-donald-trump-video-news/16u514fme4sr01wkiqv4322ipl>.

another quarterback spot in the NFL since then. It was not until the 2020 season, after the worldwide Black Lives Matter awakening, that the NFL allowed players to protest systemic racism by kneeling during the national anthem and/or making statements on their cleats. Even though Commissioner Roger Goodell, publicly acknowledged that Kaepernick was correct and apologized for sanctioning him, Kaepernick remains unemployed.

On May 25, 2020, the brutal murder of George Floyd by Police Officer Derek Chauvin who suffocated Floyd by placing his knee on Floyd's neck for eight minutes and forty-six seconds, ignited a series of worldwide Black Lives Matter protests. Though there had been other murders of unarmed Black people in 2020 by white vigilantes and police, the callousness and brutality of Floyd's televised murder caused the zeitgeist in this nation to shift.⁸⁹ New levels of Anti-Racist activism and engagement ensued as the consciousness of Americans across racial, political, geographic, and socioeconomic lines was raised.

Not only were players in the NBA, NFL and WNBA protesting, their leagues supported them. NBA players had *Black Lives Matter, Freedom and Equality* stitched onto their jerseys. The phrase *Black Lives Matter* was etched onto hardwood basketball courts. Pre-game protests continued in the NFL, and the phrase *End Racism* was stenciled onto NFL end zones. Sports and leagues that were heretofore able to "escape" BLM protests – such as baseball (MLB) and hockey (NHL) – showed solidarity. When Jacob Blake was shot in the back by local law enforcement in Kenosha, Wisconsin, players for

⁸⁹ On February 23, 2020, twenty-five-year-old Ahmaud Arbery was shot and killed by white vigilantes while jogging in Brunswick, Georgia. On March 13, 2020, twenty-six-year-old Breonna Taylor was murdered in her own home by Louisville police during the execution of a botched no knock warrant.

MLB's Milwaukee Brewers and the NBA's Milwaukee Bucks pushed to have games postponed in protest. NBA players, whose protests had previously been limited to pre-game t-shirts and social media posts, were now engaging in Anti-Racist activism that up until 2019 jeopardized their jobs. The same NBA that negotiated an agreement with former player Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf to stand for the national anthem in 1996 was allowing players to kneel during the anthem in 2020.

A Cyclical Struggle

There will be *whitelash* attempts to divide and conquer the broad-based coalitions of Americans who participated in the human rights uprising during the spring and summer of 2020. "*Whitelash* is a new word but the term describes an old reality: Dramatic racial progress in America is inevitably followed by a white backlash."⁹⁰ After the abolition of slavery, the progress of the Reconstruction Era was undermined by segregationist Jim and Jane Crow Laws. After the Voting Rights Act was passed in 1965, its power and authority were slowly eroded over time.

Kaepernick and his present-day compatriots know this pattern very well. So did Curt Flood, in 1970, when he challenged the MLB Reserve Clause that restrictively bound players to the first team that signed them for the entirety of their professional career. What added to the intensity of Flood's David-versus-Goliath fight was that he was a Black man. For his audacity, he experienced the whitelash of losing his job for years during the prime of his playing career. Nevertheless, his courage paved the way to the landmark free agency decision in 1976. So seismic was this shift, that one of the folks I

⁹⁰ Blake, Jonathan, "This is what whitelash looks like" <https://www.cnn.com/2016/11/11/us/obama-trump-white-backlash>, November 19, 2016. Following the election of the 45th President of the United States, Van Jones coined the term whitelash.

interviewed stated, “Every professional athlete should be giving a portion of their paycheck to Curt Flood’s family.”⁹¹

I have often heard Black elders lament that the generations of professional athletes that followed those who attended the 1967 Cleveland Summit are neither as steeped in faith traditions nor as civically engaged as their predecessors were. Arthur Ashe, Althea Gibson, and Wyomia Tyus are among the Anti-Racist activist athletes who followed in the tradition of Ali, Carlos, Flood and Thomas to put their careers and their lives on the line for social justice. These athletes’ mere presence in their respective sports and on international stages called the world’s attention to the dignity of Black people.

There is a cadre of professional athletes whose prophetic activism expresses their connection to and love for those who are being marginalized, oppressed, and murdered. A look at their actions demonstrates that they were watching, listening, and learning from the elders.

The Impact of Faith on Sports

There have also been incidences in the twentieth century, where very high profile, professional athletes’ fidelity to their faith has prevented them from performing on their sabbath. British runner Eric Lidell’s story is told in the 1981 movie *Chariots of Fire*. He refused to race in the 1924 Olympic Games because the 100-meter dash, an event he specialized in, was scheduled on Sunday. As a devout Scottish Christian and missionary, Lidell’s beliefs prevented him from working on the sabbath. In 1965, Sandy Koufax was scheduled to be the starting pitcher for the Brooklyn/Los Angeles Dodgers in Game One

⁹¹ All interviews were anonymous. This sentiment was shared in May 2020.

of the World Series. The game fell on Yom Kippur, the Jewish Day of Atonement. Therefore, Koufax chose not to pitch.

The Anti-Racist activism of many professional athletes and their allies occurs at the intersection of their faith and vocation. Faith is often more of a motivating factor than the outside observer can see. As previously stated, Robinson was an active United Methodist who spoke about how his faith grounded him during the turbulent times of breaking the color barrier in MLB. That platform propelled Robinson into activism that continues today.

Through his leadership, skill and courage, Jackie Robinson broke barriers in sports, media and business, impacting our entire society and helping to set the stage for the modern civil rights movement. For more than 42 years, the Jackie Robinson Foundation has continued Robinson's commitment to equal opportunity by addressing the achievement gap in higher education, and is poised to expand his rich legacy by building the Jackie Robinson Museum in New York City.

Founded in 1973 by [Rachel Robinson](#), the Foundation has advanced higher education by [providing generous, multi-year scholarship awards coupled with a comprehensive set of support services to highly motivated JRF Scholars and Extra Innings Fellows attending colleges and universities throughout the country.](#)⁹²

In the 1960s and '70s, Cassius Clay's conversion to Islam played out very publicly as he changed his name first to Cassius X and later to Muhammad Ali. When he became a conscientious objector to the Vietnam War draft, Ali cited newfound faith as a member of the Nation of Islam as his main reason.

Faith is arguably embedded in America's terroir, and has been since Native Americans occupied the land prior to the Puritan invasion. When Europeans arrived, they grafted their version of Christianity into the pre-existing terroir. Many Black people in

⁹² Jackie Robinson Foundation, "About Us," accessed January 30, 2021, <https://www.jackierobinson.org/about/>.

the United States, including professional athletes, have some connection to the Christian church. However, most Black athletes treat their faith as a private matter.

For instance, when interviewed at Union Theological Seminary in 2019, about his activism, feminism and philanthropy, NFL Super Bowl champion Michael Bennett reflected on the long line of preachers in his family tree and the role they played in shaping his worldview. Yet, there is very little mention of his religious upbringing in his book, *Things that Make White People Uncomfortable*. When I raised what I perceived to be Bennett's incongruity in my project-thesis interview with his coauthor Dave Zirin, the sports journalist said he remembered Bennett talking about his past but never thought much about pursuing it further. The book is an expression of Bennett's Anti-Racist activism. It focuses on "the responsibilities of athletes as role models to speak out against injustice."⁹³ According to Christian activist Etan Thomas, who is a former NBA player turned journalist, "agents and financial managers tell their athletic clients to stay away from speaking publicly about politics and religion so that they can build a more neutral and media-friendly brand."⁹⁴

In addition to politics and religion, many in the world of professional sports are uncomfortable with Blackness. In the book *Forty-Million Dollar Slaves*, Bill Rhoden puts forth an analogy of Black athletes being on a career developmental conveyor belt. He states,

The Belt is designed to dull any racial consciousness and eliminate communal instincts. Instead, the Belt cultivates a culture of racial know-nothingism.... [T]he Conveyor Belt involves a significant and often subtle element of 'deprogramming' potential trouble-makers – black athletes who might be tempted to think of themselves, or their situations, in racial terms and who might want to use their prominence in the service of something other than enriching the

⁹³ Conversation with Dave Zirin, September 28, 2019.

⁹⁴ Conversation with Etan Thomas, November 9, 2019.

institution....On the Conveyor Belt, young athletes quickly learn that easy passage through a white-controlled system is contingent upon not ‘rocking the boat,’ not being a ‘trouble-maker,’ and making those in positions of power feel comfortable with the athletes’ blackness.⁹⁵

The Conveyor Belt context attempts to acculturate Black athletes not to discuss their faith, politics, or Blackness.

There was one particular instance where the public articulation of one faith was encouraged to illegitimatize another faith. In an attempt to create positive polarity in his direction, heavyweight boxer Floyd Patterson, who was a devout Roman Catholic, told *Sports Illustrated* in 1964 that he had to win the fight for Christianity. Patterson also refused to call Ali by his new name. Instead of speedily defeating Patterson, Ali dragged the fight out to its full length and taunted Patterson throughout by constantly chanting, “What’s my name fool?”

There are some professional athletes who don’t mind being “out” about their faith. One contributing factor is the plethora of communications channels that allow athletes to create their own media and messaging. Reggie White, who was posthumously enshrined in the NFL Hall of Fame, became a member of the FCA while playing football at the University of Tennessee. Throughout his career, White was known as a Christian. He drew public criticism in 1998 when he openly condemned homosexuality as a person of faith. NBA all-star Dwayne Wade, one of the most recognizable personalities in professional basketball in the twenty-first century, chose his jersey number three to represent the Holy Trinity. His mother, who was formerly incarcerated for selling drugs, is now a minister. In 2008, he bought her a church building. Now retired from the

⁹⁵ Rhoden, *Forty Million Dollar Slaves*, 177-178.

WNBA, four-time Olympic Gold Medalist and perennial All-Star Tamika Catchings uses her platform as a basketball executive, philanthropist, and motivational speaker to reflect on the importance of faith as she inspires young women and men.⁹⁶

Others choose to fly beneath the radar. Though future MLB Hall of Famer Mariano Rivera rarely spoke of his faith while playing for the New York Yankees, the world-famous pitcher joined his wife in full-time ministry when he retired from baseball. Track and Field star Alyson Felix is a PK (preacher's kid), grew up in a strong Christian household and actively practices her faith.⁹⁷

The number of athletes who are “out” in terms of speaking about how their faith informs their justice-oriented activism is growing. In 2016, Eric Reid decided to kneel beside his teammate Kaepernick during the singing of the national anthem and salute of the American flag. Reid confessed, “I prayed about it and I sought guidance from my pastor. For me, this felt like the right thing to do.... My faith talks about being a voice of the oppressed, and that’s all I was trying to do.”⁹⁸

In September 2017, perennial NBA all-star Steph Curry found himself in the cross hairs of the 45th President of the United States. After Curry commented that he would not attend a White House celebration for the Golden State Warriors’ NBA Championship, the President disinvited the team. Curry is unashamed of his faith.

Being a Christian athlete means competing for Christ, in a way in which you always give your all for Him, and win or lose, you thank Him for the ability and

⁹⁶ Tameka Catchings Catch the Stars website. <https://www.catchthestars.org/> . “About Me.” Accessed on January 30, 2021. The first man or woman in recorded basketball history to record a quintuple-double (Duncanville High School in 1997), Catchings led the Indiana Fever to becoming one of the WNBA’s elite franchises. She received the first ESPN Humanitarian Award in 2015 for her Catch the Stars Foundation.

⁹⁷ Pease, Joshua. “Legendary sprinter Alyson Felix eyes 2020 Tokyo Games after challenging childbirth.” Sports Spectrum, July 24, 2019.

⁹⁸ Etan Thomas, *We Matter: Athletes and Activism*, (Brooklyn: Akashic Books, 2018)73.

opportunity to play. It means giving all the glory to God, no matter the outcome, because you trust in His plan for your life.⁹⁹

Over the last four years, Curry has intentionally become more outspoken about his stance on a variety of social justice issues.

Maya Moore, a four-time WNBA Champion, six-time WNBA All Star, and Olympic Gold Medalist, cited her faith as the reason for her 2019 break from basketball:

Some of you may know about the verse from the Bible that I include in my autographs: Colossians 3:23.... ‘Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord....’ My announcement is about how I’m shifting the focus to the whatever. My focus in 2019 will not be on professional basketball but will instead be on the people in my family, as well as on investing my time in some ministry dreams that have been stirring in my heart for many years.¹⁰⁰

At the height of her career, Moore began advocating for the release of Jonathan Irons. In 1998, at the age sixteen, Irons was convicted of assault and battery in Missouri and sentenced to fifty years in prison. Moore was a persistent and vocal advocate for his release. In 2020, Irons was exonerated and released from prison. In September, he and Moore married.

In 2020, when protests of the murder of George Floyd erupted into a storm of property damage in Atlanta, the faith of NBA player Malcom Brogden brought calm. He, along with fellow NBA player Jaylen Brown, used social media to invite protestors to join him at the MLK Historical Site the following day to march peacefully. The grandson of John Hurst Adams, a bishop in the African Methodist Episcopal Church who had been

⁹⁹ Marc J. Spears, “Steph Curry Isn’t Considered an Athlete Activist – But He Should Be.” *The Undeclared*, February 10, 2017, <https://theundefeated.com/features/steph-curry-under-armour/>.

¹⁰⁰ Maya Moore, “The Shift,” *The Players’ Tribune*, February 5, 2019, <https://www.theplayerstribune.com/articles/maya-moore-wnba-announcement>.

actively engaged in the Civil Rights Movement, Brogden attributed his activism to the influence of his grandfather.

I grew up with that in my blood....I grew up with my grandparents, understanding that the only way to change policy, the only way to make real change in this country, is to demonstrate, is to push your agenda, is to be demanding, is to not give up.¹⁰¹

In the twenty-first century, Black athletes have become increasingly more vocal and visible in terms of their activism, particularly when it comes to racialized issues. In so doing, they are disrupting the status quo and making those who embrace the current systems and structures of racialized hierarchy uncomfortable. They are also inspiring fans and allies to join the centuries-old struggle to dismantle racism in America.

While there is a wide range of support for the 2020 BLM awakening among white Christians athletes with connections to evangelical sports ministries including but not limited to the National Women's Soccer League's Julie Ertz, the NFL's Nick Foles, MLB's Clayton Kershaw, and Clemson University's college football quarterback and future first round draft pick Trevor Lawrence; Sam Coonrod, a white Christian MLB player cited his faith as the reason for his opposition to kneeling during the national anthem.

There are many athletes of faith for whom sports and activism intersect. The challenge is that their efforts lack the united, focused action that is necessary to persuade those who own franchises and administer leagues to make substantive, sustainable change.

¹⁰¹ Paul Putz, "John Hurst Adams, Church Leader and Civil Rights Icon – And also Malcom Brogden's Grandfather," *Faith and Sports*, June 8, 2020, <https://blogs.baylor.edu/faithsports/2020/06/08/john-hurst-adams-church-leader-and-civil-rights-icon-and-also-malcolm-brogdens-grandfather/>.

Chapter Five

The Project

As a lifelong sports participant and fan, I have been developing this Project most of my life. It has been waiting for years to be researched, synthesized, and written. This is more than a ministerial or academic exercise for me in that it is a lived experience that has shaped who I am today. Sports have been and continue to be a major part of my life and identity. This Project reflects that reality.

I have experienced the joy of belonging as my teams worked together to achieve common goals. As a player, coach, and parent, I have felt a tremendous sense of accomplishment when my teams have won championships. My oldest son is a baseball pitcher, and my wife and I were elated when he threw a complete game to win his state high school championship in 2019. As a fan, I was overjoyed when in 2004, my beloved Boston Red Sox won their first baseball World Series since 1918. Conversely, some of my deepest disappointments are sports related. I have felt the heartache of not making the “cut” when trying out for a team. I have felt the physical pain in my stomach when my favorite teams failed to win, often in excruciating fashion. I was heartbroken when, in 1986, I watched the Boston Red Sox lose a two-run lead in the tenth inning of the World Series to the New York Mets. They were one out away from winning. I was unable to sleep on the night when the New England Patriots lost their undefeated season to the New York Giants in Super Bowl XLVI. Whenever my son pitches for his various baseball teams, I get butterflies in my stomach.

Sports have also been the arena in which I have seen and experienced racism, sexism, homophobia, and other dehumanizing behaviors. I am angered by the veiled racist comments of radio talk show hosts and callers when NFL players chose to kneel

and lock arms during the national anthem; the idolizing of the American flag with a narrowly defined “love it or leave it” mentality; and the continued coded language that refers to players of color as athletic and white players as strategic.

As a native of Massachusetts, I reluctantly acknowledge my own initial ignorance and narrow worldview in terms of the nuances of institutional racism, sexism, and other marginalizing systems at play within my hometown teams. As a fan, I did not have a racial analysis. I was unaware, until my middle-aged adulthood, that the Red Sox were the last MLB team to integrate. I had no idea that for the longest time they perpetuated institutionalized, racialized stereotypes that limited the ascendancy of Black and Latino players. However, I was aware and embarrassed that the Celtics of my youth could play five White players at once in a league where most of the players are Black. This undermined their progressive practices from the 1960s when they became the first NBA team who had five Black players start a game, and the first to hire a Black head coach, Bill Russell.

When I started the Doctor of Ministry program at Drew Theological School, I believed that given my many years of expertise in religious leadership development, church management, community organizing and philanthropy, my Project would focus on some aspect of faith-based, organizational development. What I discovered instead was a deep, personal curiosity about the interconnection of sports, faith, and activism. Since I have been living at their nexus since childhood, I had a collection of unexamined experiences and stories. When I saw male and female professional basketball players wearing t-shirts of solidarity after Trayvon Martin was killed by a white vigilante and other unarmed Black men and women were murdered by law enforcement officers, I

began to explore my fascination with faith, sports, and activism in a thoughtful manner. I was so inspired by the Anti-Racist activism of NBA and Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA) players that I became curious about what role, if any, faith may have played in their decision to affirm the humanity of Black people and espouse their right to life. Reflections that began as tiny sparks of flickering light against the dark backdrop of injustice began to take the shape of a constellation when NFL players started kneeling and locking arms during the national anthem at the beginning of their games in 2018 to protest state sanctioned police brutality against Black men and women that resulted in multiple murders without charges or convictions in the rare instances when charges were filed. I began to clearly envision this Project as an opportunity to thoughtfully step back and examine athletics through the lenses of faith and activism.

Historical Research

In a society that seems to specialize in being ahistorical with regard to its racialized sins, it was important to engage in research to take a closer look at the historical and current ways that faith, activism and sports have and continue to be practiced and expressed by Black athletes. My discoveries gave deeper meaning to present-day protest.

Contemporary Interviews

One-on-one interviews were an important part of my investigations. These conversations provided deeper insights regarding the role of faith in the activism of those engaged in professional sports. In September of 2019, I conducted four contextual interviews. The interviewees helped me think through how I might frame this Project. I am indebted to Dave Zirin, noted sports author and journalist; Richard Lapchick, founder

and director of the Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sports at the University of Central Florida; Etan Thomas, former NBA player and current social activist and author; and Jamil Smith, senior writer at *Rolling Stone* and previous producer for the Rachel Maddow and Melissa Harris-Perry Shows on MSNBC.

With the framework in place, eleven one-on-one interviews were conducted via video conference with current and former athletes, as well as those connected to professional athletics. The people interviewed were:

- Boris Cheek, an on-field official in the NFL;
- Joy Cheek, an assistant Women's Basketball Coach at Clemson University and former WNBA player;
- Paul Dickens, a Division I college baseball player at Baylor University;
- Allie Freeman, a former Division I college basketball player at the University of Arkansas;
- Sterling E. Freeman, an ordained change agent and former Division I college basketball player at Davidson University;
- Stacy Ingram, a former Division I college basketball player at Bennett College and North Carolina A&T;
- Nick Kreutzer, a Division I baseball player at the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff;
- Jantel Lavender, a WNBA player who has been in the League for 8 years;
- Louis Moore, Associate Professor of History at Grand Valley State University;
- Paul Putz, Assistant Director of the Sports Ministry Program with the Faith in Sports Institute at Baylor University's Truett Theological Seminary; and

- Ben Troupe, former Division I college football player at the University of Florida, former NFL player, and currently an ESPN analyst in the southeastern United States.

Educational Convening

On October 14, 2020, I led an Educational Convening at the Ebenezer Baptist Church, as a part of the weekly Wednesday evening study and reflection series for the congregation. The title for the session was *Faith at the Crossroads of Sports and Activism*. In this session I shared some of the history from my research and findings from my interviews.

Area of Opportunity/Proposed Solution

It became apparent that what is missing on the landscape of professional sports is an organized, faith-rooted network that supports the ability of players to plan and organize in ways that welcome their whole selves to the work of social justice. This Project has given birth to a funding proposal to establish and nurture a network of Black professional athletes who will engage in faith-rooted, strategic Anti-Racist activism, spiritual reflection, and mutual support.

This project-thesis pulls together a lifetime of experiences. It synthesizes a range of lessons learned to develop an approach to faith, activism and sports that integrates the beliefs, vocations and passions of Black professional athletes in ways that can shift them from a perpetual reactive stance in relationship to forces that seek to dehumanize and marginalize Black people to a proactive one where Black professional athletes will have the ability to collaboratively harness their power, wisdom, words and work into prophetic strategies for social justice.

Chapter Six

Realtime First-Person Perspectives

The interviews conducted in conjunction with this project provide real-time contemporary context and add experiential depth to the research. The subjects are current and former athletes, and individuals who are closely connected to professional athletes. They shared real accounts about activism that is informed by faith. Their conversations demonstrate ways that the patterns of history are playing out in faith, sports, and activism today. Essentially, the interviews substantiate the fact that America was founded on the false principle of racialized hierarchy. This founding principle was established upon the initial European conquest of the Americas in 1492; and nurtured as new waves of immigrants arrived, including Africans in 1619, Pilgrims in 1620 and Puritans in 1630. The dynamics of racism continue to cause constant struggle as it relates to the human rights of Black people in America.

All of those with whom I spoke, in their own way, inspired me to consider aspects about the intersection of faith, sports and activism with which I had not previously grappled. This is what makes first-person interviews invaluable; they provide unique perspectives. The interviewees were intrigued by my proposal to create a faith-based network of support for Black athletes engaged in justice-oriented activism. A few key themes emerged from our conversations.

Safe and Sacred Companions

Strong one-on-one relationships sustained each individual. The Black athletes interviewed talked about the significance of their Black peers, coaches and friends who supported and mentored them at such specific times as the loss of a loved one, the change of a head coach, and the transition into a new environment. These safe companions have

helped players process change and navigate the unknown. As sacred companions, Black peers, coaches, and friends have affirmed the humanity of Black athletes when it was challenged, particularly in predominantly white situations. Religion has been very present in these relationships. Faith often organically emerged in ways that helped folks seek and develop a spiritual center and build resilience. No one spoke of being proselytized. Not all of the life-giving relationships were confined to the world of sports, especially when the athletes were in college.

Familial relationships, particularly those with parents and grandparents, were influential in establishing, instilling, and nurturing the value of giving back. It was simply what one did in community. For some, it was the loving your neighbor as yourself part of being a Christian. For many, regular Sunday worship was a given when they were young. They saw/see community service as an important way that churches demonstrate the love of God in the world. Faith was and is in the terroir of their active, intense, complicated sporting lives.

Giving Back and Paying It Forward

It quickly became evident that making things better for this and the next generation is of paramount importance to all of the Black athletes interviewed. Giving back to their communities was a consistent theme of each conversation.

First, there is a sense of personal responsibility to improve the quality of life for Black people in general, particularly those of the poor and working classes. Some of this is a result of the athletes themselves coming out of such communities. Many of their own parents were forced to work low wage jobs. Recognition of their own privilege fuels their drive to engage in community service with young people in the form of sports camps,

mentoring and small groups. Some spoke of their investments in communities that showed signs of society's disinvestment. One athlete was engaged in local demonstrations focused on changing policies that negatively impact poor and working-class Blacks.

Some of the interviewees have used their influence to create space for future collegiate athletes to have the opportunity to become paid professional athletes. They shared past and present accounts of their efforts to expand opportunities for Black college student athletes by advocating for policies focused on recruitment and retention – not just for Black students but also for Black faculty. Those who engaged in Anti-Racist activism while playing college sports understood their celebrity status as stellar Division 1 athletes and used it as a part of their organizing efforts.

The paid professional athletes interviewed reflected on using their leverage to provide greater access and opportunities for Blacks to be employed on and off the field. In the NFL, they have worked toward broadening the pipeline of Blacks to positions that have historically been reserved for their white counterparts. Though there are very few Black quarterbacks, head coaches, owners, administrations, referees, and athletic directors; in some instances, the advocacy and mentoring provided by Black professional athletes has opened doors for other people of color and women.

When asked about whether Black athletes should use their public platforms to speak out as a form of giving back, all affirmed its importance and were supportive. At the same time, they understood the tension, particularly for the less-established players. Not nearly as much is at risk for perennial all-stars, LeBron James, Maya Moore, Steph Curry and Serena Williams, as there is for the average player. Today's high profile, all-

stars are less vulnerable to the economic consequences Michael Jordan seemed to fear when he expressed the sentiment that “Republicans buy sneakers too.”¹⁰²

A few of the Black Christian athletes that I interviewed talked about fighting behind the scenes earlier in their careers. Though they had some concerns about job security and being labeled as troublemakers, they felt a sense of duty to open doors for others. They reported feeling an increased confidence and sense of freedom to speak out about injustices as they gained years of experience.

Reaching the Masses with Christianity

Admittedly, I went into this project suspecting that Christianity was an important aspect in justice-oriented activism. Yet, I was surprised to discover that Christianity is the dominant faith frame for professional athletes engaged in Anti-Racist activism. The prevalence of Christian faith expressions within sports came through loud and clear in my interviews. Players convene worship services before games on Sunday. They have Bible studies with coaches on college campuses. There are pre-game team prayers. Most of my interviewees were involved in sports ministry organizations. They pray with teammates, coaches, and other staff mid-field after football games. Some bring their bibles to the weight room.

I find it curious that so little is shared in the public discourse about sports given the fact that faith permeates the atmosphere. It leads me to believe that the power brokers in major league sports and broadcast media collude to conceal Christianity. People are rarely neutral when it comes to race or religion. Capitalism drives money makers to downplay anything that they fear might have a negative effect on their cash flow. As

¹⁰² Rhoden, *Forty Million Dollar Slaves*, 201.

stated earlier, the Conveyor Belt system of player development is designed to “dull any racial consciousness and eliminate communal instincts” so that Black Christian athletes are not perceived as troublemakers.¹⁰³

Things are changing. Black professional athletes are becoming more vocal on a range of issues, including their faith. Social media makes it possible for players to make social justice a part of their brand. They can address audiences whose interests are aligned with theirs through the use of technologies that have democratized the production and dissemination of digital content.

In the past, messaging and media were controlled by team owners’ public relations departments. As a result, players were saying what owners wanted the public to hear. Today, everyone has the power to be their own content creator and message disseminator. One by-product is that personal faith-based messages and testimonies are on the rise.

For the most part, in sports, Christianity is foundational in character and community building. Clemson University head coach Dabo Sweeney is building a football powerhouse by running a Christian-based football program with the blessing of the University.¹⁰⁴ Central to Sweeney’s approach is his focus on character building, leadership development, and community service through a Christian lens. His approach provides a strong sense of community and connection among current and former players. This was not an unusual experience for those interviewed. Many teams have engaged the services of Christian chaplains. Some of those with whom I spoke shared that there were strong Christian elements in sports as early as elementary school.

¹⁰³ Rhoden, *Forty Million Dollar Slaves*, 177-178.

¹⁰⁴ Tim Roha, “You Gotta Have Faith,” *Sports Illustrated* 130, no. 2 (September 9, 2019).

One of those interviewed stated that he believes that approximately seventy-five percent of Black football players come from the South, where the Black church is deeply rooted and a regular part of life. Some shared memories of accepting Christ as their Savior in their youth. There were others who considered themselves Christians but did not prioritize engagement with faith communities. Among those who were connected to a church or Christian sports ministry at the collegiate level, community service functioned as personalized expressions of their faith.

A Faith-based Sports Laboratory

Given their high-profile role in society, many see professional sports as a way to unite people across lines of difference. Universal elements of faith have the potential to provide common ground for conversations across divides in an increasingly polarized society. Professional athletes with a wide range of experiences, theologies and values are the terroir for a potential laboratory that would develop strategies for de-polarizing, bridging divides and embracing the humanity and dignity of all people. Their team, conference and league connections provide containers for engagement and observation.

Professional sports are a microcosm of larger society. As such, interactions within that context may provide clues as to how sports could transform segments of society. In speaking with my interviewees about the possibility of sports breaking down barriers, building transformative relationships, and creating cohesive communities, everyone felt the tension of despair and destiny. Amidst daunting systems and deeply ingrained practices, Black Christian professional athletes continue to have and to articulate visions of an Anti-Racist American society.

Chapter Seven

A Funding Proposal for Black Athletes Together Faith in Action (BATFA)

When I was in training camp with the Padres, there were about 50 people included at our alternate site. And including the trainers, and everybody that's there, you know how many were Black?

Five.

Two coaches and three players. So we were *tight*. We were all very close, having conversations about everything going on in the world like every single day. They had my back, and I had (and still have) their backs through anything and everything.

But we *had* to have each other's backs like that. Because you know what? I'm gonna be honest with you, I can't speak for what happened in the major clubhouse, but we had our normal meeting at nine o'clock at the alternate site after the **boycotts in sports started**, and nothing was said. (emphasis added)

I *wanted* to be like, "Hey, are we gonna talk about what's going on in the world? Or are we gonna keep hiding under this rock?"

I wanted to do that, but it's like, *Do I risk being seen as "that guy?" Do I risk being seen as a less desirable player?*¹⁰⁵

While the statements above by MLB player Taylor Trammell about his relationships with his Black colleagues are all too familiar for many Black athletes, such stories are rarely shared in mainstream media. There is a fear of negative repercussions for stepping up, or speaking out, to address concerns of fairness and justice. Players do not want to be marginalized or ostracized by their white counterparts, team owners or

¹⁰⁵ Taylor Trammell, "Baseball is not Black Enough," *The Players' Tribune*, September 8, 2020, <https://www.theplayerstribune.com/articles/baseball-is-not-black-enough-taylor-trammell-mlb>. The boycotts that he refers to in his quote took place on August 27 and 28, 2020, when the NBA's Milwaukee Bucks players refused to play their regularly scheduled game in response to the shooting of unarmed Jacob Blake by police officers. This led to other NBA teams refusing to play that day. The NHL postponed two days of playoff games. In addition, seven MLB games were postponed, and four NFL teams cancelled practices.

league officials. Trammell speaks of wondering how far he could go before his job would be at stake.

It is within this precarious context that I am proposing the establishment of Black Athletes Together Faith in Action (BATFA), a network of support for Black Christian athletes who desire to take the prophetic action of utilizing their platforms to correct oppression and to seek justice in the spirit of Isaiah 1:17¹⁰⁶. BATFA's mission is to engage these athletes in collaborative partnerships, theological reflection, and mutual support. This proposal seeks \$4.5 million over a four-year period to seed the establishment and implementation of this much-needed network.

Needs Assessment

The utilization of public platforms to draw attention to and advocate for the equity and human rights of Black people in professional sports and larger society by Black athletes is on the rise. From Colin Kaepernick and Serena Williams to Maya Moore and LeBron James, Black athletes are using their prominence and influence to speak out, invest financial resources and advocate for social justice. It is notable that, in many cases, the athlete's faith-rooted upbringings have instilled these values in their terroir. What is missing on this landscape is a garden to cultivate Black athletes' critical thinking about the contexts within which they work. When structural analysis is seasoned with theological reflection and message development, these support systems will affirm the liberative power of faith in action, particularly for Black people.

Among the challenges for Black athletes who dare to speak out for diversity, equity, and inclusion inside and outside of professional sports is pushback from systems

¹⁰⁶ "learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow"

that are shaped by and reflect a racialized hierarchy that privileges white power and commodifies Black bodies. When Black athletes experience pushback and setbacks from the professional sports machines and/or institutions and individuals inside and outside of sports, it comes in the form of personal attacks, lack of opportunities and loss of jobs.

Such scenarios beg the questions:

- Where is the organized community that supports and advocates for these marginalized martyrs?
- Where do Black athletes develop their understanding and belief in the power of faith to transform hearts and minds in ways that affirm the humanity and integrity of all people?
- Where are the spaces for Black athletes to create collective, faith-rooted social justice strategies to take on the challenges facing Black communities inside and outside of professional sports, particularly if you are not one of sports' major stars?

America's original sin of othering BIPOC out of the human family is at the core of the centuries-old struggle for the full acceptance of Black people into society and sports. When the Memphis sanitation workers marched in 1968 with the signs "I am a Man" and when Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi created #blacklivesmatter in 2013; these were assertions of the basic humanity of Black people. They were demands for justice.

Abolitionist Frederick Douglas stated in 1857, "Power concedes nothing without a demand." Black professional athletes wearing t-shirts with the names of Black men and women killed by law enforcement and white vigilantes before games, Tweeting messages

that speak out against injustices, kneeling during the national anthem, and leading peaceful protests are just the tip of the Anti-Racist activism iceberg. Most recently, Colin Kaepernick paid the price of losing his career as a result of calling for systemic change. As the struggle continues, BATFA will have the backs of those change agents who dare to demand justice.

Faith is a fuel source for support and sustainability for Black athletes in the struggle for human rights. At its best, faith embodies a commitment to a higher goal in terms of affirming the integrity of all people. Faith is a strategic partner that can cross boundaries, actively love the basic humanity of all people, and transform hearts, minds, and systems.

In 1968, Harry Edwards was the lead organizer for the Olympic Project for Human Rights. The focus of the organizing was to expand the work of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements to sports by engaging Black, Olympic athletes in actions that would draw attention to the injustices being perpetrated on Black communities within the United States. This led some athletes, such as Lew Alcindor (now Kareem Abdul-Jabbar), to boycott the Games. Tommie Smith and John Carlos participated, won medals, and protested. They stood on the winner's platform wearing black socks and raised their fists adorned in black gloves making the Black Power salute during the US national anthem. Though Alcindor went onto a Hall of Fame NBA career, Smith and Carlos never raced again in any sanctioned competition.

As Black athletes become more prophetic, they will need communities of organized support to hold their opposition accountable. Community organizers say that

power is *organized people + organized money + organized action*.¹⁰⁷ I would also add *organized media*. Black Athletes have the people, money, and media to galvanize their power. The collective clout of Black athletes, their allies, and their fans has the potential to protect Anti-Racist activists from the institutional marginalization and whitelash that always comes. Pastoral imagination is needed to affirm, support, and develop the faith-rooted, social justice commitments of Black athletes and tend to their spiritual needs.

Prophetic fire takes courage and it is difficult to sustain. Much of today's faith-rooted, justice-oriented activism in professional sports is ephemeral because athletes' energies are diffuse. BATFA will be shaped and led by former Black Christian professional athletes who have engaged in Anti-Racist activism. It will be space where current athletes and their allies coalesce toward diversity, equity, and inclusion. Coordinated, sustained advocacy will bring about substantive change as well as support those whose activism makes them vulnerable.

The Project

BATFA will be a national network committed to Anti-Racist activism inside and outside of professional sports. In a society where stereotypes blame BIPOC for the very systems and structures that have been created to marginalize them and ghettoize their communities. BATFA will provide resources to fight such societal ills as mass incarceration, voter suppression, and community disinvestment. Inside the world of sports, BATFA will address the lack of opportunities for BIPOC to ascend to leadership. BATFA will advocate for public and private policies that dismantle racialized hierarchies.

¹⁰⁷ Organizing for Power, Organizing for Change website "Power". Accessed on January 30, 2021 www.organizingforpower.org

Goals

- To develop dynamic communities of faith-rooted, professional athletes who are engaged in Anti-Racist activism inside and outside of professional sports
- To engage these athletes in collaborative partnerships, theological reflection, and mutual support
- To organize people, money, and messages to sustain initiatives and protect individuals

Strategies

- **Engage faith-rooted, Black athletes in strategic, coordinated action focused on social change inside and outside of professional sports.** Current activism by Black athletes is reactive and relatively short-lived. This affords those in power the opportunity to “wait out” the ever-changing news cycle. In addition, contemporary activist-athletes rarely benefit from the stories, experiences, and lessons of those who have gone before them in the struggles for social justice or to share approaches and coordinate strategies. The key activities in this area of work are:
 - Assist athletes in the development and implementation of their individual platforms;
 - Convene quarterly hybrid, in-person and virtual, gatherings for theological reflection and collective planning;
 - Create and assist with the implementation of strategic, coordinated social justice actions;

- Curate a history of faith-rooted activism by Black professional athletes; and
- Provide opportunities for BATFA members to engage former Black athletes and leaders in conversations about faith-rooted, social justice for Black communities inside and outside of professional sports.
- **Provide social change, theological message research, development, and media training.** In a society where narratives and stereotypes have more influence in shaping public policy and actions than data, it is important to have a scientifically driven space where compelling and caring narratives and messages are developed to affirm the basic dignity of all people, particularly BIPOC. As these talking points are developed, athletes will be provided media training. This area of work will include:
 - Engaging in social science-based research to develop justice-oriented, theological narratives that can move people to support the humanity of BIPOC and their communities;
 - Training BATFA members in the delivery of narratives that have been developed for a variety of media; and
 - Providing media platforms such as podcasts, social media posts and digital publications for BATFA members to reflect on the importance of faith-rooted action by Black athletes as a catalyst for social change.
- **Provide spaces and resources for religious reflection and theological engagement on social justice.** Passionate and committed Black athletes of faith can now have places to develop their theological understanding of the faith and

justice. This includes opportunities to expand their thinking about the ways that God is engaged in the world and cares about those who are marginalized. This will include:

- Creating and implementing resources that will guide theological reflection for gatherings and individuals; and
 - Providing opportunities for BATFA members to engage theologians, sports chaplains, and faith-rooted leaders in conversations about social justice for Black communities inside and outside of professional sports.
- **Provide mutual support for BATFA members as they manage the challenges and opportunities of being faith-rooted, Black athletes with an active commitment to social justice.** History shows us that there is always whitelash in response to social justice gains. In response to the success of Reconstruction, Jim and Jane Crow laws were enacted. As the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements were gaining influence, they were infiltrated by government. Movement leaders were discredited and assassinated. After the mobilization of millions during the spring and summer of 2020 in response to the continued killing of unarmed Black men and women, Republican candidates for elective office deemed the Movement for Black Lives to be violent and socialist. These labels gained traction among patriotic evangelicals. The work in this area will entail:
 - The establishment of a network of member allies who can be called upon and convened for emotional and spiritual support; and

- The provision of opportunities for personal sharing and testimonies whenever BATFA members are gathered.

Members

BATFA is committed to supporting Black athletes who are people of faith that are currently engaged in professional sports at paid and unpaid (college) levels. It can serve as a resource in real time that assists members in navigating their social justice commitments and developing their spiritual lives. The other constituency for this network is retired Black, faith-rooted professional athletes. Though no longer in the limelight of professional sports, this is an opportunity to leverage their accomplishments and relationships with current and former players and other Blacks connected with sports. Their past experience of living inside systems of professional sports and their present freedom of standing outside these same systems can provide the network with the wisdom, flexibility, and cover needed to counter-balance the trepidations of current activist-athletes about becoming vulnerable when they are deemed dangerous by fans, professional leagues, team owners, and/or administrators.

Though grounded in the experience, culture and theology of Black athletes, BATFA membership would be open to other professional athletes who embrace the network's mission and goals. This is so Black athletes can be comfortable bringing their whole selves to the Network as they establish alliances with those who are committed to Black liberation though they are not Black.

Strategic Partnerships

Alignment with strategic partners who share a similar commitment to systemic change, increases everyone's capacity to reach, engage and enlist broader constituencies

of justice-oriented individuals and organizations. A few potential partners for BATFA to have greater impact in the social justice sphere are listed below.

Athletes for Justice and other networks of professional athletes who are aligned with BATFA’s faith-rooted, social justice goals. Most Black athletes grew up within households that were either connected to the church or influenced by Christianity. As adults, they have not departed from the terroir of faith. Athletes for Justice was catalyzed by Christian, NFL player Sam Acho and co-founded by four of his Chicago Bears teammates - Trey Burton, Chase Daniel, Akiem Hicks, and Mitch Trubisky – with the mission to:

mobilize professional, collegiate, and everyday athletes as agents for systemic change by wielding their collective voice and galvanizing resources to amplify local efforts in the ongoing fight for justice.¹⁰⁸

Nonprofit organizations created by Black professional athletes. One of the strategies that Black athletes employ as a means for giving back to local communities is to create their own nonprofit service organizations and foundations. They engage in such activities as food distribution, volunteerism, mentorship, housing rehabilitation, sponsorship of summer camps, and funding scholarships. These are established by athletes who desire to address the societal concerns that speak to their hearts. BATFA is a forum for these separate organizations to unite for greater, collective impact.

Faith in Sports Institute at Truett Seminary Baylor University (FSI). Founded in 2018, FSI is currently:

- Teaching graduate courses on faith in sports at Truett Seminary with the hopes that it will become an on-line MA in Theology and Sports Studies;

¹⁰⁸ Athletes for Justice website. “Our mission and vision.” Accessed on November 7, 2021—www.athletesforjustice.org

- Teaching on-line certificate courses that include Bible and Sports, Sports and Theology, and Race and Sports;
- Convening an annual high school retreat for Christian athletes; and
- Engaging in research and writing focused on faith in sports.

This strategic partnership can expand the theological reflection and message dissemination capacity of BATFA. In 2022, FSI and Ebenezer Baptist Church will co-sponsor a public program focused on faith, sports, and activism through the lens of race. This initiative will serve as a pilot for a future Anti-Racist activism collaboration with BATFA and FSI.

Power = Organized People + Organized Money + Organized Action + Organized Media

BATFA will be the grassroots organizing body that exponentially increases the power and influence of Anti-Racist Black professional athletes and their allies. It will focus on education, reflection, planning and organizing. Black athletes love the sports that they play and desire to use their platforms to build beloved communities.¹⁰⁹ BATFA will cultivate the terroir of sports into the foundation for a world house that seeks social justice and community transformation.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁹ The King Center, “Glossary of nonviolence.” Accessed on January 30, 2021 – www.thekingcenter.org. “The Beloved Community is a term that was first coined in the early days of the 20th Century by the philosopher-theologian Josiah Royce, who founded the Fellowship of Reconciliation. However, it was Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., also a member of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, who popularized the term and invested it with a deeper meaning which has captured the imagination of people of goodwill all over the world. For Dr. King, The Beloved Community was not a lofty utopian goal to be confused with the rapturous image of the Peaceable Kingdom, in which lions and lambs coexist in idyllic harmony. Rather, The Beloved Community was for him a realistic, achievable goal that could be attained by a critical mass of people committed to and trained in the philosophy and methods of nonviolence.”

¹¹⁰ The Martin Luther King Jr. Research and Education Institute at Stanford University. “The liberation curriculum.” Accessed on January 30, 2021 <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/>. “In his speeches and writings, Martin Luther King, Jr., often talked about the interrelated and interdependent world, in which all people are linked together by common fate. His references to *Beloved Community* and *World House* captured his vision of connection and inclusion within human community.”

To launch the Network, BATFA is seeking a one-year planning grant of \$500,000. This will allow for the creation of a strategic plan which will involve labor intensive relationship building and listening sessions with Black professional athletes throughout the country, research in terms of the capacity needed to launch the Network's research and messaging activities, along with securing programmatic and administrative support that will be housed at the Martin Luther King Sr. Community Resources Collaborative of the Ebenezer Baptist Church. In years two through five, it is anticipated that a four-year grant of \$1M per year will be required to meaningfully launch the Network. This will include staff, consultants, evaluation, state of the art digital engagement tools, and administrative support from the host agency. To get the Initiative launched, I will serve as BATFA's founding director and pastoral advisor. We will also establish an Organizing and Planning Team. Its members will be comprised of current and former Black athletes who have the gifts of being connectors and organizers.

Conclusion

When I started this Project, my focus was on the interviews that I would conduct and what I might learn about public messaging by faith-rooted, Black athletes committed to social justice. What shifted was that I found myself digging deeper into the historical roots of faith, sports, and activism. This research helped me to draw on the past to better understand the present; contextualize my conversations with the interviewees; and envision a future that avoids some of the past mistakes. Essentially, this Project became a Sankofa experience.

The Sankofa bird is a metaphorical symbol used by the Akan people of Ghana, generally depicted as a bird with its head turned backward taking an egg from its back. It expresses the importance of reaching back to knowledge gained in the past and bringing it into the present to make positive progress in the future. Simply put, to understand our present and ensure our future, we must know and claim our past.¹¹¹

I come away feeling as if I have been drawn into the past of faith, sports, and activism to view iconic moments through the lenses of the Black professional athletes who made them happen. This time travel has deepened my understanding of, and appreciation for the ways in which Black professional athletes have lived into their faith commitments to seek justice on behalf of the oppressed and the marginalized. I propose a way forward with the power of past successes serving as a tailwind.

What started as a Project where I was curious about the intersection of faith, sports and activism among Black athletes and their public messaging related to that engagement, has become a launch pad for a network of Black professional athletes engaged in Anti-Racist activism that grows out of the terroir of their faith. The BATFA network will utilize strategic action, theological reflection, message development and

¹¹¹ Sankofa.org “Mission.” Accessed on January 30, 2021. www.sankofa.org

mutual support to dismantle racialized hierarchies in sports and society. Faith and activism have always been at play in the world of sports. What has been missing is the proactive harnessing of this triumvirate – faith, activism, and sports – to catalyze social change undergirded by an organized and sustainable platform.

This Kairos moment in history holds heretofore unknown possibility to break down racialized barriers because younger generations are growing up with multi-ethnic social networks. Their challenge is to sustain the prophetic fire that is necessary to burn off the societal impurities of racism, sexism, and classism. BATFA will provide the pastoral imagination and presence needed to nurture them.

Appendix I

Sports Glossary

International Olympic Committee (IOC). Founded in 1894, this is the ultimate planning and governing body for the international Olympic games. This includes setting the criteria for competing and the selection of host locations.

Major League Baseball (MLB). This is the league for professional baseball in the United States. The National League was formed in 1876 and American League in 1901. In 1903 teams began to play each other. Its first Black player was Jackie Robinson in 1947.

Major League Soccer (MLS). Founded in 1996, this is the professional men's soccer league in the United States. Given that soccer is the most popular sport in the world, the League was racially integrated from the beginning.

National Basketball Association (NBA). This is the league for professional men's basketball in the United States. Founded in 1946, the Association's first Black players were Earl Lloyd, Chuck Cooper, and Nat "Sweetwater" Clifton in 1950.

National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA). This is the largest and most influential governing and oversight body for intercollegiate athletics in the United State.

Division 1. The NCAA is divided into three levels of play. Those in this division have the largest budgets, student bodies and scholarships. Teams in this division play at the highest collegiate level of competition.

National Football League (NFL). This is the league for professional football in the United States. It was founded in 1920 in Canton, Ohio as the American Professional

Football Association. The present name was adopted in 1922. Its first Black player and coach was Fritz Pollard in 1920.

National Hockey League (NHL). This is the league for professional hockey in the United States. It was established in 1917 as the successor to the National Hockey Association (NHA), which was founded in 1909. The first Black hockey player was Willie Eldon O'Ree in 1958.

National Women's Soccer League (NWSL). Founded in 2012, this is the league for professional women's soccer in the United States. Given that soccer is the most popular sport in the world, the League was racially integrated from the beginning.

Professional sports. This is defined as those engaged in professional and collegiate sports. The latter has been included because of the income that team sports generate for major colleges and universities.

United States Olympic & Paralympic Committee (USOPC). Founded in 1894, this planning and governing body for Olympic qualifying events in the United States is responsible for fielding U.S. teams for the Olympic, Paralympic, Youth Olympic, Pan American and Parapan American Games. Black athletes have participated as members of the US Olympic Team since the early 1900s.

Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA). This is the league for professional women's basketball in the United States. Launched as a racially integrated league in 1996, its first game was in 1997.

Appendix II

Interview Questions

- Please describe your faith journey.
- How would you describe your faith?
- Please describe your sports journey.
- In what ways has your faith intersected or not intersected with your engagement in sports?
- What social justice issues are important to you?
- Where did the formation of justice concerns happen for you? Please describe.
- To what degree do your concerns about justice and your engagement with sports intersect? Please describe.
- In what ways are justice issues connected to your faith?
- Can you describe practices that keep you grounded as a person of faith?
- Do you have spiritual practices that keep you pointed toward justice? If so, what are they?
- In what ways has the faith formation by the Black church tradition inspired, convicted and compelled you and other Blacks engaged in athletics? In what ways has it or hasn't it led to public acts of justice, protest and resistance? Why
- Should Blacks in athletics use their platforms for justice? Why or why not?
- If faith shapes their public stances for justice, should they be more out front about it or keep it behind the scenes? Why or why not?
- For Blacks in athletics whose faith shapes and grounds their activism, why does it seem to not be a view or story being told in various media outlets?
- To what extent do you feel that you can disclose your faith to your teammates and colleagues? The public at-large? Can you disclose fully or partially?
- Why does it seem that there are an increasing number of Blacks in athletics claiming public platforms as avenues to advocate for justice? Have they always been doing it and only now the media is picking up on it, or is it increasing?
- Have you faced any obstacles in your ability to fully live out your faith that are not experienced by your colleagues?

- How would you describe the state of the integration of Black faith, activism and sports? Is this a positive, negative or neutral assessment?

Appendix III

Faith at the Crossroads of Sports and Activism: Navigating our World (NOW)

**Ebenezer Baptist Church
October 14, 2020 @ 6 pm**

The plan was to provide a video recording of this session, which was attended by 20 members of the congregation. NOW is Ebenezer's weekly Wednesday evening fellowship, which is designed to help individuals grow and to equip the congregation for social transformation as they/we navigate our world. Unfortunately, the recording was accidentally deleted by a member of the Ebenezer Baptist Church staff.

- An overview of the John Vaughn's Doctor of Ministry project was provided
 - Core thesis: To explore the foundational role that faith plays in grounding and animating Anti-Racist activism among Black athletes.
 - Core question: In what ways has the formation of Black faith traditions been brought to bear on athletes engaged in racial activism?
 - Assumption: Black faith plays a foundational role in animating Anti-Racist activism among Black athletes, but it is not a prominent part of the public messaging.
 - Methodology:
 - Highlight the historical intersections between Christianity, Anti-Racist activism, and sports.
 - Hear the fullness of faith formation stories and the ways that they did and did not intersect with sports.
 - Understand the barriers and challenges in both the articulation and amplification of those stories.

- Propose the establishment of a network of athletes that supports and nurtures the integration of faith and social justice in larger narratives of activism among Black and other athletes.
- Some of the themes that emerged from the research and interviews were shared to provide context.
 - Though faith has played a prominent part for Black athletes who engage in activism, faith's influence has not been widely publicized.
 - Many Black athletes who engage in activism are focused on giving back. They do so by:
 - Exposing others to the opportunities and access that helped them; and
 - Doing their part to make things better for the larger Black community.
 - Black athletes are increasingly being more vocal about the ways that faith shapes their activism, i.e. Eric Reid and Maya Moore.
- Former college athletes Sterling Freeman and Stacy Ingram, who have both been called to ministry, participated in a panel discussion moderated by John Vaughn. Each was asked:
 - Please share your history with Division 1 college sports
 - What is your "take" on the impact of activism by athletes today? Where are you seeing faith show up on this landscape?
 - What have been key elements and/or moments of your own faith journey?

- To what degree did faith overtly or covertly influence your life as an athlete?
- What is your assessment of the role that faith plays in the activism of athletes you see today?
- Congregants asked questions of the participant-researcher and the panelists.

Appendix IV
Learning Advisory Committee

Members of the Learning Advisory Committee served as overall advisors for this Project. Given the nature of this effort, a cross-section of people who have knowledge of professional sports were invited to serve. The Committee was comprised of educators, social scientists, and key leaders from the ministry context of Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia.

- *Elliot Bryant* is the chair of the Board of Deacons.
- *Robert Bryant*, an active member of Ebenezer, is a former Division 1 athlete who has family members who were professional athletes.
- *Sterling E. Freeman* is a leadership coach, organizational and cultural change agent, facilitator, counselor and public speaker. He is Co-Founder and Principal of CounterPart Consulting, LLC with Kathleen Crabbs, and an Associate with OpenSource Leadership Strategies.
- *Melissa Harris-Perry* is the Maya Angelou Presidential Chair at Wake Forest University and the founding director of the [Anna Julia Cooper Center](#).
- *Elaine Ellis-Thomas* is the Rector of the All Saints Episcopal Church in Hoboken, New Jersey. She is my peer mentor in the Doctor of Ministry Program at Drew Theological School
- *Raphael G. Warnock* is the sixth Senior Pastor of Ebenezer. He is one of two newly elected United States Senators from the State of Georgia.
- *Laura Wernick* is an Associate Professor in the Graduate School of Social Service at Fordham University in New York City.

- *Nancy Lynne Westfield* is Director of the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning (Wabash College/Lilly Endowment, Inc).

Appendix V

Quotes from Members of the Learning Advisory Committee

Over time, I have learned that the narrative that says sports bring us (the country) together and transcend matters of race is more aspiration than reality. My experience is that it is a convenient way to avoid confronting how race operates in our culture and acknowledging that racism is embedded in our culture... my sense is that *sports bring us together, so that we act as if we are together, when we are really not together and refuse to talk about why*. The machinery of sports has been a quintessential example of the capitalist ethic and its greatest asset has been Black labor. As such, sports are a glaring example of the manifestation of asymmetrical, racialized power relationships that over-advantaged whites and under-advantage people of color. Theologically, this is unjust and a violation of God's purposes as grounded in God's act of creating all in God's image... John Vaughn has the heart and mind to engage in this important work. His theological understanding and commitment, great curiosity and drive towards truth, deep love for humanity and Black people, passion for sports and desire to do his part in working for liberation, make him the right person for it.

**Sterling Freeman, Organizational Change and Racial Equity Consultant
and former Division 1 basketball player at Davidson University**

John Vaughn's emerging project is new and needed conversation at the intersection of religion, sports, culture, and Black Church studies. African American people are traditionally faithful people. It stands to reason that in any arena, in particular professional sports, that our values, behaviors, and life decisions would be influenced by our faith stance and religious teachings. John Vaughn's project explores this obvious but overlooked cultural phenomenon. Given the economic and societal influence of African American men and women in professional sports, this project promises to be groundbreaking.

**Lynne Westfield, Director, Wabash Center for Teaching & Learning
in Theology and Religion**

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