

Faith-based Physical Activity and Sport Program Initiatives: An Exploratory Pilot Study

Demetrius W. Pearson¹ & Eddie T. C. Lam²

Abstract

This exploratory pilot study was designed to acquire a general understanding of the rationale, role, and mission of contemporary Faith-based Physical Activity and Sport Program Initiatives (FBPASPI) in Houston, TX. In-depth personal interviews, on-site facility observations, and program document examinations were conducted to answer several research questions. Purposive sampling was used to identify, contact, and interview 16 key informants of church-related recreational sport/fitness programs. The data collection instrument was a 15-question semi-structured interview guide. Content analysis and triangulation techniques were employed to examine and analyze the data. Results suggest that FBPASPI appear to be an integral part of the mission of the observed religious entities. Programs were similar in many respects with regard to their basic mission and objective(s), yet diverse with respect to funding, facilities, personnel, and program implementation. Moreover, they were also found to be more inclusive with respect to gender, age, and physical activity offerings than “muscular Christianity” oriented programs of the past.

Keywords: faith-based fitness, church-based sport, familylife centers, sport ministries

Faith-Based Physical Activity and Sport Program Initiatives (FBPASPI) traditionally conjure up and elicit youth sport and exercise programs at nationally recognized facilities like the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA), Jewish Community Center (JCC), Catholic Youth Organization (CYO), and the Salvation Army.

¹University of Houston, HHP Department, GAR 104-P, 3855 Holman Street, Houston, TX 77204.
E-mail Address: Dpearson@uh.edu Telephone Number: (713) 743-9849

²Cleveland State University

However, unbeknownst to many, there appears to be a burgeoning movement underway that has led to the development of sport, health, and physical activity initiatives in church-owned (and operated) facilities. Lee (2004) noted a rise in the link between evangelical Christianity and sport over the past few decades.

Arguably, the impetus for the creation of various church-related programs and the articulation agreements with public health departments, medical schools, and private fitness entities has emerged as a result of the increased levels of obesity in American society. According to a recent study, "More than one-third of adults and 17% of youths in the United States are obese" (Ogden, Carroll, Kit, & Flegal, 2014, p. 806). Additionally, the percentage of obese children (2-to 5-years old) is approximately 8.4%. Although these figures have remained relatively stable between 2003-2004 and 2009-2010, public health researchers maintain that the prevalence of obesity remains high and warrants continued surveillance (Ogden et al., 2014). The National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey of 2009-2010 reported that more than 78% of Hispanics, 77% of African Americans, and 67% of whites were classified as either overweight or obese (NHANES, 2012). A variety of factors have contributed to the aforementioned public health crisis (e.g., poor nutritional diet, socioeconomic status, lack of exercise, technological advances, etc.). In addition, the decline in compulsory physical education offerings and rates of participation at the scholastic and collegiate levels has exacerbated the problem (Parker-Pope, 2008; Wallach, 2009).

FBPASPI have become a viable delivery system and conduit for the dissemination of organized sport, health, and recreational programming. Contrary to the evening pick-up games for neighborhood youths and low organized weekend athletic contests for kids, these church-based programs have attracted a more mature and diverse population. As a result, the programs and activities have become reflective of the needs and interests of this population. Cardiovascular disease prevention programs for women 40-60 years old, walking clubs, "praise aerobics," nutrition seminars, and fitness challenges are but a few of the innovative activities offered through religious entities.

Although the current health status of millions of Americans warrants these novel and unique interventions, are healthy lifestyles the primary objective of clerics and religious entities engulfed in this trend? Critics may point to proselytization and membership recruitment vis-à-vis holistic religious improvement as the impetus for this movement.

Others may suggest that a “neo-Muscular Christianity” or “religious fitness revival” is currently underway. Researchers in the field of sport sociology and sport management are constantly attempting to understand sport organizations (generically speaking) and their respective cultures. The perceived increase in FBPASPI elicits many questions yet to be answered by those who study the social, cultural, and historical aspects of physical activity and sport.

The rationale for this exploratory pilot study was to acquire a general understanding of the role and mission of physical activity programs and initiatives sponsored by religious organizations. These programs, commonly referred to as “Faith-Based” Physical Activity Programs (FBPAP), are not new. However, due to the paucity of research devoted to these programs, there are questions as to whether they are resurrected muscular Christianity programs, new outreach ministries, or spiritual wellness activities. To better understand FBPAP a thorough analysis of the organizational components was conducted through the use of a qualitative research methodology. Data pertaining to staffing trends, equipment and facilities, funding source(s), program emphasis, and membership requirements were collected.

This information was secured from program administrators intimately involved in the daily operations of their respective programs within the Houston, TX metropolitan area. Referred to as “key informants” during the interview process, these individuals also helped in the identification of other FBPAPs and administrators. Their unique titles gave insight into the roles they played within the church-related physical activity environment (e.g., fitness minister, sports pastor, and minister of recreation). For the sake of our study, a more expansive name was given to this research phenomenon: Faith-based Physical Activity and Sport Program Initiatives (FBPASPI). This is due, in part, to the funding initiatives, programmatic opportunities, and philanthropic incentives noted in the literature. Four research questions helped provide the focus for the study: 1) what is currently known about FBPASPI? 2) Do contemporary FBPASPI have a philosophy similar to muscular-Christianity programs of the past? 3) What is the impetus for the emergence of FBPASPI? 4) Are FBPASPI expanding nationally?

2. Literature Review

Privately sponsored sport, health, and fitness programs have grown in popularity, and are a fixture in American society (Coakley, 2015; Krotee & Bucher, 2007; Parkhouse, 2005). This trend may be due in part to a more affluent lifestyle, increased sport technology, certification standards for fitness professionals, and the demise of publicly funded programs. Ironically, publicly funded programs have not been readily endorsed or implemented in spite of escalating levels of obesity (Bryant & McElroy, 1997; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2010; Lumpkin, 2011). The decline in public school compulsory physical education at the middle and high school levels nationally is indicative of this trend.

FBPASPI appear to be growing in popularity (Beard, 2004; Coakley, 2015; Fischbach, 2007). Although these programs are not new (Eitzen & Sage, 2009; Peterson, Atwood, & Yates, 2002) they are somewhat different than public and private programs with respect to their stated mission and source(s) of funding. Arguably the most renowned faith-based physical activity program is the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), which currently has over 2600 programs in the United States alone ("Number of YMCAs," n.d.). Established in England in the mid-19th century, the YMCA emanated from a movement known as "muscular Christianity" (Glassford & Redmond, 1988). Although its origin is somewhat obscure, sport historians attribute the "coined" phrase and movement to the novels of Thomas Hughes (Tom Brown's Schooldays) and Charles Kingsley (Westward Ho) during the 1850s (Meyer, 2012; Rader, 2004; Redmond, 1978). Proponents of the movement perceived a spiritual link between religion and sport, and thus extolled the virtues of healthy lifestyles for God and country. This interrelationship purportedly contributed to moral character, fostered patriotism, and heightened religious convictions. American physical educators, long impressed by British sporting values, incorporated aspects of muscular Christianity into their programs and eventually established YMCAs throughout the country. Similar programs that espouse a religious message, along with sport activities, evolved nationally like the Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA), Athletes in Action (AIA), and Catholic Youth Organization (CYO).

Program coordinators of contemporary FBPASPI have espoused a more "holistic" approach to religion, whereby a concerted effort has been made to impact the health and well being of parishioners. Bryant and McElroy noted a holistic approach to exercise catching on among health professionals and others.

This approach "... centers on preventing and promoting health, taking into account the whole person within the entire physical and social environment" (1997, p. 187). The church was identified as part of the physical and social environment. "From a position of strong opposition to recreation and sport activities, most religions have made a complete reversal within the past century and now heartily support these activities as effective tools to promote 'the Lords work'" (Eitzen& Sage, 2009, p. 173). Donna Richardson Jordan, the wife of nationally syndicated radio host and philanthropist Tom Joyner, contended that faith-based fitness programs attempt to break the strongholds of an unhealthy lifestyle by stepping out on faith and letting God show individuals the way (Joyner, 2006). Her "Sweating in the Spirit" Gospel aerobic workout program, infused with biblical passages, has been nationally recognized. Similarly, Carla Allen, referring to her "Praise Aerobics" program in New Orleans, stated, "we're praising and worshipping God, but not in the traditional way..." (Beard, 2004, p. 7). Both faith-based fitness programs are akin to Weaver's (2007) "Hallelujah Aerobics," which combines prayer, exercise, and nutrition advice. Weaver maintained that the infusion of gospel music and Bible verses in her eight-week "Fit for God" workout program epitomizes a holistic approach to a healthy lifestyle.

According to the literature, FBPASPI are diverse in their programming and delivery systems (i.e., retreats, books, magazines, websites, audio-visual materials, etc.), and with the support of public and private entities have extended their offerings beyond their congregations. For example, the city of New York engaged in a "Faith-Based Physical Activity Challenge" with diverse religious organizations in five boroughs (Dinsay& Lopez, 2005); the Medical University of South Carolina (Charleston) and South Carolina Arnold School of Public Health (Columbia) have partnered with 276,000 members of South Carolina's AME churches in a three-year \$1.26 million grant from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (Draughn, 2002); the Department of Health and Human Services Office on Women's Health has sought contractors for faith-based cardiovascular disease prevention programs for minority women ("Faith-Based Cardiovascular Disease," 2003); and the Trinity Broadcasting Network sponsored a "Faith and Fitness Challenge" to St. Louis area churches to determine which could lose the most pounds and inches ("Winners of TBN's," 2005).

Summarily, an associate minister of recreation for the Germantown Baptist Church's Recreation Outreach Center (ROC), which draws approximately 30 percent of its patrons from its congregation of 10,000 and 70 percent from the local community stated: "We built our facility 10 years ago to build a relationship with the community as a means of reaching out with our love of God" (Fischbach, 2007, para. 2). In addition to the basic trappings of conventional recreation centers (i.e., aerobic studios, basketball and racquetball courts, cardio and weight training rooms), interestingly, the ROC plays upbeat Christian music over its public address system, hangs biblical scripture banners throughout the facility, and is free of charge.

Educational institutions have also begun to take notice of this trend through their course offerings and programs of study. Huntington University's Academic Catalog (2005-2007) suggests that the major in recreation and sports prepares students for sport ministries: "The major in recreation and sports ministry prepares students to plan, direct, and initiate church-based or community recreation programs and equips students to use recreation and sports as a ministry tool for outreach in the community" (Zezula, Updike, & Akker, 2004, para. 5). This unique Bachelor of Science program requires students to complete 64 hours of core courses within the Department of Physical Education, Exercise Science, and Recreation. A graduate degree is also offered in this program of study.

To date, a limited body of research has been published on this FBPASPI (Bynum, 2003; Cline & Ferraro, 2006; Ferraro, 1998; Peterson et al., 2002); however, thought-provoking revelations and insights have been documented. For example, in an exploratory study of state-level ecological data, and a national sample of adults, Ferraro found a link between higher body weights in states with a higher proportion of church and temple members. Cline and Ferraro documented similar findings in an eight-year follow-up study on religion, body mass index (BMI), and obesity. They contended that each increased in prevalence over the past two decades in the United States.

Due in part to the aforementioned findings, Peterson, et al., (2002) cited the need to implement "church-based health promotion programs." These intervention programs, when combined with community offerings, have been found to yield beneficial outcomes. The Heart and Soul Program is one such intervention strategy designed to increase physical activity in mid-life women to reduce cardiovascular disease risks with advancing age.

Several elements have been deemed key components: partnerships (with individuals, and public and private entities), positive health values, available services and resources, access to church facilities, community-focused interventions, focused health behavior change, and supportive social relationships. A study conducted by DeHaven, Hunter, Wilder, Walton, & Berry (2004) also discussed the paucity of research related to faith-based health and fitness programs. The objective of their study was to examine the published literature on health programs associated with faith-based organizations to determine their effectiveness. Although few of the programs reviewed presented outcome measures or outcome measures associated with a particular program intervention, the research team concluded that programs could improve health outcomes and produce positive effects.

3. Method

The research methodology employed to conduct the pilot study was comprised of qualitative and archival research. Purposive (Creswell, 2005; Fraenkel & Wallen, 2000) and “snowball” sampling (Pitney & Parker, 2009) were employed to identify and contact 15-20 prospective “key informants.” These individuals were intimately involved with FBPASPI in the Houston metropolitan area, and had keen insight into their respective programs’ operations. In addition, general information sources (e.g., program websites, advertisements, and telephone directories) were used to identify potential programs and administrators. Telephone, e-mail, and research solicitation letters were used to contact prospective key informants. A numerical coding system was employed to assure confidentiality and afford researchers the opportunity to contact key informants if clarification or additional information were sought.

3.1 Data Collection & Analysis

Copious amounts of data were collected from the 16 interviewed key informants. Data collection activities included in-depth interviews (Gorden, 1980; Lofland & Lofland, 1984; Sands, 2002) with program directors (i.e., in-person and telephone), and on-site facility observations, as well as organizational document and promotional material reviews. The latter included an examination of archival data (e.g., fliers, advertisements, schedules, and photographs). Various artifacts were scanned, photocopied, and documented.

A semi-structured interview guide comprised of 15 questions/prompts was the primary instrument employed to collect key informant data. Several audio and visual tools were also utilized in the data collection process: audiovisual recorder, digital camera, and audiocassette recorder. These tools helped depict and recreate the observed research setting, and provided a means for validating data collected in the field. When certain data were inaccessible, "researcher notes" were written to highlight their significance. This data collection technique was initiated while in the field to document the researchers' views and perspectives on various aspects of the observed research setting. It was also employed after departing the research site to serve as a "debriefing" mechanism. Researcher notes included questions and general thoughts that might yield additional data, or clarify that which had been previously collected.

Data analysis consisted of theoretical and thematic coding (Flick, 1998), as well as content analysis (i.e., "Analysis in terms of frequency counts"). The latter was used as a systematic method for categorizing and quantifying themes or units germane to the study (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2000). In an effort to enhance the study's internal validity or "credibility" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), telephone and in-person member checks (Pitney & Parker, 2009) were conducted with key informants. Member checks consisted of interpretive verifications of the researchers' written perspectives (of the research setting) by key informants. If contradictory or differing perspectives emerged, clarification was sought by contacting previously interviewed key informants. This strategy helped to clarify, confirm, or disconfirm field notes in an effort to better understand and more accurately reflect the research environment. The multiple data collection and analysis procedures served as a form of methodological triangulation (Creswell, 2005; Pitney & Parker, 2009), employed to cross-validate data secured from the field.

4. Results

The results of the study suggest that a number of religious entities and denominations are involved in physical activities, sports, and wellness programs in the Houston metropolitan area. Through the use of content analysis and thematic coding a matrix was constructed comprised of themes derived from the interview guide. As a result of the "thematization" process, 16 primary categories were created which enabled the research team to observe various gleaned trends.

Although the pilot study consisted of only 16 programs the researchers were able to accumulate a considerable amount of “rich” data. The data gleaned from the study helped definitively answer at least two of the four research questions posed, and provided invaluable information about FBPASPI in general. Our research found distinct similarities and differences among the programs that participated in the study. Programs were quite similar in the following categories: Origin, Philosophy and Goals, Population Served, Staffing, Certification/Requirements, Activities, Marketing Strategies, and Program Descriptors. However, distinct differences were found with respect to the following categories: Director’s Title, Participation Requirements, Number of Participants, Facilities and Equipment, and Funding Sources. It may be interesting to note that Baptist-oriented FBPAP comprised the largest contingent of programs within the study (8), followed by Methodist programs (4). There was also a Jewish, Episcopalian, Lutheran, and Interdenominational program in the study.

Based upon the data, most of the programs (13 of 16) were created during the 1980s or later (81%). Three programs evolved before 1982, while the earliest was established in 1936. The majority of key informants interviewed indicated that their program philosophy and goal revolved around evangelizing and discipleship. Statements like “winning souls for Christ,” “bringing people to Christ,” and “sharing the gospel” appear to corroborate the documented mission statements. KI-P6UCS indicated that their program’s mission is ... “to teach believers to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ with unlimited children through sports ministry” (personal communication, October 29, 2010). Sponsored activities were often referred to as “Christian fellowship,” “Christian character building,” “strengthening Jewish values,” and “spiritual growth.” Eitzen and Sage (2009) stated that church-sponsored recreation and sport programs might offer various services to parishioners and area residents that may be unavailable and/or unaffordable. The program goal of P1-HC is indicative of this contention:

The goal of the [P1-HC] is to evangelize and help people that may not have the finances and resources to work out at a local gym by providing a slogan of, ‘Connect, Grow, Serve, and Go!’ This slogan is supported by the vision statement... . (KI-P1HC, personal communication, June 23, 2011)

The age of the program participants ranged from pre-k to senior citizens. As a result, program activities ranged the gamut from cheerleading to senior citizen health screening, and exercise classes. The majority of the programs offered conventional sports such as softball, basketball, flag football, and volleyball. However, aerobics, dance, gymnastics, self-defense, and yoga were also available. The activities offered varied among programs and were directly related to the following aspects: funding sources, participation requirements, number of participants, and staff credentials. There were no salient trends among programs with respect to required credentials. Although 13 of the 16 programs required staff members to have specific credentials (e.g., bachelor's degree, CPR, first aid, personal trainer or instructor's certificate), no particular trends emerged with respect to the type. Some merely required church membership. However, two programs specifically required the FBPASP administrator to be a church minister. One program (P2-SC), actually required all staff members to participate in a "Safeguarding God's Children" course intended to prevent sexual abuse.

As with most any program or activity, the source of funding plays a major role in the delivery of services. It will also have an impact on prospective participants. Diverse funding mechanisms were evident in the study. For example, church offerings via tithing and donations were major sources of funding for one program; whereas registration, membership, and sport program fees were employed in other programs. Additional sources of funding included public/private fundraising, tuition fees, church denomination subsidies, and facility rentals. As previously alluded to, funding impacts all aspects of a program and most certainly the population served, as well as staffing. Most programs in the study had 15 or less staff members. Those that listed large numbers of staff included individuals volunteering in various capacities (i.e., coaches, officials, gym supervisors, etc.).

Several noteworthy findings gleaned from the study piqued the interest of the research team. Among them were the director's title, program descriptor, marketing strategies, and statement on future activities. For example, although there was variance within the titles given to program directors, common threads existed with respect to their religious affiliation. The following titles attest to this finding: Fitness Minister, Athletic Ministry Director, Athletic Department Chaplain, Family Life Minister, Sports Pastor, Outreach Minister, and Minister of Recreation. As for program descriptors, program administrators selected a combination of Faith-based Physical Activity Program and Outreach Ministry most often (13 of 16 or 81%).

A variety of marketing strategies were employed to solicit participants and promote program activities. Most of the programs used several promotional techniques. Conventional marketing strategies included church announcements, newspaper ads, newsletters, marquee signage, and fliers. Other more contemporary promotional techniques included e-blasts, program brochures, seasonal books, church and national website advertisements, school newspaper ads, and direct mailings.

When program directors were asked if future activities were going to be added, the vast majority (13 of 16) said yes (81%), 2 said no, and 1 was uncertain. This seems to suggest that additional sport, recreation, and wellness activities will be added to the existing programs in the future.

5. Discussion

Although much was learned from this pilot study, a more comprehensive survey of FBPASPI within the Houston metropolitan area is warranted. Based upon the research questions posed, we believe that two of the four questions were thoroughly answered through the study. For example, our literature review, interview data, document examination, and observational activities afforded us a general understanding and overview of contemporary FBPASPI, as well as an in-depth look at 16 programs within a major metropolitan city. Our findings were consistent with those documented in the literature pertaining to program goals, objectives, and activities. For example, much like Joseph (2012), we also found that churches have used sport as a form of evangelism, fellowship, church growth, and discipleship.

The second question posed was as follows: Do contemporary FBPASPI have a philosophy similar to muscular Christianity programs of the past? According to the program directors' responses, contemporary programs are very similar to past muscular Christianity programs with respect to their philosophies and goals, which focused on evangelism and discipleship. In essence, through physical activity, sport, and wellness programs religious entities have attempted to enhance fitness, develop sport skills, foster religious values, win souls, and recruit members. With the exception of one program administrator, none of the individuals interviewed definitively stated that their program offerings were designed to recruit members. However, they did state that their programs were a form of discipleship; whereby staff members could evangelize via sport.

For example, according to the program administrator of P16-HR, the program's goal is "To provide and present the gospel in a safe, reliable institution through fitness and recreation" (KI-P16HR, personal communication, July 20, 2011). The program administrator of P6-UC articulated a similar goal statement and program philosophy. "Upward's mission is to teach believers to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ with unlimited children through sports ministry" (KI-P6UC, personal communication, October 29, 2010). Through the aforementioned physical activities these outreach ministries have created an environment of spiritual and moral growth, Christian fellowship, and religious socialization. Although contemporary programs are not male oriented and structured to facilitate "manliness," many exhibit aspects similar to muscular Christianity and the YMCA movement of the past. This finding concurs with Meyer's (2012) statement pertaining to the persistence of a muscular Christianity ideological structure within American sport environments.

The third research question posed was as follows: What is the impetus for the emergence of FBPASPI? Although our research does not empirically answer the aforementioned question, we contend that through our literature review and in-depth interviews with program directors, a variety of factors have contributed to the emergence of FBPASPI. Contributing factors include current levels of obesity (adult, adolescent, and childhood), declines in church membership, reduction in school physical education requirements, federal subsidies for health initiatives, holistic personal growth, "quasi-proselytization," and contemporary societal fitness trends.

It appears that many of the factors associated with the emergence of FBPASPI are interconnected and intertwined. The obesity epidemic in American society is invariably due in part to the decline in school health and physical education requirements, dietary and nutritional preferences, domestic/familial obligations, socioeconomic status, and lifestyle. We contend that religious denominations and faith-based physical activity organizations (e.g., Upward, International Sport Ministries, and Church Sports International) have adopted a more holistic approach in their religious teaching, which now subscribes to a healthy lifestyle. This perspective is somewhat akin to a neo-muscular Christianity (Lee, 2004), with the basic tenets and hallmark principles of the YMCA: healthy spirit, mind, and body. Secondly, the decline in church attendance (Prebish, 1984; Wann, Melznick, Russell, & Pease, 2001) and increasing levels of secularization (Eitzen & Sage, 2009) in American society may suggest that churches and religious entities are incorporating more innovative strategies to recruit prospective members.

Quite possibly, to induce involvement and facilitate a communal environment various innocuous facility names were identified through the study: Family Life Center, Activity Center, and Christian Life Center, as well as others that cannot be disclosed due to confidentiality.

Also, our study found several church-sponsored fitness and recreational facilities on par with the more contemporary private clubs. Mounted flat screen high definition televisions, indoor running tracks, saunas, whirlpools, designated cardio and aerobic areas, as well as personal trainers are the trappings of pricey private clubs. Yet, church-sponsored programs consist of many of the same elements. For example, a dispute was documented in the literature between faith-based physical activity programs and membership driven for-profit fitness clubs due to facilities, services, cost (if any), and tax-exempt status afforded churches (Fischbach, 2007). The tax-exempt status brings about a perceived competitive edge that church-sponsored programs have over for-profit clubs. As a result, church-sponsored programs are exempt from state and local income and property taxes. Nor are they subject to taxes on new equipment.

The last research question posed could not be definitively answered through the pilot study: Are FBPASPI expanding nationally? Because the scope of our study was limited to the Houston metropolitan area a definitive response to the research question is not possible. However, we believe that a major metropolitan city like Houston would be indicative of national trends, and thus reflective of an expanding FBPASPI movement. Our exhaustive literature review, snowball sampling procedure, and interviews with program administrators suggest that FBPASPI are expanding nationally. The numerous programs archived nationally and internationally via the Internet, national media exposure (e.g., Tae Bo and Chai Bo), and state and federally subsidized training grants imply that FBPASPI are expanding nationally. For example, in 2001 former President George W. Bush signed an Executive Order creating the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives (Flannelly, Weaver, & Tannenbaum, 2005).

Lee (2004) discussed the national emergence and link between evangelical Christianity and sport over the past few decades.

The perceived link has led to major philosophical changes, whereas "... the relationship between churches and sport has moved from a position of opposition to that of a position of complete reversal, in which the relationship is readily embraced" (2004, p. 27). This is validated through the many health and wellness programs, exercise and fitness activities, recreation and organized sport leagues, and instructional sport camps sponsored by churches for members and non-members alike. Upward Sports, implemented at several of the church programs in the study, is indicative of the evolving presence of sport being used as a purveyor of religious values. International in scope, Upward Sports boasts of being the world's largest sports league for children from kindergarten through sixth-grade. Promotional materials indicate that it is an evangelistic sports ministry for boys and girls, which promotes salvation, character, and self-esteem. Its mission statement reads as follows: "To introduce children to Jesus Christ by creating opportunities to serve through sports" ("Upward Basketball," 2007, p. 5).

This appears to hold true for older participants of church-sponsored physical activity programs as well. In addition to the recreational sport offerings, older program participants often take advantage of the health and wellness activities (e.g., cardiovascular screening, weight loss challenges, nutritional seminars, etc.), and congregational support. As a result, praise aerobics, chair exercises, and walking clubs are standard program offerings. Some churches have actually revised the revered church dinner in an effort to conform to healthier nutritional standards (Beard, 2004).

Needless to say, faith-based physical activity programs do provide an avenue for physical development, discipleship, evangelism, and religious fellowship for individuals less inclined to frequent formal church services and prayer meetings. Program administrators, staff members, participants, and proponents of FBPASPI contend that the religious environment, where the diverse activities take place, has an "incubator" effect that insulates, nourishes, and protects those involved in these outreach ministries. As Overman (1997) noted, church-sponsored health and physical activities have served as a positive environment contrary to other facilities with less than desirable atmospheres.

6. Conclusion

This pilot study substantially enhanced our fund of knowledge with respect to Faith-Based Physical Activity and Sport Program Initiatives: program administrators, participants, facilities/amenities, religious culture, methods of funding, and overall mission. It also made us keenly aware of what appears to be a well-established physical activity movement within religious settings that are somewhat different than the YMCAs, CYOs, and JCCs of the past. We are of the opinion that FBPASPI are constantly evolving and expanding nationally as a result of a variety of societal issues and concerns. Summarily, evangelism, discipleship, proselytization, and holistic spiritual development are key factors in this religious oriented physical activity movement.

In light of our findings, we believe that a fascinating sub-culture has been revealed that lends itself to future studies, as well as potential career opportunities. Since faith-based health and physical activity programs appear to be on the rise occupational opportunities may be afforded individuals who express interest and aspire toward careers in this particular area of sport management. Academic institutions may also follow the lead of Huntington University and develop curricula to prepare students to undertake leadership roles in faith-based physical activity programs

To help validate our assumptions we believe that a more expansive study consisting of approximately 100-200 church-sponsored and religious oriented physical activity programs will yield a considerable amount of data pertaining to FBPASPI in the Houston metropolitan area. The study envisioned would be a survey comprised of data gleaned from this pilot study. We contend that results from this study will correlate favorably with data secured from other studies nationally.

7. References

- Beard, H. (2004, July). Can God make you thin? The good news about church-based health and fitness programs. *Essence*, 35(3), 7.
- Bryant, J. E., & McElroy, M. (1997). *Sociological dynamics of sport and exercise*. Englewood, CO: Morton.
- Bynum, M. (2003, May). The little flock. *Athletic Business*, 27(6), 36-38.

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2010). Obesity and overweight. Retrieved from CDC/National Center for Health Statistics <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/faststs/overwt.html>
- Cline, K. M. C., & Ferraro, K. F. (2006). Does religion increase the prevalence and incidence of obesity in adulthood? *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 45(2), 269-281.
- Coakley, J. (2015). *Sports in society: Issues and controversies* (11th ed.). Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill.
- Creswell, J. W. (2005). *Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research* (2nd ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson.
- DeHaven, M. J., Hunter, I. B., Wilder, L., Walton, J. W., & Berry, J. (2004). Health programs in faith-based organizations: Are they effective? *American Journal of Public Health*, 94(6), 1030-1036.
- Dinsay, S., & Lopez, J. H. (2005, June 23). Health department partners with faith-based organizations to promote physical fitness and nutrition. The New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene.[Press release]. Retrieved from <http://www.nyc.gov/html/doh/html/pr/pr065-05.shtml>
- Draughn, K. (2002, December 13). Faith-based physical activity program begins. *Catalyst Online*. Retrieved from <http://www.musc.edu/catalyst/archive/2002/co12-13faith.htm>
- Eitzen, D. S., & Sage, G. H. (2009). *Sociology of North American sport* (8th ed.). Boulder, CO: Paradigm. Faith-Based cardiovascular disease prevention program for women of color. (2003 October). *Commerce Business Daily*. Retrieved from <http://www.cbdnet.com/index.php/search/show/471992>
- Ferraro, K. F. (1998). Firm believers?: Religion, body weight, and well-being. *Review of Religious Research*, 39(3), 224-244.
- Fischbach, A. M. (2007, March). Holy union. *Club Industry.com*. Retrieved from http://www.clubindustry.com/mag/fitness_holy_union
- Flannelly, K. J., Weaver, A. J., & Tannenbaum, H. P. (2005). What do we know about the effectiveness of faith-based health programs? *Southern Medical Journal*, 98(12), 1243-1244.
- Flick, U. (1998). *An introduction to qualitative research*. London, England: Sage.
- Fraenkel, J. R., & Wallen, N. E. (2000). *How to design and evaluate research in education* (4th ed.). Boston: McGraw-Hill.
- Glassford, R. G., & Redmond, G. (1988). Physical education and sport in modern times. In Earle F. Zeigler (Ed.), *History of physical education and sport* (pp. 103-171). Champaign, IL: StipesGorden, R. L. (1980). *Interviewing: Strategy, techniques, and tactics*. Homewood, IL: Dorsey.
- Joyner, D. R. (2006, May 8). Sweating in the spirit [Web log post]. Retrieved from <http://www.donnarichardson.com/sweating.html>
- Krotee, M. L., & Bucher, C. A. (2007). *Management of physical education and sport* (13th ed.). Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill.
- Lee, J. W. (2004). An overview of the reciprocating relationship between sport and religion. *Smart Online Journal*, 1(1), 26-30.
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Lofland, J., & Lofland, L. H. (1984). *Analyzing social settings* (2nd ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

- Lumpkin, A. (2011). *Introduction to physical education, exercise science, and sport studies* (8th ed.). New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.
- Meyer, A. R. (2012). Muscular Christian themes in contemporary American sport: A case study. *Journal of Christian Society for Kinesiology and Leisure Studies*, 2(1), 15-32.
- National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (2012). *Overweight and obesity statistics*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Washington, DC.
- Number of YMCAs in the United States. (n.d.). NumberOf.net. Retrieved from <http://www.numberof.net/number-of-ymcas-in-the-united-states/>
- Ogden, C. L., Carroll, M. D., Kit, B. K., & Flegal, K. M. (2014). Prevalence of childhood and adult obesity in the United States, 2011-2012. *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 311(8), 806-814.
- Overman, S. J. (1997). *the influence of the Protestant ethic on sport and recreation*. Brookfield, VT: Avebury.
- Parker-Pope, T. (2008, July 16). As children grow, activity quickly slows. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/16/health/research/16exercise.html>
- Parkhouse, B. L. (2005). *The management of sport: Its foundation and application* (4th ed.). Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill.
- Pitney, W. A., & Parker, J. (2009). *Qualitative research in physical activity and the health professions*. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.
- Prebish, C. (1984). Heavenly father divine goalie: Sport and religion. *The Antioch Review*, 42(3), 306-318.
- Rader, B. G. (2004). *American sports: From the age of folk games to the age of televised sports* (5th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Redmond, G. (1978, Summer). The first Tom Brown's schooldays: Origins and evolution of "muscular Christianity" in children's literature 1762-1857 [Monograph]. *Quest*, 30, 4-18.
- Sands, R. R. (2002). *Sport ethnography*. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.
- Upward Unlimited. (2007). *Upward basketball cheerleading: Coach cheerbook*. Retrieved from Upward.org U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, National Institutes of Health. (2008).
- Children's physical activity drops from age 9 to 15. Retrieved from http://www.nih.gov/news/research_matters/july2008/07212008activ
- Wallach, J. (2009, December 14). Opinion: Bill to return PE to schools will help prevent obesity. *The Mercury News*. Retrieved from <http://www.mercurynews.com/fdcp?1260995220365>
- Wann, D. L., Melznick, M. J., Russell, G. W., & Pease, D. G. (2001). *Sport fans: The psychology and social impact of spectators*. New York: Routledge.
- Weaver, L. (2007, October 18). Re: Faith-based fitness [Online forum comment]. Retrieved from http://www.beliefnet.com/story/147/story_14718.html
- Winners of TBN's faith & fitness challenge announced. (2005, August). TBN Networks Retrieved from <http://www.tbnnetworks.com/affiliate/prArticle.php?ID=46>
- Zezula, P., Updike, C., & Akker, K. V. (2004). *Huntington University 2005-2007 academic catalog*. Retrieved from http://www.huntington.edu/registrar/catalog/2005/dept_of_phy_ed_rec.