



A Creative Response to Community Social Work: Introducing the Kung-Fu for Christ Community-based Ministry

Sport has a long history of importance within social life (Bolt, 2018). Only recently, however, have community social workers considered its assets (Schulenkorf, 2012). This article will discuss how sport can offer a creative response to community social work, particularly when its activities are rooted in Christianity.

Based out of The Salvation Army Kitchener Community Church in Kitchener, Ontario, Canada, Kung-Fu for Christ (KFFC) is a sports-based ministry that uses martial arts as a conduit for community social work. The program, which is offered free of charge, consists of four classes a week year-round: for children (aged seven to 15), adults (aged 16 and up), the program's volunteer instructors, and a junior leadership class where youth are taught Christ-centered leadership skills useful in the program itself as well as in their homes, schools, and communities. On average, 40-60 children and 20 adults participate in the children's and adult's classes respectively each week.

Drawing on macro social work theory (Payne, 2016), KFFC was designed to respond to complex social problems such as injustice, obesity, and social exclusion. The addition of sports to macro theory, however, is what has provided a novel framework from which to engage in community work. For example, although macro theory (Payne, 2016) and sports (Schulenkorf, 2012) are both concerned with exclusion, especially of marginalized populations, sports is argued to offer a simple, natural way of bringing diversified community members together across barriers such as language, culture, and even conflict (Bolt, 2018; Schulenkorf, 2012). KFFC

provides an illustration of this. Its participants are diversified by gender, ethnicity, culture, first language, level of education and income, ability, and religion, among others. Yet through KFFC, participants engage in fellowship, and many have developed close, personal relationships.

More than responding to exclusion, sports can foster social bonding and belonging (Miller, 2011). Program data collected from KFFC participants suggests that some of the program's longest attending students have stayed because they feel that they belong to a community through KFFC. Unlike other communities of which they are a part, they do not feel dismissed in the KFFC sports community (e.g., due to income, struggles with severe mental illness, addictions, etc.). Some report finally feeling connected after experiencing isolation or loneliness before joining the program.

Combining sports with macro social theory is advantageous, but cannot create *transformative* social change, which Christian scholars argue comes only through Christ-centered community work (Bowpitt, 2000; Gordon, 2011). They recommend approaching community-based practice from a Christian framework. The difference can be seen through the KFFC program. For instance, each hour-long class includes a devotional that relates an element of Scripture to martial arts and students' daily lives. This serves as a vehicle for sharing the gospel message and makes the Christian faith accessible to students in a respectful way, regardless of their faith background. This is important because the program serves students from various faith traditions.

Additionally, leaders are trained to demonstrate Christian values such as love and patience in every interaction with students, families, and community members. This aligns with Bowpitt's (2000) theory that social change requires divine intervention, prayer, and demonstrations of care. KFFC program data suggest that participants often feel listened to, and deeply appreciated, cared for, and loved. For some, this remains true years after they have left the program (e.g., because they moved). This is an especially important outcome because KFFC participants include those social workers would identify as "vulnerable" such as persons with mental illnesses, struggles with substance use, new immigrants, and low income (Gitterman, 2014).

Other KFFC program outcomes bear out the importance of combining macro social work theory, sports, *and* faith. Where macro theory may be concerned with increased civic engagement (Payne, 2016), especially of youth, for instance, the addition of sports and faith in KFFC has produced Godly servant leadership; that is, where children, youth, and adults have a more deeply rooted commitment to loving and serving their community as if serving the Lord (Colossians 3:23), not for altruistic reasons. Children as young as seven years of age have engaged in charitable efforts (e.g., organizing and delivering fundraising projects), developing and implementing school programs (e.g., bible studies), and helping those in need (e.g., through missions work).

The incorporation of sports within faith-based community work, however, may be met with resistance. Although research suggests that martial arts, for instance, can reduce rather than increase aggressive behaviour (see Twemlow, Biggs, Nelson, Vernberg, Fonagy, Twemlow, 2008 for an example), some members of faith communities have reacted strongly against the KFFC program. Resistance might be expected if others want to run a similar program, or draw upon other sports believed to promote aggression (e.g., football, hockey). Program data suggests that the concern about violence is unfounded. Through KFFC, not only are students taught Christian virtues such as respect, humility, peace, and patience (see Galatians 5:13-23) – virtues common in many sports – they are taught how to practice them in *and* outside of the training environment. Parents regularly report that their children demonstrate these virtues in their homes, and increasingly demonstrate them over time.

Although more research is needed, the KFFC faith-based sports ministry provides an exemplar of the potential promise of combining macro theory, sport, and faith to support community work.

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