

Sports Ministry Policy Analysis

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Both in the United States and in other countries, there are regulations that sports ministries, or sports organizations that have been made a ministry, are legally required to fall in line with. The Supreme Court as well as state courts have interpreted laws such as the First Amendment, Title VII and Title IX, the Free Exercise Clause, or even the Establishment Clause that directly affect the expression of faith in Christ in the context of sports. Most of the time, it is state legislatures that directly affect expression or the sharing of our faith.

The controversies surrounding how these laws are interpreted have been circling for over twenty years. The biggest stir of “controversy,” has been the topic of prayer. Specifically, before and after sporting events. While certain states have adopted laws concerning this matter, it has been brought to the Supreme Court. The biggest aspect in question, which finds plenty of regulation about it, is prayer. Prayer has been brought up in reference to *Lemon v. Kurtzman* in 1971, *County of Allegheny v. American Civil Liberties Union* of 1989, and *Lee v. Weisman* in 1992 (USLegal). These are tests that were introduced to evaluate if prayer was constitutional, all brought up in these court cases. The first case listed is called The Lemon test, which states that a prayer must pursue a secular purpose, not trying to advance or enforce religion. The second case makes the Endorsement test; which states that “The government cannot endorse, favor, promote, or prefer any religious belief or practice,” (USLegal). Lastly, the Coercion test; stating that the government cannot coerce anyone to support religion nor take part in its exercises (USLegal). It is these two final tests that state courts have interpreted to enforce specific regulations upon sports ministries, or sports teams that become a ministry to believers that affect prayer and how a relationship with Jesus can be pursued.

For example, pertaining to New York State, the Supreme Court made a ruling based on the interpretation of the Establishment Clause. In the case of *Kennedy v. Bremerton*, it was

concluded that coaches are allowed to play privately at work (on school property) before and after a game as long as students and parents are not invited or cause a disruption. (Johnson, 2022). If students or parents voluntarily join, there is no violation of the Establishment Clause. It is unclear today what we label a “disturbance,” due to differing opinions. Overall, this ruling creates a barrier between the coach(es) and their sharing of their lives with their student-athletes. If a coach is reported to have breached these regulations, they can quickly lose their job citing the Establishment Clause.

While it would be thoroughly joyful to write about the challenges faced in the Middle East with sports ministry, as they are far more at risk than coaches in New York State, such information unfortunately cannot be disclosed. Following some research however, a wonderful organization called BMS World Mission played a role in the spiritual preparation for the Paris Olympics. There are no state regulations regarding the expression of the Christian faith (though overruled specifically for the Olympic Games), so BMS World Mission took it upon themselves to welcome athletes from across the globe with the good news of Jesus. John and Sue Wilson have been supporting church planters for 36 years, and this past summer they hosted athletes, coaches, and spectators from all over the world at their church Avenue du Maine. This church even hosted a team from a church in the United States. Their strategy was to host “an open house where visitors can drop in, rest and find refreshment,” While also holding “cross-cultural evenings where visitors can taste different cuisines, talk about their love of sport and hear the good news about Jesus,” (Manktelow, 2024). They even used this opportunity to distribute New Testaments, which also contained “twenty testimonies from Christian athletes,” (Manktelow, 2024).

Sports ministry is about everywhere, especially places we do not see or know. There are different regulations, such as full freedom of expression, or partial freedom due to separate interpretations of Black Letter Law. While the International Olympics Committee banned expression of the Christian faith, organizations like BMS and individual athletes ate the fines or sought other opportunities to make the Gospel known. Other states and countries require much more work, which can take longer. Thank The Lord for His Spirit and steadfastness that He gives us for these challenging times. One day, I hope that opportunities will be more open, and that the things God is doing overseas will be able to be openly discussed.

References

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