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Multi-Source Story

**Could traditional practices be the reason that some Christian student-athletes are struggling to find a church?**

Josiah Taylor, a freshman student-athlete at Florida International University, chose to go to church on a Sunday morning with hopes of finding a place where he could worship. Back home, Taylor attended services every Sunday at a church that his father pastors. While visiting a new church on that particular Sunday, he realized that something wasn’t sitting right with him as a sense of pressure to get baptized weighed on him.

“They were saying ‘Oh, I know your dad’s a pastor,’ but it was kind of like they were saying ‘His way is not the right way, my way is the right way,’” Taylor said. “It’s not like they said it like that, but that’s what they were implying to me. There was a lot of pressure on getting baptized.”

At the time, Taylor was new to the city of Miami. He had moved from Sebring, Fla. to pursue his collegiate career in football as a linebacker at FIU. Taylor stands firm in his faith. His father is the senior pastor at Hope City, a church in Taylor’s hometown. When Taylor arrived in Miami, he had a realization that no one was telling him that he had to go to church anymore. It was his decision whether or not he went.

“You know, when I first got here, I told myself, ‘I’m on my own, I don’t have my dad, my mom or my grandparents to make me go to church,’” Taylor said. “I knew that I had to be in church, so I told myself, ‘I really have to start my own journey with the Lord,’ and I had to find my way to church.”

Finding a church was very difficult for Taylor. After going to two churches that made him feel like he did not belong, Taylor resorted to watching the livestreams of his church back home every Sunday.

“I watched my dad’s church online for like 5 months.” Taylor said.

For a while, Taylor struggled in many aspects when it came to finding a way to worship with others. There was even a point where he felt that some of his teammates on the football team were pressuring him to come to Bible study.

“I feel like when you read your Bible, it should be on your own time,” Taylor said, “I had a situation during spring ball last year where they used to tell me, ‘Oh yeah, come to Bible study,’ and when I would miss a day, they wouldn’t bash me for it, but it felt like I was being targeted for not coming to Bible study.”

Leroy Taylor II, the father of Josiah Taylor, feels that his son had some issues with adapting to the culture difference that he experienced in Miami.

“The difficulty of him moving to a new place, is that church is done differently in Miami.” Taylor said. “You go from a small-town church to somewhere nobody knows who you are, and so he was probably dealing with that. Adapting to the culture and the difference in how they do things and just not knowing anyone down there aside from a few of his teammates.”

Taylor also understood the importance of his son finding a church where he felt he belonged and when that became something that he struggled with, he informed him to get the most out of the situation.

“I kind of wanted him to feel it out and get what he could out of it,” Taylor said. “But it does become uncomfortable because the point of a church is not to run down somebody and what their doing between themselves and God.”

When it comes to being a student-athlete in college, it seems that the transition from home-life to campus-life can be a drastic change. These athletes move away from their families, their friends and everything that they know to pursue the sport that they love. Now they are on their own, in an unfamiliar environment, where they know very few people. They must adapt to their new way of life as they balance being a student and an athlete.

According to a study done by the NCAA in 2011, 75% of student-athletes claim to be Christian. Another report by the Fellowship of Christian Athletes in 2023, said that over 51,000 athletes made the decision to follow Christ in 2023. With that being the case, another aspect must be considered within the changes that some student-athletes go through when they leave their hometown: church.

Many Christian student-athletes must navigate through the process of finding a church to attend in their new areas. Although church may not be a foreign concept to them, finding a new one can be difficult. When going to a church that you are familiar with and have experience in, there is often a sense of safety and acceptance felt in that church. However, when you go to a new church, in a new place, on your own, it can be an intimidating experience.

As if finding a new church in a new area is not difficult enough, it seems that some churches have the potential to make new visitors feel unwanted.

Many churches have different beliefs on certain aspects of the Bible. The denomination that the church falls under typically dictates what kind of practices and beliefs they teach.

According to Merriam-Webster, a denomination is defined as “A religious organization whose congregations are united in their adherence to its beliefs and practices”

It seems that many of these denominations teach with a “my way or the highway” attitude. This way of teaching has the potential to make student-athletes feel uncomfortable and as if they do not belong at that church.

Brian Glasford, the area representative for the Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA) in western-central Miami-Dade, feels that there is an element with ministering to student-athletes that many churches today lack.

“A lot of churches today lack teaching the why behind the reasons,” Glasford said. “For young people, the why makes them feel accepted and the why makes them feel like they count. When you’re able to meet them where they’re at, there’s a whole lot that can come out of that relationship and that’s what young student-athletes are looking for.”

Glasford understands the issue that is occurring when it comes to student-athletes going to church. He believes that many student-athletes feel judged and offended by the way that some churches go about teaching.

“Some churches today turn young people off before they turn them on,” Glasford said. “They get kind of hung up in their old-fashioned ways and beliefs, but when you’re dealing with a variety of generational gaps and you’re trying to make certain things seem relevant, you have to come across as accepting and some churches struggle with doing that today.”

It seems as if churches today must realize that if they want to reach student-athletes, then they need to make an effort to minister to them in a way that cultivates a sense of belonging and openness.

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