

California's 'Punching Pastor' Views Boxing as a Ministry Tool

The lightweight champion and youth pastor from Tulare, Calif., says he's able to reach people who wouldn't visit a church
James Kindell's reputation precedes him.

He's known as the "punching pastor"—and it's not because of his forceful delivery from the pulpit. It's because the youth pastor from Tulare, Calif., is an amateur boxer, winning a Northwest Golden Gloves championship last year and advancing to a national tournament.

He even competed in the Olympic Boxing Trials, though he was disqualified after the third match.

"I encouraged him to get back into boxing," said Dennis Sunderland, the senior pastor at Bethel Assembly of God in Tulare. "It's a great contact with a segment of our community that doesn't come to church."

Kindell started boxing at age 10 while growing up in Seattle, winning a silver medal at the Junior Olympics at age 15 and five years later ranking seventh nationally in his weight division in an amateur boxing career that included 75 bouts.

A year ago, at the age of 29, Kindell returned to the ring after a seven-year layoff, winning the Golden Gloves title in Tacoma, Wash., earning top honors at a regional tournament and later advancing to nationals at the legendary Caesar's Palace

in Las Vegas—placing second in the 152-pound weight class.

Nearly every day before heading to church, Kindell wakes at 5:45 a.m. and runs six miles. He trains in the ring on Tuesday nights. “Young guys at the gym come up to me and ask, “‘You’re a pastor?’” Kindell said. “They see I’m not cussing. They see I’m different.”

Now, the 5-foot-7 Kindell mixes preaching and boxing, befriending street-tough kids who know nothing about the forgiveness of Christ.

“It’s part of my ministry,” Kindell said. “Most pastors aren’t able to reach these people. It’s a way of meeting some guys you won’t find in church.”

Win or lose, Kindell said his return to boxing has been a success because he gets an opportunity to share Jesus. Each Tuesday night at an aging boxing club, there are 20 to 30 boxers gathered, ranging in age from 15 to 25. It’s a vastly different group from those who come to Kindell’s Wednesday night Bible study at church.

“I wanted to be around street kids,” Kindell said. “Not preaching to them, just loving them, being Jesus with skin on.”

Married with three daughters, Kindell understands that he’s a role model. Tattooed above a crown of thorns on Kindell’s right shoulder is “John 14:6.”

“It’s just another tool,” Kindell said.

Ten years ago, Kindell burned his boxing shoes after becoming a Christian. It was an expression of commitment, showing that boxing would not interfere with his faith. Now Kindell doesn't see the two passions contradicting.

"They complement each other," he said. "I've been able to pray with people to receive Christ. If that wasn't there, I'd be questioning my motives."

Sunderland wasn't reluctant to let Kindell climb back into the ring. He encouraged him. "He said go for it," said Kindell, who Sunderland hired as youth pastor in 1997. "I've got one of the greatest pastors around."

Kindell isn't the first one to go from pulpit to pugilist. George Foreman, former world heavyweight champion, is a pastor and is now talking about boxing again. "I listen to George, and the effectiveness he's had for the gospel is tremendous," Sunderland said.

As with Foreman, Kindell doesn't consider boxing the priority in his life. He sees the sport as an opportunity to knock on the door of someone's life. "James has a lot of passion," Sunderland said. "He has a lot of passion about life in general. So his boxing is seen as a way of building relationships."

Sunderland said he understands concerns about the image of a pastor trying to deck someone. "The only question people have is they think boxing is brutal," he said. "But it's a contact sport, no different than hockey or football."

Kindell said he doesn't box out of anger. He called boxing "an art," saying it's a sport of strategy. But Kindell admits he looks for the knockout. "I'm a puncher as opposed to a boxer," Kindell said. "I'm a heavy hitter."

With his fists as well as his words.

Gail Wood