

How Fitness, Faith and Ministry Connect

Angela recently purchased a membership to a brand new Christian-operated gym. “It’s really nice,” she shared with me. “My son goes there to swim in the indoor pool.”

As she told me a bit more, I could tell that for her this gym was a good quality solution for her son while he was out of school. She used the place a bit too, but she really hadn’t connected with it yet.

I asked her if the Christian mission of the gym was evident to her. “No, not really,” she replied. I pressed, “Well, I mean they might place a Bible near the entrance, have an inspirational poster on the wall or play Christian music.” She thought for a moment and then with widening eyes she responded, “You know, come to think of it, they don’t even play Christian music there. All I ever see is CNN on the televisions.”

This isn’t a made-up story. It’s a real account of one woman’s experience that reflects a critical deficiency in today’s culture. Christians are players in the world around us, but they aren’t always being the life of Christ to others as they could. It’s evidence of why churches and Christian organizations need to move beyond faith-based fitness and instead do faith-centered fitness.

Why All the Right Things Still Don’t Add Up

This gym and many other Christian-operated fitness facilities and programs often do things well. In many cases they have tremendous budgets with provisions in place to assure they can maintain that budget. They’ve invested in quality equipment. They’re located in an ideal location. They staff with qualified professionals and committed volunteers. They provide

programming and services that rival their secular competitors. They do the marketing, the legal, the safety, the maintenance and the affordable or sponsored/free memberships (especially if they are a nonprofit). As the Lego Movie theme song goes, "Everything is awesome, when we're living our dream."

But when our best dreams and good works don't keep God in the center, then we're missing our full potential. Jesus was more blunt, "Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them, 'I never knew you.'" His instruction isn't specific to how fitness ministry is done. However, it challenges us to recognize our tendency to base Christian identity on a few obvious qualities and feel that indemnifies us from pursuing and executing God's will. Faith-based fitness recognizes that there is a spiritual component to physical fitness. It doesn't equip a person to fully pursue God and make Him central to his or her life.

What's the Difference?

This conversation isn't intended to criticize or make judgments. Distinguishing the difference between faith-based fitness and faith-centered fitness will help you avoid compromise and build on simple concepts to create effectual fitness ministry. Take a look at what faith-based can imply and how faith-centered can transform fitness activity into life-changing ministry.

Compromised concepts of what faith-based fitness can mean:

1. Built on a history of faith – Similar to how some of the nation's most notable universities have a history founded in the Christian faith.

2. Faith-neutral – This approach to being faith-based is inclusive of many religions and as a result devalues Jesus

Christ.

3. Faith-friendly or faith-sensitive – This environment simply makes efforts to remove offensive language, images and programs that are questionable for the family market.

4. Faith-principled – This faith-based approach promotes “Christian values” but is little more than a basis for a suggested environment.

5. Faith-lite – This includes playing Christian music, having a Bible on display, having faith-based posters, and other PASSIVE or relatively passive initiatives.

For more related resources that you can use right now, read the full article MOVING BEYOND FAITH-BASED FITNESS in *Faith & Fitness Magazine*.

What makes a fitness ministry faith-centered:

1. The Fitness Director is a pastor. Churches view their fitness facility as a “back door” for people to enter their church. This is a significant self-imposed limitation. The fitness ministry professional has two degrees—one in fitness and one in ministry.

2. Christ permeates the ethos and every aspect. It is possible and appropriate to respect and encourage diversity while at the same time promote and celebrate uniqueness. A gym, wellness facility or training program is faith-centered when the leadership recognizes that faith is the defining value that customers want.

3. Ministry is being done. To do fitness as ministry requires a different attitude, a different agenda and an expanded set of resources. Church leaders learn how to get other ministries connected into the fitness ministry to provide programs and services.

4. Members are other-minded. In fitness ministry, leadership

and members need to demonstrate an eagerness to be supportive of others and expand the reach and influence of the ministry by focusing on spiritual life and community fellowship.

5. Spiritual growth is a measurable outcome. Good gyms, programs, trainers and wellness services help people identify physical needs, set goals, implement processes and measure progress. A faith-centered fitness ministry is strategic—helping members understand that physical improvements are only *part* of total wholeness and work toward measurable spiritual outcomes.

Moving From Nice to Necessary

The goal in transitioning from faith-based to faith-centered is to create a distinctly different environment and result. A fitness ministry has the ability to transcend the goals of a traditional fitness facility or service. It also has the ability to manifest Christians “the church” in a context that is powerfully engaged, compassionate, focused and at-work being life to others. Instead of being apologetic that your fitness facility is Christian, move to celebrating faith as the defining benefit. People going to your fitness ministry want a lot more than to just see Jesus in you.

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