Hot Heads and Soft Hearts: Community and the Self in the
British Columbia Christian Soccer League

by

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B.A., The University of Toronto, 2016

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE AND POSTDOCTORAL STUDIES

(Anthropology)

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

(Vancouver)

August 2018

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The following individuals certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies for acceptance, a thesis/dissertation entitled:

**Hot Heads and Softs Hearts: Community and the Self in the British Columbia Christian Soccer League**

Nicholas William Howe Bukowski in partial fulfillment of the requirements for

the degree of Masters of Arts

in Anthropology

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Abstract

This thesis is about the British Columbia Christian Soccer League. The Metro Vancouver based league is part of a long history between sports and Christianity. The thesis is concerned with the question: what does it mean to be a Christian soccer player? Additionally, my project was interested in the social forms and relationships that could be produced, overcome and renegotiated through the soccer league. My fieldwork was spent with the soccer teams at an evangelical church, North Shore Alliance Church, in North Vancouver, Canada. This thesis is based on my time following the teams throughout the 2017 season and attending services at the churches. Soccer is a medium within the institution of North Shore Alliance Church to create community. Ideally, the soccer team, of mostly male church members, serves as a site of creating tight social bonds for people to ultimately become closer to God. The team is understood to serve as a site of community to counteract the fracture, individualism and self-glorification that the church associates with Western secularism. Players believe that the speed of the game, competitiveness and intensity leads to their “honest” or authentic self being shown. In the affective quality of the soccer field the players’ reactions to the game reveals the state of their “heart”. This knowledge allows the players to conceive of their relationship to God and the progress in a greater process of transformation. The play on the field acts as space to produce knowledge about their character and “heart”. Through soccer God can reveal and address areas of the player’s lives, such as anger. In this capacity, Christian soccer players should be open, emotionally attuned with God, emotionally responsive, vulnerable, concerned with others, and honest. The soccer team presents evangelical Christianity as a form of religion of felt experience, bodily knowledge, and emotion. In addition, it shows evangelical Christianity, a form of religion often associated with individualism, to be a form of religion that is also concerned with community and social bonds.
Lay Summary

This thesis is about North Shore Alliance Church’s soccer teams, a City of North Vancouver evangelical church, in the British Columbia Christian Soccer League. Using observation and interviews this thesis shows that the church’s soccer teams, made up of mostly male players, is seen as a place to start and form close relationships for the members of the church. In addition, in the intensity of playing soccer the players can learn about themselves and their relationship with God through their play on the field. The research project demonstrates the value and use of sports, to learn about yourself and community building, for an evangelical church. The project is also an example of how religious institutions can be a place to build community within a world that is increasingly individualistic and based on fracture. The thesis shows the possibility and potential of soccer for religious institutions.
Preface

This thesis is an original product of the author, Nicholas William Howe Bukowski. The UBC Behavioural Research Ethics Board (BREB) approved the project and fieldwork, submitted with the title “BCCSL Project” (BREB ID: H17-00828). The Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada funded the project.
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List of Abbreviations

BCCSL: British Columbia Christian Soccer League
KJV: King James Version Bible
NIV: New International Version Bible
NSA: North Shore Alliance
Acknowledgements

This project would not have been able to be completed without the time, effort, patience and support from many of the members of North Shore Alliance Church’s soccer teams. A special thank you to Dave Sattler for all of his enthusiasm, dedication, and time given my project. In particular, thank you to Ben Martin, Mark Stunnenberg, Ken Satake, Rich Maddock, Mark Peters, Josh McKay, Steve Hamer-Jackson, Tom and Mark Kanweischer, Kyla Sattler, Paul Blake, Paul Lee, Mark Pender, Errol Vigor, Thomas Vigor, Shaun Openshaw, Connie Hayes, Sam Spenser, and Caleb Sattler. Thank you to the North Shore Alliance Church as a whole.

Thank you to my supervisor Dr. John Barker for all of his support, advice and guidance during the course of my MA. I would also like to thank the other member of my committee Dr. Bruce Miller for all his help. In addition, I would also like to thank Dr. Simon Coleman for giving me the initial impetus to work on sports and Christianity.

Thank you to Dr. David Rakison for introducing the English Premier League to my sister, my dad and me on those wonderful Saturday mornings many years ago. Thank you to Olivia Babler for all of her love and support given to me during my thesis. I would like also to thank Dr. Alan Alois Weiss for his medical care over the past year.

I would also like to thank the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada for funding this project.

Above all else I would like to thank my parents, Nina Howe and Bill Bukowski, and my sister Anastasia Howe Bukowski for all of their love and support.
Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to my two footballing heroes: Roger Milla and Dimitar Berbatov. Much more importantly this thesis is for Thomas Vigor, a loving, funny, passionate, and giving person. I miss you my friend.
Introduction

I will run the course of Your commandments,
For You shall enlarge my heart.
Psalm 119:32 (KJV)

“We need passion from everyone. Whether you are Nick Bukowski who is writing an anthropological paper and he doesn’t even have a heart, maybe, underneath there. We need Nick. We need Nick” said John\(^1\) during a particularly rousing pre-game speech before North Shore Alliance Church soccer A team’s playoff game in the British Columbia Christian Soccer League. In this moment I felt very included in the team and responded with “I am there for you John”. John then proceeded to tell the team “let’s play with passion tonight. We will sink to the passion of the least passionate player here”. The players laughed at the moment John mentioned me in his pre-game speech and although the comment was said playfully, there remains an instructive quality about what John told the team. In should be noted that John, the outreach pastor\(^2\) and soccer coach at North Shore Alliance Church, who was very supportive of my project and a friend of mine, told me after the speech that his mention of my heart (or lack thereof) was said to motivate the team before their big game. The speech was instructive of many of the concerns that were present in the British Columbia Christian Soccer League (BCCSL). In the motivating speech, John commented on the need for passion, the act of playing with “heart”, the mutual responsibility of acting collectively, commitment, and unity. Importantly, the theme of the “heart” runs through this thesis.

From these themes, a Christian soccer league provides an ideal context for studying the interplay between individualism and the collective in an evangelical church. My project, the basis of this thesis, was based at a church, North Shore Alliance, in North Vancouver, Canada\(^3\). My

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1 All of the names in the thesis are pseudonyms.
2 As an outreach pastor John is responsible for overseeing mission work and student ministries.
3 North Vancouver is a city directly north of Vancouver separated by Vancouver harbour.
project was concerned with the question: what does it mean to be a Christian soccer player? This question and my larger fieldwork project, fits into a longer history of the relationship between sports and Christianity. Sharing a colonial history, the global spread of soccer was linked to Christian missionization (McLeod 2013, 112). Soccer, in its’ present form, was codified in England, primarily in London, as a sport in the 1860s (Harvey 2005, 125). Churches have also been involved in the formation of soccer teams. For example, still existing clubs such as Everton Football Club founded in 1878, in Liverpool, had “Methodist origins” (McLeod 2013, 118) and a quarter of the soccer clubs founded in Birmingham between 1876 and 1884 originated in churches (McLeod 2013, 118). In addition, Catholic soccer leagues also existed in Liverpool and in other Lancashire towns like Oldham and Bolton in the early 20th century (McLeod 2013, 119). In this way, my project on a Christian soccer league in British Columbia, Canada is part of a greater “submerged tradition” (Holt 1990, 3) of Christian soccer leagues.

Sport and Christianity also share a more recent history. Evangelical, Pentecostal, and charismatic forms of Protestant Christianity have seen tremendous global growth and popularity in recent decades, especially in the Global South (Elisha 2011, 51) (Robbins 2004). Similarly, “sport mega events” (Giulianotti 2011, 3293) such as the World Cup and the English Premier League epitomize the increasing popularity and presence of soccer as a product consumed throughout the world. The reorganization of English soccer in 1992, to form the English Premier League, has had a transformative effect on the popularity of English soccer as television product (Giulianotti 2011, 3296). Both evangelical Christianity and soccer, especially watching the sport, are increasingly popular global phenomena that have the capacity to affect and move large numbers of people (Coleman 2000). The two, are things that matter. With this in mind, I chose a Christian soccer

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4 Football is in reference to soccer.
league as it allowed me to address the relationship between these two important global phenomena.

Part of John’s speech discussed earlier focused on the importance of collective action involving “passion from everyone”. Within the anthropology of Christianity there is increasing work that disputes viewing evangelical, charismatic, and Pentecostal Christianity as a primarily individualistic form of religion (Elisha 2011, 20). Anthropologist Omri Elisha asks “do we not risk accepting too readily the proposition that Western Protestants, including evangelicals, are narrowly driven by moral individualism, to the exclusion of salient counternotions?” (Elisha 2011, 21). Instead Elisha proposes to “identify cultural values of relationalism and intersubjectivity” in American evangelical Christianity (Elisha 2011, 21). Within the anthropology of Christianity there exists a body of work including the ethnographies of Omri Elisha, James Bielo (2011), and Tanya Luhrmann (2012) that consider the importance of social relationships within North American evangelical Christianity. Like ideas of the sociality outlined in these texts, I was interested in what forms of social relations and types of community could be established through the British Columbia Christian Soccer League (BCCSL). That is to say: what forms of evangelical sociality could be found, disputed, and created in the experience of playing in a Christian soccer league and how do these forms of knowledge contribute to the relationship between self and other in the church and ultimately with God?

This question of relationships is at the centre of anthropologist Birgit Meyer’s idea of “aesthetic formations” that draws on sociologist Emile Durkheim’s question "What are the bonds which unite men one with another?" (Meyer 2009, 3). Meyer outlines an approach to religion that “stresses the importance of taking into account the role of bodies, the senses, media and things in the making of religious subjects and communities" (Meyer 2009, 2). Meyer’s work on
Pentecostalism in Ghana is central to the focus on mediation within the anthropology of Christianity (Hovland 2017, 426). The focus on the role of media and mediation in the making of community, or “formations” in Meyer’s understanding (Meyer 2009, 7), is addressed in this thesis in understanding how soccer, as a medium, can lead to the formation of evangelical social relations within the structures of a church. Moreover, my thesis is positioned alongside Annie Blazer’s 2015 ethnography *Playing for God: Evangelical Women and the Unintended Consequences of Sports Ministry*. My initial project was motivated by Blazer’s ethnography on sports and Christianity. Like Blazer’s ethnography, I am concerned with the bodily knowledge that is produced by evangelicals playing soccer (Blazer 2015). Blazer’s emphasis on the role of the body in American evangelicalism is situated closely to the work of anthropologist Tanya Luhrmann. Luhrmann’s study of evangelical Christianity in the United States of America focuses on knowledge production about God through bodily experiences (Luhrmann 2012). Both Blazer and Luhrmann are concerned with the process of how bodily knowledge is created through practice. From Blazer and Luhrmann I was interested in the question: how do evangelical Christians know about themselves and their place in the world outside of the physical confines of a church? Furthermore, drawing from Luhrmann and Blazer I was interested in the form of evangelical disposition that could be learned and taught through playing in a Christian soccer league.

The two soccer teams at North Shore Alliance Church were composed of players with diverging and common ideas about the soccer teams at the church. The value and meaning of the soccer teams was a site of some contestation. However, there are some common ideas that run throughout the team. The soccer team serves a dual purpose as a site of community building, for the strengthening of the church and as a site where the affective quality of soccer can act to reveal

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5 The soccer team is one potential site for community building amongst others in the church. Mission trips, the ball hockey league, and small bible discussion groups are other places for community mentioned by the players.
the player’s character and state of their heart. The team acts as a site for building a particular kind of evangelical, largely male, figure who is emotionally vulnerable, and aware, seeking help and interdependence from others in the church in order to move away from the selfishness of Western secularism. In this way, soccer is a playful, yet serious, medium to reorient the players from concentrating on individualism and self-glory. The soccer team is a place for knowledge about the heart, the player’s position in the world, and others in the church. On the field Christian soccer players demonstrate their “authentic” self as opposed to their performative self they display in the physical confines of church. Overall soccer should move players closer or transform to what God “intended them” to be. Importantly, these forms of knowledge and community building take place within the institution of a church.

**Description of Church**

North Shore Alliance is a Protestant church in the city of North Vancouver, British Columbia. The church is a part of the denomination of the Christian and Missionary Alliance in Canada and has an average weekly attendance of 600 across two Sunday services. The church, described as an “evangelical church” by James, its lead pastor, was the central node in my fieldwork-based project. The church’s services centered on many of the standard features of evangelical Christianity including a personal relationship with an active “living God”, the importance of mission, and the belief of the Bible as the true word of God (Christianity and Missionary Alliance in Canada 2018, 4). As a Christian and Missionary Alliance church, North Shore Alliance particularly emphasizes the engagement with the world through missionary work. Harry, an active member of the church and a player on the church soccer team, specifically contrasted North Shore Alliance with other more “alienating” megachurches. Harry situated North

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6 600 was the number provided by James, the church’s lead pastor.
Shore Alliance as large church without having the impersonal and “alienating” quality of a megachurch. In sermons the pastors mentioned sport, such as soccer, tennis and hockey. Henry, a church soccer player told me "if you want to know about sports and Christianity, then this is the church”. As Henry suggested, sports are a featured part of North Shore Alliance Church.

In interviews, several members of the soccer team described the church as “conservative”. The players saw the church as conservative based on its social views, and theology. That being said, many of the players expressed ideas, particularly around ideas of collective interdependence, which complicate the description of the politics of the church. Peter, an older and more theologically interested North Shore Alliance soccer player, described the church as “loosely reform theology” and “orthodox from the conservative evangelical tradition”. Peter also situated the church as different from the charismatic Christian tradition because of its lesser emphasis on the baptism of the Holy Spirit. In 2012 the Christian and Missionary Alliance of Canada first allowed the ordination of women (The Christian and Missionary Alliance in Canada 2012, 46) and in 2016 ordained women pastors could become lead pastors at churches (The Christian and Missionary Alliance in Canada 2018, 1). North Shore Alliance Church has two woman pastors on staff. Moreover, Peter described the church as having a wealthy and middle-class congregation that reflects the socio-economic composition of the city of North Vancouver.

Structure of the British Columbia Christian Soccer League

During the 2017 season, North Shore Alliance Church had two soccer teams in the British Columbia Christian Soccer League (BCCSL). Churches throughout Metro Vancouver\(^7\) and the

\(^7\) Metro Vancouver is defined as “a federation of 21 municipalities, one Electoral Area and one Treaty First Nation that collaboratively plans for and delivers regional-scale services” (Metro Vancouver). Metro Vancouver is an area including the city of Vancouver and surrounding suburbs. These municipalities include Anmore, Belcarra, Bowen Island, Burnaby, Coquitlam, Delta, Electoral Area A, Langley City, Langley Township, Lions Bay, Maple Ridge, New Westminster, North Vancouver City, North Vancouver District, Pitt Meadows, Port Moody, Richmond, Surrey, Tsawwassen, Vancouver, West Vancouver, White Rock” (Metro Vancouver).
neighbouring Fraser Valley made up the teams in the BCCSL. In 2017, 34 different teams from 33 different churches composed the BCCSL with North Shore Alliance being the only church in the league with two teams. However, John explained to me that the league has also experienced considerable growth in the past thirty years as it previously had been composed mostly of teams in Vancouver, and closer suburbs such as Burnaby and Coquitlam. In 2017 the BCCSL contained more teams from the cities and suburbs farther outside the city of Vancouver such as Langley and Surrey. The league had many evangelical churches, including other Christian and Missionary Alliance churches, and one Catholic team, St. Clare. The league had three divisions with North Shore Alliance’s A team playing in the more skilled second division and their B team playing in third division. The A team featured players ranging in age from 16 to a few players in their late 40s with many players in their 20s and 30s. The B team, far more intergenerational, had players ranging in age from 15 to players in their early 60s with many in their 30s and 40s. The teams played their away games throughout Metro Vancouver at fields in Langley, Surrey, Richmond, North Vancouver, Coquitlam, Pitt Meadows, and Burnaby. I travelled to some away games on public transport and also carpooled to other games with members of the teams.

The BCCSL instituted several rule changes to the standard laws of soccer. In the standard laws of the game a player receiving a yellow card does not leave the field. The BCCSL had a particular yellow card rule, where a player receiving a yellow card sat off on their bench for 10 minutes while a member of their team replaced them. I had never encountered this form of a “sin bin”, a term borrowed from rugby, in my twenty years of playing and following the sport (British Columbia Christian Soccer League By-Laws 2018, 12). In addition, the BCCSL had a system of “penalty points” in which teams received one penalty point for each yellow card and three penalty points for each red card accumulated across the season. At the end of the season, teams were
deducted points from their total based on the number of penalty points they received over the year (British Columbia Christian Soccer League By-Laws 2018). For example, three points would be deducted from a team, also the number received for a win, from their total if they accumulated twelve penalty points over the season. The players debated whether these rules were tied to the status of the league as a self-described “Christian League”. That being said, these rule changes, the yellow card “sin bin” rule and penalty points, distinguished the league from other ones I have previously played in or watched.

Each team played a total of 12 regular season games and the A team played an additional playoff game, which they lost. Games in the church league took place on Monday and Friday nights with most games starting at 9:15. I attended 21 of the 25 total games of the North Alliance’s soccer teams as two teams had four overlapping games. The teams had combined practices before the season but did not practice during the season. The A team was managed by John, the outreach pastor at the church, while the B team was managed by Patrick, a non-Christian player on the team. The two teams combined had approximately 40 overall players. The teams played their home games at William Griffin Park, which is a public soccer field in North Vancouver three kilometres from the church. In addition to North Shore Alliance’s games, I also attended the BCCCL championship games for all three divisions, played at a soccer complex in Burnaby.

**Methodology**

During my fieldwork I attended both of the church’s Sunday services from early April to late July 2017. Members of the church made up the players on the A and B teams. Some of the players were present at the majority of weekly services I attended while others I saw occasionally. Members of the soccer team were involved in other features of the church including ministry, pastoral work, the worship band, and other committees. For example, Greg was a member of the A
team and the worship pastor who led the rotating “worship team” who was the band leading the songs during services. The 2017 soccer season, running from April to early July, coincided with North Shore Alliance’s sermon series about the Ten Commandments, entitled “The Ten Words”. John, the outreach pastor at the church and organizer of the soccer teams, preached during the sermon series. At the services I sang the worship songs, bowed my head in prayer and listened to the pastor’s sermon. I tried to allow myself to engage in the affective moments of the services and would often feel the swelling and affective quality of the evangelical worship songs. I attended and observed the church services to try to situate the soccer team within the larger institutional structure of the church. In doing so, I hoped to explicitly connect the church soccer team with the broader ambitions of North Shore Alliance.

I talked with different soccer players after the first service, which went from 9 to 10. Our conversations often touched upon the soccer team, the church and thoughts on the sermon we had both just heard. I also met other members of the church not connected to the soccer team in these informal moments of socializing between services. Following the second service, which was held between 11 and noon, I would again spend time socializing with other members of the team and the church. I was invited to a Bible study for young adults (18-25), and subsequently attended several of the Bible study sections. In addition, I also attended three Vancouver Whitecaps games with various members of the church soccer team.

The BCCSL allowed four players on each team not associated with the given church. These players were designated as either “other church import players” or “witness clause import players” (British Columbia Christian Soccer League By-Laws 2018, 6). The “other church import players” came from churches without soccer teams while “witness clause import players” were invited players that were not part of any church. I did not participate as a player in the BCCSL as
by the time I began my project the overall roster had been set. However, I was still an active participant at games helping out with setting up the pre-game warm-up, corner flags, and acting as a linesman when needed. On the sideline I observed the game, talked to the players on the bench and other church members who had come to support the team. I cheered and supported the teams alongside the players with several of the players referring to me a “cheerleader”. While at the games I tried to observe the players’ actions, especially in moments of conflict, and aggression when on the field. I was interested in the bodily reactions of the players to opposing tackles and challenges.

I conducted interviews with 21 different players from North Shore Alliance’s A and B teams. I also interviewed the church’s lead pastor, James, on the place of the soccer team within North Shore Alliance. The semi-structured interviews engaged with the player’s feelings about the church soccer team and their thoughts on the church more broadly. I interviewed players from both the A and B teams and I tried to interview players who reflected the age range of the members of the church’s teams. I also interviewed both Christian players and non-Christian import players. However, given the scope of the thesis I do not discuss the experiences of the non-Christian import players on the team. The BCCSL is officially a co-ed league (British Columbia Christian Soccer League 2018, 7). However, Sarah a player on the A team and the only woman on either team explained to me technically and officially “ours is a co-ed team but it’s not because I was the only girl on both teams” and that although “a lot less girls have played recently” that “it has never been a true co-ed team” as the team has never had an equal representation of women on the team. John did tell me “I would like to see more women in our church play”. The lack of women in the team is not representative of the large number of women attending services at the church and the presence of woman pastors at the church. The players on the teams were largely white with a few
Asian players. Many of the players on the teams were middle and upper-middle class people possessing jobs in professional fields such as engineering, business, accounting, teaching, and medicine. My own position resembled many of the players on the team. Several of the players had similarly attended the University of British Columbia or were currently graduate students. This similarity provided a general ease in feeling involved with the team. I grew up in a family with parents from different religious and cultural traditions. My father is Catholic and my mother is Jewish and Greek Orthodox. We celebrated religious holidays at home such as Passover, Rosh Hashanah and Easter but did not attend any religious services. I had very little experience of attending church services before my fieldwork and I had never previously attended services at a Christian and Missionary Alliance Church\(^8\). Throughout my fieldwork I felt welcomed and invited by the members of the team and church.

After John’s previously discussed rousing pre-game speech one of the younger players on the A team turned to me and quietly said “I am expecting straight poetry from your thesis”. While I cannot promise poetry from this thesis, I have tried to provide an \textit{account} of the experiences, understandings, and feelings of the members of soccer teams at an evangelical church in North Vancouver, British Columbia. Almost all of the players on the teams were men and this thesis concentrates largely on the actions and thoughts of the older Christian players on North Shore Alliance’s teams. John described my project as a form of “internal audit, actually I would say it was more intimate. It was more like a colonoscopy”\(^9\) of the church. In looking at soccer and having spent four months with North Shore Alliance, John thought that I could give a “church health assessment” as he told me “you have been right inside, and you have seen the good, the bad and the ugly”. John saw my project as opportunity for someone to study the inner workings and

\(^{8}\) North Shore Alliance is a member of the denomination, the Christian and Missionary Alliance

\(^{9}\) John liked to use body metaphors. After the A team playoff loss he said “We are going to have a short autopsy. Cut this thing open. Find the reasons for death”.
the functioning of a church beyond the Sunday service. John’s description of my fieldwork as a “colonoscopy” is fitting for a project in part about the Body of Christ\textsuperscript{10}. John, a man in his late 40s who had played in the league for almost 30 years, was committed to the soccer team and as member of the B team pointed out, his email signature included “Outreach Pastor / Soccer Coach”. From this commitment he saw my project as way to see the effects of the soccer teams, instituted and emphasized by him in his self-described role as a “cultural architect” of North Shore Alliance Church.

\textbf{Theoretical Framework of the Thesis}

I situate my work within an anthropological approach to Christianity that emphasizes the making of community through religion. Elisha emphasizes “relationalism as a collective ethos” within American evangelical Christianity (Elisha 2011, 21). This position of valuing sociality in evangelical Christianity goes against the assumption of the individualism of evangelical Christianity that is present in other work in the subfield of the anthropology of Christianity (Elisha 2011, 21). Elisha provides the idea of “immersive sociality” (Elisha 2015, 43) that is used in understanding the social forms that can be formed through soccer. I use Elisha idea’s of “immersive sociality” (Elisha 2015, 43) in order to explain the kinds of relationships of close interdependence that some players thought could emerge from the soccer team.

Recent work in the anthropology of Christianity addresses the central place of affect in evangelical and charismatic churches. Jon Bialecki’s 2017 ethnography \textit{A Diagram for Fire: Miracles and Variation in an American Charismatic Movement} overtly engages with the role of affect in the production of miracles in Southern California charismatic churches. In addition, the

\footnote{The “Body of Christ” refers to the whole of the Christian Church (Elisha 2011, 79). My use of the term comes from Paul in 1 Corinthians 12:12-14 (NIV) “Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. \textsuperscript{14} Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many.” And from 1 Corinthians 12: 27 (NIV) “Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.”}
anthropologist Kevin O’Neil also writes about the place of affect, with specific reference to Christianity in Guatemala. O’Neill advocates for an approach to religion that deals with the “felt difference” (O’Neill 2013, 1103) of “affective spaces” (O’Neill 2013, 1104) in order to emphasize the spatiality of lived religion (O’Neill 2013, 1105). Like O’Neill this thesis engages with the affective qualities of spaces and their links to the formation of community. Central to the affect is the importance of the “heart”, described by Jon Bialecki as “the most sacred space in the charismatic folk biology” (Bialecki 2017, 194) or in this case the “heart” is central to the understanding of the body in evangelical Christianity. The soccer players consistently return to the idea of the heart and it is central in understanding how the players understand their relationship with others and Jesus Christ. The actions of the players gives them information about the state of their heart and whether their actions are inline with God’s spirit.

**Organization of Thesis**

The thesis is composed of four main sections. The first section discusses place of soccer in the church. This section provides a description of the sermon series, “The Ten Words” taking place during the course of the soccer season. In the second section I discuss the practice of prayer at the soccer games and the resonances established between the games and church practices. In this section I am concerned with witnessing practices, displays of emotional vulnerability and spiritual development that can emerge from playing in a Christian soccer league. In addition, this section deals with the importance of moral distinction for a Christian soccer league. Ideas of fellowship in the church and the soccer team are a part of the third section. In the third section I also consider how issues of authenticity, and knowledge of God are related to soccer and the formation of social bonds. This section further compares performance at the church and on the soccer field and
describes the importance of interdependence and living collectively for the soccer team and the church.

The final section is concerned with the relationships of the self and community. The topic of the last section is the heart, and by extension the issues of motivations, drives, habits, cultivation, and intentions. Relatedly, I discuss demonstrations of long-term transformation through soccer. This final section presents the affective quality of the soccer field and how that can produce an environment for knowledge of the heart. Finally, the last element of the thesis is the placement in and knowledge about the Body of Christ. This section describes the kinds of bodily knowledge that playing produces.

**Chapter I: Understanding of Soccer, Society, and Rules at the Church**

I attended the church’s weekly Sunday services during my time with the North Shore Alliance soccer teams. The Sunday service involved worship songs, announcements and a weekly sermon given by the various pastors at the church. In 2017, the British Columbia Christian Soccer League ran from early April to early July and throughout this time the church had a sermon series entitled “The Ten Words”, which discussed one of the Ten Commandments each week. I will elaborate upon the two notable discussions of soccer during the sermons series. The first mention of soccer came in the introductory sermon of the series.

In the sermon series James, the lead pastor, explained that the “Ten Words”, the Ten Commandments, were about “about who He is, who we are, and how to live a life of freedom”. James’ sermons on the Ten Words attempted to move away from an understanding of them as simply rules that regulate behavior. James stressed that they were primarily about freedom, as the Ten Words were given to Moses and the Israelites following their Exodus from Egypt. Further,

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11 The “Ten Words” was the term used to refer to the Ten Commandments in the sermon series. I choose to refer to the Ten Commandments as the “Ten Words” because the pastors did so.
James explained that the Ten Words were given to the Israelites in an effort to “protect their newfound freedom”. Beyond simply rules, the Ten Words, in this evangelical context, are related to the fulfillment of “what true humanity is meant to look like”. In this fashion, James viewed the Ten Commandments in a positive fashion as behaviours that encouraged and generated certain forms of freedoms rather than a negative denial of certain actions. Further, James told the church congregation “that God is not merely interested in correcting our behaviour; He wants to renovate our heart.” In this understanding, the Ten Words were related to people’s fundamental motivations, drives, and emotions. In the introductory sermon James used soccer as an “analogy” to explain the harmonious function of following the Ten Words for members of the church.

In this first sermon, James stated that “soccer is a beautiful game, one that I know, love” in which there are “11 players a side, working together as one”. He then continued and mentioned, “there’s a lot of rules in soccer” including ones for being offside, what constitutes a foul, and the timing of the game. James then asked the audience “I want you to imagine the game of soccer being played without any of the rules I’ve just mentioned”. James answered his own question and told the members of the church “without rules there’s only chaos—no one’s safe, and no one can enjoy the game.” Like the Ten Words, the rules in soccer are understood as productive in creating certain freedoms such as safety and enjoyment. In this sermon, soccer as a game of rules, is used as a model of harmonious Christian life. In following the rules of soccer, players are able to demonstrate that the sport is a “beautiful game” just as following the Ten Words will “showcase who God is to the world”, according to James. In this moment, James positioned soccer as being linked to Christian ideals of harmony and coherence of “what true humanity is meant to look like”.

James later presented soccer as also a site for anger and violence. James was a pastor in his early 40s who was in good athletic shape and a soccer fan.\(^{12}\) James’ talked about soccer in a sermon about the sixth Word, Exodus 20:13, which is “You Shall Not Murder” (NIV). In the sermon James described the various “ways to destroy a life or relationship”\(^{13}\) with “anger, hatred, and contempt”. In line with a positive view of law James stated that “the absence of murder, anger, and contempt is not God’s ultimate goal; His goal is the presence of love, mercy, and kindness.”

Anger, “to murder with the heart”, like murder, was wrong, as they both “ignore the image of God in others.” James used his experience of playing soccer as the sermon’s applied example to explain the dangers of anger.

James told the congregation a story about how he became angry “a few years ago” while playing for the church soccer team in a BCCSL playoff game. Compared to the older North Shore Alliance team the opposing team was “young, big, and rough”. James told the congregation that during the game when he was running for a ball and “just as I got my foot on the ball, a blond-haired, 22-year-old Viking, threw his shoulder into the middle of my shoulder blades from behind”. Some people in the pews responded “ooh” at this moment of roughness. James described his state while lying on the ground after being knocked over as a “strange combination of whiplash, blinding pain, and smoldering rage. I was so angry”. The referee then asked him what he was doing and he responded, “I’m trying to contain my anger”. James used this example in soccer to describe the dangers of “unprocessed anger”, which he compared to “hazardous waste” in that it will always “come out”.

For James one question for Christians at the church is how to “deal with our anger we feel in our hearts?”. This example of soccer is instructive in describing sport as a space of danger with

\(^{12}\) James had previously played on the church’s soccer team; however, in 2017 he did not play on the team.

\(^{13}\) James’ words are drawn from a recording and written copy of the sermons available on the church’s website.
“unprocessed” emotion. This mention of “unprocessed anger” is similar to players on the team who talked about the “raw emotions” of the soccer field. Importantly, this example focuses on the moments of reaction to a violent foul, which reveal the state of one’s heart. In contrast to the harmonious analogy of a properly played game, in this story James points to the potential risks and dangers that exist in playing the sport. These two examples demonstrate the possibility and risk that is part of playing soccer for members of the church.

The sermon series established a sense of difference and distinction between the desired lives of the Christians in the church and the broader “current, secular, West Coast culture”, as described by James. In the sermon series James overtly described the proper Christian way of being, as rooted in the intended way to live as described by God in the Ten Words, in opposition to “the culture we find ourselves in”. In the introductory sermon of the series, James stated that “we live in place and at a time where the individual reigns supreme” and that this tendency toward individualism impacts the reading of the Bible. For James, Christians read the Decalogue as “as an individual, moral code” due to a cultural assumption of individualism, the idea that each individual has control over their own life. In contrast to an inward individualism, for James the Ten Words are about the ability to “showcase who God is to the world”. In our interview James explained that the church was concerned with countering the prevalence of individualism. James explained that North Shore Alliance and by extension the soccer team is tied to the following questions:

Getting back to community. How do we find ways to bring people in a culture that tends towards fracture? How do we bring people together? How do we connect them? And in particular how do we bring together people who may or may not prioritize a relationship with God?

In these central questions James is offering a critique of contemporary life that is rooted in “fracture” and positioning North Shore Alliance as a site of potential unity and stability in comparison.
James also explained that through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, God “bound Himself to the human race” and thus, humans are tied to God. The Ten Words express a relational form of Christian life, in that people exist in a relationship with God, as God gave them to Moses at Mount Sinai. The fact that people live in a relationship with God contrasts with James’ belief of the individualism of contemporary Canadian life. Furthermore, James, in the sermon series and also in our interview, positioned North Shore Alliance in opposition to the prosperity gospel¹⁴. In our interview James explained that “the prosperity gospel at its worst is a scheme to exploit God” and that as a church, especially in a wealthy city such as North Vancouver, he was resistant to the individualism that comes with the prosperity gospel.

John, as the church’s outreach pastor and soccer coach, also preached during this sermon series. In his sermon and in his later interviews with me, he described living in the “post-Christian city” of Vancouver. In this idea of the “post-Christian city” there is a further divide between the life of Christians at North Shore Alliance Church and the rest of secular Metro Vancouver. Both John and James through these sermons position the church in opposition to the secular forces of individualism. These discussions of individualism as tied to the “current secular culture” are important, as sport is understood as a form of secular activity (Scholes 2014, 87). Emerging out of the practice of prayer in the BCCSL were issues of distinction, action, and the relationship between people and God.

**Chapter II: Prayer and Practice**

The home team led a prayer before each game in the British Columbia Christian Soccer League. The prayer took place at the centre circle of the field with the two teams standing and facing each other. This meeting of players before the game was a change from the standard rhythm.

¹⁴ Anthropologist Naomi Haynes defines the prosperity gospel as: “a theological sub-strain within Pentecostalism that has enjoyed success in numerous churches. Also known as the ‘faith gospel’ or ‘health and wealth gospel’, its message is that it is God's will for believers to be rich, healthy, and successful” (Haynes 2012, 124).
of games in the secular leagues in which I had played. For the prayer, the two teams stood facing
each other remaining on opposites sides of the halfway line. In some games the teams shook hands
either prior to or right after the prayer. The prayer was a period of relative silence, which served as
a transitional end point for the chatter and noise of the pre-game warm-up and stretching. In almost
all cases the prayer began with the declaration “let’s pray” followed by a short prayer, lasting
between thirty seconds and a minute. On a few occasions the player giving the prayer would ask
the fellow players to “bow their heads”.

There was a noticeable consistency between the different prayers given throughout the
second and third division of the BCCSL. The prayer usually began with giving thanks to God for
“this beautiful night” and the “great game of soccer”. The prayer often gave thanks for the
opportunity for fellowship and the ability to “come together to play soccer”. Following this giving
of thanks for being together, the praying player often asked God for a “clean game” free from
injury and played with the “right attitude”. Notably, the praying player usually asked, “let’s pray
that we play in a way to honour You” (God) followed by both teams collectively ending with
“Amen”. All the players I could see would bow their heads rendering it difficult to distinguish
between the secular import players and the Christian players on the opposing team. Lay members
of the church on the North Shore Alliance teams would always give the prayer, which John
explained was an opportunity for “building leadership beyond myself” and to help players on the
team develop and mature spiritually.

John, as a pastor, told me that he was admittedly “paid to pray.” In our interview he
described his frustration at the “rote” nature of the prayers given before the game. John understood
how the uncomfortableness of public prayer would lead to uniformity and consistency. However,
the “rote” quality of the prayers that repeated the same phrases, conflicted with John’s ideal of
prayer as a spontaneous expression of feeling in that particular moment. Although prayer signified the league as a Christian league, the quality of the prayer, as uniform, did not align with the John’s desire for what the league could be. John told me that the value of soccer is that it is a space of vulnerability and revelation in which God through “sports makes you aware of your weaknesses and your capabilities.” John explained to me “God has used sports to confront my anger. God has used sports to confront my frustration with difficult people. God has also used sports to confront my pride” and that some of the “darkest moments of my life” took place during soccer games. John values and was committed to the soccer league as for him soccer can be a “medium” for God to teach you about yourself, and relationship with others, and this pedagogic element to soccer requires openness and vulnerability on the part of the player. John told me that playing soccer “presses you” to “live your faith”, especially in moments of physical contact with other players. Therefore, players must have a sense of openness so as to be “aware of your weaknesses and your capabilities”. The rote prayer, as a mechanical exercise, contrasted with the openness and vulnerability that John hoped would be found by participating in the BCCSL.

Some of the players believed that soccer could be a form of mission. The BBCSL’s constitution states that one purpose of the league is “to be witnesses of Christ reaching out to others both on and off the field” (British Columbia Christian Soccer League Constitution 2018). Many of the games were played at multi-use parks, which included running tracks, other soccer fields, and baseball fields. Most of the games had very few spectators; however, one game in Richmond, south of Vancouver, was played at a field with a large number of people. During the games older Chinese men and women, were walking on a running track that surrounded the field. Throughout the game some of the walkers stopped to watch. Part of the value of pre-game prayer was the possibility that it displayed the players’ Christian faith to other people at the park. Some of
the players saw the soccer team and pre-game prayer, which took place publicly at the centre of the field, as possibly involving “witnessing without words” (Blazer 2015, 42). Anthropologist Annie Blazer uses this term in her work on evangelical women soccer players to describe the process of witnessing in nonverbal means (Blazer 2015, 42). However, in interviews players on the North Shore Alliance teams questioned whether other people, such as those in Richmond, would actually know the teams were witnessing and praying and they wondered whether people could tell they were in a Christian soccer league. Apart from the bowing of the heads, there is no other overtly ritualistic part of the prayer that would communicate to people in the park what they were doing. This questioning returns to the importance of distinction for Christian soccer players.

**Distinction**

The NSA teams began each game of the season with a cheer, collectively saying either “A team!” or “NSA!”16. After the first cheer of the A team season, Franklin, a young first time player in the league, said “aren’t we supposed to say "Jesus!"?” as a pre-game cheer. In this statement Franklin, was commenting on the issue of distinction and religiosity of a self-described “Christian Soccer League”. I asked the players in our interviews whether they thought there should be a difference between Christian and non-Christian soccer players. Peter, an older member of the B team, told me “I would hope, I definitely would, but again knowing people I was thinking ‘is there any difference?’” and I looked at the behaviour on the pitch, again it’s what I expected. Maybe there isn’t such a great difference”. However, some players considered the potential for conflict, and anger in the context of North Shore Alliance as a space that attracts “brokenness”. Sarah told

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15 “Witnessing” in an evangelical context is defined as “Broadly conceived, witnessing encompasses any interaction between a Christian and a nonbeliever in which the spiritual faith of the former is demonstrated (intentionally or unintentionally) for the latter. The goal of witnessing is sometimes immediate conversion but is more often to “plant a seed” to give nonbelievers a reason to want to know more about the Christian life. “Sharing the Gospel message,” “reaching out to the lost,” “sharing’s God’s love,” and “winning people for Christ” are examples of the many ways Evangelicals describe this type of interaction.” (Bielo 2009, 114-115).

16 NSA is abbreviation for North Shore Alliance. The B team’s cheer was always “NSA!”.
me “the church attracts a lot of people and a lot of broken people play soccer so you have a lot of broken moments”.

For Peter, the prayer was “a distinctive thing about a Christian league”. He added “if anything, that is the one thing that sets the league apart and just acknowledges ‘hey look’ there is a spiritual or we are acknowledging that there is a spiritual component to this. Maybe that woke people up”. As the prayer “woke people up”, it functioned as a “reminder” of God’s presence, even in soccer. Through the prayer there is a reminder for people to in John’s words, “live their faith” through their practice on the soccer field. In this way, the players understood the prayer as a way to “set the tone” of the game so as to try to play in a way that did not prioritize winning above all else. The prayer did have an effect on some of the players’ thoughts and approach, which reminded them of God’s presence. In addition, Luke, an older player and calming influence on the field, often gave the prayer before B team games and told me that although he is praying to God, the intended audience for his words were the players themselves who he wanted to remind of the “proper” way of playing in a Christian league.

The second period of prayer occurred after the games amongst members of the NSA team. These prayers, specifically mentioned by John in our interview, occurred several times throughout the season to mark important moments such as the upcoming marriages of members of the A team. John called the post-game prayers for these marriages “some powerful moments this season”. These post-game prayers involved standing closely together with arms outstretched around the player who was being prayed upon with John giving a prayer about their upcoming marriage. These were moments of emotional intensity and physical closeness during which the players’ private lives were injected into the sphere of the team. In these moments I felt a greater sense of closeness as I began to know about the players’ beyond their status as Christian soccer players.
The Huddle

The huddle was the second pre-game activity after the prayer. John, as the coach of the A team, announced the team during the huddle. The huddle was a circle composed of all the players on the team touching shoulder-to-shoulder. The physical proximity was another moment of literal closeness and intimacy between the members of the church on the teams. Each announcement was met with enthusiastic clapping and words of encouragement from the players on the team. In our interview John compared the pre-game huddle to the pre-Sunday service prayer huddle that took place with the worship band, pastors, technical staff, and all the other people working at the service. John specified that the pre-service prayer huddle took place at the “foot of the cross” in the sanctuary of the church, and it was also a moment of closeness and group prayer before another particular form of performance, the Sunday service. This comparison between pre-event practices demonstrates the religious resonances of the soccer game for John, the coach and pastor.

John’s mention that the pre-service prayer huddle took place at the “foot of the cross” is interesting considering the centrality of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ for North Shore Alliance. There is a large cross in the sanctuary of the church, where the service was conducted. A carpenter and member of the church built the cross fifteen years ago, and it is the most visible and dominating feature of the otherwise relatively plain church. The church has white walls, a small stained glass window, padded pews, and a very large and pronounced wooden cross to the left of the stage. The unadorned cross has numerous nail markings in the areas for Jesus’ feet and arms. These nails markings produced a sense of the immediacy of Jesus’ death, which is important as James told me “there is nothing romantic about the cross”. James explained that the cross served as a “reminder that He died” and “also a symbol of His victory over death”. Thus, in this moment
of comparing the pre-service huddle, at the “foot of the cross” and the pre-game huddle, there is a sense of importance and power invested in the pre-game huddle.

The resonance between North Shore Alliance and soccer, in the form of the pre-game and pre-service huddle, is also part of John’s emphasis on vulnerability. As a pastor John appreciated sport, as “the guys who play sports with me really know me”\(^{17}\) as most other people “have this vision of who I am”. John told me that he had a “deeper affinity” with the players on the team as they “see past the pastor” for “who I am really”. John’s ability to show emotion and vulnerability on the field conveyed a sense of authenticity to other players who then saw “past the pastor”. John told me that after losing 3-0 in the team’s playoff game that “I was crushed, I was crumbled, I was angry. I was raw after that game”. During the game John showed his annoyance toward the referee and at half-time and after the game he sometimes expressed his frustration about the state of the team’s play. For John, these instances of being “raw” are part of the vulnerability that is afforded by preaching. John also told me that “I am raw when I am preaching” and that the rote prayers often given by players in the pre-game prayer did not display the same kind of vulnerability that he hoped for in prayer and his preaching. An atmosphere and opportunity of vulnerability, the feeling of being “raw”, is a further resonance between the church and the soccer team.

John also saw that the intimacy of the pre-game huddle was found on the church’s mission trips. In our interview John told me that “Ah I, sports and mission are really closely tied. People who have been on mission trips and been on the front line of mission are the people that I think I have grown the most with”. For John, the ties between mission and the soccer game are also found in the resonance between the intensity and intimacy of the two church pursuits. Mission is

\(^{17}\) This includes the soccer and church ball hockey teams
emphasized at North Shore Alliance as a Christian and Missionary Alliance church. Various preachers and speakers explained that ministry and mission were part of the “denomination DNA”.

Luke, an older player on the B team also explained the value of moments of encouragement in the pre-game huddle. Luke explained to me that James’ sermons on the Ten Words focused on the “flip side” of the usual restrictive understanding of the Ten Words as regulations of behaviour. Luke understood James as saying “do the other thing then” instead of the usual “thou shalt not do this”. Luke explained that following this approach to the Ten Words that he tried to practice the idea “to encourage other people” in order to “bring life to them”.

Specifically for Luke, soccer had a life-giving element in which “you can cut people down or you can build them up” and that through encouragement he could “bring life to them” so as to help players mature and grow. Luke was an encouraging and steadying presence on the NSA B team and from my time spent with the team he was able to embody and practice the message of the sermon series to “bring life”, though encouragement, to his teammates and fellow members of the church through soccer.

**Chapter III: Community and Creation in Soccer**

This section explores the forms of community found and established on the North Shore Alliance soccer teams. Some players in the BCCSL understood soccer as a form of worship. A Cap Church18 soccer player said in his prayer “we thank you that we can be outside running around enjoying Your creation”. Jacob, an older player on the B team originally from England, told me “by being in a Christian league and having two teams that go to church who align themselves to some core fundamentals, there is a degree of worship”. Jacob added “being on the pitch for 90 minutes together we are celebrating creation”. Through soccer Jacob further explained

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18 Capilano Christian Community Church is a church in the league in West Vancouver, which is the next community to the west of North Vancouver.
that it is important to celebrate the moment of playing soccer as an *immediate* part of God’s creation. In addition, this act of worship through soccer is rooted in the church’s idea of sacred space. At the end of a sermon James declared to the worshippers “it is not geography that makes something sacred” but instead “it is God’s presence that makes something sacred”. In turn, worship of the sacred on a soccer field is a further part of what Harry, a younger player on the A team, called “church beyond the four walls”.

John also described a link between soccer and creation. John explained to me that the vulnerability of soccer was linked to the forms of community that humans, through creation, were intended to belong to:

Nicholas: What has been exposed or revealed in that way? Do you move on from there or sort of improve, or like, what does soccer do?
John: Let me go back a step because I do know why. I think that is how God made us. I think God made us for that deep community. I think in its purest form sports is a great place for that to play it out. I would say I have a theology of sport and my theology of sports is that I think God wired us as humans that way and sports is a venue for that. The greatest and the worst of us to be brought up in a great way.

John expressed his vision for Christian soccer, as a self-described “theology of sport”19. By stating that soccer is a “venue” for the practice of “how God made us” there is an alignment of soccer as a Christian practice linked specifically to the nature of humans established in creation. For John soccer is a “venue” or “medium”, as he would later describe it, for the fulfillment of God’s creation. In his “theology of sport” John emphasizes the importance of the *form* of soccer in acting as a “medium” for “deep community.” John would also tell me “I think there is no better team

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19 John’s discussion of creation and soccer resembles recent work on the relationship between sports and Christianity by Protestant theologians. The Anglican theologian Lincoln Harvey’s 2014 book *A Brief Theology of Sport* posits that humans were created as “unnecessary-yet-meaningful” beings and sport is also an “unnecessary-yet-meaningful” activity (Harvey 2014, 83). He sees sport as a “liturgy of our contingency” (Harvey 2014, 94) in which human beings embody and celebrate their most basic identity as “unnecessary-yet-meaningful” creatures of God (Harvey 2014, 83). In *The Games People Play: Theology, Religion, and Sport*, Ellis argues that in creation God demonstrates creativity and playfulness and since humans are created in the image of God, they are also creative and playful. In playing sport, which involves creativity and playfulness, humans are able to embrace and fulfill their basic identity as being created in the image of a playful and creative God (Ellis 2014, 145).
sport than soccer. No better team sport and when you are playing soccer you can’t help but to get to know each other, trust each other and be to boiled down to your basics and to me that helps me and us to grow spiritually”. In playing the sport, players are “boiled down to your basics”. As a sport that requires constant teamwork, communication, and trust soccer is a “medium” that allows for the development of “deep community”, which is part of human’s basic identity “wired” by God. Although “wired” by God for “deep community” according to John, humans are broken, as explained by Sarah earlier and also by Jacob in our interview. Jacob understood brokenness as being about the fact that “we have motives which are very individualistic”, and that “if we actually listen to Him, God is asking us to be on that journey to being a better person. To be more of what He wants us to do”. Due to brokenness there is a tension between the individualistic motivations of humans, as understood by Jacob, and what God “wants us to do” that for John is living in “deep community”, which can be fulfilled through the communal aspects of playing soccer.

John’s idea of “deep community” and soccer’s capacity to reveal one’s true self explained as “the greatest and the worst of us to be brought up in a great way”, which helps “us to grow spiritually”, relates to the Elisha’s work on forms of “evangelical relationalism” in megachurches in Knoxville, Tennessee (Elisha 2015, 46). Elisha posits that although evangelical Christianity is understood and discussed as form of religion rooted in individualism, in practice "evangelical churches put structures in place to ensure that members become morally accountable to one another, thereby subsuming part of their individuality in the collective Body of Christ" (Elisha 2015, 45). In turn these networks and relations based on “mutual dependence, selflessness, instruction sympathy and affection” (Elisha 2015, 46) change the position of the evangelical self to become “unbuffered” and intersubjective (Elisha 2015, 46). This movement towards intersubjectivity means that the lives of people within a Christian community “are meant to
intersect, unhindered, in the confines of religious affinity” (Elisha 2015, 43). Elisha sees these social formations of “mutual dependence” (Elisha 2015, 46) as an “immersive sociality” that act to counter the individualism and fracturing forces of secular life (Elisha 2015, 43). From Elisha’s work, John’s view of the “deep community” produced in soccer facilitating “us to grow spiritually” can be understood as a form of “immersive sociality” (Elisha 2015, 43).

John’s emphasis on the form of “deep community” or “immersive sociality” (Elisha 2015, 43) produced through soccer is also found in his sermon given on the “You Shall Not Steal” (Exodus 20:15). John began the sermon, given on Father’s Day, and stated that the “The Ten Words confront many aspects of our common life together” and in “the eighth word God seeks obedience in our economic life”. Drawing on Deuteronomy 15 John explained to the congregation “because in God’s economy wealth is meant to be shared he gave specific instructions for a new and different way of living”. John was proposing that certain “principles” should guide a Christian mode of economic life. John based these principles on the examples of the Year of Jubilee20 and the laws involving the cancellation of debts every seven21 years, as described in Deuteronomy 15:1. These principles include interdependence, selflessness, and care for others as stated by John in the following way: “if we only think about sustaining our way of life and never consider others less fortunate, near and far, we steal, we are ‘kleptomaniacs’, and turn our backs on the precious value of interdependence to which God has called us”. With respect to ideas of “interdependence”

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20 Leviticus 25: 10-11 (NIV): “Consecrate the fiftieth year and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you; each of you is to return to your family property and to your own clan.” Every fifty years all indebted land was returned to its former owners and no cultivation was allowed.

21 Deuteronomy 15:1-4 (NIV): At the end of every seven years you must cancel debts. This is how it is to be done: Every creditor shall cancel any loan they have made to a fellow Israelite. They shall not require payment from anyone among their own people, because the LORD’s time for cancelling debts has been proclaimed. 3 You may require payment from a foreigner, but you must cancel any debt your fellow Israelite owes you. 4 However, there need be no poor people among you, for in the land the LORD your God is giving you to possess as your inheritance, he will richly bless you.”
John further said “as Christians, we must advocate for a freer flow and distribution of wealth in our cities”.

From espousing a Christian view of economics based on a greater “distribution of wealth” and the “precious value of interdependence” John then turned to his own life as a pastor and father and his recent experience of finding a house to rent in the competitive and unfair Vancouver housing market. John spoke with emotion and told the congregation “you see, I long to be self-sufficient, for people to think I’ve got it all together”. Although declaring a desire for individual self-sufficiency the experience of both finding, renting, and fixing up a house confirmed the need for God’s providence and having a community of interdependent “people from church, soccer, our home group, Coffee Time, over 60 different friends” that helped him fix up his new home. Like his description of “deep community” that manifests in the soccer team, the sermon focuses on the values of interdependence between people and ultimately God that should be “aspects of our common life together”22, as stated at the beginning of the sermon.

A small number of people I interviewed expressed some apprehension or distance from the church. However, like John they also viewed the soccer team as a site of community. Laurence, a player on the B team, told me in our interview that “I am really struggling with certain parts of the church aspects” and in particular, North Shore Alliance’s conservative view on same-sex marriage. He told me the “Christian church are not accepting of people who don’t follow what a marriage is supposed to be”. However, he also told me that “I grew up in the church my whole life” and as a result, “at the same time I have a community there, I have had it my whole life and I know a ton of people”. For Laurence “the soccer league and the ball hockey league is what connects me with certain people in the church” as he was “not one to go Sunday services”. In contrast to John’s

22 All of John’s words are quotes from his sermons, which are available on North Shore Alliance’s website.
desire of the team to bring people together in community to become closer to God, the team also served as a site to continue social bonds within the church while these players retained certain apprehensions about North Shore Alliance. In this way, the team functioned to create different kinds of social relations, both for people drawn into the church and those moving away from North Shore Alliance.

At the final training session before the beginning of the season John announced to the team that he wanted each of the players to shake their teammates’ hands, greet them, and look them in the eye before each game. John had first seen the practice of shaking teammates’ hands before the game done by Paul Ritchie, former Scottish international, Premier League player and Vancouver Whitecaps assistant coach, who played on North Shore’s team in 2013 and 2014. John told me that in 2013 North Shore Alliance was playing a game in Richmond and only had ten men before the start of the game. Paul Ritchie unexpectedly showed up as the 11th man and shook everybody’s hand in the dressing room before the game. John was struck by the humility of this moment as he told me that although Paul Ritchie was a “world away from us,” Ritchie shook the hands of “fat church league players”, which raised the spirit of the team. Giving a sermon at Easter that year John said to the church audience “I said when the disciples were in the upper room after Jesus had died and He showed up in their meeting, that changed our church history and that day changed our soccer team”. John quickly added “Not that Paul Ritchie is Jesus”, but that in showing up and shaking everybody’s hand Paul was acknowledging the importance of the unity of the team and “that gave me a sense of we are all together”. This further resonance between Paul Ritchie and Jesus’s appearance before His disciples is another example of the links between the church and soccer team. John asked the team to greet one another before the game with a handshake; however, only John consistently greeted the team by shaking their hands and looking his teammates in the
eye. This physical recognition of being part of a team, as demonstrated through the handshakes and eye contact, is another attempt at the cultivation of community through the soccer team.

**Fellowship**

BCCSL players giving the prayer consistently mentioned fellowship. A player from St Clare, the only Catholic Church in the league, said in their prayer “thanks for the fellowship, thank you for bringing us together and letting us celebrate this great game”. Similarly, a player from Cloverdale Baptist Church from Surrey mentioned in his prayer “thank you Heavenly Father for fellowship with our brothers in Christ”. As the pre-game prayers established the desired vision of the game, fellowship is part of the ideal vision of the Christian soccer league. The BCCSL’s constitution also mentions fellowship as part of the “vision” of the league (British Columbia Christian Soccer League Constitution 2018, 2). However, several players were more doubtful of the potential for fellowship between different teams. Some players were sceptical of the very term “fellowship”. In our interview Edward, an A team player in his late 20s told me:

Nicholas: One prayer is “we are here as brothers in Christ, for fellowship”. Does that actually happen or is that something people say? What would that mean “fellowship” in the context of the soccer game?
Edward: I have always understood fellowship as hanging out so for me fellowship within the soccer team would be actually building friendships both with the guys around and that can be just as easily a defender on the other team as it can with Chris, whatever. It’s one of those things where it’s, again it’s a word that is bounded around a lot in churches without being understood by people. “Ah yes we should fellowship. It’s like hmmm, do we?”. What you get on the soccer field along with more raw emotion is that honesty. That ability to look a guy when he is not thinking about how he is trying to present himself and then speak to that. Speak to the real person.

For Edward, fellowship was an example of “Christianese” that “is bounded around a lot in churches without being understood by people”. Edward’s criticism of fellowship as Christianese marks the word as kind of performative language that lacks authenticity. In contrast, in the “raw emotion” of the soccer game where players are reacting to the play allows for the expression of
“the real person” with “honesty” that is not concerned with the jargon or discourse of evangelical Christianity. Edward valued the possibility of friendship and the social aspects of the team; however, he was resistant to frame it in the terms of “fellowship”. Being overly focused on the term “fellowship” as the act of “hanging out” presents a false sense of self.

The possibility of friendship and fellowship on the soccer team was often expressed in a gendered fashion. John explained to me that “women connect a lot more naturally, men need program and I would say even more than that it’s hard to connect in their Bible study”. Soccer acts as a form of “building block” for players to eventually become more comfortable with other practices such as Bible study. Moreover, John told me that “for men to connect in relationships it doesn’t happen naturally. Either you work together or you play together”. Jacob also viewed the social importance of soccer in gendered terms as he told me “I think people at church struggle to actually get beyond pleasantries especially guys, girls are so much better”. The difficulties of friendships for men were mentioned within the difficulties of physically meeting people in the church. Luke explained to me that without the soccer team as an opportunity to make initial friendships, albeit potentially superficial ones that “as soon as church was over all the guys might be running for their car”. James viewed soccer as space for men to bond as in playing together “it feels like you really know me” in the common experience of sport. For James this is needed, as “guys in general tend not to cultivate deeper relationships like women”. Within the connection of sport James saw the possibility of players getting “to know each other on a heart level”, which will then lead to “deep conversations about life stuff” that strengthens the community of the church.

The confines and scheduling of the league limit the extent of fellowship amongst the teammates and the fellow team. Although fellowship is a stated goal of many of the players on the team, the realization of that goal is difficult within the structure of the BCCSL. The majority of the
games for North Shore Alliance began at 9:15 PM and end at 11 pm. The end of the games finished with the players shaking hands, a short end-of-game speech by the coach, and then changing out of the team’s football kit. These moments after games were also a time for conversation between the NSA players. These conversations were relatively brief as players had to go home since many worked the next day, especially for games played on Monday nights. The two opposing teams would rarely have any contact after the game. Occasionally, players from North Shore would know players on the other team, for example two of the younger members of the B team knew opposing BCCSL players through a local Bible camp. Moreover, it was unclear to some players how exactly fellowship, beyond meeting briefly for the prayer, was to take place between the teams.

Comparatively, Luke viewed secular leagues as having a better “social aspect”. He told me in our interview that “sometimes I will see them with their beer cooler or they will be pulling out barbecues and I think that is kind of cool.” Luke acknowledged the difficulty of having a barbecue or a beer after or before a game beginning at 9:15; however, he still told me that more prominent socializing between the team “is something I have seen in other leagues that I wish we had”. Although many of the players expressed some desire for the distinctiveness of a Christian soccer league, they also valued some elements of secular leagues.

The BCCSL has expanded in the past thirty years. According to John, a member of the league since 1988, the league has generally shifted away from a league made up largely of churches from the municipal city of Vancouver, Coquitlam, and Burnaby. As the league grew, from 15, when John started playing in 1988, to 42 teams at the highest point, it began to be composed of teams from the more outlying cities of Langley and Surrey. This shift in composition means that teams have to travel farther for away games. Although, the third division was divided
into a north and south division, the B team still travelled from North Vancouver to games in Port Moody, Pitt Meadows, Burnaby and Coquitlam\textsuperscript{23}. The A team, playing in a division without geographic separations, travelled from North Vancouver to games in Langley, Burnaby, Surrey, and Richmond\textsuperscript{24}. NSA players met at a coffee shop in North Vancouver before carpooling out to the away games together. The games farther away, especially in Langley and Coquitlam, took between 45 minutes to an hour to reach the destination. Carpooling represented a further opportunity for conversation and developing relationships between players. The players talked about their respective jobs, family life, and the church. The conversations were also about Christianity with the players in one instance discussing their favourite scriptures in the Bible, and another time discussing the week’s sermon and Biblical law. Moreover, older players usually drove their cars and younger players carpooled with them. These longer trips were a further opportunity for some intergenerational interaction that is valued by the players on the teams.

Many of the players explained to me that they played soccer for NSA for community and enjoyment. In terms of community some players explained that they valued the possibility for intergenerational interactions on the teams. During other periods of the year, players on the NSA teams played for teams in other leagues that were often divided by age. In contrast, Timothy, an older player on the A team in his early 40s said that the teams had an “inter-mixing of generations”, which was a “great way of fellowship, great way to get out there with guys who you might not know”. Sarah, the only woman on either team, explained in our interview that she valued the teams for providing a common space to “take down one barrier of awkwardness, specially with older middle aged guys that I normally wouldn’t have any common ground with, like at all. It totally breaks that barrier down”. She also said that the players on the team are part of

\textsuperscript{23} All of these are suburbs to the east and northeast of Vancouver
\textsuperscript{24} All of these are suburbs to the south, southeast and east of Vancouver
a “community that I don’t often get to participate in because I am a girl and this is a group of guys playing a sport and girls don’t often get invited to those spaces I guess”. In this fashion, soccer provides a medium for Sarah to enter into contact with male members of the church and across generations. The soccer team provided the potential for people in the church to begin to form relationships across generations.

**Chapter IV: Getting in Touch with the Heart through Soccer**

The word “heart” has a powerful significance for evangelicals (Luhrmann 2012, 107). The “heart” was frequently referred to in sermons, bible studies, at soccer games, and during my interviews with the players. In sermons the “heart” was evoked in relationship with Jesus. I asked many of the players the question “what is the heart?” and received a variety of answers. However, Peter, an older player on the B and a more theologically engaged member of the church explained it to me as:

Nicholas: People in the church love the heart, people talk about it a lot. What is the heart?
Peter: So, synecdoche. Part of the whole. A metaphor. The idea that it’s the seat of all the emotions, the motivations, the affects. The centre of the being where we make our decisions. The whole person. The inner person.
Nicholas: is it a, ahhh, place….but is it in the body somewhere?
Peter: The New Testament idea of the heart is the inner person. That is how I would describe it. I think the old reformers talked about the affects, which is the part of us that drives us or where we feel things as opposed to the decision-making part but we can’t really break it down, it’s all together. It’s the seat of the person where you make your decisions or where your motivations come from.

Edward, an A team player in his 20s who scored the best goal of season with a beautiful long distance shot, similarly defined the heart as “the emotion element” of a person and “is a way of reorienting yourself as a person”. Edward was also wary of the term as he told me “it is a difficult term to define and that is why it is so widely used, it is a piece of Christianese”. James further described the heart as a site of cooperation between people and God. Tanya Luhrmann in her ethnography *When God Talks Back* described the heart as a site of intimacy between a person and
God and that religious practices to “develop the heart” were performed to become closer to God (Luhrmann 2012, 107).

I first heard discussions of the heart at my first training session with the team. Neil, an older player on the B team, delivered the prayer for the season and prayed for the players on the teams to have “soft hearts” throughout the season. Neil prayed that God would lead the players to have “soft hearts” and “not to get out of control” on the pitch. In this prayer Neil was stating that an under-control body, formed by a “soft heart”, was ordained by God and in turn, an under control style of play was desired by God. As explained by Peter and Edward, the idea of “soft hearts”, as contrasted with “hardened hearts”, meant striving for compassion towards the other team and one’s own teammates. Neil’s prayer, delivered at the last training session which involved both teams, projected the goals and prayers for the upcoming season. Part of this projected vision of the season was the capacity and desire to play with “soft hearts”.

Drawing upon Luke 6:45 Edward linked the heart to the bodily reactions of players on the soccer field. He told me “Jesus or someone else says ‘through the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks’”. In moments “when you are on the soccer field and you are yelling at a guy because he is a moron and you hate him and that is the overflow of the heart”. Reacting to plays on the soccer field, when there is the potential of yelling at the opposing team, was the display of the “overflow of the heart”. Christian soccer players should be open and aware of their reactions on the soccer field that can inform them about the state of their heart, which is a reflection of their “inner person”. For Edward knowledge about your heart was especially important as he was focused on the “core of Christianity, which is having a good heart”. The soccer field is a

25 A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of. (NIV)
particularly good medium and venue for this form of revelatory knowledge because according to Edward it is a space of “raw emotion”. Edward explained:

Out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks and when you are on the football field what happens when you get into a state, when you get into a state of heightened emotion the things that are buried, that are underneath, start to come through and if you are someone in tune with God’s spirit hopefully you will have the emotion, the same reaction to stuff as He does, is the idea anyway or more similar because who knows what God really feels, it’s God.

The “state of heightened emotion” that characterizes the soccer field makes it a space of affective possibility. Anthropologist Kevin O’Neill states “from the perspective of affect, the body is excitable” (O’Neill 2013, 1102). Edward’s description of soccer as involving reactions from the “overflow of the heart” also presents the bodies of Christian soccer players as “excitable” and having the capacity to be affected in different ways depending on the “overflow of the heart”.

In the affective quality of the soccer field, the “buried” selves of the player “start to come through”. For example, after a particularly aggressive and badly played game involving six yellow cards and arguing between the two teams, players on the North Shore Alliance B team joked to me about how rich a game that was for my project. Luke told me “when you write about this game put it all in red”. There was a consciousness that as the game unravelled the team was displaying poor behaviour and acting in ways that I might perceive as uncharacteristic of a Christian soccer team. Contemporary affect theory links to the “state of heightened emotion” on the soccer field.

The theorist Particia Clough, in the introduction to the edited volume, The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social, defines affect as “potential bodily responses, often autonomic responses, which are in-excess of consciousness” (Clough 2007, 2). Importantly for Brian Massumi, a theorist of affect, what characterizes the affective body is that “It moves. It feels” (Massumi 2002, 1). Affect as “intensity” (Massumi 2002, 27) and “raw, reactive sensation” (O’Neill 2013, 1095) links directly with Edward’s description of the Christian soccer league as having a “state of heightened
emotion” and involving “buried” parts of the heart that come through in moments of reaction.
Edward also explained to me that in soccer “I think really what you find is that people strip a layer off” and “forget themselves in the heat of competition”. The capacity to be affected emerges in these moments of forgetting. Through these affective encounters between players on the soccer field the state of a person’s heart is revealed. From this revealing, the state of their relationship with God is also shown, as it can be shown whether “someone is in tune with God’s Spirit” according to Edward. In this fashion, being a Christian soccer player is being open to these forms of knowledge and learning about the heart through one’s play and reaction on the field.

The affective qualities of soccer that involve “raw, reactive sensation” (O’Neill 2013, 1095) were also clearly described in my interview with Jacob. He explained:

I think a lot of people battle with this sense of mentally that I can understand theologically, theological concepts or mentally I can understand faith but my heart it’s a lot harder to change. My soul is a lot harder to change and I think soccer or any other sport you are driven a lot more by your heart than your mind but our processing speeds, like soccer I have no time to think….It’s all instantaneous, your raw emotions come out.

Jacob’s temporal description of soccer as “all instantaneous, your raw emotions come out” is similar to affect, which is “potential bodily responses, often autonomic responses, which are in-excess of consciousness” (Clough 2007, 2). Jacob is distinguishing between mental knowledge of theology and the actual lived embodiment of these concepts in the heart, which is “a lot harder to change”. In contrast to a purely mental or cognitive understanding of the theology of evangelical Christianity, soccer reveals how a person has actually embodied those ideas. The display of “raw emotions” is valuable as the players’ “instantaneous” reactions on the field display how the ideas have been embodied. For Jacob, play on the soccer field acts as a display of “deeper, core transformation” that goes beyond simple understanding of theologically based ideas to the physical practice of those ideas amongst other Christians. For Jacob, there is the also danger of church
becoming a “country club”, as a place just for friendship. Jacob proceeded to tell me that “I enjoy the country club and the friendship and the community but there is no deep sense of transformation. Playing soccer with those guys will bring it out. I think it’s revealing to us as individuals how we behave under stress situations”. Like Edward previously, Jacob is describing the revelatory capacity of soccer to teach people about the state of their heart and stage in their process of transformation toward what “He wants us to do” and be.

Jacob in the section above is also commenting on the form of the game, as being “all instantaneous.” The form of the game is related to the value of soccer as a site of revelation of the state of one’s heart. Soccer is a sport with constant encounters between players on the field. Players move around, often involving short bursts of speeds and there are consistent one-on-one encounters between opposing players that involve sudden moments of reaction. The form, the shifting of the ball between different players at often rapid speeds, engages the players in moments of stress throughout the game. This emphasis on relations is important for affect theory, as affect according to Melissa Gregg and Gregory Seigworth, “is born in in-between-ness.” (Gregg and Seigworth 2010, 2). In soccer, the affective experience of playing is produced at moments between people playing the game as the players come consistently together into new situations of encounter, such as a tackle, contesting a header or chasing a ball against an opposing player.

Philosopher Simon Critchley notes in his 2017 book, What We Think About When We Think About Soccer, that the full name of soccer is “Association Football”. In the very name of the sport, encounter and relations are signified by the notion of “Association”26.

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26 The full name “association football” is in reference to the form of football The Football Association of England developed in the 1860s. This code of football is the basis of the current laws of the game. “Association football”, as tying it to The Football Association, competed against others codes of football such as the Sheffield Rules (Harvey 2005, 125).
In the associative nature of soccer, affect acts as a moment of knowledge for Christian soccer players. Harry, a younger active member of the church and a theologically interested Christian, described that he wanted to develop a practice of “habitual intentionality” when playing. Moving beyond the binary of habit and intention, Harry saw soccer as a place that required him to act habitually with intention so as to avoid the possibility of anger emerging in the affect produced when playing soccer. Instead, he wanted to act consistently in a Christian fashion based on care and self-control. Harry was actively concerned about avoiding reactionary displays of the heart.

The Heart and Transformation

Jacob and Edward, as discussed above, stated that expressions of the heart could be seen on the soccer pitch. The way someone played and reacted to the game, acted as a site of revelation of the heart. In the intensity and affective encounters of the soccer field acts of striving toward self-control could be seen as moments of transformation and reorientation of the heart away from rage toward compassion and self-discipline. For Jacob, “deep, core-based transformation”, can often be difficult to self-perceive and temporally, takes place across the lifespan. From this perspective, moments of changing the heart can be difficult to see as a viewer of the game. However, there were practices of overt striving toward self-control that occurred on the field.

Ted, an A team player in his early 40s and a relatively recent convert to Christianity, was a player who displayed practices of self-control. In our interview Luke described self-control as a “fruit of the Spirit”27 and Ted as someone who other players saw as an example of embodying self-control and displaying good Christian practice on the field. During a game Ted lost control of the ball close to the sidelines and he pursued the ball as it went out of bounds. After it went out of bounds, the ball rolled into the stands and a fight ensued.

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27 The term comes from Galatians 5:22-23: “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.” (NIV). As suggested by the passage these are virtues that are linked to being in accordance with the Holy Spirit (Cunningham 2011, 276-277).
the field, he stopped, clenched his fists, closed his eyes, and made a slightly exasperating noise. In this moment of frustration, Ted seemed to be trying to control his anger at himself and instead of swearing or lashing out at another player he could be physically seen trying to resist in clenching his fists, closing his eyes, and saying “ah” in an exasperated fashion. From my place on the sidelines, Ted seemed to be overtly trying to control his frustration and could be seen as being actively involved in the process of transformation away from anger toward self-control.

Soccer could also involve moments of anger. Throughout the project John, along with many of the players, was supportive, helpful, and remarkably open regarding his life on the soccer pitch. John, like many of the other players agreed that through soccer God could reveal certain things to the players. John’s experiences also illustrate the possibility of violence that exist in soccer, while simultaneously viewing this possibility as space for receiving knowledge and refinement from God. As he told me, soccer had the capacity for “the greatest and the worst of us to be brought up”. In a particularly emotional, open, and honest story John shared the following with me. This section of our interview shows the how sport can be a space for God to give knowledge to the players:

Nicholas: You said “through sport God can refine you”. What did you mean by that?
John: I have had some of my darkest moments on the field, lots of them. My darkest moment was in 1989, I was 20 years old, I all of a sudden became the captain of my Bible College team and we had just come back from two straight years of national championships and all the guys I looked up to were all graduating now, everybody was looking up to me and I was so ready to take the role but I was so ramped up about it. Our very first game against our biggest rival, the Bible College down the street. We were in Regina and they were in Moose Jaw. Their best player kind of slid into me after I cleared the ball down the field. I was mad and I was also like super ramped, like Braveheart and I looked up to see where the referee was and I looked down to him at my feet and I swift kicked him right in the head. My whole bench of plays including guys who were 18, 19 years old. I remember their faces and I remember my coach who had me the captain a few weeks earlier and in that moment, I could have killed him. I kicked him so hard I could have killed him. The referee never saw it. That was one of my darkest moments of my life. I think of the half time, I was like a mess and my coach just ripped into me and it was the right move. We lost the game 1-nil I think and I was so ramped up at the end of the
game but then next, it was a Friday afternoon but the next day, me and my co-captain drove out to Caronport, Saskatchewan to find Jimmy, the guy I kicked in the head and met with him for a half an hour and I just said “I am sorry, please forgive me” and then I stood before my teammates and had a big apology. So looking back, that was thirty plus years ago that was a huge turning point for me. So when Todd Bertuzzi punches Steve Moore, Tiger Woods is a little different. When people do stuff like that in the line of duty, I get it. I wasn’t quick to judge Todd Bertuzzi because I know I have that rage inside of me, I don’t like it. I think competition can turn into rage. There is a thin line there but that was a huge humbling experience for me Nick, which I hated but looking back it confronted something in my life through sports that needed to be confronted and God has done a lot of work in my life.

Hearing the story was moving and surprising as John, was compassionate, and loving towards me. In his story John resembled many of the points covered by James’ sermon about anger in soccer. Although a site of potential violence and some of his “darkest moments” John ultimately presented soccer as an important, “a huge turning point for me”, part of his life due to the capacity of soccer to provide expository moments of disclosure about his character, and actions. John ultimately sees the possibility, capacity, and value of soccer in that it can be a medium for God to reveal and confront “something in my life through sports that needed to be confronted”, in this case anger. John is also stating through this story the need to be open to refinement and knowledge from God, even in soccer, and to be cognizant that “God has done a lot of work in my life”.

**The Heart and Community**

The state of the heart is also about to how a person relates to others and understands their place in the world. As defined by Peter earlier in the thesis, the heart is the site of drives and motivations. Peter explained that his understanding of the heart comes from the teaching of English Nonconformists such as John Owen and Richard Baxter. Peter said this about the English Nonconformists: “they even talked about what drives us and also how we have this tendency to seek our own interests, to sin”. From this particular understanding Peter explained that when the heart is only focused on selfish interests that people will be led to sin. Part of a greater change of
heart is that “then something happens when you realize ‘wait a second’ God is in the equation now” and there is shift toward glorifying God. For Peter, this realization comes through moments of self-reflection and God “working on your heart”. In soccer this sense of acting for the glory of God, not individual interests, is seen in supporting others on the pitch, and not striving only to win the game and “get all the glory”.

Peter viewed this development of the heart as indicative of spiritual growth and maturity. In our interview Peter linked the act of spiritual growth and developing the heart with the process of community building and understanding your place within the greater Body of Christ:

Nicholas: you mentioned the idea of spiritual growth. Is that something that comes with the soccer team?
Peter: Good question. You can’t force spiritual growth and it’s maturity. It can be part of spiritual growth, the whole community building process and building relationships. You can’t grow spiritual growth in a vacuum. I don’t advocate the hermit lifestyle, we all have to learn to get along.
Nicholas: In what ways does being in community develop spiritual growth?
Peter: Good, great, for one it’s the way to think about, the whole Christian idea of putting others before yourself. It’s outward looking rather than inward focused. Not navel gazing, kind of considering others, that whole thing. Also just learn to listen to other people and getting a sense that you are part of a group rather than individuals against the world.
Nicholas: Why is that important for the church to be, working as a group?
Peter: It’s vital because our whole society is promoting the self. I think the society itself is always saying “you deserve this”. It’s the whole idea that you are an island, you do it all yourself. Also the self-glorification. Feeding the Ego, all that. All those things advertisers know about, theologically we are known as the Body of Christ, so we are together and we all have different roles like different organs in the body, we are all parts of the body. Yeah, I think you can’t grow apart of being a part of a community.

In this section of our interview Peter was returning to the themes about individualism that were a part of James and John’s sermons at North Shore Alliance. Like James, Peter was critical of the individualizing aspects of contemporary society. In soccer the possibility for spiritual growth, the development of the heart, is also about how people conceive of themselves within a larger community as “part of a group rather than individuals against the world”. For Peter this spiritual development involved learning to develop your heart so as to be driven to act for God and others.
and move away from “navel gazing” and “self-glorification”. As Peter said, “we are all parts of the body” and “I think you can’t grow apart of being a part of a community”, which demonstrates his belief in the need for community for spiritual growth. Moreover, like John’s vision of spiritual development through the moments in vulnerability, Peter in referring to the Body of Christ was arguing for a form of “immersive sociality” (Elisha 2015, 43) between the members of the church in which people need each other to have “spiritual growth”.

Peter viewed the large size of the church, approximately 600 people combined attending the two Sunday services, as a space in which community was difficult to achieve. He explained:

Yes, very hard. Even in a small church. It’s very easy in a large church for a church goer to just feel comfortable, it’s almost like a consumeristic attitude – we sit down, you get spoon-fed some spiritual food through the program and then you go home and leave and you live the rest of your life. It’s very easy to do that, not ours but some churches are very glitzy. You have you superstar musicians and it’s all pre-packaged and user friendly and so if you are used to that you can just go there just be very passive and just go home and still be disconnected so. I speak from experience. It’s really easy to do that just kind of coast and show up. There is a joke that you just put on your Christian smile.

The need for community in spiritual growth can start to be developed through the soccer team, as the soccer team acts as a way to begin some form of community. Thus for Peter, the soccer team was one site amongst others for building community within North Shore Alliance, is needed for a form of spiritual development that requires growth alongside other people in relationships. In actually engaging with other members of North Shore Alliance there is the possibility of developing the “outward looking” sense of the self within the greater Body of Christ. Thus, the growth of community, in this case community largely between men in the church, through soccer acts as a medium for the development of the heart, which when transformed will point people toward community and God.

Throughout my time with the NSA soccer teams, the players were self-reflexive in thinking about what it meant to be a Christian soccer player. Many of the players were skilled in asking
better questions about themselves then I could formulate. A central theme throughout my project and this thesis is how faith is exhibited through soccer. I find the topic of baptism affords the players and me, in this thesis, an opportunity to comment on many of these same themes of practice, coherence, sociality, knowledge, and distinction. Apart from one of John’s comments mentioned below, the players never made an explicit comparison between soccer and baptism. However, in my time spent with the church I found that their practice of baptism involved many of the same concerns as soccer. In this fashion, thinking about their similarities is instructive in understanding the value of soccer for North Shore Alliance. Baptism is an important part of North Shore Alliance Church. One of the first services I attended, Easter Sunday, and one of the last services I attended for my project, in early July, involved baptisms. On Easter, people were baptized in a permanent baptism pool built into the stage of the church’s main service hall. At North Shore Alliance the baptism pool is part of the material infrastructure of the church. In early July, people were baptized on a beautiful sunny day in the ocean at a park in West Vancouver on a Sunday afternoon after the completion of the services.

A total of fourteen people were baptized in the ocean including two teenaged members of the soccer teams who had been long standing but not-yet-baptized members of the church. Before the baptisms John said “Today is like a cup final for a pastor, you know you are going to get a win”. This explicit linking of baptism and soccer is instructive as members of the soccer team talked about baptism throughout my time at the church. Peter, who grew up in a Baptist church but had spent time in different churches in his life including evangelical, Anglican, and Pentecostal ones, explained that for a baptism "if it was Anglican or Presbyterian they would just sprinkle you with water". Comparatively, the baptisms at North Shore Alliance involved the body of the person being baptized being fully immersed in the water. This comparison of the different practices of
baptisms acts as a form of distinction between mainline Protestantism and evangelical Christianity. As a representative practice of their church, that the practice of baptism displays values that are also part of the soccer teams at the church.

In the bathroom after the baptisms John proudly pointed out to me that there were “soccer stories” in the testimonies as Francis, a younger player, had mentioned the “fellowship of the ball hockey and soccer teams”. At the baptisms in the church and at the ocean the people being baptized were fully immersed and enveloped by the water after assenting to their belief in “Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour”. Like the soccer games the baptisms, although involving individual displays of faith, were community events with members of the church attending. With regards to the community aspect of baptism Simon, a soccer player, had previously told me “baptism is to show the community that you dedicate your life to God and His words”. The physical immersion of the baptized bodies in water resembles the desires for immersion and coherency of faith for the players on the soccer team. Henry, a younger player on the A team explained that “as a church and a Christian community you don’t really want to separate your belief from your sport or anything else you are involved in so you want that, you want your faith to be involved in everything. You don’t want to have any separation”. Like the full commitment of being immersed in the water, Henry stated a desire for immersion in his faith, in that “you want your faith to be involved in everything” including sport. Moreover, the immersion of the baptism and faith is further seen in Elisha’s idea of “immersive sociality” that was expressed by John is his belief in the need of interdependence between members of the church and ultimately, God. Drawing from the immersive action of baptism, soccer at North Shore Alliance Church is a space for community, authenticity, knowledge, commitment, and coherency.

Chapter V: Conclusion
My account of soccer at North Shore Alliance Church in North Vancouver, British Columbia centres on the dual process of community building and individual knowledge production that is part of playing on the church soccer team. The Christian players on the team explained that “community” was the primary reason for them playing soccer for North Shore Alliance. The act of community building through the church soccer team is used to combat the forces of individualism that the church perceives to be part of contemporary secular Western society. The player’s understanding of the soccer teams as a site of community building also serves to enable connection to move against the atomizing features of attending a large church, especially for the men in the church who I interviewed. The act of community building served to enact a sense of “immersive sociality” of interdependence amongst the almost exclusively male soccer team at the church (Elisha 2015, 43). Community in this way serves as a way to bond players for religious growth to become closer to God together. The soccer team also serves to produce a certain ideal of the evangelical subject and body in the church. The vision, largely articulated by John, is of a particular kind of evangelical who is emotionally attuned with God, emotionally responsive, vulnerable, honest, open to God’s transformative work, and passionate. Through the soccer team there is the projection of evangelical Christianity as a religion of action, felt experience, emotion, honesty, passion, and bodily knowledge. There is the belief in a version of evangelical Christianity in which members of the Church ‘really feel’ and embody their faith in action and experience.

Simultaneous to this process of community building are the forms of knowledge about the self and one’s heart that are produced in the affective state of playing soccer. Through soccer players can learn about themselves and ultimately, their relationship with God as displayed through their reactions and instantaneous expressions in the affective quality of the soccer field. In this way, soccer is a site of revelation about the state of one’s heart. The form of the game,
involving movement and encounters between players helps facilitate these forms of knowledge and expressions of the heart. In soccer there is considerable “semantic risk” (Harding 2000, 85), in what the game might tell you about yourself, both good and bad. Through knowledge of the self produced in soccer there is a realization of the need for community and the need to have an “outward” focus toward others, and God. In contrast to an escapist understanding of sport, soccer for the evangelical Christians at North Shore Alliance is treated seriously and joyfully, that involves a move to a world away from one that focused on individualism and self-glorification. In the Christian soccer league there is an active display of agency in the construction of community.

In his 2017 book the philosopher Simon Critchley asks, “What do we think about when we think about football?” (Critchley 2017, 1). Critchley writes, “football is about so many things, so many complex, contradictory and conflicting things” (Critchley 2017, 1). Critchley’s book is about the possibilities of soccer and the simultaneous joy and feelings of despair and disgust the sport can provide. Soccer can serve simultaneously as a model for socialism and the epitome of capitalist greed (Critchley 2017, 10). Importantly, soccer can produce many different meanings for different people (Critchley 2017, 2). In the construction of a self-described and altered Christian soccer league there is the display of the plasticity of both evangelical Christianity and soccer. Within the complexity of soccer and Christianity the BCCSL shows a further possibility of what soccer can be for evangelical Christians. Turning back to Critchley, evangelical Christians at North Shore Alliance Church are thinking about a whole variety of things such as the heart, community, their relationship with Jesus, coherency, authenticity, alongside scoring a goal, enjoying playing on a team, and finishing their tackles.

28 Football is in reference to soccer
Work Cited


