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Developing Interfaith Friendships Through Shared Purpose: Emerging Adult Mentors in an Interfaith Sports Leadership Program

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Abstract

As religious diversity increases, identifying contexts that foster positive relationships across faith traditions has become increasingly important. Many interfaith initiatives emphasize dialogue and religious literacy, yet these largely cognitive approaches can inadvertently foreground the doctrinal differences they hope to bridge. Drawing on perspectives of lived religion, embodied spirituality, and intergroup contact theory, we argue that sport—an embodied, cooperative practice shared across cultures and traditions—offers a distinctive context for interfaith formation, one in which relationships emerge through shared bodily activity and common purpose rather than doctrinal negotiation. This qualitative study examined mentors' experiences in Y-Sport: Greater Purpose and Performance, an interfaith sports leadership program developed through a partnership between Brigham Young University and Baylor University. Although both communities profess faith in Jesus Christ, we use interfaith—consistent with the field of interfaith studies—to denote engagement across two distinct, historically estranged religious communities, without prejudging either community's Christian identity. Eleven Protestant and Latter-day Saint mentors completed semi-structured interviews analyzed using the team-based coding approach developed by Dollahite and Marks in the American Families of Faith project. Four themes emerged: (1) discovering common ground through shared purpose, (2) developing relationships marked by love, belonging, and friendship, (3) appreciating religious differences without perceiving them as threatening, and (4) experiencing personal and spiritual transformation. Participants consistently reported that their shared commitment to serving youth and strengthening faith in Jesus Christ became more salient than doctrinal differences, fostering authentic friendships while preserving distinct religious identities. Consistent with intergroup contact theory, these findings suggest that embodied cooperation organized around a shared purpose may cultivate meaningful interfaith friendships, with implications for interfaith education, mentoring, and peacebuilding.

Keywords: interfaith friendship; sport; emerging adulthood; intergroup contact theory; shared purpose; lived religion; embodied spirituality



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1. Introduction

As religious diversity continues to increase across the United States, opportunities for fostering meaningful engagement across faith traditions have become increasingly important. Although religious diversity can enrich communities and foster learning, differences in beliefs, practices, and identities can also contribute to misunderstanding, social distance, and intergroup tension. Consequently, educators, religious leaders, and researchers have sought to develop programs that promote positive relationships across religious differences and strengthen interfaith understanding. While many interfaith initiatives focus on increasing knowledge about other traditions or fostering respectful dialogue, emerging research suggests that interpersonal relationships may be among the most powerful mechanisms through which interfaith learning and cooperation occur. Understanding how those relationships develop, however, requires attention to the contexts and practices that bring people together across religious differences. This raises an important question: What kinds of experiences most effectively cultivate those relationships?

As scholarship on lived religion has expanded, researchers have increasingly argued that religious identity is not expressed solely through beliefs or doctrinal commitments but through everyday practices, relationships, and embodied ways of living (Ammerman 2014; McGuire 2008). Complementing this perspective, scholarship on embodiment argues that religious life is constituted through embodied practices and ways of being in the world, with spiritual understanding emerging through action, perception, and participation rather than cognition alone (Csordas 1994, 2004). From this perspective, sport represents more than a recreational activity or educational setting. As an inherently embodied, cooperative practice, sport invites participants to work toward shared goals, navigate challenges together, and experience trust, vulnerability, and mutual dependence through action rather than discussion alone. These relational experiences may create distinctive opportunities for interfaith engagement by allowing participants to encounter one another first as teammates, mentors, and fellow disciples before engaging one another as representatives of different religious traditions. Taken together, perspectives on lived religion and embodied spirituality suggest that sport may provide uniquely fertile conditions for the development of authentic interfaith friendships.

Academic research in religious studies has likewise begun to regard sport as a significant venue for religious and civic engagement, rather than as merely a secular leisure activity. Alpert (2015) employs a series of case studies to demonstrate how sport has served as an arena wherein religious communities negotiate identity, difference, and belonging within public life. Shoemaker (2024) dedicates comprehensive attention to the dialogical potentials of sport, contending that shared athletic environments can facilitate dialogues across religious differences that more formal settings often inhibit. Balmer's (2022) historical analysis of religion and sport in North America similarly depicts athletics as a cultural space where participants and publics with diverse religious and ideological commitments are brought together through shared experiences. Collectively, this body of literature indicates that sport is not a neutral backdrop onto which religious actors impose meaning but rather a socially generative practice through which civic dialogue, social engagement, and enhanced understanding among citizens can be fostered. The current study advances this scholarship by empirically analyzing how a sport-based program functioned as such a space for two Christian communities, whose relationship has frequently been characterized by mutual suspicion.

This proposition is further supported by intergroup contact theory (Allport 1954), one of the most influential frameworks for understanding relationship development across group boundaries. The conditions created through embodied, cooperative sport closely parallel the conditions identified by intergroup contact theory as promoting positive rela-

tionships across group boundaries. The theory proposes that interactions between members of different groups can reduce prejudice and improve intergroup attitudes when specific conditions are present, including equal status among participants, cooperative interaction, shared goals, and institutional support. Decades of research have supported these propositions. In a meta-analysis of 515 studies, Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) found that intergroup interactions consistently reduced prejudice across a wide variety of contexts and populations. Building on Allport's original framework, Pettigrew (1998) further argued that such interactions are especially effective when they create opportunities for cross-group friendship, suggesting that relationship development is not merely an outcome of these interactions but one of the conditions that helps explain their success.

Subsequent research has supported this extension by demonstrating that cross-group friendship is one of the primary mechanisms through which intergroup contact produces positive outcomes. Friendships across group boundaries are associated with greater empathy, reduced anxiety, increased trust, and more favorable attitudes toward members of other groups (Davies et al. 2011; Pettigrew and Tropp 2008). Rather than viewing others primarily through the lens of social categories, friendships encourage individuals to develop more nuanced understandings of one another as unique persons. These findings are particularly relevant in interfaith contexts, where deeply held religious beliefs may serve as both important sources of identity and potential sources of perceived difference. Research from the Interfaith Diversity Experiences and Attitudes Longitudinal Survey (IDEALS) further suggests that friendships across worldview differences contribute to greater pluralism orientation and more positive engagement with religious diversity among college students (Hudson et al. 2021).

Research on friendship development further suggests that meaningful relationships emerge through processes that extend beyond simple interaction. Scholars have identified reciprocal self-disclosure, perceived responsiveness, shared experiences, and cooperative engagement as central mechanisms through which interpersonal closeness develops (Aron et al. 1997; Choi and Toma 2022; Sprecher 2021). Although friendships often emerge over extended periods, experimental and longitudinal research demonstrates that meaningful relational closeness can develop within relatively brief but intensive interactions when individuals engage in personal disclosure and collaborative activities. Structured opportunities to share personal values, experiences, and beliefs can accelerate the development of trust and interpersonal connection, particularly when participants perceive others as responsive and accepting.

These findings may be especially relevant in interfaith settings. Religious beliefs often involve deeply personal convictions, sacred values, and central aspects of individual and social identity (Ysseldyk et al. 2010). Consequently, discussions about faith can involve a level of personal disclosure not commonly found in other forms of social interaction. At the same time, religion frequently provides a foundation for shared moral commitments, service, meaning-making, and community engagement. Interfaith relationships may therefore develop not through doctrinal agreement but through opportunities to discover shared values while respectfully engaging differences. Recent scholarship on interfaith learning has increasingly emphasized the importance of helping participants understand both similarities and differences across traditions rather than focusing exclusively on common ground (Visser et al. 2023).

In addition to self-disclosure and dialogue, shared, cooperative practices—including service, leadership, and sport—may foster interfaith relationship development by creating opportunities for individuals to work toward common goals across religious differences. Research grounded in intergroup contact theory suggests that shared goals and collaborative activities create conditions that facilitate trust, mutual respect, and social cohesion

(Pettigrew and Tropp 2006). Programs that engage participants in service, leadership development, or other forms of collective action may be particularly effective because they create opportunities for individuals to work toward a common purpose while interacting across group boundaries (Gaertner et al. 2000; Pettigrew et al. 2011). Such experiences reflect what Sherif (1966) described as superordinate goals—objectives that require cooperation and cannot be achieved independently.

Emerging scholarship further suggests that successful interfaith programs do more than bring participants together; they intentionally create conditions that support both authentic religious expression and psychological safety. Participants are more likely to engage meaningfully across religious differences when they understand that the purpose of interaction is mutual learning and relationship development rather than persuasion or conversion (Mayhew and Rockenbach 2021; Visser et al. 2023). Programs that establish norms of respect, perspective-taking, and non-proselytizing may be particularly effective in reducing perceived threat and fostering trust. Such environments allow participants to discuss differences in beliefs, prayer traditions, scriptural interpretations, devotional practices, and faith-specific terminology while maintaining positive relationships. These conditions may be especially important when religious identities are deeply held and discussions of faith involve vulnerability and sacred values.

Emerging adulthood, a developmental period marked by identity exploration and the formation of enduring relationships, may be a particularly important stage for examining interfaith relationship development (Arnett 2000). During this stage of life, individuals often explore questions of identity, purpose, worldview, and belonging while simultaneously forming new friendships and social networks. Research from the IDEALS project has demonstrated that college environments that support meaningful relationships across worldview differences foster greater appreciation for religious diversity, stronger pluralism orientation, increased perspective-taking, and more positive engagement across religious differences while allowing students to maintain their own religious identities (Hudson et al. 2021; Hudson et al. 2023; Mayhew and Rockenbach 2021). These findings suggest that interfaith experiences during emerging adulthood may have lasting implications for both personal development and civic engagement. Despite this growing body of research, relatively little is known about how meaningful interfaith friendships develop within intensive leadership experiences in which young adults work collaboratively toward shared goals. Existing research has primarily focused on educational interventions, campus climates, pluralism orientation, and student attitudes toward religious diversity (Mayhew and Rockenbach 2021; Rockenbach et al. 2019; Visser et al. 2023). Furthermore, little research has explored these processes within sport-based interfaith contexts involving members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and Protestant Christian traditions. Although both traditions center their faith on Jesus Christ and share many foundational Christian commitments, they maintain distinct theological identities and have long been understood—both by adherents and by many outside observers—as representing separate religious traditions, resulting at times in mutual misunderstanding and contested religious boundaries. Accordingly, we use the term *interfaith* to describe interactions across these distinct religious communities—a usage we explain and qualify below.

A Note on Terminology: Why “Interfaith”?

The central pairing examined in this study prompts a definitional inquiry that warrants explicit examination rather than implicit assumption: whether an encounter between two communities, both professing faith in Jesus Christ, is appropriately termed *interfaith*. This query transcends mere semantics. The classification of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as a Christian denomination, a distinct religious tradition, or an

entirely different category has been debated since the church's inception, and the chosen labels by scholars can carry considerable theological implications. Latter-day Saints have consistently affirmed their identity as Christians and have actively endeavored to dispel the persistent assertion that they exist outside the bounds of Christianity (Robinson 1991; Haws 2013). Conversely, some scholars of religion have contended that the tradition's additional scripture, distinctive ecclesiology, and unique historical development make it most appropriately classified as a new religious tradition, which stands in relation to traditional Christianity similarly as earliest Christianity once did to Judaism (Shipps 1985; see also Davies 2003). Relations between Evangelicals and Latter-day Saints, in particular, have fluctuated between polemics and dialogue, with sustained scholarly discussions evidencing both genuine theological differences and significant common ground centered on Jesus Christ (Blomberg and Robinson 1997; Mouw 2012).

We retain the term 'interfaith,' but do so intentionally, accompanied by three clarifications that prevent the misconception that, in using the term, we as researchers are starting from the assumption that Latter-day Saints are not genuinely Christian. First, our usage aligns with the emerging discipline of interfaith studies, which broadly defines its scope as engagement among individuals who "orient around religion differently" (Patel 2016; Patel et al. 2018). This definition inclusively covers interactions across contested intra-Christian boundaries as well as between different world religions. The IDEALS research program, which informs our work, similarly conceptualizes its focus as engagement across differences in worldview, including within broad religious families (Mayhew and Rockenbach 2021). Second, regardless of its theological categorization, the social boundary between these two communities was tangible for our participants. Several Protestant mentors reported initially assuming that Latter-day Saints were not Christians, and the two groups maintain distinct institutions, authority structures, and patterns of belonging. A term that characterizes the encounter as typical intra-denominational variation would underestimate the social distance actually traversed—distance that renders the friendships documented here particularly significant. Third, we do not intend to resolve the theological issue. In this context, *interfaith* refers to a lived social boundary rather than a judgment regarding who qualifies as Christian. Readers should avoid interpreting it otherwise; indeed, a central conclusion of the study is that prolonged cooperation led Protestant participants to reconsider the presumption that their Latter-day Saint colleagues were outside the bounds of Christianity.

Readers who prefer *intra-Christian*, *interdenominational*, or *intersectarian* framings may substitute those terms without altering the study's findings; what matters analytically is that participants initially experienced one another as religious others and, through shared purpose and embodied cooperation, came to experience one another as fellow disciples. In what follows, we use *religious tradition* and *faith tradition* interchangeably to name each community; we use *religious differences* to denote the full range of doctrinal, liturgical, linguistic, and cultural differences participants navigated; and we use *interfaith* to denote engagement across the boundary between the two communities—without implying that the boundary separates Christianity from something else.

The present study addresses this gap by examining the experiences of collegiate mentors who participated in an interfaith sports leadership program involving mentors from Brigham Young University and Baylor University. Through qualitative interviews, we explored mentors' experiences of interfaith engagement, relationship development, faith sharing, and personal growth while serving together in support of adolescent athletes. Particular attention was given to the processes through which meaningful relationships developed across religious differences and the role of shared purpose, embodied collaboration, and faith-based interaction in shaping those experiences.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants were 11 university mentors who served at the *Y-Sport: Greater Purpose and Performance* (White et al. 2025) interfaith sports camp for Latter-day Saint adolescent athletes. Student mentors were recruited from psychology research assistants at Brigham Young University and graduate seminary students at Baylor University. The sample included six men and five women from Protestant and Latter-day Saint faith traditions. Protestant mentors included five men from Baylor University and one woman Brigham Young University, whereas Latter-day Saint mentors included four women and one man from Brigham Young University. Participants were predominantly emerging adults (10 of 11 participants were between 20 and 29 years of age), with one mentor aged 35. The mentors also represented diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, including five participants who identified as Caucasian/White, three as African American/Black, two as Asian/Pacific Islander, and one as Hispanic. Four mentors reported prior interfaith experience before camp participation. Five mentors also described substantial athletic backgrounds, including four Baylor University mentors and one Brigham Young University mentor. Through their participation in mentor training and service on interfaith mentoring teams before and during the camp, participants were well positioned to reflect on interfaith relationship development, leadership, and faith engagement.

2.2. Procedures

The *Y-Sport: Greater Purpose and Performance* camp was held on the campus of Brigham Young University in the western United States. The program brought together Latter-day Saint adolescent athletes and student mentors from Brigham Young University and Baylor University to promote faith-integrated character development, leadership growth, and athletic flourishing. Sport functioned not simply as the program's subject matter but as the primary context through which mentors and youth developed relationships, practiced cooperation, and integrated faith with shared physical activity. While the camp's primary focus was youth development through sport and faith integration, its collaborative structure also created opportunities for interfaith engagement between mentors from Latter-day Saint and Protestant Christian traditions. The curriculum centered on five virtues—faith, love, discipline, hope, and courage—and emphasized shared Christian commitments, including love of God, faith in Jesus Christ, and service to others (White et al. 2025; Jensen et al. 2026). Jensen et al. (2026) provide a detailed description and mixed-methods evaluation of the Y-Sport intervention, whereas the present study examines mentors' experiences of interfaith relationship development. An outline of the Y-Sport camp curriculum is provided in the Supplementary Materials.

Mentor preparation included four days of in-person pre-camp training focused on relationship building, curriculum implementation, interfaith learning, and the facilitation of constructive interactions across faith traditions. Mentors were instructed to support youth within their existing faith traditions rather than encourage religious conversion and were explicitly discouraged from proselytizing, disparaging other faith traditions, or engaging in contentious doctrinal debates. Training emphasized meeting individuals where they were in their faith journeys while fostering mutual respect and learning. Mentors also explored differences in prayer traditions, scriptural translations, devotional practices, and faith-specific terminology. In addition, mentors received instruction in conflict resolution and constructive dialogue strategies designed to promote perspective-taking, psychological safety, and positive relationship development across religious differences. An outline of the mentor training curriculum is provided in the Supplementary Materials.

Following the camp, all 18 mentors who had served on interfaith mentoring teams were invited to participate in the study. Eleven of the 18 mentors (61%) voluntarily agreed to participate and completed individual interviews. Recruitment invitations were distributed by two members of the research team representing the partner institutions. Participants who volunteered completed individual semi-structured interviews via Zoom approximately two to three months after camp participation. This interval was chosen partly for practical reasons, as mentors had dispersed to their home institutions, and partly by design: it allowed mentors time to process an intensive experience, re-enter their home religious communities, and observe how the experience shaped their subsequent attitudes and interactions—making reports of post-camp behaviors, such as correcting misconceptions among friends (see Theme 3), possible. The trade-off between this reflective distance and recall accuracy is addressed in the Limitations section. Interviews lasted approximately 60 min and were conducted by a member of the research team. Interviews were audio-recorded using both Zoom and RecordEase software to ensure data preservation and recording quality. Participants were informed that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time without penalty. This study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Brigham Young University Institutional Review Board (IRB2025-108). All participants provided informed consent prior to participation. Upon completion of the interview, all participants received a \$20 gift card. For Baylor mentors, the gift card served as compensation for research participation. BYU mentors were already compensated through their employment as camp mentors, their gift card was provided not as compensation for research participation but in appreciation of the time they voluntarily devoted to the interview. Interview recordings were transcribed using voice-to-text software, verified against the original audio recordings, and corrected as needed prior to analysis. The interview protocol is provided in the Supplementary Materials.

2.3. Researcher Reflexivity

The coding team consisted of researchers from Brigham Young University, all of whom identified as members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Because the study examined experiences within an interfaith context involving Latter-day Saint and Protestant participants, the research team recognized that their shared religious backgrounds, prior experiences with interfaith engagement, commitment to fostering positive intergroup relationships, and one researcher's involvement in the project could shape the interpretation of participants' experiences. One member of the research team facilitated portions of the pre-camp training focused on conflict resolution principles and constructive communication, conducted the participant interviews, and had limited prior interactions with the student mentors. To enhance reflexivity and transparency regarding potential interpretive bias, the research team engaged in ongoing reflexive discussions about assumptions, alternative explanations, and potential blind spots throughout the research process. Reflexive memoing was used during both data collection and analysis to document researchers' perspectives, evolving interpretations, and analytic decisions.

2.4. Data Analysis

Interview transcripts were analyzed using the collaborative, team-based qualitative coding approach developed through the American Families of Faith project (Dollahite and Marks 2018), with analytic procedures informed by Allsop et al. (2022). Researchers first familiarized themselves with the data by reading each transcript multiple times and recording analytic observations through memoing. Initial open coding was conducted independently by multiple members of the research team using a line-by-line approach,

with coding occurring primarily at the sentence level to preserve participants' intended meaning. Multiple codes could be assigned to a single text segment when excerpts reflected more than one concept. Coding was guided by a shared codebook while remaining open to inductively emerging concepts.

Consistent with the American Families of Faith approach, the research team met regularly to compare codes, discuss differing interpretations, and reconcile coding through consensus. These discussions refined code definitions, consolidated overlapping concepts, and contributed to the iterative development of the thematic framework. Consistent with Lincoln and Guba's (1985) recommendation to examine negative or discrepant cases in qualitative inquiry, the research team also actively considered data that challenged the developing thematic framework and discussed whether these cases warranted modification of the emerging themes. Coding discrepancies were resolved through consensus discussions in which researchers examined coding rationales, refined code definitions, and established agreement regarding core themes before proceeding with systematic coding. Throughout the analytic process, researchers maintained analytic memos and documentation of coding decisions, providing an audit trail of theme development. The final themes were generated through an iterative process of reviewing, refining, and naming patterns that recurred across participants while preserving the complexity of participants' experiences.

Trustworthiness was enhanced through investigator triangulation, consensus coding, reflexive memoing, maintenance of an audit trail, and peer debriefing. Four members of the research team formed two coding pairs. Each coding pair independently coded assigned subsets of the interview transcripts (five transcripts for one pair and six for the other) using the codebook described above. Prior to consensus discussions, intercoder reliability was calculated from the independent coding of each coding pair using Cohen's κ . The mean Cohen's κ across the two coding pairs was 0.72 (computed by averaging the pair-specific κ values), indicating substantial agreement (Landis and Koch 1977). Following the reliability assessment, each coding pair met to discuss discrepancies and reached consensus on all codes. The consensus-coded transcripts were then used for subsequent analysis. Throughout the analytic process, the research team also examined transcripts for negative or discrepant cases that challenged the developing thematic framework. Although one participant described discomfort with a religious practice from another faith tradition, this experience did not contradict the broader themes of relationship development, mutual respect, and interfaith learning. Otherwise, participants consistently described their experiences as positive, while differing in the degree and nature of their personal growth.

2.5. Results

Analysis of the interview data revealed four themes describing mentors' experiences of interfaith engagement, relationship development, and personal growth during the Y-Sport camp. Prior to camp participation, all 11 mentors reported entering the experience with a strong religious identity and some degree of uncertainty regarding collaboration with members of another faith tradition. Only four participants reported previous interfaith experience, and many described initial apprehensions related to belonging, acceptance, or navigating religious differences. Despite these concerns, all participants described the camp as a positive experience and reported successfully developing relationships with mentors from the other faith tradition. Four themes emerged from the data: (1) Discovering Common Ground Through Shared Purpose, (2) Developing Relationships Characterized by Love, Belonging, and Friendship, (3) Appreciating Religious Differences Without Threat, and (4) Personal and Spiritual Transformation. The themes presented below illustrate the processes through which these experiences unfolded. Participants have been assigned pseudonyms to protect anonymity.

Theme 1. *Discovering Common Ground Through Shared Purpose*

Working toward the shared goal of helping young athletes led mentors to discover greater common ground than they had anticipated. As they collaborated, mentors recognized substantial overlap in their Christian beliefs and practices, making theological differences less salient. Three related subthemes emerged: (1) discovering common ground, (2) uniting through a shared purpose, and (3) perceiving the interfaith nature of the camp as an enhancement rather than a barrier.

Subtheme 1.1. *Common Ground*

Mentors consistently described discovering that they shared more with members of the other faith tradition than they had expected. Jasmine (Latter-day Saint) reflected that although they “came from different faiths, [they] had a lot in common,” while Adrian (Protestant) similarly observed “a lot of similarity and overlap.” Rather than emphasizing theological differences, mentors increasingly focused on shared Christian commitments. Jasmine attributed this to seeing that “everyone was very passionate about their [faith]. Everyone was comfortable praying... it was just nice to see that similarity that we both live our faith as an everyday thing.” Megan (Protestant) described singing hymns together as a particularly meaningful experience because “we’re both here singing about Jesus... and at the end of the day, the center of it is the same.”

Several mentors contrasted this experience with broader patterns of division. Dylan (Latter-day Saint) remarked that his Protestant counterparts “didn’t feel like they were the opposition at all. It just felt like we were on the same team.” Likewise, Megan noted that “it didn’t feel like ‘here’s the removed mentors, here’s the BYU mentor, here’s the Baylor mentors;.’ It was just like, ‘we’re a team.’” As mentors discovered shared values and experiences, their sense of community expanded beyond institutional or denominational identities.

Mentors’ recurring use of “team” language operated on two levels simultaneously. Its immediate reference was the mentoring team itself, specifically the mixed Protestant and Latter-day Saint groups in which mentors participated. Additionally, in context, it conveyed a superordinate religious identity: a unified “team” defined by shared devotion to Jesus Christ and collective responsibility towards the youth, set against remembered patterns of interreligious “opposition.” This layered interpretation is consistent with the common ingroup identity model, in which cooperative structures enable members of distinct groups to recategorize themselves within a more inclusive shared identity without abandoning their subgroup identities (Gaertner et al. 2000).

Subtheme 1.2. *Shared Purpose*

Mentors consistently identified serving the young athletes as the shared purpose that united them across religious differences. Rather than centering discussions on theological distinctions, they focused on helping youth strengthen both their athletic mindset and their faith in Jesus Christ. Isaiah (Protestant) explained, “we focused on how to minister to the kids. We were also focused on keeping the unity that will enable the right environment.” Similarly, Mark (Protestant) described their common purpose as “advanc[ing] the kingdom of God and build[ing] up these young athletes.”

For many mentors, this shared mission provided a framework that transcended denominational boundaries. Megan explained that “the biggest thing was that we wanted [the young athletes] to feel God’s love... and integrate their faith in sport. When that became our central goal for the whole team, we were really able to show that for the

kids.” Ava (Latter-day Saint) likewise concluded, “even though there was a competition aspect of the camp, everyone was united based on the purpose... if everyone comes into a situation with the perspective of wanting to work together and wanting to love each other... then we can definitely be united.” Several mentors described how participating together in sport became a vehicle for spiritual connection. Isaiah (Protestant) reflected that the camp uniquely integrated “the small groups... the lessons... the play,” explaining, “We were able to integrate play and pray. It was phenomenal.” Likewise, Megan (Protestant) described how athletic competition itself became a shared spiritual practice: “Before each volleyball game... we would get in a little group and hold hands and say a prayer.... At first we reminded the kids, but eventually the kids started reminding us.... At the end of the day, we’re playing together, we’re singing together, and that’s what’s most important.” The athletic environment reinforced this shared purpose by giving mentors continual opportunities to cooperate in coaching, encouraging, and serving youth together, allowing relationships to develop through shared action rather than conversation alone. Rather than separating athletic participation from spiritual formation, mentors repeatedly described sport itself as the context through which faith, cooperation, and relationships were enacted.

Subtheme 1.3. *Interfaith Enhanced Experience*

Although organizers initially questioned whether the camp’s interfaith structure might complicate collaboration, mentors overwhelmingly described it as strengthening the experience. Rather than detracting from the camp’s mission, exposure to another Christian tradition encouraged reflection, curiosity, and personal growth. Ava (Latter-day Saint) remarked, “I think it really just enhanced the experience. I don’t think that it could have been as good if it was just something that [members of one faith] did.” Dylan similarly reflected that hearing other perspectives kept him from going on “autopilot,” while Miles (Protestant) explained that learning to communicate across traditions “allowed me to have a conversation that didn’t turn into a debate, [but] stayed centered on trying to make the person better.”

Mentors also described gaining appreciation for the unique strengths of the other tradition. Sara (Latter-day Saint) valued her Protestant co-mentors’ biblical knowledge, explaining that “different emphases and different perspectives were able to make it so much more than it would’ve been had it just been one faith tradition alone.” She also identified participating in the Stations of the Cross—a contemplative, spiritual practice rooted in the Catholic tradition, which the Baylor University Protestant mentors introduced in adapted form through the Truett Seminary curriculum—as one of the camp’s most meaningful experiences because it combined a physically demanding activity with spiritual reflection:

I was able to really see the beauty behind having the Stations of the Cross while doing this super hard, challenging physical experience.... The most impactful part to me was seeing the kids run up that hill with that cross on their shoulders, and all of us just cheering them on.... That’s something that I feel like we would’ve missed out on had we not had this interfaith experience. (Sara, Latter-day Saint)

Many mentors reported that learning from another Christian tradition strengthened rather than weakened their own faith. Miles reflected that the Latter-day Saint mentors “showed me Christ in a whole different way,” while Sara described leaving with “a new-found appreciation for my own religion, but also for just faith in general.” Looking toward his future ministry, Mark concluded that he would intentionally incorporate interfaith collaboration because it “creates more understanding between the different religious groups.”

Theme 2. *Developing Relationships Characterized by Love, Belonging, and Friendship*

Although mentors entered the interfaith experience with some apprehension, with one participant describing it as “almost like preparing to go into a fight” (Miles, Protestant), they unanimously described a culture of belonging and friendship that developed among the leadership and staff. Mentors from both faith traditions reported feeling accepted, understood, and genuinely enjoying one another’s company. Two related subthemes emerged: (1) cultivating a culture of love and belonging and (2) experiencing joy through shared relationships and service.

Subtheme 2.1. *A Culture of Love and Belonging*

Mentors consistently attributed the camp’s positive relationships to an intentional culture of love and belonging established during the pre-camp training. Mark (Protestant) observed that administrators had already “establish[ed] the foundation between each other with love and servitude,” creating an environment where “both people from Baylor and people from BYU [could] learn and grow with each other.” Isaiah (Protestant) explained that the training emphasized a clear purpose:

what to focus on and what not to focus on. . . We are not going to win an argument. We’re not going to prove ourselves better than others. We’re not going to try to convert people to our own camp. We are going to simply minister to others and allow ourselves to be ministered to.

This emphasis on shared ministry rather than persuasion was immediately evident to participants. Sara (Latter-day Saint) recalled that the Protestant mentors “treated every[one] like they were best friends with them already,” and reflected that “tolerance and respect and love was something that tied us all together.” By the end of the week, she said, “we all just loved each other. And the kids too. It was so cool seeing how God was able to open up our hearts to each other.”

Pre-camp conversations also helped mentors recognize that many perceived differences reflected differences in language rather than belief. Hannah (Latter-day Saint) described learning to translate one another’s religious vocabulary, explaining, “we’re saying the same things using different vocabulary and phrases. It was [a] moment of building the bridge.” For example, she realized that when her Protestant friends described having “a moment with Jesus,” it communicated an experience she understood as “feel[ing] the Spirit.”

Mentors also emphasized that cultivating this culture before the youth arrived shaped the atmosphere of the camp. Megan (Protestant) recalled repeated reminders that “the teenagers don’t care if you’re [Latter-day Saint] or if you’re Protestant. They just want to feel loved and they want to feel connected, and they want to know that Jesus loves them.” Hannah similarly observed that this emphasis was reflected not only in formal instruction but in everyday interactions as mentors intentionally learned the youth’s names, spent time with them, and demonstrated Christlike love through their relationships.

Many mentors described the resulting relationships as unusually meaningful. Adrian (Protestant) remembered leaving the retreat and seeing participants become emotional because “there is this strong connection that was formed here... That really touched my heart.”

Subtheme 2.2. *Joy Through Shared Relationships and Service*

Mentors overwhelmingly described the camp as an enjoyable and memorable experience, using expressions such as “so fun,” “amazing,” “wonderful,” and “awesome.” When

explaining the source of that enjoyment, two ideas consistently emerged: the joy of serving the youth and the friendships formed across faith traditions.

Adrian (Protestant) reflected on both dimensions, explaining:

It's hard to put into words what God did during that week. . . The people made this really beautiful. And the content [of the curriculum] helped supplement that beauty. . . I don't think I would change that model at all.

Others likewise found deep satisfaction in mentoring the young athletes. Mark (Protestant) described "just seeing [the young people] connect the pieces" as especially rewarding, while Ava (Latter-day Saint) found joy in watching the youth eagerly participate in the activities. Although mentors acknowledged that the experience was demanding, they consistently described it as deeply fulfilling.

Mentors also emphasized that working alongside members of another faith tradition contributed substantially to their enjoyment. Hannah (Latter-day Saint) remarked that she "was surprised at how much fun it was to work with [them] and how well we all got along." Mark appreciated both "the openness and being able to laugh with each other, but also being able to lock in when it's time to lock in," concluding that "it's so much fun working with [them]. I didn't have any expectations, but it exceeded my expectations." Likewise, Miles (Protestant) reflected, "I kind of didn't want to leave. I was ready to stay [there] for a while because of the friends."

Theme 3. *Appreciating Religious Differences Without Threat*

The camp's "no proselytizing" policy created an environment in which mentors felt free to experience another Christian tradition without feeling pressure to relinquish their own beliefs. Rather than viewing religious differences as threatening, mentors described growing appreciation for one another's prayer practices, worship traditions, scriptural perspectives, and religious commitments. Several participants also reported defending the other faith after returning home.

Subtheme 3.1. *Appreciation of Other*

Mentors consistently described developing greater appreciation for the other faith tradition through direct interaction and shared religious experiences. Jasmine (Latter-day Saint) explained that being paired with mentors from the other faith "really helped us appreciate each other's faiths more." Although many practices were unfamiliar, she found them "very spiritual and uplifting," concluding, "I learned a lot about how God is in people's lives, even if they're not of our faith. . . I feel like [the camp] changed part of my mentality toward other believers of God."

One of the most frequently discussed areas of appreciation involved prayer. Protestant mentors introduced communal prayer, in which participants took turns praying aloud. Megan (Protestant) described sharing this practice with the Latter-day Saint mentors as meaningful because it "was not something that goes against their belief, but it was something that they just haven't done before." Latter-day Saint mentors, in turn, appreciated the sincerity and reverence they observed in Protestant prayer. Jasmine reflected,

It was really cool to see just how they prayed. . . [It] was really different to how I was used to. . . I feel like when I talk to Heavenly Father, it's more just 'thank you for this; help me with this.' But they were very worshipful.

Similarly, Hannah noted that the Protestant mentors "prayed so much more than I usually would. . . It was a very genuine prayer from the heart. It didn't have to be long, but it was frequent and very sincere, and I thought that was beautiful."

Protestant mentors likewise described appreciation for Latter-day Saint prayer traditions. Adrian observed that praying together “in Jesus’ name. . . highlights the unity of one body of believers,” while Connor reflected that the practice brought “a deeper reverence for the words that I used.”

Beyond prayer, mentors described admiration for one another’s religious practices and commitments. Protestant mentors expressed respect for Latter-day Saint missionary service. Adrian remarked, “Something I really respect is [that Latter-day Saints] go on mission[s]. . . Going to a different place just to serve other people and spread the gospel... that’s something I really respect.” Latter-day Saint mentors similarly appreciated unfamiliar Protestant worship practices. Jasmine described participating in a guided meditation on Jesus Christ as “a really powerful spiritual experience,” while Ava appreciated learning “how [they] worship in a different way.”

Although this pattern was remarkably consistent across interviews, one mentor expressed discomfort with a religious practice from the other faith tradition. This isolated experience did not diminish the participant’s overall appreciation for the program or relationships formed during the camp. Instead, it highlighted that meaningful interfaith friendships can develop even when some religious practices remain unfamiliar or personally challenging.

Mentors also consistently spoke of the character and faith of those from the other tradition. Jasmine observed that the Protestant mentors’ lives were centered on “God, and on families, rather than on worldly things.” Likewise, Isaiah (Protestant) admired the Latter-day Saint community’s “high commitment to moral values and to community.” Sara (Latter-day Saint) reflected that “it is so obvious that their faith means everything to them. . . They’re so loving to every single person they meet. . . I was really impressed with their character.”

Subtheme 3.2. *Defending the Other Faith*

Several Protestant mentors described returning home with a desire to correct misconceptions they had previously accepted about Latter-day Saints. Isaiah recalled learning from a Latter-day Saint staff member about negative experiences she had had with Protestants, explaining that the camp gave him “the opportunity to listen firsthand to what others go through.”

After the camp, four Protestant mentors independently described correcting misunderstandings about the Latter-day Saint faith. Mark admitted that before the camp he would have assumed, “‘they’re not Christians.’” After getting to know the mentors personally, however, he concluded, “understanding where they stand and actually talking to people of the faith, I see that they are Christians.” When friends later questioned his experience working with “Mormons,” he found himself “more in defending mode [of Latter-day Saints].”

Adrian likewise reflected,

I found myself defending [the Latter-day Saints]. . . I don’t appreciate the culture of assumption. . . You can’t just downplay other religious groups. . . just because you think they’re wrong. I don’t think that’s acceptable.

Miles described returning home to questions about “what was different or weird,” but responded, “I didn’t see any of that. I saw Christ.” Similarly, Connor recalled that some friends worried he would be influenced by interacting with Latter-day Saints, but he instead described them as “people [who] know how to love Jesus. . . They’re doing something right.”

Theme 4. *Personal and Spiritual Transformation*

Through reflecting on the curriculum, mentoring the youth, and participating in the interfaith experience, mentors described meaningful personal and spiritual transformation. Participants reported strengthened faith, greater openness toward people of other faith traditions, and, for some, increased clarity regarding future career or ministry goals.

Subtheme 4.1. *Deepened Faith*

Many mentors described leaving the camp with a strengthened commitment to their own faith. Rather than diminishing their religious convictions, learning from another Christian tradition often deepened their relationship with God and inspired changes in their personal discipleship. Sara (Latter-day Saint) described gaining a “newfound appreciation for my own religion, but also for just faith in general. . . I felt my faith strengthened a lot.” Connor (Protestant) similarly reflected, “I’ve learned how to love Jesus more because of that trip,” while Jasmine (Latter-day Saint) said the experience “helped me to learn that I can include God in everything that I do.” This integration also extended to athletic participation itself. One LDS mentor reflected that before camp he believed “spiritual things can either come from music or going to church, but never would’ve tailored into the fact of athletics having anything to do with religion.” By the end of the camp, however, he realized that “you can invite Heavenly Father into our lives. . . especially in the chaos that’s involved in sports and competing.”

Several mentors described being inspired by the faithful example of members of the other tradition. Sara explained that she was striving to emulate the intentionality, kindness, and goodness she observed in her Protestant co-mentors. Likewise, Miles (Protestant) reflected that the Latter-day Saint mentors “helped me see Christianity a whole different way, because I believe that’s what Christ would do. He wouldn’t go to a different city to prove people wrong; He would go to a different city to love them. . . My walls came crumbling down. . . I don’t need to be right. I just need to love; I just need to show Christ.”

Subtheme 4.2. *Increased Openness*

Mentors also described becoming more open toward people of other faith traditions. Jasmine reflected, “I feel like it just changed part of my mentality toward other believers of God.” Sara similarly explained,

It’s helped me to see other religions not as ‘others,’ but as people who are all just trying their best to follow God and to be good people. . . If I don’t agree, that’s okay, but if I am hostile or judgmental, it probably is just because I don’t understand.

Several participants described becoming more charitable listeners and more willing to engage in conversations about faith. Isaiah remarked that “the spirit of charity has been really instilled in me through our dialogue. . . I want to listen to people the way I want to be listened to.” Hannah likewise reflected that the experience exposed her to “people from different backgrounds, different demographics, different faith traditions, and how we all have had experiences with God’s love.”

This increased openness extended beyond the camp itself. Hannah explained that the enthusiasm of her Protestant friends inspired her to share her own faith “more openly and more frequently.” Megan said she now makes “an effort to genuinely learn about other faiths and ask questions and get to know people and their traditions.” Isaiah similarly described approaching future conversations differently:

I have a better understanding of how to communicate [amid differences]. . . We had a great discussion. Normally that would not be the case. I would simply not want to talk at all, or I would be ready to begin defending my faith. But now I understand that we have a common place to begin, and that is very significant.

Subtheme 4.3. *Increased Clarity about Career and Ministry Goals*

For several mentors, the experience also shaped their sense of vocational purpose. Connor, who had previously worked extensively with athletes in secular settings, described the camp as a turning point: “It felt like a light bulb went off. . . It was reaffirming my call but also adding tools to the toolbox.”

Others described new professional aspirations that emerged from the experience. Hannah shared, “as a result of the camp, I’m actually applying to the BYU chaplaincy program.” Likewise, Sara, who had originally planned to pursue research in psychology, explained that the interfaith training inspired “a really strong desire to actually go into this professionally, to go into more interfaith work. . . I have felt that this is something that’s really important.”

Collectively, these findings suggest that mentors’ experiences extended beyond positive interpersonal interactions. Through a combination of shared purpose, meaningful relationships, appreciation of religious differences, and personal reflection, participants described experiences that fostered greater interfaith understanding while simultaneously strengthening their own religious identities. These themes provide insight into the processes through which interfaith relationships developed within a collaborative, sport-based leadership context.

3. Discussion

The present study explored how emerging adult mentors experienced interfaith engagement while serving together in a faith-based sports leadership program. Although participants entered the camp with strong religious identities and varying degrees of uncertainty about working with members of another faith tradition, they consistently described the experience as one of relational growth, increased understanding, and spiritual enrichment. Four interconnected themes emerged: mentors discovered common ground through a shared commitment to serving youth, developed meaningful friendships characterized by belonging and mutual care, learned to appreciate religious differences without perceiving them as threatening, and reported personal and spiritual transformation that frequently strengthened rather than diminished their own faith commitments. Collectively, these findings suggest that intentionally structured interfaith experiences can cultivate meaningful relationships while simultaneously deepening participants’ appreciation for both their own and others’ religious traditions.

Perhaps the most important finding of the present study is that interfaith relationships developed primarily through shared purpose rather than through theological dialogue alone. Consistent with Allport’s (1954) intergroup contact theory and Sherif’s (1966) concept of superordinate goals, participants repeatedly described their common commitment to serving youth as the organizing principle that united them across religious differences. Rather than centering interactions on doctrinal agreement or disagreement, mentors focused their collective efforts on helping adolescent athletes grow spiritually, emotionally, and athletically. This shared mission redirected attention away from potentially divisive theological questions and toward collaborative service, allowing religious differences to become less salient without requiring participants to minimize or compromise their beliefs. The sport context itself may have contributed to this process. Because mentors worked alongside one another in coaching activities, games, athletic instruction, and physically

enacted devotional practices embedded within sport, relationships developed through embodied cooperation rather than primarily through theological discussion. In this way, sport functioned as more than a backdrop for interfaith engagement; it became the embodied context through which common purpose, friendship, and spiritual formation were repeatedly enacted. Rather than merely discussing shared beliefs, participants frequently experienced faith through embodied practices of coaching, playing, praying, and serving alongside one another. These embodied experiences appeared to reinforce participants' shared purpose and the friendships that developed through it. We acknowledge, however, that sport was not the only relational ingredient at work: the program's residential intensity, the mentors' shared Christian commitments, and the explicitly established norms of respect and non-proselytizing likely contributed jointly to these outcomes. What the present findings suggest is not that embodied cooperation operated alone, but that it provided the shared medium through which these supports were repeatedly enacted and made tangible.

It is important to emphasize what precisely distinguishes sport in this context, as interfaith encounters are inherently embodied experiences: participants in a dialogue circle or sharing a meal are also physically present within a room. The unique aspect of this program was not introducing embodiment where it was previously absent; rather, it was reorganizing the type of embodiment around which the interaction was structured. Traditional interfaith formats generally position the body as a vessel for discourse, so participants sit, face each other, and discuss their traditions, with the body primarily serving as a platform for verbal exchange. In contrast, this program used cooperative physical activity as the medium of relationship: mentors coached, played, ran, celebrated, and prayed through shared exertion, and dialogue emerged within and around joint action rather than as the encounter's primary focus. Extensive scholarship indicates that coordinated, effortful movement of this kind possesses distinct social power. McNeill (1995) posited that "keeping together in time," moving energetically and rhythmically with others, generates a visceral "muscular bonding" that has historically underpinned group solidarity. Experimental and meta-analytical research further demonstrates that synchronous and cooperative movement enhances trust, cooperation, and social cohesion among participants (Mogan et al. 2017; Wiltermuth and Heath 2009). Furthermore, sport provided relational information that dialogue-based formats often do not elicit: mentors observed each other's efforts, failures, persistence, and encouragement amidst visible fatigue, thereby gaining authentic opportunities to display and interpret character across religious boundaries. Lastly, embodied cooperation served to partially diminish asymmetries of theological expertise. On the court, a graduate seminary student and an undergraduate research assistant interacted as teammates whose contributions were immediate athletic and relational, rather than doctrinal, thus approximating the equal-status condition that contact theory describes as conducive to positive intergroup interactions (Allport 1954). In summary, sport differs from typical embodied interfaith encounters not in the mere presence of bodies, but in what the bodies were doing together and in what that doing made it possible for participants to know about one another.

Building on this, the findings suggest that the friendships formed through shared purpose may themselves become conduits for meaningful interfaith learning. Existing scholarship frequently emphasizes dialogue and religious literacy as pathways to greater understanding across faith traditions. In contrast, participants in the present study rarely described doctrinal conversations as the catalyst for relationship development. Instead, friendships emerged through sustained collaboration, shared experiences, cooperative engagement, mutual vulnerability, and everyday interactions while serving together. These findings are consistent with friendship research demonstrating that interpersonal closeness develops through reciprocal self-disclosure, perceived responsiveness, shared experiences,

and collaborative engagement (Aron et al. 1997; Choi and Toma 2022; Sprecher 2021). As trust developed, mentors became increasingly willing to ask questions, discuss religious practices, and explore differences with genuine curiosity rather than defensiveness. This pattern also aligns with evidence that cross-group friendships reduce intergroup anxiety, foster empathy, and promote more positive attitudes toward members of other groups (Davies et al. 2011; Pettigrew and Tropp 2008). Similarly, research from the Interfaith Diversity Experiences and Attitudes Longitudinal Survey (IDEALS) has demonstrated that friendships across worldview differences contribute to greater pluralism orientation and more positive engagement with religious diversity among college students (Hudson et al. 2021, 2023). Rather than viewing friendship solely as an outcome of successful interfaith engagement, the present findings suggest that friendship itself may be one of the primary mechanisms through which shared purpose fosters meaningful interfaith learning, mutual understanding, and enduring relationships across religious differences.

A further contribution of the present study concerns the importance of psychological safety in facilitating authentic religious engagement. Camp organizers intentionally established expectations that mentors would refrain from proselytizing, avoid disparaging one another's beliefs, and approach religious differences with humility and respect. These norms appeared to reduce participants' concerns about being judged or pressured to defend their own traditions, creating an environment in which they could openly share personal beliefs, worship practices, and spiritual experiences. Rather than avoiding religious differences altogether, mentors engaged those differences with curiosity and appreciation because they trusted that the purpose of interaction was mutual learning rather than persuasion. Intergroup threat theory helps explain why this bracketing mattered. When members of committed religious communities anticipate that an encounter may become an arena of persuasion, religious disclosure carries symbolic threat: the sense that one's identity, community, or truth claims are under challenge (Stephan and Stephan 2000; cf. Ysseldyk et al. 2010). By taking conversion off the table while keeping authentic religious expression on it, the program transformed disclosure from a prelude to contest into an act of sharing, allowing the cooperative, equal-status conditions of contact to do their work (Allport 1954). This finding aligns with recent scholarship suggesting that successful interfaith initiatives intentionally cultivate conditions that support both authentic religious expression and psychological safety rather than encouraging participants to minimize or ignore religious differences (Mayhew and Rockenbach 2021; Visser et al. 2023). It also reflects intergroup contact theory's emphasis on cooperative interaction and institutional support as conditions that facilitate positive intergroup relationships (Allport 1954; Pettigrew and Tropp 2006). Taken together, these findings suggest that successful interfaith initiatives may benefit less from minimizing theological differences than from intentionally creating relational conditions in which those differences can be explored safely. Such environments appear to encourage authentic religious expression while simultaneously fostering mutual respect, trust, and understanding across faith traditions (Mayhew and Rockenbach 2021; Visser et al. 2023). Within these psychologically safe relationships, participants also experienced an unexpected outcome: rather than weakening their own religious identities, interfaith engagement consistently strengthened them.

An especially noteworthy finding was that interfaith engagement consistently strengthened participants' own religious commitments rather than weakening them. Many mentors described leaving the experience with a deeper appreciation for their own faith traditions, increased commitment to religious practices, and greater admiration for the devotion they observed in members of another faith community. Several participants described adopting not only new perspectives but also new ways of integrating faith into embodied practices such as sport, prayer, and ministry. These experiences resemble what Krister Stendahl

described as *holy envy*—recognizing and appreciating elements of another faith tradition that one admires without abandoning one's own religious commitments (Stendahl, as cited in Landau 2007; see also Reed 2025). Rather than viewing interfaith engagement as a threat to religious identity, participants experienced encounters across religious differences as opportunities for spiritual refinement, renewed discipleship, and greater appreciation for the diverse ways individuals seek to follow God. This finding is particularly noteworthy given the context of the present study. Although Protestant and Latter-day Saint communities share many foundational Christian commitments, they also maintain important theological distinctions and have experienced periods of mutual misunderstanding.

An important nuance in these findings is that the most explicit accounts of correcting misconceptions and publicly defending the other faith emerged primarily from the Protestant mentors. Although participants from both traditions described greater appreciation, friendship, and openness toward one another, Protestant mentors more frequently reported revising prior assumptions about Latter-day Saints and subsequently correcting those assumptions within their own communities. Several factors may help explain this asymmetry. Some Protestant participants entered the program acknowledging limited prior contact with Latter-day Saints and uncertainty about their beliefs or Christian identity. In addition, because the camp was hosted at Brigham Young University within a predominantly Latter-day Saint context, Protestant mentors had greater opportunity to encounter practices and relationships that challenged their preexisting assumptions. Rather than suggesting that interfaith learning was one-sided, these findings indicate that the forms of learning differed across the two groups, with Latter-day Saint mentors more often describing increased appreciation for Protestant practices and spirituality, and Protestant mentors more often describing changes in their perceptions of Latter-day Saints. Future research involving different host contexts and religious pairings could further explore how baseline familiarity and institutional context shape the direction and nature of interfaith learning.

The willingness of two communities, recognized for their energetic evangelism, to set aside proselytizing activities warrants particular scrutiny, as it counteracts well-established patterns of religious clustering. Americans are increasingly segregating themselves into communities of like-minded individuals (Bishop and Cushing 2008); religious congregations exhibit notable homophily within their organizational networks—"congregations of a feather" primarily associating with similar groups (McClure 2021); and the bonding social capital that fortifies these communities internally often exists alongside a deficit of the bridging ties that connect them to external groups (Putnam 2000). Both Latter-day Saint and evangelical Protestant communities have exemplified this combination of dense internal cohesion and cautious boundary maintenance, fostering a form of clustering that engenders suspicion on all sides. In this context, the present findings offer an instructive lesson for these communities: suspending proselytizing within a bounded, mutually agreed, and temporary frame did not diminish either community's witness; rather, it transformed bonding capital into bridging capital. Protestant mentors returned home revising their prior assumptions about Latter-day Saints; Latter-day Saint mentors expressed a renewed appreciation for Protestant spirituality; and members of both communities reported an increased, rather than decreased, commitment to their respective traditions. For communities whose identities encompass sharing their faith, the implication is not that evangelism should be abandoned, but that in certain settings, deliberately suspending it achieves what proselytizing in those contexts could not, namely, making the neighbor comprehensible as a fellow disciple rather than merely a prospect, thereby beginning to break down the suspicions that clustering sustains.

Nevertheless, participants consistently described discovering common ground, forming authentic friendships, and deepening rather than diminishing their own religious

identities. These findings are consistent with research suggesting that meaningful, embodied faith engagement across worldview differences can strengthen pluralism orientation while supporting continued commitment to one's own religious identity (Hudson et al. 2021, 2023; Mayhew and Rockenbach 2021). Likewise, they align with recent scholarship arguing that successful interfaith learning encourages participants to engage both similarities and differences authentically rather than minimizing religious distinctiveness (Visser et al. 2023). Together, these findings suggest that strong religious commitment and meaningful interfaith engagement are not mutually exclusive but may instead reinforce one another. More broadly, the development of authentic friendships within this setting suggests that shared purpose, embodied cooperation, and psychological safety may foster constructive engagement even among groups whose relationships have historically been characterized by theological disagreement or social distance.

Taken together, these findings have important implications for interfaith education, ministry, and peacebuilding efforts. Rather than relying primarily on dialogue-centered approaches, interfaith programs may be most effective when they incorporate embodied, cooperative experiences—such as sport, service, or collaborative leadership—alongside authentic relationship building, explicit norms of mutual respect, and opportunities to learn about one another's religious traditions. This approach is consistent with intergroup contact theory, which emphasizes the importance of cooperative interaction, shared goals, and institutional support in fostering positive intergroup relationships (Allport 1954; Pettigrew and Tropp 2006). It also aligns with recent scholarship suggesting that successful interfaith initiatives intentionally cultivate environments that support authentic religious expression, meaningful relationships, and engagement with both similarities and differences across faith traditions (Mayhew and Rockenbach 2021; Visser et al. 2023). The present findings further suggest that participants need not minimize theological differences to develop meaningful relationships; instead, friendships can flourish when individuals unite around a common mission while remaining authentic in their own beliefs and practices. Faith communities, educational institutions, and ministry organizations seeking to strengthen interfaith cooperation may therefore benefit from designing experiences that prioritize collaborative service, foster psychological safety, and encourage genuine interpersonal relationships before inviting participants into more complex theological discussions. Such approaches may help participants move beyond tolerance toward deeper understanding, mutual appreciation, and enduring interfaith friendships, consistent with research demonstrating the transformative role of friendships across worldview differences in promoting pluralism and constructive engagement (Hudson et al. 2021, 2023).

4. Limitations

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting these findings. Interviews were conducted approximately two to three months after camp participation, which may have influenced participants' recall of specific experiences. Additionally, because the first author both co-facilitated the pre-camp training and conducted the interviews as a Latter-day Saint researcher, participants may have been inclined to provide more positively framed accounts of their experiences. Although qualitative interviews are designed to capture participants' perspectives, the shared context and interviewer relationship may have influenced how those experiences were described. A related consideration concerns interpretive bias during data analysis. Although the research team employed investigator triangulation, consensus coding, reflexive memoing, an audit trail, and peer debriefing to enhance trustworthiness, all members of the coding team identified as Latter-day Saints. Consequently, shared religious perspectives may have influenced the interpretation and

emphasis of themes. Future studies would benefit from including researchers from multiple faith traditions in the analytic process to strengthen confirmability.

Participants also self-selected into both the interfaith program and the study, potentially resulting in a sample that was particularly receptive to interfaith engagement. Although the research team actively considered discrepant cases during analysis, participants' accounts were overwhelmingly positive, with only one participant expressing discomfort with a religious practice from the other faith tradition. This pattern likely reflects both the program's intentional recruitment of mentors interested in interfaith engagement and participants' self-selection. Future research should examine interfaith programs involving participants with greater initial skepticism or reluctance to better understand a broader range of experiences.

Although the mentoring teams were intentionally organized to promote shared leadership and reciprocal collaboration, the broader program context was not fully symmetrical. The camp was hosted Brigham Young University, served predominantly Latter-day Saint youth, and was organized primarily by Latter-day Saint institutions, placing Protestant mentors in the role of invited collaborators within a Latter-day Saint setting. This institutional asymmetry may have influenced participants' experiences, the patterns of interfaith learning observed in the study, and the directionality of the changes reported across the two faith traditions. Future research should examine whether similar relational processes emerge in settings characterized by greater institutional symmetry or by different host-guest configurations. Because the interfaith experience occurred within a brief, highly structured program, the study also cannot determine whether the friendships and changes in perspective observed during the program were sustained after mentors returned to their universities and communities.

A further limitation concerns the study's relationship to the program it examines. The camp was an existing program that the research team studied, not a setting engineered for research: participants were not prompted to reflect on interfaith processes as they unfolded, no baseline measures of interfaith attitudes were collected, and all data are retrospective self-reports gathered after the program ended. We regard this as a genuine constraint on causal and generalizable claims, stronger than a purpose-built design would face, and we frame our contribution accordingly, as an instrumental case study (Stake 1995) whose value lies in transferable insight into relational processes rather than in generalization (Lincoln and Guba 1985). At the same time, the naturalistic character of the setting is not only a weakness. Studying an authentic program, mounted by real institutions for practical rather than experimental purposes, offers ecological validity that contrived research environments struggle to achieve, and it reflects the methodological commitments of lived religion scholarship, which seeks religion where it actually happens (Ammerman 2014; McGuire 2008). Purpose-built, prospectively designed studies are the natural next step, as outlined in Future Directions.

Moreover, because the program combined sport with residential intensity, shared Christian commitments, and explicit relational norms, the design cannot isolate the unique contribution of sport's embodied character. Consequently, the interpretation that embodiment itself facilitated friendship formation should be regarded as suggestive rather than conclusive.

Finally, the findings emerged from a specific context involving Protestant and Latter-day Saint mentors from two faith-based universities who shared many foundational Christian beliefs and a common commitment to youth development. Consequently, the findings may not transfer directly to interfaith contexts involving traditions with less theological overlap or to other educational and community settings. Consistent with qualitative in-

quiry, the purpose of this study was not statistical generalization but to provide a rich understanding of participants' experiences that may illuminate similar contexts.

5. Future Directions

Future research could extend these findings in several ways. Most directly, prospective studies could address the limitations of the present study's naturalistic, retrospective design by assessing interfaith attitudes at baseline and providing structured opportunities for participants to reflect on their experiences as they unfold. First, longitudinal studies could examine whether interfaith relationships formed during intensive programs persist over time and whether participants experience lasting changes in interfaith attitudes, religious commitment, and collaborative engagement. Second, comparative studies involving different religious traditions or religious and nonreligious participants could explore whether the relational processes identified in this study generalize beyond Christian interfaith contexts characterized by substantial theological overlap. Third, quantitative and mixed-methods research could test the prevalence of the themes identified in this study and examine the mechanisms linking shared purpose, psychological safety, interfaith friendship, and spiritual growth. Fourth, future studies could investigate mentor–youth relational dyads to better understand how mentors' interfaith experiences influence youth participants and whether similar relationship-building processes operate across age groups. Finally, comparative research across educational, ministry, and community settings could identify the program characteristics that most effectively foster meaningful interfaith relationships, authentic religious engagement, and sustained collaboration across religious differences.

6. Conclusions

As religious diversity continues to shape communities around the world, identifying effective approaches to fostering meaningful relationships across faith traditions has become increasingly important. The findings of this study suggest that interfaith engagement does not require participants to minimize theological differences or compromise deeply held religious convictions. Instead, relationships flourished when mentors participated in an intentionally designed interfaith experience that united them around a shared Christian mission of serving youth, established clear norms of mutual respect and non-proselytizing, and created opportunities to engage religious differences within a context of trust and friendship. These experiences not only cultivated greater appreciation for another faith tradition but also deepened participants' own religious commitments and their desire to serve others. For Latter-day Saint and Protestant communities, in particular, traditions whose strong internal bonds have often coexisted with mutual wariness, these findings suggest that deliberately structured, non-proselytizing cooperation is not a threat to religious commitment but a practicable means of turning suspicion into friendship. Together, these findings suggest that carefully designed interfaith programs combining shared purpose, authentic relationships, psychological safety, and opportunities for meaningful, embodied faith engagement may offer a promising model for strengthening religious understanding, cooperation, and peacebuilding across diverse faith communities.

Supplementary Materials: The following supporting information can be downloaded at: <https://www.mdpi.com/article/10.3390/rel17101177/s1>. Document S1: Outline of the Y-Sport: Greater Purpose and Performance Curriculum; Document S2: Integrated Interfaith Reflection Interview Guide.

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