

SPORTS



Play for fun | Witness on the court

The Church of CrossFit | BY LONNIE TUTUPOLY

Why do you attend church? Too often I attend out of habit, out of feeling like it is my duty. Sure, sometimes I hear a good sermon that makes me think or sing a song that moves me, but going to church is rarely the highlight of my week, or even of my Sabbath. It seems that I am not the only one who feels this way. A lot of people in my age group are leaving church. Out of all my peers from high school, I can count on my two hands the number of people who still go to church. We all grew up in the church, went to academy, had the same education, and yet on Saturday, they are nowhere to be found. I think most of them don't feel any kind of connection to church anymore; it has nothing to offer them.

I found a "church" that I not only attend on a regular

basis but actually get excited about going to, somewhere that I can't help but tell my friends about and invite to attend. The reason *church* is in quotes is that we don't come to worship or sing, and no one talks at us from a pulpit. We may lack the "spiritual" aspect of church, but we have what a lot of churches lack: community.

If you haven't heard of CrossFit or have heard that it's crazy or unsafe, let me fill you in. CrossFit is the sport of fitness. CrossFit gyms have basic equipment (bars, weights, pull-up rigs, rings, kettlebells, etc.) and some odd objects, such as ropes for climbing, heavy stones, tires, and metal sleds for pushing and pulling.

CrossFit runs in a class setting. Classes are generally small (three to twelve people), are led by a coach or trainer, and last only one hour. In that hour, the class is put



CrossFit class doing a barbell warmup

ALL PHOTOS BY DANIEL TUTUPOLY

through a warm-up, a strength or skill program, and a workout of the day (WOD), which is programmed by the coaches. The coach demonstrates the movements and acts as a personal trainer to the people in the class. Coaches make sure everyone is moving efficiently and safely, scaling movements and workouts to the participants as needed.

One of the best parts of CrossFit is that literally anyone can do it, because it is based on movements that our body was made to do. CrossFit is all about functional movement. Squats, deadlifts, and presses translate into real-life movements such as sitting in a chair, picking up a box, and lifting something over your head to put it on a shelf. In CrossFit we practice these movements so that we can continue moving efficiently and safely for the rest of our lives.

Go into almost any CrossFit gym and you will find people of all ages, sizes, and fitness levels. You will find teenagers, college students, pregnant women, and even grandparents. Not only are these people working out together, but if you stick around a bit, you'll notice that they have relationships—they are like a family. How can these people who are so different be such a solid community of support? The answer is shared ideals and experiences.

Gym church

For me, it all started a little over a year ago, in my senior year at Andrews University. I was introduced to CrossFit when some seminary students, Jeff Tatarchuk, Juan Martinez, and Justin Knapp, decided to open a CrossFit gym in Berrien Springs. I had always been into fitness, so when I heard about the gym, I was stoked to sign up. I was just intending to learn a new type of exercise and get into better shape, but it ended up being a lot more than that. Our coaches loved the sport of CrossFit and saw how a gym could be used not only to promote health and fitness but also for building relationships and introducing people to Christ.

From day one, it was clear that CrossFit was going to be about more than individual fitness.



We were encouraged to cheer each other on and push ourselves and our classmates to give our best and not quit. In other sports, people cheer the loudest for the person who finishes first or best. In CrossFit, the loudest cheering is reserved for the last to finish, the person who keeps pushing even after everyone else is done. It's hard to stay strangers around people who suffer through a tough workout with you and cheer you on when you want to quit.

As time went on, CrossFit Berrien began putting on Friday-night programs a couple of times a month called Faith RX, where people shared a meal and some music together, and then had a bit of a Bible study and time to talk with one another. It wasn't in-your-face religious, just a way to eat and talk with your fellow CrossFitters. Since then, CrossFit Berrien has become a place of fellowship and community. The gym not only has a lot of student and community members, but it is also doing things in the Berrien Springs community, such as hosting free Saturday-morning breakfasts, free intro classes, and nutrition seminars. The gym's coaches are present in their local "secular" community and

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are doing a solid job of sharing Christ without being in-your-face about it.

Last May, I graduated from Andrews and left Berrien Springs. Since CrossFit Berrien was my only experience with CrossFit, I wasn't sure what to expect out in the "real world." Could there be a non-Christian gym out there where I could fit in and find community? Thankfully, the answer is yes. It turns out that the worldwide CrossFit community is a lot like CrossFit Berrien, even without being Jesus-centered.

My husband Daniel and I moved back to California after graduation to try and find work. We checked out two different CrossFit gyms in the Sacramento area. Both were good gyms, but we felt at home right away at CrossFit Benchmark. We have been at CrossFit Benchmark for about nine months. The best part of my day is when I get to go to the gym. I love the workouts, but even more, I love my CrossFit community. We actually talk about our lives, work, family, and our struggles and successes.

We notice when someone is absent from class for a while, and someone always reaches out to them. Quite a few of us even get together outside of the gym. We are all different, and yet we find commonality in our shared experience at the gym. These people, once strangers, have become my friends, my family.

The church of welcome

You might be thinking, that's a great story, but what does CrossFit have to do with church? Well, for me, I found what I was missing from church in CrossFit. I found acceptance, encouragement, and a family. I think that the biggest thing our churches lack today is a sense of genuine fellowship. Granted, not all churches are missing this community aspect, but I'm pretty sure there are more of them than we would like to admit.

What can we learn from CrossFit about community? We can learn to be welcoming and accepting of everyone, especially people who are different than us. Everyone comes into CrossFit at different levels of fitness, and instead of requiring people to be at a certain fitness level to begin with, coaches modify workouts and movements to meet people where they are. In CrossFit, you aren't allowed to just coast. You come to train hard and push yourself, with the encouragement of your coach and classmates, to become better than you were before. That is how church should be. When you come to church, you should be encouraged to grow stronger and closer in your relationship with God. Isn't that what Jesus did? He welcomed everyone, especially the outcasts, and instead of casting judgment on them, he loved them. Jesus met people where they were, but he didn't let them stay there.

People you know and have a relationship with are generally better at motivating you than strangers. In CrossFit, you have to be somewhat open and vulnerable with your classmates. You are with these people every day for an hour. They see you sweat and struggle; they see your weaknesses and your poor attitude when the

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Practicing rope climbs



Flipping a 270 lb tire as part of a workout

workout is not going well; they see your disappointment when you fall short of reaching your goals. It's not pretty, but it's real. So often we go to church dressed in our best clothes and on our best behavior and don't get real with people, because real is messy. When church members ask how your week was, you should feel comfortable enough to be honest and open with them. Your fellow church members aren't supposed to be strangers; they are supposed to be like your family, ready to embrace you during your struggles and your successes.

In CrossFit, there is an unofficial rule: if you do CrossFit, you talk about CrossFit. If you have friends who do CrossFit, you likely know they do it because they talk about it or post pictures and articles about it all the time. No one is paying them to spread the CrossFit message; they are doing it because they can't help it. The majority of people who do CrossFit are so passionate about it and love the difference it has made in their life that they feel compelled to share it with others. They don't want to keep this wonderful thing a secret. They want others to experience it the same way they have. Wouldn't it be neat if people felt that way about church, about Jesus? It shouldn't have to take

convincing to get church members to share the gospel or invite others to church. As a church, we should be so in love with Christ and our church community that we literally can't keep it to ourselves—we want to invite others so they can experience what we do.

If you are part of a CrossFit gym and happen to drop in at another one, you are most likely going to feel right at home. Every gym has its own coaching style and programming, so that will differ, but what is consistent is the community. You won't feel like a stranger. Church should be that way. The style of worship might vary, but the spirit of fellowship should be present. Visiting another church should be like visiting with extended family.

There is no end point in CrossFit. You can always be stronger or faster. Fitness is a life-long pursuit. That's how our walk with God should be. There isn't an end goal, a top spiritual point at which one no longer has to try. We can always grow spiritually; it is a journey. Jesus didn't want us to venture on this journey alone. The purpose of the church is to help each other along the way, making sure we keep striving. The church should be a place of support, a place to celebrate success and mourn loss. Having these common ideals can make the journey bearable.

I want to be part of a church that is more like CrossFit, a place that offers more than sermons and songs, that actually offers a community experiencing Christ together and growing together. Let's make our church a place of relationships, where we can be transparent and where outsiders feel instantly welcomed and accepted. I think heaven will be like this, so why don't we get started here and now? ■

Lonnie Tutupoly attended Andrews University, where she



graduated with a bachelor's in business administration in 2014. She currently works for *Spectrum* as the assistant to the editor. Fitness and health are Lonnie's passions. She is also a personal and CrossFit trainer at CrossFit Benchmark in Roseville, California.

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