Worship on the run: A new kind of church

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Marathon runner Alicia Heyne often meets God out on the trail. As a member of Sweaty Sheep in Louisville, Kentucky, she's part of a new brand of church. Instead of putting running in competition with church on Sunday morning, she sees running as a form of church.

"Most races are on Sundays," says 30-year-old Heyne, who is a schoolteacher turned housepainter. "You have to choose whether you're going to be at church or do a run. I like Sweaty Sheep because I don't have to choose. Jesus said that when two or more people come together in his name he'll be there. If you're in a building or if you're in a race, it doesn't matter. It brings people together."

Sweaty Sheep is one of a wave of churches that are embracing physical exercise in their ministries. Some enlist Christian runners as evangelists, giving them T-shirts to wear during races and training them both in fitness and in sharing their faith. Some

reach beyond their own running communities to established churches: the parachurch group Run for God, for example, shares its curriculum with more than 450 churches in the United States and Canada. Other congregations have started running clubs as a way of encouraging members to care for their bodies as well as their souls. Sweaty Sheep takes it a step further: its participants celebrate running and the community it creates as a spiritual practice.

“We’re starting to understand running as worship,” says founding pastor Ryan Althaus, a triathlete who has an M.Div. from Louisville Theological Seminary. He likes to say that if runners had been present at Pentecost, the apostles might have joined them on a run.

“Running is the language that we speak—the spirit coming down into you in your own unique way,” he says. “For a normal, sedentary, churchgoing person, this doesn’t make sense. For a runner this is a very natural thing. . . . I can’t go to church and meditate on scripture because I can’t sit still. The runner already thinks of his run as a church service.”

C. S. Lewis said, “If one could run without getting tired, I don’t think one would often want to do anything else.” In *Chariots of Fire*, Scottish Olympian Eric Liddell said, “God . . . made me fast, and when I run, I feel his pleasure.” Episcopal Presiding Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori told *Runner’s World* that her faithful morning jogs were “body prayer” and “meditative experience at its best.” But until recently the church has held this sort of personal worship experience at arm’s length. Now some new church plants are talking about running in terms of the Christian doctrines of creation, fall and redemption.

George Linney, pastor of Tobacco Trail Community in Durham, North Carolina, says that it’s the church’s job to help people see where God is at work in the wider world and in the people themselves—in their gifts, careers and passions. Runners commune with God by communing with nature—with the air, the trees, the dirt, the animals and especially with their own bodies. There is the ecstasy of the runner’s high, a flow of endorphins that arrives as one runs. “Heaven is the eternal runner’s high,” is one of several Sweaty Sheep slogans.

Not every runner articulates his or her experience in these terms, but Linney, Althaus and others feel called to encourage them to do so.

“They know that this thing that they do [running] has something to do with God,” Linney says.

Linney ran into roadblocks during his Episcopal ordination process, so after graduating from Duke Divinity School he got a job managing the Bull City Running Company, a high-end sneaker store at the south end of the American Tobacco Trail. While riding his bike to work, he felt a call to start a worship service along the trail. His boyhood church, Myers Park Baptist in Charlotte, ordained him in the American Baptist denomination. Many of TTC’s members are runners whom Linney met at the store.

“When there’s an ordained clergyperson in the running store, that validates their running,” Linney says. “Most days I really enjoy my job. I help people find great running shoes, and helping people leads to interesting conversations about Jesus. As you’re tying someone’s shoes, you’re quickly getting to the nuts and bolts of his life.”

The church meets outdoors in areas next to the trail. Linney sounds a bit like St. Francis of Assisi; he often talks about children chasing rabbits or birds chirping praise as part of the worship liturgy. “There’s music being played and scripture being spoken without anyone opening a Bible or strumming a guitar,” he says.

Linney says incarnational ministry happens to runners in the great outdoors. The idea is to name God in what’s already going on in people’s lives.

“This is not just about physical fitness,” he says. “Gardening could be your prayer life. Computer programming matters in the life of God. A life well lived is when you start to recognize that, hey, God is in all of this.”

But in running as in life a church has to account not just for the runner’s high and the presence of natural beauty, but also for brokenness. Brokenness may come with the agony of running for hours in a marathon. “When it really hurts, it’s like life when things are bad. You have to focus on one thing, and that one thing is God,” says Heyne. “There’s only so much will. By the time the end comes you’re just praying that your body doesn’t fail.”

At that point, says Althaus, “you throw out a prayer and hope that someone is going to answer it.” That answered prayer is a double-edged sword. A runner can finish a race, forget about a short-lived spiritual experience and never acknowledge that he

or she spoke to God. In running there's plenty of room for trying to save yourself.

"You're in an idolatrous, narcissistic world," says Linney. "Most of the people you run with think that running is their god. If they lose and they don't run well, there's nothing left."

"But when you get to that point, you get disorders," says Althaus, who himself has dealt with anorexia and exercise addiction. "You have to realize that running is just one of many means to find God. The trick is to love it but not need it."

That's why these churches aren't simply baptizing runners in their own sweat. They're introducing patterns of worship. In fact, although Linney's congregants are runners, there's no running in their Sunday liturgy. It looks like almost any other service of word and sacrament, except that Linney hauls the altar and communion elements in and out of his car as he moves from one worship site to another.

Lately the Sweaty Sheep have been experimenting with more permanent liturgical forms. In a Spin Church liturgy that Althaus developed, spinners work out on stationary bikes while listening to songs by bands like U2, Kings of Leon or Mumford and Sons.

The music does two things at once: it matches the progress and pace of the listeners' exercise, and it invites them to reflect on the lyrics. Althaus punctuates the songs with Bible verses, provocative questions and group discussion. In addition, he urges runners to pray during the week, choosing a different person to pray for during each mile that they run. And he's written a series of Bible studies for small groups to read and then reflect on during a group run. The Sweaty Sheep plan to share these resources; a program called Active Life has been adopted by other churches, including the People's Church in East Lansing, Michigan.

The pastor at People's Church, Andrew Pomerville, says that following a Bible study with a run makes sense because conversations start when people are running together.

"You lose any kind of pretension because everybody's huffing and puffing and sweating. Running is an intimate thing to do with someone. You're letting your guard down. You're showing your vulnerability. There's a sense of informality that allows people to feel more comfortable. You have to talk. It makes the run go by faster."

“A running community is the tightest community I’ve ever been a part of,” says Althaus.

Linney organized Jericho Runs to coincide with Moral Monday rallies at the state capitol in North Carolina. Sponsored by the state NAACP and other progressive groups, the rallies attract protesters who gather north of the General Assembly building to oppose reductions in unemployment benefits, environmental protections and Medicaid spending and to fight for voters’ rights and for protections against racial bias in the court system. Every week a group of trained activists (from a few dozen to more than 100) enters the Legislative Building and refuses to leave. Their acts of civil disobedience are meant to inspire the hundreds or thousands of people present and to attract media attention.

When the activists go inside, hundreds of protesters migrate to the west side, across the street from the police and paddy wagons that are waiting for those who will be arrested. The crowd chants and sings, cheering on the handcuffed detainees with civil rights–era slogans like “Forward together, not one step back!” At that point, the Jericho runners appear and cut between the crowd and police. Linney and about a dozen other runners raise their fists or clap their hands in solidarity with the crowd, which shouts its support.

“Many of you were running seven loops . . . almost nine miles into the teeth of the North Carolina heat,” Linney wrote in an e-mail to participants. “I believe we made a difference and a strong witness for justice by what we did.”

After three consecutive Mondays, Linney handed over leadership of the Jericho Run to Eric Olson-Getty, a Mennonite who works for YO:Durham, a local youth empowerment program.

“I saw how our witness energized the crowd, and I had a strong sense that we were developing a relationship with the demonstrators and were almost expected to be there,” Olson-Getty says. “We’re praying for God’s will to be actualized in what appears to be an intractable political situation.”

Althaus says that runners are accustomed to using their hobby as a way to serve a cause. They run to raise public awareness, as on Moral Mondays, or to raise funds for a cause.

“You’re giving something of yourself,” he says. “It’s a way to bring others into your run.”

The Sweaty Sheep partner with three nonprofits. They hold fund-raising races for Angels in Disguise—“celebrating the gift of Down’s syndrome”—and invite the children to run the last 100 yards with the athletes. Working with Bluegrass Achilles, they pair elite athletes with disabled athletes for training sessions. And with Kaleidoscope, Inc., they lead fitness classes for the cognitively disabled. Tobacco Trail Community gives about a third of its $17,000 budget to local missions.

“We want people to feel fulfillment,” says Althaus. “Part of that is by allowing them to serve through their passions.”

The new churches build relationships in group runs and competitive races. And they show up for important events. Last Christmas Sweaty Sheep took over the PCUSA headquarters in Louisville. Three hundred people ran five kilometers and then worshiped and shared dinner with people living on the streets. The 5K raised money for local homeless shelters.

In April the Sweaty Sheep led 300 runners in Louisville’s Cherokee Park in praying for the victims of the Boston Marathon bombing. “It was really powerful,” says Althaus. “Everybody realized it was important to have a pastor-type presence.”

These pastors expect only a dozen or so people to attend regular worship meetings. This kind of sporadic attendance might not seem to hold much promise for sustaining a church, but the communities have a low overhead. They don’t have buildings, and their pastors are bivocational. Althaus, for example, works as a triathlon coach, a CrossFit instructor and a chaplain for the Fellowship of Christian Athletes.

Linney says it’s good for congregants to see God in weakness as much as in power. He thinks too many church plants operate like caffeinated start-up businesses and are driven by the fear of not growing fast enough.

Linney says he is at home in a low-overhead enterprise that’s not guaranteed to succeed.

“I’ve been at a project for three years, and it brings in $17,000 a year,” he says. “If we are patient and discerning with our resources, there is no reason we can’t be doing a version of what we’re doing today a decade from now. I’m not sure people

will come. I’m not sure we’ll get rich. But I’m not going anywhere.”