

# Gym church members work out their faith

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Towels mop up sweat from foreheads after another successful workout. Several gym members finish stretching, while others arrange the benches and Plyo workout boxes in a church-pew formation in preparation for that evening's church service.

The gym is an unorthodox location for a church, but that's what it is—a growing body of believers and seekers who gather to worship and hear the Bible preached each week.

The men and women who attend the gym in the northern Thai city of Chiang Rai are each other's community—family, even—going on annual camping trips, white water rafting together and taking vacations to the beach.

They've traveled to Bangkok to cheer on members as they compete in a CrossFit tournament. Baby showers, weddings, funerals, baptisms and holiday celebrations all have taken place in the gym.

Nathan and Stephanie Crandall serve as IMB missionaries in Chiang Rai. Nathan joined the gym to relieve compounding stress and lower elevated blood pressure caused by his intensive language study.

After his first workout, he told his wife: "It's horrible. I go, and I die, and I sweat. It's horrible. You should come too."

# Building on an existing sense of community

The Crandalls got involved in the gym and quickly saw how gym members were not just workout buddies. They were a tight-knit community who loved spending time with one another both inside and outside the gym. It was a perfect place to share the gospel and plant a church, the Crandalls realized.

Nathan Crandall said they'd invited some of their friends to a house church, but their Buddhist friends felt uncomfortable, and the Christian vocabulary was difficult to comprehend.

"We saw that as they came through the doors of the gym ... their heart, their ears, their mind was just more open," Crandall said.

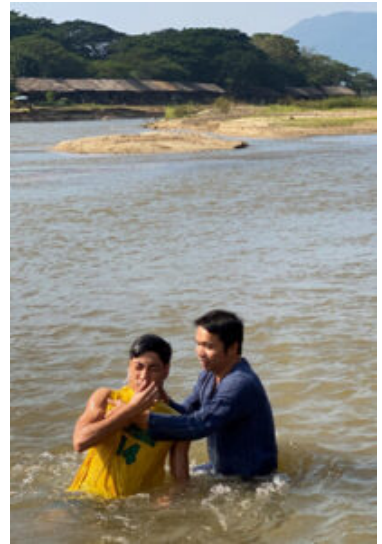
The owner of the gym is a Christian and opened the gym with the hopes of starting a church. He realized the need for someone devoted to the church-planting side of the gym. The Crandalls stepped into the role of church planters.

They decided to have church on Wednesday evenings after people finish their exercises.

"They're going to be sweaty. They're going to be in their workout clothes. They're going to smell. But that's how they like to hang out," Crandall said.

Before the service, they eat dinner and fellowship. Stephanie Crandall and others are involved in Sunday School for the children. Her husband and several believers rotate who preaches, and someone shares a testimony in each service.

# Reaching people for Christ



A Thai Christian baptizes Nett in the river. Nett committed his life to Christ because of the witness of IMB missionary Nathan Crandall. (IMB Photo).

The gym-based church is reaching people like Net.

When Net's life started to go downhill, his older brother suggested he go to the gym.

Nathan Crandall worked out with Net one day, and the twosome sweated and slogged through the workout. Even though he doesn't usually like to open up to people, Net said he was drawn to Crandall because of his sense of humor.

Net's cross earring led to a gospel conversation and an invitation to church.

The first time Net attended, he prayed silently, “Is that you God, who was taking care of me since I was young?”

The sermon that evening was on the prodigal son. Pausing, as tears welled in his eyes and emotion caused his voice to waver, he said it was like God was sitting next to him.

Net said God didn’t bring up the things he’d done or his sinful ways. God invited him in like a son.

“He said he loved me so much. He just was waiting there for so long,” Net said. “I know this is God. God is real. I just want to come back for him.”

Net accepted Christ that night.



IMB missionary Nathan Crandall talks with Nett, a new Christian, after a workout. Nett committed his life to Christ after attending a church service in the gym. (IMB Photo)

Ministry doesn’t take place only amid the dumbbells and pull-up bars. The church celebrates all holidays and hosts gospel-centered events for the

community. The church's fall festival drew around 250 children. Gym members gave away bags of treats with the story of Jesus in comic-book form.

The story of Jesus resonated with Hannah, a 9-year-old girl who attended. She asked her mother, Aoy, whether she'd heard the story before.

Hannah felt the message was true. She asked her mom if she was free to make her own decision of faith. Her Buddhist family might have forbidden such a decision, but Aoy said she'd support Hannah in whatever she decided.

Aoy, who is friends with Stephanie Cradall, asked to learn more so she could be supportive of her daughter. She began attending a Bible study and church in the gym. Hannah and her younger brother, Keith, committed their lives to Christ during one of the services.

The gym helped Nathan Crandall with his blood pressure and stress and helped him reach the language level he needed. More than that, it opened the door for the Crandalls to do what they came to Thailand to do—share the gospel and help plant healthy churches.