

Physical and spiritual exercise meet in NIA, divinity student says

July 28, 2010

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (ABP) — Claire McKeever, a Baylor University graduate studying for the ministry at Vanderbilt Divinity School, preaches that worship isn't just for the soul.

Claire McKeever leads a Nia dance session at Glendale Baptist Church in Nashville, Tenn.

McKeever teaches NIA, [Neuromuscular Integrative Action](#), at the Green Hills YMCA in Nashville, Tenn. Proponents of NIA view it as a mind/body/spirit exercise experience that combines yoga, martial arts and dance. This summer, as part of her assignment as a Cooperative Baptist Fellowship intern, she was invited to teach a series of NIA classes at [Glendale Baptist Church](#) in Nashville.

"It's really been interesting being in divinity school and doing ministry and having NIA a really big part of that," McKeever said.

McKeever learned about NIA from a massage therapist who recommended it as exercise while treating her for a shoulder injury. McKeever, who came from a dance background, tried it and knew immediately she had found a home.

"I really enjoyed exercising, and my body felt so good afterward," she said. Now it is an important part not only of her physical fitness, but also her

spirituality and theology.

"A lot of the work I do is on body theology," she said, "what our bodies look like in worship and how they are present and how they are alive."

"I'm really interested in how movement heals us, when we've gone through not only traumatic things with our bodies but also death and loss; how we move together," McKeever said.

Her theological interest in NIA began with a study about dance in the Bible. The fitness aspect developed through her work with the sustainable-food movement, where she thought about how people treat their bodies by what they put into them. "Especially at churches, where we have the big potlucks," she explained.

{youtube}V0LAxZDct1E{/youtube}

NIA was founded in 1983 by Debbie Rosas Stewart and Carlos AyaRosas, fitness pioneers credited with introducing mind-body exercise techniques that paved the way for popularity of later trends like yoga and Pilates.

"NIA is sort of a complement to yoga," McKeever said. "It's like yoga where you get stretched out," with moves drawn from a total of nine fitness disciplines including tae kwon do, tai chi and jazz and modern dance. It is used around the world in gyms and fitness clubs, spas, martial arts and dance centers and in treatment of problems like drug and alcohol addiction, with victims of sexual abuse and for cardiac rehabilitation.

McKeever said it's an important part of her own well-being physically, mentally and spiritually.

"I would say I'm a more open person for having NIA in my life," she said. "Now I know I need two things to be a good pastor and a good minister, and that is to dance NIA and to go to counseling regularly."

