

Llano pastor teaches Koinonia Karate

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LLANO—Most Christians familiar with the New Testament Greek word “koinonia” think of it only in terms of fellowship and communion.



Matt Richard, pastor of First Baptist Church in Llano, believes he can incorporate Christian principles such as self-control into martial arts instruction as he teaches a Koinonia Karate class to children in the church gym. (Photo / Ken Camp)

But it also can mean “shared gifts,” and that’s how Pastor Matt Richard views the karate classes he teaches two nights a week in the gymnasium of First Baptist Church in Llano.

Richard uses his giftedness in the martial arts to connect with his community and teach character-building lessons, particularly—but not exclusively—to children.

“There’s not any preaching or Bible study,” Richard explained, but he does see biblical applications to the discipline he is teaching.

“Students learn self-control, and that’s a fruit of the Spirit. It’s not hard to make the spiritual connections,” he said.

Richard began studying karate as a preschooler in Nederland. Born prematurely at only 2 lbs., his parents wanted to involve him in an activity that would help him overcome early developmental issues with physical coordination.

Instructor Mike Maxwell bent the rules a bit to allow 3-year-old Matt to begin lessons in the 5-and-under class at the Fight Dragons Karate School. At age 11, Matt earned his black belt in karate.

“I was obsessed with it for a while,” Richard acknowledged, frequently taking part in competitive breaking tournaments.

After he became a Christian at age 15, he began to wonder how he might merge his martial arts skills and his newfound commitment to Christ.

“I thought I might be able to do something evangelistically, but I never did,” he said.

Richard continued to keep his karate skills sharp as a student at East Texas Baptist University. When he pursued studies at Baylor University’s Truett Seminary, he regularly sparred with another student in the recreation center at Columbus Avenue Baptist Church in Waco.

‘Keep it accessible and affordable’



Matt Richard, pastor of First Baptist Church in Llano, teaches martial arts skills and life principles to students in a Koinonia Karate class in the church gym. (Photo / Ken Camp)

After First Baptist Church in Llano called him as pastor three years ago, he learned there were no martial arts classes available in town.

“Llano is the county seat, but it’s still kind of isolated here,” Richard said.

He wanted to offer a karate class for his own son, and he saw an opportunity for outreach and community ministry. The church’s missions committee agreed to provide up to \$1,000 to launch the Koinonia Karate program, charging students a relatively minimal fee.

“We try to keep it accessible and affordable,” Richard explained. “It’s a ministry of the church. It’s not about making money.”



Pastor Matt Richard of First Baptist Church in Llano demonstrates proper stance and technique to students during a Koinonia Karate class in the church gym. (Photo / Ken Camp)

Richard limits lessons to two nights a week to preserve evenings at home with wife Michelle and their 11-year-old daughter and 8-year-old son.

“I’m looking for balance and making time for my family,” he said.

Unlike some martial arts schools that require students or their parents to enter into a long-term contract, Koinonia Karate takes a more relaxed approach.

“There’s no pressure. I tell students, ‘Try it out and see if it’s a good fit for you,’” Richard said. In fact, his own son did not choose to continue taking karate and decided to pursue other interests.

Teaching Christian principles



Pastor Matt Richard teaches proper martial arts techniques while also teaching lessons on Christian principles such as respect, humility, perseverance and self-control. (Photo / Ken Camp)

Koinonia Karate classes open to children age 6 and older have proven popular, and Richard also teaches a few teenaged and adult students who participate in a second class he offers.

Richard recognizes some Christians view the martial arts with suspicion, either because of connections to Eastern religions or because they are seen as promoting violence.

In terms of the Buddhist and Taoist influence on karate, Richard teaches only those principles consistent with Christianity, such as respect, humility, perseverance and self-control.

“Koinonia Karate is based on my own ethos” as a follower of Christ, not ancient roots in a non-Christian religion, he noted.

“It’s about coordinating the body and mind. It can be a Christian concept if you choose to make it that,” he said.

As he teaches karate techniques, Richard emphasizes to students the importance of avoiding physical conflict—never initiating violence or using martial arts to get revenge.



The Koinonia Karate program at First Baptist Church in Llano competed Oct. 22 at The Best of the Best Championships in Austin, a tournament associated with the Amateur Organization of Karate league circuit. It was the first time Koinonia Karate participants engaged in competition. Two beginner students placed— Norah McCormick (left), second place in point-sparring; and CJ Ares (right), third place in point-sparring. Pastor

Matt Richard, Koinonia Karate instructor, won first place in point sparring. (Courtesy Photo)

“Karate is all about self-defense. The goal is to never hurt anybody. It’s only to protect yourself or someone else, and it should only be used as a last measure,” he said.

The classes attract “a healthy mix” of church members and non-members, but the majority of students are from families who are not already part of the church, Richard noted.

Students in the Koinonia Karate classes and their parents are notified about children’s activities at First Baptist Church such as Vacation Bible School and a fall festival, and they are invited to participate.

“So far, one family has connected to the church through this ministry,” he said.

The karate classes represent just one way Richard seeks to connect to his community. He writes a column for the local newspaper, leads the town’s ministerial alliance and also has been involved with a children’s soccer league.

“That’s an advantage to being in a place like Llano,” he said. “You’re not just pastor of the church. In time, you get to pastor a community.”

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