



Holy Rollers



Seeking the welfare of the city, for some pastors, includes ministry to two-wheelers • by STEVE HOLT

A BEEPING, BUSTLING Boston intersection is a strange place for a sanctuary, but on a blustery August evening, the corner of Beacon Street and Massachusetts Avenue becomes just that.

“This is holy ground,” says Rev. Laura Everett to several dozen people who form a semicircle around her and a lily-white bicycle chained to a concrete pole. Flowers overflow from the bike’s front basket.

“We’re here to dedicate this ghost bike,” Everett tells the growing crowd, “a visible sign of an invisible reality—that we’re fragile humans, and we’re only here for a little while.”

Everett, clad in religious vestments, and the crowd around her, wearing bike helmets and messenger bags, are installing the “ghost bike” as a memorial to 38-year-old cyclist Anita Kurmann, a beloved endocrine surgeon in the city, who was killed 13 days earlier when she was struck by a flatbed truck. A cyclist reads Psalm 23 into a megaphone and another reads a letter from Kurmann’s lab supervisor before Everett leads the congregation in a simple call-and-response prayer.

“When we choose to take a bike instead of a car,” Everett prays, “when we choose to listen instead of shout, when we choose advocacy instead of complacency, when we choose to get curious instead of cranky, when we choose to heal a broken world instead of cursing it, when we travel past this spot, remind us of Anita.”

“Holy One,” the crowd responds, some with eyes clenched shut, “hear our prayer.”

It’s a remarkable thing to witness (even on YouTube months later): a Christian minister leading a wildly diverse

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community of cyclists in prayer and lament for a fallen sister, and for each other. Her bike ministry extends beyond presiding over ghost bike ceremonies, though. Everett—a United Church of Christ minister and executive director of the Massachusetts Council of Churches—leads a “blessing of the bikes” each May where she prays for cyclists’ safety and anoints dozens of sets of wheels with chain lube. And as a four-season commuter cyclist herself who’s officiated three ghost bike ceremonies for fellow cyclists in a little over a year, she’s become a fierce advocate for transportation infrastructure that respects and protects cyclists.

Everett is just one of a handful of ministers across the nation—from New York City to Minneapolis to Denver—whose parish extends outside of traditional church structures to include bike lanes and cyclists. She says cyclists know the risks of the road and yet choose to bicycle—“a rule of life that many pastors would give their right arm for.”

“These are people who have said, ‘There’s an easier path, but I’m going to do this,’” she says. “That’s remarkable.”



A two-wheeled evangelist

With just shy of 4 percent of its population consistently choosing two wheels instead of four, Minneapolis is, according to data compiled by the League of American Bicyclists, one of the most bike-friendly cities in America. This is the context in which Rev. Travis Norvell found himself upon arriving in South Minneapolis in 2012 to pastor the Judson Memorial Baptist Church, a congregation of between 150 and 200 people.

But in fact it was Norvell’s adolescent daughter who finally convinced him to join the ranks of the city’s bicycling commuters. It was January 2014, and Norvell had just preached a sermon about the congregation’s historical response to some of the social evils of the early 20th century, concluding with a challenge to today’s parishioners to “do their part ... to love the world into a new existence.” The call to action especially touched Seneca Norvell, age 12 at the time, who turned her father’s sermon back around on him: “Dad, when are *you* going to make this a reality?”

Norvell was convicted; how could he preach to his congregation about sacrifice for the greater good and remain unwilling to give up his car? So he called a family meeting, and the family decided to ditch their car and begin biking and utilizing public

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Hope Central Church photo

transportation. Four days after that fateful sermon and daughterly admonishment—and despite subzero temperatures and snow piled high—Norvell sold the family car, put winter tires on his bike, and began cycling to the church office and pastoral appointments. He was particularly compelled by the environmental implications of biking instead of driving, and said the change “gave me a personal sense that I’m not helpless in this—that personal actions do matter.”

As Norvell settled into his newfound identity as an urban cyclist, his congregation supported him. When he worried about being able to get out to a nursing home visit in the suburbs, a parishioner offered him a ride. When faced with the mental hurdle of braving a Minneapolis winter on two wheels—temperatures often plummeted into the negative double-digits in 2014—a seasoned rider slapped him on the back and offered a word of encouragement. And when Norvell showed up at a church meeting covered in snow, parishioners “didn’t chuckle; they showed grace.”

A “ghost bike” memorial to a biker killed while riding.



Rev. Laura Everett prays for cyclists’ safety and anoints dozens of sets of wheels with chain lube.

“hemming and hawing” through his ask, nervous about insulting the church leadership.

But the leaders weren’t insulted. Originally, Goldstein suggested doing the blessing outside on a loading dock, but the ministers suggested inviting cyclists inside the 124-foot-high cathedral sanctuary. “Do you want us to sprinkle the bikes with holy water?” he remembers a church official asking him, to which he responded, “Can we do that?”

That first blessing, in May 1999, drew more than 100 cyclists. Eighteen years later, as many as 300 cyclists, ranging from hard-core racers to families with children, line up with their bikes on the cathedral floor each year, eager to be blessed. They come from all over the country, as the blessing is typically scheduled for the day before the Five Boro Bike Tour, the city’s largest bike ride. And like the blessing’s founder, attendees also come from a variety of faith traditions or claim no faith at all, says Rev. Julia Whitworth, canon for liturgy and the arts at St. John the Divine, who has designed and read the short liturgy at the ceremony the last four years.

“Cathedral of St. John the Divine is founded to be not just an Episcopal church but a house of prayer for all people,” she says. “This is one of the times during the year that we really get to be that.”

For Goldstein, the highlight of the event every year is an unusual moment following the pronunciation of a blessing over the cyclists. As bicycles are sprinkled with holy water, the riders begin to ring their bike bells, creating a symphony that echoes through the cathedral—as close to a spiritual experience as Goldstein can imagine.

“Whatever you believe in, there’s something happening in that moment,” he says. “Call it what you want; that is not like being anywhere else.”

The congregation even applied for a bike rack to be installed on the sidewalk in front of the building (the city and church split the cost), and someone put up a sign for Norvell: “Reserved for Clergy.” Then a strange thing happened: Church members began biking to church, and soon the rack was full of frames.

Norvell turned some of his attention to the cyclists who weren’t part of the congregation. As the ice thawed and more Minneapolitans began hitting the bike paths, he put on his clerical stole and collar and parked his bike along a trail well-worn by commuters with a sign: “Free Bike Blessing.” He asked those who stopped how long they’ve been riding, what they love about riding, and what they fear. (Everyone feared being hit, it turned out, and many women complained about how cycling clothing is geared toward men.) Then he said a brief prayer for them.

“I’m an evangelist for biking,” he explained.



Bike bell symphonies

The idea of a bicycle blessing, however, did not originate with Norvell—or anyone in the church, for that matter.

In 1999, New York City bike ride organizer Glen Goldstein noticed that the disparate groups within the city’s cycling community—racers, messengers, commuters—rarely crossed paths. So Goldstein, a non-practicing Jew, approached leaders of the Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine about whether they might be interested in organizing a bike blessing. Having never heard of such a thing before—not to mention being Jewish—Goldstein remembers



“Seek the welfare of the city”

Mere inches separate urban cyclists from 2,000-pound cars driving down narrow Boston streets or box trucks in New York stopping short to avoid a pothole. Even when a cyclist is doing everything right—occupying the full lane, wearing a protective helmet and reflective clothing, signaling correctly—a collision between a motor vehicle and a bicycle almost always results in the cyclist taking the brunt of the damage. Between 1998 and 2013, hospital admissions due to bicycle injuries more than doubled as more Americans than ever were cycling, according to the *Journal of the American Medical Association*. This is why Rev. Laura Everett believes cyclists are more uniquely aware of their mortality than most people—and also why risk and death are subjects that run through many bicycle ministries.



Everett points to both the size and visible emotion of the crowd of cyclists who showed up at the first ghost bike ceremony she officiated. The ceremony was for Marcia Deihl, a 65-year-old Cambridge, Mass. activist who was killed as she biked to Whole Foods in March 2015. After the service was over, Everett checked in with a woman she'd seen openly crying and asked the woman how she knew Marcia.

"I didn't know her," the woman answered, adding, "I'm a cyclist. That could have been me."

In the face of death, the cycling community needs to "connect and grieve to move forward," says Becca Wolfson, interim director of the Boston Cyclists' Union. Attaching slightly more religious language, Everett says ghost bike ceremonies are "public lament."

As cyclist and activist Jonathan Fertig prepared and painted Anita Kurmann's ghost bike, he says he was moved to tears by the idea of a fellow cyclist doing the same for him were he to die while riding. Fertig, who describes his religious status as "somewhere between agnostic and atheist," says he appreciates the way Everett's words are always "very inclusive" and "not off-putting." Wolfson, herself a non-practicing Jew, says Everett always brings a thread of advocacy and social justice into the events she leads, like her words in front of the Massachusetts State House in November for the Global Day of Remembrance, which commemorates lives lost in traffic accidents.

"She can create that compelling story through her sermons and words, both healing

and calling for action," Wolfson says.

Bicycling has become central to the person Everett is as a Christian, and she has even written a book about urban spirituality and cycling, forthcoming from Eerdmans. She models her ministry after that of Jesus, who "traveled to the people, chatted along the side of the road, interacted with surprising people who crossed his path—people he would never have met if he had stayed in clearly defined religious spaces."

But it was in the streets, perched atop her bicycle with a "Clergy" sign affixed to her rear rack, where Everett says she became a Bostonian and learned to love and advocate for her city.

"I think a lot about Jeremiah 29:7: 'But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare,'" she says. "My welfare is intimately connected to the welfare of the city. And I can't pray to the Lord on the city's behalf unless I know the city intimately and tenderly.

"Riding my bicycle through the city has helped me love this place and deepen my prayers for this particular city." ■

Steve Holt (@thebostonwriter) covers a number of topics for local and national publications. His story about healthy fast-food burgers in Boston was included in the Best Food Writing 2011 anthology. Read more at thebostonwriter.com

Sharing the Road

IN 2012, the U.S. Census reported that 786,000 Americans use a bike to get to work—up almost 300,000 from 2000. So, who's riding all these bikes? While white people (primarily men) make 77 percent of bike trips, biking rates are rising fastest among Latinos, African Americans, and Asian Americans.

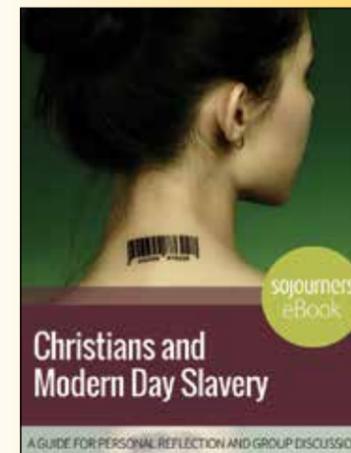
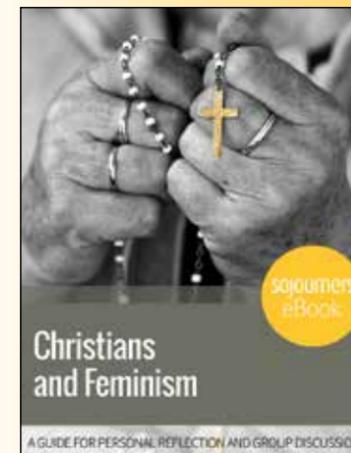
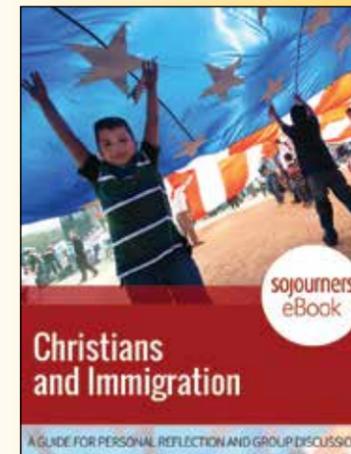
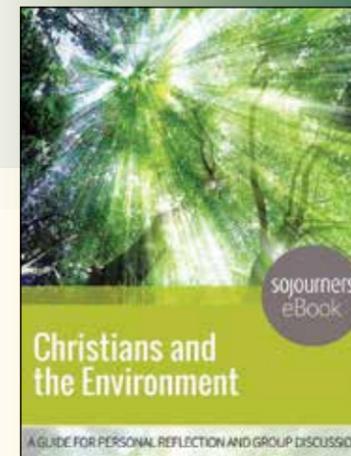
NATIONALITY: Immigrants are twice as likely to travel by bicycle than native-born Americans.

RACE: 23 percent of bike trips are by African Americans, Latinos, and Asian Americans—up 7 percent between 2001 and 2009.

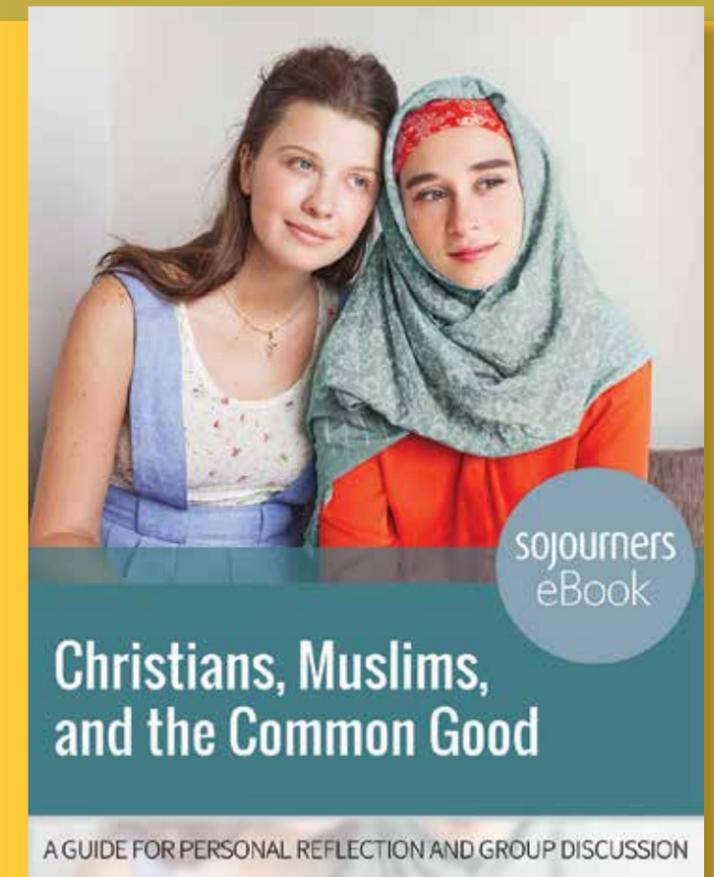
EDUCATION: People who did *not* graduate high school are the second-highest population of bikers, following people with graduate and professional degrees.

AGE: 27.7 percent of Latino children (age 5 to 18) bike or walk to school—the highest rate among racial or ethnic groups.

INCOME: People in households with lower incomes are more likely to bike to work (as opposed to biking for recreation or exercise) than people in households with greater incomes—40 percent of adult bike riders earn \$20,000 or less, according to the advocacy group PeopleForBikes. —Compiled by **Caroline Barnett**



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