

“Driven Flock”

These church members race on Saturday and pray on Sunday

BY HEATHER HAHN ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

More than 20 people surrounded Becky Bolder’s red, souped-up Buick Regal, clasped the sides of the car and bowed their heads.

“We want to lift up Becky to You,” Bolder’s pastor, Tommy Thomason, told God. “We want to pray for Your protection upon Becky, anytime she’s in this race car or anytime she’s at a racetrack. Along with protection for Becky, we pray for protection for anyone who’s working on her car.”

Members of Grace Connection Church gave similar blessings to 17 more race cars, eight motorcycles and their drivers Sunday afternoon in the church parking lot. For dozens of racing enthusiasts like Bolder, the Little Rock congregation’s sixth annual “Racecar Dedication Day” marked a promising start to the 2009 racing season.

“It makes me feel like God is in the passenger seat,” Bolder said, “like God is helping me drive.”

Each weekend from now through November, the roar of accelerating engines will lure hundreds of people to speedways and dirt tracks across the state. Grace Connection Church has made it its mission to minister to the drivers and fans — and to provide an angelic influence on the state’s speed demons.

At many of the state’s races will be church members, wearing Day-Glo green T-shirts with the phrase “Crosseyed Race Team” emblazoned on the back. Before “The Star-Spangled Banner” plays and the racing starts, they’ll invite anyone who wants to come to a prayer circle down in the pits, where they will ask God to keep all those at the track safe.

“We don’t use it as a recruiting tool, per se, to get people to come to the church,” Thomason said. “It’s just a service we can do. Most people, even if they don’t attend church regularly, they want you to pray for them.”

Still, most members at Sunday’s event said they joined the 7-year-old church precisely because of its racing ministry — Bolder included.

Like roughly half of the church’s 120 or so members, she finds the sound of “vroom” on Saturday night as comforting as a hearty “amen” on Sunday morning.

She had attended various churches before, she said, but never fit in. “I felt like lint in a bellybutton,” she said. “Now, when I come to church, I don’t just feel like I’m just coming in to hear a sermon.”

Most weekends, she races a super stock-class Buick at I-30 Speedway in Benton. Since she joined the church three years ago, she has transformed her car into a zooming, four-wheeled testimony to her Christian faith. Painted on her hood are Bible verses including Philippians 4:13 — “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.”

Mike Withers, the church’s youth director, says the racing ministry changed his life.

At the encouragement of a friend, Withers took his car to the church’s dedication day in 2005. He parked across the street and was lingering just outside the festivities when Thomason walked over and asked if Withers wanted a hamburger.

“When I stepped forth onto the property, it was like a chill came over me,” Withers said.

He said he had been struggling with alcoholism, but that day — March 5, 2005 — became his anniversary of sobriety. The experience, he said, probably saved his marriage.

“Since that day, I’ve gone through no withdrawal, no nothing,” Withers said, raising his cup of Coca-Cola. “We figured it had to be divine intervention. It was like God saying, ‘You are done.’”

Withers, who owns a paint and body shop, has been committed to the church ever since. He even repaired and repainted a badly banged-up van that he and a friend donated to the church. His finishing touch was covering the hood with pink and purple flames.

With pierced ears and giant tattoos on both arms, Withers doesn’t look like the typical church youth-group leader.

The congregation’s loose dress code is part of its appeal, members say. Above the church’s front door is a sign that reads “Come As You Are.”

That even applies to people who just rolled out of bed, Thomason said. Racing is a demanding hobby. Events on Saturday night can keep people out to 2:30 or 3 in the morning.

“But our members still show up on Sunday morning,” Thomason said. “It’s not even a question. They know when they go to bed that they will get up in a few hours to go to church.”

Paul “Shack” Shackelford doesn’t attend the church, but he comes to the congregation’s Race Day every year.

“Grace Connection does a great job every year,” said Shackelford, who runs an innercity ministry near Central High School in Little Rock. “They treat the guys well.”

Thomason says his church tries to keep up each season with the drivers who’ve participated in that year’s Race Day. So far, he said, no one has suffered any significant injuries on the track.

“We had a man’s whose car split into two pieces, and he walked away from it,” the pastor said. “He said, ‘Oh, man, that’s that prayer.’”



Arkansas Democrat-Gazette/STEPHEN B. THORNTON Becky Bolder’s super stock race car shows God as a member of her pit crew.



Arkansas Democrat-Gazette/STEPHEN B. THORNTON Members of Grace Connection Church pray over Beck Bolder's race car during Racecar Dedication Day at the church Sunday afternoon off Interstate 30 in southwest Little Rock. The event officially kicks off the church's racing season.



Arkansas Democrat-Gazette/STEPHEN B. THORNTON

Mike Withers, youth director at Grace Connection Church, talks about techniques for taking a corner in a race car. He credits the church's racing ministry with saving his marriage.