

Northwest Roanoke church reaches out with Super Bowl

New Century Church even brought in nine Virginia Tech players to spice up the gathering.

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Jorge Valencia | The Roanoke Times

Virginia Tech football players join in a halftime prayer at New Century Community Church on Sunday. The church had organized a meeting around the Super Bowl to get members talking.

At New Century Community Church in Northwest Roanoke, members and their friends shared faith and football Sunday night.

They watched the Super Bowl on three large projection screens, ate 3,500 buffalo wings and hung out with nine players from the Virginia Tech football team.

During halftime, junior Virginia Tech tailback Kenny Lewis got on a stage and introduced his teammates -- including sophomore quarterback Tyrod Taylor and junior free safety Kam Chancellor -- to roaring cheers.

Then Lewis shared a story: Growing up, his parents took him to church every Sunday. Later, as a high school athlete in Danville, he prayed to God before every game.

"And it paid off so much," he said. "I truly believe that every opportunity I've had has been because God has opened doors for me."

Sports showdowns such as the Super Bowl, the Olympics, or the X Games capture the attention of millions.

The party at New Century Church on Sunday was a mingling of two groups -- churches and faith-driven athletes -- who use those events to reach people.

The pastors at the church didn't advertise their annual game day party, but they did tell members to invite friends.

Thomas Brown, the church's worship leader, would in previous years give some halftime testimony about his faith experiences as an aspiring professional skier in Colorado.

"We like to invite our friends to have some food with good company," Brown said. "We don't want to shove anything down their throat or make them think, 'Oh, I wish I didn't come here.' We just take 10 minutes and share a message with them."

The church's youth pastor, Jared Walters, said the party serves the purpose of outreach along with building relationships within the church.

New Century is a large congregation, having a weekly attendance of about 500 people. With that many people, it's possible not everyone's on a first-name basis. Football can be a good conversation-starter.

"The one really cool thing about sports is that it's one of those things that people are so passionate about, and two people who don't really know each other can start talking very easily," Walters said.

Lewis and his teammates were brought in by Johnny Shelton, the football team's chaplain and the regional director of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes.

Ministries that seek to reach people through sports do things such as pass out faith testimony cards before major games, and get athletes with star power to go to faith-related events or visit churches such as New Century.

"People are going to listen to them because they're football players," said Shelton, himself a former Atlanta Falcons and San Francisco 49ers player. "The gospel is being shared through athletics. It gets no better than that."

On Sunday night, about 400 people met at New Century. Many of them were like John Tirica, a Hidden Valley High School senior who was invited to the party.

Tirica rode a mechanical bull the church rented and ate buffalo wings with friends.

"That's my favorite team. I'm a die-hard VT fan," he said, patting his chest with pride. "I was going crazy when my friends told me the Tech dudes were going to be here."