

Church scores with men on football Sunday

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EAST ORANGE, N.J. (RNS)—Pastor Dwight Gill figures if there is one thing that will bring more men to church, it's football.

The men's choir and Pastor Dwight D. Gill lead the New Hope Baptist Church in East Orange, N.J., in its 4th annual NFL Sunday Football Service, designed to draw more men to church. (RNS PHOTOS/Jennifer Brown/The Star-Ledger)

So, at New Hope Baptist Church, NFL doesn't stand for National Football League, but rather for New Found Life—as in the church's annual NFL service and celebration.

The most recent NFL service drew nearly 2,000 people, including a bevy of newcomers in for a worship service that was anything but ordinary.

"There's more to it than just a church service," said Michael Carrington, 48, of Newark.

Carrington said he is not a regular churchgoer but was so impressed with what he saw and the spirit of the congregation, now he wants to become a member.

He stood in awe, looking at scores of men wearing their favorite football jerseys over their slacks and suits.

In the church lobby and sanctuary, football banners and posters were

plastered on the walls and hung from the rafters.

Between songs of praise, the worshippers broke out in a stadium wave, briefly standing and throwing their arms in the air.

A tailgate party, including sandwiches, hot dogs and chips, followed the music-filled service.



The New Hope cheerleaders rally at the New Hope Baptist Church in East Orange, N.J., during the church's 4th annual NFL Sunday Football Service, designed to attract more men.

"A lot of people can get bored during a service, but this brings a sense of excitement, and at the same time, a sense of hope," said Carrington, who wore a No. 88 Lynn Swann Pittsburgh Steelers jersey.

Gill's football service could be called the Hail Mary pass of religion: Get men into the church, then give them God's message.

Gill started the event four years ago and used the sports analogy because, quite simply, "Men like football."

Women outnumber men at the church by a 3-to-1 ratio, and women's involvement in church tends to override men's participation nationwide—a problem particularly acute in many African-American congregations.

The pastor believes he has found a fun remedy to what he calls a “longtime challenge with no easy solution.” He wants to dispel any perception among men that church is just for women.

To help accomplish that, Gill also invited former Giants player Lee Rouson—now an associate pastor of a church in Harlem—to preach about “God’s promise for salvation” during the two-hour service.

Rouson praised the football worship concept.

“Men gravitate to sports. It’s physical, emotional and mental, and those analogies are all part of the spirit life as well,” Rouson said.

“Men compete, they understand competition. But the competition here is to be a real man.”

Church member Samantha Roberts, 32, said many people have a misperception of church life, as women tend to be more involved.

“Women are the ones who hold the family together,” Roberts said.

“They know with God in their lives, they make a positive place for men and women.”

Gill has been keeping score. He has been able to draw about 10 new men to the church each year following the event, he noted.

“If we can attract one man to come to church,” he said, “heaven will be happy.”