

# Irving church connects football team to love of Christ

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IRVING—To reach out and meet needs in their community, members of Oak View Baptist Church in Irving adopted the varsity football team from Nimitz High School.

When church member Becky Stipes heard about another church in town supporting a high school football team, she realized the great opportunity.

✖ Members of the varsity football team from Nimitz High School listen intently and take notes during a Sunday morning Bible study at Oak View Baptist Church in Irving. (PHOTO / Leann Callaway) “I remember my daughter calling me from a football game, and she was so sad because there was a player who broke his leg, and his family wasn’t at the game,” Stipes said.

“The last couple of years, there hadn’t been many people attending the games. The stands were bare, and it was heartbreaking to see that no one was there to support the team. That really got me thinking about reaching out and helping in some way—to let the players know that people cared about them and they weren’t alone.

“I work with several people from Christ Church and knew that they had adopted the football team from Irving High School. The following week at church, I shared what was on my heart with our youth minister. Maybe 20 or 30 minutes later, the idea was shared with our pastor, Jim Gerlach, who thought it would be a great outreach.”

Stipes visited the school to talk with the football coach, who “was immediately on board,” she said.

“The next week, we started spreading the word and looking for people to help with this project,” she recalled. “Immediately, people wanted to pitch in and started volunteering to help.”

✘ This season, 11 football players from Nimitz High School in Irving made professions of faith after Oak View’s student minister, Alex Dennis, gave an invitation to follow Christ. (PHOTO / Leann Callaway) At the beginning of the football season, church members signed up to encourage a player and put together weekly care packages consisting of a sports drink and snacks such as baked goods, chips or protein bars. In addition, they included a Bible verse and note of encouragement with each care package.

The church held a kickoff event after a football practice, where participants in the sports outreach ministry had the opportunity to meet their football player.

“Whenever the players get their bags, they immediately liven up and dive into whatever is in there,” said Alex Dennis, student minister at Oak View. “It means a lot to the coaches to know that people are coming alongside them and supporting the team, ready to do whatever it takes to help them on and off the field.”

Throughout the season, church members continued to show their support by attending home games and cheering on the team. Before the team’s first district home game, the church hosted a tailgate party where they grilled hot dogs and met people from the community.

To deepen the connection with the football team on and off the field, Dennis serves as the team chaplain. This role allows him to lead weekly devotions and the pregame prayer and to help meet the spiritual needs of the team.

The devotional time was not mandatory, but the whole varsity squad started showing up each week, Dennis noted.

✘ When members of Oak View Baptist Church in Irving adopted the varsity football team from Nimitz High School, it opened up a wide opportunity for ministry in their community. People have noticed the positive impact the church's sports outreach began having on members of the football team, Stipes noted.

Every week, the coaches thanked church members for the goodie bags and asked if they had been prayed over, she said.

"We've seen boys going to church that haven't gone before," Stipes said. "We recently had a girl come up to the welcome desk at church who said: 'Some of my friends have visited here and have been talking about how neat it is in the youth. They also told me about the church helping the football team. It's been a year since I've been to a church, so I would really like to start back.'

"If someone doesn't have a mom or dad attending church with them and they want to attend church, that says a lot. Through this outreach, my hope is that these students will know that someone cares about them and maybe they can find a church family to connect with."

As a result of the sports outreach, many of the football players were connected to the life-changing love of Christ.

"Mainly, what we have done is that we have made a connection with those boys and let them know that people care about them and want to support them," said Lynda Randle, who serves weekly in the student ministry.

"My player has come to church several times. Every time I see my player at an event, he comes up and gives me a hug. He never fails to do that and lets me know how much he appreciates the goodie bags and cards.

“That’s the fun part—seeing these football players come to church and letting them know that we really do care about them.”

At the end of the season, the church hosted a barbecue lunch for the players and their families. Eleven football players made professions of faith in Christ that day.

“Ultimately, this outreach is about meeting needs and sharing the life-changing love of Christ,” Dennis said. “Our prayer is that these football players will come into a relationship with Jesus, loving and serving him.”