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Faith a hit in softball league

Christian program in Morris unites sport, spirituality

By Michael Daigle, Daily Record

Bruce Heverly stands straight in the batter's box at the Borough School in Morris Plains, the bat pointing to the sky. On his left hand is a black batting glove. He does not move as he awaits the arcing softball tossed by the pitcher of the Grace Bible Chapel team.

The swing is short, powerful and moves slightly downward so the resulting hit is a sharp line drive single to left.

There is a directness about Heverly as he plays, a precision as he fields a ground ball, takes two steps, sets his feet, squares his shoulders and fires the ball on a perfect line to the first baseman. There also is a directness about Heverly as he talks about why he plays. "It's not just about winning for our team, but for the God we believe in," said the Washington Township resident. His game jersey carries the legend: "Be the one to spread the Word."



Jeff Hodge of Morris Plains Presbyterian Church leaps for a throw at first base as Rob Olsen of Trinity Lutheran Church runs down the line during a North Jersey Christian Softball League game at the Borough School in Morris Plains



Rob Olsen of Trinity Lutheran Church in Dover takes a swing at a softball during a game against Morris Plains Presbyterian Church at the Borough School in Morris Plains on Thursday. Dawn Benko / Daily Record

Heverly plays for the Valley View Chapel team in the North Jersey Christian Softball League. The league has 36 member churches from Stanhope to Oak Ridge, Parsippany to Washington Valley, with nearly 700 players. The league also includes teams from Morristown's Market Street Mission and The Seeing Eye.

The ground rules in the league are a little different: Each game begins with a prayer.

For the member churches, the league is a low-key way to develop closeness in their respective congregations, an invitation to new members to be involved in the church, and acts as a way to reach out to potential new congregants.

"It's a tool for outreach," said Gary Lieberman of Mine Hill, the softball league's commissioner, who attends Dover's Trinity Lutheran Church. "But it's also fun. We pray together, play softball and then go out and have something to eat." But the underlying

reason for the league is never far from the hearts of the players.

"It's a very positive time," says Bo Iwashko of Washington Township, who on Wednesday was pitching for the Valley View team. "Maybe we reach out to someone who needs direction, fellowship and companionship."

The league was formed in 1980 with members of six Morris County churches. For most of its existence, it was a competitive league that now has 24 teams, says Mike Larson of the Stanhope Presbyterian Church.

A few years ago, however, some players wanted to participate, but at a slower speed. As a result, a 12-team fellowship league was created with Larson as its commissioner, although he only

plays in the competitive league. He began playing in 1995.

"It's a noncompetitive environment," he said of the fellowship league. It also is an effective way to draw church members to the softball league and new members to the churches. He said sometimes church members see a game and don't feel that they want to play in the competitive league, where the quality of play is equal to any industrial softball group.

The competitive league plays a 12-game season and concludes the year with playoffs and a world series. The fellowship league has a 12-game season, but no playoff. There is a league Web site where schedules are kept, along with forms for protests and other business.

The Rev. Craig Lutz of Oak Ridge's Holy Faith Lutheran Church plays shortstop for his team. "But the writing is on the wall," says Lutz, 44, laughing. "It's hard to hang 'em up, but it's also hard to get up in the morning."

He said the team promotes stronger fellowship within the church. The team also becomes more than a group of players, but also a group that can react to other needs that develop, Lutz explained.

Teams learned recently that a player on one team was seriously ill, Lieberman said, and the teams got together and offered their help.

In the past two years, Lieberman said, the league donated \$900 to Morris Habitat for Humanity. Many of the churches use the teams as a way of performing community service, such as raking leaves for senior citizens, or shoveling snow.

Phil Dosier, director of the Market Street Mission, said the league gives his residents an

opportunity to continue the socialization and outreach that are a part of the mission's program. That team has 15 members, and the tryouts are very competitive, Dosier said. "It's inclusive. The staff connects with residents," Dosier said. "It's about a team effort and going out to meet other people." The goals of the softball mesh with the goals of the mission, he added.

Lieberman, a vice president for a New York investment bank, says people from all walks of life have played in the league. He found out recently that the Mine Hill electrical inspector used to pitch in the league. There are police officers, IRS agents, special law enforcement agents for the federal government, corrections officers and others.

Knute Seebohm, manager and on Wednesdays right fielder for the Grace Bible Chapel team from Chester, is the director of the Morris County Library. Seebohm said he has been playing since the beginning of the league. "It keeps me young," he said. Churches are not simply buildings that people attend on Sundays, Seebohm said, but organizations that offer fellowship and an atmosphere of togetherness. The softball league allows the church to offer that in a nonthreatening way. "This is indeed outreach," Seebohm said. Players bring their families to games and the church society extends from the sanctuary to the sidelines.

Heverly said he came to New Jersey in 1998 and was looking for a way to continue the church softball experience he had enjoyed in Colorado. There, his church team played in an industrial league and was the subject of jibes from other players. "They called us the 'church boys,'" he said. But after his team won the title, players from other teams asked if they could play with the church boys, he recalled. What makes the church league special, Heverly says, is players such as Bob Izatt.



Jon Encarnacion of Trinity Lutheran Church sets up to throw the ball after forcing a runner out at second base.

To learn more

For more information on the North Jersey Christian Softball League, visit www.njcsl.org

Izatt bends from the waist as he limps along, the posture the result of a hip replacement. His hands are gnarled from years of farm work. "I can't run," Izatt says. "If I get a hit, someone runs for me." He plays catcher. But Heverly said there is a spirit in Izatt's presence on the field that raises the simple game to another level. "He can't run, but he plays. It makes me feel wonderful to see him playing," Heverly said.