Opinion
Guest Voices



Alphonso Hodge (23) of the Gladiators breaks up a pass to Orlando player Kevin Nickerson (18) during a game at the Arena Football Playoffs at Quicken Loans Arena June 30, 2008 in Cleveland. Nickerson has served as Los Angeles Rams chaplain since 2016. (AP/The Plain Dealer/Roadell Hickman)



by Anne Gardner

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reverendannegardner@gmail.com
Follow on Twitter at @annegardner2020?lang=en

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The gleaming canopy of SoFi Stadium cuts a jaunty jib in Inglewood's skyline these days. Opened in September of 2020, it's part stadium, part entertainment complex and part modern-day coliseum for the gridiron warriors of Los Angeles.

In just a few weeks SoFi will also play host to Super Bowl LVI. The stadium provides the perfect backdrop for this glamourous showcase, with its shiny curves, wind-swept promenades and boxes filled with entertainment's premiere glitterati.

Sadly, all this lipstick does little to mask the problems that continue to plague the National Football League. For all its eye-popping ratings and sky-high salaries, professional football has endured more than its fair share of black eyes. Concerns regarding the lingering effects of repeated head trauma, reports of players accused of domestic violence and incidents involving drug and alcohol abuse are all too prevalent. Some wonder how the stress of playing in the NFL affects the mental health of its fearless combatants. In a league known for its toughness, seeking out support seems countercultural at best, unfathomable at worst. So, who catches our local stars when the going gets tough?

Kevin Nickerson, that's who.

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Nickerson has served as the team chaplain for the Los Angeles Rams since 2016. He is a true insider, having played seven years of professional football between stints in the CFL and AFL. But the chance to bring his ministerial gifts to the sidelines is an even more unlikely tale, an opportunity Nickerson actually dreamed into existence.

After falling asleep on the couch one evening, he awoke in the middle of the night to a television announcer reporting the Rams were moving to Los Angeles. Before rolling over, Nickerson recalled thinking it would be great to serve as the team's chaplain. A few months later, the vice president of the western region of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes phoned. Out of the blue, he asked Nickerson if he would be interested in assisting with the Rams' chaplaincy program. He readily agreed to the supporting role, stunned at his good fortune.

But then his luck took another turn. When the team's initial choice to lead the chaplaincy fell through, Nickerson offered to help interview a new batch of candidates. Nearing the end of the search, La'Roi Glover, then director of player engagement, pulled him out of a meeting and offered Nickerson the job. His dream had come true.

With the blessings of current head coach Sean McVay, Nickerson has been invited into the inner sanctum of the Rams facility, attending team meetings and practices, along with a post on the sidelines during game days. "I'm just a kid from Kansas City who loves the Lord and loves ball," said Nickerson when we spoke earlier this month. "My 'system' is just being available [to the players]."

Being "available," as Nickerson defines it, includes preparing a weekly chapel service, leading a Bible study for both coaches and players, organizing a couples' group alongside his wife and meeting individually with those who seek his support. "Coach McVay gave me a voice and a platform to impact the lives of the players and coaches," Nickerson stated. "I'm just here to find someone to help."

Nickerson is one of a fleet of ministers who currently serve as chaplains in the National Football League. While the duties and access provided to each chaplain

vary from organization to organization, the value of having a pastoral presence is something on which every team agrees.

Chaplains offer players, coaches and staff a safe harbor within which to share their fears, challenges and disappointments. For Nickerson, these interactions are vital to the work of caring for those under his charge. "I don't look at them [Rams] as members of my church. I look at them as members of my family."

Playing professional football is a fleeting and challenging task, particularly for those on big market teams like the Rams. Nickerson's self-effacing and quiet demeanor is the perfect foil to this pressure-filled crucible. "The work is not done in chapel," Nickerson mused. "The work is done outside of chapel. The work is done when you walk through the locker room, when you hug them up, when you sit outside on the golf cart and one of the players sits down next to you for a conversation about his family. That's when it happens."

No matter the outcome on any given Sunday, Nickerson stands at the ready. The star catcher whose presence might be just what the NFL needs.