

## Prayers for the players

Rev John Boyers

Rev John Boyers, chaplain to Manchester United FC and Director of inter-denominational sports chaplaincy body, SCORE, tells *Thinking Faith* about how he became involved in football chaplaincy. What does the role of chaplain to one of the world's biggest football clubs involve, and how does it embody a model of Christian service?

I am a Baptist minister with the Baptist Union of Great Britain (BUGB) who has, since 1991, been working full time, not in a local church but with a UK Registered Charity to develop chaplaincy work in sport. Here I share my story, of how I became involved in sports chaplaincy and of what it means to me and to those I work with.

### Personal background

I was brought up in a Protestant home in Grimsby, Lincolnshire, UK, where in Methodist Sunday School and Church I learned much about the life and teaching of Jesus Christ. But most of that was 'head knowledge', which was a good foundation for what I would call my Christian conversion, when a student in Nottingham. There, the friendship and witness of some Christian fellow students led me to think more deeply about my faith. I had thought that there was probably God 'up there' – I couldn't be sure but from an early age I decided to believe it. Later, I came to find that God who *is* 'up there' also wants to be *with us*. The grace and love of God the Father for us individually, through Jesus Christ our Redeemer, made real by His Spirit, has the power to change our lives and enliven our spirits with deep effect. The truth and reality of the Christian message brought my personal faith to life – I moved from believing there was a God 'up there' to seeking to follow Jesus Christ



Rev John Boyers leading part of the Manchester United Munich Memorial Service at Old Trafford, Manchester, February 2008.

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who, by His Spirit, now was within me. That experience changed my perspectives on life and my hopes and plans for my future. The new focus was to know God better and to serve Him faithfully, as He wished.

After those early student years, I taught in two secondary schools, but my wife and I – Anne & I married in 1972 – were always aware of a call 'to be used in ministry' which I'd sensed since my early months as a believer. In 1975/76 the call of God to train for ministry came – sure, clear and unmistakable – so we both left

teaching in Grimsby and I attended a theological college in North West London. Anne took a local teaching job to pay the bills, and I studied for my theology degree and my candidacy for BUGB ministry. The day I graduated I was ordained as a probationer Baptist minister, being fully accredited some years later. I began work in a Baptist Church in Watford – first as a student minister, later as assistant minister and then as Senior Minister – before leaving local church work to set up [SCORE](#), more about which will follow.

### Sports chaplaincy beginnings

It was over 30 years ago that I felt the call of God to offer my time as a chaplain to the local football club in

Watford. How did that come? God speaks in many ways to us, primarily I believe through Jesus Christ and through the scriptures, but also in other ways. He is not limited by methods of communication – Moses and bushes come to mind, but that’s not normative!

Through Christian people, through a club manager’s comments, through the scriptures as I prayed and meditated on them, I felt God was indicating an involvement with Watford FC as chaplain. That came about, and I served the club as a pastoral and spiritual support for about 15 years, giving a day and a half to the staff at the club, all as part of the commitment of my local church to our community. But this service was not with a Baptist tag; I felt I represented ‘The Church’ as a whole and on their behalf tried to be pastor to a ‘football club congregation’. I sought to help people of all faith backgrounds, and indeed those with no faith background. Over many years, the club appreciated the involvement. They knew that some people found my presence very helpful, and Watford FC were keen to endorse it in various ways.

Manchester United FC invited me to do a similar job for them full time in 1987, but the growth in the Watford church and the impending loss of my assistant minister to another church made such a move impossible at that time. Besides, I did wonder if a full time chaplain was the best model for Manchester United to establish. They are an influential and bigger club, and I felt the ‘Watford model’ of chaplaincy – a part-time chaplain, giving his time for free – would be more likely to be taken up successfully by other clubs. By 1991 I was working to create an interdenominational body to develop sports chaplaincy provision – SCORE. Baptist leaders had asked me if I’d be willing to leave local church work to pioneer chaplaincy development in sport ecumenically. The following year, Manchester United again asked me to become involved with them, this time on a part time basis. After much prayer, we moved the family to Manchester and in September 1992 I took on the chaplaincy role at Old Trafford, where now I give two full days per week to providing spiritual and pastoral support, while still working for SCORE.

## Current work

### SCORE

SCORE now seeks to support over 180 sports chaplains in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, and sometimes beyond. We have a small staff of specialist chaplains and volunteer coordinators, and are involved in Association Football from Premiership to non-league levels, in horse-racing, in Rugby Union and Rugby League, in County Cricket, some motorsports, athletics, and have an extensive portfolio in major sports event chaplaincy.

We have a code of practice, put on training meetings and conferences, and have just established a partnership with the University of Gloucestershire which will see a unique course in sports chaplaincy being taught at certificate, diploma and degree level. We are seeking to build a quality professional chaplaincy presence in UK sport and sense the blessing of God upon our work. The SCORE website – [www.scorechaplaincy.org.uk](http://www.scorechaplaincy.org.uk) – will expand much of this information for readers.

### MUFC Chaplaincy

What I do with MUFC is very similar to the work done by other sports chaplains throughout the UK. I give an agreed amount of time to the club – in my case 2 days per week – where my role is very varied.

- Part of my work is building relationships with staff and players across the club, so that if they need my help in any way, I’m not just a name on a piece of paper, but someone they know.
- I get called on to do ‘religious’ work: a funeral service, a wedding, a special thanksgiving or a remembrance service, etc., particularly by people who don’t have any local church link.
- I am often contacted informally by people who want some confidential comment or a neutral perspective on a personal issue that is troubling them.
- I do some educational work with younger academy players. SCORE has some ‘Life-skills’ teaching material which looks at issues such as

friendships, bereavement, bullying, sexual ethics, decision making, prejudice, privilege and responsibility etc. These lessons help to build positive relationships between players and chaplains.

- I have a role on match day at the stadium, as part of the emergency support structures present.
- I also share my time with under-16, under-18 and reserve teams: chaplains need to be interested in *all* teams, not just first teams!
- I ensure I'm known to staff at the stadium and the offices there, too: chaplains don't just work with players!
- I represent the club as chaplain in local schools and community events.
- I pray for people, for their needs or challenges, for the responsibilities they carry – but not for results!
- I'm available to all, 24/7, in the event of an emergency.
- And I write articles for websites!

### *A theology of chaplaincy*

As with all Christian ministry, sports chaplaincy aims to emulate the model of service which we have been given in the life of Jesus. His words and actions as recounted to us in the texts of the New Testament provide a rich foundation for the work that SCORE aims to support:

**Incarnation:** St John's Gospel (1:1 -18) tells of that which is foundational to all Christian doctrine – that Jesus Christ, The Word, the second person of the trinity, co-eternal with God the Father and the Holy Spirit, came to provide a pathway of redemption for sinful humanity. God came to earth. Jesus dwelt among the needy, the sinful, getting His hands dirty – and nailed – for the sake of our salvation. Here is incarnational mission. We who follow Him should do the same: our message can not be just 'come to us'; our motivation, our compassion, must take us out into the wider world beyond church, out to confront pain, disappointment, uncertainty and crisis wherever we may be needed. Christians who follow Christ should invade the world – the world of sport *and* other worlds, of education, politics, finance, social care, business, culture, music, literature, medicine, etc., with their caring, supportive compassionate presence. Christians need to be salt and light to a sometimes tasteless and dark society. (Matthew 5: 13-16)

**Servanthood:** St Paul writes in Philippians 2:5-11 about Christ's servanthood. We see great relevance to sports chaplaincy here. It's not about mixing with the famous, getting tickets for games or special lounges on match day, but about serving. It's about serving all people – the part time cleaner as much as the international superstar. Chaplains are there not for what they get out of their involvement, but for what they contribute to the life of a club or games event. The clergyman who says he wants to be chaplain at Chelsea FC but not chaplain at Brentford FC has an attitude which fails to correspond with the attitude of Christ commended by St Paul. Chaplains are present to serve – with confidentiality, with integrity, with sensitivity and with consistency.

**Relationship:** Relationship is at the heart of Christian faith – the relationship between the Lord and His disciples, the relationships between the individual believers who make up the Church of Christ. (2 Corinthians 5:16-21, Ephesians 2:11-22) SCORE would stress the importance of relationships in chaplaincy: only if people know the chaplain, understand what the chaplain offers and actually trust the chaplain, can the chaplain's contributions be optimised.

**Gifts:** We know that clergy have very many different skills. Some are great organisers, some are gifted preachers, some are deep-thinking theologians, some are skilled teachers, some are productive evangelists, some are pioneer missionaries, some are sensitive pastors. St Paul's letters to the Romans, (12:3-8), Corinthians (1 Cor 12:4-30) and Ephesians (4:11-13) explain this. Of all the leadership gifts we believe the key gift is that of pastor. We need people who express sympathy and empathy with potential clients. Chaplains need to be gifted pastors.

**Sensitivity:** Chaplains need to be sensitive people. Listening skills are very valuable, as is spiritual discernment. We need to sense the direction of God's wind in our sails, so we are found in the right place at the right time (Acts 16:6-10). We need to sense when it is right to move on from one conversation to another, from one office or department to another location.

**Saying and Being:** Chaplains need to be what they say they are, to do what they say they will do. Sports people are often surrounded by people who want to use their link – to promote business, to gain tickets or

kudos, to have photographs or autographs, etc. They see through people who are interested in 'using' them. Chaplains have to be genuine and serving all the time. They don't ask for things; they aren't self-promoting! (Philippians 2:1-4, 14-16) Chaplains always need to be acting in ways that are congruent with what they say they offer the club and its staff.

### Challenges

Many of the challenges that face a sports chaplain resemble those that anyone who undertakes pastoral work will encounter at some point: how does a Christian clergy-person work in chaplaincy in a multi-faith world? What problems might face a clergy-person working as the sole chaplain in any setting where they are tasked with representing the wider church rather than just their denomination?

But there are also questions that present themselves quite uniquely to those who undertake this particular kind of ministry. A priest/pastor/minister/vicar has a defined role in their parish, but how does this extend to a wider community role – how could they make a case for involvement in a sports club, to congregation or to denomination? And what are the characteristics of the sports person or the sports world that the pot-

ential chaplain needs to understand? To what extent do we need to understand the environment which we seek to serve? How do we come to understand the environment of sports clubs or sports events?

It may also be difficult to find the right person to engage in this particular work. To many, the role of chaplain to a sports club might sound like a dream job, but does that mean that they are right for it? How does the sports-interested person who really hasn't the ministry gifting or personality traits to fit easily into sports chaplaincy, balance interest with suitability?

It is questions like these that SCORE seeks to help those we work with to answer, so that those who find themselves called to this unique ministry are able to be witnesses to the love of Christ for all those they encounter.

*Rev John K Boyers, B Ed, BA, is the Founder & International Director of SCORE, [www.scorechaplaincy.org.uk](http://www.scorechaplaincy.org.uk), a UK-based charity that works inter-denominationally to bring quality chaplaincy to the world of sport. He is chaplain to Manchester United Football Club.*