

# A problem of two halves



A problem shared, the old saying tells us, is a problem halved. Everybody appreciates having an ally to confide in during times of personal crisis.

At Barrow Association Football Club, the Reverend David Opie, pastor of Milom Baptist Church, is available to offer that potentially vital listening ear. David, nearing the end of his second full season as volunteer chaplain at Barrow, is on hand to help all connected

with the club, from its board of directors and team manager to its players and followers, when they need to offload their troubles.

“My main role is to bring pastoral and welfare support, and to see what I can develop from that by working with the club,” he explains. “A lot of what I do

*Barrow striker Jason Walker scores from the penalty spot at Holker Street*



*Right, Barrow AFC chaplain David Opie at the club's Holker Street ground. Above, the first-team squad*



is based round building relationships and trust. Anything I'm going to achieve at Barrow has got to come out of a relationship and out of trust, both with the club and the individuals. One sports chaplain told me he was advised to take it slowly and steadily, and build relationships, which is what I've aimed to do."

North London-born David, who relocated to Cumbria from Kent in 1999 when Millom Baptist Church's congregation invited him to become its minister, is one of more than 300 sports chaplains in the UK and Ireland. Cumbria Rugby League clubs Whitehaven and Workington Town also have chaplains.

An avid fan of Tottenham Hotspur since childhood, David received specialist training from Sports Chaplaincy UK, a ready source of continuing advice. Until 2011, he was sessional chaplain at Haverigg Prison and for the last four years has been part-time chaplain, working one day a week, at the Sellafield nuclear plant.

As we chat on match day near the hospitality area at Barrow's Holker Street ground, everyone who passes by acknowledges David. He attends most home games and, clearly, his presence is familiar. "I've built a good relationship with the stewards, I've got to know the ground staff, some of those in the press box, I'm beginning to get to know the players and I know the Supporters Trust people," he says. "It's being there, alongside them, to support them. While I want the club to do well, I'm not here primarily for when the club is doing well. I'm here for when things go wrong, which can happen in club football.

"Any chaplain wants the club they're involved with to do well but there's also a sense football is not the be all and end all. I'm interested in each player as a person rather than how they perform on the pitch. You can't be overly

emotionally attached; you've got to be objective because you've got a slightly different role to play and you've got to come to the club with a slightly different view. You need to keep a professional distance."

Few concerns brought to the attention of club chaplains are unique to football. Many of us, either directly or indirectly, might find ourselves having to cope with issues such as addiction, bereavement, debt, relationship breakdown and stress. "I could be dealing with any problem anyone else has because footballers – or any football club – are not immune to the knocks and disappointments of life," says David. "It could be anything. And anything that happens to a player, a member of staff or a supporter, I'm there for."

Barrow's players are semi-profes-

sional and the club has few full-time employees. But injuries can cause as much alarm to players at this level as they do in the Premier League. David's fellow sports chaplains at bigger clubs have to deal, for example, with the fallout from young players being told they aren't good enough to make the grade or backroom staff being made redundant owing to cutbacks.

Religion does not really impinge on David's role. "Sports Chaplaincy UK has a phrase, which I find very helpful," he explains. "It is 'you're there proactively pastorally and reactively evangelistically'. I'm not here to recruit people for the Christian Church or to convert people. But I do come from a Christian worldview and a Christian position. So, if the conversation moves on, to more spiritual things, I'll go with it. There are clubs where chaplains are



running Bible studies or courses exploring Christianity. But my prime function is pastoral and welfare.”

David is thought to be Barrow AFC’s first formally appointed chaplain. The job arose by accident. For a while, his chaplaincy office at Sellafield was next door to that of a keen Barrow fan and volunteer, John Hanley, who asked if David had ever considered being a football chaplain. David then approached Barrow, offering to be chaplain. About the same time, David was involved in a seminar on chaplaincy. Its other leader was Cambridge United FC’s chaplain. That coincidental dovetailing led to fruitful talks with Barrow over establishing a chaplaincy. The club was only too pleased to sign him up!

Chaplaincy has proved beneficial to David. “To some degree,” he explains, “that applies both to Sellafield and to

Barrow AFC. In a small church, particularly when you have been in one place for a long time, it is very easy to get in a cocoon. Getting out and engaging with people, who are not Christians, may not attend church regularly or are not churchgoers, enables me to make contact more fully with what is going on in the wider community. Also, I am engaging with people on a much more personal level. Chaplaincy is about being on the front line.”

David’s training and continuing development with Sports Chaplaincy UK includes sessions dealing with particular issues. “At one,” he recalls, “there was a football manager and a Rugby League coach. Some of the differences between the sports, and issues that appear in one sport but not the other, were drawn out. We had a session on the Twenty-Five Golden Points, which





*Barrow fans are among those at the club who can benefit from David's support*

have come from chaplains around the country. If I need extra advice about a problem, I know where to get it because somewhere within the Sports Chaplaincy UK organisation, or among one of the sports chaplains, someone has dealt with it before.

“Sports Chaplaincy UK makes sure the right people are in place and that there is a professional framework for the role. It is growing all the time. Real headway is being made in sports where there hasn't been much penetration. Now, the powers that be in those sports are saying to clubs ‘you should have a chaplain.’”

These are exciting times at Barrow AFC. During David's stint as chaplain, the club, with members' approval, was taken over by Paul Casson, a Barrow-born millionaire businessman based in Dallas, Texas. An ambitious, step-by-step plan has been mapped out to improve facilities at the Holker Street ground, reach out to the Furness population and regain the Football League status lost in 1972 when Barrow rather unjustly failed to gain re-election.

Barrow, enjoying a hugely successful 2014-15 season, are on course to secure promotion to Conference National, the

top tier of English non-league football. “There's an air of optimism and expectation in the club, and certainly a sense of movement,” says David.

The team manager is one of the most important figures at any football club. Coniston-born Darren Edmondson, a former player with Barrow, Carlisle United and Workington, occupies the Holker Street hot seat. “Darren sees a role for the chaplaincy and has been very supportive, which helps,” reveals David.

Paul Casson's spring 2014 takeover led to an influx of new directors, who invited David to stay in post.

“This season,” he says, “I've spent some of the time getting to know the newer directors and I'm beginning to understand what their priorities are for the club. At a later date, we've got to move on and decide, more fully, what my role is going to be. It's very much an evolving role. It's fun, it's challenging and, at times, it can be a bit nerve-racking. Any chaplain has to be flexible in the role and I would like to see it move on in the next year or so.” <sup>n</sup>

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