

Rev. Mike Pusey: A Eulogy

On the 10th of August 2024, this world lost one of the key people in laying the foundations of chaplaincy in sport as we know it today. I am honoured to have been asked to write a eulogy of Rev Mike Pusey looking back at his early influences on SCORE which became Sports Chaplaincy UK.

Mike was a Baptist minister at Farnborough Baptist Church, who at his own initiative, in the early 1970s, had offered his pastoral skills and experience to Aldershot Football Club. In the club's words on the AFC website, he served *"impeccably and was the most dignified and gracious individual ever to be associated with football in Aldershot"* in two valued and appreciated spells as chaplain. There, with the constant help of his wife Margie, whose passing in December 2022 ended their 64-year long marriage, his chaplaincy work was second to none. They served with care, compassion, wisdom and willingness, known to all at every level of the club for their kindness and availability.

I met Mike for the first time while student assistant pastor at St James Road Baptist Church in Watford – my practical assignment during the final two years of my theology degree at what is now London School of Theology, in Northwood, northwest London. Lead pastor Richard Harbour invited Mike to talk to a house group leaders' training meeting one Saturday morning in September 1977. I chatted with Mike over coffee. He'd obviously noted the floodlights of nearby Watford FC's Vicarage Road ground. "The church is very close to Watford FC isn't it" he observed. "Yes, but they don't really bother us. In fact, they don't seem to bother anybody!" was my reply. The conversation continued. "Have you ever thought of chaplaincy work at Vicarage Road?" "No never." "Well, I work at Aldershot Football club as chaplain." Stunned silence from me! "Yes, and it's good for me. It gets me out of the church community and enables me to understand the challenges of life faced by ordinary folk beyond church. I'm there to serve everyone. They seem to find it helpful."

Then Mike's parting comment: "So think about that, about chaplaincy at Watford FC."

I never acted immediately to that piece of advice, but I never forgot it. I remembered it a month or so later when, in a school half term, the church put on a week-long evening coffee bar with Christian guests to talk about their faith. On the Wednesday evening, the captain of Luton Town FC, Alan West, agreed to come and talk about his life in football and his faith in Jesus Christ. A couple of years earlier Alan and his wife had experienced a dramatic Christian conversion. In this story, that was the most important evening of five. Alan had also seen the floodlights. He also asked about Chaplaincy at WFC. "Have you ever thought about that?" "Only once. Just over a month ago we had a chap here to speak with our home group leaders. He was chaplain at Aldershot. He asked if I'd ever thought of chaplaincy at WFC and asked me to think about it." "Did you?" asked Alan. "No, not really" "Well you need to. Football is a needy world, and it needs trained people who can offer care and support, with integrity and wisdom, especially in the crisis times in life. I'll back up what he told you: you think about it."

Mike's comments were now re-enforced by a professional footballer. Was *The Lord* saying something? I remember praying the following day: "Lord, Mike has spoken about chaplaincy at Watford FC, now Alan has said the same thing. This seems strange to me, but if you are in this, Lord, forgive me, but I need to hear that again, please."

The following day, the Friday edition of the Watford Observer contained the usual full-page interview by Oliver Phillips with Graham Taylor, Watford's recently appointed new manager. That Friday, GT's theme was 'The Club and the Community.' A paragraph amid ideas to enthuse the Watford Community about 'The Hornets' hit me between the eyes. Taylor wrote: "It's not all about us being involved with our community. If there are people in our community who have training or expertise which could help us, I'd like to hear from you. Write to me, Graham Taylor, at the stadium." Wow! An answer to yesterday's prayer?

That led to discussions with senior pastor Richard, much praying for 2 or 3 weeks, a letter to Graham Taylor, an interview with him, his decision to go ahead with a trial 9 months of chaplaincy, chaplaincy being repeated for a second season, then confirmation from GT that chaplaincy was to be an ongoing, lasting involvement. Thus, after graduation and ordination as a Baptist minister, I accepted a continuing role at the church which included 25% of my time allotted to chaplaincy at WFC.

That led eventually to the Baptist Union of Great Britain asking if I'd be willing to pioneer the development of chaplaincy in sport interdenominationally. SCORE was set up around 1990 and, indeed, the Lord was in this, with a growing openness in sport to the presence of chaplains at elite professional clubs and institutions. I retired as National Director, and currently under the Sports Chaplaincy UK banner Warren Evans and Matt Baker and others are taking things forward.

I explain the above because this is a eulogy for Mike Pusey. If you want to trace the origins of what Warren, Matt and others are now doing, it goes back to 1977. It goes back to Graham Taylor taking a risk on chaplaincy; before that to Alan West, the second voice underlining the need for chaplains in sport; and indeed, before that, to Mike Pusey urging others to follow his lead in sports club chaplaincy. There have been some who served as sports chaplains earlier or concurrent to Mike, but he was both the instigator of interdenominational chaplaincy for others, and was an encourager for establishing SCORE as a unique agency to identify potential chaplains, to train them, induct them into clubs, and integrate them into an umbrella organisation with a common ethos, principles and code of practice. And Mike went on to regularly attend many of the earlier annual SCORE chaplains' training conferences and make presentations within the programme. Sadly, many of those newer to the work of SCUK may not know of his foundational role in Sports Chaplaincy UK.

Those who do recall that, surely thank God for the ministry and legacy of Rev Mike Pusey, his quiet pastoral work which he and his loving wife Margie delivered so consistently at AFC, and the

generous but appropriate tributes from the club which he served so wonderfully till retirement at the end of football season 2021-22 aged 87.

Those who knew him are saddened by the news of his recent death, but we remain thankful for his life, his faith in Jesus Christ, his years of service to make the world of football a better world, and of course, of the Christian hope of life beyond this life. May he rest in peace and be raised in glory.

Rev. John K Boyers, B.Ed., B.A, former National Director of SCORE

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