

As the Euro 2020 football championships finally begin, we caught up with Matt Baker, Sports Chaplaincy UK National Director for England & Pastoral Support Director in English Football, to talk about football chaplaincy and why he thinks that it could be England's year...

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Matt Baker at Charlton Athletic's stadium, The Valley

Matt Baker

Matt, you've been Pastoral Support Director in English Football since November 2009 – what does that role entail?

I work with the Premier League, English Football League and the Professional Footballers' Association to bring some accountability, training and oversight to football chaplaincy. I support chaplains by visiting them at their clubs, connecting them with other chaplains and providing ongoing training. This includes areas such as bereavement support, handling addictions, mental health awareness and dealing with the media. I also help clubs find new chaplains.

You're also Chaplain at Charlton Athletic FC - what does an average week look like?

I spend two to three hours at the training ground each week, speaking to players and staff as they come off the training pitch, in the canteen or in offices. Most is general conversation as they get to know and trust me so that when a specific pastoral issue arises they will be comfortable speaking to me about it. On home match days I am at the stadium a couple of hours before kick-off. Some players come to me for pre-match prayers and then I go round the stadium speaking with whoever wants to talk such as the press office, security, match day announcer, management & backroom staff and - before the pandemic - some of the fans.

How many clubs have a chaplain?

We currently have about 160 chaplains at various levels in the English game.

What makes a good football chaplain?

Not every church minister or leader will be suited to the role of chaplain. It is about finding the person with the right skill set to support people pastorally and spiritually in a largely secular and highly competitive environment.

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What are some of the ways chaplains support footballers?

Footballers experience the same issues as everybody else – family illness, bereavements, mental health issues and the stresses and strains of normal life. A chaplain offers support through this by non-judgemental confidential listening, giving advice if asked and by signposting to organisations more qualified to help. There are also some specific football issues such as dealing with injuries, the competitive atmosphere or concerns about coming to the end of a career. On a more positive note chaplains take dedications of children or baptisms, advise on marriage or take a marriage ceremony for players. There is also the offer of individual prayer or prayer meetings and bible studies. Players struggle to be involved in a local church because of their schedule so on-site spiritual support is vital for some.

Are you ever asked what a vicar is doing in a football club?

Not really, as chaplaincy has become fairly embedded within football. Some players haven't experienced it before, particularly if they have come to the club from abroad or only been at clubs without a chaplain. At my own club at one time we had three managers in a year and none of them had experienced chaplaincy before so I had to start all over again in explaining my role and function at the club.

Euro 2020 is finally underway! Most of the players at Euro 2020 have been playing for 12 months in front of empty grounds. How do you think they will adjust to having some fans back in the seats during the tournament?

I think there will be a mix of emotions and responses. Players thrive on a crowd and so will be pleased to have the vocal support of fans in the ground and supporters to celebrate in front of when they score or win. On the other hand, I spoke to one player who felt that having got used to playing in front of empty stadia for so long it might be a bit of a shock for some who have got accustomed to the relative quiet. Football crowds can be harsh, especially if their team isn't performing, so I hope that fans will remember the impact they can have on players - especially during Euro 2020 – and get behind the team.

You've got to know a lot of football players over the years – how do they deal with the pressure of big games?

Everybody is different and there is no single answer to this. Some players might struggle to sleep before a big game. Others are able to zone out and treat it like any other game. Routine seems to be very important, to stick to the same preparation for a big game as you would for a lesser game as far as possible. From a Christian perspective I've always considered it a tremendous privilege to pray with a player before a game. I'm always clear that whilst I want them to win I am not going to pray for a win and this is true of the major games as well as the more minor ones. However, in my experience I have seen it help a player involved in a big game to calm any unnecessary nerves and to know that his worth and identity is not based on his performance on the pitch that day but on the One in whom his faith is placed.

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England at 2018 World Cup

England have a young team this year. In your experience, is there more or less pressure on younger players in big games?

England do have some young players but let's not forget that they have still played in some big games already such as a Premier League title game or Champion's League final! You also find that some young players feel the pressure less, unlike a senior player who may see this as their last chance a young player can play with a freedom and confidence and with less fear of the outcome.

How do you think England will get on in the tournament, and who are you tipping to stand out on the pitch?

You're asking someone who is always ridiculously optimistic! I genuinely think England have a chance of winning the tournament. We did well in the last World Cup in Russia, although the draw was favourable, and I think we have a better squad and improved tactics this time. I know a lot of people are talking up Phil Foden and likewise I expect him to do well as he finished the season so strongly. Jack Grealish is also very exciting to watch and I think if he has a good tournament we'll go far. If it's not to be England that win then I like Italy. The pundits are favouring France or Belgium more but Italy have an excellent record under Mancini and they are always a difficult team to beat.

Who will be the tournament's top scorer?

The Golden Boot must be going to Harry Kane! He won it at the World Cup and is probably the best striker in the world at the moment. If not, perhaps Robert Lewandowski of Poland, it will probably be his last major tournament, he's a prolific goal scorer and could go out with a bang!

More information

- [Watch our National Sports Sunday service featuring sports chaplains including Matt Baker](#)
- [Sign up for our Sport and Wellbeing Mission online gathering on 6 July](#)

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