

CHAPLAINCY EVERYWHERE

The **Methodist** Church
Network for Chaplaincy

The **Methodist** Church 

Chaplaincy Stories and Articles, No 106

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Chaplaincy everywhere – including in the stable at Christmas!

Sue Holmes, Racecourse Chaplain

Where would I choose to stand to give away pairs of flip-flops to gratefully relieve tired feet? The answer is as Chaplain, at the gates of a racecourse as race-goers depart, when stiletto heels have lost their appeal after a day's horseracing.

Horseracing is the second largest spectator sport in Great Britain, and one of the longest established. Under the auspices of Churches Together in Southern Ryedale (CTSR), horseracing chaplaincy began in Malton, North Yorkshire, in 2014. An ecumenical group of volunteers worked together with the *Chaplaincy Everywhere* resources, feeling the call to broaden their mission in and around the town. Some subsequently branched out into the Cattle Auction Market each week, others into hospital work, whilst some regularly visit the early morning training gallops and local racing yards. The work was seed-funded by the Archbishop's Mission Fund in York Diocese, the Ryedale Methodist Circuit and the York & Hull District Advance Fund.

Thus, on each raceday, an enthusiastic bunch of CTSR volunteers join the York Racecourse chaplaincy team (an offshoot of One Voice York - the umbrella organisation of those churches in York who cooperate together in prayer and mission). York is one of the premier racetracks in Europe; it was voted the Flat Racecourse of the Year and also came out top in The Times newspaper survey of all Britain's racecourses. In 2015, at the invitation of the York Racecourse Safety Officer who had seen them working, the chaplains were invited to offer the same skill set at Beverley Racecourse. That chaplaincy is now the responsibility of Churches Together in Beverley, with regular support from the CTSR team.



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As word spread, in the autumn of 2015, Churches Together in Wetherby was approached to support the introduction of chaplaincy at Wetherby Racecourse, thus extending the work from summer flat into National Hunt (winter jumps) racing. The endorsement of the value of chaplaincy work at Wetherby was made evident when management asked for chaplains to contribute to Redcar Racecourse from April 2016.

Racecourse Chaplaincy: work, event and sport

The racecourse is a working environment for as many as 2,000 people when the event attracts 30,000 racegoers, for whom it is a sporting occasion. The visibility of the chaplains' role among the security teams, paramedics and management is vital and the size of the meeting influences how many chaplains are involved and when their work begins and ends. The availability of chaplains to reunite mothers with lost children, partners who have lost each other, to take a blind person to his taxi or to the Tote to collect his winnings, all these are invaluable with the horseracing crowd, which is a microcosm of society, encompassing people from all walks of life in attendance to enjoy a day at the races.



Racecourse Chaplaincy: perceptions

For those who are unfamiliar with the work of chaplains, and even some who are, the sight of a chaplain on a racecourse can be a source of intrigue. Experience demonstrates that a persistent presence over an extensive period builds a trust and confidentiality that enhances interpersonal relationships. Members of the public, those working on the turnstiles or in the coffee shop, duty first aiders and stable staff leading up the horses (sometimes the same personnel as those riders on the gallops) see the chaplains as friendly faces and the banter is increasingly relaxed. It may sometimes get personal, as folk share their news, both good and not so good. Most conversation is relatively light-hearted, but sometimes there are personal situations that need prayer and the comfort of knowing that a problem shared may be a problem halved.

Racecourse Chaplaincy: variety

If flip-flops are not your thing, as a Chaplain you may instead find yourself shaking a collecting tin at the gate after racing. It may be in aid of Racing Welfare, or for the Injured Jockeys Fund at Jack Berry House, as both have local bases in Malton, or Walking the (race) Courses for pancreatic

cancer. You may be asked for a quiet room where prayers can be said, bearing in mind that many of the international racing and bloodstock fraternity - and indeed the thoroughbred racehorses - are of Middle Eastern origin.

Racing Chaplaincy: extensions

The stable staff who bring the horses to the racecourse are the same staff who look after them, day in, day out, at home in the yard. To visit them on their home turf is a privilege, and at special times of the year such as Malton Stables Open Day and Christmas, chaplains can offer support and a new perspective.

For three consecutive years, the racing chaplaincy has held carol singing in localities including stables and there's a touch of 'memories old and new' in the occasion. Young stable staff and their children share the carol singing event with residents of the nursing home, including racing retirees.

Every year is different, so it was no surprise this year when Rudolph, Spring Cottage Stable's Shetland, was brought into the nearby nursing home by carol singer Aimee... a member of trainer Brian Ellison's yard. Rosie was a very willing jockey and Wendy, the manager of the nursing home, was on hand too – with a bucket!

Racecourse Chaplaincy: endorsements

The general manager at Redcar agreed to include a paragraph in the racecard:

Racecourse Chaplaincy - A small team of chaplains is present to serve people of all faiths and none, offering their support to individuals in each sector of the racecourse. From the start of the day until after the end of racing, they walk the course and are ready to respond to those needing 'a listening ear'. Please say hello to them.

She summarises the value of the work as follows:

The chaplains are unobtrusive on racedays, mingling amongst the crowds, taking the time to chat and offer support to racegeors, raceday staff, stable staff, and a vast number of other people engaged on the day. The presence of the team of chaplains on racedays is invaluable and has made a great difference to the atmosphere. We are very appreciative of the role undertaken by the chaplains and the difference they make to the lives of everyone on racedays. I think the raceday chaplains do a cracking job and we're very glad they're on our team!

The longevity of the chaplaincy work at York, and the invitation to extend the work to other racecourses, underlines the perceived value of having chaplains available. At the end of the 2016 season at York, the CEO of Constant, a security company employing 800 staff in the north of England and up to 180 on any one of York's big race days, expressed his views on chaplaincy, "The work you do goes beyond God and religion".

