



Case Study:

AFL Chaplains in Country, Metropolitan & High-Performance Clubs

“It’s important for our regional and rural clubs to have effective long term measures to care for their members. A highly recommended and sustainable strategy is the appointment of a club chaplain.”

Neale Daniher

Former AFL Player, Coach &
Current West Coast Eagles
Director of Football



Case Study: AFL Chaplains

The following is a selection of case studies of AFL Club Chaplains from various leagues.

Country Club Chaplains

John Russell – Donald Junior Football Club (NCFL)

In recent years junior footballer Stephen was withdrawing from his footy. Apart from the distress he and his family were experiencing due to drought Stephen was confronted daily with the physical and mental abuse between his parents and himself. Stephen's coach noticed the change in attendance and aggressive 'on-field' behaviour – not knowing why – but ingenuously dismissing it.

Discreet Care

Donald Football Club's recently appointed chaplain John Russell took special notice of Stephen and engaged in discreet conversation with him. Leading to his frank admittance, that, *"I just want to end my life!"* The chaplain was able to provide the pastoral care necessary for Stephen to navigate his difficult circumstance and provide support and referral for his family.

Active & Engaged in Sport

Today, Stephen is more active, more stable and more engaged in his club and with his mates.

Country Club Chaplains

Jeparit Rainbow Football Club (VCFL)

In 2010 two members of the Jeparit Rainbow Football Club meet with traumatic death when they were electrocuted when installing a windmill.

Not only did family members have to face this devastating ordeal but also the football club who lost their President and long serving member.

Healthy Clubs and Communities

The community expressed their deep gratitude to the VCFL for their Chaplain helping them deal with the deep and lasting emotional trauma of the loss. Rather than retreating and isolating



themselves many reflected on how the Chaplain helped them better heal together as a community by providing timely and genuine emotional support.

Club officials were also grateful having someone who understood how to care for people in tough times.

Local Metropolitan Club Chaplains

Phil Martin – Sandringham Football Club (VFL)

Phil Martin has been a friendly and familiar face since 2005 at the Trevor Barker Oval in Sandringham. He serves as a volunteer Chaplain for the club giving a listening ear to the many players, coaches and club people who would otherwise find it hard to talk about the 'life stuff' they are regularly facing or helping others through.

Approachable & Authentic

Pastor Martin joined the football volunteer staff after the death of club champion and Melbourne Football Club player Troy Broadbridge in the Boxing Day Tsunami in 2004. He got to share the emotions and pain with the club following the tragic incident. Martin reflected, *"Since then, it's been my experience, that, blokes in particular, want to talk about 'the life stuff' privately yet casually around the track rather than formerly with a counsellor. They're looking for the friend-over-the-fence conversation."*

Whole Club Care

After the club lost its President few years ago a senior member of the Board was asked to take on heightened responsibilities at the club. This coincided with some major changes at his work. Martin said, *"Thinking about the pressure our club leaders were facing I went ahead and made a phone call to him."* The timing of the call proved to be significant. Noting that the Board member publicly acknowledged, *"No one will ever know the difference that phone call made to my life."*

Healthy Life First-Aid

Chaplain Martin regularly finds himself supporting people who are experiencing grief, loss, depression, anxiety and relationship issues. Club General Manager, John Mennie said, *"Phil has been great at providing the care our club needs when life goes a little pear-shaped. And it does – we see it all the time. He's been great for a number of our boys and staff and an invaluable help for our club over the years."*



Local Metropolitan Club Chaplains

Isabelle Scott – St Albans Spurs Women’s Football Club (VWFL)

Earlier this year St Albans Women’s Footy Chaplain Isabelle Scott received a distressing phone call from one of her club’s young players. Isabelle works retail in the city during the day and travels home to Doncaster of an evening. As she has done most weeks for the past 2 years, Isabelle left her family after dinner, drove 35km to the northern suburbs, and meet with her player.

Authentic Volunteer Chaplains

The young girl, a key member of her side, was deeply distressed and troubled about personal relationship issues. Not knowing who to turn to, and experiencing unresolved bitterness and anger she called her club chaplain, affectionately nicknamed ‘*Chappy*’, to help ease her ongoing anxiety and depression.

Isabelle spent 3 hours with her that night – followed by regular catch-ups, phone calls, chats after training and referral for professional help. The chaplain’s care was instinctive, authentic and sustaining.

However, this young woman’s experience was not isolated.

Easing the Pain

This season alone a number of players and club volunteers have either attempted suicide or have been affected by suicide.

A parent of another player approached Chappy on game day distraught and fearful. She was desperate to talk to someone who would listen and offer support. Her child was displaying suicidal tendencies.

Bringing Hope

Sadly, and understandably, these people never disclosed their pain to anyone in the club. Chappy just ‘being there’, on their turf, the footy club, made a life difference to the growing few silent sufferers. As one player said, “*We’re so glad she’s here.*”



High Performance Club Chaplains

Steve Webster – AFL AIS Academy & Carlton Football Club (AFL)

Local Anglican minister Steve Webster was appointed Chaplain at the Carlton Football Club in 2004 during troubling events such as players accused of illicit drug use and the South-East Asian Tsunami that impacted many football clubs around Australia. Steve was given the dual role of assistant to the property steward at the club which soon evolved into assisting at training sessions.

Heart & Soul of His Club

Steve regularly spends time with players and staff giving a listening ear to their personal and professional challenges. For some Steve offers a sounding board and others a chance to off-load and seek understanding on non-football issues. He spends anywhere between a few hours to a couple of days during the week depending on circumstances and needs. He could be seen handing out water bottles at training, jogging a few laps with the rehab boys, kicking or hand-balling during drills, conducting weddings for staff or players, visiting a sick staff member in hospital or sitting with a player's family on game day at the MCG.

Care of Emerging Elite Players

"*The Rev*", as he is called by the players and staff, also serves as chaplain to the AIS-AFL Academy which provides training and development to 30 scholarship holders aged 16 and 17. Steve attends camps in Canberra and Melbourne during the year. As a volunteer he serves the team providing pastoral care as a compliment to the various other professional roles at the Academy.

High Performance Club Chaplains

Cameron Butler – Melbourne Football Club (AFL)

For the past 14 years Cameron Butler has served as a volunteer at the Melbourne Football Club. Apart from the typical challenges and stresses of football life MelbourneFC has had its fair share of significant hardships over the years. Some of these include, 3 players directly affected by the Bali Bombings in 2001, the Marriage and Subsequent death of senior player Troy Broadbridge in the Boxing Day Tsunami. The suicide death of a player's uncle in 2006, the ongoing sickness of Club President Jim Stynes, and the death of two players parents and 3 other staff to cancer in 2009.



In 2011 alone, the club saw the sacking of a coach and related staff issues, 5 sudden deaths of player's best friends including 2 parents, suicidal threats by two club individuals, the loss of a former club player Sean Wight and other significant family breakdown and loss.

Pastoral Care Skills

It was coach Daniher, together with CEO Steve Harris and President Paul Gardner who turned to Cam Butler when Troy Broadbridge died and said, *"Cam, can you write the script? We don't know where to go from here... there's no manual on this stuff!"* As a pastor the Chaplain's skills and sensitivity during times of distress and loss both in a corporate and on an individual basis has helped the football club and individuals navigate these difficult and all-too common life experiences.

Today, Cameron works closely with Football Manager Chris Connelly, Player Development Manager Ian Flack and the coaches to show genuine non-performance based care for the players and staff. And not just in the tough times – but in the good moments as well.

