

Providing a vital platform for the wellbeing of UK railway workers

Railway Mission chaplain Mike Roberts on the vital role to be played in getting the railway family get back on its feet post COVID



There are very few jobs that offer the variety that Mike Roberts experiences. As chaplain for the Railway Mission, one day he could be supporting victims in the aftermath of a major incident, the next escorting a group of people who've had too much to drink onto a train in the early hours of the morning after a music festival.

He's even been known to hand out bottles of water and biscuits to passengers when trains have been severely delayed.

Mike wouldn't have it any other way, showing the same passion and level of commitment whatever the situation he faces. It's why the charity and its staff is held in such high esteem within the industry for offering independent, confidential impartial pastoral care to the railway community and members of the public affected by rail operations.

"Chaplaincy is about the heavy emotional

stuff, but it is also about sharing life with people on the railway – sitting with people, laughing with them and crying with them," he said.

People stay in touch so I hear about the bad times, but also the good times

"One day I could be sitting having a coffee with someone who is struggling, the next I might be handing out biscuits and water to passengers impacted by train delays.

"You go through the emotions with the people you are speaking with. There may have been a fatality last week that is still very raw, but at the same time you're probably dealing with someone from a few weeks ago and seeing them recover, grow and heal and that is life-giving. People stay in touch so I hear about the bad times, but also the good times.

"No two days are the same. I don't think there's a better job than sitting with people, learning and sharing with them. We are in a privileged position in the industry in that we can go and work with virtually every company in the industry."

Friendship and a listening ear

Mike is among 20 chaplains working for the Railway Mission in the UK providing friendship and a listening ear to anyone connected to the railways who suffers bereavement, loss, anxiety, fear and trauma.



"Chaplains have been doing this since 1881, and although the railway is massively different now to when the charity started, it is the same job and the same family," he said.

"I always use the metaphor of chaplaincy as being about umbrellas. You go to someone who is in an absolute storm and you just stand next to them holding an umbrella so it shelters them and after you've been talking to them a while you stay standing with them, but it is them holding the umbrella.

"A little later you say to them to keep the umbrella and that you're heading off, but for them to still use it to stay dry and stay safe. After a while you realise they are holding the same umbrella, but they're standing next to somebody else using it to shelter for them, and it all carries on."

It's Mike's way with words and his compassion that has earned him a place near the top of the list of organisations such as Network Rail and British Transport Police to contact if support is needed.

His efforts and impact on the railway haven't gone unnoticed.

Before the end of the train operating company Virgin Trains – West Coast Trains Limited – in 2019, he received the award for external partner of the year in recognition of the work of the chaplains, but in particular his efforts. A moment he regards as one of his proudest.

"The last year has been a real challenge for everyone"

2021 has already been a challenging year. "I've just dealt with my 21st serious incident this year – which is a fatality or a death in service and things like that, and each one of those involves a family, friends – a group of people that have been affected," he said.

"The last year has been a real challenge for everyone but one thing that has come out during the pandemic is that people have been more open and willing to look at their own vulnerabilities.

"We've got to make sure that as the pandemic eases that we don't try and restart and go back to the beginning and how we were. The pandemic has also brought staff wellbeing and how organisations support the mental health of their staff to the absolute forefront and that has to continue.

"I think although there is all the progress towards a physical resolution for COVID, we're going to have a legacy of a mental health crisis and that I think is going to be long-lasting. I think it was Theresa May who coined the phrase about people 'just managing'. I think a lot of people are there and we really need to be looking out for each other and supporting each other."

Mike has been a chaplain for the rail industry since 2018, joining the Railway Mission following 12 years as a local parish priest in Yorkshire and Dorset. >>

SEED Architects RIBA Chartered Architects to the UK Rail Industry
 supporting Principle Contractors, Engineering disciplines, Network Rail & TOCs
 Option Selection Reports, Grip Stages 4&5 design, Grip 6-8 PM or support






+44(0)161 832 5750

office@seedarchitects.co.uk

www.seedarchitects.co.uk

» “I didn’t really know that much about the railways when I joined, although my dad was a train enthusiast, but more of what he called ‘proper trains, with a proper engine at the front,’” said Mike.

“In 2017 I got married to Rebecca, who is also a priest and we realised it was going to get complicated both leading churches, so I started looking for something else and I pushed a few doors and someone sent me the advert about the Railway Mission and I thought ‘this could be fun’.

“Since then it has felt like I’d put on a pair of shoes that fitted absolutely perfectly. I love the fact that the railway is like a microcosm of the whole of society – everything in the world is on the railway in a way. My faith is massively important to me and this has been a chance of experiencing how that works out not in the walls of the church, but in real life. I have got a passion for people and for people to be thriving when it comes to their wellbeing.”

Railway knowledge

Although there are many transferable skills from being a parish priest to a chaplain at the Railway Mission, one thing that has taken some work has been Mike’s knowledge of the railways.

“Before I started, I imagined it being a very much religious role but it is about walking alongside people,” he said. “I knew there would be the role around the fatalities and supporting people after trauma, but it is all about relationships, walking along with people when they are finding life really tough, but also when they are finding it really good.

“When it comes to the train knowledge, as long as you don’t want me to fix anything on a train I don’t think it is too bad. I can do timetables, tell you managements systems and I can work all the coffee machines anywhere on the rail network.

“But you have got to be able to talk the language. I don’t suppose you would get a job in France or Germany without being able to speak French or German. Someone very early on gave me a list of acronyms related to the railways which sat next to me all the time and got carried around with me.

“I think it was Einstein that said we stand on the shoulders of giants. Effectively, I’m only able to do what I do because there are those people who answer my messages and calls when I need advice. I am very grateful for all the people that help me to do the job as well as I can do it.”

Looking to the future and Mike believes there is a major part to be played by the chaplains as lockdown eases and the country gets back to a sense of normality – a role he is keen to play a part in.



“The longer you are on the railway and the more connections you make, the more effective you are,” he said. “When I started one of the existing chaplains said to me that it will take me three years to really get to know my area and I’m nearing that milestone.

“I’ve got some amazing people whom I work with and know who have been brilliant in keeping me sane in the last year”

“I am really happy to be on the railway and do think it is a really privileged job and a really exciting place to be. I am looking forward to getting out a bit more and getting back into the nitty-gritty of staff and seeing more people out

there and start to work out what it means to go back to the railway as it will be again.

“Some people will be pleased to be going back to the office, others will be anxious, and alongside that there is the impact lockdown has had on relationships, and the impact of home-schooling just a few of the examples.

“For me, I’ve got some amazing people whom I work with and know who have been brilliant in keeping me sane in the last year. We need to keep building on the fact that this last year we’ve all relied on each other more and been more open about how we are feeling.

“As chaplains we’ve got this role where we’re invited in to know people and I think that is going to be a big thing over the next year. Maybe it will be a different culture we are working in, but the care and the love and the compassion still needs to be there.

“The Rail Minister and Transport Secretary have spoken about coming back from the pandemic with a new, better railway, but it is only going to be as strong as the people that are there to build back afterwards.”

