

---

## **NEWS FOCUS - I'll be praying for Northern Ireland to do a Leicester in the Euros, Ulster born Dean of Leicester**



He's the Ulster-born Dean of Leicester who last weekend donned his lucky blue-soled shoes

with their blue laces for the massive party in recognition of the world's most-talked-about football club.

But the Very Rev David Monteith has revealed that it was a tragedy nearer home in Fermanagh that set him on course to become a cleric.

Ivan Little writes in the Belfast Telegraph - While the Dean talks now of the lessons he's learned from Leicester City's charismatic manager Claudio Ranieri, it was Gordon Wilson's forgiving response to the IRA's Enniskillen bombing in November 1987 that inspired him to re-think his life.

David, who is now 48, had gone to university in England to study biology, but watching Mr Wilson's interviews after his daughter Marie died in his arms in the Remembrance Day atrocity after telling him that she loved him had a major impact on him.

"He wasn't the only inspiration," says David, who knew Gordon and Marie from his time studying in Enniskillen.

"But for me his message of forgiveness for the bombers embodied a vision of peace for the future.

"It was a significant moment for me in that I was beginning to see how Christian faith could be a key part of the work of reconciliation and peace building, because not all versions of Christianity in Northern Ireland always made that clear to me." David had been involved in cross-community projects at his church youth club in Irvinestown where he grew up, and at Portora Royal School in Enniskillen.

He was to carry his zeal for peace and reconciliation into his ministries after his ordination in 1993.

"I have often worked in places where there have been diversity issues to address," says David, who has found himself in the media spotlight in the wake of Leicester City's 5,000/1 Barclays Premier League triumph and his admission that he had prayed for the club.

But his first introduction to football was a world away from the multi-million pound business that is the Premiership.

David's father Malvern was the manager of the lesser-known Kilskeery Harps in Fermanagh, but his son wasn't their biggest supporter.

"I was dragged to the touchlines as a little boy. I wasn't particularly sporty though I did play a bit of rugby at Portora.

"My brother Maurice was more of a sportsman and he is now a house master at Rugby School in England, where the oval ball game was invented."

David's father and his mother Molly still live in Irvinestown, while his sister Lynda is based in Enniskillen. Another sister, Sandra, died in her thirties.

After his ordination into the Church of England David served in parishes in Birmingham and London, where he was the associate vicar at St Martin-in-the-Fields at Trafalgar Square.

With Buckingham Palace in the parish, it meant that the Queen was one of his flock.

But David was to establish a link with a king after he moved to Leicester Cathedral, where he was Canon Chancellor before becoming the Dean three years ago.

That king was Richard III, whose remains were found under a car park in Leicester and later interred in the cathedral after a series of legal

wrangles and controversies over whether the last Plantagenet monarch should be buried there or in York.

Leicester Cathedral is about 200 metres from where the remains were found, on the site of what had been a Franciscan friary called Greyfriars, where it is believed Richard had been buried after his death at the Battle of Bosworth Field in 1485, though there were suspicions that he might have been dumped in a river by anti-monarchists.

David says: "We were approached in the cathedral long before the dig ever took place because if you intend to engage in archaeology that is going to include the excavation of human remains you have to work out what you are going to do with them.

"And we had agreed that if Richard III's remains were found they would be buried here."  
When they were discovered, the cathedral had to carry out major building work to find a place to bury the king in what David, who oversaw the process, calls "a place of honour". He adds:  
"The story captured the attention of the world's media and the service for Richard's burial, which I led, was broadcast live on television."

Not surprisingly, the new royal connection has turned the cathedral into a major tourist attraction, along with a Richard III visitor centre built at the site of the old friary. It tells the story of the king and the investigation that confirmed the bones were his after the use of DNA, which had been pioneered at the University of Leicester.

In the pre-discovery days the cathedral welcomed, on average, 25,000 visitors a year. In the final nine months of last year - after the burial service - that figure had rocketed to 250,000. Says the Dean: "We had to recruit new teams of volunteers to welcome the visitors and it was a big year of adaptation."

And then, in the midst of all the excitement and hype, came even more excitement and hype over Leicester City.

One of the striking features at the Foxes' celebrations was the way that the whole city was united in the euphoria.

David says: "It was heartening to see that people from every background were partying and you were as likely to see a bearded Sikh in a turban wearing a blue shirt as a working-class white lad.

"It's reckoned that 10% of supporters who watch Leicester every week are from the black or Asian community, which is more than most clubs in England."

David and his clerical colleagues mirrored the growing enthusiasm for the football team by flying the Leicester City flag over the cathedral, which was bathed in blue floodlighting at night.

"It was a joy for me to see people getting their pictures taken against the blue lights and there was a sense of pride that the Church was getting involved," he explains.

"People were also lighting candles in the cathedral and leaving little prayer slips for the club, for Ranieri and players like Jamie Vardy. And we took those requests seriously and we did pray for them. It mattered to us because the success of the city matters to us.

"There's a growing confidence in Leicester, which has been bolstered by the football club's triumph and by the whole Richard III thing.

"People are walking a little bit taller and feeling better about the place. For many people Leicester was somewhere you drove past, but

not now. And the football team have shown that not everything that is brilliant about life in England happens in London"

The Dean says that Leicester and Belfast are similar in many ways. "I think Leicester is slightly bigger but, like Belfast, it's small enough to know people and grow genuine community, which is more possible than in London, which is so vast."

David says Leicester's pride in its sport isn't confined to football. The city has successful rugby and basketball teams; a snooker world champion in Mark Selby, a cricket team and a nearby university - Loughborough - which is a mecca for sports studies and a sometime base for British Olympians.

The Dean has never met Foxes manager Ranieri but he is looking forward to shaking his hand. David says: "I have been very impressed with his leadership and he has got a lot to offer many of us who find ourselves as public leaders. There's a sense of constancy about him and he seems to really understand and promote teamwork.

"I feel I have been learning from how he and the football team have been doing things and how I could use those skills in the Christian community."



The Dean says he'll be watching Northern Ireland, including fellow Fermanagh man Kyle Lafferty, in the European Championships in France on the television. He's been quoted as saying that he'll be offering up Leicester City-style prayers for them too.

But he says: "I think it's important to live in hope. They've got a bit of a chance, haven't they? It would be great to repeat the Leicester story in all sorts of places."

In his personal life the Dean has never made any attempt to conceal the fact that he's gay, and that he is in a civil partnership with his partner of 20 years.

He is on record as saying that he has no real desire to be married. But of his sexuality, he says: "I suppose it's one of the things that mean my eyes are often attuned to issues of reconciliation, inclusion and diversity. It's not the first thing that people know about me, but it's not a secret. It's in *Who's Who*."

The Dean is known to some people as the "vicar in the scarf" because he usually wears one to "add a little colour" to his traditional garb of a dark suit and shirt.

But what about that blue footwear? "The soles and the laces were my way of showing my support for the footballing boys in blue.

"Maybe now with the Euros coming up, I'll have to change everything to green..."

**GET CNI HEADLINES EACH DAY**

**Facebook and Twitter**

**Click on logo at CNI Home page**

**[www.churchnewsireland.org](http://www.churchnewsireland.org)**

**+ Please share CNI with your friends**

**[www.churchnewsireland.org](http://www.churchnewsireland.org)**