

Christians Gear Up for Olympics Outreach in Vancouver

✖ Christians from around the world are gearing up for a large-scale evangelistic outreach during the Winter Olympics, which begin Friday in Vancouver, British Columbia.

As many as 3,000 missions workers from across North America and Europe are to be on hand to reach both athletes and the scores of international visitors expected to frequent the two major Olympic sites in Vancouver and nearby Whistler Blackcomb Ski Resort Feb. 12-28.

Coordinated by the interdenominational ministry More Than Gold (MTG), volunteers will be stationed at 17 commuter stations across Vancouver, where they will help answer logistical questions and be a general love witness. There also will be 14 venues, including open stages, where Christian artists of various genres will perform for a total of 400 hours during the Olympics and the Paralympics for disabled athletes, which will immediately follow the traditional games.

(To learn about Christian athletes competing in the Winter Olympics, read "Faith on the Ice and Snow.")

The volunteers include teams from the Salvation Army, which will be providing canteens and coffee; the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association; Power to Change Ministries (previously Campus Crusade for Christ, Canada); and the Alpha course. A team of intercessors will be praying for the outreach activities throughout the games.

"We want to see the church have an impact through a whole

movement of hospitality so we'll see transformation for our cities," says MTG staffer Karen Reed, an ordained pastor with the Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada. "In Vancouver, we have the lowest church attendance of any city in North America."

MTG is also partnered with a nonprofit organization called Home for the Games, a network that provides visitors reasonably priced accommodations in Vancouver-area homes. Half the proceeds will support local homeless charities with a goal of raising \$1 million to combat homelessness, Reed says.

Although MTG has coordinated Christian volunteer efforts at both Summer and Winter Olympics for 15 years, Reed says this year marks the first time the International Olympic Committee (IOC) has acknowledged MTG's presence before the games. She says 15 denominations from the Vancouver area are involved in the outreach.

Behind the scenes, Olympic chaplains will be ministering to athletes competing at the events. Former gold medalist Kathy Kreiner-Phillips is in charge of the chaplains working at the Whistler Olympic site.

A Vancouver-area Christian, Kreiner-Phillips won a gold medal in giant slalom skiing in the 1976 Winter Olympics in Innsbruck, Austria. During the Games, she said she experienced an inexplicable draw toward Christ.

"I took in a movie, *Jesus Christ Superstar*, a couple of days before my race, and I came out in tears," she says. "I was kind of affected by it, and I couldn't stop thinking about the injustice of what happened to Jesus. Then I went back to my Anglican roots, thought of the Lord's Prayer and I said a prayer to God on the chair lift, 'Well Lord, Your will be done in regards to my performance.' It allowed me to be relaxed in my race. I knew I could win if I stayed relaxed and didn't make a mistake, and I did."

Although Kreiner-Phillips didn't fully commit her life to Christ until 1988 when she met her future husband, she says the experience showed her the importance of being there for an athlete who's truly searching for God and for some support.

"I understand where athletes are coming from and how to connect with them," says Kreiner-Phillips, who has been working with Youth for Christ for the last five years and will be serving as a chaplain during the Winter Olympics this month in Vancouver, British Columbia. "It will just be a casual kind of connection to let them know that we're there. When I was competing, we didn't know of any Christian organizations or chaplaincy offered to the athletes."

(View
videos of Christian Olympic athletes competing or sharing
their
testimonies.)

David Wells, general superintendent of the Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada (PAOC), will coordinate the chaplains at the Vancouver site. Of roughly 30 Christian chaplains, he said at least four are Pentecostals.

Wells said he is praying that the Holy Spirit will set divine appointments during the games: "I like to believe daily for a divine encounter—that one divine appointment at that divinely appointed time—for an athlete, a sports official or whoever I can help in their life somehow."

A group of community chaplains from area churches will be on hand outside the Olympic Village to assist visitors if a crisis or other need arises. As an outreach tool for churches, Athletes in Action is also circulating a DVD series filled with testimonies of Christian Olympic athletes who have overcome obstacles. The group is also arranging for Christian athletes, such as hockey great Paul Henderson, to speak in Vancouver-area churches.

In addition to their evangelistic efforts, Canadian Christians are standing against human trafficking during the Games, which often experiences an uptick during such events. In August, some 10,000 Christians participating in TheCry prayer rally in Vancouver prayed that the Winter Olympics would not bring a rise in human trafficking, crime and violence.

"We're thankful that this is going to be a blessing to our economy, but we don't want these other things to come in," said TheCry founder Faytene Kryskow. "We don't want an increase of the sex trade; we don't want an increase of crime and violence and all these things."

Anglican and Roman Catholic bishops in Vancouver echoed that sentiment in November when they released a statement saying they planned to stand united in opposing the "social ill of human trafficking." The leaders, who are part of the Anglican-Roman Catholic Bishops' Dialogue, cited a U.S. State Department report putting the number of people trafficked across national borders each year at roughly 800,000.

"The buying and selling of human beings subverts the very essence of the Olympic spirit," the bishops wrote.

"We call upon the faithful of our churches and all people of good will to uphold and defend the dignity of every human person," they added. "We pray that the solidarity and success of the Olympic Games will give a new respect for human life around the world."