

Olympic Faith

Even in communist China, Christians are quietly sharing the message of Christ behind the scenes during the Olympics.

Since 2001, when the International Olympic Committee awarded the city of Beijing the 2008 Olympic Games, many Christian Olympians have been viewing the impending event with both trepidation and excitement.

For this year's games, set for August 8-24, the Chinese government has stated that religious evangelism of any kind will not be tolerated. Yet Western Christians disagree over observing the moratorium and about whether evangelism should be practiced without prior government approval.

Franklin Graham, son of evangelist Billy Graham, sparked controversy this year when he told reporters in China, where he had been preaching legally and meeting with government officials, that Christians should not evangelize during the Olympics because it is against the laws of the country.

Bob Fu, president of the China Aid Association, took issue with Graham's comments, calling them "offensive and inappropriate" and saying that the underground church in China welcomes evangelistic efforts, reported.

"The Chinese Christians are law-abiding, patriotic citizens," Fu told the online news service. "But when an unjust law demands them to go against their faith and Jesus' teaching of the Great Commission, they cannot and will not concede to a 'faith moratorium' in order to please an atheistic government during the Olympic Games, even if that means enduring imprisonment and torture. Mr. Graham's comment is a deep offense to hundreds of house-church prisoners and their family members."

Graham released a statement in June in response to the criticism.

“I support Christian groups that want to do ministry in China during the Olympics,” Graham said. “However, I believe we must be sensitive to and respectful of the local church and the impact we as outsiders could have on them. We are guests in China, and anything we do or say has a lasting effect on Chinese Christians that will be there long after the Olympics.

“If we intentionally or inadvertently engage in any illegal activity we could jeopardize the well being of these Christians and the church in China.”

The dangers associated with evangelizing or practicing Christianity in ways not approved by the government of the communist country are no secret. For years, expression of the Christian faith has been suppressed—particularly for unregistered church groups—through confiscation of Christian literature, arrests, imprisonment and detention in labor camps.

For Christian athletes headed to Beijing for the first time, however, the visit is seen more as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity not only to compete but also to make a lasting impact for the gospel in the influential Asian city.

The idea of sharing one’s faith abroad is exciting to many of the Olympians, who believe the opportunity to reach the Chinese people cannot be glazed over simply because of government restrictions.

Cat Whitehill, a veteran defender on the U.S. Women’s Soccer Team, has been paying close attention to the situation. She hopes, in spite of a recent injury that will prevent her from competing, to be part of something special for the 2008 Olympic Games.

“I know a few missionaries in China,” she says—for whom she is praying, asking God to use them during the Olympics. She has to avoid using the name “God” in e-mails sent to her friends there because the government will flag the correspondence.

“You can’t really bring your Bible out in public without someone looking at you. But what’s cool,” she adds, “is that the Chinese culture is really accepting of God because they want something different. They want someone to love them despite what’s going on. They’re very receptive.”

U.S. athletes will be briefed on how to deal with the media in China—and will even be instructed on what to say and what not to say during the Olympics, according to U.S. marathon record-holder Ryan Hall. But he is one of several Christian athletes who is determined not to let fear get in the way of faith.

“I’m not going to be ashamed to be myself,” he says. “I’m going to give honest answers to the media. I’m not going to bring up my faith just to bring it up, either; but I’m going to be myself and be who God has called me to be.”

According to retired freestyle swimmer Josh Davis, who competed at the 1996 Olympics in Atlanta and the 2000 Olympics in Sydney and won three gold medals and two silver medals, the majority of evangelistic efforts take place outside the Olympic Village and are geared toward the host country and the international fan base.

“That’s 99 percent of what happens,” Davis says. “Ministry groups from North America and all over the world converge upon the Olympic city with hundreds of tracts and resources in hand.”

The opportunities for ministering among athletes occur most naturally when the competitors are one-on-one in their dorms, at the lunch hall, on sightseeing excursions or even at the competition venues.

Davis says that “most of the ministry happens on a relational level between athletes—not so much when an outside person is ministering. Athletes are funny that way.”

At the Goodwill Games in 1999, for instance, Davis was there

to cheer for fellow Christian athlete Laura Wilkinson at her platform diving event. "I could tell she had a look on her face like she wasn't 100 percent," Davis recalls. "I said, 'Laura, can I pray for you?' And that was a real turning point for her in the competition. So it was a moment like that. It was more relational and one-on-one. That's where you see more progress or fruit with athletes."

Religious faith is an observed element of the Olympic Games. The International Olympic Committee (IOC) assists host cities in providing a designated building for religious services. Specific rooms must be geared toward the faith traditions that are in attendance.

When the 1988 Summer Olympics in Seoul, South Korea, were approaching, the IOC agreed to allow the formation of a group of 27 Christian chaplains as part of the Protestant chaplaincy program. As a stipulation, the committee included access to all other major religions, including Catholicism, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism and Judaism.

Madeline Manning-Mims, who as a U.S. Olympic runner competed in Mexico City (1968), Munich (1972) and Montreal (1976) and won gold in Mexico City and silver in Munich, was one of those original 27 chaplains.

Manning-Mims has worked all over the world not only as a sports chaplain but also as a speaker, singer and interpretive dancer since she retired from competition in 1981.

This year, however, for the first time since 1988, she will not be taking her usual role with a U.S. team as a chaplain. Manning-Mims says the Chinese inexplicably denied access to all but a handful of foreign chaplains and instead opted to supply chaplains from within their government.

None of that dissuades her, however, from a conviction that the athletes are there ultimately to glorify God on an international stage. They aren't there to be saved,

evangelized or proselytized, she believes. Instead, they are there because they have been called to compete at the highest level—whether they acknowledge God or not.

And the chaplains are there, first and foremost, she says, to “develop and strengthen [the athletes’] level of faith.”

“The athletes need to believe that they can do something that’s impossible,” she says.

“When you get there, you have done everything physically that you need to do. You have broken mental barriers. Then, you’re trying to produce at your highest level in front of the whole world with the weight of your country on your back.

“If you don’t have a reservoir of faith to draw on and if you’re depleted, you will not be successful—whether you believe in Jesus or not. Your faith level needs to be empowered and intact so you can believe that you can do what you were born to do.”

She says prayer is the “most strategic thing” that can be done for an athlete, and it is obviously the one thing the communist government of China cannot prevent believers worldwide from doing.

“I’m talking about intercessory prayer,” she explains, “where you are traveling for the very life of that athlete. God can do things you can never do in a thousand years and things that you don’t know about.”

She suggests that groups of intercessors focus on very specific prayer points and seek the Holy Spirit for things to pray about “that you haven’t even thought about for that athlete.”

Chipping Away the Walls

As for evangelistic efforts in Beijing or other parts of China, it is imperative, Christian athletes believe, that

Western Christians be respectful of the rare opportunity they have to minister in a communist country. Any evangelistic effort in the city, whether large or small, should be preceded by prayer and practiced with sincerity, they say.

During her more than two decades in sports ministry, Manning-Mims has seen evangelistic efforts at the Olympics take many forms with varying degrees of success. She has been blessed to reach people through well-thought-out street evangelism, mass media and prison ministry efforts.

But she has also been embarrassed by the haphazard approach of some overly zealous and unprepared Christian groups. She advises anyone planning to minister at the Olympics to “seek God for His plan.”

“Have a plan and then let the Holy Spirit lead from there,” she says. “But just to go there empty-minded, like God hasn’t given you the sense to put a plan together, you’re opening the doors for [Satan] to come in and do some major attacking.

“And he’s not just trying to attack you, he’s trying to attack everybody involved in the plan of God. If I’m going to tear the kingdom of darkness down, I’d better have a plan.”

It is also imperative, she says, to connect with other Christians who can follow up with those who have been evangelized. No matter what, all efforts must be done with excellence, and believers should approach the Olympics with a prayerful attitude of expectation.

Retired wheelchair marathon record-holder Jean Driscoll has won multiple medals at both the Olympic Games and Paralympic Games. She has been disappointed at the protests in Europe and the U.S. against China—mostly due to the government’s treatment Buddhist monks in Tibet.

Still, she hopes that a more Christ-centered approach might chip away at the walls of separation. “I think this is a

tremendous opportunity for the Western world to have influence on China's leaders and their people," Driscoll says. "Rather than shunning them and judging them, I think we should wrap our arms around them and mentor them and guide them. We need to show them a new way."

Manning-Mims believes that when Christian Olympians are ready for action and prepared to engage in relational evangelism it will ultimately lead to powerful moments of salvation and grace.

"The other athletes watch very closely—even athletes from other countries," Manning-Mims explains. "There's a circuit that you run in. They'll see you maybe five or six times during that running circuit and they'll get to know you.

"They'll see how you handle times you win. They'll see how you handle times you lose. You're sitting next to them waiting to go out there to compete, and it's just an awesome time. You have all kinds of opportunities to show the love of Jesus."

Whitehill is one of many athletes who hopes to see Christian Olympians have an impact in 2008 on not only other athletes but also the fans. She believes the Olympics present a great opportunity for the Christians who are competing because it allows them such a unique platform for sharing the gospel.

"There's not a whole lot that the Chinese government can do against the Olympics right now," she says "They're trying their hardest. [The athletes] have an incredible platform just because of the Olympics, and it's going to be so neat to see what God has in store for the nation of China."

Hall agrees and is equally energized by the thought of playing some sort of role—big or small—in a seed-planting effort that might have ramifications for years to come.

"I know that [God's] got something planned for China," Hall

says. "I don't know what exactly it is, but I'm excited to be able to contribute what I can. God's always at work.

"I believe that He's definitely going to do some neat things at the Olympics. It's something to look forward to, something to be excited about.

"It is part of God's plan," Driscoll adds. "This is part of history. It's easy for us to look back and see the lessons that history has taught us after we have lived through those times.

"I'm excited about what is to come. You can't help but be touched and influenced by the world coming into your home and being an example."

Chad Bonham is a freelance writer based in Broken Arrow, Oklahoma, and producer of the sports television program The ProFILES.

ONLINE EXCLUSIVE: To read the testimony of Olympic gold medalist Madeline Manning-Mims, go to .