

Evangelists Prep for 2014 Winter Olympics

Though the Winter Olympic Games in Russia are still 18 months away, church planters in the host city of Sochi are already hard at work to capitalize on what the "Olympic Spirit" will bring to their city.

And they recently spent time in London during the Summer Olympics getting a grasp on what the opportunities would look like.

"Traditionally Southern Baptists have used Olympic ministry as an opportunity for broad seed sowing. However, Olympic ministry can be much more than that. It can be a catalyst for church planting in the host city itself," said Earl Gillespie*, a team member for Engage Sochi, an International Mission Board initiative aimed at taking Olympic ministry beyond the opportunity for mass evangelism.

Gillespie explained the Engage Sochi strategy is for the residents of Sochi to be reached with the Gospel before, during and after the 2014 Winter Games.

"It is our goal to use the opportunities that the Olympics will bring to Sochi to not just reach out to the people of the world who will visit the city for the Games but to use this event as a way to build relationships with the people who live and work in the Sochi area," Gillespie said. "And we have already begun to do that."

The Engage Sochi church-planting team, which formed after the Russian city was named as the 2014 Olympic host, has been actively involved in partnering with Central Baptist Church of Sochi for more than a year. Together they have been exploring ways to use the sporting event to connect believers with the Sochi community.

The Engage Sochi team, which arrived in London prior to the start of the Summer Games, was surprised at how the atmosphere and demeanor of the people on the streets changed after the Opening Ceremonies.

“Since the games started, people have been so open,” said Kay Gillespie, who coordinates prayer efforts for the Engage Sochi initiative. “We even had one young lady thank us for coming and telling her about Jesus. If I can have those kinds of experiences in Sochi, then I cannot imagine what Jesus is going to do there.”

Joining the Engage Sochi team was Danil Pankratov, a Russian Baptist pastor who partners with the team in Sochi.

“I was surprised how people would talk with you and would listen to a gospel presentation,” Pankratov said. “Usually in Sochi when you try to start a conversation with people they do not want to hear. And sometimes they walk away. But I am discovering that the Olympics are a celebration, and I am pretty sure that people will be more open in Russia during this time.”

While in London, the team spent time in areas where they knew Russians—specifically people from Sochi—would be.

“The Russians have two exhibits here in London to promote the next Winter Olympics, and you can already see how they are getting excited about having the Winter Games in Sochi,” team member Craig Dean* said.

The team uses pin trading, a popular pastime for Olympic spectators, as a way to engage people in conversation. The specially designed Engage Sochi evangelism pin uses the colors of the Olympic rings to tell the gospel story.

In addition to giving away the trading pins, the group also included a small card that explains the colors in both English and Russian.

"I really like this method," Pankratov said. "It helps you to meet people and to very quickly tell the important things about why people need salvation and why they need Jesus. I can see this being very effective in Sochi."

Pankratov added that in Sochi the team has partnered with his church to offer English classes for local residents who need or want to learn English to help them better communicate during the Games.

"One of the people we met here in London lives in our neighborhood in Sochi and was very excited to hear that we are starting an English program," he said. "We now have her contact information and look forward to not just teaching her English but sharing about Jesus with her."

In addition to the 2014 Winter Olympic Games, Sochi will host the 2018 FIFA World Cup and a Formula One Racing promotional event in the summer of 2014.

"I think that God has brought these events to Sochi to allow the people in our city to be more open," Pankratov said. "As the church, we have to get on our feet. And we must begin to use other methods to reach out so that even more people can hear a gospel message during these big events."

Dean said volunteers from America are needed to partner with the Sochi church. This is key, he said, as the team takes what it has learned in London and moves back to begin efforts in Sochi.

"The bridge from London to Sochi is not complete," Dean said. "As a matter of a fact, it is just starting. There are nearly 400,000 people in Sochi who need to hear the gospel. So even without the Olympics coming to this area, there is a huge need for the gospel there."

For more information about how to partner with the Engage Sochi team before, during and after the 2014 Winter Olympics,

visit .

Click here to watch a video and hear more on the story.

*Names have been changed.

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