

London Christians Prepare for Olympics Onslaught

At times, when Doug Shaw stands on the hill just outside Olympic Park in London, he can barely hear himself think.

Construction buzzes and roars in preparation for the Summer Olympic Games, which start July 27. The work's been going strong for years.

Shaw can relate. He hasn't stopped in ages either.

As Olympics volunteer coordinator for Southern Baptists, he's been in motion for months preparing Baptists to meet the tens of thousands of internationals coming to the United Kingdom this summer.

"We are praying that many people from all over the world who may not have an opportunity to hear or respond to the gospel without being persecuted by their neighbors might have that opportunity while they're here in London," Shaw said.

David Pile said he has the same hope.

"I and others are hopeful that there will be lots of local events and lots of community engagement and we'll be able to share and shine the love of Jesus with a bunch of people that we otherwise wouldn't have come in contact with," said Pile, Olympic and Paralympic Church Engagement Coordinator for the London Baptist Association.

Shaw is expecting the help of about 400 Baptist volunteers from the States, and Pile is expecting the participation of hundreds of churches in England.

Volunteers will help with festivals, face painting, handing out water and a range of other things. Some will assist churches in hosting big-screen events in parks, and sports

teams will help with basketball and baseball events in neighborhoods around local churches.

All of these efforts fall under the banner of More Than Gold, a joint effort of Christian churches of many denominations worldwide. More Than Gold helps Christians collaborate for ministry during major international sporting events such as the Olympics or the World Cup.

And its most famous ministry—pin trading—will be in full force during the 2012 games.

“Pin trading is the biggest of the unofficial Olympic sports,” Shaw said, noting that thousands participate in the hobby.

As part of More Than Gold, volunteers trade a More Than Gold pin that shares the gospel message, he said.

The pin is a good conversation piece and helps start gospel conversations in the area surrounding the Olympic Park, where blatant evangelism is not allowed, Shaw said.

“During the Olympics, you won’t be able to do literature distribution or any kind of obvious evangelism within a mile of any of the venues in London or anywhere else in the U.K. These areas are closed off to direct evangelism,” he said.

But pin trading is a traditional part of the Olympics atmosphere and, Shaw said, “There’s nothing wrong with talking with people.”

Pile said many local Baptists are also participating with a “big silent Christian witness” during the Games, serving as official Olympic volunteers, or Games Makers. These volunteers serve as chaplains, drivers and part of the field setup crew and in a range of other roles.

“They would have had to apply two or three years ago for these kinds of roles, but they will put them in direct contact with athletes and other people involved in the Games,” Pile said.

A number of Christian families in the U.K. also participate in another of More Than Gold's major ministries—the athletes homestay program, Shaw said.

"More Than Gold is the official Olympic manager of the program. It allows athletes' families to have a place to come and stay during the Olympics," he said.

Many athletes don't find out until the last minute that they have qualified for the Games, Shaw explained, and "many families come from places where a week in London would be prohibitively expensive even in normal times."

Many of the relationships built between host and visiting families lasts well beyond the Olympics, he said.

Shaw asks for Christians to pray that volunteers at the Olympics would be able to "share Christ effectively and in a meaningful way—a low-key way would be the best way to start," he said. "Pray also that volunteers coming here will have wisdom and guidance from the Holy Spirit."

And Pile agreed, asking for prayer that "we would be able to further engage with our local communities not just this year but in years to come because of our efforts this year."

He expressed a big thanks to Baptists in the States for their long history of help during the Olympics.

"We would like to thank you for sending missions teams to work alongside us ... to make the most of this exciting opportunity," Pile said. "People have saved up money, taken time off work, come over here, with prayer support from their home church and have supported us in our historic moment so that the glory of Jesus can be shared with as many people as possible."

For hopeful volunteers late getting on the bandwagon, opportunities to serve in the U.K. are still available, but they "will come at a premium" for anyone who isn't local, Shaw

said. He noted that most mid-range hotels in the London area are fully booked.

He and Pile are asking for prayer more than anything, and for potential volunteers to consider planning to serve at the 2016 games in Rio de Janeiro.

It's not too early. Abel Santos, a Brazilian Baptist, is spending this year in England with More Than Gold to learn how it works and take the ministry back to Brazil for three back-to-back events—the Confederations Cup in 2013, the World Cup in 2014 and the Summer Olympics in 2016.

“We encourage everyone to be thinking about Brazil. It would be great to have people coming in from the States to help us with missions teams and sports events,” Santos said. “If there is anyone in the States who feels a calling to come to South America to help us, that would be great.”

For more information on Olympic ministries, prayer requests and opportunities for service at the 2012 games, visit .