

Will the Prayer Covering Prevent Terrorists From Attacking Sochi Olympics?

Will Baptists have a witness at the Winter Olympics in Russia? Will it be safe from terrorists? Will other issues arise?

Marc Ira Hooks, one of IMB's main strategists for the Sochi Olympics who was involved in outreach at the 2010 Winter Olympics in Vancouver, spoke to such questions in an interview about this winter's Feb. 7-23 games.

Hooks is the creator/co-director of Engage Sochi, IMB's initiative focusing both on church planting in the Winter Olympics host city and on outreach to Olympic competitors and guests from throughout the world. Earl Gillespie* is the other co-director of the project for the Feb. 7-23 Olympics in addition to serving as the Sochi city strategist.

IMB: Where did you get the idea for Engage Sochi?

Hooks: For whatever reason, maybe it was the time difference, it was late at night, we [Marc and his wife, Kellye] were sitting on the bed and I just remember the guy pulling out the envelope and saying, "The next Olympics will be in Sochi, Russia." I remember looking at Kellye and saying, "I don't know how, why or whatever, but we're going to be involved in that."

IMB: What did you learn from the Vancouver Olympics that applies to Sochi?

Hooks: As we came away from Vancouver, we started saying, we as the IMB, our concentration, our focus is on church planting. And while mass seed sowing is good and should be done, there's more to reaching people with the gospel than just giving them the gospel and walking away. So we wanted to create something that as people came into contact with the

gospel, that they were touched for a long period of time.

IMB: What is Engage Sochi?

Hooks: We want something that is a multi-tiered approach and ... not just [during] the fortnight of Olympic competition in Sochi. We're talking about reaching the people of Sochi before, during and after the games.

IMB: What are the plans for following up with people who respond to the gospel?

Hooks: We want everybody that we come in to contact with to have the opportunity to continue the conversations that were started in Sochi. So regardless of where that person is from, we want to connect them with a believer in their area who can make a relationship with that person and continue to speak with them about issues of faith.

IMB: What has gone on in Sochi in preparation for those coming?

Hooks: For two years, we've had people coming and working with our church planters in Sochi, in winter and in summer. In the winter they are doing ministry in the mountains at the ski resorts and that kind of thing, and in the summer they're doing beach reach ministry and ministry in the city. So as our friends come in these next couple of weeks, it's just another phase of building Christ's church in Sochi.

IMB: What sort of training has been given to those coming?

Hooks: This is a relational ministry and our folks will be coming and making relationships. Interestingly enough, the majority of our groups that are coming are performing arts kinds of groups. So we have a large men's choir, we have a bluegrass band and a Dixieland band. We have a drama group coming and a church choir coming, and some people doing clowning.

Basically they're going to be walking through areas, come together, perform, talk to people and disperse again. So a lot

of it will have that flash mob kind of feel. They're not doing scheduled performances on stages, they're there to meet people and their performing arts are a way to be able to do that.

IMB: Are you frightened of the security issues?

Hooks: I would not use the word *frightened*; I would say I am concerned. It's a healthy concern, however. I am confident in the Russian government's ability to do what they say, and the Russian government has pledged that this will not only be the biggest Olympics in history, which I think it will be, but it's going to be the safest Olympics in history. And so, while there have been threats made and have been other threats that have been carried out, I really and truly believe that from January through March, Sochi, Russia, is probably going to be one of the safest cities on the planet.

IMB: How potentially disruptive will Russia's position on homosexuality be?

Hooks: There will be people who try to make this an issue, there will be people going to the games for that [reason], but the last reports that we've heard, demonstrations will be allowed; demonstrations over different issues, this being one of them, will be allowed in the city, but they will only be allowed in certain designated areas and people who are coming to demonstrate must have permits to do so, and that kind of thing. So it's not going to disappear and it'll be an issue that's there, and the media will cover it. But will it be a disruptive factor in the city? No, I don't think so.

IMB: What city in the U.S. is Sochi most like?

Hooks: It would have to be some place in California. Sochi's considered the longest city in Europe. It's about 90 miles long and it wraps along the coast of the Black Sea. But in places, it's only a mile wide. And the other thing, you can literally stand on the beach with the Black Sea to your back and see snow-covered mountains right there.

IMB: What would you want as your hope-and-pray-for result for

Engage Sochi?

Hooks: It would be that multitudes of churches are planted around the globe as a result of this and that the people who come to the Sochi Olympics will be connected with a church planter, regardless of where they're from. So, that's the home run for us, that new churches would be planted in Sochi and beyond.

IMB: How can we include the Sochi Olympics in our daily prayers?

Hooks: We want to pray for all of our friends who will be in Sochi during the games and we want to pray that they are able to do the things that they are there to do. That they have more than just a pleasurable Olympic experience, that they are able to share the Gospel and to reach people and connect them to a church planting network. That's number one.

No. 2, you can monitor @Engage_Sochi Twitter account, and through this we will be doing updates and news for daily prayer requests.

And pray for our Engage Sochi staff who are responsible for the mechanics of this whole project, making sure people are where they need to be when they need to be there, and are safe in doing so.

And for open hearts and receptivity, that God would draw to us the people that we're supposed to talk to.

**Name changed.*