

Ministry at the Sydney Olympics

By the time Pointers reaches you, the most significant outreach period since the 1959 Bill Graham crusade will have nearly finished. This time, however, the outreach rode on the back of the premier sporting event of our time, with many churches and parachurch groups making the most of the opportunity to stage special programmes and events.

Ministry mainly focussed on the Olympics, but significant events were scheduled for the ParaOlympics as well, making nearly two months of sustained outreach and service ministry.

Broadly speaking there were two very different, but complementary areas of ministry.

Official Ministry to the Athletes and members at the Official Village in Homebush Bay

This was a strictly controlled and developed ministry. Proselytisation was not permitted in this arena. The services were provided by a team of accredited chaplains from the major faiths in Australia: Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism. This not only reflected the multi-racial base of the Games, but also the multi-cultural and multi-faith basis of Australia, a factor which it is believed contributed to Sydney's winning bid for the Games.

The original task of recruitment of chaplains was undertaken by the Police Chaplains service. Underlying their task was the need for strategic orientation and a defined security base, as well as a common philosophy of ministry as service, rather than proselytisation. Members of the team were officially referred to as Religious Service Personnel Volunteers, but commonly known as chaplains, particularly the Christian ones. Many of them had a background in a regular chaplaincy such as police, defence, or an association with an established sports chaplaincy, like Sports and

Leisure Ministries. The Christian chaplains made up the bulk of about 100 accredited chaplains, with Anglican and Protestants representing about two thirds of the chaplains.

Each of the Faith groups was provided with a Prayer Centre for their own activities to ensure privacy and continuity. Activities and services were promoted through resident information guides and regular notices which were posted in official notice places at Resident Services Centres.

The main focus for the religious services personnel was the provision of religious worship services and availability at the prayer centre for personal contact. However, the Chaplains provided "a ministry of presence", and were able to walk around the village and be with all the people at meals, and events, thus being available at a time of significant vulnerability for many of the athletes.

The Village religious service was staffed on a roster basis each day from 6 am - 11 pm, over, during the last three weeks of September, and then again for the period of the ParaOlympics. Though no statistics are available for the number of people who sought use of the services or attended worship, it is evident that at the very least, the provision of chaplaincy services at the Games would equal two full-time chaplains working for a year in a specialised role.

It is worth comparing this authorised activity to the strict conditions which applied to entry into the various games venues. Among prohibited items were religious materials (for the purpose of giving away), and the promotion of religious ideas. The use of John 3:16 on a banner was a case in point. So often seen at major sporting events, this noted verse was effectively banned from making an appearance at the Olympics.

Quest Australia (see below) had a designated tent stall at the Games, in an area near the Olympic Expo site, and not far from an Official Merchandise store and Nike outlet. Quest were allowed to present a range of outreach materials, and other low key ministries, including family activities, like face painting for children, something which attracted people to their tent. One popular publication was the *More than Gold Interactive Guide* which provided a very handy tourist guide,

Olympics events outline and gospel information in a pocket book. It was co-written by the main Anglican chaplain coordinator, Revd David Tyndall.

In another case, the Angels of Peace, a singing group dressed as Angels performing around the Olympic city, were highlighted in information provided to the media as Angels which had no religious or political connection whatsoever!



Wider church and para church ministry, including QUEST Australia - with the theme of More than Gold.

Quest Australia, as the official interchurch and interdenominational organisation has worked throughout the last few years to promote a range of services and ministries. It has coordinated contact with mainstream churches and large parachurch bodies like Scripture Union and non denominational organisations like the Bible Society.

Quest estimates that about 500 local churches were involved in some way with a Games outreach or hospitality programme. This includes churches outside of Sydney which held special events or ministries during the Torch Relay. For people who wish to see the extend of the involvement, a list was prepared for the September 2000 edition of *Alive*, the non-denominational magazine published in Melbourne.

Local church events, many of which were associated with Quest, included small churches hosting youth evangelistic teams, churches holding creative arts programmes and Olympic outreach cafes. On a larger scale were the activities of Wesley Mission Sydney (222 Pitt Street) which included rallies each night, including substantial involvement from team members of the US based evangelistic group, Lay Witnesses for Christ. Former Olympians, including Carl Lewis, provided testimonies and messages. Rallies were also held in other large churches in the city and suburbs.

Several denominations thought the opportunity needed dedicated

staff, either volunteer or paid to coordinate their programmes and provide resources and liaison with their own churches, and with Quest. Four denominations, the Anglican (Sydney Diocese) Baptists (NSW), Salvation Army and Assemblies of God, had full-time workers for coordinating their involvement.

The Bible Society in Australia prepared a special edition of the New Testament, called *Towards the Goal: Games Edition*, with special testimonies from well known athletes, including Betty Cuthbert and Michael Chang. 180,000 copies were printed, with all expected to be bought by churches and individuals. 165,000 were moved from stock by the end of September. Most copies would have been given away during the public events and one on one witnessing conducted during the Olympics and ParaOlympics. While the majority of copies were bought for use in Sydney,



churches and groups in other states bought copies for use in outreach events associated with the Torch Relay. As well as the New Testament, the Bible Society produced over 200,000 gospel portions (mainly Mark's gospel) for use in outreach and as giveaways, with editions produced in a multitude of languages.

As well as the Bible Society, other bible organisations and parachurch groups provided scripture resources and tracts. In Atlanta over one million pieces of literature were distributed, and it is reasonable to assume that a similar number will have been distributed in Sydney.

At this stage it is difficult to estimate the overall impact of the Games Outreach, and also the extent of involvement of the churches and parachurch groups.

No doubt, many groups will issue statements at the end with a range of statistics detailing how many contacts were established, conversions made, tracts handed out, beds provided for evangelistic workers, meals catered for, hours worked and even pins sold. Overall there is no doubt that this was also a display of wider unity at different levels, in many ways much like the Billy Graham crusade of 1959 which demonstrated that denominations and individual Christians could put their differences aside for a common purpose.

The Olympic Games attempts to bring competing and sometimes opposed nations together for a common purpose. It is really only partly about sport. Its foundation, as revealed again in the launch of the Olympic Truce Foundation in July 2000, is to promote the truce movement and the possibility of world peace. Unfortunately this was one of the least publicised Olympic events this year.

Perhaps combined action to promote the Olympic Truce Foundation could provide an opportunity for the churches in the coming years for combined action. The churches and their media could work together in order to provide a different emphasis to the mettle of success which is so often highlighted by the secular media, and sometimes unwittingly taken on board by the churches as they try to maintain their position on the medal ladder of converts. We could even have some Angels of Peace who are religious.



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