

Why Churches should engage with the Olympics and Paralympic Games and Cultural Olympiad

The story so far and some theological reasons

The Bishop of Barking

Introduction

Faster...Higher...Stronger...

I pray that you may grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ and to know this love that surpasses knowledge and be filled with the fullness of God'. Ephesians 3:17 – 19

The 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games in London provide a once in a life time opportunity for churches to engage with an event of major significance and celebration in the life of our nation. Whether you rejoiced or resented London winning the bid, the Games *will* take place in the summer of 2012! The question is whether we engage creatively with this national event and are on the front foot or let the opportunity pass us by. . There is a good deal of cynicism towards the London Olympics as well as pockets of enthusiasm. Cynicism has been common in the run up to most Olympic Games. The British have a particular gift for cynicism and when people or projects look like being a success we delight in knocking them off their perch! Some of the cynicism is entirely understandable when you consider the disruption and change taking place in and around the Olympic park.

The Story so far

Following the winning of the bid 6th July 2005 the Bishop of Stepney and I felt it was important that the Christian community and the Church of England in particular created a positive relationship with the London Organising Committee (LOCOG) and the Olympic Delivery Authority (ODA) at an early stage so that we won the right to engage and influence. This was achieved in four ways:

1. Through two consultations 'Building Blocks' 1 and 2 which took place in 2006 and 2008 in Stratford. Building Blocks 1 produced 'The Ten Questions' about community engagement, regeneration and the legacy.
2. By the appointment of Canon Duncan Green, The Church of England Olympics Co-ordinator – a full time senior appointment made jointly by the four Dioceses which contain the London Boroughs - Chelmsford, London, Rochester and Southwark.

Duncan began his appointment in November 2007 and was licensed in the presence of LOCOG and ODA in St Paul's Cathedral in January 2008.

3. The interdenominational consultation which led to the formation of London 'More Than Gold' the brand name for the ecumenical response structure to which the London Organising Committee relates. This is chaired by Lord Brian Mawhinney. The Chief Executive of More Than Gold is David Willson who was appointed in November 2008. He has experience of co-ordinating Christian engagement at over forty major global sporting events.
4. In 2007 I appointed the Revd Kelvin Woolmer as the Chaplain to the Olympic Construction site and the parish of St Paul's Stratford in which the Olympic village is being constructed. He works with a team of volunteer ecumenical chaplains.

Because the impact of the London Games is nationwide Duncan Green and I presented the importance of engagement by all Dioceses to the residential meeting of the Bishops of the Church of England in September 2009. From then on Canon Green's role has become increasingly UK wide.

By engaging with LOCOG at an early stage and by the appointment of a capable co-ordinator Duncan was quickly identified by LOCOG as a person who could bring valuable experience in the area of community engagement and faith relations – two areas which the Church of England does well and areas where LOCOG were in need of assistance. Duncan has a desk in LOCOG offices and so is both on the 'inside' of the company as well as working for the Church of England and acting as a critical friend. He is the LOCOG Faith Adviser and Multi Faith Co-ordinator. Importantly he is also on the Executive Team of 'More Than Gold'. I believe Canon Green is an example of the right person in the right place at the right time.

An important priority in managing Duncan Green's role and all that we attempt to achieve is to clarify what we do well as the Church of England and concentrate on that as our distinctive contribution alongside all the other denominations and Christian organisations. We can't do everything. We must do what we do well.

Theological Reasons why Churches should engage with the Olympics

1. Incarnation and Mission

The Olympics are coming 'ready or not!' As an incarnational and missionary church I believe we have an obligation and pleasure in engaging with this significant event in the life of our nation.

2. Three things which give value to life

Three aspects of human experience which commonly lift spirits and give value and significance to people are culture, sport and religion. Different people would give different prominence to these activities but between them they give value and inspiration to all of our lives. The Olympic movement gives expression to each of these areas of human and spiritual endeavour and so engagement with them by the Christian community is, in my opinion, of great importance and provides us with a great opportunity to promote all three in our nation.

3. Common Values

The values of the Olympic movement sit well with the values of the church. Values of aspiring for excellence in body, mind and spirit. Celebration and zest for life and the desire to foster international respect and harmony. The promotion of healthy race relations and the dignity and value afforded to people with disablement. The value of hospitality and voluntary service for the common good.

4. The Olympic Lens - A Focus for Ministry and Mission

I see the Olympics as a lens through which we can focus and enhance all of our day to day work for God whether that is: mission, evangelism, community engagement, communications, interfaith relations, issues of justice, prophetic reflection and action, regeneration, sports chaplaincy, the arts, youth work, schools, colleges and education, the environment, disability and equality, race relations and so on. There is room for all these specialisms and for ministry generalists to view and promote their mission through this Olympic lens.

5. Mission, Witness and Evangelism

Of all these activities mission, witness and evangelism are of paramount importance. As the Olympics celebrate excellence in sport and culture so we have the opportunity to demonstrate how human life can be celebrated in even greater excellence when enhanced by faith in Jesus Christ, the one who said '*I have come that they may have life – life in all its fullness*'. *John 10:10*. The expression 'More Than Gold' speaks eloquently of the added dimension of wealth that the gospel brings to our lives.

6. Service

The opportunity of Christians serving the Games as volunteers is one which has added value to previous Olympic Games. It fulfils the important theological value of compassionate servant ministry and provides church members with the opportunity of voluntary service – something which the church does especially well.

7. Hospitality

Hospitality and welcome are central to the good news of the Gospel. Many athletes' families will not be able to pay hotel prices in London and at other Olympic venues. We can celebrate and deepen our Diocesan and parish companionship links by inviting families to parishes where we already have relationship and create new links.

8. Interfaith relations

The Old and New Testaments were written in times of competing religions and philosophies like our own. We have so much to draw on from the Scriptures and church history to enable us to make an important contribution and be a distinctive Christian witness in our multi faith communities and in multi faith events such as the Olympic Games. The Church of England has a good track record in interfaith relations- greatly assisted by the Presence and Engagement network.

9. Church Unity

Engagement with The Olympic Games can provide an opportunity for church unity to be expressed at a practical level as Christians of all denominations join hands for the common good in practical service, mission and collaborative projects.

10. Prayer

The Games provide us with opportunities for united prayer for our nation. The Global Day of Prayer each Pentecost has brought many thousands of Christians together in Stadiums, Cathedrals and churches across the country. The hope is to hold a Test Event at the Olympic Stadium in May 2012 – an occasion for united prayer and worship.

11. Communications

The opportunities for those in the Communications business are many. The Olympics provide a national, high profile 'peg' on which to hang many good news stories which can enhance the place of Christian activity in the life of our communities and nation. With imagination every aspect of church life will tolerate an Olympic spin. As we know the media makes a bee line for Bishops of the Church of England. They need to be well briefed. The scope for raising the profile and improving the image of the Church of England is considerable if we make the most of this opportunity. The Olympic media centre will house 20,000 press. The Games will be seen on 4 billion televisions across the Globe.

12. Prophetic reflection and action

There is a real need for a robust critique of the Games including the economics, ethical and political factors in addition to regeneration and legacy. To assist in this The Oxford Centre for Ecclesiology and Practical Theology have begun to write up the story and provide theological and prophetic reflection. This could be of lasting benefit and assist the Church of England in its engagement with national sporting events into the future including possibly the World Cup in 2018!

13. Legacy and Regeneration

For the Barking Area of the Diocese of Chelmsford in particular the issue of whether the Olympic legacy will be positive or negative and how well the extensive regeneration of the Borough of Newham will serve its communities is of major local concern. It is high on our agenda and particularly that of our Barking Regeneration Adviser, Carol Richards who is also a Reader at St John's Stratford. There have been winners and losers already in the communities around the Olympic Park and this will continue into the years to come. We are working in these neighbourhoods, and with the Regeneration authorities, to do all we can to ensure as many people as possible are 'winners' as a result of this major regeneration within this part of East London. There are always many winners and losers during Olympic Games – most of them never compete on the track or in the field!

I commend this once in a life time opportunity for our engagement in mission and ministry.

'Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize. 1 Corinthians 9: 24 – 27

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4th May 2010