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United States: Columbia Union Votes Gender-Neutral Ordinations

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In London, Olympics outreach impacts community members

Lilna Stevens  
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Spiritual applications from sports are hard to miss, says playwright Mervyn Weir.

That's why the Seventh-day Adventist Church member incorporated stories of Olympic greats into his latest production, from "The Flying Scotsman" Eric Liddell to the father of runner Derek Redman who helped his injured son across the finish line at the 1992 Olympics.

Weir's play, Beyond Gold, is one of several Seventh-day Adventist outreach events held in and around the city of London during the Summer Olympic Games. Weir said he wrote the play in hopes that audiences would think of their own spiritual development in light of the festivities surrounding them during the next two weeks.

"Whatever opportunity [the apostle Paul] saw, he used it to divert people towards Christ, and I think that's what the arts can do," Weir said Sunday night following the last of four performances of the show in locations around the city.

Weir's theatrical production underscores church officials' call for members to serve in the community during the Olympics, which has drawn hundreds of thousands of international visitors and extensive media coverage to London.

"We have encouraged our churches to make use of the Olympics as an opportunity to be part of an active part in the community they are called to serve," said Kirsten Oster-Lundqvist, an Adventist pastor and Communication director for the denomination's South England Conference.

While scores of members are joining thousands of other Christians serving at festivals and game venues, several Adventist congregations are opening their doors to host events. The conference Teen Department is sponsoring a teen camp for inner city youth at the New Life Adventist Church in North London.

The Bedford Central Adventist Church held a community breakfast for more than 200 people and offered health screenings and literature. Member of Parliament Richard Fuller attended and invited congregants to be even more involved in the community.

Some Adventist operations are adjusting due to conflicts with the games, Oster-Lundqvist said. The weekly homeless ministry is unable to serve its weekly meal in the streets of Waterloo Bridge - a high-density homeless area - and will move the meal to the Advent Center at the Central London Adventist Church.

Some congregations are adapting their services to include sermons based on biblical texts relating to sports. For the next two Sabbaths, visitors to the Wimbledon Central Adventist Church will receive mock gold medals. "Hopefully they'll see the medal and remember where they got it from and come again," said Wimbledon Pastor Sam Neves.

Though a few churches are holding a traditional evangelism series, many members are going beyond their sanctuary doors to seek unique service opportunities.

"I think we're at our best when we get out into the community," said Victor Hulbert, Communication director for the church's British Union Conference, based in Watford.

More than 50 youth joined the Youth Federation on Friday night for street preaching at the Stratford Underground station, a railway stop near Olympic Stadium. Others have distributed some 30,000 copies of Life.info magazine, sponsored by the church here.

The South England Conference is a sponsor of More Than Gold, a Christian organization using the games as a catalyst for ministry and outreach.

A church member making his third appearance at a Summer Olympics is Graeme Frauenfelder, who operates a clown and youth development ministry. Over the next several weeks he and other members of the Fusion Youth and Community UK will dress as clowns and talk to people in Olympic venues and parks, hoping to bring joy in addition to some silly fun.
"It's become a very special way for me to connect with loads of people," Frauenfelder said while waiting for a bus to Oxford, not in costume. "People can be more playful with us and more friendly than if I just walked up to them to say 'hello' as a stranger."

The group of nearly 80 people sponsors community festivals - instead of holding a social at a church, the group takes it to a park.

"The whole point is to get people out of church and into the community, being the salt and light of the world," said Frauenfelder, who is affiliated with the Avondale College Church and Gateway Church in Australia.

Already he's spoken at several Adventist schools and trained teens to conduct ministry with him in parks. He sometimes dresses as a clown, while other times opting for a tiger outfit.

"It's more than silliness," said Frauenfelder. "We create acceptance. We don't want to just tell people about the kingdom of God but model it. For a moment they can have a holiday from their problems."

Others mingling among the community during the Olympics are members of the South London Portuguese Adventist Church in Brixton. They plan to hand out water and give away 100,000 free hugs over the course of the games.

Even before the games began, members were several of the thousands who participated in the Olympic Torch Relay.

In Ealing in West London, the torch was carried by Tyler Saunders, an alternate on the British Paralympic basketball team. In Nottingham, the torch was carried by 16-year-old Leon Squire, a promising young soccer player and sprinter who has committed not to compete on the biblical seventh-day Sabbath. In Scotland, the Faifley Adventist Church youth choir was invited by the city council to sing gospel songs as the Olympic Torch Relay procession passed by. And Racquel Robinson, also 16, a member of Balham Adventist Church, carried the torch on July 26.

Church leaders say the public spotlight is renewing the church's focus on community outreach.

"I think in the past we've been content to hold evangelist meetings and invite people in," said Terry Messenger, Executive Secretary of the South England Conference, home to about 22,000 Adventist Church members.

"We haven't been as forward in getting out into the community," Messenger said, "but I think that's changing."

This year's Olympics are held from July 27 to August 12, followed by the Paralympics from August 29 to September 9.
A special July 29 constituency meeting called by the Columbia Union Conference of Seventh-day Adventists voted a resolution: "That the Columbia Union Conference authorize ordination to the gospel ministry without regard to gender."

Using secret ballots, delegates from the eight conferences of the union's mid-Atlantic United States territory voted 209 in favor and 51 opposed, with nine abstentions. The Columbia Union says it has 135,000 members in more than 700 congregations.

According to a statement issued by the Columbia Union Conference late Sunday, the union executive committee will no longer deny requests from conferences to ordain proven female ministers to the gospel ministry, but their calling will be fully recognized on par with their male counterparts.

"This is not an easy time for the church, but it is the time for the church," said Pastor Dave Weigley, Columbia Union president, following the vote. "We are part of the worldwide church, and we are united in the mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church."

Pastor Dan Jackson, North American Division president, cautioned, "What we are doing here today not only will impact us personally and as a union but will also impact our world church. I want to say that our primary accountability is to God."

In extended remarks, Pastor Ted N. C. Wilson, president of the General Conference, appealed to delegates not to move forward with the motion but to wait for the results of a worldwide study process approved last October by the church's Executive Committee, and expected in 2014.

"I come to you today because I care about matters of conscience," he said. "I come to you because I care about the unity of the church at large."

Pastor Lowell Cooper, a general vice president of the world church, challenged the premise that union conferences are authorized to make the kind of change envisioned under current denominational polity. "The idea that the authority and responsibility of one type of organization in the world family can be exercised autonomously and unilaterally is a concept alien to the ethos and practices of the [Seventh-day Adventist] Church," he told the delegates.

Pastor Bill Miller, president of the Potomac Conference and chair of the ad hoc committee tasked with studying this issue, started his presentation of the committee's report by reiterating that he was a "loyal member of God's remnant church." He then recounted the church's history of discussions and decisions on the issue of ordaining women to gospel ministry.

Shortly after noon, Weigley, who chaired the special session, opened the floor for constituent input. Delegates quickly formed three long lines at the microphones. Many voiced their belief that all whom the Holy Spirit has clearly called to ministry should be ordained without regard to gender, though several admitted to being conflicted.

Following the vote, Pastor Rick Remmers, president of the Chesapeake Conference, commented, "I appreciated greatly the spiritual tone set today and sensed the love and loyalty for our church."

"I am so proud to be part of a historic day in the Columbia Union," said Deborah Hill, a member of the Allegheny West Conference. "We voted on the right side of history and will work very hard to unify not only our union but to work more closely with the General Conference."

-- with reporting from the Columbia Union Visitor
ON THE PLATFORM: Columbia Union Conference administrators hear the comments of the delegates who attended the special constituency session in Silver Spring, Maryland, on June 29, 2012.