

Article Written by:

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Reflections from Vancouver-Whistler

As I write this, I am sitting in the Vancouver Athletes Village “Living Room.” It is a fantastic spot, created from an old warehouse to be a relaxing place for the athletes to hang out, play Wii and watch the big-screen TV. Right now the opening ceremonies of the Paralympic Games are on. It is a great place to ponder lessons about life and mission the Lord has taught me over the last seven years. That’s how long I spent preparing for my role as co-ordinator of Christian chaplaincy and the multifaith centres at the 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Games.

Nearby are several friends I did not know when I started this journey. Frankly, the depth of my passion and care for these men and women shocks me. You see, as a Christian minister I have always tried to ensure that I do not get trapped in a “Christian ghetto” and lose connection with those who do not have a conscious personal relationship with Jesus. But to enjoy genuine friendship with these folks over this extended period of time has busted me up inside. I enjoy their company. I care for them deeply. I want them to fulfil their purpose in life, and I want them to know Jesus tangibly.

I knew it before, but here is what’s real to me tonight: we cannot expect to transform Canada from a distance. Our lives need to be filled with friends who matter to us, whose company we enjoy, and for whom we ache inside until they come to living faith in Jesus. The Lord knows how I hate the thought that my friends and I will not see each other on a regular basis as we have these past few years, and especially these past few weeks. To Him I commend the seeds that have been planted and pray they will lead to eternal change in these friends’ lives.

I am sitting close to where I was working on the opening day of the Olympics when a VANOC official came to inform me that a young Georgian luger had passed away while training in Whistler. Soon people began to come by our Faith Centre, some in shock, some in tears, all trying to comprehend how death could intrude so suddenly on a day of celebration. We worked hard to provide ways for people to express their thoughts and prayers to the athlete’s family and teammates. Commemorative books were placed in the multifaith centres to be signed. Hundreds came by to do so.

Death, especially sudden death, is always sobering and raises deep questions. Personally, I was dealing with the contrasting emotions of grief and celebration as, leading up to the Olympics, I had two friends, both in their 40s, pass away due to cancer. One friend was to have been a chaplain with us in Vancouver. I missed having her there. It hurt—bad. On the last weekend of the Olympics, we were still caring for members of the luge community who were haunted by what they had seen. As they dealt with their own mortality, praying the Lord’s Prayer with us had deeper meaning than their race result. Meanwhile, an athlete who had come for chapel almost daily was with us celebrating a medal finish. I was reminded how to “weep with those

who weep” and to “rejoice with those who rejoice.” To really live, you need to engage both experiences deeply.

These last seven years have been a very stimulating and humbling journey. Ever since the Games were awarded to Vancouver-Whistler, I have felt a three-pronged responsibility. First, I felt responsible to expand the circle of Canadians who serve Jesus by being a chaplain at a major sporting event. Canadian sports chaplains have been at times a rare species. Sometimes I’ve felt like a cod off the east coast—endangered and alone! I am grateful to God for the privilege of making it possible for a good number of Canadian chaplains to serve at this event. I know the Lord will build on that in their own personal ministries.

I also felt responsible to pray and work for genuine Christian unity in the Greater Vancouver region. I wanted to see God “command His blessing” in an unprecedented manner on our service, witness and social action—not only before and during the Games, but especially so after the Games were over. I sincerely believe we have seen that miracle occur. A foundation has been laid for a greater day for the church in this area. Heartfelt kudos to my brothers and sisters in Christ who have paid the price to see that happen, especially Karen Reed and Nicole Preston from our Pentecostal family.

Finally, we drew our inspiration and passion for this journey from a verse in Jeremiah: *“Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper”* (Jeremiah 29:7). As a result, many Christians in the region now see their communities not as a collection of streets, restaurants, events and nameless faces, but as places filled with individuals who are loved by God. They recognize that they can be a redemptive influence right where they live. As never before, I am confident that God works through people who pray and seek the peace and wholeness of their community.

“Lord, we pray for our communities today. We do ask that they would be marked by peace and wholeness. We pray for the friends you have put in our lives who bust us up on the inside. Transform them by your good news as we live lives of grace and truth before them. In Jesus’ name, Amen.”