

Baptist mission teams use upcoming Olympics to connect, evangelize in Paris

PARIS (BP) – With the Olympic Games opening in Paris later this week, Southern Baptists have already been working in and around the city, capitalizing on the event as a bridge to spread the Gospel.

“When we heard about the Olympics, we thought that would be a good time to go, to partner with some other people and churches to reach the French for Jesus,” said Evens Jules, pastor of Bethel Evangelical Baptist Church, a Haitian congregation in Delray Beach, Fla.

Jules led a team of 18 people in late June and early July who assisted Antony Baptist Church in suburban Paris with a variety of outreach activities – distributing Gospel tracts and copies of the New Testament, conducting surveys of residents and helping with a children’s festival.

Jules said the congregation participates in international mission trips every year and chose Paris this year in part because of the upcoming Olympics. He said in addition to the evangelism and ministry work his team did with residents, his church members also spent time praying – for Parisians, for the Olympic athletes and for the tourists visiting the city as spectators.

Their prayers were “asking the Lord while people are coming, they will not just come in for the Games, but they will experience something else for their spiritual life,” he said.

Stéphane Polegato, pastor of Antony Baptist Church, said the volunteers were a boost to his congregation.

“We made evangelistic outings to more than 70 people in the streets,” Polegato said. “Imagine all the people who have been invited to church, who have received a small gift. Each participant amazed and encouraged us.”

A team of high school students from Providence Baptist Church in Harrisburg, N.C., was also present at the same time as the Florida team to help the Antony church. Evan Smith, the Providence student pastor, said his students used Olympic-themed pins to spark spiritual conversations.

Trading pins is a popular activity in Olympic host cities during the Games. Smith said one of the pins that International Mission Board personnel in Paris produced was an Olympic torch with the words “I am the light of the world” in French. Other pins carried messages such as “I am the way” and “I am the vine.” The colors on the pin can be used to explain the Gospel.

“That was kind of the bridge for us to get into that spiritual conversation, for us to pass out these pins and to use them to communicate the Gospel in a very non-threatening way,” Smith said.

His team also helped promote two events at Antony Baptist Church, one for children and one for adults. Most residents have never stepped foot inside an evangelical church before, Smith said, so the entertainment-based events were designed simply to get people in the door to have a positive experience.

Polegato “was also able to make connections and meet people and begin to build relationships,” Smith said. “Long-term, hopefully those relationships can continue.”

Smith said the experience was hugely beneficial for his students.

“It’s really cool to stand back and watch high school students

– who probably would quiver at the idea of trying to share their faith with their group of friends – go to the other side of the world and want to talk to every person who walks by them and try to have a spiritual conversation with them,” he said.

Polegato expressed his gratitude to Jules, Smith and their teams for partnering with his church and setting a positive example for his members.

“If Americans who don’t speak almost any French are able to meet strangers on our streets, then we should be able to do it, too,” he said. “They helped us by showing us that we can be less self-conscious about being Christians.”

The French pastor said that the Olympics are an excellent opportunity to connect with people and engage people with the Gospel.

“However, when they are behind us, nothing will stop us from being creative and continuing in the same direction,” Polegato said.