

# The Olympic Face of the LDS Church

A WARM WELCOME BELIES THE LOW PROFILE OF THE “LDS OLYMPICS”

BY MELVYN HAMMARBERG

As part of my research on the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, my wife and I flew to Salt Lake City the day before the opening of the 2002 Winter Olympics. Owing to the events of 9-11, security was tight. Once we were airborne from Minneapolis, the flight crew announced that for the final 30 minutes before landing in Salt Lake City, passengers would be required to remain in their assigned seats, otherwise the flight would be

diverted. A similar “no movement” rule would be imposed on our return flight. National Guard soldiers were visible at the Salt Lake airport, as was a police presence in the city proper. The LDS church joined the effort, installing airport-like security procedures at the entrances to Temple Square, the Joseph Smith Memorial Building, the Conference Center, and all other public venues.

I had registered in advance with the church’s media relations office. We secured our media credentials — embossed photo ID cards on neck chains for quick identification — and then, church media representative David Bresnahan met us. The church’s Media Center was quickly filling with journalists from around the world. Many were calling this the Mormon Olympics, something the church media people sought to discourage. Bresnahan got us media folders, church Olympic pins, and a news release that the LDS church’s president, Gordon B. Hinckley, would raise the Olympic torch at

6:23 that evening. Bresnahan also arranged tickets for the church film *Testaments*, the Light of the World church pageant, and the Sunday morning broadcast *Music and the Spoken Word*, with the Mormon Tabernacle Choir and the Temple Square Orchestra.

Among other requests, I had asked to meet with Elder Boyd K. Packer, acting president of the Quorum of the Twelve. Elder Packer, I knew, was a key figure in “correlation,” the church’s long-term program integrating all teaching and doctrinal materials for worldwide use. Bresnahan quickly became very serious and protective. “The conditions are that you will submit questions in advance. We want to accommodate your interests but do not want any surprises or confrontations. There will be no questions about the church’s



The International Children’s Choir, dressed in costumes of countries from around the world, joined the Mormon Tabernacle Choir for concerts on Saturday evenings and the Sunday morning broadcast of *Music and the Spoken Word*.

MELVYN HAMMARBERG



A view of Salt Lake City looking east, showing the 28-story LDS church headquarters building wrapped with the image of an Olympic skater. A half-dozen other city buildings also carried wraps with Olympic images. In the center are the towers of the Salt Lake Temple, and to the lower right is the Medals Plaza for the awards ceremonies.



President Gordon B. Hinckley raises the Olympic torch in front of the church administration building on the eve of the Winter Olympic Games in Salt Lake City. Other members of the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve and their families were also assembled on the steps.

stand on homosexuality, Utah’s alcohol policy, or polygamy. We have other church spokesmen who can deal with those topics. Is that understood?” It was not a question. And I agreed. Later, there were apologies because arranging this meeting simply proved too daunting under the pressures from major news sources like ABC, *Time* magazine, *The New York Times*, and other outlets. We agreed to find another occasion.

Entering the 21st century, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is gathering converts and becoming an international church by acting as part of local communities around the world. Church leaders emphasized this during the Olympics, expressing the church’s role as part of the community and “a friend to all nations” (the church’s Olympic motto). It seemed to lift a burden from the shoulders of members who wondered if they should be proselytizing. Addressing that concern, the president said, “This is not the time or the place.”

On the eve of the Olympics, when the torch relay arrived in front of the church administration building, President Hinckley held the torch aloft and said, “We’d like to hold out our hand and say, ‘Come and enjoy this great international party. It isn’t our party; it belongs to Salt Lake City and this community. We are part of this community, so we are celebrating with everyone else and welcoming people here.’”

The church took concrete steps to do its part. The Salt Lake organizing committee needed some 65,000 volunteers to handle the duties of directing traffic, staffing security checkpoints, taking tickets, and providing smooth communication between events. The church encouraged its members to volunteer. It also

loaned a 10-acre block of downtown real estate for the Medals Plaza during Olympic award ceremonies and assisted with Olympic venues in many other ways.

Utah may have more people who speak more of the world’s languages than any other U.S. state. Many of Utah’s citizens are trained in a second language from participation in the church’s international mission program, which helped Olympic athletes feel more at home during the Salt Lake City games. As group after group of athletes arrived, they met welcoming delegations that spoke their language. And on Temple Square, some 200 “sister missionaries” provided guided tours in about 30 different languages, to the pleasure of many visitors.

Church leaders intentionally kept a low profile while supporting the Olympic effort with organizational efficiency, extensive multilingual assistance, friendly service, and the music of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir. They succeeded brilliantly in communicating a friendly, welcoming, hospitable Salt Lake City attitude from beginning to end. And by presenting its 21st-century face as part of the community, the church gained national and international stature without appearing sectarian.

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