

Best Practices for Organizing & Marketing Religious Tours

By Vanessa Day

There is a special community that exists within church groups and religious organizations, where unique relationships are formed between people of mutual faiths and beliefs. While these bonds prosper in the friendly confines of a congregation and its local community, they can grow even stronger when taken away from that comfort zone and into a completely different realm. Religious tours can both nurture existing relationships and create new ties between church members. Not only that, but faith-based tours can get people more in touch with their religion, providing an experience that changes lives and strengthens beliefs. These trips hold a lot of promise for churches and their members.



Announcements during Sunday services and notices in the church bulletin can be invaluable in getting congregation members interested in the tour.

"It's a wonderful way for people to travel," said Nick Mancino of Regina Tours. "It brings people in the church together; they bond."

Despite the benefits that religious travel presents, some churches still struggle to garner interest among congregation members, resulting in failed attempts to put together a trip. Tour operators know this scenario all too well and have worked with churches for years to overcome the difficulties within the industry.

Mike Schields, managing director, groups and emerging markets for Globus family of brands, comments, "The church leaders are very busy, with different priorities to juggle, and they're not always knowledgeable about the travel business."

Globus last year conducted a survey that found 35% of all outbound travelers are interested in taking a religious vacation, and 17% hope to do so in the next five years. This presents a lot of opportunities for churches and tour operators alike.

So how can groups get past the hurdles, reach their members, and organize a successful religious trip? A lot comes down to the initial decision to do a trip. More often than not, a priest or church leader has an idea for a tour, but either cannot fully commit or is discouraged by the challenges, and the idea inevitably falls apart.

"The act of putting a trip together from beginning to end can be very time-consuming and I think that scares people from the start," said Tony Etienne, vice president, affinity market sales at Collette Vacations. This is where tour operators can truly lend a hand, helping with the early stages of the process and creating a strong relationship.

"We really want to sit down individually with these decision makers and really learn about their communities," Etienne said. "Learn about their membership and about what they're trying to accomplish with their group travel program."

This move can establish a good rapport between a church and an operator, making for a more enjoyable planning process. Those in the industry know that it is not always easy to reach out to churches and establish that relationship. It is the job of the tour leader to remain committed.

"It takes a special group leader who is persistent, has clear follow-up, and illustrates the support and value that they provide for the church," said Schields. "Stick with it, approach them and let them know you're interested, let them know what you offer, let them know your experience and stay with it."



The great cathedrals of Europe, like the Duomo in Florence, inspire religious tour groups with their art treasures and glorious architecture.



This approach will help churches determine whether or not a tour operator is for real. Experts in the field emphasize that taking the time to investigate a company and make sure they are legitimate and financially stable is vital. No trip will be successful without a trustworthy name supporting the effort because many times the brand will help sell the tour.

While tour operators must be eager to please, dedicated and enthusiastic, organizing a successful faith-based tour is by no means a one-way street. Priests and congregation members need to throw themselves completely into the effort.

"The priest really has to commit and say 'we're doing this,'" said Mancino. "They themselves have to commit, emotionally and intellectually. If they don't do that, then it might not succeed."

Carol Dimopoulos, president, Learning Journeys at Perillo Tours, agrees with this sentiment. "The successful groups are really excited about going," she said. "A lot of times you put a trip together and if you don't generate the excitement from yourself, it doesn't go."

One of the best practices when planning a trip is to start early. In today's fast-paced world, it can be difficult to think far in advance, and the timeline for many groups has changed drastically with the introduction of technology.

"When I first got in, people booked two years ahead of time," Mancino said. "But today, that's changed. You're looking at best, nine to 12 months. And some call three to four months in advance."

Most industry experts agree that having plenty of time to promote is essential for the success of a trip. A time frame of between nine to 12 months allows churches to set up a schedule and a marketing plan, resulting in a much better return on investment than if they tried to book a trip on short notice.

Once a church and its tour operator have determined a solid agenda, the next thing to consider is the destination and what kind of trip to organize.

"The first thing is planning the right product for the congregation and for the church," said Dimopoulos. "Because if you're not giving them the right product, it's not going to sell."

This "product" can be the destination, a religious celebration or an important figure in the religious community. There are many things that will drive people to travel and boost interest, especially within the church community. For example, the Pope declared a Year of Faith, from October 2012 to November 2013, as a call for Catholics to form a deeper relationship with the Lord. This offers

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Tory Etienne, Vice President, Affinity Market Sales
Cofette Vacations



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***Carol Dimopoulos, President
Learning Journeys at Perillo Tours***

a perfect opportunity for churches to encourage members to travel to holy lands and ancient shrines to help them connect with their faith, as well as with other people in the community. Whether churches decide to arrange a trip around a specific celebration or special event is up to them, but the best way to encourage members to participate is to have a clear itinerary and goal established before promotion begins.

The next question becomes, then, how do you efficiently market a tour to members of the church?

"It's one of the easiest groups to market with," said Brian White, inside business development executive at Collette Vacations. "It has such a clearly defined structure, they gather regularly and there is a weekly publication that everybody grabs and reads." The weekly bulletin is certainly a popular way to promote church events and provide information to the congregation.

"The best thing [church leaders] can do is use the bulletin," said Jim Adair, president and founder of The Catholic Tour. He notes that announcements from the pastor or assistant priest also are good marketing methods, as well as email lists and sending notices to other parishes nearby.

Dimopoulos brought up the importance of face-to-face interactions, too. "Church groups like to have information evenings, so those get a lot of attention," she said. "They like to gather...they like to do all these little things that bring the community together." Hosting live information sessions or meeting with individual societies within the church adds a degree of personalization that many members appreciate, which could make them more inclined to sign up for a faith-based tour.

Churches and tour operators working together have many other ways of generating interest in the tour. "You need to give people a lot of tools to work with," said Dimopoulos. "That's why we offer webinars, e-blasts, marketing materials. We push them to get the product out in front of people."

It is important for operators to assist in any way they can because, as many industry insiders point out, churches are not marketing companies.

"They're a religious organization, not a marketer," said Schields. "It's important to give churches the tools it takes to market and promote a trip."

This fact makes a travel company's involvement even more critical for the success of the trip. Churches need to stick with what they do best, being an active part of the community, according to Etienne, and they should not have to worry about all the marketing. Instead, they can work side-by-side with a tour operator to get their message out in an effective manner.

And it is the message that is the true selling point for religious travel. Both churches and those in the industry have seen firsthand how faith-based travel can build community through explo-

7 Questions to Ask Your Faith Tour Operator

- 1** Does the tour operator understand the **importance of this type of travel** – are they **responsive to your group's needs**
- 2** Are they knowledgeable about your **church, denomination and priorities**
- 3** Can they arrange **special services**, allowing for daily devotions in itinerary if requested
- 4** Do they have **references from similar types of groups** they have worked with
- 5** Are they willing to be **creative in itinerary planning**
- 6** Are they timely in **replying to email and phone calls**
- 7** Do they participate in any **consumer protection programs** like that offered by the United States Tour Operators Association

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Church members bond when they share the joys and challenges of discovering different lands.

ration and shared experiences, and it is this truth that really needs to be communicated.

"It's good for the congregation, the ministry, everybody in the community," said Schields. "If you go to a religious destination, it brings the church and the people so much closer together."

While tour operators can try and sell this point all they want, a prominent figure from the church is the best person to convey the importance of travel to members. People's faith lives are very personal, and having someone they know and respect promoting a trip to them adds a sense of comfort.

"You need defined leadership," said White. "They are part of a local community, so [the leader] can meet face to face and make it personal."

Many others in the industry say that getting the pastor to go on the trip is helpful. A pastor can help bring the bible stories to life, a point that Schields believes needs to be emphasized. "Don't just talk about [bible stories] in church, go see them," he said. "This resonates very well with church members."

Exploring Multi-Generational Travel

For many years, older individuals have been the typical travelers on these kinds of trips. This can be attributed to many factors: Older members are usually at retirement age and have more time to commit to longer trips. They also have more financial stability and are less likely to be concerned about paying off debt. There is also some belief that older generations are more invested in their faith and therefore more apt to take religious trips. These factors have led many churches and operators to target this demographic over the years.

However, more and more tour operators are seeing interest from young people, as well as older members eager to share experiences with their families. "You do get older people, but a lot of times they bring their grandchildren...and their families," said Dimopoulos. "Even though it's planned by the older generation...you find a lot of families traveling together."

While older customers still dominate in the religious travel market, there has been an influx of younger travelers, and that could be a booming market for certain destinations, according to Etienne. Multi-generational tours have become much more common because there is so much potential in that market to create a new generation of tour customers, according to Schields. In fact, the annual Luxe Report on what's hot in luxury travel for 2013, published by travel agency group Virtuoso, finds that multi-generational family travel is the top and recurring trend for this year. The trend is largely driven by baby boomers who wish to spend more time with loved ones, a desire that

plays a role in travel decision-making. As a result, multi-generational family travel has become a recurring trend.

Many operators have acknowledged this trend and have altered their product offerings to include more religious tour options to cater to it.

"We have family tours and multi-generational travel geared towards that market because there is certainly interest in that," said White. "And that has greater potential for faith-based groups, especially since fellowship is one of the main aspects of what it's all about." This creates a lot of opportunity for churches to develop special tours geared toward families and inspire young congregation members to continue participating in religious travel for years to come.

Furthermore, trips can become a creative way to raise funds for the church and its initiatives, according to Schields, and operators should try to work out a fundraising component because that presents a lot of marketing potential. Not only that, but fundraising can be an effective way to bring different generations together, as older adults can help children, teens and young adults discover the joys of faith-based travel while simultaneously gaining insight about what the future travelers are looking for.

Even with a dedicated tour operator, a well-formulated trip, and plenty of marketing and promotion, there are still challenges when it comes to getting people to go on religious trips. Many churches have expressed apprehensions over promoting trips to members during the recession and the volatile economic recovery.

Those in the industry acknowledge that these issues have had an effect on all types of travel, but there is still a lot of interest in faith-based trips. It is important to stay positive when there is a slowdown because more often than not, it comes back. "It's how the church stays alive," said Mancino. "Just keep going." †