
TOUR OPERATORS & WHOLESALERS

Faith-based travel surges as religious sites attract followers

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By David Cogswell

At the first Religious Travel symposium, held by tour giant Globus last December, Dan Schmier, owner and president of All Star Travel & Cruises in Flint, Mich., offered passionate testimony to agents about his personal success in a niche that is by many accounts one of the hottest growth markets in the industry.

Schmier, a former church choirmaster, had profitably morphed into a tour leader for faith-based trips. He said that so much business now pours in through his Web site and phone that he willingly commissions other travel agencies to help handle the load.

"I work with agents in California, across the country," he said. "I book the whole thing, become the tour operator, escort it personally and pay the travel agents 12% commission."

Schmier is by no means unique. A growing number of travel professionals are benefiting from an apparent boom in religious and spiritually focused travel. Consider these numbers:

- According to the U.S. Office of Travel & Tourism Industries, the more than 600,000 overseas, faith-based trips taken by Americans in 2004 accounted for 2.2% of all U.S. overseas travel.
- American Church Lists, a market research company, calculates that church travel programs increased 20% between 2000 and 2004.
- Premier Tourism Marketing recently reported that of the 400,000 religious establishments in the U.S., 50,000 now offer travel programs.
- The 2004 Religious Conference Management Association reported that religious meetings and conventions in 2004 increased 8.4% over 2003, with 14.2 million attendees, 16,214 meetings and 3,797 conventions and conferences.

Though the rise in demand for religious travel may have eluded most mainstream marketers, it is clearly part of a larger trend toward more interest in religious products of all sorts. Greeting card giant Hallmark, for example, reports that the market for Christian products is \$3.75 billion a year, up from \$2.6 billion in 1991. A similar boom is being seen in the market for religion-themed music, videos and books.

The Record Industry Association of America reports that Christian music now outsells jazz and classical combined. On the book-publishing front, Rick Warren's inspirational best-seller "The Purpose Driven Life" has sold more than 25 million copies, and the apocalyptic "Left Behind" series has grossed more than \$650 million.

Hank Phillips, president of the National



Tour Association, said that tour operators have recognized the demand and are responding to it.

"In the last couple of years, based on our research, we've seen that the number of tour operators providing religious tours is on the increase," said Phillips. "Now slightly over a third of our members provide tours they classify in some fashion as being religious."

Effects of 9/11

Schmier attributes the increased interest in faith-based products to three things. The first, he says, is 9/11.

"A whole lot of people had a religious experience real quick," he said. "When you see thousands of people murdered here in our own country before your eyes, it makes people think about how precious every minute of their time is. All churches reported an upsurge in the last few years."

The second effect, Schmier said, is the influence of the late Pope John Paul II, who "had such a profound effect on all religions. He broke so many barriers. He had a big effect on business."

Finally, in Schmier's judgment, the market is being fueled by the entrance of big tour operators like Globus.

"The market was there, but having mainline tour operators now come online has created another surge," he said. "There were people who hesitated with the mom-and-dad operators. I absolutely applaud Globus for being the first mainline tour operator to step up to the plate. They are doing a lot of marketing."

Mike Schields, Globus' director of group sales, said that by working with a major supplier, agents can get overrides plus full commission. "A lot of this kind of product has been sold by smaller operators," Schields said, "but none that have our strength, size, buying power or stability."

For Globus, one of the world's oldest and largest group tour operators, faith-based travel has been something of a recent epiphany. The company entered the market with eight programs in the 2004-2005 season. In its second year, it more than doubled its religious offerings, to 20 programs in 20 countries.

Schields said Globus is convinced that the traditional travel industry has only begun to scratch the surface of the religion-focused travel market. "Faith-based products are 5% of the music industry, 5% of radio and 5% of publishing," Schields said. "Only 2% of travel is faith-based. All we're saying is, if we keep teaching these agents, [the remaining] 3% represents a huge chunk of business."

Schields theorized that the percentage of faith-based products is lower in travel than the other industries because until recently, the few companies offering it "have never



been big enough to bring it to the forefront." But that appears to be changing.

Globus' products target the three largest religious communities in the U.S. According to research reported by City University of New York, there are 100 million Protestants in the U.S., 67 million Catholics and 4 to 5 million Jews.

Other faiths add up to less than a million each.

Globus' ace in the hole is Kevin Wright, its religious travel manager, who is the author of a series of Pilgrims' Travel Guides to religious shrines. Wright's personal involvement and knowledge give Globus a big marketing advantage because he can break the market down for outsiders to understand and provide insight into its workings.

"Sales are tremendous," Wright said. "We printed 50,000 brochures on Sept. 7. By the first week of November they were depleted. We printed 100,000 more. Now we've been through about 97,000." He describes that kind of success as "just astounding."

Globus also offers agents marketing kits that Schields terms "religious travel in a box" -- training programs and turn-key business plans that help agents set performance objectives and find and approach prospects. They even include templates for letters to priests, pastors or rabbis.

"It walks them through the process," Schields said. "Here's who to talk to; here's a form letter; find the pastor, plug in the information. It has marketing tips to train agents how to sell it."

Wright instructs agents on which destinations are important to different denominations, such as western England for Methodists, Scotland for Presbyterians, Germany for Lutherans.

"There is a certain terminology that is appropriate for each group," said Wright. "We provide a list of lingo and buzzwords, so when a travel agent is out there marketing, they know what words to use. When we talk to the Catholic market, we use the word 'community.' With Protestants, we say 'fellowship.'"



Plugging into the Network

Many of the 200 agents who attended Globus' Religious Travel Symposium told success stories about their faith-based travel enterprises.

Honnie Korngold, president of the Christian Travel Group of Seal Beach, Calif., had been involved in religious events and conferences for about 15 years and opened a travel agency two years ago in order to "develop these travel programs for a segment I'm already very familiar with."

"This segment is so underserved," Korngold said. "The growth is beyond anything I could have imagined. Our phone rings off the hook all week from travel agents who can sell these products and have been looking for them but didn't know ways to get commissions from them."

The company has booked several 700-passenger cruises each year as well as individual and other group bookings.

The Travelers Center, a Denver agency, got into faith-based travel three years ago by advertising in the Denver Church Guide, offering to donate 10% of its

commissions to the participating church.

Bookings started coming in within six months, and one opportunity led to another.

“You don’t just do a booking,” said Joann Thompson, a partner in the agency. “It keeps weaving itself. While we’re the agency of record, they [the churches] are out there promoting it, and at a higher level than a regular travel agency could. It’s not just a booking as we know it. There are a lot more tentacles or feelers, more things that can happen.”

Perception is Reality

Despite such appealing testimonials, however, some data seem to contradict the notion of ballooning growth in religion-focused travel.

For example, the fastest-growing part of the niche appears to be coming from evangelicals. But in seeking out future opportunities, some operators are now questioning how deep the evangelical movement actually runs. A 2004 Gallup poll



reported that 70 million Americans, or about 25% of the population, now characterize themselves as evangelical Christians. But the Barna Group, a religious research outfit that has done yearly surveys on the state of religion in the U.S. since 1991, took a different approach in a 2005 study and got very different results.

Instead of asking subjects to label themselves, Barna asked them if they held to specific points of evangelical doctrine, such as literal interpretation of

the Bible, the existence of Satan and a belief that salvation has nothing to do with good deeds.

According to Barna, evangelicals “remain just 7% of the adult population,” a proportion that has not changed since the group started asking the questions in 1994.

And although the number of NTA tour operators who offer faith-based tours grew 9% from 2003 to 2005, to 36% of member operators, that figure actually represents a decline from 2000, when it was 41%.

Of course, no marketing craze was ever set back by anything as mundane as facts, and few travel professionals doubt that a vibrant, largely untapped market really does exist for faith-based travel.

“What this is reflective of is the way tour operators are able to really tap into a special-interest demand,” said the NTA’s Phillips. “It can be something as broad as religious tours ... or as narrow as revolving around a popular movie. They are all part of that landscape of special-interest tours.”

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Pilgrimages to Mecca

Although statistics suggest that the Catholic, Protestant and Jewish sectors comprise the vast majority of the faith-based market, pilgrimages are also a strong part of the Islamic tradition.

Dr. Riaz A. Akhtar, a Chicago-based internist and cardiologist and the author of *A Manual of Hajj & Umrah*, has worked for 11 years with Muslims wanting to make pilgrimages.

Akhtar's company, Barakah Hajj & Umrah, offers pilgrimages to Mecca in Saudi Arabia during Ramadan and Hajj, with preparatory seminars.



As a physician and author, his interest in pilgrimages is not strictly business.

"My bottom line is not a profit margin or money," he said. "My bottom line is that this needs to be done right."

In fact, last year Akhtar said he took a loss because a travel agency that he was working with for air tickets upped the price at the last minute. Since his clients had already paid for their passages, he did not pass the increase on to them.

He acknowledges he that could use the help of a travel professional. "I want to grow bigger, but I need people to work in the office to handle the calls," he said. "I don't have a qualified travel agency yet."

Akhtar tries to fill a void. "Travel to Saudi Arabia at Hajj time is so complicated," he said. "It's not a vacation, forget about that. There are 3 million to 4 million people minimum coming from every part of the world. So many travel agents who are doing it have no idea, and things go wrong. People blame the travel agent. The agent blames local conditions over there. So I'm offering them the necessary guidance." -- **D.C.**