

How to Make Your Church a Tourist Attraction?

By Victor Beshir

Introduction:

During the Divine Liturgy at the end of the "Institution Narrative," the Church sings the following hymn: "Amen. Amen. Amen. Your Death O Lord we proclaim; Your holy Resurrection and Ascension into the heavens we confess. We praise You, we bless You, we thank You, O Lord, and we entreat You, O our God."

In every Divine Liturgy, congregations sing this hymn as a promise to our Lord to proclaim His death, which means to evangelize. Therefore, evangelizing is not a choice; but rather it is necessary. It is a commandment and a vow that we all need to fulfill.

But, how do we evangelize? We can evangelize by:

- meeting people and proclaiming the good news (The Gospel), OR
- bringing people to the church and talking about our Lord inside the Church, OR
- making use of other methods: evangelistic books, brochures, video tapes, DVDs, Internet websites, e-mails, letters, newspapers, TV, and so on..

In this lesson, I am going to concentrate on the method of bringing people to the church. However, I'd like to make it clear from the beginning of this lesson that **the objective here is evangelism. How to bring people to the church? This question deals with the method you use to bring people to the church. Thus bringing people to the church is just a method. The real objective is evangelism.**

What are the advantages of bringing people to the church?

Bringing people to the church has the following advantages over meeting people somewhere else:.

- a- Face to Face with God.** Visiting the house of God could put a person face to face with God. The visitors could find a quiet place where they could have a quiet time with God alone. The visitor may remember some old memories

about his/her sins and may realize how empty life is without God. I know a person who normally doesn't go to church and has no relationship with God, who used to tell me that whenever she visits the National Cathedral in Washington D.C., she always finds herself in tears.

- b- **Spiritual impact.** In the Orthodox Church, the house of God has its own spiritual impact on people. It draws people nearer to God. The late H.G. Bishop Youness, bishop of Gharbya, Egypt, and a great contemporary Coptic scholar, talked about a famous international architect cried when he had entered a church in a monastery in Egypt, as a result of feeling the presence of God there.
- c- **Church Structures.** The Church has icons, altar, candles, and its own special structures. All those, either individually or collectively, pass some spiritual messages to the visitors.
- d- Others that I will talk about later

Additional Arrangements for Visitors:

Do you agree with me that bringing people to the Church would be a great evangelistic method? Here are ways we can use this method:

The Church as a Tourist Attraction:

- 1- I know the words "tourist attraction" might shock some of you, but remember two things:
 - Making the Church a tourist attraction is not the objective—tourism is just a method to bring people to the church.
 - Tourist attraction has many benefits as mentioned above.
- 2- The idea of using a church as a tourist attraction is well known in many parts of the world. For example, In Paris, tourists visit the Notre Dame Church. In Egypt, tourists don't visit just the Pyramids; they also visit the old churches in Old Cairo, the old monasteries, and the new Cathedral in Cairo. In Washington, D.C., tourists make trips to the National Cathedral and the Catholic Basilica of the National Shrine, in the Catholic University campus.
- 3- People like to visit "Tourist attractions" as long as they find something beneficial or attractive for them, either historical, or cultural or artistic, just to mention a few.

- 4- By using the church as a "Tourist Attraction," the church is open to tourists from all over the world and local people as well. Some of those visitors would never hear about the Orthodox faith unless a church is open for them.
- 5- Tourists like picking up free brochures or booklets and buying books and gifts. They also like having tours and finding someone to explain the site for them and to answer their questions. Therefore, it is easy to evangelize in a those acceptable simple ways.
- 6- People will come voluntarily to your church. To appreciate that, think about the efforts and time someone could make to convince a person to come to a church.
- 7- If you arrange a church tour and a question-answer session following the tour, visitors will not only come to the church, but they will gladly listen to your hidden evangelism message during the tour and the question-answer session.
- 8- If you offer the visitors materials, visitors will also be happy to receive all your free brochures, flyers, booklets, books, and booklets.
- 9- People will directly experience the touch of the house of the Lord and the work of the Holy Spirit.
- 10- Some local people will be happy to come to your Bible study, if you offer one.
- 11- Some people will be eager to sit with a priest, if you announce that a free spiritual consultation is available.
- 12- If you offer a list of other Orthodox Churches in other states and other countries, people can visit other Orthodox Churches when they return home.

Some other denominations already have discovered the power of evangelism using a church as a tourist attraction. I saw a church that was not built to serve a congregation, but was built for the purpose of evangelism. This church is in Orlando, Florida, next to Disney World, and it is called, "Mary, Queen of the Universe Shrine."

However, to attract tourists, you have to have something unique and attractive.

So,

What Are The Unique and Attractive Attributes in the Coptic Orthodox Churches in North America, Europe, or Australia?

1-Some churches have unique Coptic structures with domes and church towers. This beautiful structure is very attractive to Americans and tourists in general. In Clearwater, Florida, I remember when our church there was completed, a journalist called me insisting to visit the church, even if the church was closed. She came while the church was closed, telling me how her friend could not stop talking about the beauty of the structure of the church building. On that day, I explained to her the spiritual meaning of the structure of the building. I expected the visit will last for a few minutes, but to my surprise we spent almost two hours there; she was thirsty to hear about the great spirituality of the Orthodox Church.

2- Most of our churches have the old ICONOSTASIS (Icon holder), which is the wooden divider between the sanctuary and the nave of the church. Did you know that the making of this iconostasis goes back to the fourth century? We can easily write this in our brochures and web pages-we **invite people to come to see artifacts from the fourth century.** The Iconostasis we have today has the same design and woodwork that were used starting from the fourth century.

3- Most of our churches have Coptic Icons:

Coptic art is unique to the Coptic Church. People will love to see the icons and learn about the spiritual meaning behind each icon.

4-Adding a museum can be an addition of a unique attribute. It can be a simple museum with pictures of monasteries and churches. More people will come to see your museum. It doesn't have to be sophisticated. Whatever you show, it is more likely that the visitors have never seen before. When you write about it, mention the word "Egypt." Remember, people are fond of Egypt. Let me add something else here; our churches could be eligible for some grants from the US government because of the

cultural awareness that this project brings. Amazingly, most of Islamic mosques and schools, if not all, get grants from the government, because the government defines the mosques and schools as Islamic cultural centers. Our churches never thought about how to get federal or local grants.

If your church has one of the features mentioned above, then your church could be used as a tourist attraction.

A Description of the Project:

Think of the church as a tourist site, then ask yourself, what should I include in a tourist site?

First, prepare the place. Have receptionist to welcome visitors. Make a guest book available to visitors who can voluntarily leave their names, addresses, e-mails, phones, and write their comments.

Second, prepare brochures, booklets about the Orthodox Church, the Coptic Church. Design attractive flyers for the church you are using as an attractive tourist attraction.

Third, you can arrange for a tour to let visitors hear about the spiritual meaning of everything inside the church. Determine tour schedule and make it known to visitors.

Fourth, The Church can also offer a question-answer session after the tour to answer some of the visitor's questions.

Fifth, open your bookstore to the visitors. This way the visitor can leave with something from the church. The gift shop or bookstore offers books, booklets, videos, CD's, and gifts that visitors can take back to read more about my church and to show their friends and family members. This way, evangelism efforts continues with the visitors and their friends too.

Sixth, prepare rooms for private spiritual consultation with priests, and include their time schedule in the flyer.

Seventh, prepare a hall or a room for video and presentations, where visitors can see power point presentations or watch a DVD about the Church. Announce its schedule in your flyer.

Eighth, start a small museum

Ninth, specify a small chapel for personal spiritual quiet time.

Tenth, make many evangelists available in order to make it easier for visitors to mingle with the evangelists and start one-on-one evangelism.

Eleventh, the Church can also announce date, time, and place of a Bible study where the visitor can learn more about the faith. Since your church could have live stream, invite visitors from other places to watch the study live on the Internet.

How Do you Start This Project?

- 1- **Start small & simple:** Open your church each Saturday morning, for example, for just three hours. Later, you can add more hours and other days.
- 2- **Prepare brochures about the Coptic Church:** You may use the one in the Evangelism web page: <http://evangelismcopticorthodox.org/resources/brochurecollection.html>
- 3- **Prepare a flyer:** Keep it simple, short, attractive, and compelling in its invitation. Have an attractive picture, a map, and directions to the church. Include the address, phone, e-mail, web page, schedule of tourist tours and of spiritual consultation sessions.
- 4- **Prepare the evangelists:** Train them on how to guide a tour, what to say about the church, and how to evangelize people. It is important to design a visitor follow-up system and to teach the evangelists how to follow up with people who show interest in the church.
- 5- **Prepare others:** Train people who will answer phone calls, work as receptionist, help in the gift shop, or in the cafeteria (if you plan to open the church cafeteria and offer delicious Egyptian food), those who will prepare materials, others who will work on public relations, and on the rest.
- 6- **Prepare an attractive web page for the church:** Nowadays, first thing anybody does when learning about a particular church or a company or a tourist attraction is to search online to see if that place has a website. Prepare a simple, yet compelling one.
- 7- **Prepare a gift shop:** Fill it with books, booklets, gifts, photo, cards, souvenirs, Coptic music, Coptic Videos, and some Egyptian stuff. Make sure it has evangelistic materials.

8- Prepare a small museum: Fill it with Coptic icons, pictures of Coptic Monasteries and old churches, some Coptic antiques from Khan Al-khaleely, and some big pictures of the pyramids and other old Egyptians artifacts pictures.

9- Prepare a room where people can watch a video tape or DVD or a Power Point presentation: It could be a very simple and a short presentation, or a sophisticated one.

10- Prepare your church and your congregation: Have enough signs that lead to the church. Get the congregation excited about the project and get as many people you can to participate in the project. You can't just do it yourself; you need to get the whole Church's support.

11- Look for ways to let visitors and tourists know about your church:

- In every American city there are offices to contact:
 - Tourism Development Office
 - Visitors Bureau:
 - Many web pages that are designed for visitors to states, counties, and cities, mostly similar to: <http://www.visittampabay.com/do/heritage/index.php>
(Where you can add your church web page)
 - For the state, there is a similar web page where you can add your church web page. Here is an example: <http://www.visitflorida.com/destinations/area.php/ca=75>
- The Tourism Development Office can help you make your church known to visitors and tourists.
- If you can't allocate your Tourism Development Office, contact the Chamber of Commerce in your area.
- In addition to the above, you can visit the web pages of the city, county, and state, and ask them to have your Church website link added to their web pages.
- You can also contact hotels and tourist information centers to put your church's flyers in their racks.
- You can also contact museums and universities in your area. Some would be very interested when they hear that you have artifacts from the fourth century, and they may help you.

12- If you want to start with a big open house: you can invite newspapers, TV stations, tourist companies, hotels' receptionists, tourist associations (if you have any in your city),

the mayor, the museums officials, and others who work in tourism.

13- Prayer Group: It is essential that you establish a prayer group that prays for every visitor comes to the church. Without prayers we can not attract people to our church.

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Tourism & Evangelism in the Coptic Orthodox Church:

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- 1- This a good project to open up our churches and to start evangelism. Instead of having closed static churches, more Copts will get used to having visitors in the church and will start to accept the idea of evangelism.
- 2- From the names you collect in the visitors "Guest book," you can start catechetical classes.
- 3- This project can attract many people from your congregation, such as retired people and youth. Very soon, we will see many of the first immigrated people from Egypt reach their retirement. Those people have great experience and dedications that we can easily utilize in this project.
- 4- I see the Tourism Attraction project as a good starting point for evangelistic activities in many Coptic Churches in USA, Canada, Europe, and Australia.