

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, this hymn is a promise to our Lord that we promise to proclaim his Death, which is to evangelize. Therefore, evangelizing is not a choice, it is a must. 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 proclaim 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 lecture, I am going to concentrate on the method of bringing people to the church. But, I like to make it clear from the beginning of this lecture that **the objective is evangelism. How to bring people to the church? This question deals with the method you use to bring people to the church. So bringing people to Church is just a method. The real objective is evangelism.**

What are the advantages of bringing people to Church?

There are many advantages of evangelizing when you have arrangement to invite people to come to your Church.

- a- **Face to Face with God.** Visiting the house of God could put a person face to face with God. The visitor can find a quiet place where he/she can 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 Youaness, bishop of Gharbya, Egypt, and a great contemporary Coptic scholar, talked about a famous international architect cried when he entered a church in a monastery in Egypt, because he felt the presence of God there.
- c- **Church Structures.** The Church has icons, altar, candles, and its own special structures. They each, either individually or collectively, pass some spiritual messages to the visitors.

Additional Arrangements for Visitors:

- a- **Optional Tour.** You can arrange for a tour to let visitors hear about the spiritual meaning of everything inside the church.
- b- **Ask Questions.** The Church can also offer a question and answer session after the tour to answer some of the visitor's questions.
- c- **Bible Study.** The Church can announce date, time and place of a Bible study where the visitor can learn more about the faith
- d- **Visual Room.** Visitors can see a power point presentation or watch a DVD about the Church.
- e- **Guest Book.** Visitors can voluntarily leave their names, addresses, e-mails, phones, and write their comments.
- f- **One-on-One Discussion.** Visitors can mingle with Church servants and talk one-on-one.
- g- **Spiritual Sessions with a priest.** Visitors can speak privately with a priest in a spiritual counseling room.
- h- **Available Brochures.** Visitors can get their hands on any available brochures that church provides.
- i- **Shop at Gift Shop.** 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 also to show their friends and family members. This way, evangelism efforts continues with the visitors and their friends too.

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 visit 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 there for them, historical or cultural or artistic, just to mention a few.
- 4- By using the church as a "Tourist Attraction," the Church is open to local people and to tourists from all over the world. Some of those visitors would never hear about the Orthodox faith unless the 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 this very simple way.
- 6- In addition to the above advantages, let me add the following:
 - **People will come voluntarily to your church.** To appreciate that, think about the efforts someone could make to convince a person to come to the church and how long that could take.
 - People will not only come, but they **will gladly listen** to your spiritual talk during the tour and have their questions answered.
 - People **will also be happy** to receive all your free brochures, flyers, booklets, books, and booklets.
 - People **will directly experience** the touch of the house of the Lord and the work of the Holy Spirit.

- Some people **will be happy** to come to your Bible study.
 - Some people **will be eager** to sit with a priest.
 - People can **visit other Orthodox Churches** worldwide if they have a list of all Orthodox Churches in the world.
- 7- Some people discovered the power of evangelism through the use of a church as a tourist attraction. They have 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."

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. In Clearwater, Florida, I remember when our church was completed, a journalist called me insisting to visit the church, even if the church was closed. She came while the church was closed and told me that her friends could not stop talking about the beauty of the structure of the 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 this great spirituality.

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 available since 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 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 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.

How Do you Start This Project?

- 1- Start small & simple:** Open your church each Saturday morning for 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:
- 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 visits and of priest visitation sessions, and English Bible study meeting times.
- 4- Prepare the Evangelism Workers:** 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 evangelism workers how to follow up with people who show interest in the church.
- 5- Prepare Others:** Train people who will work in the gift shop, in the cafeteria (if you plan to open the church cafeteria and offer delicious Egyptian food), or those who will prepare materials or who will work on public relations, and so on.

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 (Book Store): 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 also 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.

Assignment:

Search any item mentioned above. The purpose is how to make this project a reality. Here are some examples:

- 1- Search how to add the church to the "tourist attractions" list of a city? Where to go? Who to contact? What kind of fees needed?
- 2- How to get the church fliers in the hotels, motels, and information centers, etc.? How much it costs to do this? Are there agencies that can do it?
- 3- How to create an attractive web page for this purpose? Who could maintain it?
- 4- Write attractive flyers or brochures that contain all the info in an attractive way.
- 5- How to get some Egyptian artifacts (I don't mean the original ones but copies)? How much it costs? How to establish continuous supplies?
- 6- How to prepare the people who would work with the tourists?
- 7- Write a script of what the guide will say to the tourist in details?
- 8- How to get important books and CDs to the bookstore to make them available to the tourists?
- 9- How to arrange for the financial support for the project?
- 10- Create a follow up system for visitors that enter the names and info into a database, then print thank you notes, and follow up from time to time.
- 11- Create brochures that answer some questions of the visitors or explain certain things about the church, using evangelistic approach (To see an example, visit:

<http://evangelismcopticorthodox.org/booksbookletsbrochures.html> You will find a brochure, "***The Legacy of the Coptic Orthodox Church.***"

- 12- How to establish a Bible study to which you could invite the tourists? And on time, how to make this Bible study an evangelistic tool to prepare people for accepting the faith and get them ready to accept baptism.

Time: You have an entire month to finish this assignment