Amir Shani, Manuel Antonio Rivera and Denver Severt

"To bring God's word to all people": The case of a religious theme-site

Abstract

Over the past decades the Orlando theme park industry has been perceived as a secular competitive business environment, particularly characterized by an increased number of innovative and technologically advanced attractions. Recently, religious themed sites have emerged in a market that has been typically dominated by corporate giants. These sites reflect an interesting new phase in religious tourism, characterized by man-made buildings with religious themes designed to attract and satisfy tourists. This article describes this new industry trend and the managerial challenges faced by these organizations. By using a case study approach, with both primary and secondary data, The WordSpring Discovery Center in Orlando, FL is examined with special attention given to the challenges of preserving a religious belief while maintaining customer service through a compelling visitor experience. Navigating between these roles can often be difficult. However, the research indicates that the management team perceives tourism as an avenue for advancing their missionary goals, with the staff executing their work according to this guiding premise. The possible consequences of developing religious theme sites are discussed, including the expected criticism of the 'disneyfication' of religion and the potential in improving the management quality in religious sites. Finally, the limitations of the study and suggestions for future research are detailed, emphasizing the need for the examination of the visitors' experience in religious theme sites, and their satisfaction from the provided service.

Keywords:
religious tourism; visitor attractions; managerial challenges; visitor experience; USA

Introduction

With over 120,000 rooms and 47 million visitors each year, Orlando is considered one of largest tourist destinations in the world. Even though the events and convention industry has gained momentum in the Central Florida area, it is still mainly known for its theme parks and attractions. When looking at the top 10 theme parks in the U.S, seven are located in Orlando, including Walt Disney World, Universal Studios and SeaWorld. Other major theme parks include attractions such as Busch Gardens, Wet 'n Wild, and Gatorland. Although these attractions are typically characterized by their

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water activities, roller-coasters, animal attractions, and cartoons; their main goal is to provide the visitor recreation and entertainment activities. However, within this secular tourist environment, it can be noticed that, in the past few years, there has been an interesting phenomenon in the development of another type of theme-site. Although these sites rely on similar means and concepts as those mentioned above, they are built around religious contents and their entrepreneurs and managers are driven by a religious ideology. Religious theme-sites are not a phenomenon exclusively found in Orlando; they are part of a recent trend in the United States and around the world. However, their growth is particularly interesting since this city was never associated with religious tourism.

This paper will discuss the trend of combining religious contents with theming by presenting of the case of WordSpring Discovery Center in Orlando by using a case study approach. Given the fact that themed religious sites are a recent phenomenon and that their management patterns and characteristics still need to be brought to light, the study will be descriptive and exploratory, using a qualitative research strategy with a single-case design (Ho & McCercher, 2004). The study embraces Beeton's definition of a research case-study: "A holistic empirical inquiry used to gain an in-depth understanding of a contemporary phenomenon in its real-life context, using multiple sources of evidence" (2005, p. 42). Feagin, Orum and Sjoberg (1991) also argue that the case study is the ideal methodology when a holistic, in-depth investigation is required. As noted by Yin (1994), single case studies, although they may exhibit disadvantages and limitations, are appropriate when presenting a unique case or a new phenomenon. For the study, both primary and secondary data were collected. Primary data includes in-depth interviews and structured e-mail interviews delivered in a fixed-order with the site director and the management team. Secondary data includes documentation from WordSpring (e.g., brochures, DVD's promotion, and internal organizational documents). Additional information was obtained by the researchers by conducting direct observations at the site. The discussion begins with a review of religious tourism literature, followed by a discussion of the recent trend of combining religious contents with theming. The next section portrays WordSpring and the managerial characteristics and challenges faced by the organization. Finally, the main conclusions are elicited and suggestions for future research are presented.

Religious tourism

Religious tourism is motivated by faith or religious reasons (Sharpley & Sundaram, 2005, p. 161), and is considered the oldest and one of the most prominent types of tourism (Timothy & Boyd, 2006). The most known form of religious tourism is the pilgrimage, which is defined as "A journey resulting from religious causes, externally to a holy site, and internally for spiritual purposes and internal understanding" (Barber, 1993, p. 1). Pilgrimage has existed, and still exists, in many religions around the world, including Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, and Christianity. For example, close to 700,000 Christian pilgrims visit Israel annually, which represent approximately one quarter of all visitors to Israel (Collins-Kreiner & Kliot, 2000). Another famous phenomenon is the large-scale pilgrimage to the Saudi Arabian Kingdom, especially Mecca, which welcomes over 3.5 million pilgrims every year and which Muslims are expected to visit at least once in a lifetime (Sadi & Henderson, 2005). Apart from visiting pilgrimage centers, religious tourism also involves attending religious ceremonies, conferences, celebrations, and church meetings that do not take place in the home environment (Rinschede, 1992).

Not all religious tourists are believers or religiously devoted. Cohen (1998) makes an important distinction between pilgrim and tourist; both visit the same sites, but for

different reasons: the pilgrim, to worship, and the tourist potentially merely to observe and participate in the pilgrim's experience, but without sharing his/her faith (Shoval, 2000). For example, Shackley (2002, p. 346) mentioned that people have different motivations to visit cathedrals: "Some are seeking life-changing experience, others merely somewhere to while away a wet afternoon. Some wish to worship, others to marvel or just to explore". It was even argued that at most sacred sites, those who come to worship, pray, or meditate are in a minority (Shackley, 2001). In fact, many of these sites attract people not because that they are seen as sacred religious sites, but because they are significant cultural tourism attractions.

As shown, even in modern society religious tourism has a great influence on the social and cultural life of people. However, Rinschede (1992) argued that religious tourism today is closely associated to holiday and cultural tourism. For example, organized pilgrimages often include a free day to allow the pilgrims to take day trips. Further-more, he mentioned that religious and holiday tourism are especially interconnected in the United States, where many significant pilgrimage centers are located in the immedi-ate vicinity of large tourist attractions. In this regard, many of the religious tourists are akin to Feifer's (1985) earlier conceptualization of the "postmodern-tourists", who enjoy different types of experiences as part of a single excursion. For example, in a single trip a tourist may visit theme parks, ecotourism sites, and a sacred place.

Modern religious tourism has been attributed to new characteristics and aspects that are usually associated with modern hedonistic or pleasure-seeking tourism. In addition to these authentic sacred places (e.g., the Church of Annunciation in Nazareth), modern religious tourism is facing an interesting evolutionary phase: visitor attractions include man-made buildings with religious themes designed to attract and satisfy tourists (Shackley, 2003). These particular sites, although not located in sacred places, are combining religious content with theming and simulative environments. They involve the use of modern-secular means to allowing visitors to undergo a spiritual experience and to strengthen their religious-cultural identity. These religious sites possess similar characteristics as traditional theme parks, which according to Milman (1993, p. 934), "aim to create an atmosphere of another place or time, and usually concentrate on one dominant theme, around which architecture, landscaping, costumed personnel, rides, shows, foodservices, and merchandise are coordinated". Yet, these religious theme-sites are innovative in their involvement with clear religious content, and in the religious ideology that guides both the initiators and the managers of the sites.

An example of such site is the "Nazareth Village" in the city of Nazareth, an initiative by a Protestant group that reconstructs an "authentic" first century village simulating life at the time of Jesus Christ. According to Shoval (2000), this aims to fulfill the needs of religious tourists through religious visualization as a means to experience a natural and "authentic looking" site that simulates the daily life at the time of the Bible. This is accomplished by recreating the setting, having actors play specific roles, and even serving traditional dishes characteristic of the first century. All this is done to enhance the attractiveness to Christian visitors. In essence, it involves a remaking of their holy site to better fit the image they have in mind (Shoval, 2000).

However, not all Christian theme sites aim to simulate Biblical life. In the case WordSpring Discovery Center, it focuses on one particular topic: the translation of the Bible and the New Testament into all languages throughout the world and thus offers activities to center visitors surrounding this mission.

The case of WordSpring Discovery Center

The WordSpring Discovery Center is the official visitors' center of the Wycliffe Bible Translators Organization USA, and is located at the organization's headquarters in Orlando, Florida. Wycliffe is a Christian missionary organization founded in 1942 and has representation in more than 50 countries across five continents. The organization's declared goal is to get the Bible and the New Testament translated into languages that still lack translation. In October 1999, the organization launched its "Vision 2025" in which it is committed "to see a Bible translation program in progress in every remaining language lacking translation by 2025" (www.wordspringdiscoveycenter.com). The main ideological concept underlying the organization's work is that every human being should have access to "God's Word" in his/her own language, since the most effective means of communication is the mother tongue.

Since its founding in 1942, Wycliffe has helped complete more than 600 translations of the Holy Scriptures, and after the launching of "Vision 2025", Wycliffe has been involved in 386 new language programs that began in "Bible-less" language communities worldwide. Still, the organization's vision is to see the Bible and the New Testament translated into the 2,529 languages worldwide which are still lacking these translations. Today, Wycliffe International has more than 6,600 active members around the world, employed as linguists/translators, literacy specialists, language surveyors, researchers, trainers, and a broad variety of support roles. The organization is constantly looking for new members for voluntarily missions around the world.

As a non-profit organization, Wycliffe relies mostly on fundraising and not on generating revenues. The organization does not charge any fee for most of its products (Holy Scriptures translations), mostly because the "customers" from Third World countries are unable to pay making fundraising even more vital. The organization is facing a tremendous challenge with regards to fundraising, as it has to compete with other Christian non-profit organizations that deal with issues such as education and family values which might be perceived as more controversial than the translation of the Holy Scriptures. As part of the organization's efforts to recruit more volunteers and to raise the awareness about the relation between cultures, languages, and the Holy Scriptures, Wycliffe opened a Visitors' Center in its headquarters in Orlando in 2002.

The Wycliffe Visitors' Center was named "WordSpring Discovery Center". The center sprawls on 4,500 square feet and is located approximately 25 minutes from the main theme parks and attractions in Orlando. It offers visitors a variety of exhibits, interactive media, games, and video presentations focusing on the history of the Bible, the languages of the world, and on the ongoing work of Bible translation. Some of the activities for adults and children include listening to Bible stories through audio dramas, printing their name in different languages, expressing their thoughts about the Holy Scriptures on a "graffiti scroll", and listening to stories from the Wycliffe personnel who worked as missionaries around the world. The center is open all week except Sunday and on certain holidays. The admission fee is very low (around $4-$6 for individual and $25 for a family), especially when compared to the main attractions in Orlando, which charge up to $80 daily. Organized tours are offered, a restaurant is offered, and a gift shop is open. Beside its function as a tourist site, the center also organizes special events, including weddings, conferences and business meetings for churches, ministries, and other community organizations. Additionally, full accommodations are offered to event participants, including an outdoor pool, a Jacuzzi, and a game room.

As a religious site integrating theming and operating in a highly competitive environment, WordSpring is faced with challenging tasks. These challenges include dealing with the management issues related to a religious site and handling the different functions involved in the operation of operating a tourist site and a missionary center simultaneously.

Managing religious sites

Religion and spirituality issues have always been linked to the world of business and management. Religious beliefs and values strongly affect manager and employee behaviors at work (McCormick, 1994; Worthy, 1958), and impact consumers' decision-making process (Delener, 1994). Likewise, there is plenty of evidence that the hospitality and tourism industry is also heavily affected by religious considerations and influences (Dugan, 1994; Weidenfeld, 2006; Huntley & Barnes-Reld, 2003). Despite the growing interest in religion and spiritual management, the management of religious sites has remained relatively unexplored. However, although managers must consider religious aspects in the planning and operation of their businesses, managers of religious sites are faced with a unique and difficult challenge that deserves special attention.

Unlike most tourist attractions, sacred sites are seldom managed with the sole aim of increasing the number of visitors or turning large profits (Shackley, 2001). Many religious sites generate no revenue from visitors, and few generate sufficient income to cover operating costs. Many of the religious sites' managers are usually religious leaders without any management training not to mention training with financial issues. These areas may be considered "secular" matters, and thus preferred to be avoided by these organizations (Shackley, 2003). It is essential to remember that many sacred sites represent inheritance and legacy, which constitute irreplaceable resources that require conservation and good management (Timothy & Boyd, 2003). A by-product of the highly centralized and informal management structure of most religious sites is argued by Shackley (2001) posits that eluding a site's managerial issues could have severe consequences including deficient functioning of the human resources, unskilled employees, hasty decision making, and the unwillingness to deal with necessary changes. Consequently, this can further lead to problems such as overcrowding, insufficient services and infrastructure, accidental damage, noise pollution, vandalism, graffiti, and a poor overall experience (Woodward, 2004).

One of the main aspects of managing religious sites is the necessity to satisfy the needs of two audiences: the worshippers and the tourists. Although the former are an important part of the 'spirit of the place', the latter constitutes the vast majority of the visitors. The need to welcome large numbers of those who do not want to participate in the worship, but rather consider the site a tourist attraction, requires a great deal of maneuvering between the conflicting needs of the audiences (Nolan & Nolan, 1992). For example, while worshippers usually desire to keep the site as natural and authentic as possible, tourists demand an adequate level of facilities and services, which may clash with the worshipers' feelings. In this regard, Shackley (2003) states that managers of religious sites often face the dilemma pivoting between preserving the site, which may be ancient, fragile and weighed down by tradition and generating funds to preserve the site which essentially come from visitors.

The urgent need to generate revenue for operation and conservation requires the sacred sites to vary their sources of revenue from admission to donations and governmental grants. Though controversial amongst religious communities, it is not rare to find sacred sites that charge user fees or vehicle access. Additionally, the sites will also sell

souvenirs, organize special events and offer lodging and catering services (Timothy & Boyd, 2003). These factors often stimulate serious debates on the issue of the commercialism of sacred sites, as put forth by Shackley (2001, p. 86): "The process of commodification …. often happens with questionable taste, as in the development of religious *kitsch* dominating the retail environment among most Christian sites". The growing criticism on the commercialism of religion becomes even stronger as the result of the recent trend of religious theme-sites, which are not traditionally sacred places, but rather constitute contrived environments to attract and offer visitors a great experience.

Managing WordSpring

MANAGERIAL CHARACTERISTICS

The WordSpring management team includes five men and two women, exhibiting different characteristics. Their ages range from 21 to over 55, with one manager practically in each age group. All the managers have acquired some form of formal education – two attended college, four are college graduates, and one went on to graduate school. Most of the managers worked at Wycliffe before joining the WordSpring management team - one department manager has been at Wycliffe for 31 years. For all the managers at WordSpring, this is their only job and their experience with the organization ranges from two to four years for three of managers and less than one year for the remaining four.

At WordSpring, there are four categories of workers. The first category is *employees* classified as those paid by the organization. There are a total of seven employees (three managers and four staff). The second category, *agency staff*, includes employees that are sub-contracted by WordSpring. These include those that work in the Food Service Department (three in total). It's worth noting that the environment in which these employees conduct their daily obligations is equipped with some of the finest technology available. For example, the facilities have offices and meeting rooms with wireless internet connection and state of the art computer systems that can be categorized as superior or very competitive when compared to other hospitality businesses. It was also observed that this specialized arrangement offers a highly professional environment for the employees and other workers.

The last two categories include workers that do not receive compensation from WordSpring. The third category is *members,* workers that raise their own salaries through external donations with the fourth being *volunteers*. Volunteers are those receiving no compensation whatsoever. While visiting the center, the researchers observed that although no monetary compensation is given to the volunteers, the Wycliffe organization offers them access to an activity and to the volunteer center. This allows volunteers to socialize and further treasure their passion for the Bible in exceptional living and recreational facilities.

WordSpring has a functional organizational structure with a clear delegation of authority. The Center has one Director that oversees six departments. The organizational chart includes departments such as: Events & Conferences, Food Services, Guest Services, Marketing, Community Relations and Educational Programs. The complete organizational chart along with the department heads and personnel is presented in figure

Figure 1
WORDSPRING ORGANIZATIONAL CHART

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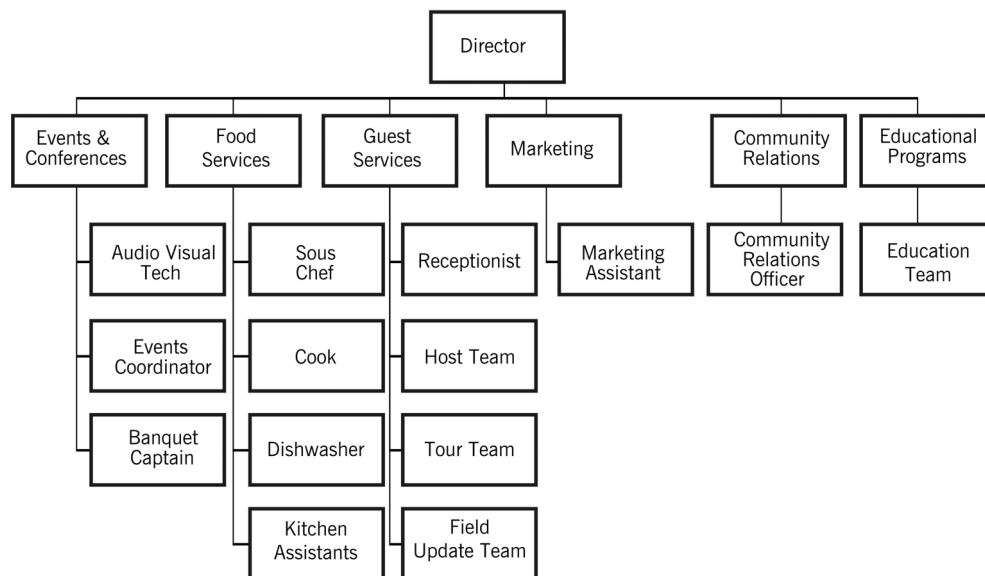
A SERVICE CENTRIC TOURIST SITE AND A MISSIONARY CENTER

It is a continuous challenge for the management team of WordSpring to integrate between the functions of the missionary center, educational center and tourist site. Although integrating these roles could be problematic, management perceives the combination as complimentary, rather than contradictory. During the structured interviews, all the managers expressed a strong awareness for the need to perform as a tourist site for all intents and purposes, with entertainment and professional guest service as can be seen in the quote below.

Good service for our guests begins before they even visit the facility. If they visit our web page, then they should receive 'good service' by being able to easily navigate the page finding the information that they are looking for. The information should be accurate and timely. The same applies if they call us on our information line. The message should be current, accurate, and be easy to navigate through (phone tree). If a person decides to speak to a live person, then they should be greeted promptly and provided with the information they requested in a friendly and professional manner. A visitor should be able to find our location easily via the provided maps, directions, and signs along the way.

Another manager emphasized the center's efforts and commitment for guest service through qualified personnel and interactive activities:

We try to have knowledgeable staff at the reception desk at all times. We try to have field experienced people available to talk with folks who are in WordSpring, should anyone have questions. We have a new Q&A program running between film showings so people coming early or staying a bit after have another engaging way to learn more about us.

According to another manager, the center needs to express '*A gracious and warm welcome; a brief orientation to the Center's features; an encouragement to explore at your leisure; and an assurance that any questions will be warmly appreciated and responded to*'. Other managers also emphasized the need to be attentive to guests, in order to make them feel welcome and to ensure they are having a pleasant experience. The management team also ac-

knowledged the constant need to change and refresh the display and exhibits, a significant concern related to the need to have up-to-date facilities and equipment, as well as professional staff training.

The educational experience at WordSpring is reflected by one manager's comments:

We present a variety of opportunities to learn about Bible translations…Our recruitment is in getting people excited about our mission rather than being overbearing with the message. Our teachers are effective communicators. We give students a variety of experiences to meet various learning styles and attention spans. We try to gear the presentations and activities to the ages of the students and families who visit. Some of our staff have lived and worked overseas, so they can give first hand experiences for our visitors. In addition, in the words of one of the managers.'[the experience at WordSpring] should be an educational experience as well as fun'.

The missionary purposes of the center were clearly highlighted. For example, one manager stated that he would like the guests to leave *"feeling that they have witnessed God at work"*. While another mentioned that he would like the visitors *"to want to be involved with Bible translations in some capacity…we would like some of the visitors to begin to think of involvement as staff in the future. In other words, we would like to begin the recruitment process with them"*. Furthermore, another one said that he would like visitors to have an opportunity *"to be involved in some way right now and in the future, at various levels of commitment"*.

Finally, the management's missionary commitment is demonstrated by their devotion to the organizational vision. For example, one manager stated:

Personally, I've devoted my entire adult life (my career) to this vision. It is the heart of what drives us to work long hours in sometimes challenging conditions for little pay, whether or not there is forthcoming appreciation of our work! Our rewards are not in tangible form, but in the satisfaction of moving one step further in making the bible available to all people in a language they fully understand.

OPERATING A RELIGIOUS SITE IN ORLANDO

The management team of WordSpring is faced with two major operational challenges. The first is derived from its ideological orientation which is reflected in the major constraints facing the managers operating the site. The theme of the site is confined to the translation of the Holy Scriptures, and deviation from the theme is not advisable given the mission of the organization regarding world-wide Bible translation. Previous suggestions about incorporating Bible related stories were rejected because they deviate from its main goal. For these same reasons, emphasizing the characteristics of the cultures that experience the translation of the Holy Scriptures was also discarded. The commitment from the organization is demonstrated by comments such as *'You have to be a believer in Christ to understand why we do what we do'*. This suggests that the site might only appeal to visitors that are emotionally involved with the religious content. Even though WordSpring does not object to hosting secular events, some visitors might have a difficult time accepting current policies such as no dancing or drinking during special events or conferences.

In any case, the strong religious affiliation is a dominant factor at WordSpring, and the management team is certainly aware of the difficult challenges involved in maneuvering between its non-profit religious ideology and the needs of the guests, which are not always at one with each other. One manager illustrates it by claim:

The biggest issue for us right now is the need for sufficient staff to provide service for the many

groups that want to come. Our staff all members (not salaried) or volunteers, so getting staff is a matter of advertising, praying, and following leads.

The second operational challenge is derived from its distinctive location. One of the most interesting features of the environment that WordSpring operates in is the very secular nature of the Orlando's tourism industry. It is a major challenge for religious sites to survive in such a competitive environment. At the same time, in the quasi absence of religious attractions in Orlando - which is identified most of all with its entertainment theme parks and the conventions facilities - WordSpring has an opportunity to step into this vacuum and serve Christian tourists who are looking for some kind of faith-related experience in Orlando. However, WordSpring competes with other religious sites, the most significant competitor being The Holy Land Experience, a Biblical museum which takes you back in time to the land of the Bible (www.theholylandexperience.com). The site includes structures and exhibits (e.g., the models of Jerusalem and the Qumran Dead Sea Caves), musical performances on themes from the Old and the New Testaments, depictions of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, and exhibits of biblical archaeological artifacts from the "Holy Land". Like the modern theme parks, it also includes interactive activities, audio-visual displays, and themed artificially simulated environments.

Additional religious themed attractions in the area include others such as the Jesus Film Studio and the Dinosaur Land. However, it would be a mistake to assume that WordSpring only competes with religious themed sites. Other small attractions, such as Gatorland or WonderWorks, also compete for the same tourists by offering half-day activities for those who wanting a break from the main theme parks, especially Disney World, Universal Studios and SeaWorld. It should be noted that the major theme parks are also providing other religious activities such as Christian music concerts, but in a looser format than that offered by religious theme-sites.

The vulnerability of the center is demonstrated by its lack of brand recognition and marketing capabilities, which is exemplified by one of the manager's comments about non-profit organizations:

We have far more non-profit organizations to compete with for public attention than ever before… Getting our name out there takes time, money, and people, and it's hard to measure quick results from it. How does an outfit like Home Depot calculate how many board feet of lumber they sell because they spent several million dollars to put their logo on a Nextel Cup car that runs around a track so fast the spectators can't even read the logo? Or how many customers does B of A get for having an ad in the outfield of a baseball stadium? Yet they know they need name recognition, and so do we. We don't have their budgets, but we still have the same need.

In addition to the non-profit organizations, it is worth noting that not all of the managers perceive WordSpring as having direct competitors. A number of managers stated comments such as *'The very fact that we are not in a competition is our strength', 'I do not consider other faith-based attractions in the Orlando area to be competitors',* and *'I do not think we have competitors because we are so different than other places'.* However, WordSpring's awareness of consumer preferences alone reveals considerable implicit knowledge of the competitive environment.

Conclusion

This paper examined a contemporary religious phenomenon that has not yet received much academic attention. Although much has been written about religious tourism (e.g., Cohen, 1998; Rinschede, 1992; Sharpley & Sundaram, 2005), and pilgrimage

(e.g., Barber, 1993; Collins-Kreiner & Kliot, 2000; Sadi & Henderson, 2005), these studies focus on the traditional visits to sacred places. However, in the past few years, there has been a growing trend to build contrived environments with religious themes designed to attract tourists. WordSpring Discovery Center is one of those cases. The organization is facing unique and complicated managerial challenges that deserve special consideration. As a non-profit organization, WordSpring depends on financial support and volunteers, yet it competes in a highly competitive environment. The management team is also facing challenges to maneuver between its different, sometimes contradictory, roles as religious, educational, and service centric tourist experience provision center. Navigating between these roles can often be difficult. However the management team perceives tourism to be a tool to assist the missionary goals (and not vice versa), and the management staff executes their work according to this guiding premise.

Even though Shackley (2001, 2002) suggested that religious sites are at risk of suffering from inefficient management, this does not seem to be the case for WordSpring. Their management team has acquired formal education and demonstrates a level of awareness and knowledge about guest service-management issues, including the constant need to change and renew the exhibits and activities, to be attentive to the visitors and their needs, and to keep the facilities clean.

Yet, it would be a mistake to assume that WordSpring, as well as some of the other religious theme-sites, are purely commercialized tourist sites. Unlike the ordinary theme-sites, WordSpring is set within a clear religious ideology, whose major goal is to instill awareness and stimulate involvement towards its mission among the visitors. The management team has drawn clear boundaries regarding which contents and activities are to take place on the site.

The ongoing criticism of the 'disneyfication' of religion is another issue that might be threatening religious theme-sites. On another note, it could also be viewed as an opportunity for certain religious theme-sites as well. The opening of The Holy Land Experience in 2001 raised concerns about the commercialization and trivialization of religion (Goodheart, 2001). However, the 'disneyfication' of religion is also taking place in "authentic" sacred places in a creative attempt to generate revenues. For example, the Gloucester Cathedral in England signed a contract with Warner Brothers for shooting the film version of the popular children's book *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (Shackley, 2002). Consequently, there is a possibility that WordSpring might face similar criticism and or opportunity depending on the viewpoint in the future due to seemingly contradictory missions.

Visitors to religious theme sites might be criticized for seeking "synthetic" experiences at the expense of the allegedly more complex and deeper experiences offered by sacred sites (Goodheart, 2001). Nonetheless, many religious tourists claim they are actually looking for a sense of authenticity which they feel is disappearing from the ordinary sacred sites (Shackley, 2001). In addition, there is a growing demand on the part of tourists for religious visualization while visiting sacred places (Shoval, 2000). Religious theme-sites can through proper and respectful design, provide these missing elements by offering the tourists more interactive, hands-on activities.

Moreover, religious theme-sites like WordSpring, have the potential to take some of the tourists from sacred and authentic places towards the contrived and less sensitive sites. This alleviates problems such as overcrowding, pollution or accidental damage. Thus, it could become easier for the sacred sites to maintain the "spirit of the place", and to offer tourists and worshippers a delightful service experience. The issue of the eco-

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nomic constraints faced by many sacred sites can be addressed by initiating cooperation and joint projects between sacred and contrived sites. It this case, it would be important to recognize the value of both sites in increasing the particular message that the business wishes to spread.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The shortcoming of this paper, an explorative case study, is the limited ability to generalize its findings to other religious theme-sites without further investigation. Although the sample of managers is small, their preparation and devotion clearly help benchmark organizational behavior in this type of attraction. Clearly, there is a need for additional academic research to get a deeper understanding about the nature of religious theme sites, and to examine particularly whether they face similar challenges (e.g., offering excellent service to a tourist, transforming lives spiritually, fundraising, volunteer seeking, and increasing headcounts).

In light of the growing interest in religious theme attractions, it may be useful to examine religious-oriented activities in these sites. Further research should focus on understanding contemporary religious tourism, the visitor's behavior and satisfaction with the travel experience, their motivation and preferences, the site attributes, and the manager's perceptions in order to assist sites' in providing excellent service to the tourists. For that matter, a concrete defining of what service means in this environment may be appropriate. Additionally, conceptual models illustrating traditional themeparks on one side and authentic tourist experiences on the other with religious contrived themesites in between may be helpful for future studies as well as the development of management implications based on type of site managed. Further research with greater representation will allow for more insights to be made regarding the management of the unique tourist destination of religious themed visitor center. Although this research deals with the managerial perspective and challenges, additional research on the visitors' experience will assist managers in the decision making process while upholding the organization's unique mission and vision. For example, the management team might benefit from exploring the relationship between tourist's religion and strength of religious belief to the perception of a visit to a religious theme site or investigating the image of a religious theme site attraction by using importance-performance analytical framework. At the same time, investigating service management particularly through volunteers can assist management in training personnel to achieve excellence in service while meeting the mission of the organization at the same time.

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