

Faith Tourism Sees Growth

✖ **May 8, 2009** – Even during an economic downturn, faith-based tourism is a growing industry, with some 300 million people taking religious-oriented trips each year, making up an \$18 billion segment of the overall tourism industry.

A U.S. Department of Commerce report states that faith-based tourism has been on the rise since 2001 and is expected to go up through 2009. Since 2003, overseas religious travel by Americans has grown by more than 50 percent, from 587,000 people to 906,000 people. “Religious tourism is recognized as one of the most resilient markets in the travel industry,” said Kevin J. Wright, president of the World Religious Travel Association (WRTA).

Faith-based tourism is so hot the WRTA held the first-ever World Religious Travel Expo in Orlando, Fla., last fall. More than 130 national and international exhibitors attended, including tourism delegates from 18 governments of the Middle East, Europe and Latin America.

In addition to faith-based cruises, many religious travelers are taking part in “voluntourism,” a mix of travel and volunteer service, as in joining fellow believers to help with disaster-relief efforts. The most popular tourist destination is Israel, with more than a third of travelers, followed by Italy (12 percent) and Greece (11 percent), according to a 2007 study by Globus Religious Travel.

Although England remains a desired destination in Europe, the Globus study found that travel to the continent has dropped compared with the Middle East, likely because of the weakness of the dollar over the euro. Yet the International Museum of the Reformation in Geneva, Switzerland, expects visitors to double this year while it displays an exhibit celebrating John Calvin’s 500th birthday. “A Day in the Life of John Calvin”

will run from April 24 to Oct. 31.