

## Religious Conventions, Meetings Stimulate Local Economy

### Economic Impact More Than \$72 Million In 2008

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**R**eligious groups and faith-based organizations affect the City of Long Beach in ways that go beyond spreading their doctrine or attracting new members: They generate revenue, boost local business and support the hospitality/tourism industry. From conventions held by Jehovah's Witnesses to expos that target any denomination, the Long Beach Area Convention & Visitors Bureau (CVB) estimates their economic impact last year to be \$72.2 million.

"Out of all the groups that we book in the year, 10 percent are religious in nature," says CVB President and CEO Steve Goodling. "Out of the room nights that we book during the year, those religious groups constitute 23 percent."

"We are currently bidding on the United Church of Christ, which would be 9,000 room nights," he adds.

These calculations, which the CVB estimates conservatively, are based on guidelines set by Destination Management Association International. The local impact includes hotels, transportation, food, services and shopping, says Bob Maguglin, CVB public relations director.

For the past 15 years, Jehovah's Witnesses have held their "Keep on the Watch" district conventions and international convention at the Long Beach Arena. According to the Watchtower Society (Jehovah's Witnesses' legal organization), there were more than 1.1 million believers in the United States in 2007.

This religious group alone brought more than 168,000 people to the city last year and had a \$60.8 million economic impact. Watchtower holds 13 district conventions and an international

convention, which attract more than 12,000 people each, according to regional spokesperson James Brown.

From across the globe, people travel to participate in these discussions at the international convention (June 18-21), which has assemblies in multiple languages to serve a diverse population.

"We're expecting probably as many as 5,000 to 6,000 people from the Far East – Korea, Japan, the Philippines, China [and] Taiwan," Brown says.

Watchtower holds conventions at major U.S. cities, from the West Coast to the East Coast, but the convention center's desirable location brings them back year after year.

"Long Beach just puts the red carpet out for us each year," Brown says. "The hotels are excellent – they provide good, easy access to the convention site. The restaurants are 'A' [quality], in terms of the feedback we get from our people. And the young ones enjoy any leisure time they might have visiting the Aquarium [of the Pacific] or going down to the harbor and seeing the Queen Mary. And the weather is just perfect."

While hotels often see occupancy rise during these events, other businesses also benefit, such as the Golden Shore RV Resort in Downtown Long Beach. Although it maintains steady occupancy year-round, business increases during the Jehovah's Witness conventions, says co-owner Kimball Wasick. Its maximum capacity is 81 recreational vehicles.

"People attending [those] conventions are a great asset to the RV park," Wasick says, noting that before the park officially opened in 1994, Jehovah's Witnesses were already calling to make reservations.

The Gideons International, an interdenominational association of Christian business and professional male members of Protestant and evangelical churches, is active in more than 180 countries. Its mission includes distributing bibles to hotels, prisons, colleges and hospitals. It will host an annual conference at the Long Beach Marriott (April 23-26), bringing roughly 300 regional members. In 1999, Gideons held the convention at the Queen Mary.

“The convention goes to different locations throughout the state,” says Steve Smith, director of communications, noting that location, availability and price determine where it will be held. “They’re very blessed in Southern California and Nevada to have a multitude of facilities that can host the event.”

But not all groups are based on the tenets of faith. Organizations such as the National Association of Church Business Administration (NACBA) and Worship Facilities Conference & Expo (WFX) cater to a variety of denominations: These events are geared toward the administrators, staff and decision-makers. For both groups, this year marks their first time in Long Beach.

NACBA, which will hold its 53rd annual conference (July 17-21), has grown significantly over the years, hosting conferences in Nashville, Dallas and Chicago. Its boardmembers include representatives of Mariners Church (Irvine), the First Presbyterian Church, Hopewell Baptist Church and Roswell United Methodist Church.

“We just move all over the country,” CEO Simeon May says. “When we were looking at stretching ourselves, and for the first time using a convention center and multiple hotels, we investigated Long Beach and felt like it would be a great fit.”

The CVB “competed aggressively” for NACBA, which signed the contract in 2004, before the economic downturn.

“Last year, in Nashville, we had [more than] 700 church administrators,” May says. “With our trade show, exhibitors, speakers, families and guests, we had [more than] 1,700 people in attendance. We were certainly hoping for at least that many to come to Long Beach. Now, we’re not so sure we’re going to draw that kind of a crowd.”

During the five-day event, NACBA will offer workshops on a variety of topics, such as taxes, legal issues, church security, property management, insurance, fundraisers and budgets. Representatives from some of the largest churches attend: “These are the people in the local congregations who are

responsible for the business affairs of the church,” he says.

Traditional often comes to mind when thinking about places of worship, and while many denominations value certain customs, others explore modern innovations to broaden their base or keep up with the times.

The WFX event has almost tripled in attendance since its first expo five years ago, says Christine Ayers, vice president of marketing. It has also expanded to two annual events in cities such as Atlanta, Houston, Indianapolis and Nashville.

But it turned to the West Coast this year (May 13-15), since Southern California is home to growing religious congregations that also lead in innovation. The WFX conference will host more than 2,500 people and have five tracks: audio, video and lighting technologies; designing, building and upgrading facilities; digital church (Web sites and new media); optimizing facilities; and professional development and team building.

The event is appropriate for religious groups of any size and their members, including pastors, operations and facilities managers, technology directors, media ministers and volunteers.

“For some of the purchasing decisions they’re going to make on some of these products and services, the cost of being at this event is really such a small piece,” Ayers says. “One of the key elements of our event is a lot of networking opportunities.”

WFX will also offer a pre-conference church tour at Cottonwood Church in Los Alamitos, which recently expanded and incorporates a variety of media and technology in its services.

“It’s a very personal experience; people get their questions answered, and they go behind the scenes,” she says.

The city also hosts other religious events, such as the Joyce Meyers Ministries, the Benny Hinn Ministries and the Christian Home Educators Association of California (July 8-12). Religious organizations sometimes book short-term events like Easter service or prayer meetings, says Daniel Lee, assistant general manager of the Long Beach Convention & Entertainment Center.

Another benefit: “When they go home, they’re promoting the city,” he says. ■