

Maria T. Simone-Charteris and Stephen W. Boyd

The development of religious heritage tourism in Northern Ireland: Opportunities, benefits and obstacles

Abstract

This paper examines the development of religious/Christian heritage tourism within Northern Ireland. Through the views of stakeholders across the public and private sector of the Northern Ireland tourism industry it seeks to establish the following: 1) whether there is demand for sites and attractions associated with religion and spirituality per se or as part of cultural and heritage tourism; 2) if the Province (Northern Ireland) has enough religious sites and attractions to become established as a religious tourism destination; 3) if the development of religious tourism is beneficial to the local economy and the communities within which the religious attractions are located; 4) and if the various stakeholders are prepared to collaborate to develop and promote Christian heritage tourism in the Province. This investigation is based on data collected in 2008 through onsite observations, and semi-structured in depth interviewing sessions conducted with representatives of public tourism bodies, private tourism organizations, religious institutions and political parties. The findings suggest that according to the interviewees' responses, religious tourism contributes to attracting visitors to Northern Ireland and that in their opinion this product is best promoted as more broadly cultural heritage tourism. From the findings, it also emerged that collaboration is welcomed by most organizations both from the public and private sectors although there remains confusion with regard to respective roles and responsibilities for both sectors. The development of a particular religious attraction around the story of St Patrick is presented that demonstrates potential contribution toward regional development.

Keywords:

religion; Christian heritage tourism; regional development; collaboration; Northern Ireland

Introduction

Modern day visitors are no longer interested in inclusive tours focused on undifferentiated sun and sea locations (Fayos-Solá, 1996; Weiler & Hall, 1992). They are more interested in discovering, experiencing, participating in, learning about and being included in the everyday life of the destinations (Nylander & Hall, 2005; Robinson & Novelli, 2005). Consequently, recent years have seen cultural heritage tourism

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mature as a distinct body of academic inquiry (Robinson & Novelli, 2005; Timothy & Boyd, 2003). Culture, however, is a broad concept encompassing everything that defines a community from its way of life to tangible and intangible elements. As a consequence, defining cultural tourism is problematic and many definitions of cultural tourism exist that focus on tourism derived, motivational, experiential, and operational aspects (McKercher & du Cros, 2002; Schweitzer, 1999; Blackwell, 1997).

Some authors have made the distinction between heritage tourism and cultural tourism. For instance, Moscardo (2000) and Richards (2000), view the former as focusing on the past and the "hard" cultural resources like museums and historic monuments while the latter focuses on the present (cultural) way of life of the visited community. Zeppel and Hall (1991, p. 49) view heritage tourism as "based on nostalgia for the past and the desire to experience diverse cultural landscapes and forms". Others view heritage tourism as a segment within the realm of cultural tourism (Nuryanti, 1996; Smith, 2003). The definition utilized in this study is that of Silberberg (1995, p. 361) who considers cultural and heritage tourism as one form of tourism and defines it as "the visits by persons from outside the host community motivated wholly or in part by an interest in the historical, artistic, scientific or lifestyle/heritage offerings of a community region, group or institution". Because of the diversity of products and experiences that constitute it, cultural heritage tourism can be further segmented into smaller, more specific sub-categories defined by specific types of attractions and events (Robinson & Novelli, 2005; Smith, 2003). Among these is pilgrimage/religious tourism.

Religiously motivated travel is perhaps the oldest and most widespread type of travel in human history (Kaelber, 2006; Rinschede, 1992; Sharpley & Sundaram, 2005; Sigaux, 1996; Vukonić, 1996), may go back to the beginnings of many of the world's religions (Casson, 1974; Tomasi, 2002; Westwood, 1997) and is still one of the most significant types of tourism in the world today by volume and prevalence (Timothy & Olsen, 2006). Only recently, however, have academics, governments and tourism agencies taken notice of the increasing numbers of religiously motivated travellers, or at least the increase in visitation to sacred sites in conjunction with the general growth of cultural and heritage tourism. As a result, a nascent collection of journal articles and books have appeared during the past 15 years, which outline the history of pilgrimage and the transformation of pious journeys into modern-day tourism (Timothy & Olsen, 2006).

Destinations that have become renowned for their religious tourism resources and attract millions of visitors every year include Vatican City in Italy, Santiago de Compostela in Spain, Lourdes in France, Mount Athos in Greece, Jerusalem in Israel, Medjugorje in Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Haifa's Bahá'í Gardens in India to name but a few. Northern Ireland is not normally considered as a pilgrimage/religious tourism destination. However, the Province has a wealth of Christian heritage attractions and, in particular, attractions linked to St Patrick such as the burial site of the Saint in Downpat-

rick, the first church founded by the Saint at Saul, the two Cathedrals in Armagh (one Protestant and one Catholic), and St Patrick's Trian (a visitor centre which tells the story of Armagh and the work of the Saint there), which are connected through the St Patrick's Trail and various festivals held on St Patrick's Day. In addition, Northern Ireland's religious heritage incorporates events and attractions linked to the history and politics of the region such as the 12th of July Parades, which celebrate Protestant King William III victory's over Catholic King James II at the Battle of the Boyne, churches and cathedrals with political connotations such as St Anne's Cathedral in Belfast, which contains the Tomb of Sir Edward Carson, leader of the Ulster Unionists and St Columb's Cathedral in L/Derry, which incorporates a museum containing artefacts from the 1688-1689 Siege, and attractions and events related to various aspects of the Troubles.

In order to capitalize on the wealth and authenticity of the Province's religious/Christian heritage, since 2005 the National Tourist Organization, the Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) has been developing the St Patrick's and Christian Heritage Signature Project, integral part of which is the St Patrick's Trail, a sixty-mile long driving route taking in various St Patrick and Christian Heritage visitor sites in the Province, which was officially launched in March 2009 (www.northernireland.gov.uk, accessed August 17, 2009). The Project aims to bring to life the story of St Patrick and develop Christian heritage tourism primarily in Armagh and Downpatrick with Bangor and Newry as secondary clusters, although it does have an affinity and resonance with all of Northern Ireland and indeed, Ireland (Saint Patrick's Signature Project- Overview, 2010). According to Northern Ireland's ex Tourism Minister Barry Gardiner MP, the potential economic contribution of the Signature Project to Northern Ireland is in the region of £30million per annum (St Patrick's/Christian Heritage Tourism Signature Project Launched, 2005).

In light of the above, the aim of this paper is to investigate the development of religious/Christian heritage tourism within the Province specifically through the implementation of the St Patrick's and Christian Heritage Signature Project and the St Patrick's Trail. More specifically, the paper aims to: (a) establish whether there is demand for sites and attractions associated with religion and spirituality per se or as part of cultural and heritage tourism; and (b) establish if the various stakeholders (public tourism bodies, private tourism companies, religious institutions and political parties) are willing to collaborate to develop and promote Christian heritage tourism in the Province. Secondary aim is to establish if there exist a critical mass of religious sites and attractions and the contribution they bring to regional development and economic benefit for those local communities within which they are located.

Literature review

Traditionally, religiously motivated travel has coincided with pilgrimages usually undertaken for motives such as visiting a site where a miracle took place or where one is expected to happen in the future, fulfilling a religious requirement, obtaining forgiveness for sins, praying and seeking a cure for illness (Timothy & Boyd, 2003).

Vukonić (2002) maintains that travel with the primary goal of visiting sacred sites often includes visits to neighbouring tourist sites and vice versa. For example, pilgrims at Lourdes (France) commonly include visits to Andorra to the East, Biarritz to the West, and the Spanish Pyrenees to the South in their travels. Likewise, pilgrims to Fatima (Portugal) along the way visit the Atlantic Coast and historical cities in the hinterland. Travels to Medjugorje (Bosnia-Herzegovina) include visits to numerous Adriatic tourist attractions. Similarly, Santiago de Compostela is usually one stop of a multifunctional trip including the Spanish seaside, culture and gastronomy (Santos, 2002).

Moreover, because of marketing and a growing general interest in cultural heritage tourism (Robinson & Novelli, 2005; Timothy & Boyd, 2003), religious sites are being commoditized and packaged for a tourism audience (Olsen, 2006). As a result, pilgrimages and other religious journeys are becoming tied to other types of tourism, and religious places are being visited for a variety of reasons such as their architecture and historical importance, some of which have nothing to do with religion directly (Digance, 2003; Poria, Butler & Airey, 2003; Vukonić, 2002). This is in line with Rinschede's (1992, p. 52) definition of religious tourism as "That type of tourism whose participants are motivated either exclusively or in part for religious reasons". Similarly, Santos (2003, p. 27) later suggested that "...the term religious tourism should... include all kinds of travel (voluntary, temporary and unpaid) that is motivated by religion in combination with other kinds of motivation, and which has as its destination a religious site (of local, regional, national or international status), but for which the journey itself is not a religious practice". In the same article Santos (2003, p. 29) also stated, from a supply-side perspective, that "Religious tourism is the expression that has been used by tour operators and... religious leaders to describe all situations that bring together religion and tourism, including, for some, pilgrimages".

According to Santos, then, tourism and pilgrimage are not found at opposite ends of a continuum where religious tourism is the half-way type between pilgrimage and tourism as suggested by Smith (1992). Instead, tourism is a broader term and pilgrimage is a sub-type or form of tourism, more specifically of religious tourism (Ron, 2009). According to Ron (2009, p. 289), "Religious tourism can, and does, include other forms of travel activities that do not fall into the category of pilgrimage". These activities include visits to Christian sites of art and architecture (e.g. Chartres Cathedral in France), Christian theme sites (e.g. Nazareth Village in Israel), Christian conferences and conventions (which are often combined with various tourism activities), Christian dramatic presentations (e.g. passion plays and pageants), Christian volunteer tourism (including volunteering at Christian sites and participating in humanitarian aid projects), and visiting local communities (e.g. to show solidarity and encourage those who feel persecuted because of their minority religion and faith) (Ron, 2009).

This scenario is further complicated by the combination of pilgrimage travel with New Age Spirituality (Rountree, 2002). According to Baum (2000), the concept of religion has shifted with the advent of modern secularising trends such as post-industrialism,

cultural pluralism and scientific rationality. As such, the term "religion" is used in everyday public discourse to refer to things outside the realm of traditional religious institutions. As a result of both secularising trends and the changing use of the term religion is being increasingly seen as a privatised and pluralized experience where the "spiritual" and the "religious" are separate (Olsen & Timothy, 2006). As Heelas (1998, p. 5) notes: "People have what they take to be 'spiritual' experiences without having to hold religious 'beliefs'". Thus, many people who consider themselves spiritual would not see themselves as religious and vice versa. This has caused the term pilgrimage to also change and broaden as reflected in Olsen and Timothy's (2006, p. 7) definition of a pilgrim as a "tourist (religious tourist) who is motivated by spiritual or religious factors". Consequently, modern society has expanded what it defines as sacred, bringing about the creation of new sites of sacrality, with travel to these sites being termed pilgrimage in its own right and considered to be journeys "undertaken by a person in quest of a place or a state that he or she believes to embody a valued ideal" (Morinis, 1992, p. 4).

In this light, the concept of pilgrimage has been extended to include travel to places symbolizing nationalistic values and ideals such as the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem in representation of all of Judaism (Guth, 1995; Rinschede, 1992; Zelinsky, 1990); disaster sites such as Ground Zero in New York and the Paris underpass where Princess Diana was killed (Blasi, 2002; Conran, 2002; Kaelber, 2006; Lennon & Foley, 2000); war memorials and cemeteries designed to commemorate famous war heroes, political figures and military chiefs such as Alexander the Great and Napoleon (Johnstone, 1994; Lloyd, 1998; Seaton, 2002; Smith, 1996); historical sites that contribute to national and cultural identity such as the Turkish Gallipoli Peninsula for Australians and New Zealanders (Hall, 2002, 2006); and places related to the lives of literary writers and the settings of their novels (Herbert, 2001). Even places traditionally associated with secular tourism are now regarded as pilgrimage sites such as those associated with music stars like Elvis Presley's mansion (Graceland) in Memphis, Tennessee (Alderman, 2002); nostalgic tourist attractions such as Walt Disney World (Knight, 1999); sporting events (Gammon, 2004) and even shopping malls (Pahl, 2003).

It follows that many people travel to a widening variety of sacred sites not only for religious or spiritual purposes, but also for reasons of a more secular and cultural nature. For example, they may visit because they have an educational interest in learning about the history of a site or understanding a particular religious faith and its culture and beliefs; for nostalgic reasons or patriotic stirrings; for a chance to admire architectural or natural wonders; in search of authentic experiences; or simply out of curiosity (Olsen & Timothy, 2006; Shackley, 2001, 2002). This means that religious sites are simultaneously sacred and secular as they are visited by pilgrims, religious travellers and cultural tourists (Collins-Kreiner & Gatrell, 2006). Given the above considerations, in this paper, religious/Christian heritage tourism is intended as travel to religious attractions and sites for faith, spiritual, cultural and other secular reasons and comprising both secular and sacred pilgrimage, and other forms of Christian travel.

The implications of the phenomena discussed above are not to be underestimated. In fact, the prevalence of religious tourism, further enhanced by the broadening of the religious tourist experience, has the potential to benefit those more peripheral, rural, or traditional regions where religion still plays an important role or used to do so in the past and has left a legacy of religious heritage sites by putting them on the tourist map for the first time or increasing their existing tourist base, which in turn, could boost regional development. Although the economic aspect of religious travel or pilgrimage has been the least researched and, frequently, estimates are made based on numbers of confessants and Community recipients at Christian sites, it is widely accepted that the arrival of pilgrims and other tourists to an area has direct economic benefits for the local population (Olsen & Timothy, 2006; Vukonić, 2002). Hudman and Jackson (1992) earlier argued that those towns, cities, and regions with sacred sites reap the benefit of the attractiveness of the site. It is not only the tourism sector that benefits, but others as well as services develop to cater to the needs of the visitors. Pilgrims and religious travellers, in fact, need some form of accommodation, food and drink, transportation, and facilities for recreation and shopping (Din, 1989). In many destinations religious sites are the main tourist attractions and at times anchor entire economies such as in Santiago de Compostela, Medjugorje, Lourdes and Mecca. According to Olsen and Timothy (2006), in many places tourism is seen either as a way to diversify or rescue a struggling economy. For example, Jackowski and Smith (1992) argue for the potential of religious tourism to become a major source of income and employment in Poland where World War II damage and communist repression have prevented the tourism infrastructure from developing up to the 1990s.

A common approach in the development of products within destinations has been the creation of networks with formalised partnerships. Partnerships, according to Svensson, Nordin and Flagestad (2005, p. 33), are made up of "people and organizations from some combination of public, business and civil constituencies who engage in voluntary, mutually beneficial, innovative relationships to address common societal aims through combining their resources and competencies". The relational ties between organizations are also referred to as networks or clusters of interest. Knoke and Kuklinski (1983, p. 12) define networks as "a specific type of relation linking a set of persons, objects or events". Porter (1998, p. 78) describes clusters as "geographic concentrations of interconnected companies and institutions in a particular field, linked by commonalities and complementarities". According to Dredge (2006), the strength of networks or clusters between organizations shapes opportunities or impediments for public-private partnerships at the local level. For instance, stakeholder interests may coalesce temporarily and struggles between interests may take place that continuously redefine the nature of action. Another challenge associated with the formation of networks and clusters between organizations is that the roles and responsibilities of the local government, local tourism organizations, industry and community are not always clearly focused and articulated. On the other hand, networks shape opportunities for communication, the development of new ideas, the translation of ideas into practice, and the preservation of community values and lifestyles, which are important attri-

butes for developing innovation and competitiveness (Dredge, 2006). In addition, networks and clusters help businesses see each other as colleagues rather than competitors and, therefore, influence businesses' willingness to cooperate and actively work towards the long-term benefits deriving from a collaborative use of resources (Novelli, Schmitz & Spencer, 2006). As a corollary then, clusters and networks are vital for regional development as they enhance public sector, private sector and community collaboration. Furthermore, by cooperating locally, regional stakeholders can compete globally (Dredge, 2006; Novelli, Schmitz & Spencer, 2006).

Broadly, public sector organizations can be defined as those owned and funded by government and private organizations as those owned and funded through sales or private donations. Organizations that overlap (e.g. private ownership with public funding or public ownership with private funding) represent mixed or hybrid types (Wamsley & Zald, 1973). In a tourism context, the private sector is, to a large extent, made up of small and medium-sized businesses, which provide services ranging from accommodation, to food, transportation, and entertainment (Fayos-Solá, 1996). On the other hand, because tourism is so fragmented, public sector bodies or public-private sector agencies usually take on the role of managers and promoters of tourism (Andersson & Getz, 2009). According to Hassan (2000), sustainable development and market competitiveness can only be achieved by destinations through sophisticated planning and development strategies coupled with the involvement of all stakeholders including public sector authorities, private sector companies, and local communities.

According to Fleischer (2000), the economic benefits associated with religious tourism are greater than those associated with other market segments because pilgrims and other religious tourists are avid buyers of religious souvenirs. Furthermore, religious tourism development can enhance the maintenance and preservation of sacred and cultural heritage sites and attractions. Many religious sites, in fact, are self-sustaining in that caretakers/managers (who usually are unpaid priests or other religious officials) are responsible for maintaining architectural quality, staffing, and utility costs and, therefore, need the tourists' money either in the form of donations or entrance fees (Olsen, 2006). The benefits associated with the development of tourism and, indeed, religious tourism are not only of economic nature. Tourism and religious tourism, in fact, also offer the opportunity to reduce prejudice, foster attitudinal change, and bridge cultural differences through contact with other cultures (Khamouna & Zeiger, 1995; Var, Ap & Van Doren, 1994).

However, there are challenges and obstacles associated with the development of religious tourism as well. In some areas the demand for services from tourists and pilgrims has caused sacred sites and religious services to become commercialized. While religious items and relics have been sold at holy sites for millennia (Zaidman, 2003), reproductions of devotional items and other religious objects can be considered as tourist trash or kitsch thus compromising the authenticity and spiritual value of the religious objects (Shackley, 2006; Vukonić, 2002). It has been noted that tourism can violate

the sanctity of sacred places for those who attend religious sites to worship, meditate, or fulfil religious obligations whether they are pilgrims or local worshippers as it has done in the case of Buddhist monasteries in Tibet and Nepal (Shackley, 1999). According to Cohen (1998, as cited in Olsen & Timothy, 2006), mass tourism often has a negative secularizing effect on the religiosity or level of spirituality of people who live in the tourism destination as it weakens the local adherence to religion and the beliefs in the sacredness and efficacy of holy places, rituals and customs.

Additionally, Olsen (2006) has noted that the convergence of religious/sacred and tourist/secular space has added complexity to traditional management practices at sacred sites as religious site managers increasingly have to mediate between religious goals and the operation of the tourism industry. The main task of religious site managers (who often are not trained tourism professionals, but professional or volunteer clergy appointed by religious leaders to run a particular site) is to supervise and mediate the interactions between people (both tourists and worshippers) and the environment (both natural and built). This means that site managers must deal with a multitude of visitor motivations and expectations, which often contrast with each other. For example, they face major challenges in maintaining a sense of place while catering to the needs of pilgrims and secular tourists and preserving the site's physical integrity. Impacts they have to deal with include visitor pressures, flows and experiences; site marketing and interpretation; accomplishing specific organizational goals; and planning special events (Olsen, 2006).

Perhaps, the biggest challenge/obstacle associated with the development of religious heritage tourism is that various stakeholders have different interests in the way religious sites are conserved, managed and consumed by religious and secular tourists (Olsen, 2006; Shackley, 2001). Place custodians of religious heritage sites can be constrained by the views and beliefs of their religion. Specific views of tourism determine whether or not care takers of religious heritage sites will cooperate with outside stakeholders. For example, if the religious authorities who operate the site view tourism in a negative light, tourism may be prohibited or restricted. In addition to religious authorities, other important stakeholders include government organizations, urban planners, local and regional tourism managers, regional economic development agencies, and state-sponsored historical societies (Olsen, 2006). Governments, in a bid to increase tourism revenues, commodify religious sites into tourist places that can be gazed at through the meanings ascribed to them by visitors and promotional agencies (Urry, 1990; Young, 1999). They not only influence the management of religious sites and attractions through marketing and commodification, but also through maintenance and interpretation policies. Some religious heritage site custodians accept government funds to cover operational expenses and support conservation. However, accepting government money means that concessions will have to be made in terms of interpretation and the operation of tourism at the site (Olsen, 2006).

Religious sites do not exist in a socio-political and spatial vacuum but are affected by the politics and social trends of the area in which they are located (Olsen, 2006). Religious sites, like other places endowed with cultural and historic meaning, are repositories of history and memory and "contain multiple levels of sedimented history" and "layers of meaning" (Yeoh & Kong, 1996, p. 55) and therefore can easily become the object of competing interests between religious groups. In this sense, the development of religious tourism could be detrimental to the host communities especially when the cultural and social texture of the host communities is already fragile. For example, in Northern Ireland religious tourism as linked to St Patrick and Christian heritage generally draws support. However, it generates controversy when linked to the turbulent history of the Province and various aspects of the 'Troubles' - a term that was quickly adopted by the media to describe the conflict situation in Northern Ireland. Nonetheless, it is accepted in the literature that in many cases the economic benefits of tourism to sites of religious importance outweigh the negative impacts (Olsen & Timothy, 2006). Before discussing the development of religious/Christian heritage tourism in the Province, the context of tourism in Northern Ireland and how the industry has been affected initially by the Troubles and subsequently by the Peace Process is described.

The context of tourism in Northern Ireland

All places have some religious dimension to them and Northern Ireland is no different. In fact, many of the political landscapes that have developed or have been argued over are often disguised by religion giving them a sense of respectability. Northern Ireland has had a long history (circa 30 years) of political unrest, which has been beamed by the media across the English-speaking world and even worldwide (Boyd, 2000; Wall, 1996). Not surprisingly, the region's tourism industry has been affected in terms of receipts and visitors, unsuitable tourism development because of a poor economic and social image, and a lack of suitable infrastructure (Devine & Connor, 2005; Boyd, 2000; Wall, 1996; Wilson, 1993). Prior to the civil unrest at the end of the 1960s, Northern Ireland had enjoyed visitor numbers that approached one million; a fact often forgotten about when discussions take place about tourism and Northern Ireland. But decline was rapid once civil unrest broke out in 1969; the year 1972 saw visitor numbers contract by over 50 per cent in a period of only five years to 435,000. This is not surprising as the early 1970s witnessed some of the worst violence the Province had to endure during the Troubles. However, the peace process and the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 have generated significant improvements for the tourism industry. In fact, since the signing of the Agreement between Westminster, Dublin and the majority of the political parties within the region, Northern Ireland has experienced a steady growth in international visitor flows (NITB, 2003; 2005; 2006; 2007; 2008c; 2009) and by 2007, the Province recorded for its first time over two million visitors, where the tourism sector contributed £535 million to the local economy (NITB, 2008c). CogentSI (2007) argue when factoring in indirect and induced spending, the figure is more likely to be around £899 million. This demonstrates that the tourism industry has a major role to play in the future economy of Northern Ireland. One as-

pect of this growth that has been witnessed over recent years is the construction of new hotels at the top end of the market (four and five stars) in both the capital city, Belfast, and around the Province with an emphasis on golf and resort accommodation.

Northern Ireland's temperate climate and location on the periphery of Western Europe can hardly be considered as desirable attributes that can help the region gain a competitive advantage over other destinations, but rather obstacles. On the other hand, recent years have seen the development of new tourism infrastructure, the capital city of Belfast becoming an established cultural city and short break destination, with improved rail, air and sea access routes to the Republic of Ireland, Great Britain and Continental Europe, respectively. Northern Ireland is also renowned for its natural resources including a beautiful rugged coastline and green rural landscapes, which allow for gentle sporting and activity holidays such as walking, golf, fishing, boating, and cycling (Buckley & Klemm, 1993; Wall, 1996). But the Province's unique selling point, which offers the biggest opportunity to gain competitive advantage over other destinations, is undoubtedly represented by its cultural heritage, which is steeped in the different histories of the two main communities, Roman Catholic and Protestant, forming the Northern Ireland society (Graham, 1994).

In response to the need to diversify its tourist offering and develop niche products in order to compete in the international market, over the 2004-2008 period, the Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) has developed what it called its Strategic Framework for Action, where a number of signature projects were identified as offering the best opportunities for tourism growth and to create world class excellence for Northern Ireland (Titanic & Maritime Heritage, Giant's Causeway, Antrim & Causeway Coast Area, Walled City of Derry, Mourne's region, potential first national park for Northern Ireland, and St. Patrick & Christian Heritage), and where five winning themes (markets/activities) were singled out for consideration (short breaks, business tourism, culture and heritage, activity tourism, and excellent events). Under the Corporate Plan for 2008-2011, the NITB has set itself the target of growing out-of-state visitor numbers by 25 per cent to 2.5 million, and spend by 40 per cent to £520 million; challenging targets within a challenging economic climate (NITB, 2008a). Religious/Christian heritage tourism is only being addressed as part of the wider signature project programme with its focus on developing and managing product.

The Saint Patrick's & Christian Heritage Signature Project is perceived to be of lesser importance compared to other signature projects. Until 2009, the NITB had not even attempted to measure religious tourism. This is probably due to the fact that many sacred places are perceived as places of worship rather than tourist attractions and, therefore, do not record visitor numbers (Vukonić, 2002). Besides, religious visitor numbers are considerably lower than those to other attractions in the Province (see Table 1, and Table 2). Nevertheless, 2.5 million visitors (domestic and out-of-state) went to places of worship in 2009, with the NITB recording that two thirds of all visits by out-of-state visitors were to places of worship (NITB, 2009).

Visitors' interest in Northern Ireland's sacred places is not a new phenomenon. Pilgrimage to Ireland can be traced back to AD 606 in Clonmacnoise (Republic of Ireland) and AD 976 in Armagh (Northern Ireland) (Griffin, 2007). Churches, monasteries and early Celtic places of worship were built across Ireland in the centuries after Patrick's death and Ireland became a centre of Christian learning and training for priests and monks. When the Normans arrived in 1169 they built new monasteries and abbeys to rival earlier centres of Christian worship (Christian Heritage, 2010). This has left an incredible legacy of religious/Christian heritage sites that are not exploited. One exception to this has been the development of the Saint Patrick's & Christian Heritage Signature Project.

Table 1

**RELIGIOUS/CHRISTIAN HERITAGE TOURISM ATTRACTIONS
VISITED IN 2005, 2008 AND 2009 IN NORTHERN IRELAND**

Attraction	2005	2008	2009	% Difference	
				2005/2009	2008/2009
St Patrick Centre	133,629	117,079	120,750	-10.6	+3
St Columb's Cathedral	44,245	77,094	-	-	-
Down Cathedral	28,798	49,858	-	-	-
St Patrick's Trian Visitor Complex	41,920	43,000	46,000	+8.7	+6.5
St Anne's Cathedral	31,894	45,492	44,669	+28.5	-1.8
St Patrick's Church, Saul	5,000	5,600	13,179	+62	+57.5
St Patrick's Cathedral, Armagh (RC)	10,000	10,000	10,000	0.0	0.0
Total	295,486	348,123	234,598	-26.0^a	-48.0^b

Source: NITB (2009)

^a average % difference total between 2005 & 2009 is misleading given missing data in 2009

^b average % difference total between 2008 & 2009 is misleading given missing data in 2009

Table 2

**TOP 10 VISITOR ATTRACTIONS
IN NORTHERN IRELAND IN 2009**

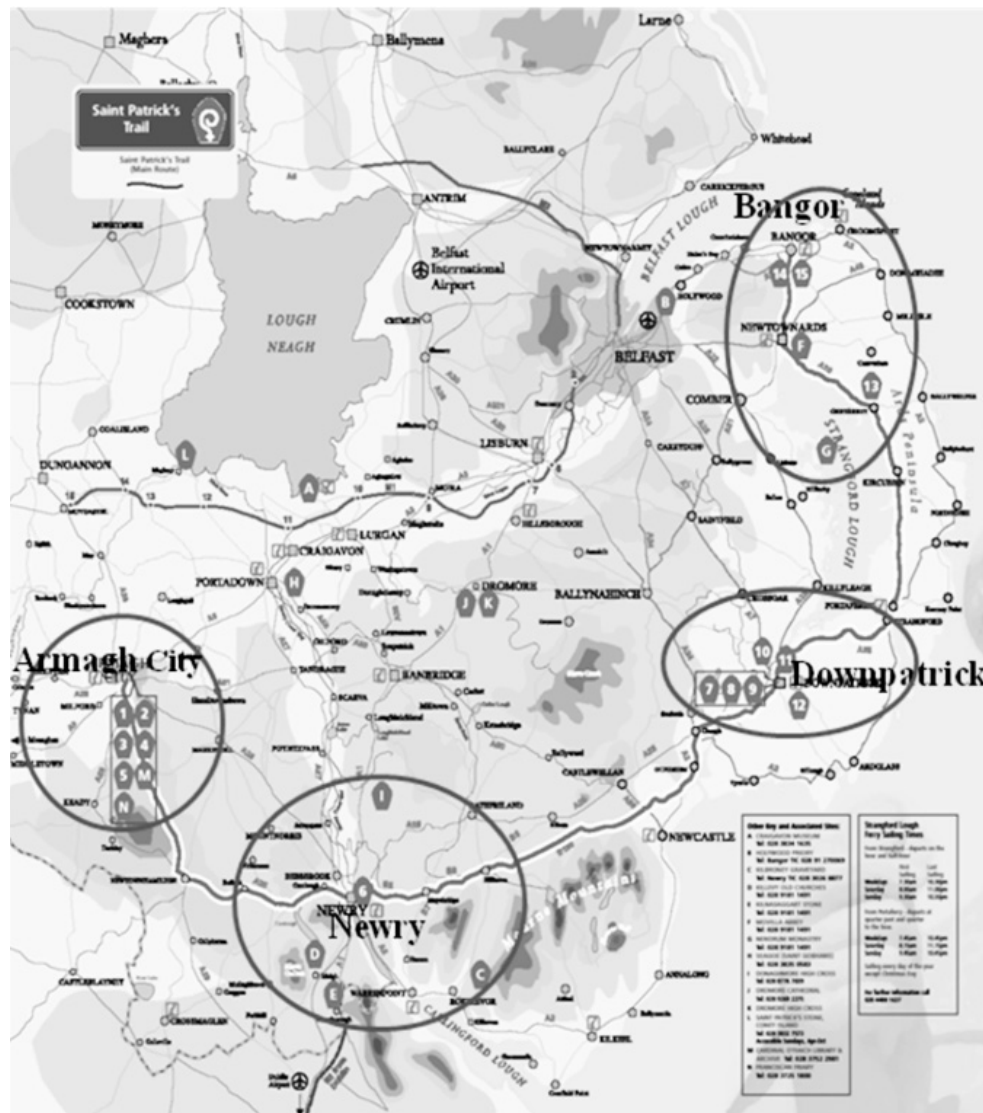
Rank	Attraction	Visitor
1	Giant's Causeway Visitor Centre	714,612
2	Oxford Island Nature Reserve	324,947
3	Belfast Zoological Gardens	304,085
4	Titanic's Dock and Pump House	261,200
5	W5 (Science Museum opened 2001)	251,268
6	Carrick-a-Rede Rope Bridge	239,299
7	Derry Walls	225,765
8	Portstewart Strand	188,480
9	Ulster Folk and Transport Museum	169,628
10	Ulster American Folk Park	154,471

Source: NITB (2009)

The Saint Patrick's & Christian Heritage signature project was chosen by the NITB because of the market potential for Christian Heritage, the diversity, integrity and authenticity of the product base, and the wealth of place association connected with Saint Patrick. The Saint, in fact, began his mission and founded his first church in

Armagh establishing the city as a spiritual centre, and when he died, he was buried in Downpatrick, County Down. The aim of the project is to create a literal and metaphorical series of journeys through landscape and culture, myth and reality that allows visitors to follow in the footsteps of Patrick's personal journey from ordinary man to Saint and reflect on how his legacy has shaped the contemporary landscape, culture and Christian heritage of Ireland. The project is primarily based on the urban centres of Armagh and Downpatrick, with Bangor and Newry as secondary clusters (Figure 1), although it does have an affinity and resonance with all of Northern Ireland and, indeed the island of Ireland. A three year Action Plan was launched by the NITB in March 2005 developed around six priority themes, namely: working in partnership, developing a St Patrick's Trail, creating a memorable experience, developing a coordinated events and festival programme, strong marketing and branding, and developing cross border activities (Saint Patrick's Signature Project- Overview, 2010).

Figure 1
ST PATRICK'S TRAIL AND ATTRACTIONS CLUSTERS



Discussion of partnerships was alluded to earlier in the paper. This is applied now directly to the Saint Patrick's Signature Project, and the formalisation of a trail with the opportunity to create development around specific clusters as shown in Figure 1. The development of the trail and the creation of business opportunity within the clusters require the cooperation of a diverse range of stakeholders. These include public and Government bodies (The Northern Ireland Tourist Board, Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, the Northern Ireland Environment Agency, the Department of Regional Development, the Department of Social Development, and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development), local District Councils (Down, Armagh City, Newry and Mourne); public/private tourist organizations such as visitor and convention bureaux and Regional Tourism Partnerships (e.g. Armagh Down Tourism Partnership); and private tourism organizations including visitor attractions (St Patrick Centre, St Patrick's Trian Visitor Complex), churches and cathedrals (St Patrick's Church of Ireland Cathedral, St Patrick's Roman Catholic Cathedral), tour companies (Armagh Guided Tours, Legendary Days Out), and community organizations (St Patrick's Trail Advisory Groups).

The St Patrick's Trail Advisory Groups and a Coordinating Group are the two most recent additions to the project. They were set up in November 2008 with a view to take forward the St Patrick's Project. More specifically, the role of the Coordinating group, which consists of local authorities, Road Service, NIEA, RTO and NITB is to agree priorities and make strategic decisions on the regional level and wider St Patrick/Christian Heritage product. The role of the Advisory Groups, which were set up by the local councils, is to pull together all local cluster members to guide and decide on local issues, generate new ideas, liaise with visitors on the Trail and inform and guide the Coordinating Group (St Patrick's Coordinators Group, 2010).

The project has been awarded a capital allocation of £5 million through the HM Treasury's Comprehensive Spending Review, £3.5 million of which is administered through NITB's Tourism Development Scheme to finance initiatives that will help develop the religious/Christian heritage tourism offering in the region. For example, the NITB has recently (March 2010) allocated £500,000 towards the improvement of the walking trail between the two St Patrick's Cathedrals in Armagh, enhancements at Armagh County Museum, and restoration of the Registry building also in Armagh (Fifteen March 2010 - Funding Boost for the Saint Patrick Story, 2010; St Patrick's Signature Project- Overview, 2010). The NITB believes that the project will help create major opportunities for community benefits (jobs, income and business growth), uplift the region's profile and appeal as a perennial destination, and contribute £30 million per annum towards the local economy (St Patrick's/Christian Heritage Tourism Signature Project Launched, 2005). This is in line with the general view in the literature, which advocates that the development of religious tourism generates considerable economic benefits in the host destination (Olsen & Timothy, 2006; Vukonić, 2002). Since the launch of the project, there have been 51 international media trips to Northern Ireland with 30 travel writers specifically interested in the Christian Heritage product (NITB, 2008b).

Integral part of the Saint Patrick's & Christian Heritage signature project is the Saint Patrick's Trail, which was officially launched in March 2009 by the Tourism Minister for Northern Ireland and the Chairman of the NITB. The trail covers a two-way 62 mile long driving route from Armagh through Newry to Downpatrick and up the Ards Peninsula to Bangor (Figure 1). Attractions on the trail include the two Saint Patrick's Cathedrals (one Church of Ireland and one Roman Catholic), Armagh County Museum, Armagh Public Library, and St Patrick's Trian Visitor Complex in Armagh, Bagenal's Castle in Newry, the Saint Patrick Centre, Saint Patrick's Grave at Down Cathedral, Down County Museum, Inch Abbey, Saul Church, Struell Wells, and Grey Abbey in or around Downpatrick, and Bangor Abbey, and North Down Museum in Bangor.

In addition to the trail being developed, there exist opportunities to expand the trail by linking it with project of developing a long-distance pilgrim walk (approximately 300 km long) from Westport, County Mayo, in the Republic of Ireland to Downpatrick, County Down, in Northern Ireland based upon the theme of St Patrick. This initial idea has been abandoned and replaced with the development of a Spiritual Tourism Strategy for positioning the West and North West regions of Ireland as a renowned destination for religious heritage tourism (Griffin, McGettigan & Candon, 2009; Major European Seminar on Religious Heritage Tourism, 2010). This project is in the initial stages of development and is not as advanced as the St Patrick's and Christian Heritage Signature Project in Northern Ireland. As regards the St Patrick's Trail, opportunities for further development include plans to extend the Trail to include attractions outside the Armagh and Down area such as Slemish mountain in County Antrim, the place where Patrick spent his years as a slave and where a pilgrimage takes place every year, and even Patrician sites in the Republic of Ireland such as the Hill of Slane, Kells, Monasterboice and Dublin in order to develop the project on a cross border basis (NITB, 2008b). The variety of the religious/Christian heritage product coupled with the fact that the NITB has been developing the St Patrick's and Christian Heritage Signature Project since 2005 and has launched the St Patrick's Trail two years ago, gives Northern Ireland a competitive advantage over the Republic of Ireland, which is still in the initial stages of developing its spiritual/religious tourism offering.

Examples of attractions linked to the Province's political history include Saint Columb's Cathedral in Londonderry/Derry which contains a Museum within which are artefacts from the Great Siege of Derry which saw the army of Catholic King James II try to take the city and the army of Protestant military governor Robert Lundy try to defend it (the cathedral was also used by the protestant army to observe the catholic enemies because of its position high on the hill), Saint Anne's Cathedral in Belfast which contains the Chapel of Unity where groups and individuals from "across the sectarian divide" meet and pray together for greater mutual understanding and also contains the tomb of Sir Edward Carson, leader of the Ulster Unionists, and the Orangefest, a festival which takes place in Belfast on 12th July and other Parades/Marches

which take place in July across the region to celebrate Protestant King William III victory's over Catholic King James II at the Battle of the Boyne. These religious tourist attractions and events tend to be promoted under the wider umbrella of cultural heritage tourism because of the sensitivities that still surround the Province's political history and their potential to generate controversy and hurt within the two main communities (Protestant and Roman Catholic) forming the Northern Ireland society.

According to the official figures, religious/Christian heritage sites and attractions still remain as sites of lesser significance for the majority of visitors to Northern Ireland. However, as highlighted in the literature (Olsen & Timothy, 2006; Vukonić, 2002), this might be due to the fact that some sacred places are considered as places of worship before tourist attractions and, therefore, they do not have systems in place to record visitor numbers. Moreover, as said earlier, because of the recentness of the Troubles some religious tourist attractions, especially those linked to the political history of Northern Ireland, tend to be promoted under the wider umbrella of cultural heritage tourism. Therefore, as time passes by allowing sensitivities to decrease, as sacred places owners/mangers become more involved with the St Patrick's & Christian Heritage Signature Project, and as the religious heritage product gains more exposure and recognition by visitors, statistics could dramatically change in the next few years. The paper now shifts to presenting the methodology that was employed to carry out the study followed by the results and wider discussion and implications.

Methodology

This essentially qualitative study is based on semi-structured interviews of managers and senior officers of public bodies and private tourism organizations, representatives of religious institutions (from most denominations), and representatives of the Province's main political parties. All interviews and site visits took place over a two-month period in the spring of 2008. As respondents were sometimes located in different counties from that of the interviewer, a combination of face-to face and telephone interviews was employed. Since the research aims to investigate an issue in-depth from a qualitative perspective, a purposeful sampling method was employed to choose the appropriate experts to interview. This allowed the researchers to select cases (interviewees) that would best answer the study aims (Hemmington, 1999; Patton, 2002).

Based on their experience, role, and influence in policymaking in tourism, 32 key participants were chosen among visitor and convention bureaux, city councils, the Northern Ireland Tourist Board, the Orange Order, companies involved in the organization of walking, bus and taxi tours, community organisations, two museums, political parties, and churches and cathedrals. The authors chose not to interview representatives of Tourism Ireland because although the company is responsible for marketing the island of Ireland in Great Britain and overseas as a holiday destination, responsibilities for product and enterprise development (as well as promotion and marketing to tourism consumers within the island of Ireland) lie with the NITB. The St Patrick's & Christian Heritage Signature Project is currently being promoted through Tourism Ireland,

but also through the NITB's visitor website and there are plans to establish a specialist St Patrick's & Christian Heritage website and link it to other specialist sites such as the Camino de Santiago website. However, the views of Tourism Ireland on the potential market for pilgrimage/Christian heritage tourism to the island of Ireland were considered through secondary sources and, in particular, a feasibility study commissioned by NITB and Fáilte Ireland in 2008 on the potential of developing a long-distance cross-border Pilgrim Walk. The study contained the results of an on-line survey with Tourism Ireland market staff across the world (TTC International & Countrywise Consultants, 2009).

The interview questions aimed at investigating the respondents' views on the following: the importance of religious/Christian heritage tourism in terms of attracting visitors to Northern Ireland; the potential for Northern Ireland to be promoted as a religious tourism destination; the contribution of religious/Christian heritage tourism towards the development of the local economy; the role played by public tourist bodies, private tourist organizations and other institutions in the development and promotion of religious/Christian heritage tourism; and the various players' willingness to collaborate to develop and promote religious/Christian heritage tourism in the Province.

All conversations were recorded: face-to-face interviews were recorded on a dictaphone and telephone interviews via a telephone conversation recorder. This not only allowed to control bias and to produce reliable data for analysis, but also enabled the authors to concentrate more fully and listen attentively to the interviewees' responses (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2007). All recordings were transcribed in verbatim format soon after completion and notes were produced during the transcription process. The transcripts and notes were analyzed according to key themes (content analysis) which are used to present the findings of the research. By looking for key terms and phrases, lengthy transcripts of key-informant interviews, were reduced to manageable blocks of text, from which relevant quotes have been selected (Stemler, 2001). Since some respondents expressed the wish not to be identified, on occasions, the authors were unable to state the respondents' names. When this was the case, the organizations the respondents represented were stated instead.

There emerged a number of limitations to the research approach adopted. It is accepted that the findings are based on the authors' interpretations of the statements interviewees made on various topics. However, this is defended on the basis that the method allowed for an exact copy of the interview to be written down. The authors have experience in conducting in depth interviews from a semi-structured interview schedule, and are cognizant of the importance of ensuring that bias is avoided in how interviewee responses are analysed. The emergent findings to the papers aims are discussed next.

Findings and discussion

ST PATRICK'S & CHRISTIAN HERITAGE SIGNATURE PROJECT: OPPORTUNITY FOR RELIGIOUS TOURISM

All participants agreed that there is a reasonably healthy demand for sites and attractions associated with religion and spirituality in the Province. The majority of interviewees described the link with St Patrick and the numerous Christian sites associated with it, as something unique to Northern Ireland, which gives it a competitive advantage over other destinations. Interviewees also unanimously believed that the NITB's St Patrick's & Christian Heritage Signature Project has potential to further improve the existing Christian heritage product and attract more out-of-state visitors. Most interviewees, however, were dubious that the visitors' reasons are purely of a religious nature and believed that the market interested in visiting Christian heritage sites is represented by 'culturalists and sightseers'. One informant stated the following: "[Visitors] are not specifically looking for a religious experience; however they are interested in cultural experiences, architecture, authentic/unique experiences, heritage sites etc" (Northern Ireland Tourist Board, Belfast, 2008, personal communication). Moreover, some participants attributed the visitors' interest in the religious history of Northern Ireland to the interconnection of religion with politics, history, and culture in the Province. As one informant noted:

In many ways you have got a political interest in the religious institutions in terms of something like St Columb's Cathedral [in L/Derry] because it has Siege artefacts, which connects it to the political history... There is definitely an interest [in religious tourism]: whether it's because of religious, historical, or political reasons it's difficult to say
(M. Cooper, L/Derry)

Visitors' interest in sites and attractions linked to religion and spirituality in Northern Ireland supports Timothy and Olsen's (2006) view vis-à-vis the pervasiveness of religious tourism in the world. In addition, the findings above reinforce Olsen and Timothy's (2006), and Shackley's (2001, 2002) belief that people increasingly travel to a variety of sacred sites not only for religious or spiritual purposes, but also for reasons of a more secular and cultural nature such as their architecture or historical importance. This, in turn, confirms that there is a growing general interest in cultural heritage tourism as advocated by Robinson and Novelli (2005) and Timothy and Boyd (2003).

NORTHERN IRELAND: A RELIGIOUS TOURISM DESTINATION?

All respondents concurred that Northern Ireland has plenty of religious/Christian heritage attractions and sites to become established and be promoted as a religious tourism destination. This point was illustrated well by a political party's representative in the following manner:

...First of all most authentic sites connected with Saint Patrick...are within Northern Ireland or within the Province of Ulster... Obviously Armagh, Downpatrick, and Slemish. So you are actually covering three counties... Also religious tourism should not concentrate solely on that early church period... There are many Americans who have an interest in Presbyterianism... The founding fathers of American Presbyterianism were

all Ulster-Scots... So [there is] potential to develop tourist links between American Presbyterianism, Ulster and Presbyterianism in Scotland... You have got [Saint Columb's] Cathedral in L/Derry, which was the first Protestant Cathedral built after the Reformation... So in terms of established church, Patrick and the early church period there are various aspects of religious history... that are important

N. McCausland, Belfast

Numerous respondents, while recognizing that work is being done to develop the religious/Christian heritage product in the Province, felt that more efforts were needed on behalf of the National Tourist Organization for the Saint Patrick's & Christian Heritage Signature Project to be successful. For instance, one interviewee stated the following: "I acknowledge that the Tourist Board is trying to do something about this project, but they could do a lot more particularly [in relation to] Bangor Abbey, Holywood Priory, and Newtownards... (L. Cree, Bangor). Furthermore, interviewees indicated the 30 years of political instability experienced by the region as one of the causes which prevented an earlier development of religious tourism. For instance, a religious institution's representative noted: "...The Troubles in Northern Ireland prevented it from having its due share of a form of tourism based on Celtic spirituality... That is ready to be exploited" (H. McKelvey, Belfast).

These examples highlight that the stakeholders are aware of how diverse is the religious/Christian heritage tourism product in Northern Ireland is diverse and that it encompasses a variety of sites, attractions, and experiences ranging from Saint Patrick and early Christianity, to established religious institutions, to religious aspects of the political history, to Celtic spirituality, thus advocating Baum's (2000), Heelas' (1998) and Olsen and Timothy's (2006) view that modern society has expanded its concept of religion, thus allowing for different types of religious tourism experiences to co-exist. However, Northern Ireland has not promoted its cathedrals and churches as visitor attractions, perhaps traditionally maintaining these as religious spaces for spiritual reflection and renewal. As stated by Hassan (2000), a destination's indigenous culture is critical in helping it gain market competitiveness. Moreover, as stated by Puczko and Getz (2007), cultural resources can be developed relatively quickly and economically. It follows that there are opportunities to develop the role the Province's churches and cathedrals can play in broadening the cultural tourism product.

RELIGIOUS/CHRISTIAN HERITAGE TOURISM AND REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

There was consensus among all respondents that tourism in all its forms has great potential to benefit the local economy. For example, a political party's representative explained that:

We recognize clearly the effect that tourism can have on the creation of jobs and we can see the benefits in its development. Up until a few years ago in the North West there was no hotel infrastructure and now we have the surge of new build programmes. In the past tourists may have come here and they may have thought that they wouldn't stay over-

night. There is a change now. People are feeling much more comfortable and confident coming here. The quality of life here is particularly good.

P. Ramsey, L/Derry

A similar view was expressed by a representative of a different political party who stated the following: "Tourism is one of the key regenerators for the Island of Ireland... Thankfully we are seeing the numbers of tourists coming in and that will help create jobs, regenerate the whole of the North and obviously create a good and positive vibrant economy" (P. Maskey, Belfast). In particular, interviewees indicated cultural heritage tourism as playing a major role in attracting visitors to the Province and, therefore, contributing towards regional development. A respondent summed this point up in the following manner:

People are coming because they have heard of the conflict... They are coming to see the murals on the walls... but also because of the background and culture that we have here, going back to the Plantation period, to the walled city [of L/Derry] and the likes of other historical and cultural events, which are crucially important

P. Ramsey, L/Derry-

Nonetheless, some respondents believed that the promotion of cultural heritage tourism in the Province requires objectivity and lack of bias, requirements that are not necessarily easy to satisfy without denying some private tourism organizations from the two main communities (Protestant and Roman Catholic) their right to tell their side of the story.

The opinions of respondents expressed above reflect thinking by Hassan (2000) that cultural attributes are invaluable resources that set a destination apart from its competitors and, if developed properly, can give it a competitive advantage. The respondents views are also in line with Robinson and Novelli's (2005) and Timothy and Boyd's (2003) standpoint that visitors' interest in cultural heritage tourism is ever growing. Based on the general view in the literature (Olsen & Timothy, 2006; Vukonić, 2002) and as supported by the NITB (St Patrick's/Christian Heritage Tourism Signature Project Launched, 2005) it may be argued that the arrival of religious tourists to an area has direct economic benefits for the local population, with the development of religious/Christian heritage tourism in Northern Ireland having potential in terms of enabling regional development in those clusters where religious tourism attractions are located. The authors would argue based on the response of stakeholders interviewed that the growth of religious/Christian heritage tourism could even help to reduce prejudice, foster attitudinal change, and act as one possible bridge to cultural differences between the Protestant and Roman Catholic communities; a viewpoint held by advocates of pro-peace tourism (Khamouna & Zeiger, 1995; Var, Ap & Van Doren, 1994).

OBSTACLES TO THE DEVELOPMENT AND PROMOTION OF RELIGIOUS/CHRISTIAN HERITAGE TOURISM

With regard to their role in the development and promotion of religious/Christian heritage tourism, there was a conflict of views between public and private sector respondents. In fact, although all public sector representatives believed that the private sector should lead, they admitted that in fact the statutory authorities were leading because the private sector was not yet mature enough. This point was illustrated by one public sector organization's representative, who stated that:

Obviously we would love to be in a position where the private sector makes a bigger contribution to assist us, but the private sector is not a vibrant private sector yet. Unlike other countries in the world that have had good tourism, we are coming out after many years of struggling...

A. Gilchrist, Downpatrick

The viewpoint that the Troubles have had a major influence on the development, or rather, underdevelopment of the tourism industry is well accepted in the literature (Boyd, 2000; Wall, 1996; Wilson, 1993). On the other hand, private sector organizations too believed that they played a major role, but they were limited in what they could do by lack of funding, training, and support on behalf of the public sector. For example, an interviewee argued:

I told the NITB that there was a gap in the market that we could fill but I've found them unhelpful... There is also an Armagh and Down body which is a subdivision of the NITB... We've spent money on [partnerships with] Armagh and Down and the NITB and we haven't see any results. So until we haven't seen evidence that the public sector can do a good job, we'd rather spend the money promoting ourselves...

P. Linehan, Downpatrick

The findings highlight that there is confusion with regard to public and private sectors' respective roles and responsibilities. This supports Dredge's (2006) view that problems arise when the roles and responsibilities of key stakeholders engaged in networks and clusters are not clearly focused and articulated. As stated by Dredge (2006) and Novelli, Schmitz and Spencer (2006), clusters and networks are vital for regional development as they enhance public sector, private sector and community collaboration. According to Hassan (2000), sustainable development and market competitiveness can only be achieved by destinations through sophisticated planning and development strategies coupled with the involvement of all stakeholders. This also applies to the St Patrick's & Christian Heritage Signature Project. Private sector organizations, in fact, possess invaluable knowledge of the religious/Christian heritage product on the ground in their area, while public sector tourist bodies and political institutions possess the resources, networks, expertise, and lobbying power much needed by the private sector organizations.

COLLABORATION TO DEVELOP AND PROMOTE RELIGIOUS/CHRISTIAN HERITAGE TOURISM

All interviewees agreed that it is essential to collaborate in order to assist opportunities associated with religious/Christian heritage sites and attractions. This point was illustrated by a public sector body's representative, who stated that: "We are not going to be able to develop any sort of tourism product in Northern Ireland without the involvement of other sectors. The government can't do everything itself... The more value we can get in from the private sector, the better..." (N. McCausland, Belfast). Despite many participants stating that they are either already engaged in collaborative projects or they would do so if opportunities arose, the general view among private sector organizations was that the statutory bodies are too bureaucratic, slow and fragmented. For example, one private sector organization stated:

It seems to us that any time we work with the government agencies we are dealing with civil servants, who have no real awareness of the commercial realities and no real awareness of the day-to-day tourism issues... The problem with Northern Ireland civil service is [that there are] five or six departments and they all have a wee bit of responsibility, so you are dealing with different people who don't talk to each other... Certainly [cooperation] is possible, we would always be happy to work with anybody, but sometimes it's just unfeasible

A. McCormack, Belfast

On the other hand, most public sector bodies stated that private sector organizations should be less reliant on the statutory bodies and should contribute more financially. From the point of view of private sector organizations collaborating with each other, some indicated competition as one of the main difficulties. A respondent from a private tourism organization explained this point in the following manner:

There are a large number of guides for a small pool of tourists... Private sector-wise locally you will find a certain degree of competition which makes co-operation difficult. If you co-operate with another tour guiding company, apart from anything else, if you get them to cover some of your tours then they can take your business. If you do walking tours, you all do the same product to a degree...

M. Cooper, L/Derry

The findings highlight again that the relationship between public and some private sector organizations is an uneasy one and that there are some barriers that need to be overcome before cooperation can take place. There might be several explanations for the lack of trust between cross-sector organizations. Perhaps private and public sector organizations are simply not used to work in partnership because during the Troubles there would have not been many private organizations involved in the business of tourism. In addition, the suspiciousness between sectors could be rooted in the political history of the Province as a certain number of private organizations are community organizations while the public tourist sector tends to be associated with the statutory authorities. Whatever the reason, the roles and responsibilities of public and private

sector organizations need to be clarified (Dredge, 2006) if cross-sector networks and partnerships are to be formed so that the St Patrick's and Christian Heritage Signature Project can evolve successfully and contribute to the development of the region (Hassan, 2000). The formation/consolidation of networks, clusters and partnerships would also help private sector businesses see each other as colleagues rather than competitors and, therefore, influence them to cooperate and actively work towards the long-term benefits deriving from a collaborative use of resources (Novelli, Schmitz & Spencer, 2006).

Conclusions and recommendations

This paper set out to establish if religious tourism had potential within Northern Ireland, and if so what role it would play in the development of specific clusters around which potential regional development could take place. The research was strongly qualitative in nature, with emphasis placed on gathering information via observation and in-depth interviews of the major stakeholders involved both from within the public and private sectors. The demand for religious tourism was examined from a supply-side perspective, and the consensus of response by stakeholders suggests that there exists considerable opportunity to promote the religious dimension of the Province's culture as tourism assets.

Northern Ireland is no different from any other destination that promote religious tourism; it has an extensive and varied religious heritage that ranges from Saint Patrick and early Christianity, to different established religious institutions, to religious aspects of the Province's controversial history, to Irish High Crosses and Celtic spirituality. These elements combined provide a basis upon which to support such niche tourism development and reap the benefits that other religious tourism destinations have realised (Din, 1989; Fleischer, 2000; Hudman & Jackson, 1992; Jackowski & Smith, 1992; Olsen & Timothy, 2006; Vukonić, 2002). At present though, the focus is with the development of product solely around St. Patrick in the form of a themed touring trail, and one of the Province's signature projects that is being driven by the National Tourist Organisation. The findings from the responses of stakeholders interviewed was that while they welcome the developments associated with this Signature Project, the focus at present was too much with the major centres of Downpatrick and Armagh, and that limited development and benefit would be realised in the cluster regions/communities of Bangor and Newry. There was also acceptance that the Province has a wealth of cathedrals and churches, and that while some do receive visitation (see Table 1), many others have potential as tourism attractions if focus was on wider links to maritime heritage and their unique architecture. Ideas also were recognised about developing connections with the Republic of Ireland but as of yet plans to do so are still at an early stage.

Secondary data obtained from the NITB (see Tables 1 and 2) in particular would suggest that given the development of the Signature Project around Saint Patrick and Christian Heritage, to date no religious/Christian heritage attraction appears among

the top 10 tourist attractions in Northern Ireland, suggesting that religion is not a major visitor draw; a position that was held by the stakeholders surveyed who felt it was more appropriate to see religion as part of the wider cultural offering that Northern Ireland has to offer its visitors. To some, this wider label was easier to identify with, enabling some religious places, especially those linked to the Troubles, to be promoted under the wider umbrella of cultural heritage tourism in order to avoid controversy. Cultural heritage tourism plays a major role in attracting visitors to the Province and offers the best opportunity to benefit the local economy (Boyd, 2000; NITB, 2009). Nonetheless, the promotion of cultural heritage tourism, especially as related to religious aspects of the Province's recent history, poses some problems. In fact, while there is a need to portray events and people in a neutral and unbiased manner, at the same time, private tourist organizations from both sides of the political/religious divide have the right to tell their side of the story without any sanitization. It follows that the only viable way to avoid discontent and hurt in the two main communities forming the Northern Ireland society is by ensuring that the Saint Patrick's & Christian Heritage Signature Project and other religious and cultural tourism initiatives incorporate attractions and sites from both (Protestant and Roman Catholic) religions and that the two main communities, represented by a number of private tourist organizations, are involved in every aspect of these developments. It is therefore crucial that Northern Ireland does not let the challenges associated with the interpretation and presentation of its cultural and political history turn into obstacles that prevent it from developing its cultural heritage assets into tourist attractions.

The second main focus of the research was to ascertain the level of cooperation needed between stakeholders involved in the development of religious tourism and to identify what obstacles they felt needed to be overcome. The key findings that emerged from the research was that collaboration in order to assist opportunities associated with religious sites and attractions is welcomed by all sectors, but that a lack of understanding what their respective roles and responsibilities were is a major obstacle that needs to be overcome. Public sector organizations believe that the private sector should be more proactive and less reliant from a financial point of view. On the other hand, private sector organizations (visitor attractions, churches, cathedrals, tour companies and community organizations) believe that the statutory public sector authorities need to do more in terms of provision of advice, funding, and marketing. Obviously these problems, if not overcome, could put the Saint Patrick's & Christian Heritage Signature Project in jeopardy. It is, therefore, essential that existing networks and clusters (e.g. the St Patrick's Trail Advisory Groups, and the St Patrick's Coordinating Group) and partnerships (e.g. between businesses in the Armagh and Down area and the Armagh Down Tourism Partnership) between public and private sector bodies but also between organizations in the private sector are strengthened and new ones are formed. Clusters and networks in fact, shape opportunities for communication, the development of new ideas, the translation of ideas into practice, and the preservation of community values and lifestyles, which are important attributes for developing innovation and competitiveness (Dredge, 2006). Moreover, networks and clusters help

organizations see each other as colleagues rather than competitors and, therefore, influence organizations' willingness to cooperate and actively work towards the long-term benefits deriving from a collaborative use of resources including regional development and market competitiveness (Novelli, Schmitz & Spencer, 2006). The consolidation and formation of clusters, networks, and partnerships is particularly significant in the case of the St Patrick's & Christian Heritage Signature Project for the Project not only requires close cooperation between all the different types of attractions on the Saint Patrick's Trail for the purpose of coordinating events and festivals, but also between attractions in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland for the purpose of cross-border activities. One of the outcomes of such cooperative efforts could be, for instance, the development of a "passport" system or membership scheme such as the one offered by the National Trust, which would allow religious/Christian heritage tourists to pay reduced prices to visit different attractions on the Trail, which, in turn, could stimulate repeat visits.

The authors are cognizant that this research was supply driven, and that the findings here need to be followed up from a demand perspective by ascertaining the opinions of visitors coming to Northern Ireland and the interest they have on things religious. This second strand of research is currently ongoing with results soon to be published. An additional avenue for further research would also be to examine if there exist interconnections between religious and political tourism as products for Northern Ireland, and to ascertain the opportunity the latter may have over the former as the Province emerges from a difficult past and moves forward to establishing a mature tourism industry. Perhaps, what this research has uncovered is that the nature and authenticity of the religious/Christian heritage product may represent part of the Province's USP, and that the wider cultural/heritage mix of tourism opportunity includes religious places and spaces. In order for that aspect of the mix to be realised, however, better cooperation, collaboration and communication is needed between the stakeholders involved.

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