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## Catholic Church turns to NKY's Gebbie

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A \$100 million complex under construction in Israel's Holy Land will let a million worshippers from around the world trace the steps of Jesus each year.

And one Northern Kentucky businessman is helping bring that project to life.

Bob Gebbie of Erlanger's Natural Bridge Group was recruited by an order of the Catholic Church to help bridge a \$70 million financing gap for the Magdala Center on the Sea of Galilee.

The Vatican-endorsed project is considered one of the Church's most significant investments in the Middle East in recent history, incorporating ruins from one of only seven known first century synagogues with a hotel, worship and meeting complex open to Christian, Jewish and Muslim visitors from around the world. Gebbie's business experience made him a good choice to manage the Church's fundraising in the United States.

His deep connections stem from his roles as an executive at the Guggenheim Museum, the American Museum of Natural History, the United States Tennis Association (USTA), as an investment banker on Wall Street, a consultant to Kentucky state legislators, and as an entrepreneur.

"It's a very, very important project," Gebbie said. "There are a lot of eyes on that part of the world. We think the center can promote world peace through a religious dialogue."

Since last September, Gebbie has spent time visiting individuals, corporations and religious organizations to raise money. Once the hotel is complete in December 2012, he hopes more U.S. residents will make the trip to Israel to experience the rich historical and religious context of the region.

"I'm not a Catholic, but there has always been an attraction to the good works of the Church," Gebbie said.

**From Wall Street to Union**

Gebbie is a Northern Kentucky transplant. He moved to Union in 2006 from Bowling Green, Ky., where his wife was a physician at the Bowling Green Medical Center.

He spent much of his career in New York City, serving in various financial and operations roles at Fortune 500 companies and nonprofits.

He ran the U.S. Open tennis event as chief operating officer and financial officer of the USTA. He spent four years as COO and CFO of the Guggenheim, leading the effort to fund its major renovation and the construction of a museum in Spain.

Before that, he held the title of CFO of the natural history museum.

Gebbie performed merger and acquisition work on Wall Street for Exxon and Chemical Bank. He's also a former Olympic athlete, serving as an alternate to the U.S. diving team in the 1972 Games in Munich.

Gebbie met Rich Hempel, now his partner in Natural Bridge, while consulting with Kentucky legislators on economic development issues in 2002. The next year, they formed Natural Bridge Mobile with a plan to commercialize up-and-coming information technology products and services. They've since managed early stage and startup technology ventures, advised firms on capital formation and consulted with governments on the creation of private-public partnerships to spur economic development.

"We like to align with projects that support our core fundamental beliefs," Hempel said. "We support education and the economic development efforts of the church, and the history aspect is just fascinating."

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### **Relationship started in 2003**

Natural Bridge Group's connection to the Legionaries of Christ came through a joint venture with the organization in Mexico in 2003. Together, they hoped to launch in the United States an online education program that had been successful teaching children in South and Central America to speak English. The joint venture is no longer active today, but the groups remained in contact.

Gebbie traveled to Israel with the order in 2007 and met Father Eamon Kelly, who helps to run the Legion's Pontifical Institute Notre Dame of Jerusalem Center, a historic Jerusalem hotel and center for pilgrims visiting the Holy Land. The two became instant friends. Kelly, ironically, had spent four years in Union working with youth and served as a chaplain at Northern Kentucky University in 2005 and 2006 before taking his appointment at the Notre Dame Center.

In 2004, the Legion had earned control of the Notre Dame Center from Pope John Paul II. The order worked over several years to upgrade the quality of service and boost pilgrimages there. In recent years, the Vatican has seen a need for another center in Israel to serve pilgrims and settled on a 20-acre plot for sale two hours away in Galilee, where few hotels operated.

The land is near Magdala, thought to be a key stop for Jesus during his public ministry and the place where he first met Mary Magdalene. According to the Bible, she was the first to see Jesus after he rose from the dead.

The Vatican chose the Legion to develop the new center and operate it when complete. The Legion would also be responsible for raising funds for the project. As it assembled a worldwide fundraising team, Gebbie was brought aboard to help Kelly raise funds and support in the United States.

Friends like Mark Ritchey of downtown's Draper Triangle Ventures weren't surprised by the appointment.

"This is an entrepreneurial effort," Ritchey said. "You've got to bring discipline to it, build a team, raise the money and execute on a business plan. His skills apply to something like this."

### **'Very powerful experience'**

Key elements of the Magdala Center include its 122-room hotel, an ecumenical chapel, an International Center for Women's Studies, four independent chapels for international pilgrims, and a \$30 million multimedia center, which will provide an interactive experience for Christian believers. That will be added in a second phase, to be complete in 2014.

"You get immersed in the culture of the biblical moment," said Father Kelly during a recent trip to the United States. "You'll get wet, smell the lake, hear the rippling waves. You'll see Jesus performing his ministry. It's going to be a very powerful experience."

Before any construction could begin, a massive excavation took place. Last May, archaeologists and volunteers dug up a coffee table-sized stone with a menorah engraved in the stone. They quickly uncovered just inches under the ground artifacts of a small first century synagogue, only the seventh to be discovered in the world. More than 250 coins dated between 42 and 67 A.D. were found, along with mosaics, frescos and stone carvings.

In recent months, the archaeologists found remnants of the town surrounding the temple.

"Our first prayer was not to find anything that would hold up planning. The second prayer was if we do find something, that it be worthwhile," Kelly said.

Those remains have been salvaged and will be incorporated into the center when the hotel is complete.

### **Right person for the job**

The walls of the hotel on the site are going up now, thanks to early commitments from the Vatican, donors in Europe and Latin America, and a grant from the country of

Israel. The Magdala Center supports the country's goals to expand tourism, as well as spur job growth. The center will employ up to 500 people when complete.

Gebbie is helping procure the remaining funds to finish the project and to raise an endowment for its continued operations. Gebbie's strategy initially is to target corporations with interest or operations in Israel and individuals interested in making large gifts. He's visiting with people such as Henry Gordon, a Denver investor in oil and energy companies, who visited Israel in 2010 and met Father Kelly.

"Father Kelly is one of the most amazing people I've ever met in my life," Gordon said. He was also drawn to Gebbie, and offered to help make introductions in Colorado.

"It seems like they have the right men leading the project," Gordon said. In June, they'll host a gala for all religious sects at the Denver Museum of Nature and Science to celebrate the archaeological findings and raise funds for the project. Other major efforts are under way in New York City, Atlanta, Houston and Dallas, where volunteers who have visited Jerusalem have gathered to support the project.

Gebbie hopes to eventually start a campaign locally, too.

"Once we start building momentum, we hope to be in all of the major cities and build some rapport here," he said.