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Student perspectives on worship services from Instructor Jennifer Garvin-Sanchez's Religious Studies 108 Human Spirituality undergraduate course at Virginia Commonwealth University.

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# Church of God: “Christianity”

by Toni Taylor

This time I decided to attend a Protestant service by the name of 21st Street Church of God, located at 1601 N 21st in the Church Hill area of Richmond City. I attended this Conservative Christian Church on November 29, 2015. The presiding official was Pastor Silas Oliver who has been pastoring there now for about three years. He is originally from Florida.

21st Street Church of God is really small compared to the services I've already attended. You can also tell that it has been there for many years. The exterior of the church is simple to say the least. It's mainly brick with a tall oval/triangle entrance. There're a lot of stairs that lead to the front door with an outside elevator alongside. There is also an outside ramp that leads to a door on the side of the building. There are three crosses in the right front yard of the church, one brown and two white. An itinerary is provided to show which services they have on Sunday and throughout the week. You can tell that there's a basement from the structure of the building and from the stairs on the left front of the building that go under the main entrance. When I walked up the stairs to enter, a man was standing there greeting everyone and opening the door. I've never been to a church where I was greeted before even entering the building, this was a nice touch. After we greeted each other, I walked through the very small vestibule of the church before entering the sanctuary. The sanctuary was small as well with a very straight forward look. The whole carpet was red as well as the

upholstery on the pews. There were wooden floors, but only between pews.

To the back of the church was a choir room where most of the choir members were waiting to walk down the aisle. I went to take a seat and noticed the beautiful stained glass windows. All of them had the names of the families that had donated the money to create the windows. I see that as being such a touching aspect in a church and it always makes me feel comfortable knowing that a church is so personal and loving. That made me comfortable as well as the people in the congregation. There were only African Americans present except for the first lady who is from Barbados. There weren't many young kids, the congregation consisted of many senior citizens and the rest consisted of adults and young adults. The congregation consisted of mostly women, but not by a substantial amount. Everyone was very inviting and comforting with the way they greeted me. I ended up sitting with family that had greeted me very nicely and had offered me a seat with them. The service soon started with the “Women's Choir” and they sounded great. They were very uplifting and full of energy which made the congregation get more excited. Between songs there was an offering and prayer. After prayer, the pastor came down from the pulpit and stood in the middle aisle for anyone who wanted to come get anointed. When I went to get anointed, he asked me if I needed any specific prayer and then he blessed me and placed oil on my

forehead. I returned to my seat and the Pastor walked around to every elder in the church and anointed them. My guess is that he did that because most of them weren't capable of coming down the center aisle. As he walked back to the pulpit, one of the ministers walked to the mic and said that coming up next would be an Advent presentation followed by a musical selection and then the Pastor. Advent is the first season of the Christian church year, leading up to Christmas and including the four preceding Sundays. Three people came up to read some facts about Advent. After that was a great musical selection followed by the sermon. Pastor Oliver is a very passionate preacher that tried, in every way, to help people receive the word. He moved a lot in his sermon, and had a few really funny jokes just in case anyone was uptight. His sermon lasted about forty-five minutes and after he said his last words the congregation seemed really pleased with the sermon he gave. By this time church was coming to a close, so they gave the benediction. The benediction consisted of a prayer and then a closing song that the whole church sang. I actually knew the song so I sung along with the congregation. After the song, the congregation got really social and everyone started hugging everyone and having conversations. The family I was with introduced me to a lot of people and everyone seemed very genuinely happy to talk with me. Overall it was a very nice experience, and out of all the church's I attended this one made me feel the most comfortable by far. Looking back at the service I would say that it was very emotional, but not the way that most would think. This congregation seemed happy, overjoyed, and grateful. I saw tears as well as excitement and rejoicing. This tone was maintained throughout the whole service and nothing seemed forced, everything about this

church was casual and natural. Most of the congregation was up and very engaged. I saw a couple reserved people but they were either teenagers or elders. The service was so natural that I would have to say it was spontaneous compared to the other services I attended. This church had no rituals except for praying, which is common in every religion. I can say that I did enjoy myself and I'm sure others would feel just as I do if they like exciting and engaging services that make you want to get on your feet. •

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