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2015

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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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Iglesia Evangelica Apostoles y Profetas

by Nancy Lopez

During my thanksgiving break I attended a Christian service, I was hesitant at first, but the experience was worthwhile. One of my aunts attends a Spanish Pentecostal church in Woodbridge, VA. It is called Iglesia Evangelica Apostoles y Profetas, their address is 1437 Louisa St, Woodbridge, VA 22191. The pastor that presides over the church is named David Fuentes. My aunt was ecstatic that I was going to attend church with her for the very first time. My mother talked about God at home and about believing in him, but we never attended services or went to church at all. The day that we went was on Friday at 7pm for a youth service.

The church looks like a building but it's quite deceiving because the inside looks like a nice church. My aunt told me that the church is very conservative, and being a guest is like being a sore thumb. She was absolutely right. They are very conservative, even with the way they sit in the church. They have a specific section for the men and a separate section for the women to sit. The women wear white veils on their heads, even the little girls. All the women wear skirts, there are absolutely no women wearing pants. The guys on the other hand wear long sleeve shirts.

The church was founded in El Salvador and was brought to the United States, and so the members of the church are largely Salvadorans. I thought that it was going to be a small church, but the membership is pretty

solid with an approximate 300 members that attend. Since it was a youth service there were more youths than regular members on that Friday night. According to my aunt, in order to be considered "youth" you had to be between the ages of twelve and 25. At first I thought I was going to blend in, but I wasn't wearing a veil, and I was wearing pants, and so I clearly looked out of place. Since I was easy to point out, as a guest, many people wished me a warm welcome, it was a very welcoming environment. Girls that looked my age approached me and invited me to sit with them in one of the very first pews. I felt like the whole congregation was staring at me, I clearly did not belong. I started feeling a bit intimidated and uncomfortable with many eyes on me. I expressed my feelings to one of the young ladies and they reassured me to not be shy and that she would explain anything if I had any questions.

The service was led completely and solely by males, the beginning until the very end. Since it is a very conservative church I noted that right away. The service was also structured in parts. It was a lot of sitting, standing, praying, sitting, and standing again. My favorite and most memorable part was the singing. I've heard choirs before but I've never heard singing come from the whole congregation. Everyone participated in singing the "hymns" from a book. It sounded very cool, the whole church was filled with harmonious song. They had absolutely no instruments; everything

was vocal. After the singing which lasted a good 20 minutes, there was another time of singing, but it was individual singing from members in the audience. 5 people went up in the front and sang a song alone. Surprisingly women were allowed to go up as well. After the individual songs they went around singing collecting money, this is called, according to the ladies sitting with me, an offering. The offering is the ten percent that in the bible says we are to give to the church. I felt bad because I didn't have any cash with me and so I just shook my head nervously when they came around to my seat.

I want to add, that the whole service was led in spanish. I understand spanish and I speak spanish but not as well as I wish I could. Thank goodness the girls sitting with me didn't mind speaking in English to me. Therefore the sermon was in spanish, surprisingly by a young man that looked too young to be giving a sermon. He spoke spanish very eloquently and led a sermon for 45 minutes. I understood some of the sermon, but it was so long that I was looking around my surroundings. Unlike the catholic church, this church did not have any pictures, or any biblical images at all. The only thing they had as a "decoration" was a sign with a scripture on it. The service from beginning till end was 3 hours, maybe a little more. I realized now why my cousins would always turn my aunt down when she would ask if they would go to church with her. Three hours seems very long when you have to sit still and listen. At the end of the service, the young man that led the sermon asked for my name, it caught me off guard. Everyone had their eyes on me. I quickly got red and had a huge urge to just sink down in my seat. It was quiet for a moment too long. I told him my name in a very quiet and timid voice, I don't

even know how he could have heard me. He then went to ask me something about coming to the front and becoming a new person. I was so confused and thought to myself that my aunt did not prepare me enough for this service. I turned to the girls asking "like what's up? what is he asking?" In short he was asking me if I wanted to become a part of the church and take Jesus into my life and heart. I quickly and shyly shook my head, I barely knew what was going on in this church, little was I thinking about converting.

All in all the experience was a rollercoaster of emotions, I was really out of my comfort zone. I felt like the new girl in a different country, in a different culture. The people in the congregation were very emotional and definitely showed it through shouting and singing and saying things like, "amen," "praise to God." Even little kids were walking around saying the same things their parents were shouting. When the service ended they had a time for members to go up and talk about miracles that happened in their lives, or things that they were grateful for. That was a very nice part and something I really liked, it was cool to be able to hear people speak about their lives so openly to a large group of members. I am a very reserved person, a very introvert person, and most of the members there looked like extroverts.

The experience was very interesting to say the least. If I would have the chance again I'm not sure if I would jump to the occasion, but I will definitely not forget the experience. But after the service when I was about to go to sleep I did start thinking about God, and how much I think about him in my life. Like I said before my mom speaks about God and love, but we haven't attended any church service. I would

like to find a church that would be a right fit for me, or maybe experience some type of special feeling that my aunt talks about. But I feel like I'll just let that happen when it has to happen in my life. It might not be now but who knows maybe next year I'll say otherwise. •

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