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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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Grace and Holy Trinity Episcopal Church

by Barrett Martin

For my final field trip, I attended an evening service for VCU Campus Ministries at Grace and Holy Trinity Episcopal Church at 5:00 PM on Sunday, November 29, 2015. The church is located at 8 N. Laurel Street, Richmond, VA, 23220. This is a Christian church, denominationally Episcopalian. Our service that evening was led by the Reverend Kimberly Reinholz.

The outer appearance of Grace and Holy Trinity was very traditional, and looked to me like what one might imagine in their head if asked to picture a typical Christian church. It is dwarfed between the Cathedral of the Sacred Heart half a block away and the Altria Theater next door, yet it still boasts a formidable exterior with a large steeple, bell tower, and a smaller attached structure that I found housed a “hall of fellowship”. It’s done all in a brown-grey stone with two red doors facing Laurel Street.

Inside, we were greeted by another VCU student, who directed us into the main chapel and handed us a bulletin. There were only about ten people there in total, all looking like they were also VCU students, except for the reverend and a man who I believe was also associated with the church. The chapel itself was large and lovely, with floor-to-ceiling stain glass windows at one end and rows of dark wooden pews with red velvet cushions filling most of the room. Contrary to my other experiences at Christian churches, we were

seated in a row of pews in the front of the sanctuary that were typically reserved for a choir. I introduced myself and talked with a few people there, and while the group was small and limited in age, there still seemed to be some diversity in gender and race present. It was a bit unsettling being at the front of the church, and sitting with people who all seemed to know each other well already. I wasn’t fully comfortable with the situation, and felt very much like an outsider.

I’d briefly been warned that the service that would be performed that night was something out of the ordinary for this group, which didn’t make much of a difference to me since I’d never been to one of their previous services; although it did cause me to wonder what I’d walked in on.

As the reverend began to speak, she told the whole group that that night, we’d be doing something called a “Taize” worship service. She explained (as did the front of the bulletins we were given) that Taize was a town in France that saw a lot of turmoil during the second world war, and it was during this time that a religious leader named Brother Roger used the location to bring people together for worship. He led unique services there which were heavy in music—it was easy for a large number of people from different nations to learn the same lyrics and melodies as one another. I personally dislike hymns a lot, so hearing about how the rest of my hour would

go was not exactly music to my ears, so to speak. However, the reverend went on, the songs that were selected for us to sing that night were designed to be “earworms”; tunes that would hopefully enter our minds in the coming weeks as we stressed over final exams, so that, in Reverend Reinholz’s words, “you will know God is with you”.

A young woman then took some time to teach us all the songs before the service actually started. When it did, nearly everything we did, said, or listened to was written out clearly in our bulletin, so the service was quite easy to follow along with. Yet—likely because of the type of service we were imitating—many things came unexpected to me, based on my prior experiences at churches like Grace and Holy Trinity. As it was when I visited The Cathedral of the Sacred Heart for my first field trip, everyone else seemed thoroughly familiar with the order of the service, while I struggled a bit to keep up.

It also seemed pretty formal for such a small group, a group of young people, at that. My last experience at a student ministry was certainly organized, but still felt more free and organic than the structure of this service. In addition, there was limited congregational participation, other than a reading from one of the attendants (who I believe was preselected to perform that particular task).

As far as the specific rituals go, the singing in itself was an interesting one (although it was apparently not typical of Episcopalian services). Beyond that, there were many moments in the service that involved the congregation repeating phrases said by the reverend, or reciting some pre-written response. I think this practice exists to create a rhythm from

service to service; as the reverend said about the “earworm” songs, these were phrases repeated enough to commit to memory and enter your mind even when you were not at church. There were two specific passages from the Bible that were read—one from the Old Testament, which we referred to as “the word of the Lord”, and one from the New Testament, called “the gospel of Christ”. Given the responses, I’d say this is a traditional part of an Episcopalian service. I can see how this would be an important part of a service, especially if you were to go regularly; as you’d be able to focus on specific parts of the holy text and contemplate their meanings. It’s a bit easier and more effective than listening to a whole sermon about broad matters of the religion.

In fact, on this night we didn’t hear any sermon at all. We did, however, take part in a lengthy “meditation” after the readings, when we were supposed to silently reflect on the passages and their meanings. While it was a little long and the silence became uncomfortable after a while, I actually enjoyed this part of the service and did try to take away something from the passages that could apply to my own life.

One of the last activities we did was communion. The reverend gave instructions as to how this part of the service would go, and then she and the older man distributed wafers and wine to us. I knew about this tradition since I’ve seen it done a few times before, however, it was interesting to actually participate in it. I actually think communion is a great tool for worship. After speaking and listening and reading, this was a physical act meant to connect a person to Christ. Depending on the person, that could easily be the most spiritual

act they partake in. Like there are many different types of learning in an educational atmosphere, I believe there are many different types of practice in a religious atmosphere; and you find the ones that fit you best.

At the end of our service, we had a few announcements about upcoming events in the church, and then we were formally dismissed. All in all, it was a fairly enjoyable experience, as I think all of these “Field Trips” have been. It certainly was a great way to learn, and I’m grateful for the opportunity. •

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