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School of World Studies

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 Puerta Del Cielo

by Mersina Grljevic

For my first field trip to my first institution, I decided to attend not only a church that is different from my religion, but a bilingual church to make the most of this new experience. This Christian Conservative church is called Iglesia Puerta Del Cielo. However, the service was being held at Methodist Temple, Cokesbury, at 14806 Blackburn Rd. Woodbridge, VA 22191. This soon-to-be Latin Church is being constructed at the moment, and it will soon be the first official Hispanic church in the Woodbridge area. I attended this service on Sunday, September 20th at 2pm, and the presiding official of this service was co-pastor Ruben Salas.

Upon my arrival, the church was standing proud and honorable as the trees and bushes around the church were neatly cut and the people entering the doors of the church were neatly dressed. As I entered inside, there was a large lobby where people are gathered and speak to each other prior to the service. There is also a staircase in the lobby that leads upstairs where religious classes were being held. As I begin to enter the room where the service is held, there are ushers at the front of the door who greet me. With a warm welcoming smile an usher greets me and gives me a paper to fill out. This paper consisted of filling out my name, address, my religious stand, as well as asking if I was a member of the church. As I shyly handed the paper back, the usher smiled and escorted me to my seat.

As we were walking through the striking red velvet carpet, I noticed how spacious the room was and how many seats and wooden benches were present. Approximately 300 people soon began to fill the room. The dominant ethnic group during this service was Hispanic with the exception of a handful of Caucasian individuals. The usher then asked me if I need assistance for a personal translator and I responded with an eager "Yes, please!" The friendly and comforting young gentleman, Richard Lazo, 22, was my translator throughout the service. As we continued to get acquainted, Richard shares with me that the church consists of four different societies: Kids, Youth Group, Women (Damas), and Men (Caballeros). The kids range from ages 0-11 and the youth group ranges from ages 12 until marriage. There are about 100 women who fall into the category of Damas and 70 men who fall into the category of Caballeros. The dominant gender I observed were actually men during the service, with all different ages. The men mainly wore suit and ties, while the women wore dresses and skirts. It was socially unacceptable for women to wear pants so I felt relieved that I decided to attend with a business casual skirt.

Once the service began, the co-pastor came out and started the service with a prayer, followed by a verse by the bible. The tone of his voice when he began his prayer was very calm and collected and the congregational participation was very reserved. After the

verse from the bible ended, the devotional began. I recently learned that this term was defined as spiritual songs. The first few songs were very upbeat and the environment was festive and lively as everyone stood, clapped, and sang in unison. Even though I did not know the words to the song, I proceeded to stand up and clapped along with the positive environment. During the second half of the devotional, everyone sat down as softer music began to play. I asked Richard the name of one of the songs, and he told me it was Oceans Hillsong United. I was interested in knowing the name of this specific song because it felt inspirational, moving, and powerful, as I felt a personal connection to God while the gospel and church members sang along.

After the devotional, the co-pastor asked for offerings for the construction of the Hispanic church which would soon be the first Hispanic church in the Woodbridge area as mentioned before. I decided to participate in the positive change for the community and donated \$10 to help build their church. The conclusion of the service ended with a sermon from Romans 15:1-6. Prior to the religious ceremony, I had the opportunity to ask Richard about the two large banners I noticed earlier hanging on both sides of the room with a poster saying "Bread of Life" in between them. On the left side of the room was a loaf of bread with a cross in the middle whereas the right side of the room had a glass of wine with a cross in the middle as well. Richard proceeded to tell me that the loaf of bread symbolized the body of Christ and the wine represented the blood that God shed. It was interesting to learn how important these banners symbolized the church as a whole and what it stood for. These two banners tied in with the religious ceremony, the honor of God, where we concluded the

service with drinking grape juice (in replace of wine) and ate a piece of bread to symbolize God's sacrifice all together.

I thanked the co-pastor, as well as Richard for his help in translating most of the service for me. A few days after the service, I received a phone call from the youth group president, Henry Escobar. He did a follow up call and asked me how I enjoyed the service and invited me to a youth group service that following Saturday. I thanked him for the invitation but unfortunately was unable to attend that Saturday. This goes to show how much they care about not only their members, but visitors of the church as well. It was easy to see that the youth group leaders and church members are very active in their community and passionate about their church. I felt content and very welcomed, as this was my first time experiencing and being a part of a bilingual Christian service. I hope that my next field trip will be as inspirational and self-rewarding as this one was. •

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