Unitarian Universalist Church of Richmond
by Lauren Chambers

On Sunday, Sept 27, I visited the First U.U. Church of Richmond for the 11:00am service. It is a Unitarian Universalist Church located at 1000 Blanton Ave, in Richmond. The service was led by Reverend Jeanna Pupke.

The building was located across from Byrd Park, and was nicely decorated inside and out. There was a lot of art because they were having a special art gallery exhibit. There was a visitors table set up right inside the entrance where we filled out a form and got a name tag. The congregation seemed to be made up mostly of older caucasians with few people of other races and ages. The social class seemed relatively middle class, but it was hard to distinguish exactly. It was a medium size congregation, perhaps a hundred people. People seemed very friendly and open to saying hello.

The inside of the congregation hall had a room for the service. I know the building went through construction recently, so everything seemed very nice and new. It was actually much smaller than I thought it would be, and the chairs were set in rows and not stadium seating, like I was expecting. The stage where the Reverend and other religious speakers sat was slightly elevated and was decorated with cut outs of candle chalice’s done by children. There weren't any religious symbols other than the candle chalice, which wasn't necessarily religious either, but seemed to be the main symbol inside the church. This seemed appropriate since U.U. is a non-denomination-al church and accepts people of all religious background and does not follow one religion of it’s own.

The opening started promptly at 11:00 with announcements made by a lady whose name I never heard. Then we were asked to greet our neighbors. Growing up in an Episcopalian church, this reminded me of something we used to do at service on Sunday’s as well. Then the intern minister, Walter Clark, got up and spoke a few words, then asked new people to introduce themselves. I did not do this, but others did. This service had a special guest, a band called “Ned and the Dirt”, who played a few songs during the service. There was also a piano player who played during the hymns sung by the congregation. Next, the chalice was lit, and singing began. Afterwards, Reverend Pupke talked about the visit from Pope Francis, and how his remarks left a positive impact. I liked that the Reverend was female, I’ve always been to churches where the Reverend was male. This was a nice change. Next, the Minister Emeritus, David Hicks, led a responsive reading, then the band played a song. During the song, most people in the congregation got up, held hands, clapped, and sang. This was the only time the congregation spontaneously did this, most of the time they only stood when they were told to.

Next, we heard more from Reverend Hicks, who read from a book called “The Holy
Longing”, about the Jewish Prophets and their views on justice. I enjoyed hearing readings from books other than the Bible, and liked that this was incorporated into the sermon. This was followed by a short moment of “meditation”, which term was actually used. This reminded me of Eastern traditions. Back in Church, we had a similar moment, but just called it “a moment of silence”. Suitably, this moment of meditation was followed by a talk about a Vietnamese Monk, told by Reverend Pupke. This was the longest sermon, about ten minutes, and seemed to be the “meat” of the service. I forget the name of the monk she mentioned, but he was apparently well known. She tied his story into being called into action to help bring about peace and justice. Justice was the central theme of the day, and the most poignant point she made was when she said: to be human, you must care for other human beings. She spoke about helping others, and by doing so, we help ourselves. Ironically, this was followed by the passing of the offering bowl for money, something I also remember from my Christian church days. The band played another song, the congregation sang a closing hymn, the chalice was put out, and the service was finished. The words “Blessed Be” were used at the end, which was very Pagan.

At the end, while exiting the room, we were able to shake hands and say hello to the Reverends. This also reminded me of Church. Most of the service reminded me of a Christian Church, which may have been intentional, but I’m not sure. I know that Unitarian Universalists are non denominational and follow no set religion. It was interesting being in an almost Christian type service, yet having no prayer or praising of God or Jesus, although the Bible was mentioned. However, so was Judaism and Buddhism. They call themselves a “Church” as well, perhaps for lack of a better term. It felt mostly just like a Jesus-less Church, in my opinion. Looking at the program given during the service, they hold other weekly meetings, such as a “Vespers” on wednesdays and “Zen Meditation” on thursdays. They also seem to do outreach work, such as collecting money, food, and clothes for the needy. They have groups for people who want to get together and knit, a singing group, and classes on what it is to be a Unitarian Universalist. They also have “religious education” for children, and I am not sure if this is the U.U.’s version of religion or if they do follow Christianity at the school.

Overall, I enjoyed the service. I felt welcome and comfortable attending. People seemed very nice and open and mostly modest. It seems like a nice place for older people to gather once a week, or more, to talk about spirituality without any judgement on who they are or what their beliefs may be. •

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