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West Broad Church of Christ
by Chantana Moapichai

The religious institution that I visited this month is called The West Broad Church of Christ at 813 West Broad St, Richmond, VA 23220. They do not categorize themselves as a denomination, but most people would classify people of this church as Baptists. I arrived to West Broad on October 25, 2015 at 10:33am. The presiding official of West Broad, also known as the minister, is James Nesmith.

The outside appearance of the church does not look like a typical Christian church, such as one standing alone with big mosaic windows and a large cross on the top of the building. Instead, it is a lot smaller with glass windows allowing by-passers to view what is happening inside. It is in an urban setting and there were shops lined down the street surrounding the little church. When you walk in, the first thing you will notice is folded chairs lined up in six rows. The chairs are facing the stage in the center toward the wall on the far left of the room. The room is spacious, but tiny for a service to be held. Though the church is fairly small, the place was lit up with fall decorations, bringing the autumn spirit to life.

I arrived about three minutes late and the service had already begun. I was not even by the entrance of the church yet when a man inside whom I have never met before held the door open for me with a big smile. His words were, “Welcome. How are you doing today?” Still with a warm smile on his face, he motioned me to sit down to listen to the first speaker’s words of service that day. There were people of all social classes in the room and almost everyone was African American. The majority of people were middle aged, some of which brought their children, while there were plenty of seniors as well. The dominant gender was female and there were about fifty people who attended service that day.

I did not feel comfortable sitting there with that many strangers at first. I was so new to this religion, I had no idea how to behave. I felt judged because people knew I was not a member of the church but after observing the people sitting around me, I began to feel more relaxed. No one was looking at me in a negative way, but mostly out of appreciation. For the remainder of the service, I sat alone. No one offered to sit with me and explain things until afterwards because when I arrived, everyone was already seated and listening attentively to the sermons that were given.

A lot of prayer occurred on that rainy day. There were several speakers who approached the podium, one after the other, whom Mr. Nesmith called Brothers. As each brother stepped on stage, they first greeted the audience, and then began a prayer signaling everyone to bow his or her heads to pray in unison. Mr. Nesmith was the last to preach to the audience. It was very interesting to hear what he had to say about God and his view on God’s believers. What really caught my interest was when Mr. Nesmith mentioned that if
you do not classify yourself as Christian or a church-goer, he is in no place to say that you are going to hell.

In the beginning of the service, the emotional tone was grief that quickly turned into compassion through singing and laughter. The opening was quite casual as the speaker began in a soft-spoken tone. Once it was time, everyone stood up to harmonize the well-known lyrics of the biblical songs, Gethsemane, Salvation Has Been Brought Down, and Thank You, Lord. Congregational participation was more than encouraged among members of the Church of Christ and seemed very emotional from my perspective. As a guest and an outsider of the Christian religion, I did not realize how special church and God could be to some people.

The service I attended was certainly ritualistic. It was mostly ritualistic because of the repeated verses that Mr. Nesmith gave to the audience during his homily and it seemed as though the members go through the same process of praising God every Sunday. The service ended in more prayer, particularly for people going through rough times in their lives. People in the audience were given the chance to speak up about themselves or someone in their life who may be going through hard times so that they can request God's blessings upon them.

After the last prayer, everyone got up to socialize with one another and get updated on each other's lives. Two women approached me and introduced themselves as Pat and Melinda. They asked how I was doing and thanked me for joining them during the service. Numbers of other people thanked me for attending the service Sunday morning (even when I was grabbing something to eat at a nearby restaurant!), which caught me by surprise. Pat was explaining to me that they are very excited when college-aged students join them for prayer. Their idea is to recruit as many people of all ages to join them every Sunday for worship at West Broad.

Behind the stage was a large cross made out of wood. Most people recognize this symbol as the crucifixion of Jesus. It is the most well-known symbol of Christianity, which is used most frequently to remind people of God's love in sacrificing his own son to sustain the growing population of humanity. One of the rituals, also known as sacraments in this case, that was performed during the service was to eat a cracker, which symbolizes part of Christ's body, and drink grape juice, symbolizing Christ's blood. Christians believe this is to memorialize the sacrificial act of Christ and to remember Christ's first coming, anticipate his second coming, and to rejoice all believers as a unity. Another sacrament that most Christians perform is a baptism. This is basically an initiation into the religion by the Christian community. Centuries ago, baptisms were a sign of moral purification and they would submerge an infant's entire body in holy water for the beginning of a new and eternal life. Modern day Christians still believe in this practice, though some believe that baptism should be voluntary and done only to adult novices. They now also baptize new Christians just by sprinkling the water on the person's head. Though these rituals may seem a bit extreme to non-Christians, the overall purpose is to achieve salvation and atonement through the worshiping of God and faith in Christ as practice of Christian theology.

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