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West End Assembly of God
by Kennedy Hall

On September 27, 2016 I visited the 11:15am service at West End Assembly of God located at 401 N. Parham Rd. Richmond, VA 23239. West End Assembly of God is a member of the Assemblies of God church, which is an evangelical Christian church and was presided over by Pastor Shane Schlesman and Pastor Jamal Jones.

The church was very large and was an all-brick, two story building. The service that I went to was considered the more “modern” service and it was help in the church gym. The floors were wooden and had lines to separate the basket ball courts and there were basketball hoops handing from the ceiling. The stage was black and covered most of the front of the room. The chairs were separated into three rows and were gray, cushion seats with no arms. The room was dimly lit but the stage was well lit with both white and colored lights.

The church was very diverse as far as age groups. A lot of the older people were leaving as I was arriving. I assume they went to the earlier service available. The modern service seemed to be filled with high school, college age, and young families. The attendants were predominantly middle class and Caucasian, though other races were represented as well. The people in my service were casually dressed. I was everything from dresses and khakis, to jeans and football jerseys. In the service that I attended there was approximately 500 people present, and there were two other services beforehand as well.

Visitors were greeted warmly, however there were so many people at this church I doubt the greeters knew who was a new attendant and who had been there many times before. I felt comfortable sitting near other attendants because every seemed friendly, however I was not comfortable talking to them or asking many questions because it seemed that everyone was in their own little group and it was hard to interrupt. No one offered to sit with me or explain things, but there were plenty of visitor stations where I could go to receive information and greeters had hanging name tags so that I could easily spot them and ask them questions as well.

The service started with the band playing music. The first song was upbeat and everyone who was talking went to their seats. It was a cue that service was starting. Then the band played about three more songs, which were slower and the congregation seemed to take them more seriously. People of the congregation sang, some closed their eyes, some clapped, and some, a lot actually, raised their hands. Then Pastor Jamal Jones came on stage and he told everyone to turn around and shake the hands of the people around you and get to know them. That was a little bit awkward for me but it was not a bad experience. Then he prayed for “needs” in the congregation. Some of the people were sick and some were missionaries so the pastor prayed for
The emotional tone of the service started out lively and happy. The toward the end it got serious and everyone seemed to be in a state of reflection. At the end when everyone was leaving they were happy and smiling again. The opening of the service was not what I would consider to be dramatic, but the loud music definitely caught your attention. The congregational participation varied. During the musical worship part a lot of people were emotional and raised their hands and seemed to be in their own worlds, but then during the service most people were reserved. Sometimes everyone clapped or someone would shout “amen” when the pastor said something profound. The service appeared to be pretty ritualistic. For example they said they pray for the church and take up tithes and offerings every week and the service lasted exactly an hour and a half. None of the member of the congregation seemed surprised by anything that happened. The service ended with the pastor standing up and raising a hand and saying what he called was a ‘benediction,’ where he basically told everyone to go forth and have a good week. There were not very many symbolic images around the church. There was a giant thorn crown hanging and that symbolized the crown that was placed on Jesus to mock him when he was crucified. Some rituals included musical worship to God as well as the giving of tithes, which is a monetary sacrifice to God, but Christians believe that everything they have was given to them by God so they money they offer him belongs to him anyway and giving some of it back is a way of giving thanks.

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