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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On Sunday, October 25, I attended the 11:15 AM service at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Fairfax at 2709 Hunter Mill Road, Oakton, Virginia 22124. At UUCF they practice liberal Unitarianism with the goal of making the world a better place for people of all backgrounds and ethnicities. I was introduced to UUCF by my Aunt, who has always been a source of encouragement to try new things in my life. She plays a large role at UUCF and is close with the presiding official Reverend David A. Miller.

Upon arriving at the church, I quickly realized that it was very different from other places of worship. The parking lot had sections of permeable structure that were built to allow rain water to flow to the ground beneath which helps keep the soil healthy and allows small plants to grow. As I walked up to the front doors I encountered a young man dressed as a pirate. I was interested to know why he was dressed in such a way, so I asked him if that was his Halloween costume. He told me in a straight face that his clothes were actually his normal attire. I wondered how many more people at this church dressed in their own unique ways, but quickly found that he was the only one.

The building had a very modern structure with angled pillars and a slightly tilted roof. Beautiful gardens framed the path up from the parking lot to the front doors, creating a pleasant sense of freshness that followed me into the building. When I entered the church I saw my Aunt chatting with a couple of ladies who turned to greet me with beaming smiles upon each of their faces. I quickly got a sense for what weekly services at this congregation were like for the regulars. They were all genuinely happy to be there amongst friends and family, celebrating their faith and their lives, working together to make the church a better place for everyone. The entrance hall was wide and spacious, made up of three connected rooms of similar size to one another. There were tables laid out amongst the three rooms with various finger foods put out for anyone to eat, such as grapes, cheese, crackers and even home-baked muffins. I made myself at home.

The congregation hall was much bigger than I expected. There was probably room for around 300 people and it filled up very quickly. The pews were soft and comfortable, with space to sink in and relax. Large windows lined either wall, letting in the soft glow of the late morning sunlight. The house band walked in after most of the attendees had taken their seats and began setting up their instruments. I got really excited when I saw them plugging in electric guitars and basses. I was sure the music was going to be very lively and upbeat. As I looked around the hall, I noticed the vast melting pot of various ethnic groups mixed together as if there was no differences between any of them. It was refreshing to see such diversity in one place, but not surprising considering the premise of liberal Unitarianism is
I know is that I want to try my best to bring about positive change to our planet and our species, before it is too late.

After the sermon, the service started to mellow out a bit. The band played a few more songs, but what really struck me as interesting was the part where everyone was supposed to shake hands with those around us, learn each others names, and give thanks to one another for being a part of the congregation, a part of each other's lives, and a part of the greater movement of redemption for the planet and for our species. It was a very emotional activity, and I even noticed a few people around me shedding tears and embracing one another. I'm not much of an emotional creature, but this brought a warm feeling to my heart, and I understand why they do it.

After the service I walked out into the connected hallways and was engaged in conversation by some people who knew my Aunt and knew that it was my first time visiting the congregation. People were enthusiastic about hearing what I thought of the service, and equally enthusiastic about wishing me well in my endeavors. I stopped to talk with several groups of people, ranging from teenagers to seniors all the while enjoying the fantastic refreshments that were laid out on the tables.

Overall I had a very positive experience at UUCF, and will most certainly return, especially to see the Battle of the Bands which I heard is quite excellent every time they put it on. I highly recommend a visit to UUCF to people of all backgrounds, ethnicities, and religious affiliations. It certainly opened my eyes to the world of possibilities outside of the traditional faiths.

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