New Life in Christ

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by Abigail Smalley

The first religious service I attended this fall was a Presbyterian church called New Life in Christ. Found behind a shopping mall in Fredericksburg, Virginia, at 11925 Burgess Lane, this church was quite random. Expecting to see a classic church building, I was surprised when I drove up to New Life in Christ Church to see a pretty plain, almost warehouse-like building. This grey building held a wide range of possibilities inside. After entering, I was greeted kindly by a few adults handing out bulletin cards and hymnal books. Overall I felt a friendly vibe. Pastor Doug Kittredge led this particular service, on September 20th.

Once I passed through the entryway and into the sanctuary, I walked into a large room with rows of grey chairs filled by mostly white adults. There were some posters with Bible passages and designs hung high on the walls behind the stage. These were semi-old fashioned looking; a little outdated but nicely made. There was a large stage with a piano and drums. A screen at the front was flashing some announcements, advertisements, etc.

After looking around more, I noticed there were many elderly men, a few young couples, and some large families. Those were the three crowds that filled most of the room. There was a wide variety of dress; some were really casual while others seemed quite dressed up for the occasion. I saw very modest groups (lots of long denim skirts), as well as some sundresses and jeans. I sat in a seat towards the back, next to a couple with two toddlers. They smiled at me, but didn't say anything. A middle aged man who was walking around the room came by and asked if it was my first time attending. I answered yes and he welcomed me, said he was the assistant pastor and I should feel free to ask any he or the other pastor any questions I may have after the service. He was friendly, and continued to walk around the room greeting people.

Then the service started, and very early on I noticed that the only people who were up on stage speaking were men. This didn't surprise me, based on stereotypes of classical Christian services. It was a bit of a slow start, the chatting throughout the room lowered, as the assistant pastor read off some announcements from the screen, telling the congregation dates of meetings, socials and youth groups. We were asked to stand and join in song with a few young adults leading on the stage. The music was a mix of traditional hymns and modern Christian songs. Some of the lyrics were quite nice, but it got a little repetitive early on. As I glanced around me, I saw a few old ladies holding their hands high up above their heads and singing with eyes shut tight. Every couple minutes a mom would quietly walk out the room with a crying kid.

After the songs, Pastor Doug, the head pastor, took the stand. He was quite old, and spoke with a slow, concerned voice. I could tell right away I would have a hard time paying
attention. First was something called the “congregational prayer” where Pastor Doug read off things going on in the community or church that requested prayer. Some of these included sickness and travelling. I appreciated the fact that this was so personal, and that the church seemed to care about the individuals who attended. This prayer lasted a few minutes which felt like years. I was beginning to wish I had made myself a few more cups of coffee before driving over.

After the prayer there was a baptism of a baby. The parents went forward, and handed the child to the pastor who then read some Bible verses and explained the reasoning for baptism. He explained that the belief that all humans are born sinful, and need Christ to heal them. The first step is to baptize, in a covenant with God. He then asked the congregation to agree to be a part of the bringing up of the child; that they must be willing to encourage, train, and teach the child in the ways of God. After this question, the congregation gave a loud and solemn reply of “yes.” The parents then watched their child get splashed with water by the pastor, and then were handed back the crying baby.

Following this, the doxology was sung, which was a slow song of a few lines that the whole congregation sang. The words were on the screen but most in the crowd seemed to know the words. Then the pastor said a few moments were given to greet one another. I introduced myself to the couple next to me, who were quiet but kind. Nobody else approached me, but as had happened earlier, a few people gave friendly nods or glances.

As I looked and listened for symbols, I definitely saw light as the main one. The pastor referenced light many times in his sermon when talking about the glory of God, and many of the verse posters had candle images and fires. Light seemed to represent both good and evil, depending on how it was depicted. The sermon was interesting at points, but the delivery was just overall quite slow. I appreciated some of the stories, and many of the audience members were very responsive to the sermon; nodding and quietly agreeing with some of his statements.

After the long sermon, another hymn was sung, and that was it. On my way out, I thanked the assistant pastor, and made my way out. I had an overall positive experience, it was an old fashioned church that I wouldn’t chose to attend again specifically, but the message was nice and some of the songs and people interested me for sure. It wasn’t the exact place for me, but a good glimpse into the life of a Presbyterian.

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