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Saint Paul's Baptist Church

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Saint Paul’s Baptist Church
by Daija Harris

This semester I decided to take a course titled Human Spirituality or also called Religious Studies 108. I have always enjoyed discussing and hearing about different religions and I figured this would be an interesting and fun course, so when I found out about the field trips that we were required to take I was very excited.

This past Sunday, September 27, 2015, I ventured to Saint Paul’s Baptist Church 9:00 AM service where the presiding official was Pastor Lance Watson. Saint Paul’s Baptist Church is located at 4247 Creighton Road Richmond, VA 23223. The church is close to my house and easy to commute to so I figured Baptist/Christian would be my first stop.

Upon arrival you can see this massive church made out of brick topped with green roofing. Surrounded by the church is a giant parking lot and woods behind it with two playgrounds incorporated within the mix. I could automatically tell this was a well-run and well known worshiping institution. The landscaping was beautiful and everything was in its place.

Walking from the parking lot to the side door where everyone was entering there were greeters on both sides of the door and at both sets of doors. All of the “members” were smiling and saying good morning. The greeters at the doors had on white gloves and shook everyone’s hands who entered. They were welcoming and very kind.

Once I entered into the church, the smell of breakfast being prepared was one that I would never forget. I, in no way, shape, or form ever expected to walk in a church and smell breakfast being cooked, let alone see a huge dining area for the church community to eat at before and after the service. The actual “area” where the service took place was so large that it had a balcony. There was a stage and a large section of seating for the choir behind it. On top was a waterfall and pool used for the baptisms. There were no murals on the walls but there were two huge screens on the walls on both sides of the stage. I would estimate the total amount of people there to be close to around 1,500-2,000 people. The average age was about 45-50, dominant sex was females, and race was black/African American. I believe the majority of the population was middle working class.

I was very comfortable sitting where I was and talking to the people around me. We actually had to because there was like a mini meet and greet during the service. Everyone was friendly and approachable. No one offered to sit with me and explain anything but I’m sure if I had asked, someone would have been more than happy too.

The tone and environment was relaxed and subtle in the beginning. It quickly escalated from casual to dramatic. When I say dramatic I don’t mean it in a bad way. The pace picked
be the collection plate being passed around. I wasn’t forced to put money in, it was just by donation.

Other than those couple of rituals, I didn’t see any symbolization or picture, murals, etc. other than a cross by the waterfall and on the front of the podium. I don’t really know what to make of that, but judging by the crowd, the symbolism isn’t necessary to feel and understand the message in the “house of the lord.”

This was an experience that was different from any other and I can honestly say I enjoyed it. I was able to understand the message and I felt very welcomed. I was nervous about these two things the most but everything turned out well. I believe part of the reason my experience was as good as it was, is simply because there were so many people in attendance. I also blended in and didn’t stick out like a sore thumb. Although this field trip was a success I am still a little nervous about the next one.

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