

Ethnography

To reflect properly on my Sunday at “First Church” I must practice reflexivity and see my own biases before I may begin. I am currently employed by First Church as an intern however I am very new to the church which I believe puts me in a liminal position. Being new lets me have enough of a view of an outsider to see the service with fresh eyes, however being on staff also enables me an insider’s view of the church. Consequently, my wife and I were also asked to give the homily for Communion on the Sunday I planned to practice ethnography. This enabled me again to have an insider view of the planning which goes into the service.

Field Observations

Setting:

“First Church” is centrally located in Abilene.” The church is surrounded by tiny houses but if one were to travel a quarter of a mile further down there are some very large homes. There are a few signs locating where people are to park however the campus is very large, and for a first timer it might be difficult to navigate their way to the auditorium. Upon entering lobby, there a numerous venues set up promoting various ministries of the church. There were areas for the “Christmas Store” buckets to drop off candy for Trunk or Treat, and yet another station was a Welcome Center to help guests find their way around. The church is quite large with an estimate of a thousand or more in attendance between the two services I attended.

Moving past the lobby, here is a sharp contrast with the newness of the lobby and the very old auditorium. The entire auditorium feels as if it were built several decades ago with out of style carpet and chairs. There are nearly no decorations in the

auditorium. On the stage is a small table with the Lord's supper and cords strewn across the stage for various speakers and monitors. On either side of the stage, are large banners with the church's theme of restoration along with a large cross on the right hand side. While there was little physical decoration, the use of different backdrops on the three large projection screens was used throughout the service. Often a candle was projected during prayers or a slide of a photo of a Bible lit by a candle. Obviously much thought was given to the backgrounds on the presentations .

The church is very much Caucasian with very few minorities. They do however have a Hispanic Elder who I met, however this is not reflective of the congregation. There were almost no minorities with the exception of a few African Americans. The age of the congregation was primarily over fifty however this might be because it was Fall Break and many college students are out of town along with families with children. The church seems to be highly educated with many professors in attendance. Despite a lack of age or racial diversity there is a diversity among socioeconomic classes. There were people in suits all the way to a man wearing a Cowboys jersey. Several people looked to be homeless and others while they may not be homeless were obviously from a poorer background.

Actions & Speech:

As soon as one walks in one is handed a bulletin and a order of worship sheet. Several people asked if we needed help finding our way around. The congregation seems to be outwardly focused with several people greeting us. The welcome to start the service was done by a woman who is the Children's Minister. There was about 20

minutes of worship led by a large praise team on stage who while diverse in age they were not in race.. The dress onstage varied from very professional to business casual.

Communion was offered to all and passed out by men, women, and even a few Middle-School aged boys and girls. Communion was offered to us by a man wearing sweatpants and a shirt with holes in it. My wife and I participated in giving the homily before the Communion talk. The talk was written word for word for us and tied in with the sermon of the morning. My wife and I both spoke, prayed, and read Scripture during communion. The Lord's prayer was recited and led by a small Down's Syndrome girl and a "Breath Prayer" was led to start the service. The sermon itself was given by the preacher who is in his early 30's and contained a video at the beginning and end. The preacher was lively and very entertaining. While professional, he was also not very polished and stumbled over words from time to time. He spoke for about 20 minutes.

Throughout worship, people raised their hands to worship but many also were more reserved. The overall mood was reserved but not so much that raising of hands was discouraged or felt out of place. One man from the audience stood spontaneously during a worship song. When the Children minister spoke about the above mentioned Christmas store which was used to help "our neighbors." She was referencing a Christmas store the church puts on for the underprivileged. The offering was distanced from the Lord's Supper with a brief homily and a woman singing a solo. The church bulletin offers Communion for all in attendance and also makes note to tell guests they are not obligated to give during the offering. The Service was ended by the preacher giving a Benediction and also mentioned prayer teams were down front for anyone that wanted prayers.

Reflections

The entire service from start to finish was well thought through. Our Communion homily was scripted to tie in with the sermon on Sacrifice. The Worship songs themselves were centered around the theme as well. The church obviously values professionalism but not to an extreme. The little girl who gave the Lord's Prayer stumbled several times. The cords across the stage seem to indicate lack of care about aesthetics. They seem to be a church who takes the service very seriously but not too seriously. There is professionalism but many lay congregants were used throughout the service. I imagine the Church has a strong leadership among the congregation in addition to the the paid ministers.

The lack of decoration in the auditorium but obvious thought given to the presentation back drops seems to be an oddity. I wonder if this is a carry over from a past church conflict. Perhaps before the use of projectors (there are still song books in the auditorium), decorations were not encouraged except for the one large cross. That conflict has since passed, but the decorations never caught up. The banners are obviously brand new, and the screens were an addition much later after the look of the auditorium was decided. The auditorium even has cheap paper exit signs posted over doors. The auditorium might be from before certain building codes were enforced, and the signs are a later addition.

The church is overwhelmingly homogenous in ethnicity. There were a few African Americans however I believe they were not full members but guests of others. There were no entire African American families in attendance and most often it was a

single African American sitting with a large Caucasian family. As observed there are individual families and members inviting minorities to the church. Obviously the church at least in part cares about changing this dynamic. There were however no minorities ever presented from the front or in videos or photographs. This might present the wrong message to minorities in attendance as to what type of church First Church is.

Gender and economic classes are different stories in First Church. There is obvious intentionality in regards to gender. There was nothing in the service which was not presented by both genders. Even the sermon preached by a male was coupled by the welcome message of the female Children's Minister. The underlying meaning is that this is a church of Gender equals. The man in sweatpants serving us Communion also gives a message of all classes are welcome and empowered here. To couple this man with our very scripted Communion message again reinforces the message, "We are a church which takes Sundays very seriously, but to an extent." The Children's Minister's words about "our neighbors" instead of the obvious underlying meaning of "the poor" again reinforces a church of equals in regards to wealth. No mention was even made of the Christmas store being for those who cannot buy gifts for their family. It must be understood throughout the congregation that, "neighbor" means those who are poor or disenfranchised.