

The Mormon Church

For this week's essay I decided to visit a Mormon church in order to better understand their practices and belief system. My family is Baptist, however we do have relatives who are Mormon and I've never really worked to understand their community better, so I thought this would be an interesting and fruitful experience in order to connect better with some of my own relatives.

Before ever entering the service it is important to note how nice and well-kept the grounds of the Jesus Christ Church of Latter Day Saints are kept. Everything is very pristine and mannered and the chapel itself appears to be modeled after European chapels, with a large worship annex and a tall pointed steeple. These exterior characteristics really set the tone for how formal and seemingly elegant most of the church really is. While most of this can be attributed to the area I attended (**, AZ), a very strong sense of tradition can be felt making such features appear to be the norm. Everyone was well dressed and modestly attired, most of the men in white shirts black tie, and trimmed hair, while the women wore dresses, adding to the air of formality.

Because I attended the service with family, we arrived early as per their usual, and I was sent to attend a class, similar to Sunday school for our church. The class itself was similar to others of this nature I've attended, it involved small group discussions on ethical and moral issues, and how the Bible and other Mormon writings can be related to the situation and used appropriately. One thing I did notice here however is how different the prayer was. While we all bowed our heads and closed our eyes, the language and diction used to address God was very formal and very linear, God was most often referred to as "Heavenly Father".

After the classes were over I was told I could meet with my relatives in the worship center, and I headed back to the central part of the church. The chapel area was high-ceilinged, and very well decorated, with stained glass windows and a large stage in the center of the room to which all the seats faced. It appeared to be very traditional and well moderated. While the classes were more jovial and casual discussion was encouraged, the actual service was much different. Perhaps it was just because I am not used to services of this nature, but there was an overwhelming seriousness in the room and several church officials started the service with a welcome, and a greeting amongst the congregation. After this, announcements were read and a prayer was said, and worship began. Worship consisted of a series of hymns that were played by an organist and accompanied by backing music and the congregation sang along with the choir. The hymns were similar to some of the older Baptist hymns I was used to, however certain historical points were mentioned that aren't a part of the Baptist doctrine. As I remember, many references were made to the history of the church, its founders and prominent leaders, because most of the church is organized in a distinctly tiered hierarchy. Reverence and respect are very apparent in the course of the service.

Communion was also given in the service (which I took), and an opportunity to tithe was also given. When the sermon was given the topic was on tithing and the importance of giving to the church, and how it relates to being a part of the community. From my understanding, not much of the Mormon doctrine is touched on every service, because generally everyone is expected to know. People my age have gone through the classes their whole lives and in order to become a new member a separate series of meetings are held in order to educate that individual on the history and ideology of the church. No extreme ideals or beliefs were really discussed during the service I attended, and it was rather similar to other Protestant services I've been to. While more reference material was used and everything was generally more formal, I did not feel incredibly uncomfortable or out of place, which made me wonder about the other aspects of the religion that most people are skeptical about, such as the cosmology, the baptism of the dead, and the sacred undergarments.

Because of these questions I decided to ask my family for details and a greater explanation. Essentially the Sunday service is a general-member public forum. It is very similar to other Christian services and more biblical. While the Book of Mormon is used as a guideline and often preached upon, some of the more serious doctrines are only discussed in temples which are a higher form of the chapel I attended. Only certain members are allowed to enter the temple after years of dedication to the church, and because of this dedication certain rights are afforded to them, such as the salvation of the dead, cosmological rebirth, and the bounty of the afterlife, as well as prestige within the church community.

Overall my experience was generally neutral. Everyone was very friendly and interested in why I was there and about me personally. I felt welcomed and a part of the community, which was refreshing. For any questions I had, the answers were only to be given to the members allowed to enter the temple, and even then they aren't allowed to talk about them to non-members. While it was interesting to see and be a part of this side of my family, I can definitely say it something I have little interest in following up.