Worship Observation Paper

I was born and raised into a Southern Baptist Megachurch in Houston, Texas. I have always attended this church and I have been highly involved in the various departments there. Aside from moving to Colorado and finding a church here, I have never really been to another church, and I have definitely never been to a traditional, Pentecostal church. However, that is exactly the church I chose to go to this past Sunday. Two of my roommates and I attended Landmark Tabernacle, the church for the Pentecostals of Denver. One of my roommates has a dad who happens to be a Pentecostal pastor and the other was already familiar with the traditions of a Pentecostal church, so I definitely felt like this would still be an experience that would take me way out of my comfort zone.

As soon as we stepped out of the car, a very friendly woman, who noticed the Texas license plates on my car, immediately greeted us and walked us inside. She began showing us around the church and walked us into the sanctuary and let us sit with her. This already jumped out as different for me. I am used to people typically keeping to themselves, aside from the greeters we have posted at the doors and around the isles, or when the pastor encourages everyone to get up and shake some hands before the sermon starts. However, this woman, without even being prompted, was so welcoming and open with us that I began to feel a lot more comfortable. In fact, everyone in the church seemed to be social and outgoing. If someone even made eye contact with you, then you could bet an introduction was about to take place. That is one of the things that still sticks out to me the most, how welcoming the entire church was without needing to be told to greet those around them. The effort those people made to get to know everyone made me feel safe in an uncomfortable situation.

If you know anything about Southern Baptist churches, then you know that most of us do not dance, the music is relatively low-key, worship is about three songs long, and we sit in our seats and listen to the preacher man for about an hour before we all go to lunch. My entire picture of what a church experience is was rocked in the first five minutes of this service. First of all, every one of all ages was in one room the entire time. This is really where my Megachurch roots come in to play. Our campus back home has different buildings for different age groups, so I was not used to seeing parents hold their babies during services, or children just running around during a service.

After noticing that little fact, we began worship and that is something that I just simply did not know how to react to. The worship was so loud that I was actually quite startled when it began. On top of the sheer volume of the music people shouted, waved their hands, ran up to the front, wept, took laps around the sanctuary, spoke in tongues, laid hands on one another, moved all around, and sang for at least an hour. Worship was as long as what I knew to be a sermon! At times, the worship was overwhelming to me and I often got distracted by the various scenes unfolding around me. The sanctuary would shake when people jumped or ran everywhere, and there was just so much extra noise from the people. A few times I thought something serious had happened to someone or that someone was about to be hurt by the passion that flowed through the room. People really like to gather in a big cluster in the front of the room, by the stage, and dance around and embrace one another. The only thing I knew to compare it to was a mosh pit at a concert, and those can be quite dangerous! Eventually the hour-long worship, which only built in intensity as it went on, ended and people moved back to their seats.

I thought that this would be where things became more familiar and everyone would simply listen to the pastor give his message. I sat down and pulled out my Bible, paper, and a pen, ready for this sermon; however, I realized I was the only one near me that even had a Bible. The preacher never once asked for people to get out their Bibles, provided scripture on the big screens, or had sermon notes to go along with his message. This amazed me because I am so used to people demanding to see the scripture for themselves during sermons, or for the church to provide Bibles along the seats. I also mentioned earlier that in my church experience people remain seated and it is very quiet while the sermon is being delivered. In the Pentecostal church I attended, this was not the case at all. The preacher shouted very often, walked around the pews, and spoke in tongues (this church experience was my first time ever hearing people even attempt to speak in tongues). The other people also shouted along, stood up, ran around, broke into songs and prayers, etc. I had never seen anything like that before, and it was my first reaction to think these were signs of disrespect, but it was simply different than what I was used to.

At times the service was just too overwhelming and I felt extremely uncomfortable and that I did not quite belong there. I also felt that I misunderstood what was happening, and that I was being misunderstood for not participating. When people noticed that I was not jumping around or singing with much expression, they often asked to pray for me. Other times people would just grab me and begin saying things that I could not understand. It was hard to stand-alone and feel like the outsider in something that everyone else was so clearly passionately in love with. However, because the people had all been so welcoming in the beginning I managed to feel okay about what I was doing and where I was. I also felt comfortable enough to feel like I could stay for the entire service, which ended up being just over three hours, while doing what I felt was natural and acceptable. Most of the time, I did not feel like I had to join in with them or that they were looking at me any differently because I seemed so stiff and quiet.

This was the most important application that I got out of the experience, and it aligned with Tomlinson’s text. Even if someone is going to be placed in an uncomfortable situation, you can make him or her feel like everything is going to be okay by just establishing that feeling of being welcomed from the very beginning and maintaining it the entire time. I will have students from all kinds of different backgrounds, but something that can unite all of my students will be how I greet them, interact with them, and set an example for how they should treat one another. I hope to greet each student and learn something new about that student and how he or she are feeling when he or she walk through the door each and every day. That way, despite what may happen through out the rest of the day, what kind of material I need to teach them that day, or how I might choose to challenge them, the students can always think back to the fact that the environment is safe, I care about them, and I want them there. In my experience I felt comfortable being myself and being the only one who was worshiping in the way that I knew and was familiar with. I hope to provide the same environment for my students one day because they will be called out of their comfort zones and be expected to grow throughout the school year. Hopefully, in my classroom they will be able to learn how to grow as individuals while remaining connected and unified as a community of unique and diverse learners.