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Culture Paper

Before moving to Utah, the only exposure I had to Mormonism was in the form of anecdotes from my grandmother and a satirical episode of South Park. Needless to say, being immersed in the unique culture Utah offers has been eye-opening. To fulfill the culture assignment for my Interpersonal Communications class, I had the opportunity to attend a devotional assembly at the Orem Institute of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. As an evangelical Christian, it was interesting to see some of the similarities and differences between the assembly I attended and the services I regularly attend at my church. In this paper, I will touch on some of the concepts we have been discussing in my Interpersonal Communications course. During this experience I witnessed *collectivism,* I needed to be aware of my own *perception* of the Mormon Church and how that would affect my observations, and I formed a better understanding of the importance of *identity*.

The first thing I noticed about the venue of the devotional service was that the room was divided into two sections. One portion of the room had a stage with a decorated backdrop with an elegant glass window. On the stage there were risers for a choir, a podium for the speaker, and a table that seated three members of the church. There were about five rows of pews in front of the stage. The other portion of the room was a large auditorium with a wooden floor and fold-up chairs for the remaining attendees to sit. The devotional began with an opening hymn by the choir and an opening prayer referred to as the Invocation. The speaker, Sylvia Allan, was introduced as Sister Allan by another member of the church. He described some of her accomplishments and provided a brief background of her life. Sister Allan spoke for about forty-five minutes about her life struggles and how her faith was strengthened through those experiences. She had a slide presentation with pictures of some experiences she described, passages from the Bible and the Book of Mormon, and various quotes from other members of the church. After she finished speaking, another member of the church gave a closing prayer that was referred to as the Benediction.

I noticed through observations of the assembly and through the content of Sylvia Allan’s devotional itself the idea of collectivism was a recurring theme. Some of her speech focused on serving the community and loving others. Her devotional emphasized the importance of her family, and how she was willing to do anything for her family. At the end of the devotional I observed that everyone helped to stack all of the chairs that were set up for the assembly without being told to do so. I felt like this reinforced the collective nature that appears to be an important aspect of Mormon culture. The fact that food was provided for everyone at no cost further affirmed this assertion for me. It was remarkable to see that the collectivism that Sister Allan implicitly talked about was evident by the actions of members of the church

It was an interesting experience attending a Mormon activity as an evangelical Christian. After learning in class about the factors that influence the accuracy of my perceptions of the environment I am experiencing, it was intriguing to see how my preconceived view of the Mormon religion affected the way I observed the devotional. I knew my perceptual set of the Mormon Church would make me more skeptical to the speaker’s message. While I was skeptical about the content of Sister Allan’s devotional, most of her narrative was about personal experience and did not focus much on the theology of the church itself. By considering the context of her presentation I was able understand how her life experiences strengthened her faith.

Through this experience in a different culture I learned a lot about the importance of identity. I believe that a person’s religious beliefs can play a huge role in establishing one’s identity. Having one’s purpose in life rooted in the foundation of the beliefs of a particular religion shapes not only the way an individual perceives the world, but how the individual interacts with the world. This became even more apparent to me when attending the devotional. Even though the speaker identified with a different faith than my own, both of our identities are formed from our respective religious beliefs. One aspect of identity is that we all have the need for inclusion. Fellowship with other people of the same faith satisfies this need. From what I observed, the congregation was friendly and inclusive. It appeared as though people seemed to know most other people there, or had the desire to get to know more people that they did not already know. I thought that the title of Sister applied to Sylvia Allan demonstrated that she is identified as part of the church family. To me, this shows that being identified as a member of the Mormon Church is an important aspect of a Mormon’s identity. I think the same can be said for believers of different faiths, including my own.

Having the opportunity to experience another culture in this way was definitely a positive event. In the two years I have lived in Utah I have learned a lot about the culture that I am immersed in as an outsider. Attending this devotional was yet another way for me to learn more about the Mormon Church and its members. It was interesting to learn more about Mormonism through the lens of communication. I further realized the importance of identity, both of my self-identity and the dynamics of belonging to a group identity. It was a unique experience trying to be aware of my perceptual limits while observing another culture that I already had some biases towards. I learned what some off the effects that being in a collectivist culture has on an individual. Overall this has been an enriching experience.