

## **Guidelines for Church Visits**

### **THEO 251: Global Christianity**

#### **Syllabus overview**

The purpose of this assignment is to develop skills in the practice of respectful ethnographic research, while noticing ways in which Christians from a very different culture than one's own are seeking to inculturate the gospel faithfully. A key skill here will be to carefully distinguish the processes of description, interpretation, and evaluation.

- To do this assignment, students will first need to experience an actual Christian worship service in another culture. In most cases this will be possible in the Twin Cities. If a student is studying a church or Christian movement that does not have any local associations, he or she should meet with the professor in a timely manner in order to discuss alternatives.
- After attending a worship service, students will write a report (not an argumentative essay or research paper) that (1) describes, (2) interprets, and only then (3) evaluates what they have observed.

#### **Choosing a church to visit**

- A directory of potential churches in the Twin Cities area is available at <http://tinyurl.com/theo251churchdirectory>. (Please email your professor if you have updated contact information, or additional churches to suggest.) There is also a link at the end of this directory to additional churches: <http://www.ethnicchurch.com/Visit.aspx?state=MN>.
- In order to enrich your ongoing study of one particular church or Christian movement elsewhere on the globe, students should attend a worship service as closely related to that tradition or culture as possible.
- Also, whenever possible, students are encouraged to visit a church that represents a different religious tradition from one's own, a different ethnic and cultural tradition, or preferably both.
- Legitimate exceptions:
  - In some cases, no local Christian community may be directly affiliated with the church or movement you are studying in other assignments. While communities in related traditions may sometimes be available, some students may still come up short.
  - For students from other-than-Christian traditions, attending *any* Christian service may be a thoroughly cross-cultural experience.
- Legitimate alternative, therefore:
  - As part of your broader research, do virtual church visits via the internet for the group you are researching otherwise – either multiple YouTube clips totaling at least 45 minutes, or a real-time streaming video.

- In this case, you must still do an actual visit to a church significantly different from your own cultural, ethnic, faith tradition. If this results in two reports you will receive extra credit.
- **Policy note for all students:** In order to keep this fair for all students, an additional extra credit option (equivalent to the higher-value one listed in syllabus) is available to any student who does a second church visit, and writes a second report.

#### **Preparation:**

- You must make a good faith effort to contact someone in leadership in the church or in the church office ahead of time and ask permission to attend one of their worship services.
- Explain that this is for a class, so you will be making observations, writing them down for your professor, and sharing your experiences with other students.

#### **You are strongly encouraged to:**

- Keep a log of your attempts to contact the church ahead of time. If you have been unsuccessful and the best you can do is arrive early for the service and ask permission to observe at the last minute, also log your arrival time and whom you meet. This will allow you to demonstrate your “good faith effort.”
- Attend with at least one other student from our class if possible (but no more than two others) so that afterward you can compare observations you might otherwise have missed.
- Make contact with the church at least three days ahead of time. This will allow you to
  - find out which service your contact recommends as the best one to attend and plan accordingly.
  - coordinate your visit with 1-2 other students.
- Allow time before the service for church members to welcome you.
- Allow time afterward to socialize, converse, and learn more.

#### **What is “ethnographic research” anyway?**

- Basically it is on-the-ground close observation of a community and its culture. Serious ethnography as anthropologists and sociologists do it could require long-term immersion into community life – maybe for years! It is a form of “qualitative” research as opposed “quantitative” methods such as polling and data-mining.
- For our purposes, we can keep it simple:
  - Pay attention to all of your senses, so that afterward you can write down: What did you see? smell? taste? feel? hear?

- Be as descriptive as possible, only allowing yourself to make value statements or otherwise reflect on your experience after you have recorded these things.
- Don't just pay attention to ritual leaders. Also pay attention to ritual participants. What happens off stage as well as on? What actions and gestures are involved?
- Since it will probably not be appropriate to take notes during the worship service itself, block out some time within a few hours, while your memory is fresh, to do a "mind dump." In other words, without analyzing or organizing your notes, madly write down as many details as you can remember, no matter how trivial and obvious they seem. You'll be surprised at how much you remember!

**One more tip:** Don't be surprised if your hosts see your visit as an opportunity to evangelize – i.e. you. Be gracious. Be polite. Use this as another learning opportunity. But be yourself.

### **Okay, the actual writing assignment:**

Following your field work, write a report that answers each of the following questions one-by-one, in this order:

1. Describe and only describe what you saw, heard or experienced with any other of the five senses. Be as detailed as you can, dedicating at least half of your report strictly to description.
2. Now interpret what you have observed. In other words, explain how the various elements of the worship service(s) you observed create meaning, communicate Christian faith, extend Christian practice, and so on.
3. Recognizing that as an outsider you can only make tentative judgments and must do so humbly, now evaluate what you have observed. How does this church group seem to be seeking to inculturate the Christian gospel? On what basis might one conclude that they are doing so faithfully or unfaithfully? Might anything you observed warrant the name "syncretism" rather than "inculturation"? Explain.

Since this is a report, rather than an argumentative essay or research paper, in this case you are not expected to frame your writing with thesis and concluding paragraphs. You should however organize your data and ideas using unified paragraphs. The paper should total 1500-2500 words, and be submitted via Blackboard.

**P.S.:** Have fun! Sure, it can be a little scary for shy Minnesotans to approach people of other cultures in their home setting. But developing relationships across cultures – even for an hour or two – can be a deeply satisfying experience.

Students will write a 1500-2000 word paper that focuses on a select number of the issues that the church body or movement they have been studying faces.

“Select” means that students are not obliged to cover all the issues that they may encounter. The most likely approach will be to do one of these:

1. Focus on how your group is seeking to inculturate the gospel faithfully in its setting.
2. Focus on a social issue or issues that your group faces as it seeks to respond to the needs of the neighbors and societies in which the Christian community lives.

Students must document their sources consistently according to the Turabian style (see [http://www.press.uchicago.edu/books/turabian/turabian\\_citationguide.html](http://www.press.uchicago.edu/books/turabian/turabian_citationguide.html) (Links to an external site.)). Students may choose either the footnote + bibliography approach, or the parenthetical citation + reference list approach, but must be consistent with one or the other.

These are the components of a solid, well-written paper based on the classic essay format:

- A clear thesis statement, usually at the beginning or the end of the first paragraph.
- Point-by-point development of your argument using unified paragraphs and clear transitions.
- Evidence that supports your argument, and is not simply there to show your professor how much you know.
- A concluding paragraph that summarizes your argument and matches your thesis but restates it in a richer way, thanks to everything else in the essay.

As you become a better writer you will find yourself departing from the formal, wooden, legalistic approach to essay writing that you may have learned in high school. That is fine. But there are reasons why the classic essay format is classic and foundational for longer papers. It has all of the elements that a persuasive well-reasoned argument needs: clear and forthright statements about what the author is arguing (thesis and conclusion), a clear and flowing structure (point-by-point development, etc.), and reasons why a reader should trust you rather than simply accepting your opinions as assertions (evidence!). So while your professor does not demand rigid adherence to the classic essay format, he will be looking for all of these elements even when a student learns to re-mix them creatively, or writes a longer and more complex paper.

The rubric for assessing your paper is available here.