HOW TO VISIT A HOUSE OF WORSHIP

1. Preparation

Worship is profound, personal, and public. It is meant to touch the deepest part of our beings and put us into contact with the holy and Divine. Before attempting this research, please consider how your previous experiences may affect both your participation and observation of worship in a sacred space.

- Positive and negative experiences that you have had in a church, temple, synagogue, or mosque.
- Experience from your childhood and experiences and more recently as an adult.
- Your beliefs, personal convictions, and style preferences about public worship.
- Your interactions with people from various religious traditions.

Confirm the exact location and time of the house of worship you plan to attend. It is good practice to call the house of worship to ask for information or any questions that you may have about the service or a guided tour. Plan to arrive early to allow time to park, navigate the building, and find an appropriate seat. If you have children ask permission before you bring them with you. While churches commonly offer worship or education options for children and teens, this may not be so in other traditions. Do not write or take notes during any worship activity. This is considered rude and offensive.

You may feel awkward and unfamiliar if you do not attend a house of worship regularly. Most houses of worship are delighted to have visitors and may have some additional information to give to you. You can remain anonymous, but you will probably learn more and have a deeper experience if you allow someone to welcome you. You may have to ask a few respectful questions of other attenders and/or staff about the service to fulfill the assignment.

2. A General Order of Worship

Even with the great diversity in religion we can generalize a bit and identify some common elements of organized worship to help you be prepared. Watch for the following elements in this general order and be attentive to the variety of practices.

- **Preparation:** Some religions require the removal of shoes, the washing of hands and feet, the covering or uncovering of heads, or bowing upon entering sacred space.
- **Call to Worship/Invocation:** Many religions will have a specific opening designed to start the worship service. This may include a call, a reading from scripture, or a prayer.
- **Music/singing:** This portion of the service probably has the greatest diversity in terms of style and presentation. However, sometimes scriptures are read in-between songs or often biblical passages are incorporated into the lyrics. The use of musical instruments varies tremendously.
- **Confessions or Creeds:** Many worship services employ corporate readings of various kinds of creeds. Sometimes this may be a general confession of sin or an ancient statement of beliefs. There may also be a corporate or responsive reading of sacred scripture.
- **Offering:** Most houses of worship will take a collection of money from its members and regular attenders for the support of the house of worship and its ministries.
- **Prayer:** Most worship services will include prayer. This is either a recited prayer or spontaneous prayer, typically led by the Pastor, Priest, Rabbi, Minister, Imam or Lay Liturgist.
• **Scripture Reading:** Liturgical houses of worship follow a scheduled calendar of readings called the lectionary in churches or *parashah* in synagogues. Churches in the free or charismatic traditions will often read specific passages of scripture that related specifically to that day’s sermon.

• **Communal Meal:** The sharing of bread or a portion of a sacrifice as part of worship is common in many world religions. Christians celebrate Holy Communion or the Lord’s Supper as a re-enactment of Jesus’ last meal with his disciples. This ritual is typically for church members or committed followers of Jesus. Visitors may be invited to participate in a common meal. However, it is acceptable for visitors to respectfully refuse receive common meal elements.

• **Sermon:** Most houses of worship will feature a sermon by the spiritual leader. These may vary widely in content, purpose, length and style of delivery.

• **Closing/Benediction:** This prayer or blessing closes the service and sends out the worshipers with a blessing. Some houses of worship utilize an “act of sending” believers back out into the world as a response to the message as the service closes.

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**SITE VISIT REPORT**

1. **Please fill out the following information about your visit.**

   Name and Address of the site:

   Date and Time of Service:

   Name of the person you spoke with on the staff:

2. **Describe any previous experience with this house of worship or religious tradition.**

3. **Identify the type of worship you observed. Then, list and describe the elements and order of the worship service. Note any points in the service where creeds were recited or passages from sacred scripture were read.**

4. **Who read each passage of scripture? Describe how each passage was read. Did you observe any congregational postures, gestures or audible responses during or after the reading?**

5. **Find someone on the staff and ask at least one question about the service. Record your question and their response below.**

6. **Describe your overall impression of the service. Consider how it may have affected you intellectually, emotionally, and/or spiritually. What questions were left unanswered?**