

OBSERVING CONGREGATIONS **A Guide for First Visits (and Beyond)**

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Before you go

- Think about how much you do and don't know about what you may see. How much of a stranger are you? If this group is new to you, consult a source such as *How to be a Perfect Stranger*, and/or ask a more knowledgeable friend to brief you or go along.
- Think about how visible you will be because of ethnic or other differences. The smaller and more intimate the group, even if you look like them, the more you will stand out. Think about how you will explain yourself, and pay attention to the effects of your presence on the group.
- Be sure you are clear about any expectations the group may have about proper dress and limitations on the participation of outsiders.
- Double-check the service times and location.
- Take along a small notebook and pen for jotting notes, as appropriate.

Getting there

- Plan to arrive in the area early.
- Observe modes of transportation. How easy is it to get there via available modes of transport?
- Observe the neighborhood. Walk or drive around. What sorts of businesses, homes, parks, etc., are present? Who, if anyone, do you see? What does the area feel like? How does the congregation's meeting space fit into its surroundings? Does it look "at home" in the neighborhood, or does it stand out? How?
- Observe the outside of the building. What is your impression as a newcomer—is it attractive and/or welcoming? Is it accessible? Are there signs, and what do they say? What, if any, visible religious symbols are there? Do you know what the symbols mean? Would most people?
- Don't forget to take notes—discreetly. Make sketches for yourself, and make notes about any things you see but don't understand.

Going inside

- Unobtrusively find a place where you can see as much of the action as possible, while still being part of it. This will usually be near the back or the side of the congregation, but beware of ending up where you can't see or hear what is happening at the front (or being so near the front you can't see the people).
- If people greet you or ask who you are, be open about why you are there. You can say, for instance, that you are doing a class assignment, that you plan to do research on religious groups, or that you are just curious and wanted to visit. Whatever your explanation, be sure to express your appreciation to them for allowing you to visit.
- Read the bulletin. If you are handed a program of any sort, read it.
- Observe what is done where. As you are able, sketch a "function map" in your notes. Where do people mill around and visit? Where do they position themselves to participate in the service (and do different kinds of people—by gender, age, etc.—occupy different spaces)? What spaces do leaders use? Are there multi-use territories? Visible barriers?
- Observe what is displayed. What do the banners and bulletin boards say? Pick up any flyers or other literature that may be available.



Observing the Service

- Observe time. How long does the service last, and does it start on time? Are there clear “segments” and how long are they? Do people seem aware of time?
- Observe leaders. What are they wearing? What are the leadership activities (e.g., singing, announcing, directing, preaching, conducting rituals)? Do different kinds of people (by gender, age, ethnicity, etc.) do different leadership things?
- Observe participants. How are they dressed? What is their demeanor? What do they do at each stage of the service? What physical activities are called for?
- Observe groups and divisions. Who is most involved and who is least involved? Who gathers with whom?
- Observe “artifacts.” What special decorations, furniture, clothes, and implements are used? Is there a printed program? Pay attention to any object that does not seem to be “ordinary.” If you don’t know the meaning or use of something you see, find someone to ask.
- Observe feelings. What emotions do people express? What are your own emotional responses to the service?
- Listen to what is said. Pay attention to announcements and prayers, as well as sermons. Make special note of the picture they paint of their deity, what they say about how people should behave, what they think is good and bad about the world. Listen for what is assumed about people’s everyday lives, concerns, and social circumstances. Note also what is said about the congregation’s activities and projects, what they are trying to accomplish.
- Take notes, if you can. Be as inconspicuous as the situation will allow. Writing is often possible during the sermon, but avoid writing during prayers or other important ritual moments.

After the Service

- Strike up conversations with anyone who will talk, and pay attention to who seeks **you** out. Remember to be open about who you are and why you are there. Stick around as long as it seems polite to do so.
 - You might start by asking a person if he or she is a member or regular attendee and how long they have been coming.
 - Ask how they found out about the congregation and why they first came.
 - Ask what they especially like about this congregation.
 - Ask if there is a part of the service they especially like and why.
 - Ask if they participate in other activities sponsored by the congregation.
 - Ask them to explain things you didn’t understand.
- Look around. Either before or after the service, ask someone to show you around other parts of the building. This might be an usher or greeter or perhaps someone you’ve struck up a conversation with. Note how much space they have, what they do with it, and what sort of condition it is in. Ask about other organizations that use the space.

Back Home

- Go back through the notes you jotted, and make additional notes immediately to remind yourself of the things you couldn’t jot down at the time. Start by completing your map of the space and a chronology of the event.
- As soon as humanly possible, preferably before you sleep, type up a full set of notes. Your jottings will be good for jogging your memory for no more than a couple of days; you will need to put flesh on those notes if you need to be able to retrieve the memories weeks and months from now.
- At the end of your notes, jot questions you have for future exploration, and reflect on the particular analytical questions that your project or assignment required.