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The Research Project: Requirements and Guidelines

This research project requires you to visit worship services at three different congregations and observe four YouTube videos. Based on these observations, you are required to write a three-to five-page research paper. Given below is a list of the specific submission requirements for this assignment and some basic guidelines for writing the final research project.

Submission Requirements

1. **Observations:** For each congregational observation you should complete the “Observation Tool” that you constructed in class. The final version is available [online](#) and at the end of this handout.
2. **YouTube:** For each video you watch, you should write one paragraph describing what you observed. Be especially attentive to areas that might be of interest for your research paper. Go to the ARDA’s Learning Center for a list of YouTube videos:
<https://www.thearda.com/learningcenter/>
3. **Research Paper:** Write a three-to five-page research paper based on the observations made above. The paper should be in 12-point font and double-spaced.

Guidelines for Writing the Research Paper

The format of your paper should be similar to any research paper. You introduce the reader to a general topic, narrow it to your specific interest (or research question) and then you review the evidence related to your topic of interest. After reviewing the evidence, you then draw some conclusions on what you have learned and how it is related to the questions you posed at the beginning of the paper. Here are a few more details.

The specific outline might vary, but I encourage you to use the first couple of paragraphs to introduce readers to the general topic you plan to address. This is your chance to convince readers that this is a topic of interest. This section often will start out quite general, but by the end of the first or second paragraph you should have your general topic narrowed to a workable size. Often you will pose a specific research question that you want to answer. When this section comes to a close, readers should know what you plan to study and why this topic is important.

The next section will review the evidence. Here is where you describe what you saw, heard and read about your topic of interest. If you are interested in how music is used, review the examples you saw and explain how it is related to your research question. Or, if you are interested in how congregations are involved in their communities, you might describe some of their community activities, offer quotes from your conversations or review the congregation’s newsletter and calendar. This section also might use outside sources, such as appropriate websites or past research from the library. Using outside sources, however, is not required.

The final section summarizes your findings and offers conclusions. What did you learn from your observations and how is it related to the specific topics and questions you posed earlier? You might also use this section to suggest other topics of research interest or other ideas on how your topic might be studied more fully. Enjoy your research!



FAQs on Congregational Visits

The two adages "seeing is believing" and "the best teacher is experience" have garnered substantial research support. Hence, your research assignment requires you to visit three congregations and observe four YouTube videos. These observations will provide the information (data) used for your research papers. Before you conduct your visits, however, I strongly encourage you to review Nancy Ammerman's two-page guide on "[Observing Congregations: A Guide for First Visits \(and Beyond\)](#)." Both Professor Ammerman's guide and a list of [YouTube videos](#) can be found in the ARDA's Learning Center. Below I answer some of the most commonly asked questions about conducting congregational visits.

How do I select a church?

First, select one congregation from three of the four following categories: 1) Evangelical Protestant, 2) Mainline Protestant, 3) Roman Catholic or Orthodox, and 4) Other (e.g., Muslim, Hindu, Jewish, Jehovah's Witnesses, etc.). For a list of many of the religious groups in the U.S. and the categories where they fall, go to the ARDA's [U.S. Membership Report](#). Please select worship services that you have seldom or never attended. If you are familiar with the Methodist church DON'T attend a Methodist church, or even another mainline Protestant church. You should visit a Jewish synagogue, a Catholic mass, a Pentecostal service, or another religious group. Second, visit congregations where the majority of the members are from the community outside of Penn State University, i.e., avoid student congregations. If you have an appropriate justification for visiting a student church (e.g., it is the only Muslim mosque in the community), please let me know. You can attend worship services without asking permission from congregational leaders, but if they ask why you are attending, tell them the truth. Third, to locate possible congregations in an area, go to the ARDA's GIS Maps feature: <https://www.thearda.com/DemographicMap/>.

Should I participate in the worship service?

Please refer to Nancy Ammerman's guide mentioned above for details. Standing and sitting with the remainder of the congregation, even singing and responsive readings, are appropriate, but don't pretend that you are a member. Pentecostals don't expect visitors to speak in tongues or come forward for healing any more than the Jewish synagogue will expect, or allow, you to read publicly from the Torah. Respect the most sacred rituals and sacraments of the various groups (e.g., Holy Communion for Catholics) and don't participate unless it is clearly open to all. The bottom line is: show respect for each religious group and use good judgment. Do I sound like a parent, or what?

What should I wear?

You're asking me? The usual parental advice applies here: be neat, clean and dress modestly. For some services you will be asked to wear a head covering or remove your shoes, but most services will have few dress requirements. Males should wear a pair of slacks, or even a nice pair of jeans, and an attractive shirt. For females, please translate the above into culturally acceptable female clothing. Sorry, I wish I could do better. If you are visiting a mosque or temple, you might call ahead to ask for advice.

When should I fill out the observation tool?

You can jot down a few notes during the service, but most of your writing will be completed after the service. You don't want participants to feel like lab rats being studied. But complete the observation tool ASAP after the service. Also, no filming, photographing or recording without permission. Again, see Professor Ammerman's guide for helpful advice.

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STUDENT DESIGNED CONGREGATION OBSERVATION TOOL

Congregation Name:
Address:

Day and Time:
Date:

(If available) Year congregation was founded:

PHYSICAL SETTING

Describe the surrounding neighborhood.

Describe the worship area. Include information on the interior design, shape and furnishings, as well as the physical symbolism and artifacts.

List and describe the congregational facilities beyond the worship area (e.g., school, parsonage, gymnasium, kitchen or classrooms).

Describe the outward appearance of the buildings and setting (e.g., artwork, architecture, sign, landscaping, symbolism, etc.). Was the building designed for religious worship or is/was it used for other purposes?

Describe any new forms of technology used for worship or religious education.

PARTICIPANTS

How many people attended the service? What percentage arrived late?
Offer a demographic profile of those attending.

Offer more description of the participants. For example, how are they dressed and what kind (year, model, etc.) of cars do they drive?

Describe the responses of the participants during the worship service and sermon (e.g., engaged, bored, emotional, spontaneous, meditative, etc.).

SOCIAL INTERACTION

Describe the social interaction between participants before, during and after the service (e.g., how many were engaged in conversations and appeared to know and care for each other).

List and describe any social or religious activities they support during the week. Did these activities support the congregation, the larger community, or both?

Did they notice you were a visitor? If yes, what was their response?

LEADERSHIP

Offer a demographic profile of those involved in leading the worship. What did the worship leaders wear?

Describe the interaction between the worship leader(s) and the congregation. How formal or casual is the relationship?

How long was the message (e.g., sermon, homily, etc.)? Describe the content (e.g., topics covered) and appeal of the message (e.g., intellectual, emotional, etc.).

RELIGIOUS SERVICE

How long was the service?

Did they have music? If yes, offer a brief description of the type and amount of music used.

Did they take an offering?

Do children attend the entire worship service? Do they have a separate service for children?

Did they use a sacred text, (e.g., *Bible*)? How often? Did members bring their own sacred text?

Was the service highly structured with a clearly defined order? Did they use a hymnal or a preprinted publication for congregational responses? Explain.

Describe the content and style of prayers (e.g., formal, spontaneous, personal, emotional, etc.).

Describe the mood of the religious service (e.g., somber, bored, upbeat, meditative, etc.).

Optional questions that might be of interest:

What percentage of the total membership attends worship on a given weekend? (Keep in mind how many worship services they have)

Do they place a strong emphasis on the recruitment of new members? If so, how do they recruit new members?

Did they have a special religious ritual or sacrament, such as Holy Communion? If yes, describe how the ritual was conducted.

Considering all of your observations, the congregation's website and other sources, what are the core religious beliefs of this group?

Did they mention other religions? If so, what did they say?