

# Protestant Site Visit Guide

## Introduction

Protestant services typically tend to fall into one of two categories. *Mainline Protestant* services/churches tend to have a more traditional structure, style, and worship building. *Evangelical Protestant* services/churches typically have less structure, use contemporary worship styles, may use non-traditional teaching techniques, and often occur in less traditional buildings.

The most common type of mainline Protestant service is the *Holy Eucharist* or *Holy Communion*. During this service, communion is served and songs, readings, and prayers are typically part of the service. However, some protestant churches only serve communion intermittently. Evangelical services are usually *Worship Services* where no communion is served but the rest of the service remains the same. In addition, depending upon the denomination, specific church, and evangelical orientation, there may also be *morning prayer services*, *evening prayer services*, *contemporary services*, *modern services*, *family services* (where children are invited to attend and might be separated for Sunday school), *youth services*, and several other variations that may be geared towards a particular demographic or style. Most services are held on Sunday mornings. However, many churches now also offer Saturday and Sunday evening services.

## Arrivals

**Dress:** Contemporary conservative. For males this usually means slacks and a polo/dress shirt. For females it means slacks/skirt and a blouse. Jeans are becoming more acceptable, especially among contemporary churches. You might want to call and ask for advice.

**Time to arrive:** 5-10 minutes early to find a seat and pick up a bulletin.

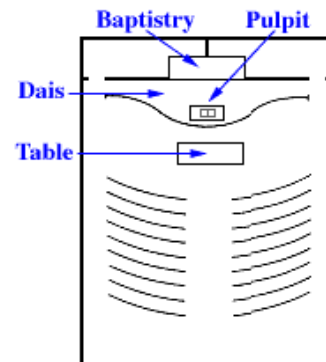
**Where/how to enter:** Simply come in the main doors and seat yourself with the rest of the congregation (sometimes there will be ushers who will seat you).

### Architecture:

**External:** The styles of churches vary dramatically from traditional church forms to buildings that look like office buildings. In general, Protestant churches have a cross of some sort outside to indicate that it is a Christian establishment.

**Internal:** Direct your attention to the front of the room/altar. Usually there is a (holy) table, a cross, a pulpit, and possibly a lectern from where the readings are shared. In some churches there is a baptistery where baptisms take place.

There is a lot of variation between different Protestant layouts. Here is a typical Baptist layout. Most simply have seating facing the front worship area.



## What to expect during the service:

Protestant services vary tremendously based on the church, the time of the year, the particular service, the denomination, and type of Protestant community. As a result, it is impossible to provide a comprehensive view of what to expect in a Protestant service. Some will seem very structured, serious, and traditional; others might be led by a rock band, include skits, and use very contemporary language; still others may focus on miraculous healings and charismatic gifts such as speaking in tongues. In general, Protestant services stress the active role of the Holy Spirit, filling the participants in the praise section and teaching them through the explanation of the bible by the pastor. Usually, the culmination of the service is found in the sermon during which the pastor illumines the congregation about the meaning and application of the bible. The frequency and role of communion varies with the denomination, but has tended to recede in importance in recent years.

## Structure of the Service

**Call to worship-** This opening part of the service may include a formal prayer or an informal initial blessing and opening to the service. It is usually done by the clergy member leading the service. However, it could also be done by a guest speaker or another member of the church community. A hymn or two can accompany this call to worship either before or after.

**Worship/Praise Singing-** Many protestant services place a great emphasis on praise or worship singing (especially evangelical churches). This type of singing takes place throughout the service and usually provides transition from one part of the service to another. Often, praise/worship bands provide instrumental background and a cantor and/or a choir leads the rest of the congregation in the song.

**Scripture reading-** Depending upon the service, denomination, and church, multiple Scripture readings may be read throughout the service (often broken up by songs and/or prayers). These rotate every week and may be from the Gospels or the rest of the New Testament. During reading from the Gospel, the leaders often cue to congregation to stand up out of respect before beginning.

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**Homily/Main Message/Sermon-** This may vary from week to week and from church to church. Some services may feature a guest speaker who might talk about a modern topic relating to faith while others might simply feature a clergy's interpretation or expansion on one of the selected readings for that day. The bulletin often features an area where the congregation can take notes on this portion of the service or offers an overview of it. This part of the service usually takes place after the Scripture readings and is the most informal element. In Protestant services, this is also one of the most important parts of the service.

**Communion (Occasional) -** When a church is having communion, most protestant denominations invite all baptized Christians to partake. This involves following the rest of the congregation as they approach the front where the clergy (sometimes with Eucharistic ministers) are handing out communion (a small piece of bread or wafer and wine or occasionally grape juice). However, each church and denomination may vary in their methods of and views on who should receive communion. It is best to follow those cues given by the congregation, clergy, and ushers.

**Closing Prayer/Closing Song/Benediction/Altar Cal-** The service usually closes with some song, blessing, or prayer.

**Other common elements-** Other common features to Protestant services include a time designated for greeting others, an *offering* (where some sort of bowl is passed around to collect money for the church), *moments of silence* (a short period for silence and reflection cued by the clergy), and recitation of the *Lord's Prayer* and the *Nicene Creed* (usually available in the hymnals for people to follow along with).

## Observation Tips/Participation

- The important thing to remember is that almost everything you need to know will be told to you. When in doubt, simply act as any other member of the congregation. This usually entails sitting and standing at the appropriate times (when cued), bowing your head in prayer, and singing along with hymns (optional).
- In most churches there is also a period when you are asked to greet others sitting around you. During this time, you simply shake hands and either introduce yourself or offer a wish of peace (cued by the clergy).
- In some churches, parishioners will bring their own Bibles to follow along with scripture or sermon, but this is not necessary (although it could be helpful!). Often churches provide hymnals and Bibles in the pews for use during the service and will cue page numbers or citations to aid the congregation in following along.
- If you are nervous or have any initial questions before the service, utilize ushers (if present). They will be more than willing to help in whatever way they can. Their whole purpose is to greet you and set you at ease.
- Above all, be respectful. If you are going to ask questions, phrase them in a respectful manner. Remember to turn off cell phones, remain quiet throughout the service, and attempt to engage as much as you feel comfortable doing so.

## Afterwards

After service, many churches will have an informal meal or gathering that the congregation is invited to attend. This period can be very helpful if you have questions. Feel free to approach the leaders! Usually the clergy and/or guest speakers will be wandering around, greeting, socializing, and engaging with the congregation at the end of the service.

## Additional Resources

For more information, feel free to look at resources on particular denominations or churches (i.e., their websites). Here are some useful denomination specific websites about what to expect:

**Episcopalian/Anglican:** <http://anglicansonline.org/basics/expect.html>

**Typical Unitarian:** <http://www.theopenmind.org.uk/about/leaflets/first.html>

**Typical Baptist:** [http://www.selsdonbaptist.org.uk/visitors\\_guide.htm](http://www.selsdonbaptist.org.uk/visitors_guide.htm)

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