

Participant Observation 4: Religious Gathering

Visit a place where a group of people are gathered for religious purposes. This may be a group that is reflective of the most common religion in your country or a Christian group.

Participate in culturally appropriate ways without violating your testimony as a believer in Jesus. Your purpose is absorb the activity of the gathering from a cultural point of view. Take nothing but your eyes, ears and notebook or electronic device (to be used only for recording your observations).

Take your time as you take it in. Spend at least 30 minutes observing. Your goals in this exercise are...

1. **Observe** and **describe** the gathering without being judgmental or presumptuous.
2. Identify your own feelings and attitudes as you make your observations.

Questions that may help to open your eyes.

Do not take these questions with you, but think about them before you set out to do your observation.

1. What do you notice about the setting (the building, layout and decor)?
2. What objects or things are in central or prominent positions?
3. What is the posture of the people?
4. How is the seating arranged?
5. What props and equipment are used or displayed?
6. Roughly how many people are present?
7. What are the demographics of the congregations - age, sex, class, family composition?
8. Describe the attire. Who is in uniform? Describe the uniforms.
9. How do people greet each other?
10. Are there clear gender roles?
11. Are children included? If so how?
12. What happens during the gathering?
13. Does the gathering appear to be pre-planned or spontaneous?
14. What would you say is acceptable behavior and etiquette? What kinds of behavior appear to be unacceptable?
15. Who are recognized as leaders in the setting? What indicates they are leaders?
16. Who is honored/respected? Who is disrespected/marginalized?

Write it down.

It is important to write down notes of your observation, both to remember as well as to help prevent inadvertent interpretation. Your memory will interpret and remember what it deems as important. So writing down simple notes as you observe, or immediately after, is very important. But at this point don't analyze, don't sort. Just write!

You may want to draw a simple map of this place of gathering. Your map does not have to be perfect to be helpful. In all likelihood, the process of making a map will reveal helpful things about the cultural setting.