

ESSAYS

An Afternoon with the Augustine United Church

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It was an extremely windy and rainy Thursday afternoon; a typical February day in Edinburgh. We were in the midst of storm Gertrude when my research group, consisting of Shannon, Araminta and myself, arrived at the Augustine United Church; a relatively large and tall building, situated on a busy George IV bridge. It was a relief to get inside the church where it was warm, bright and full of friendly faces. This was only the second time I had visited but I already felt vaguely familiar with my surroundings. Upon first entering the church there is a bright, unintimidating and rather generic welcome area. There are shelves with leaflets, as well as notice boards on the walls, informing visitors about upcoming events and about the church's work with various charities. The main area of the church, where services take place, is separated from the welcome area by double doors with large windows. It was through these windows that a man spotted us waiting and came to greet us. He was quite young, possibly in his late twenties, dressed in a casual outfit of a jumper and jeans. With a smile and an enthusiastic tone, heightened by his strong West Coast American accent, he introduced himself as Jason and asked us if we were there for the 'Coffee, cake and conversation' meeting. We said that we were and he led us into the main room.

I remember feeling apprehensive about entering the main room of the church, where services took place, when I first began my research, a week prior to this experience. I expected to be faced with cold stone pews and intimidatingly large stained glass windows; depicting images of Bible stories of which I had no knowledge. Given my non-religious background my preconceptions surrounding what to expect were a result of how the church is portrayed in the media; as well as limited first hand experiences of being in a church for events such as family weddings and christenings. This time, however, I approached the room with a more positive and confident attitude, knowing what to expect. I was instantly struck with the pleasant temperature of the room, drastically different to the cold outside. The warmth was coming from the heaters lining both the left and right hand side walls, which were also emitting a reddish glow giving the whole room a cosy and comfortable feel. There were many features to the room that I recognized as typical of a church, such as the large ornate cross on the far wall and organs in the left-hand corner. However, there were no pews like I had previously assumed there would be. Instead, there were rows of individual chairs, with cushioned seats and backs, like what would be found in a café or some other type of social space.

On this particular day, around half of the chairs in the church had been moved to accommodate for the tables that had been set up for the gathering. There were four tables set up towards the back of the room, near the entrance. Three of these tables were already full of people chatting. There was a pretty even mix of males and females but I still felt self-consciously out of place, as the majority of people were on the older side; made evident by the sea of white and grey hair. Everybody seemed to be settled in, with their coats, scarves and hats hung on the back of their chairs. After standing awkwardly for a few moments, we proceeded to sit at the only empty table, not yet confident enough to start mingling on our own. Jason politely asked us if we wanted something to drink and a short while later he brought back two cups of tea and a coffee to our table, along with a jug of milk, a pot of sugar and a plate of cakes.

Jason sat with us and, after he told us he was originally from California, the conversation naturally moved towards the weather. We were also joined by an older man named John, who seemed very happy and eager to see new faces at the church. As we were talking the minister of the church, Freida, noticed us and came over to welcome us. We had met her once before, but only spoke for a few minutes, so it was not surprising that she had forgotten our names. She sat down as we reintroduced ourselves and continued our chat about the weather. People continued to drink and eat whilst the exchange went on. Freida asked if anyone had seen the video of the panda playing in the snow after the East Coast blizzard, which brought on a queue of excited 'yes, it was so cute' and noises of our endearment. Our cooing was interrupted by an elderly woman who came over to speak to Freida. She was wearing her puffy winter coat and a woolly hat; a sign that she was on her way to leave. However, once a discussion was brought up about a documentary she had watched last

night she ended up staying for another half hour. Freida introduced this woman as Anne, who then told us at length about this documentary about a man called Nicholas Winton, who is known for organizing the rescue of over 600 children during the Holocaust.

This shift in topic got John pondering on his life before World War II. He told us how he remembers seeing a car for the first time, as they were not common where he lived in rural England. He also told us about how his mother used to take him shopping with her to Sainsbury's, which was extremely different all those decades ago. He explained how nothing was individually packaged as it is today; individual portions of butter were taken off a large stick of it, and biscuits were taken out of a large tin and put into a paper bag. Everything had to be weighed before you could pay, making the whole grocery shopping process take much longer than it does today. John's reminiscing also got another woman, Susan, talking about what life was like during her childhood. In her case it was in reference to this particular church we were in, which she had been attending since she was five years old, for over eighty years. She told us about how the church was originally much bigger; built for a congregation of one thousand people, whereas now it can only fit a few hundred. She also explained how there was a high pulpit up on the balcony, so that the minister could preach to the people. The church still appeared to be a huge part of Susan's life, as Freida told us that she helps make all the food for church suppers and lunches, as well as the cakes for charity stalls and for more casual social gatherings such as the one that was happening that day. I listened with interest to the various anecdotes the afternoon provided, glad that none of them seemed to center heavily on religion, which I'm sure would have left me feeling out of my depth. This lack of religious content was something which my group and I found intriguing and it lead us to focus our ethnography around how this particular church worked to make themselves relevant to people of all ages, genders and backgrounds.