

15-minute Assignment PRIOR TO JANUARY 13, 2017 CLASS
Field Observation in a Congregation

One of the ways we understand the culture and theology of a congregation is by observing its social setting, its building, its artifacts, and its rituals. This is a very brief introduction to how to start this process.

Visit a church building – preferably one you do not know. It can be for a worship service or at a time when worship is not held. Write brief notes to answer the following questions.

**ST. PETER LUTHERAN CHURCH
HOPEWELL TOWNSHIP, NJ
STPETERNJ.ORG**

What does a quick look at the neighborhood tell you about the community surrounding this church?

St. Peter Lutheran Church is in a rural area surrounded predominantly by farms with scattered houses. It is a quiet area, although the church resides at the intersection of two main county roads, both of which are still not heavily traveled. Houses are far apart from one another, lending a bit more isolation to each household. On surrounding roads, it is a common site to see cows, sheep, horses, farms for crops, etc. Uncertain if the dominant congregant is a farmer, this could still indicate a focus on the gifts of nature God has given the people of this church.

What does the building tell you about the culture of this church?



The building is relatively new. The church used to reside in a tiny village a couple miles away. The village is comprised of maybe a dozen houses, the church and cemetery, and an old general store that has been repurposed as a home. Some time after relocating to its new home, the congregation actually built a large addition to this facility. The original chapel was repurposed as a common area for miscellaneous gatherings, while a new worship area and classrooms were constructed. The church does consider one of its ministries housing a preschool organization at minimal cost to them, providing affordable education and child care to local families. The primary worship space, as well as exterior and foyer are all designed simply. There is no ornate detail as would be found in classic Roman Catholic or Episcopal churches, aside from taller-than-average ceilings. It certainly holds a more modern feel with the focus directed toward the cross at the backdrop of the altar. Based on the size of the interior and number of pews, this indicates a fairly well attended (and well-funded) church, especially considering the renovations undertaken in recent years.

What do the material objects inside the church tell you?



The lack of ornate details, artwork, stained glass windows, and so forth suggests a more frugal parish. The simplicity of design and layout indicates either a desire to control expenses on decorating or a desire to maintain spiritual focus on the few items that are in the church – altar w/ cloths, cross behind the altar,

Baptismal font at entry. This congregation has a tradition with structure to its service as well as music as a part of its service as indicative of the hymnals in the back of the pews and piano toward the side. The Baptismal font placed near the entry point seems in line with the common tradition in Roman Catholic and Episcopal churches, where the first Sacrament a Christian experiences is also connected to the first symbol of that sacrament upon entering the church. This indicates, as well as the altar positioned at the front, that the congregation to have some sort of focus on sacraments.

Looking at the bulletin (if one is available inside the sanctuary), what do you learn about the symbols, rituals, worldview, tradition, and culture of this church?

The bulletin left inside the foyer detailed the parts of the service for congregants to follow along together. It also listed a prayer list, weekly announcements and other events, including Sunday School and Bible study. Based on the bulletin, there is certainly emphasis on and encouragement for continuing prayer and reading the Bible through the week. The front of the bulletin has an image of Jesus with the words "This is My beloved Son." Interestingly, the name of the church or date of service is not on the front cover, but on the first page when opening the cover. The bulletin also lists some service opportunities as well as church ministry gatherings. There is much emphasis on developing spirituality, family spirituality, and outreach. They also include administrative details, such as numbers of attendees by service time, presumably from the previous week, and totals for offerings. With so many details, this certainly appears to be an active church in both prayer life and service.