

Highland

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not sure I'd call it a "worship service." A tall black man played the organ beautifully as we sang "Now Thank We All Our God" (with such a diverse blend of humanity, it doesn't seem right to identify people by ethnicity, age, gender or disability – People Being Human Together might be a more accurate description).

For the "special music" a soft-spoken man stood and sang a lovely song he read off his cellphone screen. You wouldn't think by looking at him that his voice would be so pleasant but appearances are not what they seem at Haywood Street.

Another person stood up and asked who would like to read the scripture. From the back of the room someone launched right in to the reading.

"Shared leadership" hardly describes the reality of what I witnessed. The most delightful aspect for me was wondering who the pastor was! No one presented themselves as the main leader. No one stood up higher or spoke from the pulpit, though one was available. There were no robes or other vestments to readily set apart a minister. Even the woman who gave the "conversational homily" was not identified either in the bulletin or verbally (though I happened to know she's a clergyperson, there was no sense that she had a special position). The homily was engaging and light, even with the serious topic of temptation and power. Invited by the

speaker, people did not hesitate to share their thoughts.

The prayer time was quite unusual, at least for me. Plastic bottles full of beads were passed around and as each person spoke up with their concern or gratefulness, we all shook our shakers as a kind of "amen." The man who led the prayers was very sensitive and loving to each person, giving them time to make their request or to vent their feelings.

As the service was closing, a different woman stood behind the communion table and tore the bread. She may have been clergy, but was never identified.

"The unidentified." Maybe that's a central meaning of the gathering. It was obvious that many of the congregation were known to each other and there was a palpable affection in the air. Each individual seemed valued, identified as one of "God's people," yet no one was singled out as "one of them or those."

Strangely, I felt almost at home. The mixture of humanity was a mingling I was used to from years of chaplaincy. This kind of gathering was exactly what I thought "church" should be – delightfully diverse, fully inclusive, "earthy and honest," and always a bit unpredictable, slightly crazy. A place where "all misfits could fit." Even misfit chaplains, or writers.

A woman wore a shirt that said, "Holy Chaos," which seemed to express the experience pretty well.

The Haywood website lists more than 20 congregations and nearly 30 organizations who support their work. An impressive array of partners. I can see why so many want to participate in this

"church experience."

While people walked, rolled and shuffled their way to the table, I slipped out the back. I'd seen enough, felt enough. I think I'd already partaken of the bread of community and blood of humanity.

Chris Highland served as a Protestant minister and interfaith chaplain for many years. He is a teacher, writer, freethinker and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife Carol, a Presbyterian minister, live in Asheville. Learn more at chighland.com.



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AN-GC0170811-02