

On January 31 five recently confirmed youth and five adults traveled by train from Charlottesville to New York City on pilgrimage to attend Nightwatch at the Cathedral of St. John's the Divine. The Nightwatch program started in 1975. The program hosts youth groups and people of all ages for an overnight pilgrimage in the cathedral filled with exploration, prayer, song, fun and conversation. One of our youth is the same age that her father was when he attended Nightwatch with his youth group!

Before checking into the cathedral Friday night our group did a bit of sightseeing. We visited Times Square and then rode the subway to the cathedral. Entering the cathedral is breath taking with its massive size. We were joined by 2 other groups, a Presbyterian group from Northern Virginia and another Episcopal group from Vermont. The evening started with music and singing, and then icebreakers in the great nave. We were then divided into 2 groups. One group did a scavenger hunt around the cathedral (an excellent teaching tool) and the other group walked a huge labyrinth in the cathedral and wrote prayers afterwards. The groups switched activities midway. The cathedral is so large that even with kids, and chaperones dashing around on the scavenger hunt the labyrinth was very peaceful.

This Nightwatch was an inter-spiritual concept. Our recent confirmands have been studying world religions this year on Sunday mornings. After the scavenger hunt the labyrinth and a snack break we all gathered quietly in the very dark great nave with individual candles for a mediation period.

Even sitting in the dimly lit cathedral, one is struck by its magnificence. You see the outline of its soaring height and width. The cathedral opened in 1911 but is considered to only be 2/3's finished. It is 601 feet long and 241 feet high. If you add individual the numbers of the height ($6+0+1=7$) and width ($2+4+1=7$) of the cathedral you get a total of seven. Sacred math. The cathedral also has seven altars. It is said that the number 7 is the number of perfection and completeness in the Bible. More sacred math.

During our worship time we experienced several prayer traditions of different faiths. The first tradition was the lighting of the candles and prayer at the beginning of the Jewish Shabbot. We were told that at the lighting of the candles the woman of the household, traditionally, stands before the candles and lights them. She then invites the light into the home by moving her hand over the candles and towards her in a circular motion. She then takes her hands and covers her eyes and says the blessing in Hebrew, *Baruch atah, Adonai Eloheinu, Melech haolam, asher*

kid'shanu b'mitzvotav, v'tzivanu l'hadlik ner shel Shabbat. Blessed are you, Adonai our God, Sovereign of all, who hallows us with mitzvot, commanding us to kindle the light of Shabbat.

After having the blessing modeled we were invited to come and say our own blessing. It was moving to see that over half of the entire group came forward, one at a time to experience this opportunity.

We were then treated to a musical Metti prayer chant from the Buddhist tradition. “May I be happy and peaceful, may I be healthy and strong, may I be safe and protected, may I live in ease “, the chant continued with concern for others, may you be, may we be, may they be... Many commented that this was one of their favorite parts our experience in the cathedral.

Next was a Hindi chant, again repetitive and meditative.

Before we ended the evening with Eucharist we were invited to pray by writing with our finger in large sand trays, saying Amen and shaking the sand tray to lift up our prayers to heaven.

We were up early the next morning, and were able to see the cathedral in the daytime, with the sunlight shining through the stained glass. The cathedral contains a mix of ancient and modern, the ancient feel of a cathedral with some very modern statuary. The Cathedral of St. John's the Divine is a baby in age, at 109 years old, when compared to the other cathedrals in the world. Wells Cathedral in England is over 800 years old.

Our group had time for more sightseeing before our train left in the early afternoon. One group opted to go to the Metropolitan Museum of Art and another went to the 9/11 Memorial.

The definition of a pilgrimage is a journey, often into an unknown or foreign place, where a person goes in search of new or expanded meaning about the self, others, nature, or a higher good, through the experience. It can lead to a personal transformation, after which the pilgrim returns to their daily life.

I believe that we had a successful pilgrimage, learning more about God, worship spaces and each other.

Thanks be to God for our safe journey!

Sharon

