Witnessing Worship: A Photographic Study of Faith in Alexandria

Alexandria History Museum at The Lyceum
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In 1985, photographer Nina Tisara documented fifty worship groups throughout the City of Alexandria. The 106 images, now in the Alexandria History Museum collection, provide a portrait of Alexandria’s worship community at that time.

The idea for this project came to Ms. Tisara while driving from her home to work in Old Town where she was freelancing for a local newspaper. In that short distance there were seven different denominations of churches. The architecture initially caught her attention, but she soon realized it was the people at worship that truly interested her.

With the support of a small grant from the Alexandria Commission for the Arts, Ms. Tisara worked on the project for a year. The Alexandria List of Clergy given to her by The Rev. John Von Hemert of St. Paul’s Episcopal Church served as her guide, and the telephone directory Yellow Pages provided contact information.
Ms. Tisara photographed worship in many different churches, as well as synagogues and a home where Buddhist monks lived and worshipped. There were no mosques within the city, so none were available to be included.

Ms. Tisara used an approach familiar to those in photojournalism and anthropology. She sought to intrude as little as possible as she took the photographs, using only available light and foregoing the use of flash. Sometimes she had to be creative to get enough light. In one instance, Ms. Tisara used the light from a nearby soda machine for a photograph. To help her remain as unobtrusive as possible she used Tri-X film and high energy developers. She often returned to a worship place on multiple occasions to ensure good photos.

Nina Tisara sought to document “the breadth, variety, and vitality of worship in the city.” She came to call her project Converging Paths because the experience led her to conclude that, despite the many different paths worship takes, “we are all kin.”

This presentation is a sampling of the photographs.
Worship at Baptist Temple
Donning Vestments, St. Joseph’s Catholic Church
Silent Prayer at Third Baptist Church
Imposition of Ashes at Immanuel Lutheran Church
Singing Hymns at Beverley Hills Community United Methodist Church

Gospel Song at Mt. Jezreel Baptist Church
Worship at Wat Lao Buddavong
Worship Service at Jehovah’s Witness of Northern Virginia

Epiphany Play, Spanish Mass at Blessed Sacrament Catholic Church
Torah Reading (Reenacted) at Agudas Achim Hebrew Congregation
Worship Service at Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints
Usher at Beverley Hills United Methodist Church
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Photographs by Nina Tisara

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