

How Things Get Done in Santo Daime Churches in North America

I would not have been able to have had the opportunity to drink Daime if it were not for the often heroic, and deeply courageous, ongoing efforts of countless individuals in North America who, for years now, with a lot of faith, have been willing to start a Santo Daime church and to keep it running.

It takes an enormous amount of thought, care, time, and energy to carry out a Santo Daime work. And all of this thought, care, time, and energy is offered, over and over again, month after month, by a truly committed group of people. Works simply don't happen without these fardados (literally "uniformed" initiates) and "firmados" (literally "firm ones," i.e., people in white who come regularly and want to help out). These are the people who, time after time, show up and get things done: whether it's schlepping chairs, or washing candle holders, or putting xeroxed copies of hymns back in their proper place in the spiral binders, etc. etc. The works are only able to take place due to the ongoing efforts of these dedicated people. Each and every work depends upon their willingness to offer themselves up, more and more selflessly, to the ongoing, complexly interactive, task of making sure that each work is as expansive, powerful, and beautiful as possible. It is this group of fardados and firmados who make it all happen. They are the firm pillars of each Santo Daime church; they are the ones who offer their time and energy, during each and every work, to make sure that everyone is safe and flourishing.

And at the very center of this core group of people is the leader of the church – the person (or persons – some churches are run by husband and wife teams) who has received the blessings of

an elder, to take on the enormous responsibility of shepherding a Santo Daime church in North America.

Tasks of the Church Leader

Arguably the central task of a church leader is to be in charge of the works – to be the one who leads the collective prayers; who decides which hymns to sing; who (along with others appointed to this task) serves the Daime. The church leader sits at the head of the central table/altar. She or he is the person who is attuned to, and responsible for, whatever needs to be done, in the moment, during works; the one who makes the difficult decisions; the one who (ideally at least) models firmness, clarity, and kindness.

The church leader has other not-so-sexy, but oh-so-essential tasks as well, tasks that in larger churches are often spread out among a selective core group of fardados. For example, the church leaders are often the ones who send out online announcements about upcoming works; they are the ones who set up various meetings with key people in their church to talk over logistical issues; and they are the ones who touch base a few days before the work with their head guardians (who then consults with their own respective teams of male and female guardians).

Church leaders are also the ones who “put out the fires” that periodically flare up within their community. Daimistas are as human as anyone and due in large part to how hard they are working on themselves spiritually, it’s not uncommon for a fair amount of friction and misunderstandings to arise within churches. It’s crucial therefore that church leaders (as soon as possible) deal with whatever issue is presenting itself – addressing it with as much clarity and

kindness as they can muster. Because the church leaders are the ones that everyone in the church looks to for inspiration and guidance, it's important for them (again, at least ideally) to embody as much clarity, openness, authenticity, and love as possible in these sorts of often quite demanding and intense situations.

Church leaders are also available to their fellow damistas if/when they need to have a heart-to-heart conversation: to listen deeply when their daimista sisters or brothers are sharing their own unique struggles with the complexities and challenges of life; to be as fully present, and openhearted, and clear as possible in order that they can offer guidance that can (hopefully) genuinely help these individuals and will (again, hopefully) shine some Light on the situation at hand.

Orientations

Church leaders (and/or, at least in larger churches, a select group of key people) are also the ones who take on the essential task of giving orientations to newcomers. Typically, Santo Daime churches in North America do not publicly announce their existence. Instead, a person usually first learns about Santo Daime works because she/he has expressed some sort of interest in ayahuasca/the Santo Daime, and some local daimista (usually a friend), responding to that openness, informally lets the person know, without any pressuring of any sort, about the local church. If the person seems genuinely interested, then that daimista will reach out to the leader of the church, asking if she/he can share the church leader's contact information with the potential newcomer. If the church leader says yes, then it is up to the person who is interested in learning more to reach out to the church leader, and if all goes well, then the two of them will

usually arrange to get together for a relatively brief (typically between an hour to an hour and 1/2 long) “orientation.”

Orientations emerged rather organically in North American Santo Daime churches. Arguably, the primary impetus for the creation of orientations (and the forms that are filled out by each prospective participant) was the desire not only to make sure that a potential newcomer was given a basic, well-informed sense of what to expect during a work, but equally importantly, for the church leader to screen out individuals for whom Santo Daime works would not be appropriate – in particular, individuals with a history of, or tendency towards, severe mental illnesses such as schizophrenia, bi-polar disorder, and borderline personality disorder. Most church leaders are not trained mental health practitioners, but over the years, many (if not most) of them began recognize that as much as they might want to offer the healing Light of the Daime to everyone, nonetheless, there were clearly individuals who should not be given the sacrament. The church leaders realized that people who had been struggling in the past, or were currently struggling with, these debilitating illnesses, were not well-suited for the psychological rigors of a Santo Daime work. In certain respects, therefore, the orientations (and the documents that the potential participant needed to sign) emerged as a way not only to protect these individuals from potentially disorienting reactions to the Force of the Daime, but also to protect the community itself from the (at times) extremely challenging behavior of mentally-ill individuals who did not possess the requisite psychological stability needed to successfully navigate, and benefit from, a Santo Daime work. Santo Daime church leaders are keenly sensitive that one of their most important tasks is to (kindly, but firmly) keep those with fragile psychological structures from

drinking the Daime, and the orientations are, in many respects, formats in which church leaders attempt to accomplish this task.

These exceedingly rich meetings, however, also accomplish many more prosaic tasks as well. For example, in most orientations, after some casual “getting-to-know-each-other” talking back and forth, the church leaders (or the appointed church representatives) will provide a short overview of the historical development of the Santo Daime. They will then describe what happens during a concentration work, a dance work, and a healing work (and during their description of a healing work they will typically say at least a bit about mediumship).

The church leaders will then give the individuals interested in the Santo Daime an overview of what to expect when they arrive at the work that they will be attending (if they still want to come after the orientation). They will also be told that they will need to get some white clothes to wear for the work (although most churches ask that participants change into their whites/their fardas after arriving at the place where the work will be held.) The church leaders might then say something about signing in at registration, emphasizing how the donation is as low as possible (churches often just barely manage to cover their costs); how financial transparency is crucially important within the Santo Daime; how there’s absolutely no profit (the church leaders give the same donation as everyone); and how these are works of charity and that therefore no one will ever be turned away due to financial constraints.

The church leaders might then let these potential newcomers know that after they register, someone will orient them to the space – they’ll be shown the *salão* (the central ritual space), the

bathrooms, the healing rooms, and the *ponto* (a simple altar, primarily focused on Mary, that in most churches is located outdoors where people can go to pray during a work when they are struggling and need help). They are often then given a brief overview of the logistical details of the work that they'll be attending.

Church leaders will also typically say that they like to touch base with newcomers during the casual, chatting-while-snacking-on-potluck-items-while-perhaps-listening-to-someone-strumming-the-guitar informal time after the work is concluded, to see how they're doing; to give them an opportunity to share how their work went, as well as a chance for the newcomer to ask the church leader any questions that they might have. The potential newcomers might also be told that while it is quite likely that they might feel tired after a work, nonetheless, that tiredness is also usually accompanied in the days that follow by a wonderful sense of having been cleaned-out on an energetic level (personally I often refer to this "clean and clear" feeling as the Santo Daime "anti-hangover"). The prospective participant might also be told that it's completely normal to feel a fair amount of anxiety a day or so before the work, even if the church leader might also emphasize that this anxiety isn't really a bad sign, but rather, on some level, simply means that the person is feeling, and bracing against, the "shockwave" of the potency of the work ahead of time, and that internal tension is what often tends to be labelled as "anxiety."

Church leaders will also typically say something about how important it is to stay for the whole work – not only to experience it in its entirety, but also because they want everyone to be safe, and therefore they want everyone taking part in the works to leave only when they've "landed"

fully and can drive home with no problem. Church leaders will also often stress how much they'd like to hear from the newcomers the day after the work, while also advising them to make sure, if at all possible, to give themselves time and space during the day after the work to integrate what they've experienced, and to really take care of themselves, whether by sleeping in, or by going for a walk in nature, or getting a massage, or going to yoga – whatever works to help them feel more grounded, rested, and relaxed. (Newcomers will also often have a “sponsor” in the local church who is responsible to look after the newcomer, both during the work and after it is over.)

During the orientation, church leaders will also often emphasize how the church at times has to limit the number of newcomers at each work in order to be sure that the church has enough experienced guardians to effectively work with each person. The church leaders will point out how the guardians are there not only to fill the water glasses at the table and to keep the candles lit, but also (crucially) to help people who are having trouble navigating in the Force – how the guardians are there to assist people, whether it is helping someone to make it safely to the healing room; or helping them to lay down on a mat; or covering them with a blanket; or making sure a plastic “purge bucket” is nearby if they seem nauseous, or giving them a tissue after they've purged (church leaders will often also say something about how purging in a Santo Daime work feels rather different than throwing up when you're drunk or sick – how it can actually feel really good, especially afterwards). Basically, the church leaders will emphasize to the person in the orientation that the most important job of the church is to make sure that everyone is protected, safe, and well cared for during a work.

During the orientation, church leaders will also stress that there is absolutely no pressure on anyone to come, or to keep coming, to works. Church leaders will often emphasize that there is no proselytization in the Santo Daime – how it’s fine to share your experiences with the Daime with people who seem open and receptive, but that, in the end, each person should ideally decide to come, and to keep coming, to works because they’re responding to some deep inner “yes” within them – not necessarily a “yes” to the Santo Daime as a whole, but at least a “yes” to the “rightness” of exploring, for themselves, what it’s like to drink (and to continue to drink) Daime.

At some point during the orientation, church leaders will typically say at least a little about the legal situation of the Santo Daime, perhaps letting the potential newcomer know about the 8-0 Supreme Court judgment in favor of the União do Vegetal (also known as the UDV – another ayahuasca-based Brazilian religious movement) – how it was a clear-cut freedom of religion issue; how even though the UDV is a different religion than the Santo Daime, they nonetheless drink the same sacrament as the Santo Daime, and that therefore, the Supreme Court ruling is a powerful legal precedent for the Santo Daime churches in the United States. And it’s at this point that church leaders often emphasize the need for discretion, noting that there are no social media announcements of Santo Daime works, and that, instead everything is spread via word of mouth.

If, after hearing all of this information, and after filling out the forms, the potential participant would still like to do a work, the church leader will (usually with a smile and a hug) tell her/him that they are welcome to attend.