

Varieties of service

By [Debra Bendis](#)

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Our congregation's River of Praise group takes over the late service on the third Sunday of each month. We praise singers turn up the amps, warm up with our repertoire of popular Christian hits, and invite the congregation to join in.

I like some of the songs, but I dislike others, particularly those with hard-to-sing lines in the bridge section. (I call this "the sinner's cadenza.") I like the energy and talent in the group, but invariably I'm the one who asks if the bass player could turn down his amp. . . and I've been known to ask if we could sing more songs that let Jesus down off of the cross. At other times--fortunately for everyone--I let go of my reservations and just sing.

I sing for the fun of it, and for the joy of seeing the congregation respond with enthusiasm. I sing because this is the most energetic of our services, and it displays a more visible corporate claim of worship that seems muted or internalized in other services. I sing because in this service I can sing with a half dozen teenagers--the teasing and spontaneity and fun of singing with them is worth the price of admission.

I also sing in order to worship with my friend John. John is 50 but a teen in spirit. While he faithfully attends

all worship services, his heart is in the praise service. He always sings with a broad smile on his face.

Here's a story about John. Several months ago, a son of well-loved church members moved back to our town with his family after many years away. Suddenly his ten-year-old son, Mason, became ill and was taken 70 miles to a Chicago hospital, where he was diagnosed with brain cancer. Although most of us in the congregation have never met the boy, we immediately began praying for Mason.

One night when I was in Chicago I decided to visit Mason. I knew the ten-year-old would not be eager to meet yet another stranger, but I hoped that his parents or grandparents might be grateful to see a friend from home stop in.

When I arrived, John was there. I remembered then that he was Mason's fourth-grade teacher. Apparently John had committed to making the trip to Chicago once a week in order to bring Mason news and homework from school. There they sat, Mason's hand gripped in John's with Mason gazing steadily at John while John spoke to him quietly and calmly. I could see that John was Mason's hero--and his lifeline back to home.

I'd come upon a Christian brother deep into ministry. I felt as if I'd interrupted an intimate and sacred scene. On John's right side, the boy's mother kept watch. On his left, my hand rested on John's shoulder. Grace poured into that room during those minutes, stilling pain, fatigue and fear--and transcending worship styles.

Mason's still in the hospital; he won't make it to Palm Sunday worship. But John will. It's River of Praise Sunday. The service will tilt heavily [away from palms and parades](#) and lean into the atonement. (It's always Good Friday at K-LOVE Christian radio.) I'll be there next to John, praising the God who sends a teacher into after-school ministry 70 miles away, where he serves at Mason's bedside with energetic, undiminished joy.