

What you're looking for: Worship at the U2charist

by [Jason Byassee](#) in the [November 27, 2007](#) issue

A church service called the U2charist would seem like liberal Protestantism at its worst: take music from a band that was cutting-edge over two decades ago, sprinkle some religiosity on top and try to reach hip younger people. I went expecting the worst.

My dread increased when I arrived for a staging of the event at Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago. The crowd was mostly folks in their mid-30s who had listened to U2 as kids. Many had brought their own youngsters with them. Not a few church youth groups had been dragged in for the event from the suburbs. Seeing them, I remembered my youth group's reaction when U2 was featured at the 2004 Super Bowl: "Who are these guys?"

The music by a U2 tribute band called Elevation was so loud that the tunes were unintelligible, let alone the lyrics. Elevation imitates U2 slavishly. Its lead singer is even named "Danno," after U2's Bono. Danno wore his hair, clothes and shades to resemble his idol, and even donned the leather jacket with the American-flag liner that Bono wore for U2's Super Bowl performance. Watching him bounce around in a fully lit gothic sanctuary in front of people sitting in pews was, at first, downright painful.

The widespread press coverage of U2charists has followed a familiar trope: "Stuffy old church updates for new day." Episcopal liturgist and well-known blogger Sarah Dylan Breuer devised the U2charist in 2004 to pair the Irish rock band's passion for God and social justice with the sacrament of Christian worship. The band allows its lyrics and name to be used as long as any proceeds go toward organizations working to further the UN's Millennium Development Goals.

The UN's Millennium Goals are certainly laudable: eradicate poverty, promote gender equality, reduce child mortality and so on. But with this kind of focus, God's good news in Christ can be easily reduced to do-gooderism. At best this kind of

event offers social justice without obvious religious content; at worst, it touches on Pelagianism, reducing faith to the sum total of our impressive good deeds. Tack on what Bono calls U2's tendency to be "painfully, insufferably earnest," and a liturgical disaster was ready to unfold.

But then Elevation lit into the guitar riff that precedes U2's great song of religious longing, "I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For." Something in me changed. I started to groove. So did the 30-somethings and their kids around me. It takes a lot to get Presbyterians up in their pews and dancing, but it happened. The parents didn't just mouth these lyrics, they shouted them, as they doubtless had thousands of times before. Their children smiled at their parents and danced in the pews beside them. Suddenly it worked.

"Still Haven't Found" is the sort of song that led Breuer to write the U2charist liturgy in the first place: "You broke the bonds and you loosed the chains, carried the cross of my shame." They're lyrics that almost demand to be sung in church. Loudly. When the song finished and we stood, rather formally, for a typical high-church responsive reading, our shouting voices were ready, and we bellowed with the psalmist, "Sing to the Lord, all the earth!"

Later in the service Danno asked for help. He had the church bulletin in front of him—not a normal part of Elevation's performances, to be sure. "Uh, OK, I guess we're supposed to sing the Doxology now. You all are going to have to help me." And he began, a cappella, "Praise God from whom all blessings flow." These were church people, good Presbyterians, and their voices were warmed up.

We lingered as the last note, sung in harmony, wafted by the wood-carved angels in the top of the nave. Somehow, between Danno's charming hesitation and the congregation's confident response, the Doxology had never been more beautiful.

It all may have worked in the end because of U2's ability to capture the tensions of the city. Bono often speaks and sings of the religiously inspired violence in Northern Ireland. U2's great song "Where the Streets Have No Name" is an eschatological plea for a time when we can't tell who's Catholic and who's Protestant, who's friend or enemy, based on address or surname. It's a lament, full of longing, but finally hopeful.

Singing that song in the midst of Chicago, a city with great beauty but also huge social problems, somehow seemed right. As visitors wandered into the church from

the street to see what was going on, it felt like the church was serving them well—it was making space both for U2's passionate love for humanity and for its fury at how we treat one another. The church was speaking about a merciful God not perched above the fray but down here in the mess with us.

Maybe this service actually represented the mainline church at its best. It was about worshiping a God who is too passionate to allow for cynicism, a God ready to bless our best and curse our worst, eager to bring the kingdom, but not before we turn to God in freedom.

Sure, the show would've been better if staged by Willow Creek. The music would have been better if performed by U2 itself. But earnestness ain't all bad: "One life, but we're not the same, we get to carry each other, carry each other, one, one."