

God's own language

by [Steven Peterson](#) in the [December 15, 2021](#) issue

The Hindi service is at nine o'clock,  
the Gujarati is at ten. I pick  
the later one so when it's done I'll stick  
around when people have the time to talk.

And sure enough, my presence in the church  
this summer morning raises smiles and nods  
from immigrants from India laying odds  
this older, gray-haired stranger's on a search.

They're right. This church is where my father's parents  
had worshipped God with somber Nordic joy  
in Methodist Evanston, Illinois.

Methodist still, this church's declarants

welcome me here excitedly, insist  
I sit up front, and lead me to a pew.  
There's something in the angle of the view  
and sixty years dissolve like morning mist . . .

I am a little boy. It's Christmas Eve.  
We're in my grandparents' church, here to praise  
the child they call Emmanuel. A blaze  
of Advent candles beckons me: *believe*.

We sing an opening hymn, we all sit down,  
but when the pastor speaks I start to laugh  
because for all the elderly's behalf  
tonight's in Swedish—what a funny sound!

My giggles runneth over while, in anguish,  
my father elbows me to hush and heed.  
My grandma has a better plan, that Swede,

whispering, *Hear that? That is God's own language . . .*

Now I am back among South Asian saints.

The Gujarati done, it's almost noon.

They say come back—they're adding English soon  
in answer to their children's bold complaints.

I promise I'll return. I hope I do.

I thought that all had changed, but what had changed?

Though Swedish, English, Hindi get exchanged,  
God's language is whatever makes us new.