

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.