

The Congregation

By Wilson Sunderland

“Peace be amongst you and the world,” spoke the frail, bony, but stern fatherly Pastor humbly to his congregation, making the sign of the cross. “Aaah-men,” answered the congregation in unison, after which they all stood up and began to collect their things. The routine seemed well rehearsed on the part of the Pastor and the congregation to a point of familiarity that not even the yelling and chanting of the protest outside could interrupt. If not for their old age which demanded some sort of routine, all of them were observably set in their ways. The members of this particular congregation numbered among the last of a once larger congregation of German asylum seekers in Washington, DC who narrowly escaped the blitzkrieg of fascism just before it swept over Europe in the outset of the Second World War. Where their age may have faltered, their stubborn Prussian demeanor made certain that not even the noise seeping in from outdoors would disturb their weekly service. As part of that routine, all eleven of them would stand in line to greet the Pastor after each service as they followed out one-by-one into the adjoining room where the almost too flagrantly happy widow of a once prominent church member, Sofie Amthal served coffee and cake.

As usual the Pastor was happy that he didn’t have to greet Sofie, because although he gladly greeted his congregation with the sort of solidarity of an aged friendship, Sofie’s excessive happiness, making up for the recent death of her husband of 86—which wasn’t so recent at all—gave him an ill feeling in the stomach, knowing that without the conversation of her husband to subsist from, she would feed off of church gossip like a tick that once having filled its belly with blood from its first victim, moves to the next without any sort of understanding of where the source of its existence spawns.

The first in line marched forward to greet the Pastor. “Good Morning, Herr Pastor,” said Astrid, whose smile with its dimples, skin creases, and squinted eyes made her face into something outlandish and foreign. The Pastor could not help but notice this about her, however, he mused to himself that it was probably the result of too much tea and too little sleep for a woman who in her younger wilder days probably smoked a little too much of the opium, for a period, if not to have been even more encouraged by her peers after trying to quit. “Good Morning, Astrid,” spoke the Pastor gently and kindly while squeezing the old woman’s hand, carefully avoiding her excessively long fingernails, then turning a face, said, “do call me by my first name, Lars! Certainly after fifty years of knowing each other you would call me by my last name at least! We might hope to get beyond formalities then!” An understanding smile came upon Astrid’s wrinkled face, hiding beneath it some sort of unknown or unrealized contempt which desired for itself his humble position, and spoke “But Herr Pastor Amann, I am just showing my respect for you!” Winking, the Pastor replied, “The respect is all yours, Frau Church Committee Chair,” knowing full well the uselessness of such a title in a congregation of eleven people.

When the line ended, the Pastor turned to go into the adjoining room for coffee and cake, when he almost jumped for fright at the sound of a cough from a woman standing behind him whose presence he had not noticed. Immediately gathering himself, he turned and spoke in a patronizing voice to the woman standing there, the church secretary, who most people like him, commanded but ignored, “Afra! You gave me a shock! I didn’t see you there,” and before she could get in a word, the Pastor walked straight for the other

room, leaving her standing alone with the only other presence being the sounds of the protest outside.

In the room next door, the chanting from outside could be heard with greater volume, but the clarity of what was being shouted was still difficult to make out. But maybe that was due to the hearing aids that almost all the church members wore which tended to distort noises when amplifying them. "Those damn kids should stop protesting and get a job!" remarked Astrid, standing in a circle with three others drinking coffee, "That's what I would do if I were out of a job! Look for another one instead of standing across the street from here around some corporate building blaming my troubles on some abstract concept of economics! And then these other protestors complaining about problems that aren't even their own! Poppycock!"

"Now now, Astrid, we must be patient with the youth," came the irritably patronizing voice of the Pastor, "They will grow up, they will mature, and they will find that their frustrations are only for lack of God in their lives." This response brought smirks to the faces of everyone in the room, for it may not have occurred to the Pastor, but everyone else privately felt that church was something that they went to, not because there was much religion among them, but because it was their last piece of community left in their old age. None had actually ever desired new, younger members to join, but they all humored the Pastor anyways.

Then in a less judgmental tone and one more sincere and serious, Astrid said, "Speaking of being out of a job, Herr Pastor, we received this month's utilities bill yesterday, and I'm afraid we haven't got the funds to pay for it." Sighing, the Pastor replied, "Well, we will have to proceed as usual then," and turning to the others in the room, said, "Everyone! God calls upon you to donate some mon--" but he was interrupted by Astrid again who said, "This month's bill is different. We have been circulating the bill around on everybody's credit up until now, but I doubt any of us or all of us combined with our retirement income will be able to pay it off." Silence ensued for a moment when to everyone's surprise, Afra spoke up, "Well let's just hold a charity drive to save the church." Indignation swept the room. Frowning, the Pastor answered, "We cannot lower ourselves to that level. We are respectable citizens, not beggars! Besides, God is on our side!" Everyone exchanged nervous glances at these words which could be read in their eyes as the church's foreseeable doom. Sofie and the others gossiped loudly so that one could make out—with use of a hearing aid—the hopeless feeling of resentment that they might be required to endure a Sunday or more without heating and electricity. Seizing the moment in a shift of mood, Astrid spoke with dramatic passion, "I take it upon myself to solve this problem, burdensome though it is!" With that, the members applauded her so loudly that for a moment, they could no longer hear the demonstration outside, but then the confused looks in the room suggested that perhaps what they were actually hearing was static interference from their hearing aids.

Later that day, when the Pastor, all alone in the church, finished dusting the altar, he heard what he thought was a piece of paper distantly falling to the floor. Inquisitively turning around, briefly blinded by the multi-colored light shining through the stained glass windows, he noticed something that had fallen through the mail slot on the church doors. With eyes squinted, he walked toward the doors, and surely as he had predicted it, a letter lay on the ground. Picking it up, he read the return sender's name, 'Interfaith Church'.

Wondering how miraculous it was to receive mail on a Sunday, he could think of no other explanation than that it was the work of God Almighty. This resolve was strengthened after opening it and reading its contents:

Dear Pastor Amann,

The Interfaith Church is an organization of 184 churches worldwide. It was established to promote the word of God by financially supporting troubled churches in troubled times through monetary cooperation, accounting stabilization, and orderly church arrangements. To foster church growth; and to provide temporary financial assistance to churches to help ease the burdens placed on their congregations.

Since the Interfaith Church was established its purposes have remained unchanged and its operations—which involve financial and technical assistance—have developed to meet the changing needs of its member churches in an evolving community of faith. Since the founding of Interfaith Church our member churches have grown from 40 to nearly 200 in the past fifty years!

We here at the Interfaith community hope that you will consider our offer to extend membership to your congregation. We are very excited about the prospects of such an arrangement. We understand the dire need of certain churches to lift their financial burdens as soon as possible, and so we only await your answer to our offer. A consultation meeting will follow.

God Bless,

Norman A., Eugene
Representatives
Interfaith Church

On a foggy, misty, rainy Sunday in the unheated candle-lit office of Pastor Amann, the church council—comprised of Pastor Lars Amann, Sofie Amthal, Astrid, and Afra—met to discuss the accession of the New Hamburg congregation into the Interfaith Church. Awaiting their guests, the old fogies sat wrapped up in sweaters to fend off the late fall chill. Then no sooner as expected, a cheerfully loud and rhythmic knocking came to the office door. The Pastor shakily spoke, “Wh..who is it?” Ignoring the Pastor altogether, Astrid hopped out of her seat in a flash, with the help of her walker, and opened the door. Two men of contrasting stature walked in, smiling, and extending their hands to everyone, introduced themselves. The first was an exceedingly tall man, quite young, wearing a flashy bright blue suit of modern trim. “Hello everyone! Ahh! I take it you are Pastor Amann! Nice to meet you! I’m Norman, yes, very pleased to meet you! Good good! Can’t tell you how pleased I am to meet you all,” and then pausing for a moment, turned around, slapped his face, then motioned to a man of a much smaller stature, saying, “Ahh! And this is my colleague Eugene!” The much smaller and almost ancient seeming man, wearing diplomatic attire with tails, took off his hat, bowed, smiled, and with the politeness of an aristocrat said, “A pleasure.”

Observing awkwardly the cold candle-lit room and the old Germans seated around the Pastor's desk, Norman, meaning to elbow Eugene in the gut, but instead missing and knocking his head, bent down grinning, and tactlessly whispered to him, "It's like a graveyard in here, eh Eugene?! haHAH!," then elbowing him in the gut, this time successfully, said "Get it? Hah HA!" Eugene, maintaining posture and rubbing his bruised head, cleared his throat and said, "Certainly sir." Norman's untimely laugh did not go unnoticed, and the four others in the room stared at him with an uncertain and inquiring look. Norman, who had just noticed this, jumped up, took his seat, clapped his hands together, and said, "To business!"

The Pastor began, "Let us start with a prayer." Astrid bowed her head with Sofie and Afra following suit. Eugene took off his hat, placing it in his lap, and Norman, who glanced down at all of them, being the tallest, awkwardly folded his hands, eyes darting to and fro, glancing around at everyone as they lowered their eyes. The pastor looked toward heaven—which in this case was a leaky, yellow, water stained ceiling—with his hands folded and spoke:

"Dear Lord, we ask for strength in this time of need. We ask for the energy of youth..."—Norman's eyes twinkled—"...to carry out your holy tasks to make again this church a place of worship for you. We ask for your guidance and for your patience. We cannot fail you, and we will not fail you. Bless this meeting oh Lord, and bless the people here among us. In the name of Jesus Christ our Savior, Amen." Then everyone repeated, "Amen," and they all shifted in their chairs, getting comfortable.

The Pastor began again, "Well, as we were just discussing... we don't have the credit anymore to pay off the bills, and as you can see, they've cut the power," then pausing and continuing as if hit by lightning, "I.. I just realized! I don't know if I'm even on the payroll then!" Afra placed her hand on the Pastor's back to sympathize, but the gesture was clearly misinterpreted as he said, "oh do you have to leave, Afra? No problem, we can take care of it from here." Sofie interrupted and speaking to the two gentlemen said, "Look, we received your letter, and is it true that you can provide us with financial security?" "Absolutely, my dear," came the soothing reply from Eugene. "Well, what is in it for you then?" asked Astrid cunningly, as if engaged in a game of power politics. Clearing his throat and speaking with the utmost elegance, Eugene responded, "Well we don't presume to support your church forever, unless that is what you desire. Essentially, we will implement policies that will help your church be more *efficient*," pausing on this word, he continued, "and this will solve your financial problems. In the meantime, it would be necessary for you to take a loan from us. This will pay for all the expenses, and our programs will secure your churches unrealized success!" Norman slapped the old man on the back, grinning and said, "Well put Eugene! You've got a way with words, you do!" The Pastor then said, "Well that sounds good! And these err... programs are successful you say?" "Absolutely, my dear sir!" came again the soothing reply from Eugene. He continued, "My church was among the first to receive programs and funds from the organization, and it worked so well, we decided to stay perpetual members in order to help the organization proceed in helping other troubled congregations." "That's very magnanimous of you!" replied Sofie. Eugene nodded his head, smiling, with humble agreement. More critically than before, Astrid asked, "Has a church ever failed? And what happens if we don't have the money to pay you back?" Eugene replied understandingly, "It has occurred, but I assure you that if you carry out the structural changes required, you will be able to pay off the loan

in no time,” and then pausing and taking a deep breath of air, continued more gravely, “If after that, you for some reason cannot pay us back, we will have some of our own people take control of the church administration to assure that we are reimbursed. You would of course be allowed to stay, seeing as though it is your congregation. No harm done. But like I said, this would only occur if you yourselves were incapable of implementing our programs...,” and then in a flattering voice said more directly to Astrid, “an unlikely event I think, given your obvious wisdom and experience, having run this church for fifty years.” Astrid blushed.

“Well I think that settles it!” said the Pastor confidently. His conclusion evoked nods all across the table. Norman stood up slowly, grinning, and pulled two pens from the inner pocket of his blazer. Then he handed them to the Pastor and Astrid, and said, “Very glad to do business with you, Sir! Mam! I just can’t wait to get started! You’ve made the right choice! I’m so glad we can help!” Eugene placed a document on the table, and all eyes followed the pens across the bottom of the document as ink spilled out to form the signatures of the Church Committee Chair and the Pastor. With great attention to detail, Eugene took out a rubber stamp, smacked it on an inkpad and then onto the document. Norman gave a stark yelp-“HaH!,” then, eyes darting around the room, said, “Heheh. Heh. You scared me there pal!” Eugene, ignoring his colleague, stood up smiling, gently shaking the hands of everyone in the room which conveyed a warmth of intention that not even his eloquent speaking could do. Then bowing and putting his hat back on, Eugene left the room followed by Norman, towering behind. Norman paused in the doorway, scratched his head, then turned for a moment and said, “Well! We’ll be seeing you all real soon! Can’t Wait, I’m tellin’ya! Well! Adios! Heh!” And with that, the door shut, and the New Hamburg Church Committee stood around the desk confident that they would soon have order restored to their quaint little congregation.

Sometime in the middle of the following week, Afra, who was typing up the church bulletin on an old streamliner typewriter in the church office, stretched for a moment, looking over at the opaque glass door which led out into the entrance hall. The power had since been turned back on, and so the room was brightly lit by overhead fluorescent lighting, but it would still take a few weeks for someone to come and turn the heating back on, the effect of which was a well-lit ice box. Unaccustomed to such a temperature, Afra was wrapped in blankets, constrained from movement except for being able to type by extending her arms out from somewhere inside the layers of covering, making her into a mummy of sorts. Eyes focused on movement from behind the door, she noticed the shadowy figure of what appeared to her to be perhaps a thief or bum indecisively pacing around, as they sometimes did, to pester her for free handouts. Knowing the drill, she eyed the figure while hesitantly picking up the telephone receiver, and as she did, the figure stopped, dead still, and then the door suddenly burst open, and before her, in a cloud of fog created by the room’s chill, stood the tall shady figure of a man who now... no longer seemed so shady. To both her horror and her relief, Norman stood there with a broad grin across his face and said, "Did I freak you out or what?! hah hah!" Gasping for a breath of ease, but instead wheezing in cold frigid air, Afra exclaimed, "Mr. A!" then more silent and restrained, "I.. I wasn't expecting you!"

"Mr. A.. ... I like that name! Suits me well!" returned Norman in his high pitched voice. He seated himself comfortably in front of Afra and stretched out his arms behind his

head, plopping his feet up on her desk. "Bit chilly, isn't it! Hah! Well we'll soon change that!" said Norman, winking, "Know what I mean?! hah hah!" Afra stood there still somewhat in shock from Norman's sudden entry, not registering anything he said. Blinking she slowly came to herself, and asked, "Mr. A? What was it you wanted?" "Oh, that's right!" said Norman, still grinning, "I came to give you your first assignment!" and then tossing a yellow manila envelope on the desk, said, "You will be organizing a christian rock service for next Sunday! That's what the people want these days! Rock and Roll!" Then drumming with his fingers on her desk with a smile and gleam in his eyes, he continued, now speaking to a very pale looking Afra, "I want you to take care of the PR and the purchase of the uhhh.. let's see... ahhh.. the electric guitar, the electric bass, the synthesizer, ummmm.. ahh yes, the drum set, and the PA system. It's all there in the envelope. We will definitely need to revamp the speakers in the church." He chuckled, "They're a bit outdated, I'd say, and young people don't have hearing aids like you do! hahah! hah!!" "And don't worry about the cost. Just put it on the account we setup for the church. You'll be making money back in no time once we rack in some new church members!" Afra, accustomed to taking orders, unquestioningly opened the packet and began reviewing the specifications.

The first document she pulled out of the packet was a mail-order catalog for a well known music business. Flipping through the glossy pages she saw advertisements and specifications for musical instruments and equipment. Page corners were bent, items were circled several times over with black pen, and written on the sides of the pages were indecipherable scribbles—presumably notes. Here and there she noticed the outlines of people sketched behind instruments, and on one of the drum sets was written 'Norm and the Norms'. The markings confused her though, because some of the items seemed a bit exotic for a christian rock band. For instance, the selection of instruments Norman had circled included a double-neck custom guitar, a Stratocaster, a Gibson, a custom made Ibanez electric base, an acoustic base, several synthesizer keyboards with shoulder straps, five harmonicas, a set of conga and bongo drums, a set of woodblocks, graphite blocks, cow bells, and symbols. Then to top it off, he had circled more than one drum set, one normal, one electronic. The PA system bordered on outlandish as well, and Afra flipped through the pages noting the various sets of speakers ranging in all shapes and sizes. "You have a lot circled here.. How do you...how do you envision the setup?" asked Afra nervously, awaiting the sort of patronizing rebuke that the Pastor might have given.

Motioning with flat hands extended in front of his face, eyes gazing distantly as if seeing a vision before him, Norman exclaimed, "This is how I see it!" Then, as if being sucked into his eyes, travelling into his mind, Norman projected his vision: The church, packed with people. Myriad lights shone down from the stained glass on to the altar, which now looked more like a stage. The effect was divine. A band played. The words to the music could not be distinguished, but the crowd seemed to understand. They cheered and sang along. It was a grand show. It was brilliant. The band had talent. The crowd enjoyed it, and more and more people bustled in from the church doors to get a better look. The atmosphere was beauty. It was harmony. No chaos. No bleakness. It was a supreme addition to the marvels of contemporary society. No longer was God inaccessible to the masses. This would make them see Him. This would make them hear Him. They could almost grasp what it was they so desired and burned for. They were closer now, closer to perfection.

Then, as space and time warbled back into vision, the magnificent light and sound distilled back into the chilled, harshly lit church office. It seemed somehow new, magnified. It was as if everything had an aura. Feeling a bit dizzy and overcome, Afra attempted to rationalize in her head what was happening. Then she said, "Well I think the Pastor might be pleased to hear that you want to bring new people to the church. He has always wanted to expand the congregation... but...Who is going to play in the band?" "Leave that part to me!" Norman reassured her, "I know some real talented musicians! Oh its going to be classic I tell you!" then spreading out his arms, broadening his smile, said, "REAL CLASSIC! Kids are gonna eat this stuff up! Yeah! hah! hah hah!"

Norman's eyes darted around the room and focused back on Afra's face. "I took the liberty of writing some music as well... I thought I would ask you for your opinion. It's all there in the envelope." Afra appeared stunned by Norman's apparent recognition of her talents—of her existence even. "I... I would love to look this over for you! You know I used to play the piano when I was younger! I just love music!" said Afra, pulling the next item out of the envelope. But for all her years of musical training, Afra could not grasp the structure of the music she read. The notes were written in a way which didn't make any sense to her. Maybe her eyes were finally going bad in her old age. Maybe she was turning senile, or was she just outdated? "Mr. A? I don't understand." Pulling the pages out of her hands, Norman looked them up and down and said, "Oh. Can't you read this? Well of course, I'm using a new program for music composition. It has a different format than what you might have known when you played the piano." Then squinting, looking Afra directly in the eyes, he said, "I'm going to get these into the older format for you so that you can read them! yeah! hah! hah! But now I must be off. I've got to get some things in order for the big day this Sunday!"

Afra hadn't felt so youthful and inspired in years. Then, as suddenly as Norman had entered, he jumped up to leave. Afra extended her hand for him to shake, but he simply waved, opening the door for his grand exit. Afra excitedly waved back smiling, encouraged, and shouted after him, "I'll get right to it! I'm glad you have confidence in me, you know nobody see--," but before she could finish the sentence, he had vanished without turning back.

Oddly situated amongst a modern urban background of towering concrete government, non-government, and university buildings stood a quaint one-story red brick church, the cornerstone of which read – "Foundation 1885 – Rebuilt 1919." Written on the marquis on the street-facing side of the church stood "German Service, Sundays 9-10, Coffee and Fellowship afterwards. This Sunday: Musical Service."

As the Pastor arrived early that morning, he walked up to the church entrance, observing the new addition to the marquis which stated that a musical service would take place that Sunday. Somewhat pensive, somewhat delighted, he curiously but slowly opened the church doors taking in the disorderly sight which greeted him. The wrinkled old church secretary bustled about pushing one of the church pews out to the side in order to give the effect of a central stage area, hardly matching Norman's vision. Nothing, aside from the new PA system, had been set up or installed. Microphone stands and instruments lay strewn about at the altar area. The drum set was still in the box, and wires ran amok, making the stage area look more like a pit of vicious snakes than a performance area. The single item which appeared to be properly hooked up to the new speaker system was the

tape deck.

Bewildered, the Pastor exclaimed, "Afra? What is this? What has happened?! Is everything alright?" Turning toward the direction of the Pastor's voice, meeting his gaze, came the outline of a very overworked elderly woman, whose face, like the effect of an eclipse, sucked the surroundings inward by effect of frightfully dark bags lining the underpart of her eyes. The Pastor had never before known this woman. 'Was this Afra?' he thought. Then, as he stood poised, staring at the motionless woman, he heard the footsteps and speech of several women coming toward the door in front of which he then stood.

As the door opened, the cheerful gazes of Astrid and Sofie met with the grave look plastered over the Pastor's face. Flipping the switch to turn on the lights, Astrid remarked to Sofie, "It really was dark in here," and then with the light revealing the changes brought about in the church, her mouth dropped wide-open, making her false teeth plainly visible. "Herr Pastor! What is going on here?!" she exclaimed. The Pastor replied, "Well, now, let's not get overworked here. I'm sure Afra has an explanation for this that will clear everything up for us," and he glanced nervously over to Afra who still stood frozen to her place, gazing back. Then she slowly and sulkily limped over to the Pastor and explained what had happened. After quickly recounting Norman's midweek visit, excluding the more confusing and useless details, she then went on to explain what followed.

"I placed a phone order for the equipment with a request for installation, but the young men who showed up yesterday installed only the speakers and then left, saying they were going for a lunch break. Well, they never returned. I spent all last night and this morning doing as much of the work as possible myself." Then taking a deep wheezy breath, eyes lowered to the ground, continued, "I attempted calling a company for doing the advertisements, but they said that it wouldn't be possible, because they needed at least an entire week's notice. They also said that nobody else would be able to do the job, because it's sort of an industry standard. I put up the notice on the marquis, hoping that it might reel in some passers-by, but..."

In an unprecedented recognition of Afra's difficult toils, the Pastor placed his hand on her shoulder in order to soothe her, and said, "You did your best, Afra. Nobody in their right mind would have expected so much from you. God will see to the rest." These last words evoked hesitant stares from Astrid and Sofie, communicating everything without a word.

Afra continued, "Norman will be here in a few minutes with the band he hired." Indignantly, the Pastor remarked, "What nerve! He'll have something else coming to him!" "Shouldn't we try and put the rest of the equipment together?" asked Afra. "No! He can do it himself, that bastard! I knew there was something about him I didn't like."

But Norman never came. They waited for ten, twenty, then thirty minutes, exchanging nervous glances, when a small boy of approximately six years of age entered the church. Running over to them, the cute, innocent voice of the brown haired, green-eyed boy yipped, "Are you the old people here?"

Astrid replied, "Hello there, what's your name?" The boy innocently but defensively stared back and said, "Mr. Normy told me to give you this," and he handed her a few papers and a cassette with a stick-it note attached.

It read, 'Sorry I couldn't make it. I tried to get the band together, but they had another gig going on this weekend. Just put in this tape and sing along. Stand behind the instruments and make it look real. You'll be a hit! God Speed! -Norm,' and then an arrow

pointing to the backside of the note led to a postscript: 'Oh, and can you watch after my sister-in-law's kid? Someone will come by to pick him up after the service. Thanks!'

Showing the note to the Pastor, Astrid bitterly remarked, "So, what was it you were going to tell Norman, Herr Pastor? Perhaps you can convey the message to the boy, here?" But there came no response.

As a few passers-by entered the church and seated themselves, Astrid, feeling the weight and urgency of the situation, took command. "It doesn't appear that we have much choice now. Let's set the rest of the equipment up." Handing the tape to Afra, she said, "Afra, you put the tape in and queue it up to the first song." Then handing out copies of the sheet music to the Pastor and Sofie, she said, "Herr Pastor, I think it would be best if you just sat at the drum set. Try and make it look as if you are playing, please," then looking at Sofie, she continued, "Sofie, you and I will lip-sync to the music. I'll take the bass. You take the guitar." Finally, looking down at the little boy who was now crawling through her legs, she commanded, "Go and sit down young man!" Beginning to sob, the boy crawled in between a few of the pews and disappeared.

If someone were to have looked in through the church doors just then, they would have seen approximately forty people gathered inside, more than had graced that building's presence at any single time for some twenty years. Some stood at the back of the church, leaning against the wall, while others sat in the middle or back pews. However, nobody sat in the front, unless one were to count the little boy, who like a crusader or jungle explorer rapaciously exuded from one row of pews to the other, each time shouting with a roar, "CHARGE!"

The altar area was another sight altogether. Back and right, the Pastor, an old frail and bony man, sat at the drum set clumsily holding a pair of wooden drumsticks upside down, looking utterly confused as to what a drummer did. To the left stood an hunched old woman, covered in layers of blankets, hands placed submissively on a synthesizer which was strapped over her rickety shoulder like a guitar. In front of her, at what might have been the front of the stage, stood two other elderly women, both looking neither lifeless nor lively, each at a microphone, holding an electric bass and a double-neck guitar, respectively. They wore long skirts, pulled up to their midriff, leading one to wonder where their wastes ended and where their stomachs began. All had gray or white hair except for the Pastor who had none at all. The old woman on bass gripped her walker tightly. Nothing could have looked more awkward. But then the music began.

The music which played actually seemed proper at first, but then one might have noticed that the band was not really playing at all, and that instead it was just a recording which they heard. The shabby elderly women stuttered as the first words were sung, attempting to move their lips to the lyrics, but after realizing that the voices were those of young males, they did not attempt to even lip-sync until the chorus came around.

It sounded of a swinging bass line with drums pushing the beat forward while the piano lagged slightly behind for the effect of a live jazz performance. The guitar played an accompanying melody alongside the singing:

Well just an hour ago, I was watching the glow
of your baby Jesus' star out from the backyard afar!
I ran down the hill, and I about had my fill!
who did I see? but an Angel, oh glee!!

He said, That star is rising! Oh its Rising, believe me!
It's a gonna keep on rising, for us to see!

He said, That star is rising! Oh its Rising, believe me!
It's a gonna keep on rising, for us to see!

Then came the drum solo. All eyes moved from the motionless old women to the Pastor, who was trying to play along by quietly but unsuccessfully tap the drums. This clashed with the recording, resulting in a jumbled cacophony that made the onlookers cringe in embarrassment. Then as he finished, almost as if it had been timed, Afra fell over backwards unable to support the weight of the synthesizer on her old decrepit back. The audience laughed, not knowing whether this was part of the act or not. Surely, old people in a rock band had to be a joke. A suit wearing businessman said sarcastically to another, laughing, "Christ! If this is the opening act, I can't wait to see the main attraction!" Then the next verse came:

Weeeell, that night there was madness, yes Madness!!!
Three wise guys were havin it right! and one took flight!
He shouted, Come and see! the baby is born!
Let's not leave him forlorn!

He said, The baby is born! Yeah yeah!
We won't leave him forlorn!

He said, The baby is born! Yeah yeah!
We won't leave him forlorn!

At this point, the crowd of people began to shuffle out of the church. Some were mumbling to themselves. Some laughed. Some called it sick. But nobody called it a success. The old people were left at the altar, totally, and utterly humiliated. The music kept on going, but they had all abandoned their instruments in order to attend to Afra who was now lying lifeless at the altar, crushed under the weight of the synthesizer. The Pastor, Astrid, and Sofie all stood around her in a circle, knowing it was the end. Then the little boy, who was the only other left in the church, charged the altar, roaring, "Come back you animals!!! I'll get you!!! Rarr!"

Instead of Afra, as was usual, Eugene sat at the desk in the church office looking gravely over some paperwork. On the other side of the desk sat the Pastor and Astrid, both looking sullen and depraved. "As per our contract, I am now forced to fully take over the administration of this congregation" said Eugene dejectedly. The Pastor and Astrid took deep heavy breathes. Eugene's obvious sympathy somewhat lightened their spirits. "I understand that you no longer have proper administration anyways. I am very sorry for that. How is dear Afra?" asked Eugene. Astrid replied, "She is in urgent care at the hospital. Sofie is there to keep her company and pray." Eugene solemnly lowered his eyes and spoke, "I see. Well, please wish her a speedy recovery for me." Astrid nodded.

"Now, the takeover need not be permanent. We will only run the church as we see fit in order to recover the funds which you have been unable to pay us back," said Eugene. "That's unfair!" retorted Astrid, "That awful man, Norman, didn't even show up to give us a hand. We did everything he told us, and see where that got us?" Clearing his throat, Eugene politely responded, "My dear lady, I am afraid to say that you cannot fully place the blame on Norman. In the past, he has had good success in these matters. Though I fear it is a bit untimely to say it...it was Afra who hindered the success of this endeavor. It was her responsibility to advertise the church service, and she did not complete this task successfully." Neither Astrid nor the Pastor responded, knowing that it was indeed Afra's fault, and in their minds there still lingered an ounce of disparagement for her because of it.

"Please excuse me. I know it isn't my place to judge the poor woman," said Eugene. "In any case, you can expect Interfaith Church to carry out the changes you were unable to do yourself. In no time, things will be back to normal, and you will be able to run affairs as usual." Eugene conveyed a sympathetic look and said, "Good day, then." The Pastor and Astrid submissively mumbled, "Good Day," and then they got up and left.

In the weeks to follow, posters on every street corner exclaimed, 'New Christian Rock Service! feat. God's Grooves, The Peachy Preachers, and the Lord's Little Lackeys! This Sunday at the New Hamburg Church!'

Crowds of young business people and students pushed their way in through the confines of the church doors. People cheered and sang as music blasted from the stage inside the church. It was so loud that it could be heard several blocks away.

And there at the street corner, sandwiched between the small quaint church, the university, government, and non-government buildings stood ten frail old Germans, ranging in age from eighty to ninety-seven, with no place to go. They threw a glance at the church, and then they looked over to the towering buildings which encroached on their once sacred meeting place. The modern concrete skyscrapers engulfed the urban setting, and briefly they were reminded of the better days when all that stood there were houses and that quaint one-story red brick church.