



Dear Prayer Partner,

As a monthly financial contributor to (or a board member of) the Sharing Org I consider you to be one of our partners in this ministry. By your participation you are communicating that you have a deep commitment to taking the Gospel of our Lord to the residents of care facilities and that you are committed to the mission of providing weekly worship services for those who cannot get out of their homes to attend a local church. For this reason, in addition to your monthly prayer letter, I will be including additional details about the ministry in order to give you a fuller view of how the Sharing Org touches the lives of the people that we serve. In doing so I hope that you will gain a deeper understanding of how you are a part of a powerful and meaningful ministry that loves people who are often overlooked in our society.

'Twas the day before Christmas when all through my car
I couldn't find any music, not even a bar.
The service would go on and we'd sing anyway,
I hoped I knew the words—there was no time for delay.

If I had the inclination, I would continue this parody of *'Twas The Night Before Christmas* and reveal in comical form how I was going to my first Christmas weekend service when I realized that I did not have the Christmas carol books or the music CD. I decided that I would not be 15 minutes late by turning back to retrieve the missing items (my first mistake). Instead, I decided, I would just lead what songs I could (my second mistake).

Let's see, we sang the first stanza of *Away In The Manger* with only minor difficulties and *Silent Night* and *Joy To The World* with about the same level of success. Toward the end, I asked if anyone had anything special they liked and wanted to sing (my third mistake). One woman said "*Rudolph The Red-Nosed Reindeer*" and a second woman started singing with the other 10 residents joining in before I could say anything. In spite of the theological problems that I had with singing about a mythical magical piece of venison at this celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ, we sang this song exceptionally well, complete with added words like "like a light bulb" and "like Pinocchio."

Sound theology is something that is often lost or challenged in this ministry. Earlier in the month I was asked to pray for a woman's sister. The woman's sister died last year and she was missing her. The woman's spiritual roots taught her to pray for the dead, and so when she asked me to pray for her sister, I suspected that I knew exactly what she was asking of me.

What could I do at this point? I could have told her (in front of everyone) that my theological beliefs did not allow me to pray for the dead. I could have told her "no" (again, in front of everyone) and scheduled an appointment to explain to her my theological position on the matter. Or I could have told her to call the local priest to do this for her. I did none of these things. Instead - I prayed. The

woman who asked me to pray for her sister has the mental capacity of a six- or seven-year-old. As I pondered what I was going to do to preserve my sound theology, I decided that the most loving and graceful thing to do was to pray.

I admit, I prayed a very generic prayer that emphasized the living woman and her hurting soul as she missed her sister this Christmas season. I don't know the first thing about how to pray for someone who has already passed, but I knew that in order to love this living woman I had to accept her request and pray for her comfort and Christian encouragement. Afterward, Megan and I discussed how I should have handled this situation.

The conclusion that we came to was that I handled this situation the only way it could have been handled. Because this particular woman is like a six-year-old, it is pointless for me to attempt to engage her theologically and expect that any consensus of the matter would be achieved. Had I denied her request, I would have been sending the entire 30 residents who were present the message that *my theological comfort* is more important to me than loving and caring for them. I've played through different ways that I could have possibly handled this situation, but none of them seems to simply, and without reservation, love the woman and offer her comfort and Christian encouragement.

I often run into theological differences with the residents, but I have had some pretty intelligent debates with them as well. I struggle with how to engage in a touchy theological discussion with a mentally ill patient or how theologically deep to go with a mentally challenged person. As I face these sort of challenges I am quick to remember a short saying that I coined as my mantra many years ago – *When in doubt, err on the side of grace.*

~John