

Congregational song

The power to heal, the power to hurt

Katie Graber

Showing strength

In 2020, survivor advocate agency Into Account received reports of prominent Catholic folk composer David Haas's long-term emotional, spiritual, and sexual abuse of dozens of women. At the same time, the committee compiling the new Mennonite hymnal, *Voices Together*, had been planning to include seven of Haas's songs. These included several that appear in *Sing the Journey* and *Sing the Story* and have become heart songs among many Mennonite congregations: "Peace Before Us," "My Soul Is Filled with Joy," "I Will Come to You in the Silence," "Blest Are They," and "Come and Be Light for Our Eyes."

In conversation with Into Account and based on recommendations from survivors, the *Voices Together* committee decided to remove all of Haas's songs from the collection. Both groups further recommend that communities not sing these songs from *Sing the Journey* and *Sing the Story* in corporate worship without serious, survivor-led discussion and reclamation. Hilary Jerome Scarsella (Into Account Director of Theological Integrity) worked with several members of the *Voices Together* committee and Carolyn Heggen (co-creator of Sister Care) to create a resource for communities to navigate discussion and communal changes that can support survivors and disrupt injustice. This resource, called "Show Strength: How to Respond when Worship Materials Are Implicated in Abuse," is available for free download at the MennoMedia website.¹

1 Hilary Jerome Scarsella, Carolyn Heggen, Katie Graber, Anneli Loepp Thiessen, Sarah Kathleen Johnson, and Bradley Kauffman, "Show Strength: How to Respond when Worship Materials Are Implicated in Abuse," <http://voicestogetherhymnal.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Show-Strength.pdf>. Since the publication of *Voices Together*, the committee learned that fellow member Tom Harder had been disciplined, and credentials restored, by Western District Conference in 2011-12 for sexual misconduct. Tom was not involved in writing or editing "Show Strength," nor in preliminary decision making around David Haas songs (though he, along with the whole committee, affirmed decisions made by the editorial team). I name Tom here not to shame him but to clarify

Below is an elaboration on some of the ideas in that resource, along with meditations on how music can work toward health and healing.

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An important aspect in understanding music's power to heal is recognizing its converse, the power to hurt: the intensely embodied nature of music can be as traumatic as it is uplifting or life giving.² Worship planners must be cognizant of these contradictory effects in order to care for how people will experience worship, and thus, how they are able to experience God. Caring for one another means caring for each person's embodied experience of worship and creating structures that allow each person to

feel whole. According to US and Canadian statistics, as well as member surveys of MCUSA, all congregations include survivors of sexual abuse. Beyond that sobering fact, congregations include people who deal with many kinds of mental health issues and other types of trauma. Attending to the ways music can affect people in worship can help us sustain healthy communities.

Reducing harm

"Show Strength" begins with these words: "We worship a God who shows strength when siding with the oppressed, who lifts up the vulnerable, and who challenges injustice (Luke 1:46-55). God asks us to show strength and stand in solidarity with those who are abused."

A hymnal can offer paths toward healing and hope grounded in justice and solidarity in several ways. The content of songs and worship resources in *Voices Together* includes lament, confession, reconciliation, and hope of many kinds (from enacting and longing for the reign of God to calling for peace and justice in a variety of ways). In addition, the origin of tunes, art, and words can offer a diverse, balanced, and just body of mate-

his roles, to break silences, and to take seriously the experiences of women affected and harmed by such actions.

2 Lauren F. Winner advises similar caution in her analysis of Eucharist, prayer, and baptism in *The Dangers of Christian Practice: On Wayward Gifts, Characteristic Damage, and Sin* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018).

rials for use in worship, thus creating a structure in which we can listen to and worship with many voices.

Throughout the process of compiling and editing *Voices Together*, the committee had conversations about where songs came from and who wrote them. We screened material anonymously as a first step for new-to-us material³; then, when we had a list of over one thousand highly rated songs, we used many intersecting criteria to shape a collection that includes a variety of topics and uses in worship from a variety of locations and time periods. We asked questions at the junctions of theology and style: What percentage of songs should come from previous Mennonite hymnals? How many should come from Reformation era writers and be-

fore? How many songs should we have in categories like Lent, Advent, gathering, sending, communion, and others?

In addition to representing a diversity of topics, we strove to include a variety of voices. After anonymous reviews were finished, the committee had many conversations about various balances of contributors: we took care not to include too many items from any one writer, and we considered equity of geographic origin, racial or ethnic background, gender, Anabaptist writers, and more. We sought a wide variety of voices to inform our collection, both for phil-

osophical and material reasons (which cannot be separated, in the end). The reasons for this emphasis include receiving wisdom from many people, financially supporting artists, and encouraging new generations of writers and composers. If women do not see female writers represented in a hymnal, for example, they come to think of hymn writing as a male activity, not for them.

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3 Screening was a combination of anonymous and known authors and composers—for example, *Hymnal: A Worship Book* and some other published collections could not be anonymous. Items that were screened by a small number of people and that came through our online submissions portal were anonymized for full committee discussion. Sometimes one or more members of the committee knew who had written a song or text, but often our first conversations about merits and drawbacks were about anonymous items.

When we learned, in the late stages of this process, that seven of our slated songs were written by a man accused of long-term abuse of people and power, it was a serious but not unprecedented conversation. We had already considered questions of songs that have hurt people—for example, we had already decided not to include the song “’Twas in the Moon of Wintertime” because of its complicated relationship to colonialism and misappropriation of Indigenous cultures.⁴ We had also decided to restore the words “You’ve Got a Place at the Welcome Table” to its earlier iteration “I’m Gonna Eat at the Welcome Table” in order to honor its use in African American theology and practice.⁵ An analogous question was whether including David Haas’s music in *Voices Together* would harm people in our denominations.

Recognizing entanglement

The “Show Strength” resource reads: “A decision not to use worship material written by a perpetrator of sexual violence has less to do with that person or the specifics of that person’s behavior and more to do with the well-being of survivors and potential victims.”

The *Voices Together* committee decided to remove Haas’s songs from the hymnal, but that cannot be the end of the conversation about how songs can affect individuals or about how worship enacts justice. We know that *Voices Together* is not perfect and that many communities use songs and worship resources from beyond denominational collections. Each community needs to process how words and music in worship can either harm survivors or work to support justice. Continuing to worship with songs and prayers implicated in abuse can be retraumatizing for direct survivors and others connected to our communities.

Music has the ability to evoke intellectual, emotional, and physical responses through its materiality and its intersection with discourse. We tend to think of music as immaterial, as if it floats through the air and affects us “in our heads” or “in our hearts.” Of course, our heads and

4 See Katie Graber and Geraldine Balzar, “‘Twas in The Moon of Wintertime’ Not Included in New Mennonite Hymnal,” Menno Snapshots, December 10, 2019, <https://www.mennoniteusa.org/menno-snapshots/moon-of-wintertime-mennonite-hymnal/>, as well as *Voices Together* accompaniment edition entry on “The Garden Needs Our Tending Now” (#788), for more on this song and why *Voices Together* uses the tune with a new text.

5 For more information, see the reference note to *Voices Together* #801, “I’m Gonna Eat at the Welcome Table,” available at VoicesTogetherHymnal.org.

hearts are physical locations. Many say singing is enjoyable because of the bodily resonance and sensations: blending voices, breathing together, and getting goosebumps. These are physical responses to material stimuli, and at the same time, chills might be from the meanings and memories associated with the songs. Words, actions, and physical responses are inseparable. Our reactions to situations are influenced by our physical bodies (in-

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cluding our chemical and neurological makeup, distinctions of size or age, or circumstantial factors such as how tired we are) as well as our past experiences (which include words as well as physical experiences).

While drafting “Show Strength,” Hilary Jerome Scarsella wrote, “Continuing to sing songs implicated in abuse can cause serious injury. It enacts connections;

it can trigger visceral memories and cause pain. It demonstrates that the violence survivors have suffered is not understood or cared for by your community. Unreflectively continuing to use such songs and prayers in worship also passively forms your community to be unresponsive to the reality of sexual violence, thereby damaging all members and enabling abuse.”

We make meaning through actions (such as singing), and every action happens in relation to other beings and objects. Actions can involve thought, physical movement, and words—discourse and material existence are not separate. Physicist and philosopher Karen Barad argues that nothing is separate; everything arises through interaction—she coined the term *intra-action* to emphasize a reality where there is no prior or separate existence. She argues that this entanglement is central to the way the universe works: “To be entangled is not simply to be intertwined with another, as in the joining of separate entities, but to lack an independent, self-contained existence.”⁶ She writes not only of humans being entangled with one another but also of our existence being deeply created by everything around us.

Within Christian imagination, entanglement can be seen as the idea that all creation and selfhood arises from the single source of God’s

6 Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), ix.

thought, speech, and breath. It describes the community we strive for, where everyone's joys and pains are shared. Recognizing the deep material relationship to music helps us understand both our entanglement with music and our entanglement with one another through music. What we sing has a material (and therefore spiritual) impact on individuals and on the ways we relate to one another.

Worshiping justly

“Show Strength” encourages communities to “embrace this as an opportunity not only to decide whether you will sing a specific song, but also to think about ways to build greater solidarity with survivors.”

Because we follow a God who calls for justice, our worship must embody justice. “Show Strength” outlines steps in a survivor-centered response, as well as some verbal, structural, and embodied changes to worship that have the potential to disrupt injustice. These include regularly engaging the topic of sexual violence in worship and community life, providing opportunities for pastoral conversations, ensuring policies such as background checks that protect vulnerable people, and more. Each community will need to engage in conversations about what this looks like in their local context.

There is great potential for hope and healing through music, but it is not a simple process. Whether or not a congregation plans to adopt *Voices Together* in the near future, everyone should have a conversation about how their worship may contribute to either healing or harm—how it may support justice and help build healthy, entangled communities. The work of redefining our relationships with songs and resources implicated in abuse is difficult, and it is work that we are not meant to carry alone. As communities across North America engage in this discussion, we are reminded that this is yet another opportunity to sing justice, stand in solidarity, and show strength.

About the author

Katie Graber is a music historian who studies race and ethnicity in a variety of contexts from Mennonite music to European opera. She was the intercultural worship editor of *Voices Together* and now leads webinars and short courses about *Voices Together* and related topics as co-director of Anabaptist Worship Network. She lives in Columbus, Ohio, where she attends Columbus Mennonite Church and teaches courses at Ohio State University.