

SHOW STRENGTH

How to Respond When Worship Materials Are Implicated in Abuse

*My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord,
my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for you, Lord, have looked with favor
on your lowly servant.
From this day all generations will call me blessed:
you, the Almighty, have done great things for me
and holy is your name.
You have mercy on those who fear you,
from generation to generation.
You have shown strength with your arm
and scattered the proud in their conceit,
casting down the mighty from their thrones
and lifting up the lowly.
You have filled the hungry with good things
and sent the rich away empty.
You have come to the aid of your servant Israel,
to remember the promise of mercy,
the promise made to our forebears,
to Abraham and Sarah
and their children for ever.*

—LUKE 1:46–55 (ELLC)

1 What does this resource address?

This resource offers a survivor-centered perspective on how individuals and communities of faith can respond when it is discovered that beloved songs and prayers were written by a person who has perpetrated sexual violence.

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 survivor-centered response to testimonies of sexual violence answers this call. It prioritizes the safety, experiences, and concerns of survivors—people who have been directly injured by sexual violence.

A survivor-centered response cares for the best interests and recommendations of the immediate survivors of the abuser in question, survivors in your community, and sexual violence experts whom survivors find trustworthy. There may not be full consensus among survivors; that is to be expected.

Spiritual care of survivors includes care for their trauma. A survivor-centered response helps limit harm, interrupt patterns of sexual violence in our communities, and work toward just social transformation.

Every congregation includes people who have been sexually abused or violated. The 2006 Mennonite Church USA Church Member Profile indicated that 21 percent of women and 5.6 percent of men in Mennonite Church USA congregations have experienced sexual abuse or violation.¹

Because both sexual trauma and worship are deeply ingrained in the human body, songs and prayers with connections to abuse or perpetrators may retraumatize people. Experiencing such songs or prayers in worship can cause survivors to relive violent memories—mentally, emotionally, and physically. Continuing to worship with these songs and prayers may also demonstrate that the violence is not understood or cared for by your community. Ignoring the reality of sexual violence unintentionally forms communities that enable abuse.

¹ This data does not include information on nonbinary people or Mennonite Church Canada congregations.

2 What feelings are okay when I learn that songs are connected to a person who perpetrated violence?

Survivors: You may feel sad, hurt, betrayed, angry, overwhelmed, or confused. You may feel rage. You may reexperience feelings associated with your own trauma. You may feel embarrassment or shame if these are songs you have loved. You may feel relieved, glad, or powerful to witness a person held accountable for abusive behavior. You may feel concerned for other survivors. You may feel tired, annoyed, or resentful that this subject is demanding your attention. You may feel very little or nothing at all. All of your feelings are okay. They deserve respect and care.

Others: You may experience a number of the feelings described above, though differently. It is important to process feelings in ways that enable you to support survivors and work for justice. Some may also feel a different set of feelings: skepticism of survivors' testimonies, defensiveness, anger at those speaking up about the abuse, concern for the abuser, the abuser's family, or the abuser's reputation. All feelings deserve to be internally processed with care. However, these are feelings that put you at risk of speaking and acting in ways that enable abuse and cause serious injury to survivors. It is important to meet these feelings with self-reflection, education, and accountability.

We can all show strength by facing our feelings and claiming our power to disrupt injustice.

3 What do we do with the deep formation we have experienced together with these songs in the past?

The meaning these songs have had for you is not invalidated. The memories you associate with them do not need to lose even a glimmer of their value. Your memories, your spirituality, your relationships, your *self*—these remain. You have the right to renegotiate your relationship with these songs and prayers without losing the significance of the memories and formation you previously associated with them. However, the formative role these songs and prayers have played for you in the past will need to change. This is a loss that must be mourned personally and communally.

Your new knowledge of survivors' experiences also carries a responsibility. Consider that your past expressions of love for this music may have increased a survivor's suffering. Ultimately, this suffering, as well as any that you experience upon realizing your role in it, is the responsibility of the person who behaved abusively. Renegotiating your relationship to these songs will help minimize survivors' suffering and disrupt cycles of violence.

4 Who owns the resources we use in worship? Can a song be separated from its source?

Songs and prayers used in worship are communal by nature. They belong not only to the authors, but to each person and community formed by worshiping through them.

When abuse is made known, new connections are added to songs and prayers. For survivors, singing a song of a known abuser can cause the traumatic harm of sexual violence to viscerally rush in. This is especially true when the abuser is alive or recently deceased.

When people directly injured by the abuser's violence experience a song as inseparable from its source, communities of faith cannot claim to make such a separation without doing harm to survivors.

Abusers have sometimes woven expressions of faith into their work that rationalize their behavior. Although it is difficult work, it is important to reflect together on whether these songs have subtly formed your community in ways that enable cultures of violence.

5 What makes someone's actions so bad that we can no longer sing their songs? What about the parts of the Bible attributed to David or Solomon?

We choose not to sing a composer's songs when doing so causes injury to survivors or enables abuse.

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.

This general principle should guide decisions, whether that violence is portrayed in a biblical narrative, as in the story of King David, or perpetrated by a living or recently deceased figure, whose immediate family or survivors are still alive. The care for material from these different contexts can look different in worship settings.

Factors that influence how survivors are impacted by a perpetrator's songs:

- Whether the perpetrator is living and able to continue to abuse others.
- Whether using a living perpetrator's work increases that person's authority and power to abuse others.
- Whether using a living perpetrator's work increases that person's financial means to access and abuse others.
- Whether continuing to use a living or deceased perpetrator's work causes injury to survivors, breaks trust with survivors, or erodes a community's work against sexual violence.
- Whether continuing to use the work perpetuates a community culture or approach to faith that enables sexual violence.

6 Is it ever appropriate to sing these songs again?

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.

It is only appropriate to use songs by a known perpetrator of abuse if significantly impacted survivors ask your community to do so as an intentional practice of resistance. Even then, it should only be done if steps are taken to ensure that engaging in this kind of practice will not cause re-injury to other survivors in or beyond your community who may feel differently.

Survivors should be invested with authority to shape your community's response to testimonies of sexual violence. However, it should never be considered survivors' responsibility to do so. Survivors may choose not to participate in conversations, for example, because doing so may be retraumatizing for them. Survivors may not be known to their communities, and may not be interested in sharing or ready to share their experiences and offer insight. Or, survivors may want your community to support them without making burdensome demands on their time and energy. If a community does not have survivors who are interested in participating in the process, seek accountability from survivor advocates instead.

As in any community process, a survivor-centered one is likely to include conflict. This is natural. When conflict arises, engage it in ways that minimize harm to survivors and increase your community's resistance to sexual violence. If you need help, consult advocates whom survivors trust.

Steps in a survivor-centered response

- First, stop using the songs, at least during this process, and likely permanently.
- Share which specific songs are implicated, as well as survivors' testimonies.
- Introduce or reiterate the concept and necessity of a survivor-centered response.
- Identify leaders to frame and facilitate your community response. Leaders may be from within or beyond the congregation, but it is important that they have experience working with survivors of abuse.
- Recognize that this process may activate memories of abuse for some survivors. At the outset, identify someone in the congregation who is qualified and willing to be an advocate and support for survivors as they find professional resources.
- Seek to learn about the impact of the abuse on survivors as well as survivors' advice for your community's long-term relationship to the songs.
- Grieve the losses of particular songs, taking care to name and honor the feelings described above.
- Identify the power your response will hold. This is an opportunity to take action for justice.
- Engage and educate your community. For example, this can happen through small groups, sermons, or print and online communication.
- Make choices and take actions in solidarity with survivors to limit harm, interrupt patterns of violence, and work toward just transformation.

A survivor-centered response makes verbal, structural, and embodied changes in worship:

- Develop long-term worship habits that acknowledge and care for survivors: address sexual violence regularly in prayer, preaching, and faith formation classes.
- In dialogue with survivors, pastors, and scholars, struggle with Scripture readings that depict sexual violence. Draw strength from Scripture readings such as Mary's song in Luke 1:46–55 that address structural violence and cast a vision of God's justice and peace.
- Care for how physical touch such as hugs and handshakes are invited in worship. Teach, model, and practice consent for all ages.

- Consider the language and imagery used in connection with the celebration of communion and other rituals.
- Attend to the misuse of Christian concepts like forgiveness, submission, sin, and love of enemies that place burdens on survivors instead of holding perpetrators accountable.
- Ensure policies are in place to protect vulnerable persons, such as vetting and training for staff and volunteers.
- Create space for pastoral conversations with those who are directly or indirectly impacted by sexual violence.
- Commit to ongoing communication surrounding your choices about what to sing. Rehearsing the story by sharing with newcomers and remembering together is part of renegotiating your relationship with songs.
- Commit to ongoing learning about how to make worship practices attentive to experiences and needs of survivors.

7 How can we talk about this with children in our community?

Be honest, forthright, and age appropriate. This is an opportunity to help children understand that standing with people who have been unjustly harmed sometimes means we will experience feelings of loss and grief. Explain that we have learned that the writer of this music hurt people, and that those people feel hurt all over again when we sing the songs together. Because we don't want those people to hurt anymore, we're going to stop singing this music. This decision might make us feel sad. Sadness is okay; we are in this together, and we are committed to caring for each other each time any one of us is hurt. Have this conversation with children in a way that both helps them mourn the loss of the music and strengthens their developing ability to show strength in making hard choices to resist injustice.

8 What options do I have if I am invited to sing one of the songs in worship?

Options during worship:

- Choose not to sing the song.
- Pray for survivors and for an end to sexual violence during the song.
- Leave worship for a few minutes or for the remainder of the service.
- Stand during the service and ask those gathered not to sing the song.
- Text or call friends for support.
- If you are a survivor, you might choose to sing the song as an act of resistance, mindful of the impact of your choice on other survivors.

Options outside of worship:

- Talk with trusted friends ahead of time about how you might respond and how you will support each other.
- Contact your community's worship team to tell them how you experienced the song. Take this as an opportunity to educate about the composer's abuse or about survivor-centered responses. Ask them not to sing the song in the future.
- Privately reflect on or publicly share your experience as a form of self-care, as self-expression, or to move the social conversation forward.

9 Where can I go for more information?

- [“Sexual Violence: Christian Theological Legacies and Responsibilities.”](#) Introduction to thinking about sexual violence and foundational Christian concepts. Article by Stephanie Krehbiel and Hilary Jerome Scarsella, *Religion Compass*, vol. 13, no. 9, September 5, 2019.
- A variety of practical resources are available from the [FaithTrust Institute](#).
- [Telling the Truth: Preaching About Sexual and Domestic Violence](#). Support for preaching on the subject of sexual violence. Book edited by John S. McClure and Nancy J. Ramsay (Pilgrim, 1999).
- [Words the Heal: Preaching Hope to Wounded Souls](#). Support for trauma-informed preaching and worship. Book by Joni S. Sancken (Abingdon, 2019).
- [Abuse of Power: A Theological Problem](#). Support for ministering. Book by James Newton Poling (Abingdon, 1991).
- [“The Lord’s Supper: A Ritual of Harm or Healing?”](#) An example of a trauma-informed approach to practicing communion. Resource by Hilary Jerome Scarsella, with Rhoda Keener, Eleanor Krieder, David B. Miller, and John Rempel, *Leader*, vol. 13, no. 4, Summer 2016.
- [Circles of Grace](#). A curriculum that teaches children and youth about how to identify and maintain appropriate physical, emotional, spiritual, and sexual boundaries; recognize when boundary violations are about to occur; and demonstrate how to take action when boundaries are threatened or violated. Developed by Dove’s Nest, 2018.

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