

Why my church is done singing David Haas's songs

It's not because we don't believe in grace.

by [Melissa Florer-Bixler](#) in the [September 23, 2020](#) issue



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I find myself, from time to time, with a song running through my head:

Rejoice and be glad:
Blessed are you. Holy are you.
Rejoice and be glad:
Yours is the kingdom of God.

This song has anchored me through seasons of catastrophe for people at the margins of power. Its words, from Jesus' beatitudes, remind me that those who

suffer oppression are the bearers of God's reign.

Now, when I sing "Blest Are They" I catch myself and wince.

The song I find myself humming was written by David Haas, a prolific Catholic songwriter whose influence extends to the Mennonite church I pastor. There are at least five Haas compositions that my church regularly sings as part of worship. Some people in my church refer to these as "heart songs."

This summer, more than 40 women made credible allegations of sexual abuse against Haas. Some women described grooming behavior that began when they were as young as 14 years old. Others tell stories of groping, kissing, and other unwanted sexual advances. Other woman disclosed Haas's manipulation and shaming when they resisted him. The abuse they allege spans decades.

The renewed efforts of the Me Too and Church Too movements helped ensure that these women's accusations of sexual assault were taken seriously and addressed with swift consequences. Liturgical publisher GIA dropped Haas from its catalog. The Mennonite *Voices Together* hymnal project pulled Haas's songs from its printed materials when they were in the final stages of production.

Meanwhile, congregations like mine have grappled with the betrayal of trust and the sense of loss that stem from Haas's abuse. This struggle includes reconciling the excision of familiar songs with our central theological conviction—that all people need forgiveness.

My church is painfully familiar with abusive and controlling behavior by male leaders. We watched in horror the avalanche of accusations against Catholic priests who sexually assaulted children and enjoyed the protection of calculated, systematic cover-ups of their crimes. Willow Creek founder Bill Hybels admitted to sexually abusing women connected to the church; later his mentor, Gilbert Bilezikian, was also caught in sexual misconduct.

In my tradition, theological giant John Howard Yoder spent decades sexually abusing women as part of a bizarre theological experiment. In every Christian tradition there are survivors of abuse by leaders in the church.

We know of high-profile abuses because of their impact on the finances and cultural cachet of their institutions. But there are hundreds of other survivors—of youth

leaders and small-church pastors, of seminary professors and children's ministers—whose pain is known only within their local communities.

Because of the monsoon of allegations over the previous decade, pastors find ourselves needing to help people in the pews navigate the process of removing books, music, liturgies, and Bible studies from our sources for spiritual formation—and to explain why we are taking these actions. It can be counterintuitive to church people, those of us who have gathered around a faith with the central premise that we are not as we ought to be, creatures held by boundless grace, to excise someone's work so definitively from the congregation.

I hear people voice worries about purity, about unrealistic expectations that our preachers, theologians, and composers must be faultless if we are to engage their work. Other people are reminded of words we often say in our closing prayer with the women we visit in prison: "You are not the worst thing you have done."

But there is something that we often do not calculate into these equations of forgiveness and grace: power. I am far enough along in life that accusations of men abusing women do not seem surprising or unusual. For me, the shock of abuse by church leaders is how long perpetrators are able to act out their crimes without getting caught or being held accountable, often for decades.

Power is what makes this possible. Institutional leaders—whether they are from the Catholic Church, the Southern Baptist Convention, or a nondenominational megachurch like Willow Creek—calculate that the overall mission and work of their institution is more significant, worth more than the correction of wrongs done to survivors.

Their victims learn this as they watch women silenced and dismissed as liars, as they see people who report their abuse shamed for bringing down ministries that positively impact millions of people. The Christian commitment to sacrificial self-giving is the catalyst for a survivor to keep her trauma to herself.

My congregation will not sing the songs of David Haas again. This isn't because we are vindictive or because we lack grace. Thankfully for me, we don't expect perfection in our leaders. We have no qualms about the difficult and complicated act of living.

But we do want to assure all those who would follow in the steps of David Haas, Bill Hybels, or John Howard Yoder, those who use their position of authority to take advantage of others, that they are not indispensable. We will mourn their loss for a time, but there are other songs to sing. Eventually, “Blest Are They” will leave my memory, replaced by a new tune.

In the gospels, Jesus’ constant frustration is his disciples’ jockeying to secure positions of power within his orbit. In one of these encounters Jesus responds in exasperation, “The first shall be last and the last shall be first.”

Leaders like these men calculate their wealth, institutional standing, and social influence and conclude that we cannot get by without them. They are essential. We, the ordinary people who show up to church to sing and pray, need their thoughts, writings, and songs. Their gifts and leadership will shield them from the fallout from their bad behavior.

It is incumbent upon the church to prove them wrong. By putting down the books of abusers and the hymns of predators we are not refusing forgiveness or denying hopes for redemption. We are making clear that no individual, no matter how charismatic or how great their following, is more important than a survivor of that person’s abuse.

Whatever the church will be in the future, it doesn’t depend on stadium congregations or soaring anthems. Our health and vibrancy will not be based on influence over governing officials. The reign of God belongs to those whom God has called blessed—those who weep and those who mourn, the poor and the hungry. Blessed are you, yours is the kingdom of God.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “Who's indispensable?”