

# Hymn writer branches out with anti-bullying children's musical

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WACO—By blending choruses, empathy and common sense, hymn writer/lyricist Terry York and more than 200 elementary school students and adults in choirs launched an unusual anti-bullying effort.

✘ Lyricist Terry York (left), professor at Baylor University's Truett Theological Seminary, and composer David Schwoebel, minister of music at Derbyshire Baptist Church in Richmond, Va., collaborated on *Sit in a Circle: A Choral Response to Bullying*. (PHOTO/Caryn Gibbons) Their musical message—called *Sit in a Circle: A Choral Response to Bullying*—urges children to be “upstanders,” not bystanders, and poses the question, “How would I feel if I felt like you?”

Woven into the production is what York calls the “genius” of third- to fifth-graders. They not only sing, but also several wrote about being bullied and read their essays between songs.

The children's efforts are part of a growing trend of young people joining in to prevent bullying—whether small-town middle school students in Washington state producing a video or hundreds of students hosting a “No Place for Hate” flash freeze with the Anti-Defamation League in South Florida.

The Texas production—which included the Irving Chorale, Irving Honors Choir and Irving Children's Chorus—premiered in March and has begun to draw attention elsewhere in the country.

Involvement for York, a professor of Christian ministry and church music at Baylor University's [Truett Theological Seminary](#), began with a phone call

from the artistic director of Irving Chorale, asking whether York and a composer friend would be interested in writing a commissioned piece about bullying.

After they agreed, then came the hard part.

✘ A children's choir from Irving debuts *Sit in a Circle: A Choral Response to Bullying*, created by Terry York, professor at Baylor University's Truett Theological Seminary, and David Schwoebel, minister of music at Derbyshire Baptist Church in Richmond, Va. (PHOTO/Caryn Gibbons) "I was kind of at a loss, because I usually write for the church in the language of the church," said York, whose published work includes hymns and anthem texts. "Here I am not in church and not in the language of the church—and not only that, I knew very little about bullying."

He turned to his wife, Janna York, an elementary school counselor and a former president of the [Heart of Texas Counselors Association](#). She loaded him up with books, journal articles and even a 1956 French film, *The Red Balloon*.

What emerged in York's work was a message of loving one's neighbor.

"The lyrics don't mention church or the Bible, but it's sharing the gospel nonetheless," he said. "Some things just sort of started to lift up and became the subject matter of the anthems."

### **'Together we'll see'**

One was the notion of sitting in a circle.

"A lot of the books would say, 'Have the children sit in a circle and begin this discussion,'" York said.

He wrote: "Let's sit in a circle, together we'll see, I'm not behind you, and

you're not behind me. We all will be helped and be helpers in time. Together we'll sing, in life's rhythm and rhyme."

That chorus became "the string that the pearls were on," York said—the reprise for anthems about respect ("Kaleidoscope of Colors"), identity ("I Have a Name"), bravery to speak out rather than being a bystander ("Will Courage Rise?"), empathy ("How Would I Feel?") and pain ("Will It Ever Go Away").

David Schwoebel, a minister of music and composer-in-residence at [Derbyshire Baptist Church in Richmond, Va.](#), composed the accompanying melodies, ranging from urgent to poignant.

"It is my understanding that occasionally during rehearsals the children would actually sit in circles and discuss the topic they were singing about," York said. "That gave another dimension to it."

### **A song about pain**

One child wrote of a pain that "happens every second of my life. Can't walk down the street, people are there telling me bad things like, 'You don't belong here.'"

In York's lyrics to a song about pain, he asks, "Will it ever go away? Or must I?"—a reference to the "unspeakable reality" that some young people commit suicide to escape bullying, he said.

One boy wrote a matter-of-fact assessment:

"What if we need each other one day, and we are not happy with each other? Make it better for you and the world, because bullying can be miserable. Don't bully because you'll have no friends, and you'll get in trouble, and because you might not get good grades and not pass your schools."

A girl set the record straight on just what bullying is—and is not—and offered advice.

### **What is bullying?**

“What is bullying? It is behavior you want to stop. ... There is shoving, name-calling and cyberbullying. Bullying is not something cool or funny. Put a piece of paper in your pocket to write it down, and show it to a grown-up.”

She noted bullying has no age limit: “People have been bullied since they were 1 to 100.”

That became clear—and emotional—at rehearsals.

“I was expecting to hear the kids respond, but the first week we rehearsed, I had some adults come up and say, ‘I’m being bullied at work,’” said Harry Wooten, conductor and artistic director of the Irving Chorale, who also is the minister of music and worship at [Royal Lane Baptist Church in Dallas](#). “This isn’t just a children’s thing.”

The choirs have been asked to repeat the performance next season, and acquaintances of choir members in Missouri and North Texas have expressed interest in seeing it or beginning similar efforts of their own.

The hope is the messages will make an impression on children and discourage bullying as they grow older. About 16 percent of U.S. high school students are victims of cyberbullying alone, according to a study presented in early May at a Pediatric Academic Societies meeting in Washington, D.C.

“I couldn’t say all there was to say about bullying, nor could I find a solution,” York said. “All I could do was write about those things. ... But I hope this allowed the children the chance to vent and gave some of them

courage.”