

“What are we singing?” a sermon preached at the evening service at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand remembering the life and music of Shirley Murray, New Zealand’s most recognised hymn writer who died on 25 January 2020.

There are few things that divide Christians more than the songs we sing. And it’s an issue. How off-putting it is to go to a new church and not find one song we can sing. Or, as often happens to me, when I go to a national or regional gathering of my own denomination, and I don’t find one song that I know or feel able to sing. Many congregations, perhaps half or more, no longer sing songs in the hymn style. One of our denomination’s musical leaders said to me that very few churches now sing hymns.

Part of that is because few congregations use hymnals. For Presbyterian churches, up to about thirty years ago, the hymns we sang mostly came via the Church of Scotland. Before the 1970s, people sang from Church Hymnary 2. Then since I have been in the church as an adult, we have sung from Church Hymnary 3. Then from about five years ago, there is Church Hymnary 4. The visits by Billy Graham introduced Sankey songs. And in 1982, just as I was beginning in ministry, we sang from the Australian Hymn Book with a New Zealand supplement, a book called With One Voice. For the first time there were New Zealand hymns in the languages of our nation. And over the last twenty years, there have been hymns from the New Zealand Hymnbook Trust, publishing New Zealand writers and composers.

But over the last forty years there has been a burgeoning of Christian music of many different styles. The phenomenal growth of evangelical, Pentecostal and independent churches across the world and in New Zealand has been accompanied by a burgeoning of music with a certain contemporary styles. I remember waiting to speak in a Methodist Church in Colombo in Sri Lanka and noticing that much of the music came from Hillsong, a large charismatic church that started in Sydney and now has branches in many parts of the world. And I have heard Hillsong music in Zimbabwe and Sudan and many parts of the Pacific. Hillsong is a producer and presenter of highly accomplished music of a particular style, and also a significant publisher. I had the privilege of spending time with Geoff Bullock who was their most well-known composer until about

20 years ago. Since then his theology has shifted. He was being drawn into the Uniting Church in Australia and he wanted to support the Agency I led. He was rewriting many of his songs, to turn them more towards emphasising the grace of God with less effort.

I sense that the most sung Christian song in the world is now his – the Power of your Love. While the words are fine, it is more the music that I think makes it singable for people.

Lord I come to You Let my heart be changed, renewed
Flowing from the grace That i have found in You
And Lord I have come to know The weaknesses I see in me
Will be stripped away By the power of Your love
Hold me close Let Your love surround me
Bring me near Draw me to Your side
And as I wait I will rise up like the eagle
And I will soar with You Your Spirit leads me on
In the power of Your love
Lord unveil my eyes Let me see You face to face
The knowledge of Your love As You live in me
And Lord renew my mind As Your will unfolds in my life
In living every day By the power of Your love

This burgeoning of music though is a real challenge for a congregation like Knox. We are a University church and it is likely that very few of the young people, including Presbyterian young people, who come to Knox to see if they might participate here, will have sung hymns before they come here. Church schools are as likely to sing the Geoff Bullock style as they are hymns. We are also, because we are in the middle of the city, increasingly multicultural. One of the major changes in the church over the last forty years has been the massive decline of participation in church by people who have lived in New Zealand for a long time and the increasing proportion of participation by

people who have come from countries more open to religion. I personally do not think it can be said of churches with a proportion of people under 50 or 60 that people will know a well-known hymn. Except perhaps Amazing Grace and How Great Thou Art and Be Thou my vision. Late last week I saw a list of the most sung songs in churches and I knew perhaps two of them. Musically, churches now exist in parallel universes, and for a central city, University oriented, multi-cultural congregation that seeks to help people participate when they move to Dunedin, that is a very big challenge.

Worship is the work of the people, not my work or any leader of worship. Archbishop William Temple wrote: "Worship is the submission of all of our nature to God. It is the quickening of the conscience by his holiness; the nourishment of mind with his truth; the purifying of imagination by his beauty; the opening of the heart to his love; the surrender of will to his purpose--all this gathered up in adoration, the most selfless emotion of which our nature is capable."

And the role of the leader of worship is to enable people to give of themselves, in mind and body, spirit and soul, in that most selfless emotion, in adoration of God. Soren Kierkegaard said that leaders of worship are prompts. The minister, choir and the organist and all who help lead – we are prompts to enable the people to worship. Prompting worship in you.

Which leads me to the music of Shirley Murray who sought to do that by writing hymns that spoke of our land and our experience, human and near at hand. As she said in one of her hymns, faith has set us on a journey past the landmarks that we know. Shirley Murray was New Zealand's most internationally recognised hymn writer and she died just over a week ago at the age of 88. I spoke about Shirley's hymns and life this morning and I won't repeat what I said then. Shirley was part of a group of hymn writers who wrote faith in the present tense, to use Colin Gibson's words.

She was interested in how our human experience related to the presence of God, how we faced the challenges of our society, how we dealt with the struggles of life. Wide range of topics – racism and rights, personal commitment and devotion, the importance of quietness, and centring, climate

change and peace. Indeed, Shirley wrote that her hymns were all expressions of one central Christian commitment, the commitment to peace.

In the increasingly diverse music we sing, Shirley Murray's hymns have a place. With them we take seriously our humanity, our location, our part in the principalities and powers of our times, we take seriously the choices we are called to make in our everyday living. And through it all to experience again the wisdom and presence of Jesus, the ever-flowing energy of the Spirit of God and the overarching and inclusive embrace of a loving God. Thanks be to God for the life and music of Shirley Murray, whose music will be sung for generations.

KNOX CHURCH, DUNEDIN

***Captivated by the vision of the realm of God,
made known in Jesus, given in grace***



Knox Church

449 George Street

Dunedin

New Zealand

Ph. (03) 477 0229

www.knoxchurch.net

Kerry Enright: 027 467 5542, minister@knoxchurch.net