

A Place at the Table Worship & Song 3149 BY [SHIRLEY ERENA MURRAY](#)

For everyone born, a place at the table, for everyone born, clean water and bread,
a shelter, a space, a safe place for growing, for everyone born, a star overhead,
and God will delight when we are creators
of justice and joy, compassion and peace:
yes, God will delight when we are creators
of justice, justice and joy!

For woman and man, a place at the table, revising the roles, deciding to share,
with wisdom and grace, dividing the power, for woman and man, a system that's fair,
and God will delight when we are creators
of justice and joy, compassion and peace:
yes, God will delight when we are creators
of justice, justice and joy!

For young and for old, a place at the table, a voice to be heard, a part in the song, the
hands of a child in hands that are wrinkled, for young and for old, the right to belong,
and God will delight when we are creators
of justice and joy, compassion and peace:
yes, God will delight when we are creators
of justice, justice and joy!

For just and unjust, a place at the table, abuser, abused, with need to forgive,
in anger, in hurt, a mindset of mercy, for just and unjust, a new way to live,
and God will delight when we are creators
of justice and joy, compassion and peace:
yes, God will delight when we are creators
of justice, justice and joy!

For everyone born, a place at the table, to live without fear, and simply to be,
to work, to speak out, to witness and worship, for everyone born, the right to be free,
and God will delight when we are creators
of justice and joy, compassion and peace:
yes, God will delight when we are creators
of justice, justice and joy!

*For gay and for straight, a place at the table, a covenant shared, a welcoming space,
a rainbow of race and gender and colour, for gay and for straight, the chalice of
grace,
and God will delight when we are creators
of justice and joy, compassion and peace:
yes, God will delight when we are creators
of justice, justice and joy!

*=optional verse

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From Discipleship Ministries: history of the hymn by Shirley Murray

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“Universal Declaration of Human Rights”

– General Assembly of the United Nations, 10 December 1948 *Article 1*: All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.

Article 2: Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind....

Article 3: Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person. ...

In recent decades, an influential and significant force has developed within the world of congregational song. That force is Shirley Erena Murray (b. 1931), who has written some of the most convicting and challenging hymns of this era by addressing issues and concerns relevant to modern-day audiences through the paradigm of the Christian tradition.

In her hymn, “A Place at the Table” (1998), Ms. Murray presents a Christian equivalent to the “Universal Declaration of Human Rights,” drafted by the U.N. General Council, thus connecting the global concern of Christianity with the global concerns of the United Nations and, indeed, all humanity.

She notes: “I couldn’t find anything to reflect a broad overview of human rights in any hymnbook. You can see that I have used some of the very basic ideas of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights – the right to shelter, safety, food, and later, the right to a job, to freedom of speech and worship. I’ve tried to put them in a context which relates directly to the Gospel, but without excluding those who are not of the Christian faith. . . .”

A close examination of the hymn reveals thematic connections with the Declaration, thereby demonstrating the relevance of Christianity with contemporary affairs. For example, in the first stanza, “clean water and bread, a shelter, a space, a safe place for growing” stems from Article 25: “Everyone has the right to a standard of adequate living for . . . health and well-being . . . including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services . . .” The next phrase, “a star overhead,” relates, according to the poet, to Article 26 and the aspiration for education.

A fourth generation New Zealander, Murray is well-educated, holding a master’s degree with honors in Classics and French from Otago University. Her awards and honors include the New Zealand Order of Merit (2001) and an Honorary Fellow of the Royal School of Church Music (2006). Her hymn “God, In Your Grace” was chosen as the theme song for the IX Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Porto

Alegre, Brazil (2006), and she has been honored as a Fellow of the Hymn Society in the United States and Canada (2009).

Though well recognized today for her accomplishments, her development into one of the world's leading English-language hymn writers was a rather unassuming progression and came about as a result of her involvement in the church as a layperson. In fact, the story of her rise to prominence in Christian hymnody should encourage any Christian wondering how he or she can contribute to the community of faith.

Shirley Erena Murray proudly describes her ecclesial affiliation as ecumenical in nature. Though born to a Methodist family, she later became Presbyterian through her marriage to The Very Rev. John Stewart Murray: a Presbyterian minister. As she writes in one of the collections of her hymns, "The Methodist tradition nurtured me, the Presbyterian tradition claimed all my adult life, and the ecumenical movement called me out of both." Murray describes her identity and perspective as "that of a woman, a mother, a grandparent, a citizen, [and] a layperson."

Shirley Murray began writing hymns in the 1970s to accompany her husband's sermons, because he had difficulty finding traditional hymns that truly captured and articulated his messages with language relevant to contemporary life. The fruit of her labor resulted in a plethora of Christian hymns that poignantly address modern concerns in a relevant way. Fellow New Zealander and Methodist hymn writer Colin Gibson notes that the most common themes of her hymns address "peace, justice, human rights, inclusiveness, gender equality, environmental concerns, and social responsibility." Her work is included in more than 100 different collections and has been translated into several different languages. Additionally, she contributed to the groundbreaking hymnal *Sound the Bamboo* (2000), wherein she collaborated with Dr. I-to Loh, an ethnomusicologist from Taiwan, to provide English lyrics for Asian Christians with a distinctly Eastern-Asian style of music.

For most of the text of "A Place at the Table," see www.hopepublishing.com/html/main.isx?sitesec=40.2.1.0&hymnID=342.

In this hymn, Shirley Murray finds a way to subtly incorporate the Christian imperative of equality and justice for the entire world. In the first stanza, she begins with the statement, "For everyone born, a place at the table ... for everyone born, a star overhead." At first glance, the song appears as if it will address global hunger, which indeed it does. But on a metaphysical level, she clearly expresses that the justice and equality humanity needs actually comes as a result of the birth of Jesus Christ. Here, she has flipped our understanding of what "the table" actually means. **The table does not simply represent the proverbial dining table or the political forum (such as the United Nations), but also stands as a metaphor for the Kingdom of God. The table embodies a world where everyone has a place, because God became human in Jesus Christ, expressed by the star on**

Christmas night. “The table” of abundance and equality is the prophetic expression of God’s will manifest in creation.

She continues her theme of justice and equality in the subsequent stanzas by providing a series of binary expressions, thereby articulating the need for Christians to extend justice and joy across the diversity of humanity: “for woman and man” (stanza 2), “for young or for old” (stanza 3), and “for just and unjust” (stanza 4). In the fourth stanza, Murray presents us with perhaps a more difficult challenge by including both “abuser” and “abused” at the table. She draws the language of “abuser/abused” from the Lord’s Prayer: “forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors,” acknowledging that all humanity stands in need of God’s grace, love, and mercy: even those who have committed acts of abuse in its many forms.

An omitted stanza, listed as “optional” in the original publication, confirms the radical hospitality that is proposed by the author:

*For gay and for straight, a place at the table,
a covenant shared, a welcoming place,
a rainbow of race and gender and color,
for gay and for straight, the chalice of grace . . . **

The author states her theological premise in the introduction of the collection, *A Place at the Table*: “I have used the words of the hymn ‘A Place at the Table’ as title for this book, because there are still Christian people not welcome, either at the communion table or at the common table of society. . .” **Such hospitality, however, is already apparent in the Invitation to the Table found in *The United Methodist Hymnal*: “Christ our Lord invites to his table all who love him, who earnestly repent of their sin and seek to live in peace with one another.”** The invitation is extended to all regardless of gender, cultural background, social class, or sexual orientation. This stanza, deleted from most hymnals, is a further demonstration of Ms. Murray’s willingness to address the concerns of a contemporary audience. **Here she challenges us to recognize the sacrament as a place of unconditional inclusivity.**

According to the refrain, we understand the Christian’s role to play in offering “justice and joy” because paradoxically, “God will delight when we are creators of justice and joy.” In this way, the Creator expresses delight when humanity “creates” justice and joy. Not content to leave Christianity as a relic of the past, Murray’s hymn gives new voice to Christians crying out for God’s justice and joy as they enact God’s will “on earth as it is in heaven.”

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