

The Benefits and Blessings of a Dance Ministry

I am a liturgical dance leader in Whitby, Ontario, and a member of St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, Whitby. My dance training is formed by classical ballet and followed by a love of modern dance and folk dance.

In Easter, 2001, I had the privilege of organizing five of St. Andrew's young people to prepare a dance for the SonRise service. After the early morning youth-led service, the dancers were promptly invited to dance during that morning's 10 o'clock Easter service. Since those dancers first moved along the aisles of St. Andrew's, there has been a steady growth of acceptance of dance in our church, including invitations from other churches to welcome dance into their worship services.

Over the years, two dance groups have been developed with the goal of bringing music and movement to worship services. This activity of praise comes from the Bible (*Psalm 150*), with many references cited throughout the scriptures.

The two dance groups based at St. Andrew's are *Anointed Joy* (for grades 9 and up), and *Raise the Praise* (Grades 5 to 8). The groups mainly serve in Durham Region and the Greater Toronto Area in Ontario. We see dance as an opportunity and a privilege to bring honour, glory and praise to God. The fellowship and fun we have as we engage in liturgical dance is a priceless, long-lasting gift.

Anointed Joy has hosted a number of dance workshops during the past four years. Our main challenge is people who would like to start dancing and have a dance group but do not know how to go about it. They need training, guidance and follow up support.

Have you ever thought about starting a dance group in your church or on your campus? Do you lack dance experience, but have leadership skills and the desire to begin a dance group? Do you want to see the youth of your church explore liturgical dance but wonder where or how to start? Are you already leading a dance group but get stuck with choreography problems? Do you have people who want to dance but are unsure of how to start? Do you have ideas, but just need guidance or support?

There are answers for these questions, and solutions for these problems when people work together.

In May, 2009, we called a meeting to find out if we ought to begin a leadership development and support network that would start in September. The discussion topics were: Leader Training & Support, Idea Sharing, Group Organization and Administration and Starting from Scratch.

We found that time is the main roadblock to starting a group. It takes commitment and an investment of time on the part of the leaders and dancers to plan, prepare and practice. If you are willing to put time into this wonderful worship art to bring honour to God, you will be blessed many times over and then, again.

Starting a dance ministry can be simple or complex. Our dance ministry is simple. We want to stay close to God through prayer and listening.

1. Getting started

Establish your purpose. Develop a mission statement

Consider why you have the urge to bring liturgical dance to your church experience.

In the case of *Anointed Joy*, I had always loved ballet, the classical music associated with it and stories that were told through the dance medium. When a friend of mine was invited to present a Palm Sunday dance, it seemed like a natural thing to do because of the music and the beautiful movements of her classically trained ballet dancers. The dance was orderly and meant to beautify the moment. It was meant as an offering to God, and fit in beautifully with the theme of that day's service. The dance contributed meaning to the service.

I talked with our minister about the idea of having a Palm Sunday dance. The youth leader phoned me that same evening with the names of five young people who were interested in giving it a try. Another way to generate interest could be to make an announcement before the service, and make yourself available afterwards to answer questions and fully share your idea with those who would be interested. Do this for two or three weeks, to catch up with people who may have been away when you made the first announcement.

When you consider your reasons for dancing, establish a mission statement and write it down. *Anointed Joy's* mission statement reminds us why we do what we do: "*Anointed Joy is a Christian dance group which prepares and offers dances to bring honour, praise and glory to God.*" Once you decide on a mission statement, remember it and refer to it. The mission statement keeps the group on track and helps it to stay focused on its goal.

2. Leadership

Practice leader / Administration / Idea Sharing

You may be blessed with multiple leaders for this ministry. If not, the leader will appreciate any assistance. Input from the whole dance group is very important. There may be a place in a dance in which the choreography just doesn't look right and the choreographer is stuck. Someone else from the group may come up with the right solution for that problem. Another pair of eyes is all it takes to begin building a good team.

It is a good idea to create a paper trail of events and dances. This means keeping files, but it is worthwhile to keep track of what have already danced when you are invited to perform at another church. You will also know when you last danced a particular dance, and if it is time to do it again or if it may be too soon to repeat it. *Anointed Joy* keeps a scrapbook of pictures and bulletins from places we have danced. It is also nice to look back occasionally, to remember how the ministry has grown and developed over time.

Keep notes on the choreography. They can either be quite simple or an order of patterns sketched out on paper. This is ever important because if you revisit a dance two years later, it will help to remind you of what you did. If you make changes later, pull out the original notes and update them. If you are technology and computer-friendly, make a video of each dance to record the choreography. Then store it in your files.

We would like to start sharing ideas with other dance groups. Sharing not only choreography, if that is appropriate, but also ideas for operating a dance ministry and for leadership affirmation. In Ontario there is at least one sacred dance guild, in which leaders and groups can get together from time to time for fellowship, workshops, dance and sharing ideas.

Holding dance workshops serves to share some of the dance ideas we have found effective. Workshops are also an opportunity for fellowship amongst like-minded dancers. A dance workshop can serve as an outreach to the neighborhood surrounding the church. It has also proven to be an outreach opportunity for inter-denominational Christian fellowship.

3. Set a Practice Schedule

Weekly or Project Oriented

Weekly meetings are helpful—it may take six to eight weeks to prepare a dance. Once a week is not very often for an adult brain to learn a dance. However, it can work if attendance is consistent. A regular weekly meeting is best for adults, so they can work it in to their schedules. People have a lot to do each week, so just getting to practice on a regular basis can be a challenge in itself. Also, adults may need to take a little more time in order to feel confident when the time comes to dance during the service.

For children, it may be better to concentrate on project oriented goals, like a dance for Christmas done in a 6-week sign up. This shorter lead-in may give them sharper concentration for a short duration to produce a piece they are comfortable with presenting.

A third option is to combine the above suggestions with a special project or multiple projects which may come up. For example, if we feel we are not going to be ready at the promised time, *Anointed Joy* will occasionally add an extra practice or two as we come close to a dance date. For this, you need dedication from the dancers as well as the leaders. If they want to do it, they will.

Healthy Dance Schedule

The multiple project challenge is something *Anointed Joy* has been faced with over the years. Often, when we are out dancing, someone will come up to us and say, ‘We’re having an event. Could your dancers come and bring that dance?’

‘When is it?’

‘Next Saturday.’

An invitation made well in advance must come first, and it must be given priority over a last minute request. It would be great to be versatile enough to be able to accept all invitations, but God comes first, then family, then church. We have found that the planned invitations are a better fit for our families.

The last minute invitation may be a relatively unplanned event that could take up a lot of family time. Refer to your Mission Statement.

4. How to Practice

Open and close each dance session with prayer.

The Basic Warm Up

After prayer, the warm up is a good way to set the tone for practice. In liturgical dance, the upper body movements take on more significance than the footwork. Warm up the back, shoulders, arms, and then the ankles, feet and knees. Use your favorite Christian music to warm up, and let the day's worries roll off you all at the same time.

Roll down through the back: begin by rolling down and up through the relaxed position of the back, curling forward and downward, and hang in the downward position for a moment. Uncurl the spine gradually to an upright position. Repeat this four times, slowly.

Shoulder rolls: gently move the shoulders in a circular fashion: forward, up, back and down about 4 times, then reverse the movement. The key is to do it gently.

Shoulders up and down: up to reach for the ears, pull them down low. Repeat 4-8 times

Arms: slowly move arms from outstretched sideways position downward in front of the body, gathering up air in front of the body as arms move forward past the waist, reaching overhead and unfurling above your head to reach towards your sides once again. We call this a 'sweater-off' movement because it reminds us of the pulling off of an over-sized sweater. Another arm movement is the side to side sway of the arms as if they are moving in unison, brushed from side to side by the breeze. Repeat these 4-8 times.

Ankles: stand on one foot, hands on your waist to give you balance, and with a relaxed foot, roll the ankle in a circular movement very gently 8 times. Repeat on the other foot. Repeat with reverse circular movement on first and second foot.

Feet: as for ankles, gently flex and extend (stretch) the ankle and toes of the relaxed foot 8 times. Repeat with the other foot.

Knees: (Plié) keep the heels planted firmly on the floor, and the back straight, eyes looking straight ahead, hands on waist. Bend knees and stretch to full height again three times and change position of the feet. We do this in easy turn-out position – 45 degrees – and in parallel positions of the feet:

- 6th or completely parallel feet together,
- 1st (heels together, toes at 45 degrees),
- 1st parallel (swing heels to stop behind 45 degrees, toes are pointing forward, feet are parallel to each other),
- 2nd (feet a shoulder-width apart, a little wider than 1st parallel, toes at 45),
- 2nd parallel (toes pointing forward), and
- finish with feet together, ankles together, parallel (6th) position.

You can also do rises in these positions. A *rise* is holding these positions with fully stretched knees, and lifting the full weight onto the balls of the feet and allowing the heels to push up off the floor. Squeeze ankles tightly together and push them forward for best position and balance.

Shake out your feet and arms whenever you need to release a tension build-up.

Dance Moves

Dance moves are any sequences or moves that help dancers relax and hear the counts of the music. Movements such as a side to side step, just tapping the toe to the beat each time, are simple and get the dancer used to the tempo of the music. If you have folk dance sequences with which everyone is familiar, these are helpful, too.

If you have a combination of steps you are planning to use in the current dance project, or a part which has been difficult for the dancers to master, now would be a good time to review before you face them in the dance itself.

Dances

Repetition is the best way for people to learn a dance. No matter how much you discuss detail, physically repeating a dance over and over will reap the most benefit for the dancers. If they are tired, getting them to 'mark it' instead of doing it full out each time, is still beneficial. Marking it will give the dancers a sense of timing and placement simply from being in the right place at the right time, even if they are not making the full movements.

Presentation: timing (being ready)

For the last few practices, go through the dances without making any corrections. Just run it through without stops and without demonstrating in front of the dancers.

This will give the dancers a feel for how it will go when they dance it during worship, and give them the confidence that they each know the dance without relying on someone else. We do rely on each other at times, but each dancer should know the steps and movements in order, and they can rely on each other as a team--turning together at the same times, and watching each other discreetly for coordination of arms moving in unison.

Having an awareness of these practical techniques can help everyone to really 'worship' on the day of the dance. By the day of dancing during worship, the goal is for everyone to have this confidence to simply come to worship, without worrying that they must negotiate through a set of complex moves in order to bring the message.

5. Choreography

One of the most rewarding and most challenging aspects of liturgical dance is the choreography. It is rewarding because of the opportunities to stretch the imagination, reach into an often untapped set of emotions and find ways to make simple movements which present elements of universal meaning. It is challenging because there are times when a song can touch the soul with its message, have beautiful words and lovely music, but no word pictures immediately spring out of the piece.

Music: with or without words

This subject comes up time after time in liturgical dance discussions. Words add meaning to a liturgical dance. This is the opposite of what is normally done in secular dance. The first two liturgical dances I choreographed were danced to instrumental pieces, and were accepted. However, our experience shows that songs with words are far more meaningful.

The idea of combining words and music to praise God is supported in scripture, in the Psalms and by New Testament writings. We are to use music and words to praise God (Psalm 30:4; 47:6; 63:5; 89:1; 119:171-172; Acts 16:25, Ephesians 5:19). Martin Luther wrote about the relevance of using both music and words to praise God “For Gospel is a Greek word translated as ‘good message, good tidings, good news, (or) good announcement’ about which one sings, speaks, and rejoices.” (Luther on the Gospels)

Make sure the message of the song you choose is supported by scripture. A song with words brings a bible study element to each dance learned, as the words and message are constantly being reviewed.

Of course, one can use instrumental music to portray a dance, but it may need to be preceded by an explanation of what is about to happen. Also effective is a dance done to a spoken prayer, enacted through movement; or begun and ended with words, perhaps a passage of scripture, using movement in the middle. These latter suggestions would be most effective when danced by a well prepared and very experienced dancer or group.

With respect to music style, consider the setting of the dance. Will you be at a worship service, concert, nursing home or hospital? Think about being ‘dance appropriate.’

Ask yourself: "Will the message of the song/dance blend with the theme, making it meaningful and memorable?"

Chorus and Verse / Structure of a Dance

In the early church, people stood during the whole time of worship. There was no seating, except perhaps around the perimeter of the room. Hymn verses would be sung by the best singer and the choruses by the whole congregation. In hymns, the verses describe specifics in the theme, whereby the choruses repeat the main theme of the song.

In dance, we have patterned a similarity in setting dances to worship songs: the verses have specific movements and the choruses repeat their movements each time. This is a technique which makes choreography a little easier. Also, the repetition of some parts of the dance make it easier for dancers to learn and remember. If the song is long in duration, for example more than three minutes, vary the chorus with alternate combinations for visual interest and another way of ‘hearing’ the chorus.

In a musical interlude you will need to provide some ‘filler’ action, either steps or action with a prop such as a flag, scarf or streamer. This is a good place to use folk dance steps which may be appropriate in the cultural heritage of the congregation. We have adopted Messianic Folk Dance steps and sequences. Also, consider moving the dancers around in the dance space by use of repeating patterns during a musical interlude.

Messianic Folk Dance

The ancient Hebrews danced. Their sequences have been carried down through history to be used in the church of the Messianic Jews of today. These steps and sequences are simple and filled with meaning. Each step and sequence has biblical significance. The moves have been named and therefore are easy to identify. Messianic folk steps can be used as connectors in bridges, in interludes, for whole dances or for congregational involvement in dances. The steps become meaningful because they represent ‘praise within praise’ for the dancers, which results in a freer expression of the dance.

Symbolism and Props

An aspect of early church dancing was the use of symbolism. The circle motif, symbols of clapping and stamping to lift up praises would have been popular. The waving of scarves came about from times of slavery, representing the toil of a hard life and the promise of freedom.

Today the waving of large flags represents the glory of God and the movement of the Holy Spirit throughout the earth. The eye line is directed upward and away from the dancer. As flags are waved through the air, a powerful sound can be created as a referral is to the unseen but very real presence and power of God. Waving flags and streamers brings a mood of celebration and expectancy.

A recent but effective prop is dowel rods, or 'God Rods'. These are dowel sticks, used in pairs, to create picture ideas. They can be held throughout the dance or quietly picked up and put down as needed.

Planned Choreography or Spontaneous Movement / Creating, or Waiting

Although there are some people who can simply get up and dance without choreography. I respect those who can spontaneously dance during a church service, but I believe it is a risk. Since most public worship follows a type of plan, spontaneous dancing may be an unexpected upset to someone unaccustomed to it. The other problem is that if the dancer draws a mental 'blank,' an awkward moment will follow as she or he wanders about collecting the next thoughts. It would be one thing to get up and wave a flag during a worship song, and quite another to get up and start pouring out an uncharted emotion with no confirmation as to where the urge has come from.

Choreographing a dance to a song takes prayer, waiting, listening and watching. Sometimes the whole dance will come in an afternoon. Oftentimes the dance will come about in pieces that need to be fitted together. Sometimes the dance needs to be simplified after the initial idea forms. To be able to wait and watch requires patience, but God's timing is best. If you take your time with choreography, you also can enlist suggestions from your group. If there are parts of the music which are difficult for you, someone else may have a wonderful idea for those places.

Sign Language

Sign language can be a good dance aid to blend in occasionally. Take care to perform the movements as accurately as possible.

6. Presentation of a Dance

Make up, Hair, Style of Clothing, Jewelry, Footwear

Facial expression is part of the presentation. A light application of make up on eyes and mouth helps those at the back of the sanctuary see the dancers' facial expressions. Hair must be neat and brushed away from the face. Clothing is most functional for liturgical dance when it modestly covers the body, but still allows for body movements to be seen. A good choice for this is solid fabric underneath with a more flowing fabric over the top.

Simple outfits work best. A dancer is beautiful by her movements and facial expression. Minimal jewelry works best. Bare feet, light dance shoes or dance sandals allow the dancer to move smoothly and quietly over floor space. Many sanctuary floors are carpeted, so light shoes or bare feet are safer for movements.

At the Lectern

When I have choreographed a dance, the last thing I want to do is stand up and talk about it. I just want to dance, but we want people to understand the idea and the scripture that spoke to us from the song.

We may need to simply state the relevance. Sometimes an explanation is needed of what is going to happen in the dance. This would be like having a synopsis in a ballet which explains what the viewer is about to see, to enrich the experience of the viewer.

Sometimes we have a printed insert which is given out with the bulletin. At other times, we announce the title, writer and scripture reference for the song. We may read the chorus out loud. The whole purpose in liturgical dance is to share the Gospel with others and give the glory to God. With this goal in mind, the spoken explanation is an important part of the presentation, or as we call it, the dance offering.

Be blessed as you walk and dance with God!

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Anointed Joy & Raise the Praise

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About Sharon Geigl

Somehow, I am a dancer. I have always danced, and dance was probably my first language. It was a huge part of my life, even before my first ballet lesson at the age of eight. I loved the music and the movements and the way they blended together.

As I continue to explore my faith, I repeatedly discover there is a firm connection between my relationship with God and my ability to communicate how I feel about God through dancing. My heart and my dance time has been sweetly won by the Lord of the Dance, the Lord God Almighty.

Dance Certificates:

Ballet - Intermediate Certificate Cecchetti Method

Modern and National Dances - various I.S.T.D. certificates

Reference Material

Part One- *Dancing in the Church*

A Short History

Lucinda Coleman: excerpt from her thesis *Worship God in Dance*
www.pastornet.net.au/renewal/journal6/coleman.html

Roberta Jean Walther (Spirit Wind Dance Ministries): *Postures of Praise*

Dancing as Praise

Patricia Browne: *Liturgical Dance: Why We Do It*

Part Two- **Building a Dance Ministry**

Choreography: Music: with or without words

Concordia Reference Bible / copyright 1989 Concordia Publishing House / Luther on the Gospels

Luther's Text (Matthew) page 1177 / sources: Martin Luther, "*Werke*" (Weimar: Bolau, 1883) and *Luther's Works* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971)

Symbolism and Props

Salt and Light Ministries, Jeff Smith, www.saltandlightmin.org

Messianic Folk Dance

Monica DiFrancesco: *Messianic Dance Workshop* booklet of steps and sequences.

Also see www.stpbystp.com Teresa Narroway/Messianic Dance resources

Sign Language

Religious Signing by Elaine Costello and *The Kids' Pocket Signing Guide* by Mickey Flodin: both are picture books which include written descriptions of each movement.

Additional Reading on Liturgical Dance

Tricia Browne: *Why I Dance* / Glad Tidings Magazine May/June 2008

Praising God Through the Lively Arts, by Linda M. Goens / Abingdon Press, Nashville
ISBN # 0-687-03113-3

Dealing with Objections to dance in Christian worship: article on the internet
<http://bonasdancesite.homestead.com/objections.html>

www.reformedworship.org

Issue 75: *Entering the Discomfort Zone: Our First Experience with Liturgical Dance* by Ron Rienstra

Issue 75: *Praise Him with Dance: It's Time to Consider the Use of Dance in Worship* by Todd Farley

The Dancing Reverend

www.geocities.com/dancingrev/

The Christian Dance Fellowship of Canada: *Worship Dance / Celebration of Dance*.
www.celebrationofdance.com

The Living Word: Dance as a Language of Faith, by Kathleen Kline-Chesson

www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=1106

The Liturgy as Dance and the Liturgical Dancer, by Carolyn Deitering

A Time to Dance, by Margaret Fisk Taylor

The Spirit Moves Handbook of Dance and Prayer, by Carla Decile

Spirit in Action, by Irene Lamberti, DC, and *Moving Meditations* (through dance, video series)