

Is spiritual liturgical dance comparable to dance drama? Identifying liturgical dance pieces

By Dr. Karen Smith-Eyma, The Revere Group International LLC, Ft. Lauderdale, Florida

In my formative years as a novice dancer and teacher, I saw many variations of liturgical dance (1990's). Dancers in different parts of the world were trying to establish the same thing: Purpose and rules for liturgical dance. There were many similarities, yet there were also some profound differences. And although the differences made each group's presentation seem unique, to some onlookers, it was confusing. Priests and leaders wanted to understand what this liturgical dance was all about. They wanted a foundational premise and expectations from any dance ministry group, especially when ministering on a Sunday morning during their liturgy. Would the liturgical dance piece enhance the worship service or hinder it?

As I started out with Dr. Ann Higgins (nee Peterson), she gathered groups of professional dancers, teachers, administrators, and anointed church leaders to teach this craft. We would go where no other dance group had gone before: into the charismatic church. Dance had more often become associated with secular artistry: sometimes fun and other times filled with vulgarity, and anything but anointed. Over the next two decades I would continue on to teach both ballet and liturgical dance, as well sell dance supplies to the entire Bahamas as well as embark on research as a dance educator.

This particular question arose when a local competition re-categorized liturgical dance to dance drama. To some church dance leaders, the new description seemed like a mockery to church dance. The genre dance drama is described as creating meaning with movement, and associated with theatrical dance, storytelling and facial expressions. Maybe the new category infers that liturgical dance movement looks similar to acting. However, music for dance drama is not usually Christian, but tends to be theatrical or Broadway musical arrangements or a variety of other sounds. Furthermore, whereas theatrical dance uses props and character clothing, the term dance drama is more commonly an expression given to the movement used by performers trying to convey a story using movement, but with no particular attire.

On the other hand, liturgical dance, also known as "dance ministry", "interpretive dance" and "praise dance", is a type of spiritual or sacred dance. From an historical perspective, spiritual or sacred dance is described as religious dance usually used for worship (Oesterley, 1923). Oesterley, the professor, Christian writer and theologian, said both the movement and music connect the dancer with the Deity. Sacred dances are characterized by attire and music. For example, the medieval people wore large silk gowns in some performances with drums as compared to people of New Guinea who danced barefooted to drums and lyres.

While the type of movement and the Deity differs, spiritual dance seems to have a common goal: that participants connect with or come into the presence of their god, and to enhance the major aspects of their lives. **Regarding liturgical dance ministry, we can define its purpose as that of using movement to evangelize and edify the body of Christ** (Ephesians 4:12; Mark 16:17). For example, spiritual dance is associated with outcomes such as healing, deliverance, miracles, and other gifts of the spirit (Isaiah 11:2-3).

Whereas dance drama and other secular dance movement have its origins in stage plays and an audience, liturgical dance has an audience of one. The dance is performed for our deity, Jesus Christ. It is a means of connecting with Him. The scripture says: And He inhabits the praises of his people (Psalm 22:3). It's as if while dancing, the spiritual dancer is overtaken by the Holy Spirit and it takes over her actions, or her dancing ushers in the presence of the Holy Spirit to dwell in that place. This is the expected outcome of worship and praise dancing. However, there are other types of liturgical dance: celebration, warfare, and prophetic dance. Both the dancers and the audience expect to be comforted and find a spirit of peace or joy. It seems as if dancing ushers in the fruits of the spirit (Isaiah 11:2-3). This may be at a wedding, funeral, cultural festival, deliverance service, or other religious occasions. Hopefully, the Father will inhabit our praises, and someone will be set free, lives will be changed, burdens will be lifted, a sense of joy and exaltation will come over the people who see it or participate in the dance.

Dr. Myles Munroe stated in his book *Understanding the Purpose and Power of Woman*: "when purpose is not known, abuse is inevitable." When seeking an understanding of liturgical dance and distinguishing it from other dance genres, it is important to clarify its intended outcomes. From a group of 30 liturgical dancers and dance leaders surveyed, the most common question arising came from the area "understanding the balance between dance technique and anointing". The other areas of concern were finding Biblical references for dance, acceptable music, garments, and movement, expected spiritual outcome from dancing, and knowing who can dance (gender, age, position).

A summary of how to recognize a liturgical dance piece is to use the Bible as a reference for music, garments, movement, participants, and spiritual outcomes. The research should include the many other dance terms including jump, leap, twirl, and rejoice. Historically, sacred dance used string and percussive instruments including drums and lyres (Psalm 150:3-6). The instrument was usually representative of the culture of that era. The old testament describes garments from the priestly line as they were in charge of worship. The garments included fine linen robes and vests (1 Chron. 15:27-28). Liturgical dancers usually try to be fully covered so that the audience is not distracted and avoid sensual elements. The anointed men of God such as priests and kings led worship through singing and processional dancing (Joshua 3:13). There are fewer instances of female dancers (Exodus 15:20, 1 Samuel 18:6-7). However, as the gospel is given to the entire world, including Gentiles, the dance is used by more Christians as celebration, not as worship (Feeney, 2005; Luke 15:21-29; Matthew 11:16-17). The Bible makes general references about attributes needed for any

leadership roles in ministry. For example, in Acts 6:3 when deacons were appointed, they were to be honest, filled with the Holy spirit and wisdom. Biblical requirements state that persons in ministry should be skilled, anointed, and have an honest reputation (Proverbs 16:13).

Liturgical dance, as with other spiritual dances, seems to use some dramatic movement but involves more spiritual elements and have a sacred intent as compared to the goal of dance drama. They also differ because of the expected outcome of dance drama to merely give a visual to acting, whereas, liturgical dance desires spiritual release, power from God, and has an audience of one, God.