

Dancing His Story

Sunday morning, 1978, Resurrection Lutheran Church, during the last song of the worship service – something happened that had never happened before in this church – dance burst forth! The acolyte (liturgical assistant to the pastor) robed in a white alb began whirling and leaping before the Lord in a circular manner around the altar situated in the center of the room. Several of us found ourselves immediately, unhesitatingly joining in - spinning, twirling, skipping and leaping with all our might- as the worship that had been welling up within our hearts during these early years of the Liturgical and Charismatic Renewals exploded in this utterly spontaneous and abandoned outward expression of praise. And, though it has experienced many different forms and seasons, the birthing of dance initiated by the Lord that morning has continued for over thirty-five years. Unquestionably, it was the Lord who birthed the release of dance in this church for His pleasure, His purposes, and His glory - and it has been the faithfulness of the Lord that has carried it on to this time.

History is God’s story. It is truly *His Story*, and we are the language God is using to write in these prophetically filled days. How thankful and privileged I am to have been a part of telling His Story through the language of movement during my own generation. When I first experienced dance as an expression of praise, of my love for God bursting forth through the movement of dance, I had no idea that moment would be my entrance into a lifelong involvement of participating in the birth of many dance ministries, and the development and/or restoration of others for this historical resurgence of body, soul and spirit movement for the glory of God during this era of the church. As I have reviewed dance throughout Church History, I believe we have witnessed and continue to experience a unique move of the Holy Spirit involving the restoration of dance for the glory of God in our lifetime.

As a teacher and director, I became aware many years ago that each new class of dance ministry students lacked knowledge and understanding of the origins and history of the dance ministry into which they were entering. They did not know there was a time when dancing *before, for* and *with* the Lord was not the norm. They have, in a sense, been born into an environment where dance ministry is a normal part of worship expression. That is wonderful! But it has both its positive aspects as well as its challenges. Just as it is important for us, as Christians, to learn from 2000 years of church history, so too, I believe, is it important for those of us involved in Worship Arts Ministries to learn what God has revealed and how the Spirit has moved historically within the worship arts realm of HisStory. In order to understand our present and prepare for our future, we should build upon the solid foundations of the past – including the past history of dance used as an expression of Judeo/Christian praise and worship within our own generation. Let *us* fulfill the exhortation of the psalmist in declaring “One generation shall praise thy works to another; they shall tell of your mighty acts” (Psalm 145:4 – KJV).

I confess that I have found it impossible to comprehensively condense into these few pages the history of what the Lord has done in and through the Resurrection Dance Ministry over three and a half decades. Nevertheless, here is part of one person’s story – my story as a worshiper, dancer, choreographer and director with *The Resurrection Dance Ministry (RDM)*.

A brief historical overview of The Resurrection Dance Ministry

Prior to His ascension, Jesus told His disciples that they would be His witnesses “in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8 NIV). I have

found the analogy of this progressive expansion of local to regional to international ministry helpful in describing the growth and development of the Resurrection Dance Ministry. Here is a brief decade-by-decade synopsis.

And you will be my witnesses...
In Jerusalem (locally) – 1970's The Birth

Dance was released as a congregational expression of praise and worship during the Sunday Morning Worship Service. In addition to spontaneous responses to the Presence of the Lord, special offerings of choreographed dance and dramatic interpretation of Scripture were included in the worship services. Larger Drama/Dance Productions such as *The Witness* (Jamie and Carol Owens) and *The Lord's Supper* (John Michael Talbot) were presented locally and regionally. *The Resurrection Dance and Drama Ensemble* began with 20 – 30 young adults.

...in all Judea and Samaria (regionally and nationally) – 1980's The Growth

Dancing before the Lord developed into a ministry in and to the local congregation and to the larger geographical region through workshops and conferences with participants of all ages. The biblical study and understanding of worship and dance deepened and matured as *The Dance Ministry of Resurrection Church* worked with and learned from other national and international ministries and teachers. Teresa Gardner, the director, began serving with *The Tabernacle Dance Company* of The International Christian Embassy in Jerusalem, Israel (ICEJ). "Worship with Dance: Volume I" (a two-hour video featuring 24 dance selections of various levels within a local congregation's worship environment) was produced to encourage others beginning in dance ministry. Worship Dance Classes began at the request of several parents desiring that their children learn to worship the Lord with dance.

...to the ends of the earth (internationally) – 1990's
Missions and Training the Next Generation

The ongoing training of Worship Dancers/Future Minister/Disciples grew to nearly 100 students weekly from ages four through adult. Several classes became active and committed Ministry Teams of *The Resurrection Dance Ministry (RDM)*. Students of all ages participated in worship service dance offerings and ministry outreach opportunities began in the 3rd Grade. In 1992, RDM began teaching and ministering in Worship Conferences overseas throughout the former Soviet Union (Poland, Ukraine, Russia [from St. Petersburg/Moscow to Siberia/Vladivostok], Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan), the Philippines and Hong Kong. Worship Missions continued into the next decade with teams ministering in India, Argentina, Belize and Israel. RDM began teaching and leading Dance Ministries in several other churches locally and regionally. "Worship with Dance: Volume II" (a four-hour/two video compilation of dances, teaching and congregational expression) was produced. The annual Worship Dance/Creative Arts (now Worship Arts) Conference began in the summer of 1997.

2000's - Ever Growing, Ever Changing - from glory to glory....

Local, regional and international ministry continued to grow and RDM students grew up to become teachers, staff and faculty. *Zion Center for Worship and the Arts (ZCWA)* was officially established as a covering for ministries which had grown beyond the realm of the local church. ZCWA began partnering with *The Obed Project* and ministering annually in Israel with worship, intercessory prophetic prayer trips and service projects. Teresa's involvement with the

ICEJ/Israel continued for a decade as Dance Company Manager for The Tabernacle Dance Company. In 2002, ZCWA began *Dancing Together – A Multi Cultural Youth Dance Program* – as an expansion of RDM's already existing neighborhood outreach to the local international, refugee and underserved communities near inner city Charlotte, NC. An annual Winter Worship Dance/Arts Conference began in 2000. In 2005, Linda Sloan joined ZCWA's staff full-time. In 2011, Teresa received her Doctorate in Worship Studies and began implementing ZCWA's Online Course Studies Program.

It is good to give thanks for all the Lord has done! Unfortunately, there is not room here for the many testimonies of changed lives or to share the individual, ministry and congregational victories and trials, gracious successes and redemptive failures that God has used to continually form and transform us - changing us into His image from glory to glory (2 Cor. 3:18). Overall, though, the truths and principles that apply to our lives as Christians apply to our calling in dance ministry. Love for God and one another, relationships, unity, faithfulness and commitment, a servant's heart, walking humbly before God and esteeming others better than ourselves, recognizing and honoring one another's gifts, roles and callings, and so on. I do believe dance ministry may be one of the more challenging ministries to be involved in, as it requires our whole being – body, soul and spirit. It is a completely vulnerable and obviously visual expression of the Body of Christ and, therefore, the enemy works hard to damage and destroy God's image in any way possible. But, thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!!!

Our stories as part of the larger picture...

Let me share an encounter with the Lord and a vision He gave to me in 1990. I was visiting Times Square in New York City. Standing there, I thought of the many "stars" who over the years had performed and walked through the very spot where I was standing. The Lord pointed to me and said, "You are the generation I want to use to change things." My response was immediately, "But Lord, that is for people who know what they are doing." I knew I certainly was not qualified. I was just someone who loved God and was trying to be faithful with the little that I had. (Well, I think we all know it is not wise to argue with the Lord!) And, please be honest, how many of you reading this have felt unqualified for what the Lord has asked you to do?

Within the hour, while overlooking the city, the Lord showed me a world map – the type you used to see on walls with little colored push pins designating specific points. There were pins all over the earth, more in some places than others. The pins represented those the Lord had placed in specific places with the call of using dance for His glory all over the world. (When we began our international missions trips I had the privilege of meeting some of those the Lord had planted!) I sensed that many did not understand why they were *where* they were and others struggled with *why* they were called to this type of ministry - but God had planted them there for His purposes. And in His time they would come forth as part of God's revelation and covering the earth with His glory. When revealed in its fullness, the earth will have to reckon with this revelation and either accept or reject the glory of God.

Please do not underestimate your part in God's plan.

A brief personal testimony....

I am a worshiper. It was through worship that I came into a deeper relationship with the Lord and, as a young Christian, it was one of my deepest desires and prayers that the Lord would use me to lead others to worship Him so that they, too, would know and love him more. I have been more surprised than anyone that part of God's call on my life has been dance ministry. I was not a dancer, and I was not very good at it when I tried. However, shortly after I recommitted my life to following Jesus Christ at the age of 21, dance became the most natural and heartfelt expression of love and praise to God I had ever experienced. I could no longer keep inside all that was within me, and it came forth through expressive movement.

Like many of the pioneers of dance ministry in my generation, we were adults when the Lord called us into this ministry. And, though I had been dancing in the church for many years and even released into public dance ministry through many venues outside of the church, I was 32 years old when the Lord clearly told me to pursue dance. Knowing in the natural that I was well beyond the age when you would begin this type of pursuit, I knew it was the Lord. But what the Lord made very clear to me was the purpose. The classes and training were not so that I could become a great dancer, but so that I could make His message clearer. Increasing my movement vocabulary and the ability to execute the movements placed within my heart, mind and spirit by building a more solid technical foundation would enable me to more freely and clearly express visually through movement what the Lord was speaking and revealing. It would enable me to better show forth His sights and praises and to be a more faithful messenger of His revelation.

I am often asked if I think it is necessary for those in dance ministry to receive technical training, or is it enough for the Holy Spirit to guide us? My experience would encourage me to say "both." There are many venues for training and I certainly encourage Spirit-led decisions when making those choices. However, I do believe technical instruction is helpful for every type of dance communication - from congregational leading to prepared choreography to spontaneous and prophetic communication. We should pursue excellence in both Spirit and skill at whatever level or age we find ourselves.

So, what is your story within His Story?

If I may, I want to encourage you to begin where you are. Please do not deny the calling of the Lord nor ignore that quietly persistent voice of the Holy Spirit encouraging you to move forward, even though you may not feel like you know how. A journey takes place step by step.

If the Lord has placed the desire within your heart and spirit to dance before Him, to dance with Him, to make Him known to others, to show forth His glory through movement ... I will say to you what my pastor's wife said to me 35 years ago shortly after dance first burst forth in our church: "(Teresa), if you are the only one to dance before the Lord, I think that is just fine." *Your* story is important. I encourage *you* to respond to His initiation of love and to take His hand leading you in the dance.

May God the Father, His Son our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit lead you into His perfect will and calling for your life and may you say a resounding "yes" to all He has for you.

Shalom,
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Another BIBLIOGRAPHY style:

A Work in an Anthology, Reference, or Collection

Works may include an essay in an edited collection or anthology, or a chapter of a book.

Gardner, Teresa. "Dancing His Story." *Every Knee Will Bow – A Literary Treasury for the Advancement of the Arts in Worship*, edited by Rekesha Pittman and Crystal Daniels, Basar Publishing, 2014, 107-116.