

In praise of the lectionary and long-term planning for dance choirs

by Rosalie Bent Branigan

Dancers try with their whole being to be instruments for the worship of God.

Story one: Several years ago a dancer friend in Hawaii called on the Wednesday before Holy Week to say that her pastor had just asked her to dance for both Maundy Thursday and Good Friday and had requested pieces she had never danced before. She was frantically trying to find existing choreography that she could learn and perfect in a week. If none could be found she would have to do new choreography or not dance.

Story two: My pastor decided on Tuesday to base his sermon for Sunday on the Woman at the Well. Would I please choreograph Peter, Paul and Mary's "Jesus Met the Woman at the Well" and dance it during the sermon? Yes, I complied, but it was a rough week.

Story three: After weeks of work preparing the Shaker piece "Followers of the Lamb," arranged by Phil Dietterich, my nine very tall adult dancers arrived on Sunday morning to find that a bassoon quintet had been added to the service and we would have less than half the space we had planned on. The piece was a disaster.

I could go on for days with such stories, but you get the idea.

I do not believe that many choir directors would be asked to compose an anthem and have the choir learn it in a week, let alone a day. Nor do I believe the choir would be moved out of the choir loft to a new location in the chancel without a rehearsal, but that is the

equivalent of what happens all too often to those of us in dance and drama ministries.

For those of us in the leadership of dance and drama ministries it is our usual policy, when working as part of or auxiliary to a church staff, to try to fit in, to cooperate. This is especially true for "non-traditional ministries." We are so thankful to be allowed to exist that we bend over backwards to be team players. This is compounded if the group, the pastor or the choir director is new. All too frequently it has been my style not to make waves and to make it sound as if the dance choir can do anything, anytime or anywhere.

However, I have come to realize that I do my dancers and myself a great disservice when I agree to do things that put stress both on the group and on me. Also, I now appreciate how many pastors and choir directors have never worked with dance and drama groups and simply do not understand our parameters.

So what is the remedy?

Long-range planning, the lectionary and timelines. Fellowship members blessed with a pastor who preaches from the lectionary have the best tool available for long range planning. Each July when the *Worship Arts* lectionary guide is published, with its wonderful little synopses, I sit down and go through the entire year and mark every scripture for which I already have choreography. I then go back and look for scriptures that lend themselves to dance. In addition, I use the David Bone and Mary Scifres *United Methodist Music and Worship Planner*, published by Abingdon Press, and look for anthems and hymns that I might want to choreograph. Having done my homework I can go into long-range planning meetings, hopefully four to six weeks before



the start of each season, and ask for my dancers to be included in the appropriate services. Or I can sit down with my choir director or worship planning team knowing the themes for the coming services.

If the pastor is not a lectionary preacher, hopefully he/she plans sermon topics several months in advance and is willing to share these with the dance/drama leaders and the choir director. If not, then looking for festival and seasonal occasions or universal themes becomes the best means of planning.

Second, make a leadtime chart for your group. While there are many published resources for drama ministries, there is little written choreography published. As a result, dancers are forced to create most of their material.

For new choreography: it has been said that it takes an hour of preparation for every minute of a sermon. I believe that it takes even longer to create good choreography. If possible, at least two to three weeks should be allowed before rehearsals begin to choreograph a new piece. Before this process can start, a CD or tape of the material—be it anthem, hymn or spoken word—must be obtained or made. This is not always easy to obtain since the lead time for the choir is so much less that they usually have not even looked at the piece when the recording is needed. It is impossible to play and choreograph at the same time and those who sing for themselves while choreographing tend to move the notes around to fit the movement, so it is important for choir directors to realize how necessary a recording is for the success of the choreography. Happily, many anthems are being marketed with recordings so this problem is slowly being solved.

Rehearsal timeline:

Adults and Youth—For new choreography at least four rehearsals

For dances that have been presented before: three rehearsals

Children—Usually the same timeline but often it helps to start even further ahead and teach the harder steps separately so that the children are comfortable with them when they are incorporated into the piece.

Third, make a plan for space needs:

Rehearsal space and safety requirements: when

rehearsals are held in a space other than in the sanctuary, at least one rehearsal needs to be held in the chancel with it set up as it will be on Sunday morning. It is impossible to properly prepare a piece, especially with children, if they have to imagine how things will be. This is particularly important at Christmas and Easter when lilies, poinsettias, extra instruments, music stands or microphones are placed in the space after the last rehearsal. My church's sound people often set microphones at the very last minute before a service starts and the cords are placed across the dancers' paths untaped. All these things present a safety hazard as well as causing the dancers to have to readjust their steps and spacing. When the configuration of space changes it is, for the dancers or actors, as if the choir was given music with all new notes and words!

To help resolve the space situation, I make a scale drawing or diagram of the chancel that can be duplicated. For each service, well before the dancers rehearse, I draw in the set-up: communion table, pulpit, microphones, music stands, podium, flowers, everything that is to be in the space. I make sure that all groups concerned, including the custodians, are consulted and concur with the plan. Knowing beforehand that there is not enough room to dance if the bell tables are in place or there will be a small orchestra will help keep space and schedule conflicts to a minimum.

I have been called too pragmatic, told I care too much about the "little things" and even that I am negative because I am concerned and worry over all the above details, but I firmly believe that much grief can be avoided by this type of thinking and planning.

Few dancers are confident enough to be unfazed by inadequate preparation or last minute changes, yet many worship planners and musicians do not appreciate this fact. Those who dance in worship are brave, gutsy folks. I hope that this article will help make their job easier as they try with their whole being to be instruments for the worship of God.



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