



Dance is Prayer in Motion

Introduction

Rhythm Without Soul: Barriers

The black-clad dancer embraced the white material at the front of the church. As her spine curved and her arms cried, I saw repentance. By the end of worship, the Spirit used the movements to break open my heart.

As a communication tool in the 21st century, dance ministry “speaks” from soul to sole in a universal language. Research shows that only seven percent of communication includes the spoken word by itself.¹ According to “Nonverbal Communication Theories,” wordless cues include body language, tone, and appearance in much greater significance than we recognize.² That’s what makes dance so powerful. As the gospel is shared visually, intentional choreography transforms, communicates, and convicts people to function according to His design. That knowledge forges our call into dance ministry.

But Jesus beckons us with another call. It concerns more than dance presentation. Secular dance institutions distort the intended purpose for dance while historical church aversion ignores it. Confusion exists. As supporters of dance education, we must change this. The information style of the 21st century requires innovation in ministry communication. The road map to the current technological generation demands visual, creative, personal, and experiential styles. Dance fits this definition perfectly. However, the church may not “get it” yet.

1 A. Mehrabian. (1981) *Silent messages: Implicit communication of emotions and attitudes*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, (currently being distributed by Albert Mehrabian, am@kaaj.com).

2 Republished with permission of Sage Publications, Inc. Books from *Encyclopedia of Communication Theory*, “Nonverbal Communication Theories,” Stephen W. Littlejohn and Karen A. Foss, 2009); permission conveyed through Copyright Clearance Center, Inc.

When concise education tools, biblical clarity, and practical, targeted intent form the foundation for presented choreography, the universal, non-verbal language of dance communicates worship movement from soul to sole. On the other hand, when we don’t navigate dance ministry with knowledge and skill, or work with inadequate resources, sometimes barricades appear that prevent movement from achieving transcendent purpose.



A negative exposure to dance often shuts the door to future acceptance. Some in Christendom fear body movement but the intimacy of the body should not disqualify dance as a form of communication. In fact, the intimacy of dance naturally projects complex ideas through seemingly simple, pure movement.

We twist inside when we hear worried comments about the art form we love. Of course, THEY can reflect the problem; on the other hand, we need to remedy ministry confusion regarding the use of dance as much as we can. The balance of truth involves ownership. If we own our own issues and resolve them internally, we can eliminate the resistance to dance on our side of the stage. The rest of the resolution belongs to Jesus.

Can you identify with any of these barriers?

Barrier One: *I didn't even know that I was asleep until I heard the phone reverberating. It was 5:30 a.m. I yanked my pillow to the side as two fingers groped for the phone handle. The cheery voice said, "Are you the Soul to Sole Mary Bawden?" I sighed affirmation. My husband rolled over and groaned.*

"Well, I'm calling from New Joysey. My church is starting a dance team, and we can't find any practical materials to help us. Where can we get some?"

Solution: Nationally, we need Christian dance resources to support the ministries that are exploding everywhere.

Barrier Two: *The Christian dance concert began. I sat in my seat and strained to hear the song. The ladies came onto the stage teetering in toe shoes with costumes that showed skin falling forward. I looked away, and then I looked again. The group smiled as they moved; I knew they were trying to say something, but I didn't get it. Ministry? A woman next to me shoved my elbow and said, "Those swans would make a big splash, wouldn't they?" The snickers around me shut out the silence. I knew my ears were turning red; actually, they were hot. Then I shoved the worship folder to the floor and moved in my seat. Finally, it was over.*

Solution: We need to define what Christian dance ministry is and use that definition to develop clear ministry guidelines with targeted choreographic intent.

Barrier Three: *The trained dancer asked me to come to coffee and pray about ministry. Jen was surprised to hear the new pastor wanted to meet with her personally. His earlier comment dried her heart: “I have never seen dance used effectively for ministry communication.” Fear seeped through her skin and stole her peace.*

Solution: We need to educate pastors about the relevance of dance ministry with articulate goals.

Barrier Four: *God anointed Machel to dance radiantly and faithfully. She knew it, and I saw it. We talked the morning after the meeting with the church programming committee. They desired “trained dancers” for the Easter service—“real” dancers. The church yearned to develop a dance ministry with professionals that would choreograph soul to sole movement and transform lives.*

Solution: We need to validate the relevance of trained and untrained dancers, and provide movement tools that access all technical levels.

Barrier Five: *I knew that dance was supposed to touch my soul and give me hope, but it didn’t. They danced with skill and training. Technically, it was the best group I had ever seen. But the movement had nothing to do with the message of the song. The applause came from the appreciation of dance skill, not dance ministry. I walked out of church feeling sad.*

Solution: We need to make sure technical dance skill never ranks above a relevant gospel message.

Barrier Six: *I was embarrassed by what I saw. And I knew the seekers sitting next to me thought the dance was funny. Because it was. The skinny woman in the bright green dress wore a costume that was a size too small. Fortunately, she didn’t have a bust that choreographed its own song. But if she had, that movement would have been more interesting than the dance on stage. Confidently, she placed herself in the front for the audience. At the same time, the children in the back missed the meter entirely. The ribbons tangled together, and in the middle of the dance, their colors moved back and forth like half-chewed taffy. On the other side of the stage, two men wearing blousey shirts with visible edges carried flags as they hopped; I never saw their faces. With a dip, they*



completed the movement in a chorus that repeated over and over and over again. Unfortunately, the chosen song had no theological content. The final section of the choreography ended with a turning crystal ball and a smoke machine that had no relevance to anything.

Solution: We need to set up accountability structures inside dance ministry so that we do not present dances that do not reflect a gospel message in costuming, choreography or worship.

Barrier Seven: *But pastor, the dancer only touched her thigh because of a weight exchange. It kept her safe. Why do I have to cut that part of the dance?*

Solution: We need to be submissive to church leadership and have a sweet spirit, even though we don't always agree with leadership decisions.

For those of us who live with a passion for dance ministry, there is much to do. But the goal is transcendent. We need to understand what Christian dance ministry is and craft choreography that targets biblical messages. A clear, scriptural foundation will set the stage for Soul to Sole Choreography. Just as critical, we must not avoid the issues that cause internal tension. We must face them with courage so that we can stand in unity before a church that looks sideways at our gifts.