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Sacred Dance: A Call to Worship

The subculture I intend to observe, listen to, interpret, and analyze the behavior of is, "Gospel Praise Dancers". I plan to attend a performance in Forest Park at the end of June. I have however, seen performances in the past. The performance at Forest Park will be held in an auditorium with theater seating for the audience. The audience will probably include hordes of excited, well mannered young people. The population is affected by strong conservative myths which associate this movement with decadence and a departure from true and faithful worship. I am not certain how this resistance of acceptance has affected this group. I am however, certain that the young swarm to their performances. Why is a question I would like to ask.

Sacred or Praise dancing is a new phenomenon has sprouted wings in churches across America. Gospel Dance Ministry is a clearly define culture. This weekend I had the opportunity to attend a workshop where a group of devotees gathered to discuss their craft. The groups attending were easily identifiable by customs and "garments" they wore. Each group has a leader and some are associated with particular churches. I have chosen a group that is associated with the church I attend. This will give me access to information, in as much as a lone geographical site is not available. I plan to attend performances, use archival materials, published hand books and DVD's for my project. I have seen several, "Praise Dance" performances and in most cases I have enjoyed their ministry. A few of the areas of my interest include their history, garments, flags, purpose, and the people involved in gospel dance. I have very little information regarding this subculture and I am eagerly looking forward to researching this group.

The Researcher

I am a middle age, married, mother of four and grand mother of eight. I was born and grew up in Chicago. I have been a member of a church for over twenty five years. I have lived in O'Fallon for twenty years or more. I feel my life has afforded me a wide range of experiences both in city and small town venues. I enjoy plays, the theatre and family gathering. I am the oldest of three children born to a hard working middle class single mother, who later married. Oh, by the way I was the only girl. My parents eventually purchased a home in a neighborhood that strongly objected to our being there. Initially, life was awful with children often attacking my brother as we walked to and from school. This of course meant my committed involvement. Slowly our arch foes began to move, and life became bearable.

Life continued, I married and began a family. Soon new foes arrived, gangs. Trouble was again on the horizon. My family chose to relocate to a small town where life once again slowed

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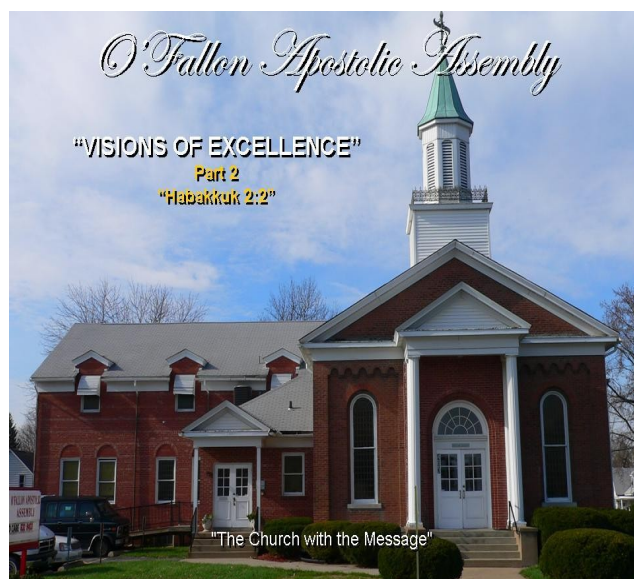
and new challenges appeared as my husband began to minister in a small church. Cultural differences immediately became evident. Hours previously spent involved in church activities abruptly ended. Fishing and leisure time were now paramount. Women were limited in their participation in intricate works in the church. After five years our work was completed and my husband set out to build a new ministry. I am a mother four successful children and the grandmother of eight. I enjoy my grandchildren and often have the pleasure of seeing them. My third child is in the Air Force and is now stationed at Scott Air Force Base. I am delighted they are back home after three years overseas. My fourth child was born physically challenged and has been happily married now for three years. During the formative years of my children lives I was a stay at home mom. This seemed to work best for my family. To augment our income I began to do in-home child care. This was the beginning of a long career of service to children. I am happy to say one I don't regret.

Currently, I am working in a church owned daycare. I am presently serving as a teacher in the classroom for children 3 years to 5 years of ages. I am committed to the well being of children and much of my time is without pay. I have worked for five years in this center and love what I do. Now, don't misunderstand me I would enjoy getting a check for what I do but often that's not possible. Not to mention I am often very tired because the work is quite demanding, but the rewards are innumerable. Volunteerism is a phenomenon encountered usually in the upper class. Economically speaking I rank in the lower middle class and hope that one day the service I render will bring financial benefits.

My church experience is helpful in understanding some of the obstacles that may be faced by this new dance movement in the church, today. During, our early involvement and commitment to the church, my husband was faced with similar problems as he began working with young people reenacting biblical scenes. Yes, twenty years ago plays in our churches were considered taboo. Change in the church appears to be slow but often thrilling and membership building. I think this is a positive change in the church. After probing my position as a researcher I realize I am indeed biased. It is my opinion however, that I can present "Gospel Dance Ministry" in an objective way in a paper.

The Site

The building is a church located in O'Fallon, Illinois. The property is one block long, to the left sits a small parking lot filled with cars parked to an angle. Looking up I see two white columns extending from the roof to steps at each of two entrances. On the roof sits a large white steeple surrounded by a small wrought iron gate. The building is old, perhaps even a landmark. Leaving my car, I walk past the ramped entrance for the disabled and ascend four concrete steps. Pulling open the first of a set of three double doors I enter. The room is L shape.



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As I step into the small maroon carpeted annex, with matching cushioned chairs; which is clearly an addition to the original structure, voices permeate the air. Directly positioned, in front of the chairs is a stage or pulpit area. Seated on the stage in a high back Plexiglas looking seat sits a smiling middle age man in a white robe. Flanking him sits both men and women. Is this a sign? Churches who generally allow women in positions of authority are usually considered liberal. A short right turn from the annex brings me into a larger area, complete with pews. This site is used for multiple purposes. Today, people of all shapes and sizes are gathered for church services.

Dance presentations are normally done on the floor in front of the pews. This would normally present a viewing difficulty; for those seated in the annex, but placed strategically in a corner sits a monitor. Now all vistas are unobstructed.

Interview with an Enthusiast

A thinly framed woman walks through the doors eyes fixed, weaving swiftly through small groups of people that impede her path. I must speak with her before she gets busy. She is the leader of the church's Young People Ministry and the Praise Dancers. I have spoken to her before and need a few questions answered. "May I speak to you a moment"? Her warm response, "sure", is encouraging.

Gospel Dance Ministry is a new phenomenon that has sprouted wings in churches across America. Lakita Humber of "Panh Praise and JOYED UP! Dance" describes this new subculture, as "Presenting the gospel using music and sacred dance, which are expressions of praise and thanksgiving to God".

As Lakita a single woman, articulate and confident, continues to describe this work she smiles warmly. "I am so excited you have chosen this subject to write about", she replies. "There are clear references to dance in the Bible, both in the Old and the New Testaments".

J.O.Y.E.D. U.P!

This team is composed of children from the ages of 6 years to 13 years of age. All the members of this group are children of whom parents are members of the church. Their dances are choreographed by their team leader, Ms. Lakita Humber.

Ms. Humber a former member of the U.S. Air Force, is a 'no nonsense person' who seems to have the respect of the children she works with. During rehearsals they sit attentively as their leader demonstrates, and imparts her visions of how they will minister



A Time to Dance

The bible in Ecclesiastes chapter 3 verses 1 through 8 speaks of daily events. Verse one states "1 There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven": While verse four states, 4 a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and "a **time to dance**," This passage clearly indicates in the Old Testament dance was permissible.

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A King Dances

2 Samuel 6:14, 15

14 David, wearing a linen ephod, danced before the Lord with all his might, 15 while he and the entire house of Israel brought up the ark of the Lord with shouts and the sound of trumpets.

Special clothing was worn by the King, trumpets heralded the victory, and the King danced before the people. Just as in days of old great significance is given to the garments worn in ministry, today. These garments are considered sacred and are to only be worn for dance ministry. They may be purchased online by companies that specialize in clergy vestments or handmade by individuals. They are considered imperative in conveying the proper atmosphere for the dance that is presented. In addition, colors, in the garments are considered important. The colors can represent the heavens (blue), royalty (purple), holiness (white), etc. and are often chosen based on the dance performance.

Riding the Wave

Sacred Dance Ministry may not be well understood but finds deep inroads into the biblical study of worship. This movement has at its center both pros and cons. The challenges conservative church groups face in their ideas of worship may cause great controversy but this may be offset by the ability of the church to reach an untapped force; “the youth of our communities”. The choice of ministry today is, “Will we ride the wave?”

Revelation Teen Dance Ministry

Revelation is the name of the youth dance team in the Pentecostal church in O’Fallon, Illinois. Today, Sunday July 1, 2007 I have a scheduled a meeting with Alan, a 15 year old male whose mother has been a member of this church for at least 16 years. Alan, an African American male has been member of “Revelation” from its inception. I arrive early and begin my normal duties; checking voice mail as I await Alan’s arrival. He arrives wearing a broad smile as usual and apologizes for forgetting our previously scheduled meeting. Alan’s life has been marked by life crisis’ that would devastate the best of us. A father recently released from prison, a new step-father and unfortunately friends who have been murdered.

Alan can you tell me what you feel about being a member of “Revelation”?

“I like to dance and sing but in dance I read the word (bible) and pray before I dance”. “I like it also because it keeps me busy and out of the streets”.

You recently lost a friend did your relationship with dance and God help you?

The smile slowly leaves Allan’s face. He bows his head and pauses.

Finally, he raises his had and says, *“Prayer I worked through it. He pauses again; “I wish I could have done something”* the air seems heavy.

It’s time to change the subject.

“Alan how has Lakita influenced your life, I ask?

A smile returns to his face.

“I look up to her, she’s cool, she helps and she’s probably praying when you don’t know it”, he responds.” She takes me to conferences and I meet new people and learn new dances. I am looking forward to going to another conference soon, there they will be teaching tap dancing.”

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"I love to practice" Alan says and begins to look uncomfortable I take the cue. "Well, Alan I have really enjoyed talking to you today thanks for talking to me." "Your welcome" he says as he gingerly walks out of the room.

The Journey

It is late afternoon on Thursday, June 21, 2007, I feel terrible, and all I want to do is go home and go to bed. Just as I prepare to lay down the telephone rings. "Honey it is Lakita," my husband calls. Oh no, I reluctantly answer the telephone. "Hi Lakita". Hi! First Lady (a term for a pastor's wife). I spoke to Ms. Charlye and she has given permission for you to sit in on our rehearsal, tonight. "Can you come"? "It is in St Louis, Missouri." "If you drive you can follow me and leave when you are ready". "O.K.", I respond. I will be by at 6:15 p.m.

Lakita arrives promptly at 6:15... As we walk to our respective cars she joyfully tells me she we try to drive so I won't get lost. I have all ready determined to be positive about this meeting. I buckle my seat belt and I tune the car radio to a station I enjoy. It is a beautiful evening and about 85 degrees. I am not feeling ill anymore, in fact I feel pretty good now. Peering through my front window as we exit the Martin Luther King from Illinois into St. Louis, Missouri the sun is setting. A single puffy cloud hangs just below the yellow-orange sunset. What a beautiful sight. Is this a sign of what is to come?

The Hood

Exiting Kingshighway my heart begins to beat faster. I have never been here before. Where am I? This is appears to be a bad neighborhood. Well, maybe we are just passing through. No, she is pulling over. On the corner sits a large two story building with very few if any windows. "We are going this way" remarks Lakita, walking toward the building. Entering everything is immaculate. We walk up stairs, down a hall and Lakita knocks on what appears to be a metal door.

Ms. Charley's Body Shoppe - The Dance School

We enter a large office with a computer, and chairs place in a large circle. Seated are about twelve women; some middle age, some young, some talking and some even laughing. a happy voice from somewhere in crowd greets us, "Hi". "Hi Ladies I chime" *"And gentleman,"* another sternly replies. I quickly look around the room again. Yes, there is a man seated in a seat near a window, comfortably blending into the setting. Oh boy, my first mistake. "And gentlemen" I reply. A short physically fit middle age woman sit at the computer. Her hair is neatly combed and pulled up into bun and she is wearing a black warm up outfit. On her shirt is written, "Charley's body Shoppe."

Prayer

Ms. Charley begins to pray. As she audibly prays she begins to rehearse adverse situations that have occurred in the lives of the group. The group responds by saying "Thank you Jesus" and silently nodding their heads. The atmosphere is solemn. Charley begins to cry. Soon she ends the prayer takes her seat again and begins to speak, daubing away tears. She begins to speak of the great acts of deliverance (or rescue) in the lives of the people present. Her voice now becomes both tender and resolute. "Most of you know the third trial of the person who murdered my son is due to begin soon". "I know God will bring my family and I through just as he has before, continue to pray for us" She slowly rises and sends the team to the rehearsal hall.

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The Performance:

Charley's Body Shoppe
Presents

JESUS REIGNS

Saturday June 30, 2007

Midred Bastian Theatre

5600 Oakland Avenue, St. Louis, Mo



Conclusion

My initial premise in researching this subject, "Sacred Dance" was to research dance in the church as a new swiftly spreading phenomenon. During, my research I have found sacred dance or gospel dance can be traced as far back as biblical times. Smith's Bible Dictionary describes the dance as symbolic of rejoicing and is also coupled with mourning. This of course destroys my initial premise as sacred dance being new. However, it is my view this biblical position is not widely known but there appears to be a wind of change introducing churches all over the world to its scriptural validity. Now in retrospect I believe my topic more accurately should have been, "The Resurgence of Sacred Dance: A Call to Worship".

Merriam-Webster describes a subculture as an ethnic, regional, economic, or social group exhibiting characteristic patterns of behavior sufficient to distinguish it from others within an embracing culture or society. While sacred dance is not confined to an ethnic group, or region, or economic, or social group it does distinguish itself from traditional church groups or culture. In addition, these groups are easily identifiable by their customs and the garments they wear.

Surprisingly, I found the research of this group reaffirmed and yet challenged my own beliefs in God. My most helpful resource has proven to be Ms. Lakita Humber her inside connections allowed me to view this subculture, up close and even personally. Her passion for this "work in ministry spurred me on to examine areas I would not have ordinarily noticed or visited. Yes, sometimes against my own will I found myself in places I had never been but I now am a better person for having gone. The introduction to the dance team at, "Charley's Body Shoppe" (a dance school) was eye opening. It takes a special dedication for people to go into communities who are economically deprived and not only work but provide social programs. Ms. Charley's level of commitment seemed to soar above the ordinary. Her emotion-full and powerful prayer spoke clearly of her commitment not only to community but to her God. How else can one explain a continued commitment when faced with personal challenges of the death of her son. Many voices have piped, "One Person Can Make a Difference" but she lives these words every day.

The recital at St Louis Community College was also, an unraveling of preconceived erroneous ideas. It was my initial position that most of the audience to this performance would be, "well mannered young people". Somewhere in the back of my mind I just knew the number of people attending would be low. Again, to my surprise there were people of all ages attending. Especially, surprising was seeing the elderly come in, stooped, on canes, walking slowly but determinately to their seats. The young were also there but the very young were there too (3 and 4 year olds). My thoughts were jumbled and confused. How did so many people know about "Sacred Dance" and I had only just learned of it? Finally, the auditorium didn't have a few hundred people but

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rather was entirely full. Thousands sat laughed and applauded as group after group performed. I don't have answers to all my questions and of course hind sight is always better. I should have asked the audience questions at intermission but quite honestly it didn't occur to me, until much later. I found this opportunity to research this group inspiring and now realize time brings about change and change can occur right before our eyes. In conclusion, although I found, "Sacred Dance" currently is a subculture it is my opinion it will soon emerge as a part of mainstream church worship.

Glossary Terms

Sacred: dedicated or set apart for the service or worship

Praise: to glorify (a god or saint) especially by the attribution of perfections

Yadah: Genesis 29:35 To hold the hands

Towdah: Josh 7:19 An extension of the hand

Zamar: Judges 5:3 to touch the strings of a musical instrument

Tephillah: Psalms 17:1 intercession

Shabach: Psalms 117:1 to speak in a loud tone

Halal: 2 Chronicles 5:13 to boast ; top be clamorously foolish; wild abandonment

Tehillah: Psalm 22:3 to laud

Word of wisdom:supernatural revelation by god revealing divine purpose

Word of knowledge: mind of god revealing things places, people present or past.

Discerning of spirits: being able to hear and see into the spirit world.

Spiritual warfare: for we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but againstEph 6:12

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