

Liturgical dance, part of praise and worship

By **Connie Brennan**
For Coastal Parent

Voluminous skirts of purple and white, breath-like with the air of whirling dancers, a blur of brightly-colored ribbons streaming from floral wreaths, the rhythmic jangle of tambourines, processions of swaying palm branches and candles held high, illuminating the way to the altar. Is this some sort of new cult or

strange religious ritual? On the contrary, these are snapshots from the new wave of liturgical dance which is sweeping Savannah's oldest established churches.

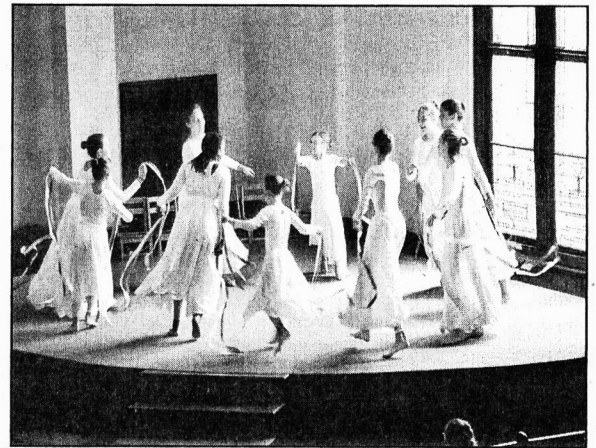
But it's not exactly something new. Dance has a rich biblical heritage. Scripture gives many references to the use of dance as a form of joyous celebration and reverent worship.

Inclusion of dance in the liturgy continued until the early 1500s when fear of its misuse

eventually forced it out of the church and into the secular realm. Gradually, with the renewal of the church in the 20th century, dance has begun to find increasing acceptance in the worship life of the church once again.

Asbury Memorial United Methodist Church, whose sign out front proclaims "where the joy of God is expressed creatively," has been incorporating liturgical dance in its worship services for 10 years. Faced with the challenge of boosting the church's declining congregation, the Rev. Billy Hester and wife Cheri, both of whom had enjoyed careers in show business in New York, shared a vision of incorporating their love for the arts into the worship experience. Both believed that it could be a way to encourage participation by those who had formerly felt excluded or limited during worship experiences.

Sunshine streams through tall stain-glassed windows in the sanctuary where the dancers stand in a circle, hands clasped and heads bowed. It's a Saturday morning, a time when most youngsters would still be lounging in bed or watching



Connie Brennan photo

Dancers at Asbury Memorial United Methodist Church.

cartoons. The group opens its rehearsal with a short prayer. As they prepare their bodies to dance by stretching, they talk about the Bible story that they are about to express through dance and its relevance to their lives today. They talk about the history of the musical selection, a traditional spiritual, its place in world history, and its relevance to the spiritual struggle of mankind in all cultures throughout time.

The group incorporates a

wide variety of dance and music styles, including traditional hymns and spirituals, classical, Gospel, show tunes, jazz and pop. Dances are created as a testimony to biblical passages, to reinforce a sermon's message, make social commentary, express a meditative prayer or jubilant celebration of God's love. The group, ranging in age from 5-50, paid tribute to 9/11 by creating a

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Notebook

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gram, domestic infant adoption, international adoption, special needs adoption, the home-study process, adoption law, adoption costs and assistance and adoptive panel discussion.

The seminar is sponsored by Southeastern Fertility Center and Adoption Advocacy. To reserve a free seminar packet call (843) 714-2216.

SIGN UP FOR ACTIVITIES

The Bluffton Family YMCA is taking registrations for the following fall programs: youth soccer for ages 2 to 10; gymnastics for ages 24 months to high school; adult dodge ball; and healthy kids after school program for ages 4 and older.

For more information, call (843) 757-9622.

STORY TIME FOR CHILDREN

The Hilton Head Island branch of the Beaufort County Public Library, 11 Beach City Road, will begin registration for the Fall Story Time program today.

The program will begin the week of Aug. 23.

Programs offered will be Caterpillar Lapsit for 12 to 24 months; Mother Goose for 2- and 3-year-olds; Bookworm for 4- and 5-year-olds; and the educational Home School program for elementary school-aged children.

Day care providers and pre-schools are invited to schedule story time visits to the library on a first-come basis.

There are informational brochures available in the library's Children's Room.

For more information, call the Youth Services staff at (843) 342-9200.

Dance

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moving tableau depicting scenes from the event. In contrast, on Easter morning colorful ribbons and flowers arched over heads, full white skirts swirled and tambourines shook to the beat of conga drums and voices of the choir as they danced down the aisles in joyous celebration.

"Dance was developed as a form of praise," Lawanda Tillman said. Tillman is co-director with Keisha Cohen of First African Baptist Church's two liturgical dance ensembles. She believes that liturgical dance addresses the more physical needs of youth to move while adding something different to the worship experience.

"Dance is another element of praise and worship. It is another

area in which I can express my love and admiration for Christ," she said.

It is also a way in which she hopes to direct people's focus to the inner rather than the outer appearance. During a recent performance to a Kirk Franklin song, half of the dancers were dressed in traditional floor-length liturgical dresses, while the other half wore a hip-hop style.

"God is not necessarily looking at the outside, but rather the inside. For all of God's people - black, white, old, young, men, women - the focus should be on praise and worship, not the outer appearance," Tillman said.

Overcoming by Faith Ministries has taken it to another level by the creation of its Highest Praise School of the Arts. Not only does the church include dance during the praise and worship portion of each service, but they have devel-

oped a dance program to address the technical component by enhancing technique. The program is so popular that there are five ministries divided by age group spanning third graders to senior women.

Nancy Sprauve, director of the school, sees liturgical dance as an opportunity to reach youth on their level. "Youth see that they are relevant," she said.

Dance has become a power-

ful outreach ministry for the church, with invitations to perform at community centers, youth conferences, Gospel Fest, and the Civic Center.

"Not only do we reach out, but we call the community in," Sprauve said. On Friday nights anywhere from 200-300 youth can be found at what the church calls a "Christ Party" where youth celebrate God through liturgical dance.

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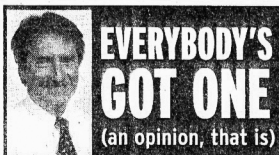
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