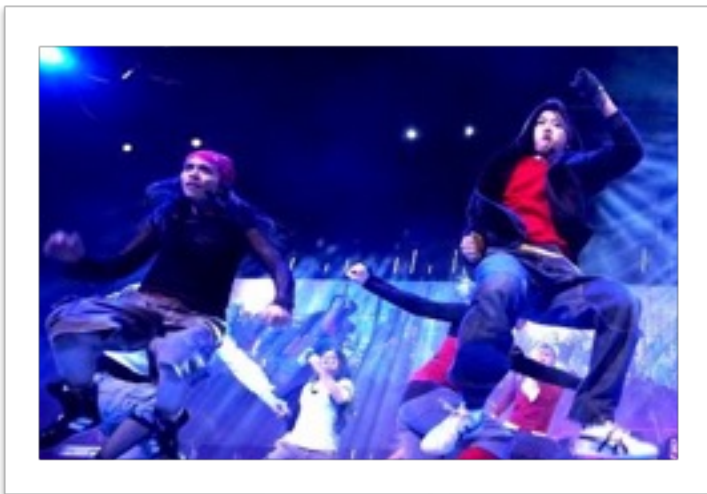




Dance in Outreach

by Mary Jones

In the 1970s there were not many churches that had heard about dance as a way of expressing worship or evangelism – in fact most evangelical churches would have regarded it as quite inappropriate. Dance, although a part of faith expression in the Bible, had virtually been lost to the church for around 200 years and so the images it would have brought to peoples' minds were of secular entertainment, sometimes difficult-to-interpret culture or sexual stimulation. My own parents did not think dance appropriate for Christians so it was somewhat a surprise when at the age of thirty, with very little background in dance, I felt a strong call to become involved in dance as ministry. I began training, started a small dance group at church and taught children in the local school system where we were living in the USA. On my return to Australia I founded the Christian Dance Fellowship of Australia (CDFA). This was a time when several Christian arts organisations came on the scene and after CDFA had been operating for 10 years we went international to help other countries found their own Fellowships. Since that time CDFs have started in about 25 countries on all continents with 13 having become fully chartered. Every three years we meet for an international conference – this year in Malaysia.



Hillsong

The purpose of the Dance Fellowship is to encourage and network Christians interested or involved in dance and movement, whether amateur or professional, using it in the church or community. It also seeks to provide training and to serve church communities who want to introduce or develop ministry through dance. Because dance is a language of communication it can express most of the ministries of the church including evangelism. The

advantage it has over the use of words alone is that dance is visual and eye-catching, is something not usually associated with the church and can communicate such things as emotions and relationships holistically, touching the heart. Images are often retained together with their emotional imprint long after words have faded. Combined with music and

often with words, dance has a strong impact and a huge potential to reach a modern audience. There are many different styles of dance that can be used to reach different groups of people. Hip-Hop is very popular with youth both to do and to watch. Many youth groups have used it to attract and train youth and in outreach to other youth. A dance group is a very practical discipleship group where people learn to relate, minister and develop as Christians. There is a growing body of Christian music in the Hip-Hop style but often the message carried when danced is not so much in the words of the song as in the life and energy of the dancers. It is very important in all styles that the dance style is “redeemed” rather than just being taken straight out of a secular environment and copied. Even if it is put to Christian music some movements or the way they are executed may not express the right atmosphere or values. This may be true, too, of facial expressions or costumes. Both choreographers, leaders and dancers need to be aware of this and prayerfully seek to make adjustments so that what is conveyed speaks of Christian values and conveys God’s presence. Hip-Hop and other styles of street dance, especially when combined with a testimony or short message, can be very effective in reaching young people.

Other western styles such as Ballet, Contemporary, Tap and Jazz are also popular and will be appropriate for different themes and occasions. They can be used for outreach to the community in many different ways in both performance and participation. There are several highly trained Christian dance companies that work both in Christian and secular settings. They have the opportunity to be salt and light in the dance community and also to be a more acceptable way of bringing the gospel to many places that would not want or accept a preacher. Springs Dance Company in England take programs around to schools. Dance Ad Deum and Ballet Magnificat in the USA have both worked within Christian and secular settings in teaching, choreographing and performance. At one concert I attended I was moved to see company members come out at the end of the concert to pray with people. But it is not only the highly trained dancer that can be effective. If something simple is done well and communicates strongly it is often just as meaningful. Even more important than skill is sincerity and relationship — people are looking for meaning and reality that speak to them emotionally and spiritually more than intellectual appeals.



[Springs Dance Company](#)



Kaloob

National cultural styles are also being redeemed to express the gospel. These may be folk styles used for community dances or performance styles. Kaloob, one of the top cultural companies in the Philippines is a Christian company. Their founder and director, Pastor Ed Lapiz, is senior pastor of Day by Day ministries and Co-ordinator of CDF Philippines. Kaloob has a unique ministry in the way members have travelled to meet and spend time with tribal groups throughout the Philippines researching their dances, asking permission to record, learn and perform them. In this way, many dances have been preserved that might otherwise have been lost. When first performed the company dances them in the church and dedicates them. They will then perform them in both secular and Christian settings and adapt them to Christian music to be danced as part of the worship in church services. Kaloob

performs regularly at large cultural festivals and expositions alongside other Filipino companies with opportunities to witness in these settings in several ways.

In Bali, Indonesia, where the majority of the people are Hindu, Nyoman Murdita became a Christian through dancing with a Balinese Troupe that was composed of both Christians and Hindus. He then went on to form his own company that had both Christians and Hindus, both because there were not enough Christians trained in Balinese dance but also because of his own experience of finding the Lord through a similar group. They dance both traditional dances and Christian stories using the Balinese style. Kalai Kaviri, a Christian College I visited in India teaches both the classical style Bharata Natyam and several folk styles to both Christians and Hindus and forms a company that takes programs out into the community. The repertoire consists of both Bible stories, Christian themes and social themes and they have been invited to temples as well as churches to dance. When they go to a temple they will perform a social theme program but include one or two Bible stories. Because it is told in dance they are able to go to venues and occasions where normally the gospel would not be heard or accepted.

Seth Newman, CDF Ghana Coordinator, teaches African dance at the University of Ghana. For many years he has directed a dance and drumming group that has taken the many different tribal dances of Ghana and danced them to Christian songs. The church has been slow in seeing the opportunities this presents because of early missionary teaching but have seen it bring identification and joy into church communities as well as being a very effective outreach in both town and rural settings. Dance is such an integral part of African culture and when people see their own tribal dances bringing a Christian message they can feel that the gospel is relevant to them as Africans. In CDF South Africa which includes a number of races it is much more common to see a combination of western and African

styles used with some exciting and effective results. This has modelled the working together of different racial groups that has been so important in that country and a witness to the unity we can find in Christ.

It is not only in performance where dance finds expression. There are many other ways of interacting with the community and bringing the Christian message in word and deed. Dancers can work with community groups to help them express their problems and aspirations. This has proved to be a



CDF Ghana

very significant way of working with disadvantaged communities. Classes and workshops can provide opportunities for performance, working creatively, relating to others, developing greater awareness of one's own body and feelings, exercise, relaxation. Many people are looking for exercise that has a spiritual component and gravitate to Yoga or Tai Chi. Here is an opportunity to provide a Christian equivalent. Dance Therapists work with those with social, psychological or physical challenges. Dance schools with a Christian foundation provide a service to the community. Hillsong church in Sydney, Australia, so well known for its contemporary worship music has a large dance school from which many families have found their way into the church. The founder of the Christian Dance Fellowship in Canada was converted through a Christian jazz teacher at a dance class she attended in Singapore.

Unfortunately, many sections of the church are still caught up in Platonic idealism where the body is seen as inferior and the emphasis is on the mind along with the separation of secular and spiritual. This does not help to reach out into a post-modern world where the church is often viewed as irrelevant and not connected to the present reality. Dance can help to bridge this gap with its holistic character — a way of expressing the artistry and creativity of God and the two greatest commandments that Jesus spoke of — to love God with heart, mind, soul and strength and your neighbour as yourself

This is covered comprehensively in "Taking it to the Streets" by J.Nathan Corbitt and Vivian Nix-Early, 2003 Baker Books, Grand Rapids, MI

Mary Jones

2006

International Christian Dance Fellowship | www.icdf.com