

Worship Music & Ministry

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United Church of Christ
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Dancing through the Screen

By Betsey Beckman



An ecstatic and expressive being, **Betsey Beckman** grounds her dance offerings in an integration of Theology (Masters in Ministry), Movement Therapy, and InterPlay. From classrooms to convocations, cemeteries to sanctuaries, retreats to reconciliation services, Betsey has honed the skills of storytelling and artistry through the gift of embodiment and opens these doors for others to dive in and bring forth creative expression. Through the years, she has honed a full repertoire of Biblical StoryDances, and delights in directing the Movement Ministry at St. Patrick Catholic Church in Seattle.

In her recent years, Betsey has been collaborating with Abbey of the Arts to develop resources for prayer and embodiment which include leading programs in Germany, the UK and Australia, as well as publishing DVDs and CDs for online retreats. She shares the gift of playful embodiment whenever possible! You can find more of her work at www.TheDancingWord.com.

When I was a child, I remember wishing that I could break the glass of the TV and step into a world that seemed so dynamic and compelling beyond the screen. I longed for a kind of “Lion, Witch and the Wardrobe” journey into an adventure beyond our little “den” where we watched “Wizard of Oz,” “Batman,” and Disney’s “Wonderful World of Color.”

Call this strange, but there is something about that vision that is coming true for me now. TV is no longer an experience for movie actors or talk-show hosts alone; due to the magic of Zoom and/or livestream offerings, TV (and our devices) are becoming interactive screens that we reach through to share life with our friends, our loved ones, our yoga instructors, our doctors, our reunion classmates, our ministers, our choir directors, our fellow congregants.

How does this affect the body at prayer? The longtime habits of TV viewers have mostly been passive, where a body just plunks itself down to be entertained. But times, they are a-changin’! Now through the magic of the screen, students are called upon to answer questions; dance and piano instructors call forth scales and leaps; birthday and wedding toasts are being raised for celebration! So, the question becomes, for ministers in the church, how can we foster embodied prayer and engagement in worship through our new online modalities?

Not all churches have a commitment to dance in worship or movement as ministry. But if your church has this practice, then these strange times are encouraging a whole new skill set and treasure box of creativity to bring the gift of embodiment to our shared worship. And as challenging as this is for all of us, this moment of pandemic offers some unique opportunities in the realm of dance prayer, just as it has in sung prayer.

Let me venture to say that the commitment to embodied worship is perhaps even more important at this moment in history. Since a large number of our communities have not able to meet for worship in person, we haven’t been gathering in three-dimensionality as the Body of Christ, feeling our hearts beat together, our hands clasped in passing the peace, our voices rising in unison, our lips open to “taste and see the goodness of God.” And so, for anyone creating worship experiences, we have new challenges to help communicate the breath and bone of our shared physicality in the incarnation of our worship, community and prayer.

For many years, the ministry of movement has been my particular calling. My own tradition is Roman Catholic, and at my home parish, I have been challenged over the past series of months to transfer many of our time-honored traditions of movement prayer to online versions of these offerings. I’d like to share some of what we have found to be possible, and also to share some of the creations of our local UCC church with whom I have had the joy of co-creating.

There are a variety of goals one might have in creating embodied offerings for worship:

1. To kinesthetically embody moments of worship, break open the Word, and stir the hearts of those witnessing.
2. To deepen the awareness of the presence of the Holy.
3. To engage community members (trained dancers, youth, children, or those with various learning styles) in a creative process whose fruits are shared with the community at large.
4. To model and invite participation of all community members in a shared body prayer.

Or some combination of all of the above!

Luckily, my own ministry of dance has also led me to develop the gifts of videography and editing, and just in time for this particular moment of pandemic. Here are a few examples of how the gifts of dance, embodiment, and video might be interwoven in our seasons of worship.

Breaking Open the Word / Moving Hearts

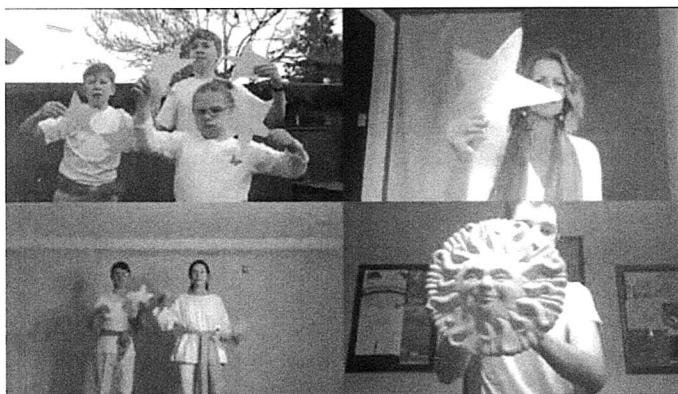
Some liturgical feasts and seasons call for a refined artistry and seriousness to embody our prayer. For example, in the Good Friday service, the psalm of lament is one that I usually embody to express the depth of Jesus' cry from the cross. This past year, without the opportunity to offer this piece live in our church sanctuary, I was able to collaborate with a young 20-something



dancer at our parish who is steeped in the art of both sign language and hip-hop dance. Over Zoom, he and I choreographed a simple and profound dance prayer for Psalm 31. Then we met in my yard with video camera and tripod to film this piece. This allowed a variety of gifts: 1. Including a young artist in our offering; 2. Honoring our deaf community by drawing on sign language in our prayer; 3. Including a simple sign language refrain so folks could join in from home; 4. Keeping social distancing while still collaborating; 5. Offering a deep expression of lament as part of our Good Friday service.

Engaging Youth in Zoom Creations - Easter

Easter brings the height of joy to our liturgical worship. For our typical Easter Vigil service, the Genesis reading is our most inclusive and beloved offering, involving a dozen or so youth who, with the help of various props, become water, sun, moon,



"Then God said, 'Let there be lights in the dome of the sky.'"

stars, vegetation, wild animals, butterflies, fish, birds, and finally culminate in expressing the gift of humans. This piece is not complex in terms of movement, so that untrained dancers can be comfortable and expressive without worry. However, the piece is rehearsed carefully so that the coordination of all the scenes of the seven days of Creation are mapped out and each one has its own colorful flair.



"And on the 7th day, God rested."

This year, our piece was re-worked and filmed as a Zoom creation! The narration was pre-recorded by seven lectors, then each scene was rehearsed over zoom with its various props, and once filmed, then stitched together with careful edits so that timing issues and "mistakes" could be smoothed out as needed to bring a professional quality to the creation.

Granted, even though the quality of filming over Zoom is not high resolution, engaging the youth in the dynamic enactment of storytelling, with clear direction and careful crafting, brings a delight to those viewing, and gives a primary purpose of including the gifts of youth within the service.

Pentecost

Likewise, we were able to translate our Pentecost story into a "Zoom Creation" as well. Different scenes included different numbers of players, so that the editing of the story together sometimes had a more complex screen of multiple disciples or a smaller group of foreigners, giving a variety to the visual feast. This piece engaged the gifts of dancers aged 8 to 62 and included a beloved member of our community who has Down Syndrome.



"They were amazed and astonished!"



"Dance Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your children."

Our closing song on Pentecost was a pre-recorded virtual choir version of one of our community's favorites for the season, the spiritual, "Every Time I Feel the Spirit." Rather than creating a visual virtual choir, we created a collage of images of the choir members interspersed with many of the youth dancing in their homes with Pentecost streamers. We also sent little sets of Pentecost ribbons and greetings in envelopes to our entire congregation, so that all the folks at home could dance along with the festive Spirit of Pentecost. For a glimpse of this community expression, you can view the video here -

Every Time I Feel the Spirit - <https://youtu.be/ICGup7oaKtY>

So far, I have mentioned two ways that one might foster movement participation from those witnessing at home. Having adults or children on screen offering sign language or simple gestures for a song, and then actively encouraging those at home to participate can go a long way. Modeling a festive dance on screen and inviting those at home to join in (with streamers or without) gives permission for an ecstatic expression of movement. (Some viewers may actually be more apt to join in at home than they would at church!) And finally, I wanted to mention that even when a person witnesses movement, they receive the kinesthetic benefit of that expression through the miracle of mirror neurons, which are brain cells that activate equally whether a person enacts a motion, or simply views that motion. So, we have the gift of knowing that those moving on screen can stir kinesthetic prayer in the receivers at home, even if those at home remain still.

UCC & Outdoor Videography

Over the years, I have been delighted and honored to support the dance-in-worship program at one of the local UCC churches in Seattle: University Congregational. UCUC's long-term commitment to embodied worship is a true inspiration to me, and I have been a guest artist and consultant for dance projects for this community through the years. Just pre-pandemic, I was invited for Sunday service to offer my piece enacting the story of Miriam dancing her people through the passage out of slavery and into freedom. Three other adults, including one of the pastors, joined in as Israelites, while four children danced the part of the Red Sea, and we shared a joyous dance of freedom!

So, when pandemic came to pass, of course the UCC'ers, like all church communities, needed to shift gears. This congregation doesn't have a resident choreographer, so each piece created needs to find its own birthing organically. My friend, Lori VanderBilt, a member of the Creativity Council for Liturgical Arts, is dedicated to embodiment and a great organizer to boot, so she could help facilitate this transition to new modalities. Their first step was

to work on a smaller project with videographer Trent Siegel and teen modern dancer Zella Meyer. With just two folks, there was an ease in scheduling, and simplicity for rehearsals. Honoring the need for social distancing, Zella and Trent were able to meet at a beach park in the area, and to film a moving piece honoring the gifts of creation in this natural setting, integrating passion and beauty. Lori worked as liaison between the pastor, the readers, and the musicians to help pull the piece together. I loved that this offering could highlight the gifts of an emergent youth dance artist in their community.

With this accomplished, the organizing team was ready for a more complicated piece. The Prayer of Confession was chosen, in a text adapted from the United Methodist Women's Meeting, 1976.

Prayer of Confession

Voice 1: You asked for our hands for your work.

Voice 2: We gave them for a moment and then withdrew, for the work was hard.

Voice 1: You asked for our mouths to speak your justice.

Voice 2: We gave you a whisper that we might not be accused.

Voice 1: You asked for our eyes to see the world's pain.

Voice 2: We closed them for we did not want to know.

Voice 1: You asked for our lives that you might live in us.

Voice 2: We gave you a small part, that we might not get involved.

Voice 1: God, forgive us for calculated efforts to serve you only when it is convenient, only in places where it is safe.

Voice 2: Creator God, create a new heart in us, that we may be faithful in following you.

Combined Voices: Amen

A Prayer of Confession in essence requires a depth of searching one's own being to acknowledge blind spots, short-sightedness and stop-points, and to surrender these shortcomings and collective sins to be transformed into patterns of engagement. This is a powerful process to embody.

To take up this task, Lori engaged her behind-the-scenes skills to find eight adults (including two couples) who were willing to interpret this text in movement. Lori also requested permission for funding to bring me on board for support, demonstrating the church's awesome commitment to supporting the arts in worship.

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Dancing Through the Screen

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For preparation, rather than everyone learning the same choreography (which complicates rehearsals), each person (or couple) was invited to interpret the piece individually. One remarkable aspect of the piece ended up being that none of those who participated (besides myself) was a trained dancer, but each brought a willingness of prayer and depth, giving an emotional immediacy to their expression. One of the couples integrated their experience with ballroom dance, which added an engaging movement vocabulary to their portion of the project.

Trent scoped out a good place for us to meet which would provide backdrop for our videography. We all gathered on a sunny September Sunday afternoon in the park, keeping social distancing. Everyone was so happy to be out in the open air together, bringing a sense of adventure, reflection and prayer. During the first half hour of our time, Trent was able to film each of the parts separately, with close-ups focusing on the emotional content of solos or duets. We then culminated in a group form called "Gesture Choir" – borrowed from the practice of InterPlay, (which many UCC'ers are familiar with). We situated ourselves in a diamond across the grass with me at the front point. As leader, I responded with a gesture to each of the phrases being read, and the other dancers simply followed along in my movement from their places behind me, bringing a group body expression to the text that each had already prayed with individually. This movement form provided a simple and potent way of creating cohesion and communality in the prayer of confession and in the words of assurance to follow.

The video offering was then edited together in several versions so that it could be repeated with different variations over the course of 9 weeks of the fall season. As a bonus, Lori happens to be a skilled cellist, so she was also able to create a reflective cello score to accompany the piece. You can view one of these versions here – Prayer of Confession - <https://youtu.be/-kMWAgZUmtM?t=1434>.

Dancing through the Seasons

Each season of our lives calls for a responsive spirit, and this season of pandemic has been one of our most challenging nationally and globally. We know that thinking our way out of this crisis is not going to work; the journey requires depth, tears, laughter, insight, growth, outreach and creative responses. Creating movement pieces that are engaging of heart, gut, body and soul move us all as worshippers and social activists to engage in new ways of being that honor our bodies as instruments of the Divine presence here on Earth.

A rich experience of dance in worship can help us reach through the flat screen of our online services and move us to tears, stir us to action, or invite us into a celebration of joy that lifts our weary spirits and gives us a taste of the heavenly banquet. I pray that your community can find ways of including a diversity of ages, backgrounds, and skill sets in the gift of embodiment as a pathway to courageous vitality, bringing the gifts of three-dimensional incarnation from church to the world.