

# Jesus Wants To Dance With You At Church

by Richard Fabian

Why is most Christian worship still so far from the talk of Jesus, whose Aramaic tongue said 'rejoice' by using the verb 'to dance?' Once dance and worship were married; now they go to church together rarely and keep separate friends.

Longtime puritan anxiety is one cause. King David learned dancing from roving prophet bands who harped and psalmed and danced naked on stony Judean hillsides. He shocked aristocrats (2 Samuel 6) by bringing those dances into royal worship, where -- presumably clothed -- they flowered at court and temple for centuries.

By contrast, Christians emerging from the persecutions into Roman civic eminence adopted wholesale the Roman educated classes' disgust at popular revelry. J.G. Davies' book, Liturgical Dance: An Historical, Theological and Practical Handbook (1984), describes preachers' campaigns, from the fourth century onward, to purge dancing from Christian life. Like pagan Hellenistic thinkers, these crusaders saw our human bodies as our chief human problem, and feared dance and song alike as dangerously sensuous. Fourth and fifth century sermons show ambivalence, at best, toward music and dance, sometimes extolling them, but rarely inside the liturgy. Bishops like Augustine introduced congregational singing only as a last resort, to keep crowds from talking during services. Dance in church found even fewer champions. In a backhand way, the succeeding centuries of church canons against dance prove its popularity.

Despite official bans, western church dance bloomed for so long that modern scholars are often surprised to learn how recently it withered. For example, literary commentators on Dante's *Paradiso* fall silent when Dante spies a circle of humming lights and straightway meets Thomas Aquinas. Dante expected his readers to recall here the celebrated spectacle of theologians dancing in circles, in his day their most public activity, and a university custom still seen in eighteenth century Cambridge, where aging Doctors of Divinity gathered each spring in bright red robes to dance around the new doctoral candidates. Even when the reformation launched fresh waves of puritan opprobrium, driving dance from cathedrals and parish churches, yet on the margins of that same reformation, Calvinist revivalists and Shakers completed their worship with dancing and marching well into the nineteenth century.

For most of eastern Christendom, dance became laypeople's stuff, celebrated in home courtyards or village squares outside the church. That is how Greek and Arab Christians dance now -- although indeed they dance plenty. To this day, Ethiopians -- the largest eastern church -- enjoy clergy dancing after Sunday services, and congregational dancing on festivals; and Russian clergy still dance at Easter matins.

*I experience a wonderful thing at St. Gregory's when we dance in a circle. We have our hand on the shoulder of the person in front of us and we are doing a simple Greek step together, going around in a circle. As the circle folds in on itself you're passing each member of the community as the very last thing that you do . . .*

After so long a history, worship leaders might expect to recover congregational dancing easily, just as ballroom couples today are rediscovering the Latin American rhythms popular a

few decades ago, before rock 'n' roll drove them from the dance floor. But few Christians have done so because we have lost our long-loved models for congregational dance, and must make them anew. Here then is the second cause for the estrangement between dance and worship in our churches.

Writing dances down is a modern idea, much younger than musical notation; so we have been losing dances for ages. Hebrew temple music and dance became secret arts, and were forgotten after Roman armies wrecked Herod's temple and paved it over to wipe out all memory. In the fourth Christian century Gregory Nazianzen applauded congregations dancing at Easter, trampling death underfoot -- a gesture cited in the Easter refrain (troparion) still popularly sung at Eastern Orthodox Eastertide services, and now gracing page 500 of the Episcopal Prayer Book. But only a few secular mosaics survive to suggest what steps early Christians actually danced. Their music has vanished, and with it the rhythm, tempo, gestures, and feel.

Medieval western Christians carolled enthusiastically at festivals, and the French word 'carol,' like the Greek 'chorus,' meant dancing first of all. Moreover, Renaissance hymns based on popular ditties almost beg to be danced again today. But these popular steps, too, are largely lost, although renaissance dancemasters, our earliest dance chroniclers, noted down their courtly variations. Gymnastic and fashionably complex, these defy congregational use today. They evolved into baroque court and theater dance, and so into classical ballet, while social dancing evolved into cotillions and reels.

Soon layfolk and clergy alike danced only in ballrooms and mostly in couples, until dancing served romance and courtship, but no longer prayer or community rejoicing. Shaker dances, though they kept their communal religious character, were purposely made hard to do. Shakers wanted to experience the body's limitations, and ultimately to flee it in death, so they designed awkward movements, impractical for popular use. For so many reasons, European tradition provides scant resource for reviving congregational dance now.

Our own century has seen the 'modern dance' revolution, pioneered by Isadora Duncan, Martha Graham, Ruth St. Denis, Ted Shawn and others. Here natural body movements made steps easier to imitate, and new dances easier to design. Some creative churches and synagogues have introduced modern dance into their worship, training soloists and dance choirs to perform much as organists and singing choirs perform; meanwhile the people watch and, at least ideally, participate inwardly. Modern dance can certainly enrich parish liturgy, by allowing gifted churchpeople a chance to develop their talents for dancing, and share these with fellow Christians on the sidelines. But most modern dance is interpretive; and interpretation can distract from liturgical action as much as illuminate it. Indeed, few watchers join in, even when a simple congregational part is offered them.

Such reluctant participation from people who dance readily enough outside church frustrates their worship leaders' intention to reunite dance with worship. Perhaps unwittingly, worship leaders overturn the normal relation between soloists and the crowd when teaching congregations simple movements to accompany the performers. By contrast, classical and folk solo dance have evolved as specializations of popular dance, and build on known popular forms. (Rock 'n' Roll concerts show that relationship clearly: the audience take up familiar, unchoreographed movements, while the musicians onstage lead them with dramatic variations. Popular participation is never a problem here!)

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*It's kind of an unconscious pass and review, individual by individual, as a group undertaking. It has no use and yet it is so deeply moving. We go around and around in circles. It is the last thing we do before we go back to our lives, walk around in circles looking at each other.*

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Recent videotapes by Thomas Kane (*The Dancing Church*, Paulist Press) show an exciting folk revival underway in African congregations, where the whole church joins in dancing during processions, canticles, and prayers. Here instead of merely interpreting the entry processional texts, the dancing clergy and people are the entry procession, moving together in steps with rich traditional associations. African church dance engages the congregation by invoking folk dance movements known to everyone: something western modern dance cannot do -- except in some ethnic parishes -- because European-Americans have lost touch with their dancing roots. To engage most parishioners in congregational dance today, we must supply a new folk-like vocabulary, quickly picked up, repetitive rather than interpretive, and flexible enough to serve many texts and tunes without elaborate memorization.

St. Gregory Nyssen Church numbers almost two hundred worshippers on a Sunday and over four hundred at Easter. We especially designed our new church building to support congregational dance around the altar table. The table stands at the center of an open, octagonal wood floor, slightly sprung, as in a gymnasium, for dancing comfort. Here, we are pioneering congregational dance based on folk resources. Like our metropolitan ministry area, we combine contributions from different ethnic groups, welcoming what best fits our task. We dance hymns to folk steps chosen because they exhibit the very qualities described above: quickly learned; repetitive; and fitting many texts and tunes. We dance these steps twice each Sunday, circling the altar first as we gather the whole congregation to the table before the kiss of peace, and then again following communion.

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*It's a celebratory thing, a sort of throwing your hands up and saying, you know, life really is a mystery. Today at church we've talked about stuff, we've sung about stuff, and we'll go back out to our lives, and then we'll come back the next Sunday and do this all over again.*

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Our simplest steps come from opposite world hemispheres. The Tripudium (three steps forward and one back; sometimes counted five steps forward and two back) was universally known in Europe from at least the eighth century, and survives today in annual processions at Echternach in Luxembourg. From Africa comes High Life, an even simpler pattern (step sideways right, slide the left foot together, then sideways left, and slide the right foot together). High Life is danced in place with a swing in the hips, and sometimes a handclap; black gospel choirs dance it with almost every song. The short four-beat compass of these steps suits any hymn with four or eight downbeats to a line -- even hymns mixing lines of different lengths, or hymns with three internal beats per measure. At the midpoint of every St. Gregory's service, our whole congregation dance the Tripudium processing to the altar together for the eucharist, circling the table until the hymn ends.

But these plain steps would prove monotonous, if used exclusively. Congregations need something more varied and inventive, while still easily learned and danced. Among a wide range

of European folk traditions, we have found that Greek folk dances serve that purpose supremely well. The simplest are ancient, some say as old as our Indo-European language family. Hellenistic mosaics suggest several were known to fourth century and New Testament Christians, and perhaps to Jesus himself. Thanks to the wide diaspora of Greek immigrants and their strong ethnic loyalty, many American cities boast Greek folk dance groups who will gladly teach their fellow Americans how to join in.

Greek folk steps also transfer well to classical western hymn tunes, and distinctively suit congregational dance. Their repetitive rhythmic figures fit almost half the hymns in the Episcopal Hymnal 1982. Greek dances offer a folk vocabulary easily grafted onto American worship. They have a further virtue for our purpose: unlike other ethnic dances featuring energetic vertical movements, these move sinuously, even sensuously sideways, providing the dancers a palpable feel of the whole community dancing together. This sideways momentum also makes it easy to sing and dance at once, as each dancer can place one hand on a neighbor's shoulder, while the other hand holds a song sheet.

For simplicity's sake, and especially for the sake of enrolling newcomers to St. Gregory's, we dance hymn tunes with regular lines of equal lengths. (Some tunes with a single short line can be danced in paired stanzas, provided the overall rhythm is clear.) Of course we choose lyrics to match the readings or liturgical moment. Then we fit steps to the number of strong beats per line, and the internal rhythm and tempo. Note that the number of dance beats results from the musical rhythm, not from the syllables or word accents. Hence the conventional metrical tune classification appended to most hymnals will not serve our purpose; instead we have begun compiling a table of hymns in danceable meters. (If you are interested in obtaining one of these tables, please contact St. Gregory's at the web address on the last page.)

These Greek steps serve for our second dance, the carol ending each Eucharist. After communion, we collect alms and food for the poor and set these on the altar table; then we circle the table teaching the dance step, and soon start singing and dancing to the beat of drums, sistrums, and bells. This dance completes the service in a burst of (literally) touching community warmth. More than that, it gives everyone a clear image of the world's hope and our true future, a mystical end to the mystical supper. Grasping this image for themselves, people overcome fears of awkwardness and take part as they may not have expected to. Caroling has proved remarkably inclusive, as most newcomers are willing to try it, and trying it, most say they love it.

A seminarian in an electric wheelchair learned to lead the dance during her fieldwork year with us, and other physically challenged worshippers have joined in too. Sometimes older people or little children will sit out one or both of the dances, as happens naturally in secular gatherings, and we have made a practice of sending one or two people to sit with them so that the sense of physical closeness and community is maintained. Often those seated will move however they can to the music, even if it's only tapping feet or waving hands, and because our worship also offers many chances to sing without dancing, no one has said they feel excluded.

Many visitors have taken a love for caroling home with them, and some report they have planted it in receptive soil. Our workshops have produced happy feedback, sometimes from the oldest parishioners present. We hope that other churches are developing congregational dances on their own. If your congregation is dancing, please write to us! Despite a century or more of estrangement, the wedding of dance and worship is right and deep, and the friends of each have every cause to rejoice together.

On the walls surrounding the altar space in St. Gregory's new church building -- as quickly as we can pay for them! -- icons of the saints are beginning to circle-dance with us, led by Christ the Lord of the Dance. And with these may be written an inscription from those sayings preserved outside the gospels, one that scholars now think come authentically from Jesus himself:

*Whoever does not dance,  
does not know what is coming to pass.  
--Acts of St John*

*Rick Fabian is rector of St. Gregory's and says, "I go to church to sing and dance!" This article is adapted from a chapter of the forthcoming book "As We Gather to Pray" to be published by the Church Hymnal Corporation.*

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