A Liturgical Dance Choir can be defined in many ways. One such way is “a group of people who wish to deepen the worship experience with movement”, just as a singing choir does in nearly every worshipping church.

There are key people who must be in a supportive role in order to create a positive experience. The identity of these people depends on the management style of each worship community. Clearly the pastor/priest/rabbi will be crucial in the process. In our church there is a Board that oversees the spiritual and parish life. Another worship community with which I am familiar has a group called the Board of Elders. It will be important to identify the group in the church in which you wish to participate that has this role. The choir director or organist will usually be part of this group. Some groups place a heavier authority on the clergyperson.

Once you have identified the guiding person or group, you will need to determine their level of appreciation for dance as an art form. You may also want to prepare with some research about the history of dance in worship. At the end of this article are some possible older references. You may also find more recent references in the Sacred Dance Guild listing found on this site.

The next step will be to arrange an orientation meeting with the identified person or group. In this meeting you may present some of the history of Sacred Dance and show either on video or in person, some examples of what your sacred dance might be like. Many parts of the liturgy lend themselves to dance interpretation.

Examples are:
1. Opening processional
2. Hymn interpretation
3. Prayer interpretation (general or pastoral)
4. Scripture (possibly with supportive music)
5. Message
6. Anthem

Another step will be to analyze the people who will be in the congregation in terms of age, educational level, lifestyle and general interests. The pastor/rabbi or other leader can probably help you with this. The components of such a choir must include at least one or two people who have studied one or more dance forms, and a few others who
wish to experience movement as a part of worship. When deciding what music or reading (or even silence) will be the accompaniment for the dance or dances, you will need to know what sort of choir is available and/or what sort of sound system might be used if recordings are used.

An aspect which will directly affect the choreography you plan is the arrangement of the sanctuary in which you will move and the sightlines that will apply when the pews are occupied. Dancers may have to be in small or even separate areas from one another. The floors and the floor coverings will also cause changes. For instance if the floor base is concrete you will not include many leaps as the landings may injure your dancers’ legs or hips. The rugs or floor coverings may determine the shoes or lack thereof which will permit the most appropriate movements.

The next step would be a gathering of anyone among congregant members or friends who have an interest in experimenting with what this form of worship could mean to them. Then a discussion regarding what contribution to their worship the dances will offer to those who may be the congregation/audience should be held. The leaders would need to demonstrate and/or teach one or two pieces which they have researched or created as a starting point. This may be followed by discussion and experimentation, although a moving simple first piece may be enough to inspire the group.

It is usually best to start with a simple piece that is somewhat familiar to both the dancers and the viewers. I have found Mallot’s The Lord’s Prayer to be a good introduction. Sightlines for the congregation must continually influence the patterns and movements.

Choice of music or readings will depend on each individual group. The complexity of the piece must depend on the abilities of your dancers. It’s important for them to feel they’ve achieved effectiveness in the presentation before offering it in worship. This may also require some knowledge of your dancers to determine when they need a push.

Another issue which must be addressed is the attire worn for the presentation. Clothing may address, to some extent, the subject of the dance. Because of the variation found in most groups, modesty will be important along with comfort. If leotards are part of the chosen costume they should be cotton based in order to void any translucency. It may be necessary to find a budget for costuming needs.

After one or two presentations it will be important to follow-up on the responses, especially of the person or group you initially identified. This can also provide useful input for future presentation ideas. When you’ve shared in worship for a season you will be prepared to decide whether some dances could be more suggestive of, rather than specific to, an anthem or reading.

Liturgical dance shares a message or ambience to add to the inspiration hopefully received in a worship service. Having led sacred dance groups for many years, I would offer consultation to any who have questions not dealt with in this article. My E-Mail address is mailto:Annpomeroy@cox.net

