

**A SPACE FOR WORSHIP:
HISTORY AND PRACTICE IN CHRISTIAN SACRED DANCE**

Emily Wright
Doctoral Student
Texas Woman's University

Dance has existed in some form within the practice of Christianity since its inception. Beginning in the home church meetings of the early Christians, the practice of sacred dance simultaneously shaped, and was shaped, by this emerging religion within the context of the spaces in which it was practiced. Dance often served as the handmaiden to ideology, as it advanced mimetic illustrations of core tenets or enacted central mythologies of the faith. The twentieth and twenty-first centuries have seen a dramatic resurgence in sacred dance, particularly within Protestant circles. This contemporary iteration is also powerfully influenced by the spaces in which it is enacted and concurrently is changing traditional worship spaces. These contemporary spaces, while more conducive to traditional Western concert dance, generate a greater distance between dancer and worshipper, performer and observer.

This essay surveys the history of Christian sacred spaces and the ways in which moving bodies shaped and were shaped by these spaces particular to Christian worship. Further, it explores the practice of contemporary sacred dance in the American Protestant sanctuary and its effects on the contemporary practice of Protestantism. Finally, it suggests that while contemporary developments in church architecture appear

to establish a more generous treatment of the moving body in religious practice, the particular use of western theatrical conventions undermines the sense of communal participation that is key to the contemporary American Christian spiritual experience.

The literature surveyed for this essay juxtaposes resources from the fields of religious studies, architecture, and dance studies as a means of making connections among disparate fields of inquiry. The sources utilized examine the particular architectural developments of Christian sacred spaces, from home church to basilica to cathedral. Due to my particular research interests, the types of sacred spaces explored post-Reformation place particular emphasis on the development of Protestant spaces in Europe and America as a result of shifts in Protestant Christian beliefs and practices. Finally, the contemporary American Protestant examples are delimited as a subset of my own fieldwork and experiences in researching contemporary American Protestant Christian dance inside and outside the church.

History and Development in Church Architecture

“...And upon this rock I will build My church” (Matt. 16:18b, NAS). These words from the book of Matthew are the first mention made by Christ in reference to the new entity of his followers. The word “church” used here comes from the Greek *ekklesia* and is used to denote both the physical place of assembly and the community of all believers.¹ The most common meeting place for early Christians was the “*domus ecclesiae*” or home church. Precedent for the use of this type of space was set by Christ himself, when he gathered with his disciples in the upper room of a private dwelling for a last supper before his crucifixion.² A typical Roman home consisted of an entryway from the street, which opened into a large, central atrium. This atrium was

roofless to allow light and air to permeate the dwelling. Encircling the atrium were various rooms for members of the household, including the triclinium, or dining room. Scholars believe that the triclinium was the initial meeting place for followers of Christ as the emphasis of their gatherings was a “love feast” or the sharing of a communal meal, including the observation of what would later become known as the Eucharist, a ritual observance of the death of Christ with the symbolic partaking of his body and his blood in the form of bread and wine (Doig 2008, p.5). Because these homes were virtually indistinguishable from other private homes of the time, little evidence exists to suggest what types of movements these early Christians employed in the practice of their faith. From the writings of various church leaders in the patristic era, one gathers that dancing did take place, although more frequently in proximity to the tombs of the martyrs than in the spaces of communal worship, which were smaller and meant to primarily accommodate eating and drinking (Davies 1984, pp. 44-45).

Scholars note that Neo-platonic thought in the intellectual community surrounding the early Church and interpretations of specific scriptures in the New Testament merged to create a mind/body dualism that has remained in Christian religious practices to varying degrees since its inception.³ The early Church in Rome was surrounded by ‘pagan’ religions, many of which made use of dance as part of their religious practices. Additionally, the intellectual community of the day, the Neo-Platonists, looked down on pagan religious practices, including their dances. J. G. Davies (1984) writes, “where the body is vilified dance has little place except as further demonstration of the body’s degradation. In the words of Plotinus (205-70), whose neo-Platonism was largely incorporated into Christian thought: ‘Corporeal things... belong to the kind directly

opposed to the soul, and present to it what is directly opposed to its essence” (19). The early Church aligned itself with the intellectual community against the pagan practices of the day in order to establish itself as distinct from other religions and as a worthy member of the intellectual community.⁴

The Roman border city of Dura-Europos contains what is thought to be the first domus ecclesia constructed with specific modifications to the typical home dwelling for the purpose of Christian worship. One architectural modification, in particular, reinforces this notion of distinguishing themselves from surrounding religious practices by which the emerging practices of Christianity were governed. The main assembly room, which housed up to sixty people, had a permanent fixture called a bema, or platform, upon which the leader or speaker stood to direct the assembly in teaching or in the observation of the rites of baptism or the Eucharist. Significantly, as architectural historian Allan Doig points out, the altar remained on ground level with those assembled, rather than on the raised dais with the leader. This practice suggests that the early Christians were attempting simultaneously to avoid an association with the pagan use of altars and to construct a clear sense of hierarchical authority (Doig 2008, pp.12-13). This separation and elevated relationship of leader from followers will have profound implications for the shape of Christian worship practices even into the present day.

The emergence of the first structure explicitly designed to house Christian worship began in approximately 318 C.E. with the construction of the Lateran Basilica in Rome (Doig 2008, p. 24). The construction of this edifice marks a monumental shift in power and influence for the Christian Church. The Lateran Basilica was commissioned

and built under the authority of Constantine, thought to be the first Christian Roman Emperor. As its name suggests, the Lateran Basilica was modeled after the Roman public house of the same name. As religious scholar Jeanne Halgren Kilde (2008) notes, although the term basilica can refer to a wide variety of public assembly halls, “its strong connection to the basileus, or emperor, remained clear” (p. 46). The shift from home church to basilica, while gradual, exemplifies the ways in which Christian worship practices shifted as well, from an emphasis on the varietal, decentralized and communal methods of numerous regional bodies to the formalized, centralized, hierarchical, and imperialized entities under the rule of a few, powerful leaders. The long central nave, or aisle, which led worshippers towards the raised platform that now signified the sanctuary or holy of holies, encouraged the development of processions. However, the particular character of these early Christian processions in the formalized space of the basilica conveyed a greater degree of ceremony and rigidity taken directly from imperial court ritual (Kilde 2008, p. 51). Kilde describes this new formalized procession in *Sacred Power, Sacred Space: An Introduction to Christian Architecture and Worship*:

Gathering outside the church in the expansive atrium, lay worshippers watched as the bishop and the emperor met in the porch or narthex and prepared for the First Entrance into the church. Entering the church together, the bishop and emperor were followed by a deacon carrying the Gospel, then by the celebrant, other clergy, the emperor’s guards, and the empress and her attendants. The procession continued up the nave to the sanctuary... This architectural path led to the Holy Door of the sanctuary, the area immediately surrounding the altar upon which the

Eucharist would be prepared... The bishop stepped up into the sanctuary followed by the emperor, who placed a gift on the altar and immediately exited and moved to his loge, or imperial platform, in the right aisle. The bishop and clergy proceeded through the sanctuary into the apse, where they took seats on the steps of the semicircular synthronon. Lay worshippers then followed these official processors into the church and took up locations in the aisles and nave, as near the sanctuary... as was deemed appropriate (p. 50).

With the formalization of space for Christian worship and the direct association with imperialism, the movement of bodies in Christian worship became formalized and hierarchical as well.

The structure perhaps most commonly associated with the notion of church is the cathedral. "The word cathedral is derived from the Latin word *cathedra* ("seat" or "chair"), and refers to the presence of the bishop's or archbishop's chair or throne."⁵ Cathedrals began to emerge as an even more elaborate form of the basilica in the Middle Ages. Several modifications and/or additions developed, which had significant implications for the practices of Christian worship. The first was the innovation of the cruciform plan, in which a narrow aisle called a transept was inserted perpendicular to the nave so that the main hall formed the shape of a cross. Processions could now advance along the shape of the cross in contemplation of the sacrifice of Christ. This notion of journey coincided with another development in Christian practice, the pilgrimage. It became popular among Christians to journey to sites that were purported to be either significant historical locations in the life of Christ or to shrines erected to

contain holy relics from martyrs of the faith. This “movement of the body within and through space,” according to Kilde, illustrates the theological emphasis on the notion of the Christian journey (Kilde 2008, p. 86). Further, the practice of identifying with the sufferings of Christ by locating them within the bodies of the pilgrims simultaneously furthers the pilgrim’s identification with the humanity of Christ and reifies the tension between body and mind in Christian practice. In later Gothic architecture, in which the elevated ceilings of the nave were accentuated and larger windows were introduced, the eyes of the worshipper would immediately travel up, further emphasizing the felt experience of this tension between the earthly, sinful body grounded in the path of the cross and soul’s desire to transcend to the heavenly realm. This notion of transcendence and its association with body/mind dualism would have pervasive effects on Western ideas about the body in general and dance in particular. The burgeoning ballet would take this notion as its aesthetic ideal and as the narrative subtext of its training practices and choreographic creations. Later, when twentieth century churches would begin to introduce liturgical dances to their congregations, they would turn to ballet, whose aesthetic not only illustrated this tension, but employed it with a controlled and codified movement vocabulary in the tradition of Christianity’s oldest rituals.

Theology and Practice

As this essay transitions to the sacred spaces developed by Protestant Reformers in the 1500s, it is helpful to discuss the theological premises upon which the Reformers based their objections to conventional Christian practices of their day. Several practices developed between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries, which had a significant impact on the ways in which the general population of Christians, or laity,

practiced their faith. The first was the introduction of the rood screen, which separated the chancel, or sanctuary, and the altar from the main assembly in the nave.

Consequently, the clergy conducting the Mass were virtually hidden from the laity, thus encouraging them to pursue their own private devotions, prayers, and attentions to the shrines and relics of saints that were ensconced in the nave (Yates 2008, pp. 5-6). This separation and privatization of religious practice would have implications for Christian religious experiences in the Reformation period and beyond.

The second development was the sale of indulgences. The connection between Christians and their departed began early in the history of Christianity with the meetings in the catacombs and the subsequent development of shrines erected to saints and martyrs of the faith. As the ritual practices of the Eucharist, now referred to as the Mass, and baptism became submerged to the general laity, a greater emphasis was placed on the theological notion of purgatory, an intermediary place of suffering and trials in which the souls of the dead waited to be judged by Christ, and a belief among Christians that special prayers and devotions could shorten this period for their loved ones and assist them into heaven. While a belief in purgatory or an emphasis on caring for the departed through prayer and ritual is not unique to Christianity, the practice of selling these special prayers or services for the dead became the catalyst by which the Reformation, and consequent changes in Christian religious space and practices commenced (Yates 2008, pp 7-8).

In her essay, "Communal Transformations of Church Space in Lutheran Lubeck," historian Bonnie B. Lee discusses the ways in which one particular community deliberately modified their religious space to reflect the new beliefs and practices of the

Reformers (Lee 2008). The first significant change was the removal of the rood screen, which separated the clergy from the congregation. While the clergy still remained on an elevated platform, the purpose was more practical than symbolic in that this elevated position allowed the clergy to be more easily seen and heard by the congregation. While never completely eliminated, the implication of these actions, among others, served to lessen the rigidity of hierarchical authority and to decrease the separation of the sacred from the profane. The second development was the gradual removal of images in the forms of shrines to saints or iconography. Instead, various aspects of the space were embellished with scripture in decorative script. In this way, as Lee points out, the word actually became image in that it replaced the iconography with words that were viewed as works of art (Lee 2008, p. 161). A final significant change was the advent of conducting the service entirely in the native language of the congregants, rather than in Latin, which was only understood by members of the clergy and the wealthy educated. Not only was the sermon now conducted in common parlance, but also the congregation was further involved in the service through responsive readings and singing. Lee writes:

“The Word became concrete and beautiful in ornately wrought script and gold paint... The Word was further beautified through music, in which the whole congregation participated in singing praise to God in the vernacular” (p. 166).

The gradual shift in emphasis from the rituals of the sacraments with their attendant imagery and corporeal involvement to text-based practices would have far-reaching implications for the practice of Protestant Christianity. While these practices

would create a greater sense of participation and personal responsibility among the body of Protestant believers, this text-based participation would further emphasize the mind over the body in religious practice. The irony of these changes, as historian Nigel Yates points out, is that while designed to increase the involvement of the laity, the dominant role in the service was still assigned to the clergyman. In fact, Yates suggests that active participation actually decreased as the congregation was compelled to sit attentively through longer services conducted by the clergyman without the freedom to attend to their own private devotions (Yates 2008, p. 22). In addition, the notion that the linkage of art and music to the Word of God justifies their presence in religious practice would also impact the development and implementation of liturgical dance, or dance explicitly for the purpose of religious expression.

As we have seen from the previous example, many of the “new” worship spaces for Protestant Christians involved the reclamation and reconstruction of existing Christian (i.e. Roman Catholic) spaces. And due to the continued conflict and sometime persecution of Protestant congregations in many areas of Europe, when new structures were created, they were often along the most basic and utilitarian lines. Well into the nineteenth century, many of these spaces continued to reference the basilica in that they remained rectangular in shape with an elevated platform at one end from which the clergy conducted the service. With the shift during the Reformation and beyond away from the visual and sensual and toward the act of listening to the expository preaching of the Word, any space for the practice of religious dance was virtually eliminated. Many Protestant theologians and leaders decried as “sinful” even participation in social dancing. Works such as Ann Wagner’s (1997), *Adversaries of Dance*, and Elizabeth

Aldrich's (2008) essay, "Plunge Not into the Mire of Worldly Folly: Nineteenth-Century and Early Twentieth-Century Objections to Social Dance in the United States," provide an overview of the historical Christian polemic against dance, which illuminates the legacy of ideas about the body and dance in Western, and particularly American, contexts. Aldrich's essay relies heavily on Wagner's delineation of the arguments against the "essential nature of dance" as disorderly, trivial, anti-intellectual, and artificial, and the "incidental characteristics of dance" as leading to sexual immorality, the squandering of time and resources, unnecessary health risks, and participation in "worldly" pleasures to the peril of the immortal soul (Wagner 1997, p. 363-378). However, Aldrich's specific focus on "anti-dance" literature, a collection of essays, sermons, and other publications written primarily by Protestant pastors from the Reformation to the early twentieth century, demonstrates the dramatic increase in negative attitudes toward dance post-Reformation (Aldrich 2008). While these texts focus primarily on American social dance in a broad milieu, their narratives stem directly from a religion-based dialogue within American Protestantism that continues to impact dance practices in secular and religious frameworks.

Church as Theater

However, as Kilde (2002) demonstrates in *When the Church Became Theatre: The Transformation of Evangelical Architecture and Worship in Nineteenth Century America*, by the end of the nineteenth century the emerging designs of American Protestant churches would dramatically reverse these notions, even foreshadowing the contemporary megachurch. Although the new emphasis on listening began with the Reformers, many facilities, particularly those modeled on the basilica format, were ill

suited to the task. Kilde describes the First Baptist Church of Minneapolis, constructed in 1886, as a notable example of a new type of Christian worship space that emerged to meet this need:

“The rectangle... with its easily read longitudinal orientation had been replaced by a square room oriented diagonally toward a corner that housed not a pulpit hung high upon the wall but an elaborate stage elevated some three feet above the main floor. The term stage was truly an appropriate one, for the room was arranged more like a theatre or opera house than a church of previous generations. The lavishly articulated stage functioned as the focal point of the room. A portable lectern, which served as a pulpit, claimed the center but was dwarfed by the features located behind and above it—the baptistery and choir, partially obscured by a short curtain, the grand organ console, and the stenciled organ pipes that soared to the ceiling. An elaborate proscenium arch framed the entire stage area. The main floor continued the theatre motif. The floor sloped from the back of the room toward the stage at the front, and arcs of curved pews radiated up it from the stage. A balcony encircled most of the room, dropping slowly down to the stage level in a series of steps that distinctly resembled opera boxes” (p. 6).

The advent of these new “theatrical” spaces for Protestant Christian worship indicates that by the end of the nineteenth century, a significant shift was occurring in along ideological lines. And while these facilities would fall out of favor with liberal Christian denominations, who after the turn of the century desired to return to more traditional

ritualistic forms, these spaces would remain popular among conservative evangelicals, which would have implications for the reemergence of religious dance in American Protestant Christianity.

Contemporary Spaces and Liturgical Dance Beginnings

The advent of liturgical dance in American Protestantism began in the middle of the twentieth century with, among other factors, the formation of the Sacred Dance Guild in 1958. Since its foundation, involvement and inclusion of liturgical movement has soared in popularity, particularly within the last twenty-five years. In tandem with this renewed interest in dance is the advent of the mega church, a general term referring to a congregation of two thousand or more members, and new worship spaces to accommodate them. As an aside, I would like to clarify that in talking about contemporary trends in American Protestant worship, I am confining my discussion to traditional or mainline denominational practices. The subcategory of the emergent church, while offering some compelling and provocative new modes for worship spaces and practices, is beyond the scope of this paper.

While the construction of these new, large-scale worship spaces is varied, I have observed several apparent trends. First, is the reappearance of the amphitheater formation, with its curvilinear seating focused toward an elevated “stage.” Secondly, pews or benches have been replaced by individual cushioned chairs, or in more elaborate facilities, with movie theater seats, complete with arm rests and a folding seat to allow attendants to pass easily along the row. Finally, the stage is equipped with theatrical lighting and projection screens, which project song lyrics or sermon points and sometimes brief illustrative video clips during the service. For all intents and purposes,

this new space is a theater in form and function. As a liturgical dancer, I had many opportunities to in the traditional, basilica-style church with a small, often carpeted platform and a permanently affixed lectern. Needless to say, basilica-style space can be difficult for performer and observer alike. However, although these new theater-style spaces offer a platform more conducive to the practice of western concert dance, I submit that they actually hinder the development of the practice of dance in Christian worship and continue to reify the body mind dualism so pervasive in American Christianity.

Firstly, the stage, while opening up a large space within which to move, nevertheless demarcates that movement to a particular area, and much like the processions of the earliest Christian rituals, participation in that area is delineated by status. The emphasis on highly stylized, theatrical movement is inaccessible to the average churchgoer. Only particular members of the congregation who are skilled in a particular kind of dance, often ballet, are permitted to enter that space and only for limited periods of time. In terms of hierarchical status, a particularly problematic issue surrounds this notion of who gets to dance. Most liturgical dance ensembles situated under the auspices of worship or ministry within the church are composed of amateur dancers of varying skill levels. Some groups want dancers with a certain level of training; others are content to allow anyone to participate who has the desire to dance and the willingness to attend rehearsals. However, many professional Christian companies face a dilemma in that there are a relatively small number of Christian dancers with high technical skill levels. Some are rigid in their exclusivity—only professing Christians may be a part of their groups, no matter their level of technical

acumen. Others are more fluid—if a dancer wants to work with them, has the necessary skill level, and doesn't mind that much of the content is influenced by Christian themes or ideas, then no problem. The problem comes however, when these companies are invited to perform in churches as part of the worship service. While professional Christian companies face this issue to varying degrees, this tension is currently uninterrogated. If Christian dance is to be validated in the same way as other modes of religious expression, will it submit to the same traditions of exclusivity that began so early with the rites of baptism and the observation of the Eucharist, but that continue today within Protestantism in the practice of "fencing the table," in which those who are not professing believers may not partake of Communion?

A second consequence of these contemporary theater spaces is the relegation of much of the congregation to passive observers. The felt experience of sitting in a dimly lit auditorium in a cushioned chair with one's focus being directed by powerful beams of light toward an elevated platform is so powerfully reminiscent of a theater experience that one cannot help but slip into passive observation and the expectation of entertainment. Dance is present in the service, but by framing the experience in this way, it reinforces the idea that dance is entertainment, fluff, a superfluous diversion, rather than a means by which people can engage in deep communion with their God. I would like to note that the felt-sense of passivity is by no means a universal experience among audiences/congregations in Christian services in which dance takes place. However, the responses I often hear after these performances usually run along the lines of, "Oh, I wish I could dance like you do up there," and "Maybe we'll all get to dance like that in heaven." The implications of these statements are that observers are

expressing a sense of longing and incompleteness. They do not see the dances occurring in their services as something that is accessible to them in this lifetime, but only in the life to come.

Another problematic issue is the practice among Christian dancers of reimagining the dancer's struggles as a spiritual struggle. This reimagination of the struggles and triumphs of life as a spiritual journey has historical precedence in the practice of pilgrimage and is pervasive throughout evangelicalism. In some ways this can be a helpful project. Viewing an injury or a painful rehearsal as an offering of worship⁶ can be a helpful coping mechanism. However, it can also be a means of hierarchical manipulation and ethical compromise. When an artistic director employs verbally abusive language because he or she is not getting the perceived effort or desired effect deemed necessary and the dancers are made to feel that they are not serving God whole-heartedly or when a manager is unskilled with finances and is unable to compensate his or her dancers adequately and makes reference to "sharing in the sufferings of Christ," this reimagination is detrimental to the dancer, if not a violation of his or her human rights.

Finally, and perhaps most significantly, is the means by which the use of dance is justified in Christian practice? As we have seen from the history of the Reformation, the Word replaced image in Protestant worship spaces. In the same way, dance and the body must be connected to word to justify their place in the worship service. Most contemporary Christian dances are performed to praise songs with simple lyrics so that congregants can easily make the connection between the movements and the meaning of the dance. Even when music without lyrics accompanies the dance, the drive to

create a mimetic narrative is strong, if not mandated by church leadership. This practice can be a way of acknowledging and encouraging community among practitioners in that observers often readily identify the codes and conventions of commonly held beliefs and symbols while watching the dance. However, the downside of this practice is that it can stultify the capacity of dance as a means of knowing, particularly those things that often seem beyond the realm of human words to express.

Conclusion

It should be noted that there are instances in which contemporary liturgical dance in American Protestant churches departs from the previously mentioned examples. Sometimes the aisles are utilized for movement in addition to the stage, so that the dancers are in some ways among the congregation. In more rare instances, congregations learn simple gestures and can then participate in a more limited way in communal embodied worship. The charismatic denominations in general make frequent use of spontaneous, improvised dance as a part of their communal worship service. However, the frequency with which traditional Western concert dance and the architectural constructs necessary for its implementation appears merit attention. The implementation of Western concert dance as a means of Christian worship is ill suited at best and at it worst is contradictory to the aims of Christian worship entirely, which is to engage the individual in an encounter with the divine. Although the moving body is perhaps more prominent in Protestant churches than it has been before, we are further than ever from realizing an embodied practice of our faith.

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Notes

¹ Church. In *Encyclopedia Britannica online*. Retrieved from <http://ezproxy.twu.edu:2515/EBchecked/topic/117086/church>.

² For examples of this, see Matthew 26:17-30; Mark 14:12-25; Luke 22:7-20.

³ Specific Biblical references include “I discipline my body and make it my slave” (1 Cor. 9:27), and “If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body” (1 Cor. 15:44).

⁴ A modified version of this section was previously published in my chapter, “Not of Themselves: Contemporary Practices in American Protestant Dance. In *Fields in Motion: Ethnography in the Worlds of Dance*. Canada: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2011.

⁵ Cathedral. In *Encyclopedia Britannica online*. Retrieved from <http://ezproxy.twu.edu:2515/EBchecked/topic/99526/cathedral>

⁶ This practice is taken from the verse in Romans 12:1-2, “Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God--this is your spiritual act of worship.”