

# THE DANCING CHURCH

## AN AFRICAN AND PACIFIC PERSPECTIVE

BY THOMAS A. KANE

*In the beginning was the dance* - words on a screen in a darkened theatre, set amidst blue sky and clouds - so begins the new Irish dance sensation, *Riverdance*. The show explores the origins of Celtic dance and connects classic Irish step dancing to world dance and music, including the fiery flamenco of Spain, the high kicking and boot stomping of Russia and the easy flow of African-American jazz dance and tap. *Riverdance* celebrates a world dancing together. This image is particularly striking because it understands dance as a uniting force. Today, not only the world dances, but the church dances. While this may seem shocking to some, it is happening around the globe, especially in cultures where dance is such a vibrant life principle.

We live in a society that yearns to dance, where dance may be a metaphor for life, but the actual practice is a bit conflicted. We may love the dance, but we often don't know what to do with it. Sometimes we have removed dance from our direct experience and disconnected it from the life of the community. We have marginalized the dance of western culture by preserving it as a fine art in the exclusive and privileged world of ballet, or by calling it entertainment, available for the masses in the disco and dance halls of the city, or by seeing it as a museum piece, an oddity, reserved for a *National Geographic* or a PBS special. Dance becomes something to look at, acknowledge, but rarely to participate in. Its power is too threatening, its allure too seductive.

### DANCE THROUGHOUT THE WORLD

Dance has its origins in mimetic movement. Our ancestors imitated the world around them, created symbolic and ritual forms of communication. Before speech and before music, the ancients moved to the rhythms.<sup>1</sup> Dance, the most universal of all the arts, is movement ordered by rhythm, time and space, expressing life and its deepest mysteries. Throughout history dance has been significant to all aspects of life. From the beginning most cultures employed dance in their rituals, ceremonies and celebrations. Dance was inescapable, part of everyday life. As societies developed, dance was a constitutive element. It would be impossible to consider society without dance

Throughout the world, various societies danced for the planting and harvesting of crops, for rain and productivity, for rites of passage, for celebrating new life and commemorating the dead. The Hebrew scriptures record the frenzied dance of King David accompanying the ark into the city and the tambourine dance of Miriam after the crossing of the Red Sea.

Dance has had an uneasy history with Christians over the centuries focusing primarily on the body: fear of the body, the need to control the body, suspicion over ecstasy, splitting the person into two with the spirit being good, the body being bad, in need of redemption. However, the dance story is not all bleak - the early Christians used the body to express prayer. Through gesture the body was expressive of reaching out and beyond

to God. The *orans* position painted on the walls of the catacombs portrayed holy women praying with arms and torso raised, communicating with God in what some consider a “Jewish style of praying,” with heart opened. Early worship also used the body to express resurrection by standing and repentance by kneeling and processions and modest dance or movement forms became a part of Christian worship.

In the Middle Ages, dance was often a significant aspect of religious and academic celebrations. There were May pole dances at weddings and a ring dance for the conferring of doctoral degrees. Imagine doctoral committees dancing in a circle around the successful candidate! Yet the official Church has been fearful and leery of the charismatic power of dance, describing dances as pagan, physical or carnal. In reading the history of sacred dance and Christianity, we can see vividly the repression of the body in worship and the fear of the raw spiritual energy emerging in the Middle Ages.

Processions and popular devotions employed a variety of movement styles and celebrational rituals. Dances were taken out of the churches and strong barriers were placed between the sacred and the secular. As the ban on dance in Churches began sweeping over Europe, the dance moved from inside the Church to outside - to parks, piazzas and plazas. Even today on most Sundays, one can experience the *Sardana*, the folk dance of Catalán outside the Cathedral of Barcelona. This celebration dance was most probably the closing part of the actual service in earlier days and now it finds its way to the Cathedral steps and eventually to the Cathedral plaza. The place for the dance has changed, but the dance lives on.

This fear continues in our present age. The musical, visual, architectural arts flourished under church and papal patronage. Sadly, the dance did not fare as well. There are remnants today of sacred dance protected by papal jurisdiction. The dance of Los Seises in the Cathedral of Seville is one example. At the recent Eucharistic Congress in Seville, during the exposition of the Blessed Sacrament, the young boys from Seville performed the classic medieval dance with full pageantry to a packed Cathedral of cardinals, bishops and pilgrims with Pope John Paul II presiding.

### **A DANCE EXPLOSION**

In the Arts, as Europe developed ballet, North America discovered the roots of modern dance. In performance, Isadora Duncan, the foremother of Modern Dance, explored the spiritual realm and the freedom of the body in her greco-classical mode. Martha Graham, a revolutionary modern dancer and choreographer, explored intensely religious and psychological themes on the stages of America. Graham dances were often powerful rituals with scriptural or classical themes. Her dances continue to touch audiences deep inside. At Jacob’s Pillow, Ted Shawn included men in his athletic choreography and opened the possibility for men to explore ritual and movement in what was predominantly “a woman’s world.”

Dance is a part of our folk heritage and a fine art. Ballet and modern dance companies are performing across North America. Folk dancing and aerobics are taught in adult education classes and social dancing is very much a part of family celebrations and other social situations. In the midst of this "dance explosion" religious groups are working with

dance as an art form and as religious or ritual communication. In the United States, the Shakers, the "holy Rollers" and some evangelical church groups have used and continue to use sacred dance or "the holy dance" in their worship. These dances might be a simple circle dance or ecstatic movement brought on by the spirit.

The new-old art of liturgical dance has been renewed. While it is difficult to pinpoint the actual rebirth of sacred dance in churches, we get glimpses as early as the mid 1940s of individual dancers using movement to explore the sacred or spiritual realm. In the United States, some dancers became aware of a deeper spiritual energy within themselves and the possibilities of this new form within the worship of their communities. These dancers brought together their spiritual quest along with their own disciplined training in the dance. Thus began the re-birthing of the sacred dance tradition and the new awakenings of liturgical dance. It is interesting to note that about the same time, there were similar explorations in Europe, especially in France and Switzerland. Dancers began reclaiming sacred dance as part of their Western religious and cultural tradition. These pioneers introduced dance in worship and engaged the congregations in using the body to express prayer and connection to God.

As religious dance struggles to find its old-new identity, the effort is enriched by the growing interest and study of different types of dance styles in western culture, especially folk dancing, ballet, modern dance, yoga and world dance along with the experimental work of contemporary dancers and choreographers.

#### RECOVERY OF THE SACRED

The recovery of sacred and liturgical dance continues to have a mixed reception in the United States. For many, it is difficult to conjure up a proper image of sacred or liturgical dance. Our own images may disturb us. Dance is either for the trained professional and therefore tends toward performance, or it is manipulative or unworthy of being a part of the divine liturgy. If one were to say liturgical music, one can hear or imagine the sounds of a Mozart Mass, a Bach cantata, Christmas carols, Gregorian chant or contemporary church music. If liturgical dance is mentioned, what does one see in the imagination, perhaps nothing, a blank screen, or maybe a thin pale woman in a diaphanous gown gesticulating to the heavens and or taking flight into the heavens. The fact is that we don't have a clear image of liturgical dance. In church circles, the word *dance* might be an off putting term, perhaps the use of movement or gesture might be more appropriate.

The growth in liturgical music, an allied art, may help us see the parallel in liturgical dance. The harsh, amateur-sounding guitar strumming of the sixties has given way to a more advanced and enriched style of performance. Church musicians have moved through the "hootenanny stage" to a more blended style of instrumentation. Today liturgical music has matured in lyric and melody with less friction between the organ and the guitar. Composers have also recognized the value of musical heritage and are more attuned to the aesthetic and theological issues within the liturgy. Music, in general, also reflects a more global or world music style. We are beginning to sing in different languages and with syncopated rhythms.

For over twenty years I have pondered this liturgical, aesthetic and political question. Some liturgical dance I have experienced has been prayerful, uplifting and carefully crafted within the liturgical rite, appropriate to the architectural space and the rhythm of the liturgy itself. At other times, I have experienced poorly planned and rehearsed dance, more performance than prayer, more aerobic than artful, more pretentious than prayerful. In the final analysis, liturgical dance is a mixed bag, reflective of where we are in the church and the many struggles we continue to work out liturgically.

I have been encouraged by the seriousness of many leaders in the liturgical dance field, who work for collaborative liturgical planning, insist on fine performance skills and are aware that the dance is a part of the larger liturgy and that the bottom line is to minister to the prayer life of the community.

As liturgical dance continues to move through this period of adolescence, the issues facing it are manifold: a more public understanding of dance, an appreciation of the place of liturgical dance within our North American culture, a deepening of the quality of choreography, the appropriate placement of dance within the liturgy, a sensitivity to a deepening multi-cultural church, the involvement of the community and the need for the artistic discipline of the solo or group dancers themselves.

#### DANCE AND RENEWAL

Dance can be a renewing force in our spiritual lives, whether it is for personal prayer, public prayer or celebration. Today we are recovering an holistic sense of the person, acknowledging the body-spirit connections. We are just beginning to explore in simple ways how our body expresses in movement our deepest longings and yearnings and connects us more powerfully with our God. This may still sound very abstract. Good theory but where is the model? What does it look like? Can communities do it? What is the connection between dance, prayer and culture. How can we learn from the peoples of the globe? How can we break down the barriers that divide us?

As a ritual maker and dancer, I struggle to portray the power, the majesty and the prayerfulness of dance in the context of liturgy and culture. Over the years, I have explored liturgy, dance and culture, traveling to two very different parts of the world to experience, study and record worship experiences in Africa and Oceania, primarily Polynesia and Melanesia.

With reports from missionaries about wonderful dancing and thrilling integration into liturgy, I brought that experience back on videotape. After months traveling around the African continent and the deep blue waters of the Pacific, I had incredibly moving experiences about life, family, faith and dancing. Not only was the church dancing, but the Christian faith was so embodied and connected to everyday life. No longer a tourist, my traveling became a pilgrimage and I learned to pray and move in unexpected ways.

The two video documentaries<sup>2</sup> present actual worship; nothing artificial, nor constructed for the purposes of the project. Both aim to acquaint Western audiences with the liturgical developments within the wider Church and to present full, embodied worship, examining various Church contexts: village worship, Cathedral/city worship, worship in the bush and the worship of a cloistered community. Many of the locations

were selected because of the creative use of cultural elements in the worship, especially dance.

Inculturation, the bringing together of cultural elements and the symbols of the Christian faith, is no longer a theoretical exercise, but takes shape in a variety of communities where the parish or church leadership has begun opening up the Christian symbols within the local context. This means using the experience and history of a particular tribe or community as the starting place to express the deepest Christian mysteries. Theological reflection is not static and requires the interaction of poets, musicians and dancers with the theologian and liturgist. The work is creative, collaborative and ongoing.

#### AN AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE

The African research was done on two different visits in 1987 and 1990. The first visit took almost six months, crossing the continent from East to West. On the second visit, I retraced some steps and explored new areas that opened up. Because there is no generic African worship, it is impossible for any one example of community worship to represent the entire continent. Each segment speaks its own language and culture. Let us take a journey and experience some of the world's Christian communities where dance is part of the every day experience of people, especially in prayer. I have divided the journey into the types of liturgical dance. PROCESSION DANCE is direct and functional movement to and from a specific place, including the Entrance procession, the Gospel procession and the Gifts Procession. PRAYER DANCE includes acclamation and invocations while MEDITATION DANCE is reflective by nature. PROCLAMATION DANCE announces the scriptures. CELEBRATION DANCE begins or completes a ritual activity.

#### PROCESSION DANCES

**Ndkamenya, Malawi:** The *Ingoma* is a traditional dance of the Ngoni warrior, from the Zulu stock of the "Nguni Peoples" of South Africa, who came north on a conquest trek in the mid-19th century and settled in the northern districts of Malawi. Today, the *Ingoma* warrior dance is performed throughout the district by different tribal groups, including the Tumbukas. The opening dance of the liturgy has been adapted from village life and transformed into a liturgical procession dance for the Easter season. The procession includes all age groups - beginning with the young girls, who are part of a small liturgical dance group, followed by the members of the Legion of Mary, dressed African-style in white and blue.<sup>3</sup> Men of varying ages up to seventy years of age surround the presider at the altar and dance with a heavy foot step, the same step in the village dance. They dance naturally, without being conscious of their movements; the dance is in their bodies; it is a comfortable thing to do. The movement is into the ground, because the earth is sacred, they are connected to the earth. Africans make little or no distinction between the sacred and the profane. All life is holy, all life is sacred. For them, to dance is to breathe. To dance is sacred. The candle bearer and the book bearer sustain the holding up of the book and candle throughout the entire opening song, which takes about ten minutes.

This opening is a traditional dance form transformed into liturgical dance. This form is called *Mgubo*, the celebration of victory. The text has been adapted and changed from the village victory to Christ's victory over death, Christ victorious in the Easter Season. During the long procession, the entire church sings: *God sent his only Son, to come and save all humankind. And we all say thank you, merciful God. Jesus came to save us by dying on the cross, but rose from the dead, we are saved indeed.*

**Yaoundé, Cameroon:** The Presentation of Gifts is a full choir dance in which the gifts of bread and wine, banana, fruits, squash and food staples are brought to the presider and then danced around the church and then back and down the main aisle again. The movement is repetitive, more complicated than the once down the aisle processions we may know.

#### PRAYER DANCES

**Kumasi, Ghana** (Acclamation): Under the direction of Bishop Peter Sarpong at the Cathedral in Kumasi, the dance at Eucharistic acclamation draws on the traditional greeting of the Ashanti King with special drumming and movements reserved for royal occasions. The women, dressed in special cloth, greet the coming of the Lord/King during the Eucharistic Prayer with hand gestures and a torso curved reverently. The dance is slow and deliberate as the music group sings: *The King has come. Let us ask the King for a blessing. Praises to the King!*

**Lilongwe, Malawi** (Invocation): At the Poor Clare's House of Prayer, for the Feast of Our Lady of Africa, the Mary statue, carved of ebony wood, draped with a blue dress and pearls around her neck, is placed in a corner of the chapel. At the beginning of morning prayer for the Feast, there is a hushed reverence to the *a cappella* singing as the sisters kneel on the floor and bend over as they sing. At the opening hymn, a sister pounds an actual mortar and pestle for the percussive sound. The sounds of the grinding mix with the sounds of sifting grain as a rhythmic element underneath the singing. These dramatic sounds are the ones young women would have heard in the village, in the early morning light before sunrise and the oncoming heat of day. The percussive elements highlight a unified sifting dance gesture, down, left and right, all combining to underscore the hymn-text.

**Yaoundé, Cameroon** (Acclamation): This liturgy has been celebrated for about ten years in this parish. Set in the middle of the capital city, the people celebrating are city people. The modest church structure is new. The Eucharistic Prayer of the priest is intertwined with the choir singing and dancing. It begins with the *Sanctus* and continues through the Eucharistic Acclamation. The choir is dressed in traditional African colors: white, red and black. During the *Sanctus*, the choir becomes almost a living iconostasis between the people and the altar. The dancing is highly stylized. The women carry *abui*, white pompoms, symbols of respect, used traditionally to express joy and happiness. The men shake the *apback*, symbolizing the power of God, *chasse-mouche* or fly-swatters. The movement continues throughout the Eucharistic Prayer in a call and response style. Note the integration of voiced prayer, sung chants and danced acclamations.

#### PROCLAMATION DANCE

**Addis Ababa, Ethiopia:** In the Capuchin Church of Holy Savior down-town, people gather before sunrise to sing the psalms of Morning Prayer. The most significant aspect of the prayer is the *Allegro dance*, one of the oldest liturgical dances in Christendom with its origins in the early church. This dance represents the ecstatic dancing of David rejoicing before the Ark. Large drums are carried and played in a circle dance with a stylized stomping of the feet. Even with an ongoing civil war, in a time of food shortage, the Christian gathers to pray, sing and dance and in these difficult times to offer their dance for peace and reconciliation.

**Turbo, Kenya:** On Good Friday, there is a dramatic presentation of the Passion, beginning with the betrayal in the garden and concluding with the interchange of Jesus and

Pilate. The drama uses the grounds of the Mission, the Parish house and church as the congregation follows the action from place to place. From Pilate's house, everyone then continues in the way of the cross through the village, praying the Stations of the Cross. The entire event takes about three hours; and the journey goes through the village up a hill to Calvary. This drama has an evangelical edge, proclaiming the passion of Jesus Christ. As the procession moves through the center of town, stopping traffic and using the main road, more people hear the proclamation and they join in the prayer walk. At the time of crucifixion, there is real weeping and a genuine sadness descends over the entire congregation.

#### CELEBRATION DANCE

**Nandom, Ghana:** To celebrate the Feast of Corpus Christi, there is an outdoors mass on the grounds of the Church of St. Theresa in the Northern District. After the post communion prayer, each group in the Parish is invited up to pray, sing and dance before the Blessed Sacrament. The monstrance is placed on the altar and for the next four hours or so, there is a variety of adoration styles. The Dagatti people are basically agriculturists, living on the Southern Burkina Faso border, whose Ghanaian dance forms are quite strenuous and complex. The foot patterns go deep into the ground with an isolated movement of the torso, the back bent over a bit and there is a sudden impulse to the shaking of the head. The dancing is ecstatic. People are aware of the Eucharistic Presence, yet they give themselves over to the dancing. Time seems suspended as priests, sisters and parish groups spend most of the day praising God with song, dance for the gift of the Eucharist.

#### SPECIAL CELEBRATIONS

**Kinshasa, Zaire:** The popularly called *Zaire Rite*<sup>4</sup> is the first new Roman rite in many centuries. As celebrated in St. Alphonse Parish, Kinshasa, Matete, the opening procession involves all the ministers doing a *step together step* dance, servers carry spears as symbols of the chief and the main presider carries the *symbole du chef* (the sign of the chief, a carved stick with horse hairs). As the procession nears the altar, the presider kisses the altar north, east, south, west, representing the universe, signifying the global quality of praise. The Gloria is a *circle dance* around the altar with all ministers, men and women, following the presider who incenses the altar. The steps are highly patterned and there is stylized hand-clapping. Note that dance is not something added on to the rite, but a constitutive element. Without the dance, there can be no rite, which is very comprehensive in describing the elements for the celebration. Each participating tribal group must work with their own symbols and find the balance in expression. The rite is more than a liturgical order or set prayers, but rather the entire complex of words, actions and cultural symbols.

During the opening prayer the congregation uses the *orans* gesture, spreading out their arms with their hearts opening to God. The people respond with a longer phrase than *Amen*. The homily is also energetic as the congregation participates, shouting out certain phrases or singing a song or acclamation. The order has also been re-worked according to the older liturgical tradition. The Introductory rites have been simplified. After the

homily, there is an invocation of saints and ancestors, a litany of forgiveness, the sprinkling rite and the sharing of peace.

**Lilongwe, Malawi:** *Misa Chimalawi* is the result of many years' work by the Poor Clare sisters. Still in an experimental stage, this mass is not often celebrated publicly. The structure of the Mass combines Roman liturgical form and rich, traditional Malawi symbols. At the beginning, there are prayers before entering the sacred space. Once inside the enclosed sacred space, the sisters invoke the saints and ancestors to be present in the celebration. The presider is dressed in the style and colors of a Chief. Highlights include the firepole dance as part of the responsorial psalm; the presentation of bread and wine along with the symbols of a cloistered life: prayer books, song books, farm implements, the fruits of the field, flowers, chickens and rabbits raised within the cloister. These are received and placed near the sacred fire. In place of incense, flour is sprinkled on the objects, the traditional way to make things holy, as a blessing.

#### A PACIFIC EXPERIENCE

The journey to the South Pacific took place in 1995 and 1996 and included many islands in Polynesia and Melanesia. During the return trip, I showed the original, raw video footage to a variety of communities for discussion and feedback. These responses along with some new footage helped shape the final edited version.

The people of the Pacific dance! They learn movement as little children. Dancing with hand gestures are perfectly natural. Thus the inclusion of dance in the liturgy can be very natural, too. One of the interesting features of Pacific liturgical dance is that many dances done in Church come directly from the culture with little adaptation. This is more often the case than not. While there may be a new dance adapted from the rich assortment of movement patterns, most Pacific people themselves make the connections and design natural movements to fit the liturgical moment, based on traditional dancing styles. The dances use hand gestures and a gentle swaying of the body. In some cultures, the congregation itself would remain seated on mats throughout the ritual. Standing up or changing positions, except for communion, would be disrespectful.

Inculturation is becoming a hallmark of the Vatican II Church and many Pacific Islands are beginning to develop a Pacific Theology by exploring the interaction between their island way of life and the age-old traditions of Christianity. It is a lively and exciting time to be Church in the Pacific.

#### PROCESSION DANCE

**Suva, Fiji:** For the patronal feast of St. Peter Chanel, the seminarians at Pacific Regional Seminary have employed a traditional Royal Kava dance. In its original form, the dance is a presentation of a bowl of kava to a royal personage, such as the chief. In this Gifts procession dance, the seminarian in full Fijian attire, dances the chalice and paten to the Archbishop. While the chant has been rewritten for the liturgical act of presentation, the dance movements are the same as the Royal Kava dance.

**Gizo Island, Solomon Islands:** For the Ordination of the Bishop Cyril O'Grady, the Solomon Island boys from the local high school, played the pan pipes, swaying in rhythm

to the hypnotic tunes. These traditional musicians led the procession from the downtown Cathedral to the open field where the liturgy was celebrated. The traditionally clad pipers contrasted to the servers, a few in warrior dress, but most in red cassocks and white surplices.

The women from Kiribati presented the bishop-designate to the Apostolic Nuncio with a rhythmic and patterned dance. The women surrounded the candidate, weaving intricate cross patterns with their steps as the men stayed on the outside edge, singing and gently drumming.

The Papal letter was also presented to the Apostolic nuncio by three warrior-messengers. The contrasting image was startling: three boys in grass skirts and fresh white paint on their black bodies interacting with a white and gold vested Roman bishop with towering mitre. Here was a meeting of two very distinct cultures!

**Throughout the South Pacific:** In many parts of Western Samoa, the Fiji Islands, Kiribati (actually a part of Micronesia, whose peoples have migrated to other islands) and Papua New Guinea, women play an important role in bringing the Scriptures to the congregation. After the opening prayer, it is quite traditional for the women to dance in the Word with a group of four to six. The dance styles, costumes and chants are as varied as the cultures.

#### PRAYER DANCE

**Suva, Fiji** (Acclamation): In preparing a new Alleluia acclamation dance, a group of seminarians, designed an Alleluia in the *Haka* style (usually associated with the Maoris of New Zealand). The arm movements were strong, almost chopping like karate, yet joyful, combining arm gestures from different island traditions. The dance was natural and graceful to introduce the reading of the Gospel.

#### PROCLAMATION DANCE

**Southern Highlands, Papua New Guinea:** The Obene people live deep in the bush in the mountainous region of the Southern Highlands. The community is an outpost station in the diocese of Mendi. In the community there are a number of dance groups. Wearing traditional Obene attire, one dance group greeted the arrival of the priest and performed a welcome dance to the church. This group also assisted in blessing the new church space with a special dance. Within the liturgy there were other groups of men and women who perform a processional dance with full circle turns with guitars and all.

The water used in the baptisms during the liturgy was *bamboo water*. This water was carried through a bamboo piping system from the top of the hill all the way down into the village square near the church. The water was flowing and living water. Because the village is not near a stream, they use this form of *bamboo water* because for them it is living water. They call *plastic water* (water in a plastic container) dead water. This water would not be suitable for baptism.

During the marriage ceremony, the couple pledges their love by placing their hands on the village rock with the priest's hand on top as a seal. This is the rock of covenant and is

used for all contractual matters. It is a symbol of the sacredness of contracts and the special place of marriage within village life.

#### MEDITATION DANCE

**Nanaculli, Oahu, Hawaii:** Because there has been a repression of Hawaiian culture for a number of years, the Hawaiian people are very interested and determined to revive the ancient customs and religious symbols. The Hawaiian hula has always been an expressive religious dance and not just for the tourist industry. On *Aloha* Sunday, the parish of Saint Rita prepares the liturgy in an Hawaiian way.. After communion, a group of women dance a hula meditation. Each hand gesture has a meaning and the movements are gentle and beautifully constructed. By its very nature, the hula is religious. The joining and recognizing of traditional Hawaiian culture within the church rituals is just a start - a way to honor a culture and a people that almost disappeared.

**Rarotonga, Cook Islands:** The Cook Islands are also in the midst of a cultural revival. The Maoris or the indigenous peoples of the Cooks are trying to relocate their Polynesian identity. The dancing in these islands is the most noticeable cultural force. In general, the English language and the New Zealand influence have taken over. At the Cathedral, there is just the hint of a start toward the use of more cultural elements and of the possibility of dance in the church. At a First Communion celebration, the boys and girls learned simple hand gestures for a post communion song. The gestures are very elementary but powerful. The children are committed to their movements with a certain ease. The next step will be to move into simple congregational movement and possibly solo dance meditation.

#### CELEBRATION DANCE

**Mendi, Papua New Guinea:** For the celebration for the new bishop of Mendi, Stephen Reichert, the various Huli tribes came to the city after a three or four day trek. On the Saturday before the ceremony, the tribes gather for a singsing. This is celebration dance in one of its truest and most original forms. With multi-colored painted faces and plumage from the birds of paradise, these tribal people are stunning and fierce in appearance. This was a first for Mendi as hundred of tribal people, men and women, marched in unison onto a large grassy plain. Each group then assembled, performing in place. Some pounded their drums and did a form of jump dancing, other groups marched around as if in a military parade. They were celebrating the new bishop and showing themselves off to the people of Mendi who wore western-style shirts and pants. It was a high pitched celebration. Many of the assembled groups would participate in the Liturgy the next day by dancing the word procession, the alleluia dance, or the gifts procession. Words on this page could never capture the incredible sight of these Huli tribes in feathers and paint engaged in Catholic worship. See the video! Our church is truly catholic and embraces the world.

**Leva'a, Western Samoa:** The feast of Pentecost is an example of the creative liturgical work of Cardinal Pio Taofinu'u. The cardinal is Samoan and recognizes that the future of the church in Samoa and possibly the world depends on an evangelization that

speaks the language and culture of the people. To this end, the cardinal has been working on a liturgy that expresses itself with the rich symbols and folkways of Samoa. The *fa'a samoa* (Samoan way) is still very strong in the islands. As part of the celebration, the cardinal has involved a number of dance groups and various chiefs.

Three moments stand out. The first is during the penitential rite, when the eldest chief and his wife are covered with fine mats as a symbols of reconciliation. This custom follows traditional village life for the seeking of forgiveness. The couple remains under the mats during the singing of the *Kyrie*. They are then greeted with the sign of peace and the paschal candle, which the priest then processes throughout the church. The second is during the liturgy of the word when the talking chief, present on the altar through the entire liturgy, speaks to the people and then gives the talking stick and the symbol of the chief to the cardinal. The Cardinal with the appropriate symbols in hand then advances to the lectern for the reading of the gospel and the homily. The third is the gifts procession where flowers are presented around the altar and to the presiders and associates. This also includes traditional Samoan dancing with oiled bodies and the unique hand gestures of Samoa, finishing with the bringing in of a roasted pig as a sign of community celebration.

#### A RESPONSE

Today in North America, we continue our exploration through images, stories and symbols to understand the relationship of liturgy to culture and to discover how the body can be used more expressively. This entails studying the life experience, history and symbols of the community as the starting place to express the deepest Christian mysteries. The work presumes the creative input from poets, musicians and dancers to shape the material with liturgists and ritual makers. We must move forward with confidence of a faith that is embodied and does justice.

It is clear that Africa and parts of the Pacific are still considered mission land. Yet, there is more freedom with experimentation and less surveillance because liturgy is considered the new evangelization. The Catholic liturgy invites and beckons the uninitiated, speaking the language of Christ from within the culture. Many of these newer churches are post-Vatican 2 which means they only received an inculturated church. Many communities, especially in Papua New Guinea, did not have to *unlearn* from the past. This is not to say that the work of the church and the spread of the gospel is finished. Inculturation speaks Christ, but not in Western clothes, with western words.

Art and ritual can elevate and expand our spiritual horizons. Symbols can express what the heart feels and the tongue cannot articulate. Let this experience of *The Dancing Church* invite you to a ritual world of symbols and dance. Just as poetry transcends the use of everyday language, even though the words are the same, so too does dance transcend ordinary body movement to elevate and uplift the spirit. One does not need to have a complete understanding of the poem to experience the transcendent. Likewise, an understanding of every movement is not necessary for the dance experience to be felt and appreciated. *The Dancing Church* can raise questions and open new possibilities for worshipping God and celebrating the spirit.

Through an understanding of dance and the ways various cultures have employed symbols in their own societal and religious ways, we need to begin reflecting on how we can embody our own worship and open up ritual activity to the entire congregation. As technology shrinks the world and we become more a global community, the practices and customs of the world will touch us in new ways. For so long we have given our resources and our missionaries for the building up of world and church and now, perhaps for the first time, we must learn to receive. It may be difficult or embarrassing to open our hands and arms. Now is the time to receive from the world church. Now we learn from others very different than ourselves to receive a new spirit of Pentecost which will challenge and transform, bringing fire and light to our lives, our faith and our worship. Let there be dance!

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<sup>1</sup> Suzanne Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1957.

<sup>2</sup> *The Dancing Church: Impressions of the Church of Africa* is a 58 minute video available from Paulist Press, Mahwah, NJ. *The Dancing Church of the Pacific* will be available late summer 1997.

<sup>3</sup> Women play a significant role in the Church life of Africa, as lay ministers and in a variety of liturgical ministries.

<sup>4</sup> The official title is the Roman Rite for the Dioceses of Zaire. Many dioceses have not yet implemented this new rite, especially in Eastern Zaire.