

ICDF NEWSLETTER- AUGUST 2014: "Men in Dance"

MEN DANCING

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Vera's background:

I teach almost everywhere and in all continents wherever I am invited, normally in churches, at conferences, Messianic Jewish Festivals, etc. The level of dance can vary with each invitation. Sometimes I find it's necessary to adapt my choreography to match the ability and experience of the dancers - from the very young to the highly professional. In 1994 I was called to choose and train a Russian dance group for the outreaches there, most of whom were highly skilled Russian Ballet dancers in big theatres in their own land. Meanwhile, I also teach children; the youngest I am prepared to teach is 7 years old. I read scriptures related to my music, and I have found that children younger than 7 have shorter attention spans, and are often bored by this. I am always ready to change that though if the need is there. On the opposite end of the scale, one member of my UK New Jerusalem Dancers (NJD), who has just retired, was 81!

I work in the Hebraic/Jewish dance style, which is characterised by the use of true Biblical dance steps such as those used by King David and the Jewish community of Bible days. Many people do not know that the original Tenakh (Hebrew Bible) actually describes what the body movements in these celebration dances. Since many translators have no concept of dance as worship, they used words like joy (Zeph 3:17), rejoice, dance, feast, celebrate, and many more. Yet the Word actually translates as 'spin around in sudden emotion,' 'jump on both feet,' 'limp'...

My regular monthly workshops simply consist of spending an afternoon worshipping the G-d of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Many other teaching events involve training leaders or teachers to incorporate dance in church celebrations or feasts, concerts, TV or stage productions.

On men and dance

The very nature of Messianic Dance, as described in the Bible, is that it is mostly performed by men. It is a very easy style to learn and generally they feel like men doing it! One of my long-term men says he likes to make some steps 'a bit more blokey!' We have chatted much about how he feels as a man doing my choreography. I allow these men certain differences in how they use my ideas. I do not want them to be 'floaty,' and if they don't point their toes it's not a big deal. The Bible does not say if David pointed his! Nor that he was a technically correct dancer!

The presence of men means some of our dances can tell stories. We have a Chassidic Wedding dance, impossible without a groom, best man, a father and the bride's father, all of whom have important roles in a Jewish wedding. Another dance is based on Song of Solomon and is a dance of flirting and trying to find a bride. Many Jewish dances also require the participation of couples.

The dynamics are, of course, different for mixed groups. Traditionally women find it easier to learn the dances, so I have to be sure to show patience and avoid embarrassing or offending

the men as they learn, since it can be difficult for them to maintain confidence if they are not progressing as quickly as the women in the group. At dance venues, I ensure that we have two dressing rooms - and we never get changed in the toilets! Our costumes are garments of worship and praise and need to be treated as such. I have found that men often need more time to change costumes, so I incorporate longer narrations or scriptures to accommodate this.

Until 1993 all my dances were for women, including an evangelical dance to 'Liberated Wailing Wall' song Isaiah 53. I used a man to represent the Suffering Servant. He was the only man at the time, but within a year I had about six men as part of the group. At a particular performance, we had an hour free after setting up and rehearsing, so I said, 'If you guys have the energy, figure out something you can do in Isaiah 53 to be on stage with us.' Within a few minutes they chose to 'frame' the stage to protect us, and just pick up with hand movements on a certain phrase - '*who, who, who has believed*' - where they offered their hands to bring the audience to the LORD. It was simple, effective and easy to learn and they have been doing just that ever since.

I do like to ask men how they feel about a dance and if they can add something to it. All my men (including our sons) over the last 23 years (about 30 plus men) have gone on to be teachers in their churches, home groups and Shabbat services, some lead dance at conferences. I love it when a man in the audience tells me after our presentations that he always wanted to dance but didn't think he had the skills - but when he saw the men in NJD he knew he could give it a try! These men started coming to my workshops and some eventually became NJD members!

If you could choose any male to dance with, who would that be?

My choice of male dancers? My husband of 36 years!

My second choice is Peter Hothersall ICDF Network for Ballroom dance. We have danced a 'fusion dance' together and he is amazing to work with.

Vera Chierico