



Dancing the Sacred, Moving the World...

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HOW TO FORM A SACRED DANCE MOVEMENT CHOIR

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Laban's definition of Movement Choirs still holds: numbers of people joined in using choreographed movement together, with varying degrees of personal expression. Spiritually based Movement Choirs add yet another element. The spiritual energy of a group can be enormously greater than that of a single person alone and a Movement Choir combines the joy and freedom to dance the sacred with the power of the group, benefiting both the dancers and audience.

Today's Movement Choirs vary in their makeup and purpose from highly professional one-time or ongoing groups to collections of people brought together for a short period or as a continuing group –people of all ages and backgrounds and of all levels of experience and ability sharing the dance.

The first issue in creating a Movement Choir is its purpose or function, whether it is to offer collective prayer, to evoke Spirit, to celebrate an occasion, to bridge a social or cultural gap, to unite people, to heal – the purpose needs to be made conscious, although the function of the group may focus or change over time. And along with this is the question of the audience – some Movement Choirs have had none, but have established rituals for connecting members of the group with the sacred; others create the group as a focal point to bring the sacred to others.



The second area of concern is the question of who will be involved, what the time commitment will be and where the dance or dances will take place, all tied to the function. This will dictate your choreography, the length and frequency of the group's performance and how much improvisation you want to incorporate. Whether you choose to involve people who move in the same tradition, a diverse group in terms of experience and sacred traditions, a group of men only, women only or an age range, your pathway will be colored by the nature of the group.



Choreography is much touchier for a Movement Choir than for a professional company. The most successful pieces are beautiful, but within the compass of the least accomplished person in the group so there is satisfaction in achievement that allows the participants to fill the movement with their individual spiritual connections and build the collective power.

Another key element is what you will dance to – are you planning to use music, drums, hands clapping, chant, breath?

It can be useful to find something physical that can unite the group and underlines your purpose – armbands, banners, costumes, whatever. Several groups I have worked with had medicine sticks for the Four Directions or the Elements or whatever they worked through to greet the Divine; some have used colored clothing, some ritual masks, but it really helps to establish a group identity physically as well as spiritually. This may depend on your resources (financial and artistic) or those of the group itself, as well as how long the group will work together.

One pitfall of Movement Choirs has traditionally been that quick simultaneous movement, unless carefully choreographed, can look like calisthenics when performed by a large group, especially when many members are inexperienced. You'll need to consider how to make the movements count, how to go beyond the need to move together to the content of the movement, conveyed in a way that works for the dancer and the audience, if there is one. In sacred dance as in all connection with the sacred, there is a delicate balance between the personal experience of the Divine and the power of the group, and way you choose to cut this cake will have a very strong impact on your creative process and performance.



Practical steps:

Plan how you will handle expenses and whom you have to draw on for help in everything from costumes to permits, rehearsal space to makeup. Give group members some ownership here, if possible; involve them in finding resources.

Know how you will communicate with the group (and how they will communicate with you).

Be sure to get agreement on the length and frequency of practice sessions; if these are not professional dancers you will have to make allowances for latecomers and individual conflicting commitments that pop up.

Make your process very clear when you introduce a dance to the Movement Choir. Give them time to absorb each section and find the spiritual content or they will have the moves and miss the most important aspect.

Give some attention to what happens after the performance; some sort of celebration, completion or continuation is in order. Don't let the energy just disperse at random; it's very disconcerting.

Document, document, document – and share the documentation with the members of the Choir.

In my experience, if you can unite the group vertically – with the Divine – many of the horizontal issues evaporate...