

In the Beginning...

The River Dance Company was founded in 2002. It's birthing was sometimes painful, but always certain. It was what God had created me, Monica Gingerich, to do. . .

The Lord began to stir my heart about dance after several years of utilizing my giftedness in drama. As a young adult in the late 80's and into the 90's, I gave leadership to my church's arts program, specializing in annual Christmas dinner theaters – directing, building sets, sewing costumes (yes, even cooking the dinner!). The annual musicals afforded opportunity to create choreography. Never having taken dance classes, I took what the Lord gave me for a dance vocabulary and realized I had a natural gifting for communicating through stimulating and powerful combinations of music, movement and drama. I also began assisting with creative aspects of Cantatas through visual aides (primarily set design and slides to accompany the music).

Another dance ministry, Restored to Glory with Peggy Alberda, was operating in this area. Attendance at one of their performances sent my head swirling. How awesome! Dance being used by God for something more than just a casual musical? The creative juices were beginning to flow. . .

The Lord began to show me movement as I listened to music. I shared my first “dance” as a special music number one Sunday morning, utilizing my hands, head, and kneeling/bowing for the extent of my movement. This was quite a stretch for my church tradition; however, several people shared their appreciation for what I had offered that morning. Eventually I was asked to put a special dance together for Christmas Eve service using some young girls. Over time, similar requests came as well as adding special touches to Easter services with processions and flags done by young children. Though I had some interest in dance at this point, the passion for dance hadn't yet been ignited.

In early to mid 90's I sought to seek out the congregation for participation in the performing and creative arts. Unfortunately, my enthusiasm was not well received. After receiving several unsigned and signed notes and letters denouncing this sort of thing and accusing me of stirring up trouble, following after “New Age” philosophies, and being out of line in the church, I left the creative and expressive arts lie dormant. We continued to do bi-annual dinner theaters (after all, folks love to eat and be entertained); however, doing much with dance or mime was pretty much out. My heart was broken, and for several years I continued to serve in the arts department with a crushed spirit, but with a hope for more.

In May 1999 I attended another dance concert by Restored to Glory. Entitled “Messianic Praise”, the concert was fueled by Hebraic undertones, color, and wonderful creativity. Something stirred inside me that was different than before. I wanted to be part of something like this! I purchased a book that Peggy Alberda recommended that her sister had written. The following day I went to a local Christian book store to get a gift for a couple who was leaving our church to pioneer in youth ministry in Atlanta, Georgia. I moved into the music section and was struck by a CD entitled “Messianic Praise”. Hmm . . . “I bet that's good,” I thought, having enjoyed the music from the night before at the dance concert. Then a second CD found it's way into my hands – “Jerusalem, Arise!” by Paul Wilbur. Never heard of him before, but again, live music in Jerusalem sounded wonderful after hearing the invigorating music the night before. Didn't plan to get myself anything, but I ended up with 2 CDs and a gift for my friends.

When I returned home from my errands that day, I popped in the Paul Wilbur CD while I unpacked my groceries. My head began to swirl again. Dance, dance and more dance! All I could see was dance! This time, however, I saw myself as part of the picture, being part of something much bigger. My heart was so stirred I fell to my knees on my kitchen floor weeping before the Lord. It was at that moment in the summer of '99 that I surrendered to the call on my life to minister in the dance, despite what the Church would say.

I listened to “Jerusalem, Arise!” over and over again. My husband even enjoyed it. I remember telling him at one point that I’d love to go to Israel and worship under the leadership of this man (thinking he was a resident of Israel). I couldn’t turn the movie reel off in my mind – every time I listened to music, I saw dance. Whatever would I do? I can’t dance at church!

The more I listened, the stronger the vision became for a women’s dance ministry at church. Choreography began to take shape. I was creating dances for dancers I didn’t even have yet! I wouldn’t even know who to ask. Were there other frustrated worshippers sitting and standing in the pews? There must be. . .

Christmas 2000 I was again asked to put together a dance for some girls for our Christmas Eve service. As I didn’t have garments for the girls to wear, I thought I might contact Peggy Alberda to inquire about borrowing some. That conversation led to many others, and I began gleaning a harvest of thoughtful guidance for dance ministry. Come to find out, her group of 70+ dancers (children and teens) was teaming with her sister’s group of 100+ dancers (located in Michigan) to dance at a Paul Wilbur concert the coming year. No way! I was astounded at God’s sweetness to me, knowing my heart for dance and love for the music of Paul Wilbur. I ended up making four dresses for that Christmas dance, but I also traveled to Michigan the following year singing and dancing as a worshipper at the Wilbur concert. God continued to confirm His direction for dance ministry.

2000 was the year of the big scare of Y2K. While my husband was busy making provisions for the worst, I began seeking direction through books about dance in worship, doing extensive Bible study, and soaking in the presence of the Lord. I began developing a handbook for the ministry, at this point a women’s ministry in my mind. Upon its completion, the Lord showed me I needed a group of intercessors to begin praying for me. As the intercessors read my materials and heard my heart, they enthusiastically prayed for and over me. At the close of the year our pastor shared a message relative to the Y2K hype. Whom would I fear? Man? Or God? Little did he know the struggle I had been having with the fear of man and stepping out to do what God had called me to do. I committed that morning to fear God instead of man.

As I felt totally inept and unequipped to teach dance, having no formal training, I sought out a Christian-based program to learn some skills. The other dance ministry in the area did not have an adult program. I found a studio in town. After taking only a couple months of ballet, the studio shut down. Nevertheless, a Divine appointment was made with Terry Foss, my instructor, which would play a part of God’s design later.

During 2001 I wrote a Bible study based on that first book I read, “Restoring the Dance: Seeking God’s Order,” by Ann Stevenson (one that every worshipper should have and read!). The study would be foundational to the ministry, and I knew it would become a requirement for anyone who would eventually become a part of the ministry (adults were all I had in mind yet at this point).

In the summer of 2001 I attended a creative worship conference in Arkansas, never having been to any such thing before. It was my first taste of abandoned worship with creative arts and dance. I was so inspired. Having prayed that I would take back to our church only that which the Lord wanted me to retain, I began to see some of the elements of our ministry unfold. Something I wasn’t counting on was a vision for children in the ministry.

I wasn’t interested in teaching children. Restored to Glory was doing that. After all, how many children could there be who were interested in sacred dance? “Let Peggy do that,” I told God, “I don’t want to.” I

fought the idea of opening up to youngsters, but the Lord turned my heart, reminding me that “a little child will lead them.”

With my vision tweaked, I contacted Terry Foss – that aforementioned Divine appointment – to see if she'd be interested in teaming with me as our ballet instructor. After several meetings Terry excitedly jumped on board with me. During this time I also began teaching my intercessors the Bible study I had developed – partly as practice for me, and also for the sake of helping those who were praying for me to be better equipped on how to pray. We continued praying and waiting on God for His perfect timing to present my vision to church leadership. In my season of waiting and seeking the Lord, I had learned that without the consent and blessing of my pastors and elders, God would not bless the ministry. Finally, in the Spring of 2002, I felt the release to give to the board of elders and pastors my proposal for establishing a school of sacred dance.

I'm sure the group of 6 men were certain nothing would really come of this, but they permitted me to scratch this itch of mine with some thoughtful admonition. To their astonishment, we began our first season with 30 dancers that fall, 8 of which were adults.

Our first season's theme was “Setting the Captives Free!” – prophetic of what the Lord wanted to do through the dance and with me. Interestingly enough, God not only set me free to dance and know His plan for my life, but He also freed me to become a mother. After 12 years of marriage and infertility, our first adopted child, a daughter, joined our family in May – just days after completing our first season and production. Two years later we also adopted a baby boy. Isn't God amazing? His timing is impeccable. Since that first year, we've added a third instructor, began training student assistants, and enlarged our program to include boys. That “itch” hasn't gone away. It has been amazing to see God's sovereignty and provision through all our growth. It gives us confidence that He will continue to lead and guide RDC into the future as we continue to teach the art of dance with a heart of worship!

Choosing a Name...

Ezekiel 47:1-12 describes for us the river flowing out of the temple of God. As Christians, we are also the Temple of God. As we give out of ourselves in the dance and worship, God's river of life flows out of us to others, giving them life (verse 9), healing (verse 12), and freedom in the Lord Jesus Christ.