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The Impact of COVID-19 on Liturgical Dance in Black Churches  
in California and the Northeast United States

THESIS

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by

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Much love!

## ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

The Impact of COVID-19 on Liturgical Dance in Black Churches  
in California and the Northeast United States

By

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This thesis explores liturgical dance in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, in relation to the global COVID-19 pandemic. Dance ministries throughout the nation were severely impacted by COVID-19. The project examines the impact that COVID-19 has had on liturgical dance within the Black Church. Interviews with Pastors and Dance Ministry Leaders, key figures in these communities, uncovers the methods and strategies they used, throughout varying stages of the pandemic, to enable liturgical dancers to continue their mission(s).

The research uncovers and reflects upon the opportunities the pandemic brought to expanding the field of liturgical dance. Additionally, the study proposes present and future strategies that support and reinforce the church's vital embodied expression of worship.

## **Introduction**

The dance ministry at my church, a predominantly Black, nondenominational Church, located in New York, had our annual dance concert scheduled for March 21<sup>st</sup>, 2020. This event was particularly special for us because that year, for the first time ever, we (the Church) curated a collaborative dance concert to include liturgical dancers, dance ministries, and worshipping artists from other churches in our local and adjacent communities. Formally called “iWorship”, we changed the title of the 2020 event to “WeWorship”, as the intention was to collaborate and to unite dance ministers and churches outside of our local assembly. The aim was to provide a space for Dance Ministers and congregations to gather, use their gifts, and to worship together, as one community in one place.

Though our dance ministry and the artists/ministries we invited spent several months planning and preparing for the event, our attempts were met with resistance, as the presence of the virus resulted in mandates that went counter to the aim and goal of everything that we were planning for – gathering in the Church, as an attempt to unite the Church. The concert, which would have been a gathering of more than ten people, had to be canceled two weeks before the event date. Not having experienced or lived through a global pandemic before, no one knew what was ahead or what to anticipate from the coronavirus.

My church, like most churches, had to pivot and shift their focus to find ways to conduct Church virtually. In the beginning of the pandemic, my church made a formal announcement that many ministries would be inactive because of the state mandates and guidelines – the dance ministry being one of them. There was never an announcement about when we would return to ministry. We just knew that we would be able to gather once it was safe. Though my Church’s

dance ministry was impacted in specific ways, I am positive that there are other ministries within Black communities who have endured similar, yet different, obstacles, tests, trials, and triumphs.

This thesis will analyze liturgical dance in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, in relation to the global COVID-19 pandemic. In February and March of 2020 COVID-19 cases began to rise, and a state-wide shutdown was put in place. Not having experienced or lived through a global pandemic before, no one knew what was ahead or what to anticipate from the coronavirus.

The coronavirus had a devastating impact on the Black population and, in effect, prevented Black people from gathering in their churches. There is also evidence that Black people were dying from COVID-19 at disproportionately higher rates than that of any other racial group (Garcia, 2022). During this time of crisis and devastation, resources in the Black Church were spread thin, as Pastors and church leaders' energies went to providing soul care to their congregants. To minimize the risk and threat to their congregant's health, Pastors, especially within black communities, had to adhere to and comply with stay-at-home mandate(s) and incorporate isolation techniques within their churches.

Though dance ministries serve in the same role and function across the church at large, to usher in the presence of God, the COVID-19 pandemic had a unique impact on each individual ministry. My research approach and methods are developed with the intention to understand the impact COVID-19 had on dance ministries in Black Church California and the Northeast. This study looks at how churches had to pivot and shift their focus to find ways to conduct church virtually.

As I aim to uncover and understand the phenomena of the COVID-19 pandemic and its effects, there are some limitations to my research study. The study engages one Pastor and Dance Ministry Leaders in Black Churches only on the east and west coasts of the United States to

identify challenges that dance ministries faced in this socially distanced era in their regions. Only one Pastor is included in the study and only one Church on the west coast has representation. Dance ministries that dissolved during the pandemic are not included in the study, neither are the varying reasons or deciding factors that led to their dissolution.

Chapter One lays the foundation for my research study and includes a review of literature, used to identify key concepts. In Chapter One I define the Black Church, Dance Ministries, and the Impact of COVID-19 on Black communities more broadly and then more specifically in the Black Church. Chapter Two provides the history of the Black Church in the United States, in addition to dance within the Black Church. This chapter also includes a timeline of the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on the Black community. Chapter Three deploys my methodology and uncovers the impact that the pandemic had on dance ministries in the Black Church. Through the voices of church leaders, I investigate the specific ways dance ministries were impacted, how dance ministries moved forward during this time, and how their work affected the function of the church. Lastly, Chapter Four examines my research findings and offers a practical guide on how to forge ahead in ministry, based on lessons learned. I uncover ways and opportunities that the pandemic has brought to expand liturgical dance for its necessary future.

I conclude the thesis concludes with a reiteration of revealed outcomes. From challenges discovered to remaining issues to overcome, I offer dance ministries and the liturgical dance community a way to review what occurred during this unprecedented time of crisis, in order to build resilience and plan ahead.



## **Chapter 1**

This chapter lays the foundation for my research study and discusses the Black Church, liturgical dance, and the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic had on the Black community in the USA and liturgical dance, specifically within the Black Church. After addressing the role of the Pastor within these communities, I also discuss how the larger dance world made use of technology, during times of isolation. This chapter contains a review of literature, and utilizes the work of experts to define key concepts, address issues, and give shape to my research questions. The chapter highlights challenges faced by the Black community and Black Church over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Literature Review**

This literature review defines four key terms: 1) the Black Church, 2) liturgical dance, 3) dance ministry, and 4) the COVID-19 pandemic. These terms are fundamental; they are the main focus and subject of the study.

### **The Black Church**

Dance ministries within the Black Church are the main focus of study. When I refer to the Black Church, I am referring to the African American Christian Church. The term Black Church is found within the work of W.E.B Du Bois, a prominent African American sociologist, socialist, historian and activist. In his 1903 work, *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois emphasized that marginalized African American (then referred to as negro) people must have a social center

and that foundation for these people is the Negro Church (Du Bois, 1999). Since the Transatlantic slave trade in the 1500s, these churches were the first institutions built and run by Black people, independent of white society in the United States.

For more than 300 years the Black Church has provided a safe haven, offering spiritual equality and self-expression, for the community and for Black Christians, in a nation shadowed by the legacy of slavery and a society defined by race and class. Tracing the history of the Black Church, I reference *The Black Church*, written by literary scholar, journalist, professor, and filmmaker Henry Louis Gates Jr. In his book Gates points out that although African American Churches can be diverse in philosophy (with denominational affiliations ranging from Methodist to Baptist, to Presbyterian), they all provide a refuge for teaching and learning, as well as psychological and spiritual nourishment. He adds that these Churches are and have been centers of hope for the hopeless, while providing a community with moral and ethical leadership (Gates, 2022). Based on the significance of the Black Church, it is worth considering that any and all threats to the institution could directly impact the congregation and subsequent larger Black community.

### **Liturgical Dance**

To define liturgical dance, I will be using Dr. Kathleen Turner's definition, as a means to situate and justify the spiritual practice, as it relates to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Dr. Turner is the Director of Christian Education/Discipleship at the Greater Allen AME Church in Queens, NY, in addition to being one of the founders of the Liturgical Dance Network (1998). Turner's definition of liturgical dance is that it is:

...expressive, and imaginative movement that is used both inside and outside of worship that creatively educates and instructs Christians to comprehend the Bible and their faith in the Trinity through the elements of space, time, and design. Liturgical dance has a relationship with music, spoken word, and silence. For both the individual dancer and the congregant, the church is identified as community through individual and mutual movement, and dance explorations that cultivate love, prayer, healing, and reconciliation, while fostering Christian identity throughout the liturgical calendar. Because of its experiential properties non-Christians can be exposed to liturgical dance and influenced by it (Turner, 2021, 169).

Turner's definition illuminates the diversity, capacity, and power that liturgical dance offers. It also lays the foundation for my research study. By fostering identity and community, exposure to this activity affirms and educates the Christian. With love, healing, and reconciliation being the byproduct of this creative activity, it appears that the Church would have to employ this movement practice - almost out of necessity.

Reverend Stephanie Scott, an ordained Deacon and theologian, states that these bodily movements, founded in religious language, are used to communicate with God and express spiritual experiences (Scott, 2000, 245). Liturgical dance, also known as Praise Dance within the Black community, is a sacred dance form (Elisha, 2018). Though the term liturgical dance did not exist until the 20<sup>th</sup> century, worshipful movement and dance are recorded in the Bible, 22 times in the Old Testament and 5 times in the New Testament.

## **Dance Ministry**

The dancing troupe of a Church is referred to as the Dance Ministry or Praise Team. The role of a dancer can be viewed as one who ministers. According to Webster's New College Dictionary a person who ministers is one who attends to the needs and to the wants of others (Pickett, 2008). In dance ministry, members use formal dance training alongside informally

accrued movement knowledge to share the gospel or good news of Jesus Christ to the congregants encouraging, comforting, and edifying those in the faith. Using the body to commune with the Spirit, liturgical dance can be done solo or with a group (Turner, 154). The role of the Dance Minister is intentional and specific. Claire Maria Chambers Blackstock, a writer and scholar of theatre and performance studies, wrote in a 2009 article that the purpose of Liturgical Dance is not to entertain or amuse the congregation or to promote one's self. The role of the Dance Minister is to usher in the presence of the Lord and the ultimate goal in liturgical dance is to reveal biblical truths. (Blackstock 2008, 102). It is through this dance that members of the faith can also receive a more complete and comprehensible understanding of what is mentioned and depicted in the Bible.

Most dance ministries are Church based and depend on church-owned facilities to operate (Elisha, 2018. 388). Having spent the last decade as a Dance Minister, it is substantiated that dancer ministers meet weekly, typically in the sanctuary, on weekday evenings or Saturday mornings, to rehearse/practice. During this time, Dance Ministry Leaders lead and teach choreography, provide scripture-based lessons, and lead their team in prayer. The leaders of these ministries serve as the primary visionary of the team, in conjunction with the pastoral/church leadership.

### **The COVID-19 Pandemic**

The Coronavirus Disease 2019 emerged in December of 2019, in Wuhan, China. Those who contracted the virus (SARS-CoV-2) experienced mild to moderate respiratory illness and many required special treatment(s) to recover. In many cases people became seriously ill and required emergency medical attention. Across the world millions of people died. APM Research

Lab indicates that at the time of my research (February 2022) approximately 977,092 Americans have died, with Black people accounting for 141,644 of the deaths (APM Research Lab, 2022). It was also established that older adults, and those with underlying medical conditions, like cardiovascular disease, diabetes, chronic respiratory disease, or cancer were more likely to develop serious illness (World Health Organization, 2022).

On March 11<sup>th</sup>, 2020, the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic, as the disease spread across several countries and affected a large number of people, resulting in a large number of deaths. By March 15<sup>th</sup> states in the U.S. began to shut down, as the government initiated immediate work from home mandates to prevent its spread. The White House also implemented social distancing measures and a protocol recommended that all people wear masks outside of the home. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention Museum (CDC), in association with the Smithsonian Institution's timeline provides information about select moments of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States and around the world (last updated in January 2022). This timeline, found on the CDC.gov website, is referenced in this study. It outlines, illustrates, and records the pandemic from its beginning to today. It is referenced globally and is maintained and updated regularly.

When the virus became recognized as a pandemic, it took the world and of course the Church by surprise. It demanded many organizations and institutions to find alternative ways to operate. For the first time in history the doors of the Black Church had to close, and no one knew for certain when they would be open again. Churches were confronted with the challenge of remaining accessible. With dance ministries relying on the infrastructure of the church building, it also became a challenge to rehearse and reach their congregations.

## **Impact on the Black Community and the Black Church**

Black people, especially older individuals, in communities of color have died disproportionately, due to societal, racial, and healthcare disparities. Dr. Aneesah McClinton, a surgeon, and Dr. Cato T. Laurencin, a professor, both affiliated with the University of Connecticut Health medical center, wrote an article to identify and address the racial and ethnic disparities of the COVID-19 virus. They found that though the coronavirus did not discriminate based on ethnicity, race, gender, age, or religion, in regard to who the virus is transmitted to, there were disparities posed against those in Black and brown communities. They highlight that Blacks already assume the status of a marginalized group - disproportionately affected by poverty, mass incarceration, limited healthcare access, and now the COVID-19 virus (Laurencin, 2020). In the United States Black people represent 12.5% of the population. However, when it comes to mortality rates, Black people accounted for 18.7% of overall COVID-19 deaths, confirming the health disparity (Gold, 2020).

As older adults within the African American community make up the majority of church attendees, it is important to highlight the impact of the virus on this particular demographic. Linda M. Chatters, a professor and researcher on Black American at the Institute for Social Research and the Center for Research on Ethnicity, Culture, and Health, explores these ideas in her article, *Older Black American During COVID-19: Race and Age Double Jeopardy* (2020). In the article Chatters highlights the relationship between faith communities and loneliness, due to the inability to meet regularly with Church members, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. This unfolding reality presented additional challenges that placed older Black adults at higher risk of social isolation, and loneliness, with its associated mental health challenges

(Chatters, 2020). Chatters also gives voice to Churches bearing a significant burden in caring for the sick and the loss of members.

Marla Frederick, an ethnographer and scholar, with focus on the African American religious experience, shares the shocking story of loss, posted in *Charisma News*, a faith-based news outlet, that had the title “Up to 30 COGIC Bishops, Leaders Die from COVID-19”. The Church of God in Christ (COGIC) is the nation’s first incorporated Pentecostal denomination and within a month of the pandemic 30 of its leaders passed away, as a result of the COVID-19 virus (Fredrick, 2020). The passing of leaders like those in one of the most storied Black religious institutions in the country, along with the death of pastors, choir members, and worshippers from other religious communities, brought about the need for immediate change in how religious communities should gather during COVID-19. Many of them subsequently canceled in-person events and went completely online.

Commenting on the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on people of color in the US, due to structural inequalities related to race, ethnicity, and socio-economic status, resulting in dramatic health disparities, behavioral scientist Dr. Deanna Kerrigan, a social researcher focuses on the toll of socio-structural factors that shape the health of underserved groups. In her 2021 study, consisting of a total of 76 individuals from communities of color within Washington DC, she identifies barriers and developments related to COVID-19 vaccine uptake among African Americans. Kerrigan finds that the historic and ongoing socio-economic context and realities of communities of color must be understood and respected to inform community-based health communication messaging (Kerrigan, 2022). To support vaccine equity for COVID-19 and other infectious diseases these disparities and contextual historical issues need to be understood. Not

only would these efforts support equity, but they offer potential to inform and save the lives of a community in need, for both COVID and beyond.

Church and faith groups were repeatedly cited as important channels and messengers of vaccine information in Kerrigan's study. One of the subjects stated, "Church leaders have a huge influence on the community", while another subject stated, "However people feel about the church; however they care about the church, it raises their attention to another level". Some participants suggested mobilizing community partnerships through local churches, such as using church space for vaccination sites and church vans for bringing people to sites to get vaccinated. Others suggested the opportunity to present informational videos on the vaccines, to be viewed on YouTube, during online sermons, during the COVID-19 lockdown.

Dr. Joyce Newman Giger, former President at American University of Health Sciences and Professor Emerita at UCLA's School of Nursing, speaks to the role of the church and how it impacts the community. In her article, "*Church and Spirituality in the Lives of the African American Community*", she notes that in the Black Church there is growing evidence of a direct relationship among religious practice and its positive influence and augmented health benefits in the African American community. She also found that the success of health intervention programs, when church-based, regardless of the intervention, often increased trust on part of participants through building adequate social support networks. Her article also found that the Black Church plays a major role in providing critical information related to healthcare, in addition to assisting healthcare providers and researchers with points of entry into the community (Giger, 2008). Giger also points out that the church can be a valuable asset in the African American community – even to those who do not necessarily attend church or subscribe to a particular worldview or religion. It is important for stakeholders interested in healthcare



outcomes to collaborate with the Black Churches because they can serve as a tremendous asset in, not only bridging a gap between religious commitment and improved health status, but also leading the way for the rest of the healthcare community to build trust, to widen access, and find ways to eliminate health disparities disproportionately affecting African Americans. The partnership of healthcare stakeholders and the Black Church could also aid in accelerating an end to the COVID-19 virus and subsequent pandemic.

### **Role of the Church/Pastor in Times of Crisis**

Pastors, as servants to their Church and congregation, have had to respond to situations that involve or impact their communities, whether in times of crisis or normalcy. Dr. Anthony-Paul Cooper, Co-Director at Centre for the Study of Modern Christianity, found that churches responded to the COVID-19 pandemic by shifting their activities online. One of the challenges that this created was that many Churches within the Black community were not physically or financially prepared for such an undertaking. Cooper found that, when entering the digital space, there are a variety of unsolved questions which need to be addressed, including theological, ethical, practical, and technological questions and problems. One point that Cooper made clear is that church leaders will need to be careful to ensure that digital exclusion does not threaten to isolate sections of the Church community, especially those who lack digital resources and skills (Cooper, 2021).

There were also questions surrounding online church attendance, growth and/or decline. A 2020 study by Dr. Jeffrey M. Jones, Senior Editor of GALLUP, shows that in recent years Church membership in America has been on the decline (Jones, 2021). Cooper expresses that though virtual streams can be quantitative, showing the number of views, there remains difficulty

in calculating and assessing accurate online membership. Jones highlights that Churches are only as strong as their membership, as they rely on their congregations for financial support. With difficulty accessing and ascertaining membership, I assert that Churches experienced financial difficulty due to financial instability experienced by their members and the challenge of members giving support virtually.

As a liturgical dance leader, one of the first things that I noticed, during the pandemic, was that the presence of dance was lost. While Pastors' efforts went to creating a church online, a heavy emphasis was put on worship and the Word [of God], which are the fundamental and essential elements of the worship experience for the Christian. In ordinary (in-person) circumstances, typically Dance Ministries would accompany that worship experience by ministering once a month (on a specific Sunday or for special events) or weekly (for/during praise and worship). However, with the mandates enforced as a result of COVID-19, numerous months passed without the presence of liturgical dance. With church services streamed virtually, viewers saw various worshiping arts; the singing, and the musicians - weekly, but dance was not a part of the programming. Dance had fallen away. The only justification for the absence of dance, from my vantage point, was due to all that pastors and church leaders had to respond to during this pandemic, while ensuring the safety and survival of their congregation.

Given what was taking place in the world, an insurmountable amount of pressure and weight was put on pastors in the Black Church. During of the COVID-19 pandemic, pastors had to serve to members who were dealing with: physical distancing and isolation; deaths of congregants and their family members (along with restrictive burials and cremations); unemployment and mortality rates; vaccination policies; decline of church attendance and funds; the death of George Floyd and subsequent rise of the Black Lives Matter movement; fake news;

and social discord surrounding the 2020 election. Throughout all of this, the Pastor stood as the central figure in the Black Church and community. Their role, especially during this pandemic, remained vital, steering the direction of multiple ministries in the Church, impacting the experience of their members and the surrounding communities.

### **Dance and the Technological Pivot**

The COVID-19 pandemic changed the way people worldwide engaged with dance, be it teaching, learning, or seeing dance. With theaters and dance studios closing around the world, dance educators took action to meet the challenges posed by the pandemic, by creating dance(s) on film, which became the primary way companies engaged with their audiences. I saw dance organizations create and deliver classes online (on multiple social media platforms and via Zoom). As an employee at a prominent dance institution, I also saw the shift to dance educators having to learn video editing software and attend trauma-informed training workshops, while creating ways to teach and give technique classes online. Dr. Rebecca Weber, who holds a PhD in Dance Psychology and Lecturer in Dance Studies, notes this pivot to technology in her article *Social (Distance) Dancing During COVID with Project Trans(m)it*. Weber addresses the intersection of dance and technology as a trend that has been heightened by the international shift to digital collaboration, creation, production, and promotion during the pandemic. This world event has caused everyone in dance to begin to consider how digital technologies may play a part in their practices of dance creation, collaboration, education, and presentation.

## **Summary**

This literature review presented ways in which the Black Church and community were impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. To hone in on the functions of this community and how they operated, I defined liturgical dance, the Black Church, and dance ministry. From there I address challenges faced by the Black community and Pastor, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, from health disparities to the Church being recognized as an asset to help mitigate the spread of the virus. With these challenging circumstances, as a liturgical dance leader, many questions arose around the current and future state of Dance Ministry. From here, I will introduce my resulting research question and outline a methodology to examine the issues Dance Ministries faced during this time of crisis.

## **Research Statement**

Understanding how severely impacted by COVID-19 liturgical dance ministries were within the Black Church across a 2 years period leads the inquiry. The Black Church entered survival mode and dance was no longer visible within the congregational activity. As a member of the community, I will examine the ways in which Dance Ministers went into survival mode, what strategies they undertook in the face of a sudden lack of resources. Thus, the following questions are considered for this research:

- 1.) Given the volatility of the COVID-19 pandemic, what challenges did dance ministries in the Black Church face?
- 2.) How will dance ministries operate and move forward, as events and crises like the pandemic threaten their place and function in the church?
- 3.) What is needed for liturgical dancers to build resilience, within and as a community?

Through these questions, this study aims to decipher and illustrate the varying levels of impact that the pandemic had on different liturgical dance ministries throughout the United States. By researching how liturgical dancers engaged in dance ministry throughout the pandemic, I will discover challenges they faced (and are potentially still facing). Using this data, I will highlight trends, patterns, and areas of departure among the varying ministries. My aim is to offer suggested ways to move forward and build resilience, both within the persistence of COVID-19 pandemic and any other event or force majeure that may disrupt or prevent the community from serving in their spiritual purpose and community function.

## **Methodology**

To tackle these questions, the approach that I am using for this study is a qualitative research method. I will select and interview experts in the field who have led Dance Ministries over the last two years. Qualitative research can be multimethod in focus, involving an interpretive naturalistic approach to its subject matter. (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). This means that qualitative research studies subjects in their natural setting attempting to make sense of it or interpret phenomena in terms of the meaning people bring to them. To learn how dance ministries within the liturgical dance community were impacted by COVID-19, this thesis employed two methods: structured interviews and autoethnography.

Professor, author, and researcher Stacy H. Jones explains that autoethnography uses personal experience (“auto”) to describe and interpret (“graphy”) cultural texts, experiences, beliefs, and practices (“ethno”) (Adams, 2017). I utilized autoethnography as a method to give context via my personal experience. As a liturgical dance leader, I connect that with the cultural

events that occurred within the Black Church. I also lived and experienced phenomena changing. Using this research method, I will connect my personal experience to the culture and community of liturgical dance. With this approach, I aim to see and interpret how Dance Ministry Leaders pursued their missions.

I aim to conduct a total of six interviews: four with Dance Ministry Leaders and two Pastors/Church leaders. This creates space for a variety of perspectives and levels of COVID-19 impact to be gathered. Interviews I conduct will address the following 10 questions that describe the characteristics of how dance ministries operated and how they were impacted by the pandemic:

1. What age range(s) does your dance ministry serve and include?
2. Who is your ministry trying to reach? (What audience, demographic, community, population, etc.)
3. What relationship, if any, does your dance ministry have with your direct community?
4. In terms of impact and access, how far (distal, proximal, domestic, international, etc.) does your ministry desire to reach?
5. In what ways has your [dance] ministry been impacted by COVID-19?
6. What accommodations/alterations did you have to make to your ministry, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic?
7. In what ways would/does technology allow you to accomplish your ministries mission and/or vision?
8. What technological resources would you say your ministry is in need of?
9. What reservations does/would your ministry have, in regard to operating digitally/virtually?
10. What resources would your ministry like to have (i.e. assistance, training, education, professional development, support from other church ministries, etc.)

Through these questions, this study aims to decipher and illustrate the varying levels of impact that the pandemic had on different liturgical dance ministries throughout the United States. By researching how liturgical dancers engaged in dance ministry throughout the pandemic, I will discover challenges they faced (and are potentially still facing). Using that data,

I will highlight trends, patterns, and areas of departure among the varying ministries. Once I complete this research, my aim is to offer suggested ways to move forward and build resilience, both with the presence of COVID-19 pandemic and any other event or force that may inhibit or stifle the community from serving in their purpose and function.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I provided a literature review that defined liturgical dance, the Black Church, dance ministry, and the COVID-19 pandemic. With historical text, I highlighted the role of a Pastor in times of crises and with current data illustrated how the pandemic altered processes for dance ministries within the Black Church. After gathering my research statement and research questions, my methodology of structured interviews and autoethnography is presented.

## **Chapter 2**

In this chapter, I first give an overview of the Black Church – how it came to be and how dance became incorporated, as a congregational worship activity. I will show how the *Ring Shout*, the concert spiritual and modern dance reconciled dance within the Church. Furthermore, I aim to show the significance and continuity of dance in the Black Church. Once a fundamental overview of dance within the Black Church is provided, I will proceed by giving a timeline of the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on the Black community. From there I delve into how that impact similarly impacted the church, at a time where churches had to close their doors and create a means to conduct operations virtually. From here, I explore reasons for dance falling away from central church activity, within the unpredictable societal shifts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Origins of the Black Church in America**

To understand the role and significance that dance has had within the Black Church, it is necessary to take a look at its history. The Black Church is a result of western colonization of the Americas, from the 1500s – 1700s, when enslaved Africans were kidnapped, sold as cargo and brought to the United States and indigenous people and their ways of life were virtually decimated. Henry Louis Gates Jr. notes that after 1619 and until the time of the Great Awakening in the 1750s, many of the first generation of enslaved Africans in the British colonies did not have interest in Protestant forms of Christianity, the religion practiced by their White captors. Similarly, Protestant Christians were not especially keen on converting slaves either – worried about the relation between conversion, the saving of souls, and the right to be free (Gates, 2021, 17). W.E.B. Du Bois explains the first century of Black religious formation in this way:



The church was not at first by any means Christian nor organized; rather it was an adoption and mingling of heathen rites among the members of each plantation, and roughly designated as Voodooism. As a result of their masters and missionary efforts, after a lapse of many generations, the Negro church became Christian (Du Bois, 1999, 123).

Researcher and Senior Producer of the PBS special *God in America*, Marilyn Mellowes states that, “Upon arrival, it is documented that those enslaved were baptized Catholic and given Christian names” (Mellowes, 2021). Black activist and theologian James Cone states that though many Africans at the time died with their traditional religious beliefs intact, enslaved Africans, born in America, were more socialized to accept and adopt the Christian faith over time (Cone, 1984, 28). The goal of evangelical preachers after the start of the First Great Awakening, became to convert as many souls as possible – even Black souls (Gates, 2021, 22).

White Methodist and Baptist preachers traveling throughout Southern States made intentional efforts to convert those enslaved to Christianity (Mellowes, 2021). According to educator and scholar, C. Eric Lincoln, these evangelical preachers presented their message of the gospel vehemently, teaching Christian brotherhood and spiritual equality. Their passionate delivery and inclusive message appealed to those enslaved, as it affirmed their bodies and existence, in a society that said they weren’t fully human (Lincoln, 1990).

In the 1770s Methodist preachers, given permission by slave owners, licensed Black men to preach. This gave enslaved men the ability to spread the message of the gospel to their peers (Mellowes, 2021). And though they were using the same *Bible* as their White predecessors, these Black people did not absorb the Christianity of their oppressors. Instead, the Christianity that they iterated is the one they created and configured to meet their needs. With Black men offering the liturgy, sermon focuses shifted from “slaves, obey your masters” to “one day God will set us free”. Several extracted traditions from various African cultures, represented in the

slave population, were also implemented in their adaptation of Church. Antony B. Pinn, a professor of religion at Rice University states that, “It’s a mistake to think that enslaved Africans came to North America tabula rasa; this is to say that they came here with nothing. That is not the case. They came bearing a rich cultural heritage, and this cultural world got filtered through Black Churches (Gates, 2021, 16).

The Negro Church, originally called the “Paise House” or “Pray’s House,” developed during the 1860s. Praise Houses – the forerunner to brick-and-mortar churches, were the first institutions in which African American worship traditions were developed. (Costen, 1993, 40) During slavery, “Praise Houses” operated in the shadows, becoming incubators of African American culture in the South and resilient sites of resistance to various forms of White supremacy. These Black houses of worship sheltered a nation within a nation, gradually becoming the political and spiritual center of local Black communities. (Gates, 2021, 64)

Melva Costen, a retired Professor of Music and Worship at the Interdenominational Theological Center said says that slave owners permitted such activities as they realized it kept slaves both confined and occupied (Costen, 1993, 42). Eventually, Black people entrapped in slavery in the British colonies in North America reconciled with conversion to Protestant forms a Christianity. Through it they recognized a chance to improve their status, to learn to read, write, and ultimately, to escape the bonds of slavery, albeit in the afterlife (Gates, 2021, 21).

### **The Rise of Dance and the Spread of the Black Church**

In the Negro church, the spiritual experience of dance in worship was communal, where the entire community joined in the activity (Scott, 2000). The use of African song and movement within the Praise Houses laid a firm establishment for the call and response song pattern and the

*Ring Shout* movement that followed. (Turner, 2021, 8). The *Ring Shout* also known as the *Rock Daniel*, the *Flower Dance* or the *Rope Dance* (Nash, 2000), provided a scheme through which dance was reconciled within African religious behavior. (Turner, 2021, 11). In the *Ring Shout* the congregation circles around in a ring, shuffling their feet against the wooden floor, moving their torso from side to side, while the verse is sung by the leader or leaders (Turner, 2021, 12). “Through the singing of spirituals, congregants sang, hummed, clapped, moaned, stomped, and swayed themselves into a remarkable transcendence.

Lincoln states that these Spirituals were a pastoral liturgical resource for any community of worshippers” (Lincoln, 1990, 25). As an interlocutor, this call and response method of memorization not only reminds me of the Biblical account of the prophetess Miriam<sup>1</sup>, leading the Israelites in singing and dancing, but of today’s culture of following the leader, both in dance ministry and in the congregational setting. For decades, dance remained in the Negro Church which, in the late 1960s, became known as the Black Church (Lincoln, 1990, 22).

The Black Church includes a spectrum of beliefs and voices. Henry Louis Gates Jr. confirms that the simplified idea of the Black Church refers to a group of seven major historical Black Denominations in the Methodist, Baptist, and Pentecostal traditions: The African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME), the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church (AME Zion), the National Baptist Convention, USA (NBC), the National Baptist Convention of America (NBCA), the Progressive National Baptist Convention (PNBC), the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church (CME), and the Church of God in Christ (COGIC) (Gates, 2021, 9). I identify as a nondenominational Christian, but I have seen and experienced, throughout my years, the subtle and vast differences between the Methodist, Baptist, and Pentecostal traditions.

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<sup>1</sup> Exodus 15: 20-22

The Black Church gained prominence, especially during the Great Migration (1890 – 1930), when some 1.7 million Black Southerners relocated to the north, enhancing the spread and power of the Black Church. Through the Great Migration and the African American Spiritual, the Black Church body sang, clapped, and stomped, infusing movement as a key element to the worship experience.

### **The Influence of Concert Spirituals and Modern Dance**

Early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century composers began to arrange these songs to accommodate concert choirs, developing what was known as the *Concert Spiritual*. These *Concert Spirituals* became popular throughout the United States, as choirs became the backdrop for another key expression in African American life. Choir Director Lydia M. Toliver highlights that as gospel music emerged, choirs became the main source of music (Toliver, 2020). As concert spirituals gained popularity across America, newly formed African American dance troupes in the 1920s and 1930s performed to recordings of these choirs.

Author J. G. Davies, in his *Liturgical Dance Practical Handbook*, notes that later in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the arrival of modern dance and its gradual acceptance, brought entirely new insights into the possibility of dance as worship (Davies, 1984, 54). Modern dance, not concerned with appearance or look, focused on inner feelings explaining and communicating the meaning of life via movement. At the time, many modern dance pioneers saw dance as a language, and the sole essence of modern dance was the movement and its use of outward expression - similar to what became known as liturgical dance (Davies, 1984, 54).

In 1958 Carla De Dola, a Christian dance pioneer who promoted dance as means of worship and communication, started the Sacred Dance Guild (Daniels, 1981). De Sola believed

“practiced by liturgical artists, dance serves and functions as a conduit from the inner workings of spirit to the outer expression of today’s worship”, as told by former members Doug Adams and Carlynn Reed (Adams, Apostolos-Cappadone, 1990). Reed also states that with the aid of 1: the rise of modern dance and 2: a more open response on the part of church leaders, dancers who wanted to express their faith through movement have found the tools in the new technique and the place in many sanctuaries. The original purpose of the Guild, as stated in Article II of the By-Laws was to “stimulate interest in dance as a religious art form, and to provide a means of communication and training for dance choirs” (Reed, 1978).

The early stages of Modern dance consisted of explorations of spirituality and religious themes - Christianity being one of them. Sharing similarities, both Modern and liturgical dance focus on expression that is considered freeform and fluid, and are often inspired by other dance styles. Author and Professor Thomas DeFrantz shares that countless modern dancers choreographed biblical interpretations, such as the work of Helen Tamiris’ *Negro Spiritual*. Later, Alvin Ailey’s *Revelations* explored Biblical themes in terms of Black consciences of Christianity within the American context (DeFrantz, 2002). This historical framework shows how the Bible provided foundational inspiration for many modern dance pioneers. With this expressive use of dance as a language, dancers and choreographers were able to bring the Bible to life, through movement, compared to a verbal sermon. These influences led to the legitimization of dance’s ongoing tenuous connection within the congregational setting, while also providing teaching and training in righteousness.

### **Liturgical Dance: Uses, Methods, & Practice in the Black Church**

Based on her definition, Dr. Turner establishes that through liturgical dance, the church is identified as community through individual and mutual movement. In an interview for *Journal of Dance Education*, Professor and Choreographer Julie Kerr-Berry asked Dr. Albirda Rose-Eberhardt, Founder of the Institute for Dunham Technique, “What role does Praise Dance play in the religious community [then]?” Dr. Rose-Eberhardt responded,

I think it’s a way of thoroughly invoking and empowering the presence of God as a community. I was told, I believe by the Holy Spirit back in October, to gather together all the dancers in my community into a healing circle. I realize that this is what I am talking about, that people who have a Christian context, or even a non-Christian context, need to come together to move and dance, sing and praise, pray and thank God. The movement is the main entity that brings about community. Having been a dance instructor for so long, I have watched dance build community. (Kerr-Berry, 2008).

This healing circle that Dr. Rose speaks to represents, once again, the impact that dance can have on a congregation and community as a communal practice. From my own experience I have found dance in the church to be rather inclusive, with liturgical dance not ascribing to any specific dance genre. Also, based on a dance member’s interests, skillset, and the capacity of the ministry, some ministries offer the opportunity for worship artists to express their reverence through movement – engaging in mime, flagging, or stepping (Gains, Ross, 2009).

As an insider, I have witnessed and experienced how liturgical dance ministries within the Black Church operate. Having been a liturgical dancer for over a decade, typically dance ministers meet in the church sanctuary, gathering to pray, rehearse, study the Bible, and fellowship. The use of the sanctuary provides a haven. They offer their members a safe, free, and familiar sacred space, allowing them to develop and/or deepen their passion and understanding of God and dance. These sanctuaries are a vital space, as these gatherings are crucial to the operation and carriage of liturgical dance processes.

The notion of liturgical dance being communal is both foundational and fundamental. Dance serves the body of Christ at large, as it is both a personal and universal way of giving praise to a higher being (Gaines, Ross, 2009). Liturgical dancers, today, act as religious iconographers, using symbolic movement and visual imagery to connect with the congregation and bring awareness to spiritual realities that surprise, challenge, and/or offer new insights to Christian communities. In addition, 1 Corinthians 14:40 insists that “all things be done decently and in order”. Dance ministers use these scriptures as guidelines, to ensure that they are serving God the way that He wants to be served and to meet the needs of the congregation. With ministry meaning to care for the needs of others, liturgical dancers need to reach fellow believers (and those outside of the faith) – utilizing dance to expose, encourage, teach, and challenge the church at large. Growing up Bible verses like Matthew 5:15-16<sup>2</sup> and songs like *This Little Light of Mine*, taught and encouraged me to not hide the light and rather dance that God gave me.

The standard for dance ministries varies from Church to Church. Most dance ministries offer inclusivity, allowing church members to join the ministry with little to no dance training or experience, as long as they have a heart for God. While some cater to a variety of levels and capacities other ministries may have a higher (more technical/Eurocentric) standard of what it means to minister in excellence. Whether congregants sway, clap, or stop during worship services, dance plays a vital role in the Black Church. Congregants who have a passion, interest, or curiosity in dance are often compelled to join dance ministries.

Anne Streaty, Professor Emerita of Christian Education at the Interdenominational Theological Center, notions that African Americans interpret the Bible in light of our own

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<sup>2</sup> Matthews 5:15 Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead, they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. 16 in the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.

experience, through movement, spirituals, sermons, and testimonies – something we learned from past generations (Streaty, 2014).

### **Timeline of the COVID-19 Pandemic**

Based on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention timeline, the Coronavirus Disease 2019 emerged in December of 2019, as a cluster of patients in Wuhan, Hubei Province, China began to experience shortness of breath and fever (CDC.gov). On January 17<sup>th</sup>, 2020, the Center for Disease Control deployed a team to Washington state, as the first reported case of the disease was found in the U.S. (CDC.gov). On January 31<sup>st</sup> the World Health Organization International Health Regulation Emergency Committee declared the coronavirus outbreak as a public health emergency of international concern.

Those who contracted the virus experienced mild to moderate respiratory illness and [would have] recovered without special treatment. However, some became seriously ill and required medical attention. Older people and those with underlying medical conditions like cardiovascular disease, diabetes, chronic respiratory disease, or cancer are more likely to develop serious illness. Anyone could contract the Coronavirus Disease and become seriously ill or die at any age (CDC.gov).

In February of 2020, new regulatory travel policies were put into effect to mitigate the global spread of the virus. During that time Senior Scientist, Paul Webster, noted the name of the virus was shortened from Coronavirus Disease 2019 (SARS-CoV-2) to COVID-19 (Webster, 2021). On March 11<sup>th</sup>, 2020, the World Health Organization declared that COVID-19 was a pandemic, as the disease spread across several countries and affected a large number of people. By March 15<sup>th</sup> U.S. States began to shut down, initiating work from home mandates, to prevent



its spread, including houses of worship. The White House implemented social distancing measures and by April 3<sup>rd</sup> new mask wearing guidelines recommended that all people wear masks outside of the home. Though President Trump deemed houses of worship as essential, the virus impacted them (Vazquez, 2020). New outbreaks of the coronavirus surged throughout congregations across the country. By July of 2020 more than 650 cases were linked to nearly 40 churches and religious events across the United States (Conger, 2020). A year later, causing further unrest and a national divide, on September 9<sup>th</sup>, 2021, President Biden issued an Executive Order mandating vaccination for all federal employees, as well as private employers.

Medical Epidemiologist Jeremy Gold asserts that the COVID-19 pandemic simultaneously changed the daily activities of humans all around the globe, resulting in an unforeseen global multisystemic impact on healthcare, economic, political, and social systems (Gold, 2020). Tim Henderson, Senior Demographics Writer, reported that in America the ensuing lockdown led to 25 million people losing their jobs in 2020 (Henderson, 2022). From February 12 – October 15, 2020, the coronavirus disease resulted in approximately 7,900,000 aggregated reported cases and approximately 216,000 deaths in the United States (Gold, 2020). As of August 2021, the United States remained number one internationally with over 35 million cases and over 600,000 deaths, due to COVID-19 (Garcia, 2022). Amid these high rates of infection and death, COVID-19 hospitalization and mortality rates were significantly higher among Black and Hispanic communities. Specifically in Chicago and New York, among highly marginalized people at the intersection of immigration and incarceration suffered heavy losses of life (Garcia, 2022).

Alongside churches; school, business, and theater doors were closed, as mortality rates rose, and stay-at-home mandates were put into place. I lived this reality, as my church, school,

job, and the studios/theaters in New York all closed. Mask and vaccination mandates went into effect, impacting the United States, a country also battling with high unemployment rates. This event changed daily life for everyone, around the world, and was a major turning point for how and when people should gather spiritually.

### **Further Impact on the Black Community**

Within two months of the declared global pandemic, a tragedy of epic proportions was unfolding in one of the most storied black religious institutions in the country, the nation's first incorporated Pentecostal denomination (Fredrick, 2020). On April 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2020, seven leaders of the *Church of God in Christ (COGIC)*, including bishops, and superintendents of the Michigan district, died of COVID-19 (Fredrick, 2020). The next week a story posted in *Charisma News* led with the simple title "Up to 30 COGIC Bishops, Leaders Die from COVID-19" (Spauldo, 2020). Death hovered over the church.

The passing of leaders like those in the *COGIC* community, along with the death of pastors, choir members, and worshipers from other religious communities, brought into sharp relief the need for immediate change in how Black religious communities should gather during COVID-19. Many of them subsequently canceled in-person events and went completely online (Spauldo, 2020). During this devastating time, I was asked to minister at a virtual memorial service that paid homage to leaders in the faith who had lost their life. This *COGIC* event and numerous others led to the conversation around a Christian's right to practice their religion freely and the importance of churches remaining distant for their health and survival (Williams, 2021).

During this time, Professor Linda Chatters' article on Faith Communities and Loneliness, pointed out the double jeopardy – being both older and Black. Being unable to meet regularly with church members, particularly during the pandemic, presented additional challenges that placed older Black adults at higher risk for experiencing social isolation, loneliness, in addition to amplified mental health challenges, depression, and anxiety. Buildings of worship were forced to close and Black people, for the first time in history, did not have physical access to the church to lean on during times of crisis. Flavia Desouza, from the Yale School of Medicine, notes that traditionally, these sanctuaries offered Black congregants both sacred places and places of physical and psychological refuge from the mistreatment in the United States (DeSouza, 2021).

During this time social and behavioral scientist Deanna Kerrigan's study found that people of color in the United States continue to endure the ravages of long-standing and deeply rooted structural inequalities resulting in dramatic health inequalities (Kerrigan, 2022). As COVID-19 vaccines became available, uptake and intention to vaccinate in Black and Latinx communities lagged (Kerrigan, 2022). Mistrust of the safety and efficacy of the vaccines were identified as driving factors for vaccine hesitancy among communities of color as well as a history of maltreatment by the healthcare industry. One 70-year-old African American informant described their impact on perceptions of the COVID-19 vaccine as follows:

Vaccine hesitancy is deep and it's real. You'd like to, but you can't erase the memory of what happened that easily... We started talking immediately about vaccine hesitancy, we understand how our community responds to vaccines based on the Tuskegee experiment, based on Henrietta Lacks, based on our whole history of how, in many instances, we have not been fairly dealt with and how that lingers with us and it will. (Kerrigan, 2022).

Themes of historical mistreatment of Black Communities in clinical trials, lack of trust in government, and experiences of social and economic oppression are highlighted in Kerrigan's

study. Many felt that they did not have the same rights to healthcare as others, which caused concern for essential workers who had jobs that did not allow them to work from home.

Participants of Kerrigan's study also suggested mobilizing community partnerships through local churches, such as using church space for vaccination sites and church vans for bringing people to sites to get vaccinated. Other participants spoke about the importance of online sermons during COVID-19 lockdowns frequently viewed on YouTube by congregation members and the opportunity this presented for informational videos on the vaccines and guest speakers hosted by pastors at the end of services to reach individuals watching at home with key information. A 28-year-old informant, included in the study, simply stated, "Church leaders have a huge influence on the community" (Kerrigan, 2022). Throughout history, most prominently exhibited through the Civil Rights Movement, the Black Church has been a strong social and religious force of unity for many African Americans. Although the influence of the Black Church has been underestimated by physicians and nurses, it could be pivotal in optimizing health status among African Americans (Giger, 2008).

### **Pastoral Concerns Throughout the Pandemic**

It has been established that the Church is a space that creates meaningful spaces for individuals, communities and societies engaged in diverse activities (Cooper, 2021). Anthony-Paul Cooper highlights that the coronavirus disease 2019 pandemic had a profound impact on how to organize the life of the church at a time when traditional physical spaces were not available and social distancing ruled the daily life. As the church went online, there were a myriad of challenges that needed to be resolved. Among those were theological, ethical, practical

and technological questions and problems. Marshall Williams, in his 2020 dissertation about the utilization of the internet in the Black Church, pointed out that:

Many voices are clamoring for attention through the Internet and social media. The Internet has become a worldwide platform where the intellectual and the lunatic alike can voice their opinions, start a movement, gain a following, and influence the minds and spirits of many. Words of encouragement sit beside vicious insults. Purity and depravity walk hand in hand...The world stands at a crossroads of conflicting information bombarding from every direction” (Marshall, 2020).

In Cooper’s study he found that churches responded to the COVID-19 pandemic by shifting their activities online and found that there were a variety of unsolved questions which needed to be addressed, including managing online church attendance, growth and/or decline. Overall, a national survey showed that Americans' membership in houses of worship continued to decline last year [2020], dropping below 50% for the first time in their eight-decade trend (Jones, 2021).

In relation to my own generation, currently, 31% of millennials have no religious affiliation, which has increased from 22% a decade ago. Similarly, 33% of the portion of Generation Z that have now reached adulthood, have no religious preference (Jones, 2021). Churches are only as strong as their membership and are dependent on their members for financial support and service to maintain operations (Jones, 2021).

Given what was taking place in the world, an insurmountable amount of pressure and weight was put on pastors within the Black Church. As stated in chapter one, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, clergy had to support members who were dealing with various social, emotional, and spiritual challenges. Throughout all of this, the Preacher stood with all these

challenges as the central beacon in the Black Church and community. These factors could be among the reasons that dance ministry declined during this period.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I illustrated possible factors and scenarios that could have led to dance ministry losing their visibility and priority within the church. The Black Church faced a multitude of unique factors in this distanced era. It has been established that although Black Churches had the potential to serve as resources to optimize outcomes and positively impact the pandemic COVID outbreaks within the church communities thwarted this in many instances. Additionally, the older populations within the Black Church were more susceptible to contracting the virus which gave great cause to church doors remaining closed and sanctuaries being unavailable for dance activity.

By entering into my research study, I hope to discover the unique challenges dance ministries faced on the west and east coasts of the U.S, locating the severity of those challenges and the subsequent strategies for survival.

### **Chapter 3**

This chapter deploys my methodology and uncovers the impact that COVID-19 had on dance ministries in the Black Church during the pandemic. I begin with a brief recap of my research process – methodology and approaches used to perform the study and identify the subjects. I address initial thoughts of the stay-at-home mandate and early notions of the pandemic within the Church. The shift and aid of technology will also be included, in addition to reservations and reluctance of the Black Church entering the virtual space. Challenges to ministry procedures, shifting to operating virtually, and returning to the Church building will also be highlighted. The chapter concludes with knowledge accrued throughout the pandemic by the subjects and their organizations.

#### **Research Process**

I chose five Dance Ministry Leaders, four from the East coast (Maryland, New Jersey, New York, and Washington D.C.) and one from the West coast (California). Also included in this study is a Pastor whose Church is also on the East coast. All participants are part of a Black Church, having a congregation where the leadership and the majority of its members identify as Black. These Churches are identified as having had active dance ministries before the pandemic and were maintained throughout.

Each interview was conducted in confidence to gain insight and perspective as to unique challenges their Churches and dance ministries faced. No identifiers, in regard to the interviewees, will be included in this narrative. To maintain the interviewees anonymity, I do not disclose their names, Church affiliation, or specific location – only region/state. For brevity,

when referring to a particular subject, I identify them by their role and State. For example, the Dance Ministry Leader in California will be identified as ‘*DML - California*’.

<b>Ministry State/Location:</b>	<b>Church, Interviewee &amp; Dance Ministry Demographics</b>
California	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Church has multiple dance ministries, arranged by age</li> <li>● Interviewee shares leadership responsibilities with two other leaders (1 of 3)</li> <li>● Dance ministry of approximately 16 - 20 adult dance ministers</li> </ul>
Maryland	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Leader is affiliated with multiple dance ministries and liturgical dance organizations nationally</li> <li>● Leader has influence, as a dance ministry leader, nationally</li> </ul>
New Jersey	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Leader is affiliated with multiple dance ministries and liturgical dance organizations</li> <li>● Leader has influence, as a dance ministry leader, internationally</li> </ul>
New York	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Church membership of approx. 300</li> <li>● Dance ministry of 12 - 16 adult dance ministers</li> <li>● Leader has influence, as a dance ministry leader, in the state</li> </ul>
Washington DC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Multiple dance ministries, arranged by age</li> <li>● Dance ministry has approx. 130 dance ministers</li> <li>● Church membership of approx. 2,000 members</li> <li>● Church steamed live worship services (pre-pandemic)</li> <li>● The Church has a large influence in the community, resulting in the dance ministry</li> </ul>

Most ministries have at least three divisions, primarily divided by age group (children/youth, adults, and older adults).

### **Initial Thoughts and Notions of the Pandemic**

In my interviews I found that my subject’s Dance ministries gained awareness of the presence of the COVID-19 virus in the United States in March of 2020. For many Dance Ministry Leaders, myself included, when the virus was first announced, we took things lightly, expecting to return to life as usual in two weeks or so. However, the rapid rise of the global pandemic, with sickness and death increasing weekly, months went by without these ministries being able to gather and connect with their congregations and communities. The *DMLs* in California and New York noted that it was not until the Spring of 2021 that they were able to resume ministerial activities.



‘Go ye into the world’ and bring the gospel to as many people as possible (Matthew 28:19). Each Dance Ministry Leader established that the purpose of their ministry, including prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, is to go into the world - starting with their congregation, their community, then wherever the Lord leads, be it national or international. According to the DMLs there is no one specific population or demographic that they are to reach, as for them, dance is a universal language where everyone can benefit from the encouragement. While some ministries may only be involved in their local Church or community, each DML had a desire for their ministry to reach the nations. This notion is confirmed with one the DMLs stating, “God said if you claim the nations, you will have them, so I’m claiming them all and I want them all – but I want them all for Christ” (DML - NY, 2022).

From the onset of the pandemic, each dance ministry felt that it was essential to maintain their efforts in working towards their mission to spread the gospel. However, restrictions and government mandates, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, created dire challenges, limiting the operational capacity of these dance ministries, causing them to be inoperable or take a hiatus. For example, the *DML - New York* had a dance ministry concert scheduled for the end of March 2020. With the inability to gather, and with limited time and alternate options for conducting a concert, the event was postponed indefinitely.

Two weeks into the pandemic, the *DML - New Jersey* realized the impact of the virus was much greater than what they knew or thought it would be. Their first concerns were, “Where is the Church and what are we [the Church] doing [in this season]?” (DML - NJ, 2022). Upon reflecting, the *DML - California* felt that “the initial break was a good breather”. But as time progressed, they realized that this was more than a temporary break in activity. As weeks turned into months, they began to question what was happening. “Is this [virus] changing the way we do

life and ministry?” (DML - CA, 2022). No ministry knew when COVID would go away. Uncertainty rose within the Church, placing the future of dance ministries into limbo.

### **The Turmoil, the Tragedy, and the Trauma**

The pandemic impacted almost everyone, regardless of their societal status. This protracted uncertainty required spiritual and communal strength. The Pastor in the study contracted the virus in March of 2020 and did not know if they were going to return to health. They also stated that the first year of the pandemic was the hardest year of their life. They expressed that, “Nobody trains you on how to Pastor during a pandemic. How do I encourage 300 people, when I, myself, needed to be encouraged?” (Pastor - NY, 2022). Acknowledging that the pandemic had a heavy economic toll on operations, the Pastor expressed that there were lots of equipment purchases for the Church. The purchasing of this equipment showed great faith, as finances within the church were diminished, as a result of the congregants who drifted away, no longer supporting the ministry, financially, in tithes and/or offerings.

In the Spring of 2020, as the number of deaths began to increase, the *DML - Maryland* expressed that their faith was shaken. Both of their parents were in the hospital, battling the virus, with their mother eventually passing. They tried to manage things while grieving. With that loss and all that was happening in the world they questioned, “God, couldn’t you have warned us?” (DML - MD, 2022). This experience made them empathic to their dance ministry members who similarly “couldn’t get the kind of closure or grieve in the way we were used to”. (DML - MD, 2022). With new pressures, demands, and challenges that arose as a result of COVID-19, the *DML - New Jersey* urged people to;

Pray for leaders, as they are dealing with different things that people haven't dealt with before. Give leaders time to become mentally sound. Some of us in leadership are dealing with [new] things, while trying to produce, so be sensitive to leaders by giving them time and having more conversations around mental health. (DML - NJ, 2022).

Many DMLs shared their experience of trying to keep their dancers motivated, through the turmoil, the tragedy, and the trauma surrounding the pandemic. Unfortunately, during this time four out of the five *DMLs* saw a decline in dance ministry involvement in church activities, with many of the dance ministers falling away. The *DML - New Jersey* stated that, "Things separated real quick. You saw those who are called to the work and faithfully committed and those who see it as being in some sort of club or whatever." (DML - NJ, 2022). Dance Leaders sensed that some dance ministers fell away because they were no longer seen, with COVID preventing them from making any public appearances, while for others they either lost hope or grew discouraged, due to personal hardships or lack of ministering opportunities. The diminishing of Dance Ministers was hard to see and experience for these Ministry Leaders.

Noticing that dance had subsided, the *Pastor - New York* addressed the impact that COVID-19 had on worshipping arts/artists, affirming, "If you're using your gift properly [dance, singing, etc.] it becomes a part of your identity. So, who am I if I can't dance? If I don't have the ability to operate in the calling that God has given me? Who am I and what do I do?" (Pastor - NY, 2022). I empathize with that notion, as a Dance Minister who believes that I am called to dance, but felt idle and useless, as a result of the pandemic. The *DML - Washington DC* also noted that during this time many Dance Ministers did not take advantage of the time they had, throughout the pandemic, to learn something new, so that the ministry could still be connected, cultivating community through crisis. This leader also noticed people not wanting and/or not having the capacity to learn during this time. They felt that their dancers had no personal

accountability to their craft during the pandemic, resulting in a loss of dance technique. As Leaders, they saw that their Dancer Minister's hearts were really for God, however they did not see many of them develop skills, in any area, to support their spiritual mission.

### **The Aid of Technology**

With stay-at-home mandates, COVID restrictions limited gatherings to no more than ten individuals, resulting in reduced access to the Church building. Dance ministries could not gather in-person. As a result, dance ministries began to meet on Zoom for prayer, check-ins, and stretch classes, primarily during the Spring and Summer of 2020. Though the majority of the dance ministries had no events or engagements to prepare for, they felt that it was important to continue in the mission of the work, both for morale and to make sure the ministry was prepared for whatever came next (DML - CA, 2022).

From dancers not knowing if the movement should be done on the left side of the body or right to issues related to sound, DMLs relayed similar challenging accounts while teaching virtually. Space, or lack thereof, became an issue as dances tried to navigate movement and find rehearsal space in their homes. Wi-Fi signal strength and connectivity issues caused lots of glitches when learning via Zoom<sup>3</sup>, resulting in many dancers and leaders having to upgrade their internet service and bandwidth to accommodate the virtual sessions. DMLs shared that dancers had a hard time hearing the music, both when it was played on the computer and from an external speaker. Dancers expressed to the leaders that there were many times when they could not hear the music, follow rhythms, or start at the right time due to sound delay. Also, because

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<sup>3</sup> Zoom is a communications platform that allows users to connect with video, audio, phone, and chat. Zoom requires an internet connection and a supported device. (Zoom Support, 2022)

sound traveled and reached the dancers at different times, dancers could/did not move in unison on the Zoom screen, resulting in DMLs not being able to give proper feedback. Though it provided a means to gather, virtual learning and rehearsals proved to be more difficult than expected and became increasingly challenging over time.

*DMLs - California and Washington DC* tried to conduct Zoom sessions and rehearsals with their younger members, while the *DML - New Jersey* made an attempt with their older dancers. All three ministries found this to be a more significant challenge. The DMLs found that the attention span and focus of those in the younger ministries was a lot shorter than that of older members. The youth involved in these ministries had limited technical access, relying on their parents, with most of them dealing with limited space and access, in addition to dwindling attention spans. The *DML - New Jersey* found that the older dancers over 50 or 60 weren't as tech savvy and capable, making the process burdensome for some dancers. The New Jersey leader also stated that "people were 'Zoom-ed out', after having to utilize Zoom for work, school, and life" (DML – NJ, 2022), which may be why they came to the screen with a lack of energy. For the dancers and dance leader, the overall process became time-consuming, mentally and emotionally draining.

While some DMLs found the use of technology discouraging, the Summer of 2020 gave others hope, as technology created a new avenue for the liturgical dance community. The *DML - New Jersey* stated that, "A light bulb came on, with the idea of dance on film. Sharing the gospel through dance and getting it out there" (DML – NJ, 2022). Dance on film was becoming more and more prevalent across the field of dance, so it was no surprise this concept was being adapted for ministry. Many DMLs pondered, "How are we going to do this thing called dance?" For those ministries that were still striving in their mission to reach the nations, technology gave

them that opportunity. With the technical difficulties that the ministry in California experienced on Zoom, they also found that creating pre-recorded material to share was the best solution for the ministry. Dance on film became an effective method for teaching, training, and encouragement.

For the *DML - New Jersey* dance on film fulfilled a prophecy. They stated, “This is that call that God gave me a long time ago, when He said, “Come out of those four walls”. Now the Church *has* to come out of the four walls. This [pandemic] was perfect timing”. This *DML* also shared that they had to start thinking differently in terms of how to prepare to utilize this time to share the gospel. They had to be strategic in their approach and planning, but they found that the best route (for evangelism) was to create pre-recordings and send it out to the masses – their congregation, friends, family, in addition to posting on social media. Because dances were now on film, they realized that there was a different requirement for dance on film versus in-person dance ministry. With the film aspect, the *DML - New Jersey* found that dancers had to execute movement(s) with greater precision and give consistent energy when recording multiple takes. Change was required from all parties involved, as dancers had to adjust their execution of movement and dance leaders had to create and capture a vision that worked on film, that could be recorded and shared for others to witness.

Prior to COVID-19 each ministry utilized technology to communicate with their members, be it a text or a group messaging app like WhatsApp or the BAND app. In these communications, music, schedules, and events were shared, in addition to rehearsal footage, for rehearsal and archival purposes. Going into the pandemic these methods of communication, along with Zoom, became the sole means of connection and contact. By November 2020 all five *DMLs/subjects* created at least one dance on film video, increasing the shareability and exposure

of these digital dance ministry presentations. The *DML - New York* noted how they would send/share liturgical dance happening (videos, virtual events, and conferences), with their dancer ministers, for them to stay connected and inspired, and workout videos via YouTube to encourage dancers to take care of their bodies/health. The use and aid of technology began to be more and more effective in allowing each ministry to resume their movement practice and reach greater heights, in terms of fulfilling their missions.

### **Returning to the Church Building**

Though sermons and Church services were being streamed from the Church early on, most Dance Ministries did not return to the Church building until Spring and Summer of 2021. Returning to the Church building required a lot of statutory administration on behalf of the Church and returning ministries. Each subject made mention of a variety of safety protocols and procedures, based on the ordinances of their Church. All *DMLs* abided with State regulation requirements, by having dancers complete health screenings and temperature checks before entering the Church building. They also spoke to having a limited number of dancers in attendance, practicing social distancing, and wearing masks when required. Many wore masks the entire time (even when recording/filming), while others took their masks off for recordings. For one of the Dance Ministries all active and returning participants had to sign liability waivers and were required to be vaccinated, while masks were optional for another ministry. The administration required of the Church was quite extensive, as there were daily protocols for all who entered the building. When first returning to the Church many *DMLs* noted that there could only be one ministry operating in the Church at a time, for safety reasons, creating another

burden for the administration and DML to manage how and when people entered in and out and operated within the building.

To date, at the time of completing this research (February 2022), across the board, only the adult Dance Ministries (between the ages of 18 - 50, approximately) have met in person, while the other groups remained inactive. When the Dance Ministry in California returned to the Church the DML decided to give dancers freedom to move according to their comfort level, as they eased back into the space after operating virtually for a year. After witnessing what the virus is capable of, with the discovery of new variants, I could understand the wisdom behind waiting for the optimal time to permit everyone to return.

### **New York's Shift to Soul Care**

Upon their return in Summer 2021, the *DML - New York* shared that there was less of a dance focus, and more of an emphasis on faith, encouragement, and fellowship. For them this created what felt like a cell group or small-group ministry. They talked a lot and stretched out their bodies simultaneously. The leader shared that there was a definite intentional shift to soul care where, "It's time for me to cover people and have real check-ins. Asking dancers, "How is your heart, soul, mental health?" – I hadn't cared for the dancers in that way [at that level] before" (DML - NY, 2022). Their intention resulted in an intimate time where dancer ministers united and drew together. The Ministry Leader gave spiritual homework to the dancers, which gave them a lot to reflect on and talk about. This small-group ministry model created a space to affirm their identity as Dance Ministers and allowed them to grow in discipleship.

In terms of motivation, Church leadership asked the *DML - New York* to make dances, specifically on/for film, to be prerecorded, edited, and shared. For a ministry that was not able to



hold hands while praying, the approach to choreography also had to shift. To comply with the protocols and regulations, much of the choreography consisted of solos and duets, allowing the dancers to remain more distant and separate. Including a larger, spread-out dance ensemble, would have also been difficult to capture in one camera frame. I recognize this Leader's efforts in being intentional, doing what was best to keep everyone safe, even during the production process.

### **Choreographer's Block in Maryland**

When asked about their return to the Church building the *DML - Maryland*, quoted 2 Timothy 1:7 stating, "We kicked fear in the chest as we walked through the Church, continuing to move – God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power, love, and a sound mind" (DML - MD, 2022). In mid 2021, dancers at this Church were also asked to create dances on film, as the Church requested more content to share online/virtually. Under pressure, this ministry was asked to do more because the Church wanted to produce more content, more quickly. This leader felt that urgency, but voiced that, "Content requires attire, choreography, and music (that is not going to be flagged)" (DML - MD, 2022). Church leadership did not realize that they needed to give the Dance Ministry some time to relearn how to share the Word through movement and film.

As a Ministry Leader, I often wondered, "How do we generate material and use the body for the gospel during this time?" Upon their return to the building, *DML - Maryland* gives the account of reteaching dancers how to use the top of their face (eyes in particular), as a result of mask mandates, with facial expression playing a huge role in how the dancers communicate with the congregation. This DML also found that Dance Ministers were struggling with "choreographers block", so they decided to lead a series of dance composition classes – an

opportunity they typically would not have had, if not for the pandemic. The *DML - New Jersey* supports this notion when sharing that, “There are many ministries who use the same movement to every song because they don’t know how to become creative, inhibiting the ministry from going deeper” (DML – NJ, 2022). As a result, this New Jersey leader spoke with other Ministry Leaders, admonishing them to take their ministries deeper, communicating what the requirement for real discipleship, a notion the *DML - Maryland* was spiritually in-tune with. This innovation was beneficial for multiple reasons, as it generated more material, inspiring those who may have felt stuck or unmotivated. It also gave Ministry Leaders the chance to rest, while giving others who do not usually get a chance, to share their God-given voice in a communal setting.

### **The Meeting of the Ministries in DC**

Having an existing online presence, the operations for the Dance Ministry in Washington DC, in terms of sharing the gospel through dance, was technically never interrupted. The DML returned every week to record or create solo movements – for all special events, various Sundays services, and for/during Praise & Worship. With their Church live-streaming services before the pandemic, and with the dancers having signed media releases, the *DML - Washington DC* had the pre-existing virtual infrastructure needed to maintain their presence in the Church building (at a limited capacity) and online. One interesting aspect for this ministry is that, at the time of completing this research (February 2022), they were the only Church that was yet to have any in-person Church services. All of their content remains pre-recorded and continues to be shared virtually for their congregation and community.

Though the Church in Washington DC was very capable technologically, they found challenges in presenting and sharing their dance content on YouTube and Facebook. This Church

found that, due to music rights and licensing, that dances on film, done to the audio recording of popular gospel tracks, were flagged as contravening rules, and subsequently removed from the platform. The removal of these videos diminished the efforts of this ministry, as they encountered the restrictions of the recording industry. The *DML* reached out to their affiliates, including the Ailey Organization, who were experiencing the same obstacle, with YouTube and Facebook not paying streaming fees to the artists. This music rights issue served as a huge obstacle and stumbling block, as most virtual churches stream their services on these platforms.

The solution that they found was to bring these ministries (the dance ministry, worship leaders, and band) back together and have live singers and musicians accompany the dancing. This was a great innovation, as the status quo in traditional ministry is to use the track of the original artists, not utilizing or involving the Church's own music ministry, singers and the choir, as Churches did before technological advancements in audio recording. A greater sense of in-house collaboration resulted as their music departments created cover versions of songs (laying their own vocals and runs over the track) that were then given to the Dancer Ministry for use in rehearsal and their pre-recorded videos streamed online. This equitable solution, though it involves more hands and creates additional responsibilities for the music department, is one of the only solutions for the foreseeable future, as Dance Ministries strive to reach their congregation, community, and the nations - without restrictions or threat of violating performing rights laws.

### **Elevating Dance in New Jersey and Beyond**

For the *DML - New Jersey*, excellence is the standard, but sometimes this comes with a financial price. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, The *DML - New Jersey* informed other church

and ministry leaders that they needed to invest more in better audio and recording systems, which, according to their Dance Leader, always appeared to be low on the list of church priorities. This New Jersey Ministry Leader, not always having the budget, learned and strategically figured out how to do ministry dynamically and in excellence. Some leaders may question, “How are we going to move forward if the budget doesn’t allow it?” This New Jersey leader stated that, “This is not about blowing the budget, but the requirement for excellence in ministry.” (DML - NJ, 2022). Once this DML shared the finished production, the excellence radiated to the congregation and through the tv screens, computers, tablets, and cellphones of those watching virtually. They also shared their gratitude in stating, “God brought the right people to us, to help establish us where we are now.” (DML - NJ, 2022). As a Dance Minister, I similarly believe that everything should be done in excellence and this pandemic allowed those who were skeptical of this type of investment to see the benefit.

The New Jersey leader followed that idea with, “In times of COVID, people may not come into the Church building. You’re going to have to go to them.” They also referenced “not doing church as usual” and that “what Dance Ministers do has to be relatable. Sometimes you have to take off the costumes and [come out of the garments/pageantry] because if not people may be turned off” (DML – NJ, 2022). For me, this demonstrated that the Dance Minister’s approach to ministry has to change by 1.) Minister’s seeking God for how to be impactful in the age and season and 2.) Minister’s being open to where God takes them, as it may not be what is customary. When asked, “What resources would be needed for your ministry to navigate, move into, and thrive in the virtual arena?”, the *DML - New Jersey* simply stated, “Support, and in some way respect/value, from church leadership.” (DML - NJ, 2022) This Dance Leader felt that higher levels of commitment from pastors, leaders, and even the church treasury, could lead to a

better understanding of the value of Dance Ministry. In this case, with their efforts, this DML elevated Dance Ministry as a tool for embodying Christ, for dance on film and dance as production.

### **Out of the Archives of California**

Prior to the pandemic, the *DML - California* recorded their run-throughs for rehearsal and archival purposes, which I have found to be the norm and customary for most dance groups. After uploading the video to a shared folder online, the dancers in the ministry could access the videos to self-teach, correct, and recall the choreography. With the Church in California becoming an online Church in 2020, as a result of the pandemic, the Dance Ministry in New York also pivoted to this form of operation. By November 2021 their dances were shared and showcased online, for all to see, experience, and witness. The benefit of a digital footprint was revealed and confirmed to the *DML - California* who stated:

We've had prophetic words [spoken to us] and we know that we're called to minister the gospel through dance, to reach the lives of others. In receiving past prophetic words, I saw us physically going to those places, which we have done. Now, in hindsight maybe it was the virtual ministry that allowed us to "go". It was obviously a part of the prophetic word, not just the way we thought it would be. (DML - CA, 2022).

For Dance Ministries that desired to reach the nations, this technological ability to share and showcase what God was saying and how He is moving within ministry, gave them that opportunity. Following similar protocols to the ministry in DC, surrounding music rights and restrictions, the Dance Ministry in California has had to collaborate with their music department (who subsequently sang live) to successfully upload and share video content online and across social media platforms. From filming for archival purposes, to filming for ministry, this method

provides longevity of dance ministry on film, as these videos can be shared and referred to for years to come.

### **Reservations and Response of the Pastor**

The Pastor I interviewed expressed that from the start of the pandemic they had hesitation and reservations, in view of bringing Church into the digital virtual space. At the time of this study, the Pastor's Church was only four-years-old, effectively, half of its existence had taken form during the pandemic. In the interview the Pastor mentioned being anti recording *anything* regarding Church service. The Pastor mentioned that, "there are also a lot of personal, intimate, and vulnerable moments that take place throughout the in-person worship experience, and it was important to them for the congregation to feel that they were safe [in the Church space]" (Pastor - NY, 2022). The Pastor did not want anyone's personal healing, deliverance, or moments of encounter to be publicized. They also expressed not being ready for the judgment and scrutiny that comes along with operating virtually. They felt that spiritual things could only be discerned spiritually, questioning the idea of being in a secular space?

Things shifted in 2021, as the Pastor decided that the Church would become an e-Church/Online Church. The Pastor shared that, "The pandemic forced us to do what was best for the kingdom [of God] and the kingdom is public." (Pastor - NY, 2022). In preparation to record live services, the media team (those responsible for capturing and recording live services) were trained in what not to capture, to respect people, and not expose their personal experience. This approach, shift, and intentionality is innovative and also fulfills the mission of the Church, as it strives to spread the prophetic messages. Once the Church began broadcasting live, they found that social media was the tool that was getting people into the Church building. For the Pastor, it

did not translate into people receiving salvation or accepting the gospel on Instagram. The Pastor shared that, “It has developed a curiosity of what it’s like to be in the place. [Now] 25% of people in the [Church] building are visitors. Different people!” (Pastor - NY, 2022). They added that the video cameras still pose some discomfort for some, in regard to their ability to be as free as they once were. However, the church found a balance and were able to continue to expand their reach, bringing greater access to and awareness of the Church. Still, they continue to stay away from Facebook, as it gives a level of access [to the public] that they are not comfortable with.

### **Lessons learned**

Entering the second year of the COVID-19 pandemic, I found that Dance Ministry Leaders used what they learned and experienced the year prior to influence how to navigate ministry going forward. By year two, these Leaders were able to reflect on lessons learned - making decisions that impacted the future and survival of their ministry. Upon returning to in-person rehearsals, the *DML - California* learned not to take anything for granted, reflecting on the themes of – “the souls” [members], “the space” [Church], “the gift” [dance], and “life”. The same ministry made it clear that, although Zoom does allow their ministry to connect through the COVID-19 surges, spikes, and variants, if they can avoid it, they have no desire to return to the virtual space. Zoom presented many challenges for this ministry and the leader felt like the online platform took away from the personal touch required for dance.

Half of the ministries participating in this study found that they [still] had to educate Church Leadership on the value of liturgical dance and the importance of their movement ministries. The *DML - Washington DC* voiced that, in year two, their Church Leadership

expected the Dance Ministry to operate how they used to - dancing only during Praise & Worship or only for special events and Church Services. These traditional views of conducting ministry began to shift, allowing Dance Leaders and Dance Ministers alike to dig deeper into the identity, purpose, and future of their ministries. For all of the subjects, there was a strong consensus that the pandemic was an amazing time to unlock creativity. It caused the *DML - New York* to think, “What’s stopping me from running the dance ministry in a way that is not popular?” (DML - NY, 2022). Through these modes of reflection and discourse I find it highly encouraging and helpful for the Church to open to learning, adapting, and persevering through times of hardship and uncertainty.

In my interview with the *DML - New York* they shared that, “COVID-19 was a blessing in disguise”. Referencing Romans 8:28, they continued saying, “God uses all things to work together for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purpose” (DML – NY, 2022). Upon reflection, the *DML - New Jersey* made similar remarks stating, “I know God was up to something and would utilize these circumstances in life to draw us closer to Him” (DML - NJ, 2022). During this unprecedented time these Ministry Leaders held onto their faith, hope, and trust in the Lord, pressing towards the mark and striving to accomplish their God-given mission, pushing past the challenges they encountered. In discovering the impact that COVID-19 had on these Dance Ministries, I see the benefits of the pandemic in that it unlocked creativity in nearly every ministry, while also teaching leaders new skills. This period of isolation, uncertainty, and tragedy has allowed ministries to refocus on God, while creating innovative solutions to meet their operational needs. In their closing thoughts from the interview, the *DML - New York* shared, “We [the Church] do better when we’re together.” – sentiments I share and have found to be true, two years into the pandemic.



## **Conclusion**

Through my interviews with the Dance Ministry Leaders and Pastor I learned that, from the onset of the pandemic, each Leader had the desire to continue the mission of spreading the gospel (Matthew 28:19), with each of them seeking to reach beyond their Church, into their community, and internationally. With the COVID-19 pandemic posing a threat to their operations and mission, these leaders found that this pandemic was the perfect time for the Church to “go ye into the world” and operate outside of its four walls. Technology was a great aid to accomplishing this mission for each ministry, but it did require a lot of effort, decision making, adjusting, and readjusting. Zoom became a great way for members of these Dance Ministries to connect with one another, check-in, and share ideas/concepts. After enduring various challenges, it was found that these virtual meetings were not the most effective tool for this particular population, especially in regards to dancing. However, creating pre-recorded dances on film served as a great solution for all of the ministries to get the gospel out.

My key findings were the references of soul care, music collaboration, expansion through the challenges and the loss of children in the virtual space. After experiencing the first year of the pandemic, returning to the Church building became a great catalyst for innovation for the subjects I met with – each of them finding a creative solution to their unique challenges. Though some ministry members fell away over the course of the first [virtual] year of the pandemic, Leaders spoke to their Dance Ministries growing closer and stronger as a team, with the slow acclimation to in-person ministry offered them the opportunity to switch gears and focus on interpersonal matters.

## Chapter 4

In this chapter I will discuss my research findings, sharing the common and unique challenges that each subject endured throughout the pandemic. After I establish the problem-solving innovations of each subject, I will highlight valuable lessons and key takeaways for the liturgical dance community at large. Looking ahead, I will discuss how the resilience within the liturgical dance community can help steer and guide dance ministers, as they encounter and deal with challenges that remain.

### **Throughlines – Parallel Worlds**

My research found that there were multiple commonalities and shared experiences among the Dance Ministries I spoke with. The limitations of the pandemic resulted in most dance ministries taking a one-year hiatus, returning to modified schedule and practice in the Spring of 2021. This is one year apart from their congregation and community. With the aim of all five Dance Ministries and the Pastor being to reach their congregation, their community, and all of the people of the world, the pandemic restricted them from accomplishing that, at least via in-person methods. The use of technology (the internet, Zoom, applications, social media, and streaming platforms) gave these ministries the chance to use their gifts and spread the gospel virtually.

There was one common “new” thing that each ministry had to endure, including the Pastor, and that was the “Sea of T’s” – the turmoil, the tragedy, and the trauma. None of these ministers had to lead through a pandemic before – a life event that did not just affect them, but everyone in the ministry, the church, and the world. This caused leaders to operate at a new level of care, sensitivity, grace, and compassion. This also gave leaders some time to tend to, or at the

very least acknowledge, their emotional, physical, and spiritual needs during this time of crisis. With the Pastor contracting COVID early and the *DML - Maryland* losing their parents, the impacts and effects of loss and devastation were felt across the nation.

## **Innovation**

The pandemic caused numerous shifts within these ministries and each ministry leader shifted with great intention and innovation. With no space to rehearse and with no events or engagements on the calendar, the *DML - New York* shifted their focus to the soul care and well-being of their dance ministers. With pressure from the church to produce, the *DML - Maryland* led dance composition classes, empowering their dance ministers to use their God-given gift(s) and choreographic voice. As a result of music laws and steamed content being flagged and removed from the internet, the *DML – Washington DC* reunited the dance ministry, with the worship team and band. This was one of the most progressive and potentially enduring outcome of the pandemic, as it allowed for seamless and unrestricted streaming possibilities. This fruitful and continuous collaboration between the church ministries is set to continue bringing artists together. With great foresight and discernment, the *DML – New Jersey* knew, well before COVID-19, what it would take to propel liturgical dance into the standard of excellence. The pandemic allowed their harbored vision to manifest, while God fulfilled a prophecy that was spoken to them years ago. For the *DML – California*, their disdain for technology was partially reconciled, once they saw the multiple benefits of producing dance ministry on film. Similarly, the New York Pastor, who had great reservations to streaming church online, embraced the virtual space and created an infrastructure that now supports a very successful e-church.

Though the COVID-19 pandemic brought many obstacles, restrictions, and hindrances, each ministry forged ahead with great resilience, regardless of the excuses and oppositional forces. This solution-based creativity demonstrated to me that dance ministries in Black churches in the United States, when met with great resistance, possess the power, ingenuity, and creativity to strive ahead. These Ministry Leaders have demonstrated that the resources they have built, though not traditional to the typical Church or Dance Ministry experience, can work powerfully in alignment with gospel.

### **Lessons Gleaned**

The COVID-19 pandemic may have been the first event to disrupt operations of the church and access to the church building, but it certainly will not be the last. Threats of war(s), disease, artificial intelligence (AI)/ machine learning, and high unemployment rates are all in the foreseeable future in the United States – a relatively young nation filled with contention. To ensure that ministries are better prepared for these potential/inevitable events in the future, I assert that there needs to be an accessible system or infrastructure put in place to give dance ministers hope and carry dance ministries through those moments of social and emotional upheaval.

Based on my personal experience and communications with my subjects, the future of dance ministries is connected to the deployment of digital technologies. Although the Black Church may be reluctant to enter virtual spaces, for a myriad of valid reasons, life and technology are becoming more and more interlaced. The major thing to consider is the inevitability of this relationship. In order to accomplish their ministries' mission of reaching all people, I believe it is important to acknowledge that we are living in a technological era. With

the decline of church attendance, it would appear that ministries need to reach the masses through technological – via social media and streaming platforms like YouTube. Once the dance content is uploaded to these platforms, the accessibility and shareability becomes infinite.

To accomplish this, similar to the collaboration between music and dance ministries for the *DML – Washington DC*, I believe that dance ministries will have to partner and collaborate with their churches media ministry. This new relationship may alter the process of producing or choreographing a dance, but I believe the experience benefits both ministries, allowing the develop new skills, save time, and reach the masses beyond their immediate congregation. It will also inevitably create a stronger bond between the ministries, further uniting the body of the church. The *DML – New Jersey* was very successful at discovering the needs and benefits of virtual ministry. Their experience can be used as a guide and example for other ministries to follow. One further consideration is that not all churches have these ministries, or perhaps the expertise, to adopt such methods. Music and media equipment can be costly and not every church has the means or hands to make such collaborations happen.

Dance on film serves as a great way to preserve and memorialize the art of liturgical dance. Now that there exists an assortment of liturgical dance on film, among multiple ministries, the liturgical dance community now has diverse, relevant, and shareable content that can be organized to serve and impact generations to come. Organizing this repository, potentially housed on a central website or hub, could be a place of exchange and learning. This digital hub would be a central source that grants anyone the opportunity to see, contribute to, or participate in liturgical dance. This website would have the potential to cultivate and foster a sense of unity and community among dance ministries throughout the USA and potentially beyond. It would also incorporate and cater to the spiritual and physical needs of the congregation at large. This

hub would allow the church to continue in its vital embodied practice - ushering in the presence of God, whether we are together or apart on our own devices.

### **Remaining Challenges**

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed areas of deficit within Dance Ministries in the Black Church. As a Dance Ministry Leader, a solo dance minister, and with an affiliation to multiple ministries, I can attest that the need for resources, be it financial, operational, or developmental, has persisted for years. One of the things that the COVID-19 pandemic did was exacerbate the need and demand for such resources. While some churches financially support dance ministries, the vast majority do not, requiring dance ministers to cover expenses. Considering the cost, when preparing for a dance film you have to budget for costumes, camera equipment, editing software, music rights/fees, videographers, and heaven forbid - rehearsal space, dance ministry requires a lot more from the dancer than just their time and attention. As the *DML – New Jersey* shared, they had to inform numerous church and ministry leaders of the requirement and cost of ministering in excellence. This revealed that dance ministry leaders carry the burden of having to advocate for their ministries, as others in the church may not be privy to or cognizant of the cost.

Similar to the *DML – New York*, I personally believe that more space and time could be given to reaffirm and reinforce the identity of the dance minister. As the Pastor in the study mentioned, if someone is not able to operate or function in their gift/calling, then what are they to do? With liturgical dancers being out of commission for over a year, one's identity and purpose can be challenged. With the younger kids still missing from the dance ministry activities, there will need to be a great deal of education and development, as the next generation of liturgical dance ministers are reared. During the pandemic I had to remind and encourage

myself that God gave them a reason to dance before the pandemic, that I will have a reason to dance after the pandemic, and that I have a reason to dance amid the pandemic.

## **Conclusion**

I conducted this study to ascertain the impact and bring to light the challenges that Dance Ministries in the Black Church faced over the course of the first two years of the COVID-19 pandemic, 2020-2022. Based on what the study revealed, the resilience that existed in the beginning of (and throughout) the Black Church still remains an inspirational space of spiritual nourishment. In times of chaos, crisis, and uncertainty, church leaders remained steadfast and faithful to the mission(s) of their ministries. To their success, soul care, dance composition classes, collaboration with music ministries, dance films, serving in excellence, and church online became the new normal.

## Conclusion

In order to discover the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic had on dance ministries within the Black Church on the east and west coasts, I embarked on a journey of investigation and discovery. I set out to understand the challenges dance ministries faced in the socially distant era between March 2020 and March 2022. Exploring the experiences of 4 dance ministries through interviewing their leaders I also set out to find commonalities and differences between them, based on their varied approaches. I also integrated my autoethnographic voice as a ministry leader to contextualize the significance and threat of the pandemic. Lastly, I ventured to establish what would be needed to build resilience within these liturgical dance communities.

To begin this process, I evaluated literature about the Black Church – its history, significance, and relationship with liturgical dance. Following this, I highlight the global COVID-19 pandemic and its devastating impact on Black communities in the United States and through the interviews identified how state mandated safety protocols disrupted the practice of all dance ministries.

Using a qualitative approach for this research study, I used structured interviews and autoethnography as my methodology. I deployed these methods to establish what occurred in these local dance environments. Discovery of unique strategies were revealed, and new challenges arose with innovation – such as music rights with recorded performances being transmitted online. There were many similarities and throughlines, such as the use of technology and videography; these innovations in some cases increased the impact of ministry. New choreography was developed due to a new emphasis on developing choreographic skill. Time was taken to engage in a deeper level of soul care.



I conclude that the future of dance ministry is connected to technology. Ministry is about people. As a result of the pandemic life and times have changed and people have learned to rely on and expect the use of technology; it seems that dance ministries will inevitably have to do the same and in doing so expand their reach and solidify their purpose. Be it virtual rehearsals on Zoom, livestreams of concerts on Facebook, or dance films on YouTube/social media, the future of liturgical dance is inevitably tied to technology. This future would also call for more collaborations and exchanges between in-house church ministries to make getting the gospel out more attainable and sustainable.

Not only is dance ministry connected to technology, but I also found that it is even more-so connected to gospel music and the music of spirituals. This progressive (re)discovery of music ministries' engagement with its allied partner in dance ministries is a powerful opportunity to unite the church. With issues pertaining to copyright and licensing, I foresee challenges and hurdles ahead, but with these two ministries allied together, there is an unstoppable spiritual force.

This thesis was carried out to keep the advancement of dance ministries active in discourse within the Black Church. As an active member of the community, I too felt and saw the impacts of the pandemic, therefore it is of personal interest to me to keep moving spiritually in the name of the Lord, Jesus Christ. This project offers a framework for ministries to guide the growth of their work, even during turbulent times. This research was undertaken to encourage those ministry leaders who do the work of the Lord, regardless of the trials, tests, and tragedies that came their way.

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