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Celebrating with a dance

Ancient tradition reintroduced to historic church

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AL ZAGOFSKY/TIMES NEWS Shari Kenlin - director of the Kenlin Dance Academy in Palmerton readies student dancers for liturgical dance performance at the Episcopal Parish of St. Mark's and St. John on Race Street in Jim Thorpe. Lead dancer Laurette White stands behind lyrical dancers, from left to right: Briana Kult, Kayla Pincilla, Emily Evans, Mackensey Evans, Laurette White.

On Easter Sunday, Father Joseph De Acetis' surprised his congregation at the Episcopal Parish of St. Mark's and St. John on Race Street in Jim Thorpe with an unannounced Easter gift-a liturgical dance presentation.

The five-member dance ensemble from the Kenlin Dance Academy in Palmerton participated in two performances, for the Entrance and Offertory, of an original work inspired by Father Joseph De Acetis and choreographed by Shari Kenlin - director of the dance academy.

"This may be St. Mark's first integration of liturgical dance within a service," said Father De Acetis. "At least in recent years."

When Father De Acetis met Shari Kenlin and learned she taught at a dance school, he asked her if she would work with him to produce a liturgical dance for his Easter service.

"To be honest, I'm not one hundred percent certain what liturgical dancing is," confessed Kenlin. "Father Joe had me come in and he and his wife, Joan, gave me specifics of some of the steps and moves that they wanted in it."

"I do lyrical dance, which is an interpretive gesture dance," Kenlin continued. "Father Joe felt that was very close to liturgical dancing. He was looking for something new."



AL ZAGOFSKY/TIMES NEWS Dancer Laurette White leads procession of lyrical dancers: Briana Kult, Kayla Pincilla, Emily Evans, Mackensey Evans, and Laurette White. The ensemble from the Kenlin Dance Academy in Palmerton introduced liturgical dance at the Easter service at St. Mark's and St. John on Race Street in Jim Thorpe.

This all came together just two weeks before Easter Sunday, causing Kenlin to quickly search for students that could learn the routine quickly and were available for both rehearsals and the performance.

She selected a troupe of five girls: lead dancer - 17 year old Laurette White from Palmerton, and four girls between the ages of four and six years old: Briana Kult, Kayla Pincilla, Emily Evans, Mackensey Evans, and Laurette White. "We had one rehearsal at the church and one at the dance academy," said Kenlin. "Father Joe even came down for the rehearsal.

On Easter Sunday morning the sound of chimes drew parishioners to St. Marks for the 9:30 a.m. service. People entered into the lobby and rode the Mary Packer Cummings elevator to the third floor main chapel.

As a fluted organ voice began playing Hymn 207, Laurette White - dressed in a pure white worship dress, led four younger dancers - each wearing off-white lyrical dresses and carrying garlands down the aisle to the front of the service. With gestures, pirouettes and tour jetés they performed in a style that blended elements of ballet and rhythmic jazz.

Choreographer Shari Kenlin of Nesquehoning began her dance education at three years old. She studied at the Susan Yushko School of Dance and with Gloria Dillon.

Some churches are reintroducing liturgical dance into their services as a way a minister, as what one liturgical dance choreographer described, "to liven up his sometimes "austere and predictable" worship services," and as a way for children to become active in worship.

Dance was important in the early history of religion with biblical references to Miriam's dance of deliverance in the Exodus, and David's dance of ecstasy before the ark in Samuel. Over the centuries, worship services became formalized and both the Protestant and Catholic churches sought to eliminate creative expressions such as dance.

In the twentieth century, dance began to be reintroduced into church services. Congregations have found that liturgical dance offers opportunities for dramatic presentations and spontaneous celebrations to congregations of all ages.

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