

Movement As Worship

Deepening Spiritual Practices Through Bodily Awareness and Expression

Project Purpose

This project seeks to discover, and gather tools and methods to increase bodily awareness and expression to deepen the individual spiritual practices of members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. This project aims to bring our bodies into the conversation of spiritual learning as members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints through the lens of movement and dance choreography. I am curious about extrapolating what skills and approaches contemporary dancers know and have access to that can be information for a non-dancer audience to consider or apply. I will be researching what contemporary dancers experience about deepening their connection to the divine through movement and how I can translate that information to a non-dance community in a way that is approachable and accessible.

Project Importance

In my experience, contemporary dance showcases vulnerability, daily emotions, what we freely give, and what has been taken, it preserves history and connects us from the inside to what we worship. From my perspective, dance is a representation of the deepest parts of what it means to be human (a different approach from those who pursue competition dancing, Broadway, clubbing, etc.). As a contemporary dance major at a religious university, I have observed the depth that movement can offer me in my spiritual practices. For example, when I am dancing through a meditative improvisation, my thoughts and feelings often reflect on my gratitude for God. I feel connected to my body and therefore connected to my spirit. The movement offers me time to reflect on the needs of my spirit and my relationship with God, inviting me to seek a deeper connection. This project seeks to find tools and methods of bodily awareness and expression that can be applied to the individual spiritual practices of a general population of members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. Through my experiences, I wonder about the possibility that movement, practiced or observed, can deepen our connection with each other and with God. This project seeks to investigate and share these findings on deepening individual spiritual practices with members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints.

Project Overview

Preliminary Research

Preliminary research is primarily comprised of my past creative projects where I have explored and experienced spiritual connection through dance performance. This will include personal journals I have kept through my experiences with dance and spirituality, specifically as a missionary for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. Three spiritually-rooted

choreographic works I created as a missionary and journals I kept while making these works will be referenced.

One past creative process was an interfaith choreographic dance project I participated in. I collaborated with a Jewish choreographer in creating a solo that was performed and presented at a forum at BYU in 2022 and the Religion and Spirituality in Society conference in 2023. This creative process helped me understand the connection between spirituality and movement in the context of research and primed my curiosity about this topic, leading me toward my thesis question. I observed a second interfaith choreographic process between an LDS peer and a Christian choreographer. From observing this creative process, I recognized both spiritual and choreographic principles I will explore in the creative element of this project.

At BYU I have completed the course Dance 343: Principles of Somatics. Somatic theory in dance explores patterns, change, and relationships within the body. Through this course, I have learned several physical patterns that connect my body, mind, and spirit. I have also learned idioms using the body to make sense of the world around us which has me curious about the other ways the body is involved in our daily meaning-making, specifically regarding spirituality.

Methodology

Further research will reference extensive journaling that was kept during both previous interfaith choreographic interactions. I will interview both professional dance choreographers from the interfaith projects I previously participated in and observed. Interviews will ask about their experiences and discoveries regarding movement and spiritual practice throughout these processes.

I will write a literature review including sources discussing spirituality in dance¹, the relationship between dance and religion², and understanding the role of our bodies³ and other physical activities in spirituality⁴. The review will also include canonized scripture and other published addresses from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints about the body.⁵

¹ Debenham, Pat, and Kathie Debenham. 2008. "Experiencing the Sacred in Dance Education: Wonder, Compassion, Wisdom, and Wholeness in the Classroom." *Journal of Dance Education* 8 (2): 44–55. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15290824.2008.10387358>.

² Brown, Frank Burch . 2014. "The Oxford Handbook of Religion and the Arts." Google Books. 2014.

³ Taylor, W. David O. 2023. "A Body of Praise: Understanding the Role of Our Physical Bodies in Worship." Google.com. 2023.

⁴ Tristão Parra, Maira, Gustavo J. M. Porfirio, Elva M. Arredondo, and Álvaro N. Atallah. 2017. "Physical Activity Interventions in Faith-Based Organizations: A Systematic Review." *American Journal of Health Promotion* 32 (3): 677–90. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0890117116688107>.

⁵Tanner, Susan W. 2005. "The Sanctity of the Body." [Www.churchofjesuschrist.org](http://www.churchofjesuschrist.org). October 2005.

In the Winter 2025 semester, I will conduct a choreographic research process. Exploring this question through the method of choreography gives me access to several contemporary dancers' somatic experiences with spirituality. I will facilitate movement prompts, discussions, and journal prompts that will hopefully uncover what a contemporary dancer has spiritual access to through their bodily awareness and how it can be shared with a non-dancer audience. Along with sharing written research and findings, the resultant choreographic work will share my conclusions with a non-dancer audience through visual and emotional experience via live performance. Not only am I interested in what the creative process of choreography will discover, but also what thoughts and feelings a non-dancer audience will experience about this topic while watching a performance about it. To gather this data, I will include a QR code in the performance program that audience members can scan to take a 1-2 question survey regarding their thoughts and feelings while watching the choreographic work.

A cast of 6-8 contemporary dancers will meet weekly for rehearsals held for 2 hours each week. The choreographic process will begin with journaling and discussions about each dancer's personal experience with movement and spirituality. Prompts from these journals and discussions will be used to generate movement that will be structured into choreography. Dancers will journal about their experiences embodying each other's movements. They will also journal about any embodiment experiences they have had associated with their personal spiritual practice. Prompts will include how the perspective of a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints influences their dancing and vice versa. Responses from these journals will be used to generate movement and used as data for me to synthesize as part of my research.

As part of the movement generation process, I will draw upon somatic theory and try to understand the somatic nature of spirituality. Part of this exploration will be experimenting with the principle of repetition in movement. I hope to discover what repetition somatically evokes and how that discovery can translate into practical tools that a general population of members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints can utilize.

I will draw from my experiences from the two interfaith choreographic processes I participated in and what they taught me about the way my religious identity informs my dance practice and performance. From the first interfaith collaboration I participated in, I will specifically draw on the principle of shared felt experience in spirituality. We may not all believe the same or have the same experiences with spirituality, but we can feel the same about those experiences (feelings such as reverence, humility, gratitude, etc.). From the second interfaith collaboration I observed, I will specifically draw on principles of repetition and refinement in movement as well as how to embody scripture in movement as a way to internalize it more deeply. Both of these insights will assist me in generating movement for the choreographic work. I will also reference the interviews I conduct with these professional dance choreographers to inspire journal prompts

during my choreographic process. I will analyze dancers' experiences with other faith embodiment rituals they or I have come across and generate movement utilizing this comparison.

There are several scriptural references to the body in LDS canonized scripture that I am curious about practically applying through movement and to personal spiritual practice.⁶ Embodying scripture will also be used to generate movement. This includes using ideas from what the scriptures teach about the body, using movement to memorize and internalize scripture, and embodying personal experiences with scripture.

In my research, I am interested in discovering what movement can communicate spiritually and how it is different from verbal worship. I am interested in studying the similarities between dance practices and spiritual practices and recognizing any patterns or common themes between the experiences of each dancer throughout this process. This analysis will seek to synthesize best practices that members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints can use to deepen their individual spiritual practices.

The culminating dance will represent what we have discovered about how bodily awareness and expression can deepen our spiritual practices. The dance will express the dancers' personal relationship with the body and divinity, reflect learned experience throughout the process, and share with others what we have discovered. The culminating choreographic work of this research process will be performed at the end of the Winter 2025 semester in the Dance Department Senior Showcase concert as part of this creative/performance-based thesis project.

Thesis Committee

Faculty Advisor/Honors Coordinator: Marin Roper

Faculty Reader: Kori Wakamatsu

Faculty Reader: Liz Dibble

Thesis Committee Qualifications

Faculty Advisor/Honors Coordinator: Marin Roper

Marin Roper's creative and scholarly research examines the relationship between religious identity and creative practice, with focus on the body as a site of empathy and divine intelligence. Her writing about dance and empathy is included in *Dance Education Around the World: Perspectives on dance, Young People and change* (Routledge), *Laban/Bartenieff Movement Studies: Contemporary Applications* by Colleen Wahl (Human Kinetics) *Journal of Dance Education in Practice and Dance*, and *Dance, Movement and Spiritualities*. Professor Roper currently serves on the BYU Council for Interfaith Engagement. Before coming to BYU,

⁶Examples include: Doctrine & Covenants 88:67; Mosiah 24:14; Isaiah 66:14; Doctrine & Covenants 9:8; Romans 10:15; Moses 7:36

she founded M.E.L.D. Danceworks in New York City, a contemporary modern dance company committed to “dissolving religious and cultural barriers through the art of dance.”

Professor Roper has mentored me throughout my Honors journey. She has also mentored me in previous interfaith collaborations which has led me to this Honors research question.

Faculty Reader: Kori Wakamatsu

Kori Wakamatsu’s specialty is dance education. Before entering higher education, she taught both junior high and high school in the Utah public school system. She received her MA in Dance from California State University, Long Beach; a Theatre Endorsement from the University of Utah; and a BA in Dance Education from Brigham Young University. She has been honored to work on collaborative projects such as the *Thought of You* animation, *The Nightingale* play, *Dance Engine*, and *ON SITE mobile dance series*.

Kori Wakamatsu has mentored me in previous research and has influenced how I approach research of other people. She will mentor me in my research process and guide me in blending dance with research.

Faculty Reader: Liz Dibble

Liz Dibble finds great joy in telling stories of humanity and hope through dance. Her choreography has been presented at DNA, The Mark Morris Dance Center, White Wave SoloDuo Festival, Sheridan College, BYU Contemporary Dance Theater, Breaking Ground Festival, The Utah Dance Film Festival, and at the Rose Wagner Theater as part of the RDT Link Series. Her research interests include abstract narrative as it pertains to contemporary choreography.

Liz Dibble has mentored me in contemporary choreography and partnering work. I am requesting Professor Dibble as my mentor in the choreographic aspect of this project as she will guide me through the creative element of this project in a way that challenges my artistry and expands my research questions in the direction it needs to go.

Project Timeline

December 2022 - preliminary research; initial interfaith choreographic project

October 2024 - preliminary research; interfaith observation project

December 2024 - submit thesis prospectus and IRB

January 2025 - interview professional dance choreographers from previous interfaith collaborations

January-February 2025- research and write literature review

January-April 2025 - facilitate creative choreographic research process and journal prompts

April 2025 - interview cast of choreographic process about their culminating experience
April 2025 - present choreographic work at the Dance Department Senior Showcase concert
May-June 2025 - synthesize research from choreographic process and interviews
July-October 2025 - consolidate research into written thesis
November 2025 - submit thesis defense information
December 2025 - thesis defense
December 2025 - thesis publication

IRB

Submitted and pending approval.

Funding

N/A

Culminating Experience

The choreographic work that will result from the creative element of this thesis project will be performed live at the Dance Department Senior Showcase concert in April 2025. The work will also be documented via video and submitted to the American College Dance Association conference in the spring of 2026 to be adjudicated for choreography. The written thesis will be presented at the Utah Academy of Science Arts and Letters conference and the accompanying journal in the spring of 2026. The experience of this thesis project will also serve as a stepping stone in my preparation for graduate school.