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### Dancing the Story of Ruth

Calvin Symposium on Worship and the Arts

Anna Douthwright

*Celebration Dance Guild*

Agnes Kramer-Hamstra

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## SYMPOSIUM CONVERSATION STARTER: *Dancing the Story of Ruth*

... thoughts for the airplane or car ride home, or as a discussion guide for your next worship committee meeting

At the center of Christian worship is the proclamation of the good news of the gospel. One important contribution of the arts in worship is to enable this task of proclamation. In fact, in an era in which Christian churches are (happily) putting enormous amounts of energy into artistic creativity, it is helpful to pause and reflect on the reasons and purpose for this activity. **Does this reflection happen in your congregation? In what ways?**

Art exists in worship not for its own sake, but to enable Christian communities to proclaim God's Word more fully, and to respond more honestly and fittingly to that proclamation.

(For more on this theme, see Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Art in Action* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980], 183-189; and John D. Witvliet, "Toward a Liturgical Aesthetic: An Interdisciplinary Review of Aesthetic Theory," *Liturgy Digest* 3:1 (Winter 1996): 4-86. Both are available in the Calvin College library).

This goal has been reflected in the program of each of the last three Calvin Symposiums on Worship and the Arts. Two years ago our conference theme was "Bringing Biblical Narratives to Life." We explored how preaching, music, drama, dance, and the visual arts are complementary tools for challenging congregations to "be absorbed into" the biblical text. Last year, we witnessed a moving dramatic depiction of the *Song of Songs*—a sermon in dramatic form on the power of this often-neglected scriptural book. Likewise, this year, we gratefully receive the gift of dance, as it preaches for us the narrative of Ruth.

This goal has also been important to many congregations. Several congregations have replaced their annual spring musical "program" with the dramatic depiction of a scriptural text—that is used in a worship service. Other congregations have replaced their annual children's Christmas program—with their cute, performance-like scripts—with intergenerational services that use drama and music to live into the biblical texts (for examples of this, see the *Noel Series* [CRC Publications] found in the conference bookstore). In some congregations, drama troupes that formerly performed only daily-life scenes that function as sermon illustrations, are now also focusing their imaginative energy on reading and presenting scriptural texts. **Are there other examples in your congregation's life?**

We acknowledge that this liturgical proclamation of Ruth is not something that could be done by home-grown talent in every congregation. Yet it is a valuable contribution to our conference for several reasons. First and foremost, like all of our conference services, it is an occasion for worship. We gather first of all as worshipers, and only second as learners about worship. Second, in this service, we receive and affirm as a Christian community those who have been given the gifts of imagination and physical expression which are combined in dance. Third, we have the opportunity to reflect together on the most fitting use of the arts in worship. Here is a service to stimulate our imaginations about both the narrative of Ruth and the role of the arts in worship.

The Symposium planning committee hopes that in this service we have together worshiped God in spirit and truth. And we hope that in our conversations following the service (or in the airplane or car rides home after the conference), we can discern together how we can use the various arts in our local congregations in the most fitting, helpful, and creative ways to bring scripture to life. **Did your conversations produce any insights that would be helpful for others?**

We look forward to receiving your reflections on these questions at [worship@calvin.edu](mailto:worship@calvin.edu)!

**For further conversation on *Dancing the Story of Ruth***

How can we portray the richness and depth of the good news as it comes to us in Scripture? Do we rely too much on words set in a logical sequence to express our worship in a service? How can we explore and begin to express all the images, poetry, psalms that God gives us in Scripture? How do we show, what we tell, in worship?

How do we go about honestly acknowledging and giving expression to the effect that trouble has on us? And what is the radical Word that stirs the heaviness of sin?

We are literally, the Body of Christ. How do we faithfully develop a bodily expression in our worship?

These are the questions that were present as Anna Douthwright and I approached the story of Ruth. Our work together has arisen from Anna's grounding in the Roman Catholic faith, her experience in liturgical dance, and my grounding in the Reformed faith, and experience with writing. This mix delighted both of us, and in working together God blessed us with a sense of the fullness of God's Body.

In *Dancing the Story of Ruth*, the congregation is invited to enter into Naomi's grief, her loss, and the fact that her name will be cut off from Israel's redemption history. Naomi's trouble is also our trouble, and we attempted to give this expression by using the narrative with a dance to Mahalia Jackson's rendering of *Trouble in the World*. The good news for Naomi comes from a surprising and unexpected place. Such is the working of the Holy Spirit. Through the narrative poetry, music and dances, we try to give expression to the fullness of the story of Ruth. As we worked together and with the dancers, the story literally got under our skin and into our muscle and bone. The process of working together to develop the story brought the blessing of the Word becoming part of our flesh.

For example: In the narrative, the image of travelling blind, as an expression of walking by faith and not by sight, was developed. Out of this text, Anna developed the idea of a blindfold dance. As I watched her dance develop, I changed the text because the dance brought out another part of the story.

How does one who believes that the Newer Testament of Jesus Christ Messiah completes the Older Testament, tell an Old Testament story?

In my research, I discovered that liturgically, Israel heard the story of Ruth during her feast of Pentecost. And so, it seemed fitting to begin and end the telling of Ruth with a prayer for the Holy Spirit to come and the promise God made to pour out God's Spirit. This promise that those who persistently open themselves to the Holy Spirit will be practicing what Jesus practiced: the undoing of the yoke, and the comforting of those who mourn in Zion. Ruth and Boaz are such redeemer-kinsmen for Naomi.

If we carry some of these questions further to other ways movement might be used in worship, we might ask these questions: How can simple movement be incorporated into our worship? Could we begin by developing processions? For example, a way of adding movement piece by piece, bringing in the wonder of the Lord's Supper. Could we set the table slowly, with dignity before communion? As elderly and younger members of the congregation by turns carry up the tablecloth, wine, bread, grapes, wheat, etc., the rest of the congregation could sing, e.g. *Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silent*.

Could those who receive the offering, or could the deacons take the offering plates, turn, lift them up slowly, lower them and bring them to their place?

We hope that the power of God's promises and God's overflowing generosity has come through our telling of the story of Ruth. May God empower us all to use the gifts he has given us to give witness to his glory.

*Agnes Kramer-Hamstra*

# *Dancing*



## *the Story of Ruth*

*Narration written by Agnes Kramer-Hamstra*

*Dances choreographed by Anna Douthwright*

*Story performed by Celebration Dance Company*

*Calvin Symposium on Worship and the Arts  
January 14, 2000*

## *Dancing the Story of Ruth*

During the Hebrew harvest feast of Pentecost, the priests dance with the Torah. God's Presence is like the overflow of ripe fruit and grain. It shines through the Torah. After the priests dance, the story of Ruth is told, because it is suffused with God's steadfast lovingkindness (*hesed*). The promised Holy Spirit was poured out at Pentecost, continuing the story of the overflow of God's generosity. Our story, then, begins and ends with the prayer and the promise that God's Spirit lead us on the way that Ruth took.

### **Prelude**

**Sung Prayer for Illumination:** *Veni Sancte Spiritus* (Come, Holy Spirit) - Taizé Chant

The image shows a musical score for the Taizé Chant 'Veni Sancte Spiritus'. It consists of two staves, a treble clef staff on top and a bass clef staff on the bottom. Both staves are in the key of D major (two sharps) and 6/8 time. The tempo is marked 'pp' (pianissimo). The melody is simple and repetitive, with the lyrics 'Ve - ni San - cte Spi - ri - tus.' written below the notes. The first staff has a double bar line with repeat dots at the end, and the second staff also has a double bar line with repeat dots at the end.

**Poem:** *Come, Like the Aroma of Bread*

Naomi's trouble begins with a famine. Hunger drives her family away from Bethlehem. Trouble follows Naomi to Moab. There, her husband dies. However, her two sons marry Moabite women, and their voices welcome Sabbath around the table. Then, Naomi's two sons die, and she is suddenly without a name in Israel, stripped of her kin. It is a dangerous time to be left so vulnerable.

**Music:** *Trouble in the World* (Mahalia Jackson)

**Poem:** *The Husk*

Naomi begins her journey home. Ruth, her daughter-in-law, faces Naomi on the road between their two enemy nations. Naomi urges Ruth to return to her homeland. Ruth clings to Naomi and pledges her love. Ruth's promise leads her into the unknown. Naomi and Ruth do not know what lies ahead of them: they are travelling blind.

**Poem:** *Seeds of Promise*

Naomi comes to her hometown, Bethlehem. Beside her walks Ruth, a despised Moabite. It is a dangerous time in Israel. God's law is like a powerful wing providing a safe place, a community within which the poor, the widowed and the foreigner could move and live freely. But, in those times, God's law was ignored by those with power. As Ruth and Naomi arrive in Bethlehem, the villagers look up. They stare. Naomi left with three men. She is returning with a woman, a stranger.

**Music:** *Recuerdos* (Nana Mousskouri)

God is not absent. Naomi and Ruth return to Israel at the beginning of the harvest. Ruth, who acts as Naomi's nearest kin, goes out to glean the leftovers behind the harvesters. She finds herself in the part of the field belonging to Boaz. Boaz reveres God. He practices Torah, sharing in God's passion to be a refuge for anyone weakened, broken, or left alone with the trouble in the world. Ruth finds security in Boaz' field until the harvest is done.

**Music:** *Flatbush Waltz* (Itzhak Perlman)

**Poem:** *Rich the Soil*

The harvest comes to an end. Naomi looks for security for Ruth, through Boaz. Like Tamar who gathers her wits and tenaciously pulls on God's promises, Naomi sends Ruth through the night to Boaz' threshing floor. Boaz has already recognized in Ruth the same Spirit whose wings bring refuge. When Ruth proposes to him, he is delighted.

**Music:** *Durme* (traditional arrangement by Sharon Wise, Richard Negus)

Ruth and Boaz marry. Their love becomes a shelter for Naomi. The one who came back to Bethlehem bitter, finds nourishment.

**Music:** *Erev Shel Shoshanim*

*Nitsanim*

*Shibolet* (traditional arrangements: Sharon Wise, Richard Negus)

Ruth and Boaz have a son. They present their child to Naomi, and a new kind of harvest feast begins. Ruth and Boaz become redeemer/kinsmen to Naomi. And out of their family, the main character, God, comes as the one who empowers, comes as Emmanuel, comes as a stranger bringing a larger redemption. Emmanuel becomes the way home.

**Music:** *Allelu Adonai* (Barry and Balya Segal)

Surprise enters into toil and trouble whenever a door in the heart opens a crack for the Spirit of the Redeemer.

**Music:** *I Will Pour Out My Spirit* (Fisherfolk Productions)

**Poem:** *Like Grain, Like Water*

*Moments of Reflective Silence: Prayer for the Spirit's Power in our world and lives*

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*Come Holy Spirit*; Verses drawn from Pentecost Sequence; Taizé Community, 1978

Music: Jacques Berthier, 1923-1994

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## *Enfolded*

The God of power, as he did ride  
In his majestick robes of glorie  
Resolv'd to light; and so one day  
He did descend, undressing all the way.

George Herbert

Jesus Christ came to earth and dressed himself in the clothes that we wear. As he put on our everyday clothing, became like us, and died the deaths that humanity lives, Christ covered the bald nakedness of sin. All creation lives and breathes under the mercy of God, and the ever-present Spirit of Jesus Christ is a place of shelter from which our everyday living can spring vibrantly, like freshly washed clothing.

God covers the Body of Christ. Securely, within the safety of God's Presence, the Body can take the risks of love. And it is a dancing Body that tells the story of Ruth here at Symposium 2000. When the Body makes its threadbare promise to accompany the powerless into an unknown future (Ruth 1:16, 17), God's Presence weaves the promise into a rich texture. The story of Ruth is about how God clothes the promises of a foreign beggar, a woman who first comes alongside Naomi as a kinsman-redeemer. The Body of Christ, as characterized by Boaz and Ruth, participates in the sheltering Presence of God, here on earth (Ruth 2:8-11).

The fabric of this setting was gleaned from thrift stores. The cast-off clothing was then fashioned into an over-arching fabric sculpture, entitled "Enfolded". Within these Wings, even the smallest bird can give full-throated voice to all the laments, songs and praises that arise from life. The women of Naomi's village recognize that this is where Naomi has found herself at the end of the story of Ruth (Ruth 4:14). And it is here, within these wings, that the Body can risk the dance of the kinsman-redeemer (Isaiah 58).

Fabricwork by Evelyn Dreise  
Gracia Wassink