A dance of grace. The Anglican Planet

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By Alex Newman

In its 15 years serving the mean streets of Toronto, Church at the Yonge Street Mission keeps desperation at bay with a liturgy of joy. Just beyond the front doors, in one of the city’s poorest areas, prostitutes, pimps and panhandlers jostle with shopkeepers, power brokers and artists.

Inside, though, congregants come and go at will, downing cans of Coke, clapping their hands to the swelling music, or dancing with banners and praise hoops held high, while a power point flashes on the screen above contemporary messages of God’s abiding love.

It’s an unlikely place for an internationally renowned ballet dancer to fulfil her vocation as deacon – and soon-to-be-ordained priest – in the Anglican church.

But to Ronda Nychka, it is home. “Single moms and refugees, PhD grads and the mentally challenged, are all part of our community. And no day is typical.” Between her, Parker, and community outreach pastor Jan Rothenburger, they manage a street ministry, outreach to prisons and those in the sex trade, funerals, baptisms, marriage prep, going to court with an offender or victim, hospital and shut-in visits, hanging out with youth, praying, listening, serving food, blessing homes, pastoral counselling, Sunday services, Agape suppers, Sunday school, and administrative minutiae like budgets and staffing.

In addition, Nychka governs the 35 courses offered, such as Worship Arts, Prayer as a Way of Life, Alpha, and Liturgical Dance. “Between all that, and hanging out...”
with my son Adam, cooking, cleaning, laundry, walking the dog, preparing sermons, it’s a really full schedule,” she says.

But Nychka is no stranger to full schedules – the slender 44-year-old with the ramrod straight back was only nine when she moved to Toronto to join the demanding National Ballet School. By her 20s she had gained international renown dancing with companies such as the National, Calgary, and Alberta Ballets, Bejart Ballet Lausanne and Deutsche Opera. She counts as personal friends some of Canadian ballet’s greatest stars: Veronica Tennant, Rex Harrington, John Alleyne, Frank Augustyn and Karen Kain.

Though humble (I had to hunt down her bio and kudos) she admits to constantly moving towards a goal of “divine perfection.I would strive to be in complete control, mentally and physically; I became dizzy spinning around for complete control over my life.”

But “deep inside,” she admits her “life was dry and empty. I was thirsty and hungry for something more. Physically, mentally and spiritually vulnerable, I danced on the edge of the sacred and profane and fell into the pit of darkness.”

Then one night in Cairo, seven years ago, while dancing with the Alberta Ballet, Nychka found what she was looking for. “In the pit of darkness, I was so down that I could no longer move. When I was still, I could listen with the ear of my heart. It was Jesus Christ knocking on the door of my heart. When I opened the door and let Him in, I invited the Power of Jesus Christ to work in me.”

The conversion went deep -- returning to Alberta, Nychka left the stage, sold her things. “Being a world traveller and a single-dancing-mother, I hardly had any material possessions to get rid of, but my own definition of self the Lord showed me has no place in His Compassion.”

She felt called to the ministry to “share the miracle of his healing hand upon my heart, mind, body and soul,” moved back to Toronto, and “pounded” on Toronto School of Theology’s door until they let her in to take a Master of Divinity.

“It’s like being washed up on a shore,” she recalls, “and there you are, that’s where you’ll be and that’s where he’s placed me and called me.”

To support herself and son Adam (now 13), she took odd jobs, even driving a dry-cleaner’s truck.

And she would dance from time to time – in 2004 in Trio, a dance drama created especially for her by Veronica Tennant, who said in a Banff Centre release that Nychka “was her inspiration, an outstanding talent who has a distinguished reputation...also a remarkable human being who has overcome several injuries caused by her profession, to return always a better dancer, a more complete person.”
What Nychka has discovered is that her conversion has not only infused her dancing with a maturity and depth, but has encouraged her to be more open and vulnerable – definitely a plus in her current line of work. Likewise, the rigorous demands – mostly of obedience – of the old National Ballet School – have helped lay the groundwork for an inner embrace of God’s sovereignty. But in outward expressions much has changed. In ballet, the “old school” no longer prevails, with the introduction of so many different styles of dancing. Similarly, Church at the Mission is a break from traditional church services. “It’s not set in a mode of what ministry should look like in the present Anglican stream of things, especially parish ministry,” Nychka says.

Nychka, who is to be ordained March 1, has opted to join ANiC – the breakaway Anglican body that is theologically conservative. While it remains “true to the faith,” in her view, it also gives her the freedom to remove clergy garb, “roll up” her sleeves and “do God’s work.”

“I cannot hide behind big theological words at Yonge Street Mission. I must be transparent and vulnerable in front of the needy.”

Not that the lost, lonely, sick and hungry are necessarily materially poor. “Sin is in our spiritual DNA,” she says, “and the cares of this world will choke the life out of the Word if the Church does not daily return to Him.”

To banish those worldly cares Nychka’s prescription is to turn to praise and rejoicing: “We sing, play instruments, cry, dance, wave flags, paint, sit, kneel, whirl, skip and roll in wheelchairs. We come as we are, just as we are. In Aramaic, the language that Jesus spoke, “dance” and “rejoice” are one and the same word. So when Jesus said rejoice in the spirit, he said dance in the spirit.”

“St Benedict said if you hear his voice, you’ve got to go. It’s about moving and keeping your eyes on Jesus, regardless of what’s going on around you. That speaks to me as a dancer -- even standing still is a movement because the heart is restless until it’s with him.”
Your story touched my soul. Thank God for the faithfulness of the Anglican Church. Thank God, Ms. Nychka, you have found your fulfillment in Jesus. What a blessing it is to praise Him in dance and what a beautiful gift you must bring to the throne of grace. I too am a trained dancer who has found my purpose after many years of searching. At the age of 54 I started Rejoice School of Ballet in Nashville, TN. We teach children from low income families, ballet with a Christian focus and how to use dance as praise and worship to God. I feel blessed to be able to do anything for the Kingdom of God and to have the opportunity to work with God's beautiful children. I'm thankful I ran across this article and will pray for you and the Church.

Blessings,

Patricia Cross
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