



Reggie Dabbs, keynote speaker at ROCK 2005, plays his saxophone during one of his four conversations with youth and their leaders. Photo: Erik Alsgaard

Racing Toward the Freedom of Jesus Christ

Carrie Steele

Neither rain, nor sleet nor blinding snow kept more than 4,200 youth and youth leaders from driving from all parts of the Baltimore-Washington Conference to attend ROCK 2005. The youth retreat had registered nearly 4,800 people and conference organizers fretted at first that many people would not show up. However, more than 4,200 people from some 200 churches braved the elements.

When they arrived, they stepped into a cavernous room filled with thousands of teens and parents buzzing with excitement. The audience sat in front of a spectacularly lit stage, set between two large screens brimming with Christian music videos. People began to take their seats and let the music reprogram their moods after a long drive to Ocean City. They were in the middle of ROCK 2005, and the energy was infectious.

"I thought it would be just like church, but it wasn't," said Zachary Spencer of Annapolis, who found his first ROCK retreat surprising. The high-energy, contemporary feel of the retreat appealed to both the youth and their leaders. Zachary's sister, Brittany, agreed, "Each year it gets more intense," she said. "They talk about the same ideas of faith in different ways."

ROCK 2005's main speaker, Reggie Dabbs, came to the weekend after a 29-hour flight from Australia. He showed no signs of fatigue while maintaining all the energy and fervor the youth could hope for. "It's good to be loud in church, isn't it?" Dabbs asked the crowd. "I don't know what brought you here this weekend, but I believe you've been captured by the One who is omnipotent."

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—Becki Price

Bringing Dabbs to the stage, along with a Christian rock band to lead praise and worship, coordinating lights, sound, registration and all the components of ROCK required months of planning. The planning for ROCK began last March, led by the Baltimore-Washington Conference's Director of Youth Ministries, Tom Price.

It's all for a great cause, agreed the dozens of staff and volunteers. "The best part is watching kids rush to the stage and

run to the freedom they've been offered in Jesus Christ," said Becki Price, Tom's wife. "It's ten months of planning for one moment."

Helping set the stage for real faith learning was Tree 63, who opened each session with praise and worship music. Every time the first chords of their guitar, bass and drum trio played over the speakers, youth rushed to the foot of the stage, just like at a rock concert.

But youth knew this wasn't just any rock concert as they swayed lifted their hands, sang and jumped around to Christian songs with messages of praise and hope. "I chose to be here because God told me there would be young people here who are blind and need to see God," said Dabbs.

A group of college students with Dabbs, "The Masters Commission," served to demonstrate several of his points with skits and pantomime. One such scenario was set to the popular Evanescence song "Frozen," showing what a person feels like who is caught between vanity, drugs, temptation, violence and all the other things that can make one stumble. Other dramatizations illustrated how Jesus will run to those who call out to him.

"Run to Jesus, he's calling your name," pleaded Dabbs, whose audience hung on every word.



*Youth participants share a moment of prayer and praise at ROCK 2005. More than 4,000 youth and youth leaders attended the annual event, under the theme "Transformation."
Photo: courtesy of Ruth Burns/UMConnection*

Between dynamic speaker sessions, youth and their leaders could find much to enrich their walk of faith. A candlelit prayer room beckoned just off the convention hall floor, where youth could find peace and solace among the crowds. An exhibition hall offered opportunities to sponsor Compassion International children in need, find a book on faith, or browse through ministry options for young adults. The Maryland Bible Society, American Bible Society, and the Conference joined forces to distribute 4,800 free Bibles at the event.

Saturday's breakout sessions allowed for smaller audiences to explore a variety of topics, such as "Finding God in Strange Places" and "Being a Transformed Disciple of Christ." As they learned how to develop and stay strong in the faith, participants learned how to make a difference to others. Youth and their adults put their faith into action on the last day of the retreat by raising more than \$18,000 for victims of the tsunami and mission efforts in Zimbabwe.

Both kids and adults agreed that this year's ROCK was the biggest ever. "This year's different," said John Harrell of Rockville, President of the Conference Council on Youth Ministry. "But it's equally as great because God moves in powerful, great ways and kids get saved."

Youth who came for the first time said the retreat exceeded their expectations. "I

liked it; it was stronger than I thought it would be," said Brittany Fox of Berkeley Springs, West Virginia, after Dabbs' Saturday evening session.

In this safe place where kids could literally stand up for Jesus amid their peers, Dabbs equipped them to stay strong in their home and schools. "Jesus Christ knows exactly what you're going through," said Dabbs. "You've got to let him carry you. There's got to be a day when you just take your hurt and pain and give it to him."

It was lessons such as these that made impressions on Baltimore/Washington Conference youth. Indeed, snow flurries, ice and wind could not stop the youth and their leaders from getting spiritually charged.

"It was amazing," said Paige Eustace of Washington, after Dabbs' Saturday night session. "It's real. It's stuff Reggie Dabbs saw himself – when you have faith it's so great." □

Carrie Steel is a staff writer for the Bay Weekly newspaper in Annapolis and a member of Oakdale-Emory United Methodist Church in Olney, Maryland. This article is reprinted with permission of The Connection, the newspaper of the Baltimore-Washington Conference.

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