



Reaching the Hip-Hop Generation

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It is no secret that young adults are noticeably missing in the pews of many Christian congregations around the country. Among this generation of missing in action churchgoers is a little understood subculture known as hip-hop. Contrary to what many outsiders may think, hip-hop is much more than the music of rap; it is an attitude, a distinct lifestyle. Those connected to and associated with this culture adhere to a fast pace, instant gratification, street dialect, adventurous mind-set, urban mentality, suspicion of authority, and free spirit.

This often daring and provocative alternative way of life is expressed in dress, language, politics, worldviews, and especially in rap music. Although hip-hop originated in the African American communities of New York City, today it has made its way beyond the rhythm-rich urban core to suburban homes and even rural communities. Its influence impacts all levels of pop culture, from television commercials to political campaigns.

Despite the popularity and broad reaching effect of hip-hop in the secular world, the church of Jesus Christ has failed to recognize the existence of or the need to reach these Generation Xers. It is apparent that the church, including, if not especially the black church, has ignored the ever-growing, hip-hop generation. To some degree, this oversight is more about the age-old resistance to change than inhospitable congregations. The church does not prohibit the hip-hop generation admittance into its worship celebrations or refuse to issue an invitation for membership to these spiritually

hungry young people. It is the church's refusal to meet this generation where they are that keeps them away from Sunday morning worship.

Although it is sometimes unintentional, the church's environment is utterly uninviting to those of the hip-hop culture. By its "gimmie-that-old-time-religion" nature, the often staid church of today is opposed to change, while change and hip-hop are synonymous. Whereas hip-hop has changed radically since it first surfaced in the late 1970s, mainline Protestant congregations stubbornly cling to older models of ministry and worship.

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That is to say, hip-hoppers are living in a DVD/CD-ROM world while the church is stuck in an eight-track mentality. Thus, there is an ever-widening gap between the church and Generation Xers that perpetuates the problem of an aging population in pews across the country. The root of this crisis is expressed by rapper Phife Dawg from the group A Tribe Called Quest on their 1993 CD *Midnight Marauders*. In the Song, "We Can Get Down," Phife asks a profound rhetorical question, "How can a rev-

erend preach when a rev. can't define the music of our youth from 1979?"

What is at the heart of this question is the understanding that a sermon is not a sermon if it is not heard. Christian service must always be reverent in its witness to Jesus Christ. It must also be relevant to the times. A ministry is useless if it doesn't reach its intended audience. In short, the effective practice of ministry and transformative preaching only happen when they are received.

The church cannot have a positive impact on the lives of persons they don't appreciate or understand. It appears that the church doesn't want to understand hip-hop; therefore, the church doesn't reach them.

This generation is saying by its distance from the church, "How can you say you love me if you don't know what hurts, heals, or hooks me?" If the gap between the church and the hip-hop generation is to be bridged, it must be the church that is willing to seek understanding. Refusing to consider the culture as a viable tradition is an indirect way of saying I don't respect what it's about or the people who embrace it.

To be dissed (disrespected) in the world of hip-hop is perhaps the number one cause of conflict. My generation will not take kindly to anyone or anything that devalues or demeans our personhood and self-worth. When the church declines to respect rap music and urban dialect or fashion, it is blatantly dissing the very age group it claims to desperately desire. Thus, the hip-hop generation has not connected with the church.

One definite way of demonstrating respect for the culture is by incorporating its unique style of music in worship celebrations. Today we are witnessing the marriage of gospel and hip-hop and that union has produced artists such as Kirk Franklin, J Moss, Trin-I-Tee 5:7, G.R.I.T.S (Grammatical Revolution In The Spirit), and the Cross Movement. These revolutionary artists have combined the message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ with the beat, energy, and dialect of hip-hop. Young people outside the orbit of the church are buying CDs and flocking by the tens of thousands to experience these Christian performers in concert. Yet, when they enter churches on Sunday mornings, this musical genre is not widely accepted or appreciated as authentic worship and praise.

When you listen to the likes of Kirk Franklin during the daily commute, it's very difficult to get excited about hymns composed over two hundred years ago, unless those hymns have been remixed (made over) to appeal to contemporary listeners. However, hip-hop is more than music; it is expression that can also be

experienced in praise dancing. This form of spiritual movement is completely different from what many may know as liturgical dancing. Praise dance is Spirit-filled and emotionally energizing and incorporates the more tasteful dance moves that can be seen in rap videos.

In addition, the spoken word (poetry in hip-hop form) is extremely popular and could be used as a form of worship to bridge the gap between the church and the hip-hop generation. By integrating



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elements of hip-hop culture into worship the church not only shows that it respects and appreciates it as a vibrant and vital aspect of liturgy, it also makes worship meaningful and exciting.

This brings us to another obstacle the church faces with African American young adults, the monotony of worship. As I stated earlier, hip-hop culture is all about energy and fast-paced excitement. When worship is viewed as boring, it is very easy to find an excuse not to get up on Sunday mornings. Thus, if congregations don't have exhilarating worship celebrations then there will be an immediate disconnection with the younger generation. Worship must be so stimulating that it becomes a Sunday morning experience that cannot be missed. This is not to suggest that worship should be reduced to entertainment but rather MADE more relevant to Generation Xers.

Lastly, the preacher must play a critical role if there is going to be a union between Christian congregations and the hip-hop generation. Because preaching has historically served as the pinnacle of the black worship experience, the preacher must be able to relate the message of the sermon to the practices and experiences of the hip-hop culture. My generation doesn't necessarily care about a sermonic exposition of theological terms nor does it delight in doctrinally irrelevant preaching. What we want to know is what

the gospel of Jesus Christ has to say about the rising cost of living, a sixty-hour work week, relationships, dealing with stress, and being young and black in America.

What is the gospel's relevancy in the midst of the vicissitudes of an urban existence? Rap music, from its inception, has always dealt with the values, concerns, trials, and issues facing young urban African Americans. If preachers are going to reach this generation, sermons must be culturally relevant, spiritually informing, and practical for twenty-first century living. Congregations need to be prepared to welcome the culture of hip-hop through its worship style, attitudes, and language if there is going to be any kind of reconciliation between the church and hip-hop.

All things being considered, I want to suggest five simple and practical ways that can aid congregations in connecting with the hip-hop generation:

- Allow youth and young adults to be a part of worship planning.
- Adopt the philosophy that worship must be constantly updated.
- Exercise the use of generationally sensitive language in worship.
- Develop practical ministries that address the issues facing Generation Xers.

We generally reach those we are intentional about reaching, therefore practice intentionality when it comes to extending invitations to Christian discipleship.

Reaching the hip-hop generation is vital to the church's mission. If the church does not connect with each subsequent generation, it will fail this mission. Congregations must have a radical paradigm shift as they relate worship and Christian service to this generation. The church should model its ministry after hip-hop culture in that it is

always evolving to capture the hearts of young people. □



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