

The Underground

The Living Mural of a Hip-Hop Church

Ralph Watkins

What is hip-hop, and how is it informing what it means to be the church? Let us be clear: hip-hop is bigger than music, bigger than rap. It is bigger than what we see in the story of this worship experience at The Underground Church, even though it informs what we see there. Hip-hop is a break from the traditional. Hip-hop takes what was meant to be used one way and uses it another way. Records were not meant to be touched, but hip-hop took records, touched them, remixed them, and extended the break beat. What we see in The Underground or BASIC Ministries or any other hip-hop church is a break from the past. As I lay out the story of The Underground versus my home church, FAME, the distinctions are obvious. The hip-hop church is not the old church we were raised in. It is a church that embraces the basic tenets of hip-hop culture as they are baptized in the Word of God to serve as the key building blocks for their quest for an authentic Christian community.

Culture

Hip-hop is a culture. It involves morals, values, ideas, ideals, ideology, and a way of life. It is a product of the African American youth culture that was

birthed out of the sociopolitical context of the late 1970s. The sociopolitical-economic timing of its coming out is important. Hip-hop was born at the end of the civil rights period. While the middle class, both black and white, were running for the suburbs, hip-hoppers were left in the inner cities with a crumbling economy. Within this inner-city milieu there was a cross-fertilization of minority groups coming together to bring to maturity what African Americans had birthed. From its early years hip-hop was multicultural. What is seen in hip-hop today, and especially in the hip-hop church, is this multicultural reality. Hip-hop churches are multicultural churches.

According to KRS-One, the teacher of hip-hop, hip-hop culture is composed of nine elements:

True Hip-hop is a term that describes the independent collective consciousness of a specific group of inner-city people. Ever growing, it is commonly expressed through such elements as: 1 Breakin' (Breakdancing), 2 Emceeing (Rap), 3 Graffiti art (aerosol art), 4 Dejayin', 5 Beatboxin', 6 Street Fashion, 7 Street Language, 8 Street Knowledge, and 9 Street Entrepreneurialism. Hip-hop is not just music and dance, nor is Hip-hop a product to be bought and sold. Discovered by Kool DJ Herc in the Bronx, New York, around 1972, and established as a community of peace, love, unity and having fun by Afrika Bambaataa through the Zulu Nation in 1974, Hip-hop is an independent and unique community, an empowering behavior, and an international culture.¹

KRS-One defines hip-hop culture in its broadest and purest form. Hip-hop is an international culture, born in the Bronx, New York, and has extended its influence throughout the world. The nine elements form the base of the culture, and in the Christian context these nine elements sit on the foundation, which is Christ.

Hip-hop is a culture that informs the lives of those who consider themselves hip-hop and provides the framework and ethos of the hip-hop church. When you look at hip-hop culture and allow it to be a lens for looking at the hip-hop church, what you see is a church that will not be mainline. It will develop its own line. An example of the hip-hop church's move away from the mainline is found in Tommy Kyllonen at Crossover Church in Tampa, Florida, who is developing a network of hip-hop pastors who are mentoring one another. They aren't trying to break into mainline denominations; they have felt that rejection and moved on. The entrepreneurial spirit in hip-hop is to develop, to literally start from scratch (pun intended). Tommy is the mentor of Pastor Tymme, and it was Tommy who hooked me up with Tymme. This is an

1. KRS-One, *Ruminations* (New York: Welcome Rain, 2003), 179–80.

informal network that goes around the system to create its own system. This is hip-hop. We will make our own beats, perform on the street, sell our own mixtapes. We do not need the system.

The hip-hop generation, according to Bakari Kitwana, are those born between 1965 and 1986.² When we accept Bakari's generational time frame for the hip-hop generation we have to understand that we are not talking about teenagers. We are talking about young adults. The hip-hop church is a church that by definition is to comprise young adults and those who love them.

An Experiment

My Journey to The Underground

On October 24, 2010, my wife and I went through our regular Sunday morning routine. We got dressed and made our way over to our home church, First African Methodist Episcopal Church (FAME), in Los Angeles, California. Today was not a normal day, however, because as we were preparing to go to our church, we were looking forward to what would come later that day. After the first of our three worship services, Vanessa and I would leave our church to go celebrate with The Underground Church as they marked the grand opening of their full-time ministry. At FAME we went through our normal, predictable worship experience. Even though it was Women's Day, there was nothing new in the routine. Given the predictability of the method in which we do what we do, I could not wait to go to The Underground. I knew The Underground would be stimulating.

I dressed for The Underground, not for FAME, even knowing that I would be considered nontraditional by many of my FAME church family. As one who does both youth and young adult ministry, one would think I could be who I am, but in my church I occasionally get comments about the way I dress. As a man in his mid-forties who is an old hip-hop head, I must admit that I dress a bit casual. My casual dress is in line with what young adults and the youth might consider cool for an old man. But my peers tend to make fun of or at a minimum chide me for my style. On this Sunday I wore a pair of jeans, hard shoes, and a collared shirt with cuff links. I thought I was pretty dressed up,

Hip-hop churches are emerging to engage young people who are not attracted to the traditional form of service.

Eddie Gibbs (CM, 128)

2. Bakari Kitwana, *The Hip Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African-American Culture* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2002), 7.

considering, but sure enough I got comments and looks. As I was pricked by what members of the congregation said to me, I could not help but project what my reception would be at The Underground. Being a frequent visitor to churches that embrace hip-hop culture, I could predict how The Underground family would receive the old hip-hop head. I am always amazed at how unyielding and unwelcoming traditional churches can be when it comes to anything that might be considered hip-hop, new, or different. The acceptance and willingness to create the new is one of the things that distinguishes churches that embrace hip-hop from traditional mainline churches. I knew The Underground would receive me in my new shirt with a warm welcome and no chiding comments.

Vanessa and I made our way from FAME to The Underground. The drive was only about thirty minutes, but the difference in distance was literally from the past to the future. As we pulled into the hotel parking lot, I saw “me.” I saw young adults who were dressed like me, and I saw a few adults my age who looked at me as if we were looking in the mirror. I felt good about this place right away. Whenever I walk into a worshipping community that embraces hip-hop, I am always touched by how they embrace me as an elder who loves them. The emerging community of the hip-hop generation is in search of elders who embrace them and their culture. They are quick to return the love in a look, a nod, a hello, and a genuine welcome. The community in hip-hop is by definition welcoming of diversity in age, dress, and ethnic background. They tend to be younger congregations, and their youth is a factor in the older generation’s preference for traditional church and/or rejection of hip-hop culture.

No one frowned on my dress at The Underground. The greeters welcomed Vanessa and me as we walked up to the hotel. With a smile and the opening of the door they said, “Welcome to The Underground.” As we approached the building we saw a white female and male; they smiled at us, and we of course smiled back.

The Underground

Tymme and Aury Reitz were professional dancers who were called to serve God in early 2000 and in 2001; they committed their gifts as dancers to the kingdom of God. After working with such artists as Madonna, Will Smith, Missy Elliott, Backstreet Boys, Dru Hill, and Shanice, Tymme and Aury co-founded the dance ministry at In His Presence Church and soon thereafter founded Word in Motion Dance Company to present the gospel while developing a nation of dancers for Christ. In the hip-hop church, professionalism and high standards are the norm. People do not expect to come to worship and

get a warmed-over sermon or see praise dancers who are not gifted and a worship service that is not tight.

Tymme and Aury started The Underground as a monthly service “utilizing relevant biblical teaching and worshipping through original rap, R&B, and dance genres.”³ This monthly service morphed into a weekly meeting that, as of October 24, 2010, became its own freestanding church with the blessings of In His Presence Church. The first meeting of this new church was held at the Burbank Marriot Hotel in the San Fernando Valley, just north of Los Angeles.

Practices

Worship

As I entered the ballroom-turned-sanctuary I did not see a lectern but instead saw a stage—a stage with black curtains behind it, and in the center a purple banner that read, “The Underground: Not Your Typical Church.” The Underground makes it clear that their call, like all hip-hop churches, is not to be like your typical church. This is a statement about who they are and how they understand the “typical church.”

Worship at FAME is a mix between old-school, traditional African American worship and more contemporary gospel flavor. It has a congregation of over six thousand, mostly in their fifties and sixties, with a minority of young adults and young families. That night, we saw the young adults who weren’t at FAME because they were worshipping at The Underground. Where FAME starts with the traditional call to worship, The Underground starts with prayer and spoken word: from spoken word to praise and worship. Praise and worship is backed up not by a band or a choir, but by a DJ who is spinning on his Mac computer using Searato (a digital DJ software package). The DJ appears to be in his mid-twenties, white, with the flavor of an old-school DJ like Grandmaster Flash. Behind the praise team is a young white male playing the guitar. The praise team is a mix of African Americans, Latinos, and whites, both male and female, but all young adults. The lead

Many . . . urban churches . . . represent indigenous expressions of church. They are faith communities that have been *birthed* within their neighborhoods and are therefore culturally appropriate to their contexts; they do not represent preconceived church models that are *planted* by outside agencies and groups. Urban contexts are so diverse that faith communities will have to discover what “church” will look like for them, enabling them to express worship, embody fellowship, and engage in ongoing mission to their wider community.

Eddie Gibbs (CM, 136)

3. See <http://theunderground.la/about-us/our-story>.

singers are two African American females who would fit perfectly at my home church. They sing praise songs, and then the group is joined by four young men who have microphones in their hands. As the young men merge into the praise team, they rush up front and the mood changes from melodic praise songs to holy hip-hop rap as the rappers begin to rap to the glory of God.

The lights are turned down low. The room feels intimate as we are led through worship with a remix of praise songs and rap. You can feel the power in the room. Eyes are closed, hands are being waved in the air, worshipers are in the front of the church coming out of their seats and breaking into dance. The praise team continues to sing, the rappers continue to rap, the DJ continues to mix it up as the screens on the side of the stage are flashing the words to each song so the audience can rap and sing along. I am feeling this! The room is filled with call and response as we are all singing and rapping together.

From all four corners of the stage enter the praise dancers. As they take the stage the praise team simultaneously exits. In a seamless transition, our praise breaks out into a dance. These praise dancers are not like the praise dancers at FAME who wear long flowing garments, as the audience watches and claps. These praise dancers make you get up and move, and the audience moves with them while watching them. The beat drops, and the choreography is totally professional. A mix of breaking, popping, and smooth hip-hop moves graces the stage. The praise dancers are dressed in normal street clothes that I would not see any of my young adults wearing at FAME on Thursday night for our weekly gathering. They are hip, cool, and in style.

The professionalism and spirit of excellence in the worship service at The Underground typifies what the hip-hop generation expects. They have heard the best rappers and seen the freshest dancers, and they expect worship to be on point. As the praise dancers finish, the pastors take the stage.

In the hip-hop church the embrace and lifting up of the Bible is something I have always been enamored of. There is an embrace of Scripture as a text for life. In the sermon the pastor referenced seven extensive passages of Scripture, in contrast to FAME, where the pastor takes a single text and preaches for twenty to thirty minutes. In the hip-hop church multiple texts tend to be sourced as a conversation piece for the teaching. It is a teaching church where members want to get more into the Word of God.

It seems that in the United States the reinvention of church is a different one than in Europe. The United States seems to reinvent toward a society that is still deeply culturally Christian. The Christian narrative is still there, but the culture may have perverted it into something un-Christian. In Europe, the culture already erased the Christian narrative, requiring a different reinvention of church altogether. *Nico-Dirk van Loo*

Community

Prior to the dancers taking the stage you would have thought they were regular members of the congregation. Part of the hip-hop ethos is that those up front do not stand out but rather fit into a community. This community does not worship them or set them apart but worships *together* while recognizing the gifts in the community as they manifest themselves from the audience through the stage. These dancers did not have special seating or special dress, but they did have a special gift to dance. These were professional dancers who were gifted and well trained.

After the chatter between the pastors, they excused the kids for children's church. The emphasis on kids and young families is a central component of the church's identity. Pastor Tymme announced that they were only having one worship service this week at 10:30 a.m., but starting next week they would move to their normal format of having a worship service at 10:30 a.m. and at 1:00 p.m. As he shared about the format and why they started this way, he explained that he wanted the parents who volunteer in the children's ministry to hear the message and to have an opportunity to worship.

Hip-hop culture is a participatory culture in which the audience members are cocreators—not sing-along muses. Community in hip-hop culture invites people to come in as equals, and community forms in the process of our creative communal experience. As the worship service progresses we move from the praise team to the praise dancers.

The hip-hop church looks hip-hop from dress to mission. It strives to be an oversized church by loving those who haven't been loved by the larger church or society. Those who are looking for real community in a world that has gone digital will find it in the hip-hop church, where real touch makes a real difference. These are small communities where everybody knows your name. The hip-hop church is akin to that old house church that we see reflected in the New Testament. Ironically enough, that is the model of church that is lifted up in the hip-hop church's ecclesiology. It is a church that goes back to its roots. The hip-hop church moves forward by looking backward at the biblical standard for church that many of its mainline seniors have forgotten or dismissed.

As the children at The Underground were being dismissed, the pastors welcomed the visitors, who were not asked to stand but simply to wave their hands in the air. The pastors made the visitors feel welcome and told them that there was a free gift waiting for them after worship. All people were then asked to stand and "love on somebody next to them." The church exploded into a hug fest as members went around and hugged one another—including the visitors. They introduced themselves, and the party was on. We felt

genuinely welcomed. After the welcome, the pastors lifted the offering, being very clear on where the money was going.

Mission

When we first stepped into the building a young African American woman handed us a beautifully printed brochure. It was not a church bulletin, or an outline of the service, or a list of the sick and shut-in; it wasn't a list of weekly activities either, and it made no mention of the pastor and his or her spouse. This beautifully printed, slick document was entitled "The Scoop," which was The Underground's bimonthly newsletter-type thing. I have to say "type thing" because it was not a typical newsletter or bulletin. It explained that parking was free, talked about their commitment to the kids and childcare, their vision of the ministry, and what was coming up—like Partnership Classes, The Underground Live talent showcase in February 2011, Word in Motion Dance Conference in July, and the Men's and Women's Ministry sometime in 2011. What stood out was the church's outreach to Mexico; "The Scoop" shared how the church would partner with their sister church and supply needs to eighty-seven families in Tecate, Mexico. On the back of "The Scoop" was a list of twelve additional ministries to which The Underground had given financial support over the previous two months.

None of these types of things were in my FAME church bulletin. At FAME we had an outline of the worship service, which is the same every week, a list of weekly activities, a picture of the pastor and his wife (which is there every week), and our core beliefs, but no list of ministries we had helped, churches we had partnered with, or families to whom we had given direct assistance. Churches that embrace the ethos of hip-hop, which comes out of inner-city poverty, are poised theologically to give back. It is a movement that looks outward at those the society has forgotten, because the forgotten are the ones who birthed hip-hop in the first place.

At first take I could see that The Underground was an active ministry that was not simply about in-reach or growing a big church. It was clear from reviewing "The Scoop" that this church saw Matthew 25:31–46 as central to its understanding of the gospel. They were about feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and visiting those in need. When the pastor broke this down in his sermon and was very clear that this was the type of church that The Underground would be, I was not surprised. While the appeal for the offering was given, clear, plain envelopes were handed out. Giving is black-and-white in the hip-hop church. The pastors shared their commitment to helping others and gave specific examples of who the church was helping.

The hip-hop church has inner-city cultural roots, so by definition it feels the pain of the poor. Its mission comes out of the mission of the poor who created the culture. The average hip-hop pastor links back to the golden years of hip-hop and has a sense of the activist beginnings of hip-hop when groups like Public Enemy were calling for social justice. These leaders are young visionaries who want to see a church that is vibrant, relevant, and making a difference. Hip-hop's street knowledge puts them in touch with the pain of the poor, and they are committed to doing something about it.

Leadership

One thing hip-hop expects is transparency and authenticity. The hip-hop generation doesn't want leaders who pretend to be perfect or superhuman; rather, it wants leaders who are real, who struggle, who are honest about it and walk with one another through life. There is a transparency in the leadership when it comes to giving and supporting the ministry. The next fund-raising goal of the church is to move to a permanent location. The members can see where the money is going and understand the reason behind the financial appeal.

Pastors Tymme and Aury serve as a team. The challenge of sexism in ministry and in the larger hip-hop culture is present in hip-hop churches as they seek to be inclusive. Pastor Tymme and Aury engaged in banter as they prepared for the preaching moment. They both shared how blessed they were on this day. It was a few minutes of obviously unscripted dialogue as they shared with each other. The dialogue was loving and transparent. They were just being honest about how thankful and overwhelming this moment was for them. The church affirmed this transparency, honesty, and authenticity.

An essential characteristic of spiritual leadership is *authenticity*. Church leaders must embody what they teach.

Eddie Gibbs (INO, 109)

There is a sense in the hip-hop church, and especially in churches like The Underground, of wanting to get back to the core of ministry. This church saw something awry in the mainline churches and wants to be part of something new. There is a sense, in the hip-hop church, that it is trying to rediscover the faith in its purest form.

The Gospel after Christendom

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New Expressions

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INITIATIVE

To Eddie Gibbs,
My teacher, role model, and advocate.
You are the wisest one I know about all things church.
You inspire leaders to overcome inertia and embrace innovation.
Careful with words, you tell the truth in ways that invite the other to transform.
You celebrate those who overcome barriers to pursue God's call.
You appeal to the church to follow God into the world.
You readily laugh at life's absurdities.
With all gratitude.