# FAITH MEETS FLOW: EMPOWERING FUTURE LEADERS THROUGH THE ELEMENTS OF HIP-HOP IN THE CHURCH

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# Approval Page

## Dedication

I dedicate this work to God, whose grace and guidance have sustained me throughout this journey.

To my wife, Jeanelle — your unwavering love, strength, and support have been my anchor.

To my sons, Jaxon and Miles — you are my inspiration. May you always pursue your purpose with courage and conviction.

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To my sons, Jaxon and Miles, you are the heart of my ambition. May you always embrace your dreams with the same passion, curiosity, and resilience that drive me daily. I hope you learn to be bold in the pursuit of your own paths and to carry the values of integrity and compassion into your futures. Always remember that your potential is limitless, and I will be here to support you every step of the way.

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Abstract

This study highlights the importance of understanding the disconnect between young Black adults and the traditional Black Church. With Hip-Hop defined as a cultural framework rather than solely a musical genre, this research investigates how the core values of Hip-Hop, such as peace, love, unity, and enjoyment, can inform and revitalize church engagement strategies. This study utilizes surveys and interviews with young adults and urban pastors in the U.S. to collect data on their perspectives and experiences with church leadership. This professional paper proposes innovative approaches that employ storytelling, emceeing, free-styling, and inclusivity. Incorporating elements of Hip-Hop culture can effectively nurture the development of young church leaders.

# Introduction

The notable question from the 2002 movie *Brown Sugar* is, "When did you fall in love with Hip-Hop?"[1] My answer is unique in many ways—I grew up surrounded by Hip-Hop, with party flyers plastered on the walls of corner stores in my neighborhood. B-boys (breakdancers) would use cardboard to dance in front of my building. The sounds of rap songs were heard in high volumes from both boomboxes and car stereo systems. I grew up less than 5 miles away from Bronx, NY, where Hip-Hop was created. My family and I lived in the same New Jersey city from which the legendary group Sugar Hill Gang is from. We were surrounded by Hip-Hop—the rhythms, the lyrics, the sounds that shaped our world. We witnessed the style of Hip-Hop clothing, and we were excited by the different Hip-Hop gatherings. I fell in love with Hip-Hop after watching the solo rapper Big Daddy Kane perform his song, "Ain't No Half-Steppin,"[2] on *"Video Music Box".* This was a popular television program that showcased music videos. I was captivated by the rapper's confidence and mesmerized by his innovative use of rhyme to share his message. His personal and cultural pride inspired me deeply. My friends and I were so moved by him that we all got the same haircut as he had. I spent my free time memorizing the lyrics to his songs and trying to imitate his fashion. Hip-Hop felt welcoming—I wanted to be part of that community. Over the years, I came to understand that Hip-Hop is more than just music—it's a culture.

During my formative years, my family underwent a significant transition when my mother was hospitalized for her mental illness, prompting my siblings and me to move in with

[1] Rick Famuyiwa, dir., *Brown Sugar*, (USA: 2002), film.

[2] Big Daddy Kane, "Ain't No Half Steppin'," on *Long Live the Kane*, Cold Chillin' Records, 1988.

our grandmother. She insisted that we attend church regularly—a small, multicultural Pentecostal congregation in New Jersey with about 100 members. I enjoyed the highly infectious worship services charged by the energetic choir. I was especially drawn to the pastor's inspirational messages. However, I did not enjoy the strict messages about proper Christian living, which included a church dress code. I did not feel as welcomed in church as I did in Hip-Hop culture. I came to understand that I needed both church and Hip-Hop, each for different reasons. Church gave me the hope to believe that my family's situation would improve, while Hip-Hop gave me a sense of connection—to my peers, my heritage, and my self-confidence.

In the early 2000s, Christian rap—or "Holy Hip-Hop"—saw a surge in popularity. As my faith in God deepened alongside my love for Hip-Hop culture, I began searching for rap music that resonated with my beliefs. One day, I was invited to a free concert at a local middle school that promised Hip-Hop tailored for Christian teens. To my surprise, there was a group on stage that looked like Wu-tang Clan, a (mainstream rap group), but they were talking about Jesus. Each chorus referred to Jesus Christ the same way the choir songs from my grandmother's church did. Their lyrics mixed slang with biblical references, helped me understand the Bible. The group explained biblical stories and church teachings in relatable terms. For example, instead of stating the doctrine of grace, they said, "Off the hook." I immediately understood what they meant because that was a known phrase used in Hip-Hop circles. Hearing the church teaching in familiar terms helped me grasp the concept and desire to grow further in faith. It also inspired me to explain concepts to my friends who were struggling with faith. I was introduced to a subculture within Hip-Hop that focused on sharing the message of Jesus as the Savior to the Hip-Hop community. However, many Christian Hip-Hop artists portrayed American culture, especially Hip-Hop, as dark and lacking redemption. They stressed that Jesus was our only hope

in a sinful society. Although I agreed with the notion of Jesus as Savior, I struggled to accept that Hip-Hop offered nothing redemptive. Hip-hop lyrics kept me from making bad life choices and encouraged me to serve my community. My friends and I were confronted with the choice between fully embracing God and His church or remaining invested in Hip-Hop culture. We grappled with the belief that Hip-Hop was fundamentally flawed and did not promote a lifestyle that reflected moral integrity and positive values. During this struggle, I decided that my faith could coexist with the powerful messages found within Hip-Hop. My experiences helped me challenge the notion that Hip-Hop culture is devoid of redemption.

Unknowingly, I entered into a debate with church leaders over Hip-Hop's ability to share good news. Most of the churches in my community did not believe that Hip-Hop had a place in the church. After experiencing God personally through Hip-Hop and seeing others do the same, I became convinced that Hip-Hop has the power to transform lives. As a teen, I went to an event in New York City where I performed and heard other aspiring rappers. I performed a song that expressed how I felt God had saved my life. After the event, a group of teens my age approached me outside. They asked me if I believed what I rapped about. I told them that I believed and that I was able to explain what I knew about God in terms they could understand. We ended the conversation with the teens expressing a desire to build their faith in God. I believe that was the day that God chose me to do ministry.

Although Hip-Hop was not created inside the church, it can be used to inspire Hip-Hoppers to trust in God. Hip-hop, explained by Hip-Hop pioneer KRS-ONE, was founded upon four core elements. "The elements are love, unity, peace, having fun. These elements are expressed through emceeing(rapping), breakdancing(b-boy), graffiti(aerosol art), and

deejaying."[3] The foundational elements of Hip-Hop—love, unity, peace, and having fun—serve as the pillars upon which the entire culture is constructed. Unlike many other music genres, Hip-Hop is anchored in principles that encourage individuals to maintain their authenticity and creativity as they navigate various contexts. The emcee, or rapper, possesses the ability to command the attention of the Hip-Hop audience—a skill that is transferrable to other environments requiring confidence, such as the classroom, boardroom, or social media platforms.

Breakdancing, rooted in freestyle movements during instrumental breaks in songs, symbolizes the desire for freedom of movement, a yearning that transcends Hip-Hop and permeates various aspects of life. Graffiti, or aerosol art, embodies a spirit of self-expression and identity. In the early days of hip-hop, artists often risked their safety by spray painting their names on New York City trains. While some may interpret this as vandalism, those within the Hip-Hop community recognize it as a significant act of visibility and a means of establishing oneself. The public display of one's name allowed artists to reach audiences beyond their immediate surroundings and to cultivate respect within the community; the more recognizable their name became, the greater the respect they commanded.

These elements of Hip-Hop extend beyond mere artistic expressions; they represent principles that can be leveraged by individuals aspiring to succeed in leadership roles. Whether it involves fostering creativity, commanding presence, embracing self-expression, or earning respect, the lessons derived from Hip-Hop offer valuable insights that influence various dimensions of personal and professional development.

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[3] AllG'sReact, *KRS One Hip-Hop Lecture: Come Get Some Hip-Hop Knowledge*, YouTube video, 2:11:33, posted January 24, 2023, https://youtu.be/H8ddsJwz7N4.

I believe that Hip-Hop can be used to promote anything, as it has a unique ability to bring people together through music. Hip-hop culture encourages unity and celebration, bringing together individuals from diverse backgrounds and inspiring joy. It promotes love and peace by encouraging people to embrace themselves and their heritage. The inner peace that comes from self-awareness fosters a sense of connection with others. When guided by Christians committed to developing leaders, hip-hop can also be a powerful tool for promoting love, peace, unity, and joy.

The Cross Movement, a group of five rappers from Philadelphia, performed in a concert in 1996 where they creatively shared their faith. For one song, they transformed the stage into a courtroom, depicting God as the judge, Jesus as the lawyer, and the rapper as the defendant. As they rapped about Christ's suffering, clips from *The Passion of the Christ* played on big screens. Their lyrics were rich with vivid metaphors, and for the Human Emergency project, they dressed as doctors to further promote their message. Their projects, *Heaven's Mentality,* and *Human Emergency,* both contained content that was mainly for Christian consumption. The Ambassador, a member of the Cross Movement, said regarding the group's focus, "We're the Cross Movement, which is an alliance of born-again believers in Jesus Christ, that are trusting God by His grace to become agents through whom he's going to advertise salvation advertise and also communicate His purpose for all of humanity."[4] Although this explanation was eloquent, it left me feeling frustrated because Christian rappers remained focused on saving souls.

In contrast, mainstream Hip-Hop encouraged listeners to engage in activities that could bring about change in their communities. This group demonstrated to me that it was possible to love Hip-Hop while growing in my faith. However, I continued to apply the lessons I learned

[4] William Branch, *Heaven's Mentality* (CMN Distributors, 1997).

from mainstream Hip-Hop to balance my passion for community care. The church I attended—like many others in my community—was not easily convinced. It felt as though the church community, both in my neighborhood and across the United States, had dismissed Hip-Hop as worldly, demonic, and harmful to the well-being of the Black community.

My desire to become a part of hip-hop materialized, but it wasn't in the form that I had dreamed it would be at first. After experiencing God through Christian Hip-Hop, I searched for more ways to connect with Christian rap groups. I landed an internship at a Christian music distribution company in my high school years. I witnessed how Hip-Hop embraced everyone and fostered the development of leaders from various backgrounds, ages, and economic statuses. Working closely with these diverse artists and attending events further strengthened my conviction that Hip-Hop is a culture. Many of these young artists took on business roles to expand their groups' reach and were positioned as spokespersons. Due to the small market that Christian Hip-Hop served, an artist often had to create music while also generating opportunities for those in their circle. For instance, record labels were formed where the main artist would receive an advance from a larger distribution company, funding the chance for them to recruit other artists whom they would then be responsible for paying. Time and again, I observed these artists being called upon to explain the youth experience and articulate the needs of their communities.

Furthermore, I recognized that Christian Hip-Hop is a subculture within Hip-Hop. Daniel White Hodge asserts,

> Hip hop is larger than the radio commercialized artists and record industry branding it is a culture, a people, a movement, a growing community of people that live breathe, eat, love, hate, and work just as anyone else does. Hip-Hop cannot be easily understood or

defined. It is complex and full of narratives that will blow away even the strongest anthropologists. Hip-Hop in the words of KRS-One, "is something that is being lived.[5]

I agree with Hodge; Hip-Hop is comprised of complex narratives. I suggest that those narratives incorporate the journey of coming to faith and maintaining that faith in the face of adversity. This theme not only highlights personal resilience but also serves as a powerful tool for uplifting the Black community. These stories offer a sense of hope and encouragement, illustrating how individuals can overcome struggles while rooted in their trust in God. Moreover, this aspect of Hip-Hop unites people from diverse backgrounds and experiences, showcasing a collective journey that works to elevate the voices and experiences of those in varying circumstances. By sharing these narratives, Hip-Hop fosters a sense of solidarity and empowerment, reminding listeners that they are not alone in their struggles and that faith can be a guiding force amidst the challenges they face.

Given the decline of interest and involvement in the Black Church among the Hip-Hop generation, examining how these foundational elements of Hip-Hop can inform and inspire new approaches to leadership within the church context becomes increasingly crucial.

Paul Taylor, in his work, *The Next America: Boomers, Millennials, And The Looming Generational Showdown,* asserts, "Despite the relative stability in church membership, the number of Americans who do not identify in surveys with any religion, the "nones"—has been growing at a dramatic pace. As of 2014, more than one-fifth of the U.S. public and more than one-third of Millennials were religiously unaffiliated — the highest percentage ever recorded in Pew Research Center polling."[6]

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[5] Daniel White Hodge, *Hip-Hop's Hostile Gospel: A Post-Soul Theological Exploration* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2018).

[6] Ibid.

Trends in the Black Church[7]purports the findings in the black community to show a decline in both church attendance and Christian affiliation among Black adults between 2011 and 2021. While the trends in the Black Church findings are specific to the black community, they are indicative of the national declines reported by the Pew Research Center.

The Hip-Hop generation is a term used by Bakari Bitwata in his work, *Hip Hop Generation: Young Blacks and The Crisis in African American Culture*, to describe individuals born between 1965 and 1984[8]. While this represents a broad generational spectrum, my focus will be on individuals between the ages of 18 and 35. The use of Hip-Hop can also be very broad. I realize that not everyone listens to hip-hop music exclusively, nor do they all listen to the same type of hip-hop. For this reason, we will not focus solely on hip-hop music. This study will focus on Hip-Hop as a culture, including Hip-Hop music and its transferrable values. Recent research has focused on how to incorporate Hip-Hop music into church worship. However, there is a lack of research regarding how best to develop young church leaders using storytelling, emceeing, free-styling, diversity, and inclusion found in Hip-Hop culture. From its inception, Hip-Hop has incorporated positive core values such as peace, love, unity, and having fun. KRS-One, a prominent Hip-Hop pioneer and historian, insists that these elements serve as the foundational pillars of Hip-Hop culture. His respected perspective, rooted in both participation in the genre and a commitment to preserving its history, provides valuable insights. Consequently, I used KRS-One's definition as a guiding framework for our exploration of Hip-Hop culture. I concentrated on how the Black Church can leverage storytelling, freestyling, emceeing/rapping, and diversity to cultivate young leaders. As stated earlier, Hip-Hop is built upon these core

[7] Barna Group, Trends in the Black Church: Celebrating Its Legacy and Investing in a Hopeful Future (Ventura, CA: Barna Group, 2021).

[8] Bakari Kitwana, *The Hip-Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African American Culture* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2002), 12–13.

elements that make up the basis for the culture. Culture, in this work, refers to the working definition provided by Marcus Collins in his book, *For the Culture: The Power Behind What We Buy, What We Do, Who We Want To Be*. Collins defines culture as "A realized meaning-making system that is anchored in our identity (who we are) and made up of three elements: how we see the world, our shared way of life, and the creation of shared expression."[9] I believe that there are aspects of Hip-hop culture that the Church-at-large, and the Black Church in particular, can use to address the needs of the next generation. I raise the following questions: *What values in Hip-Hop culture can the church use to create community among the Hip-Hop generation*? *How can Black Church leaders ensure that they utilize Hip-Hop not merely as an eye-catching novelty but as a genuine source of unity to engage people across generations within the church*? *Can the church adapt Hip-Hop elements to develop leadership capabilities among young people?*

My project theme and title is *Faith Meets Flow: Empowering Future Leaders Through The Elements of Hip-Hop In The Church*. The Black church has the potential to increase interest and involvement among the next generation by incorporating values found in Hip-Hop culture, such as love, peace, unity, joy, creativity, ingenuity, justice, self-awareness, and cultural pride.

The significance of my Doctor of Ministry professional paper is that it will challenge Black church leaders to utilize Hip-Hop culture as a means to bridge the gap between those who identify with Hip-Hop and those who are currently disconnected from the church. If this bridge isn't created, the church risks losing connection with the next generation, thus creating a moral gap that could diminish its relevance and impact in their lives. This work aims to demonstrate

[9] Marcus Collins, *For the Culture: The Power Behind What We Buy, What We Do, Who We Want To Be* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2023), 49.

how the church can foster young leaders by adapting storytelling, emceeing, free-styling, and inclusivity found in Hip-Hop.

In addition, I will provide practical examples and strategies for creating spaces within the church where youth and young adults can find their voices and meaningfully engage in the life of the congregation. I contend that young leaders must feel they can engage with the mission of a ministry before exercising faith. While salvation is very important, I believe that people will not listen to what we believe until they believe we care about them. Caring about them includes inviting them to bring their experiences, aspirations, and culture to make the community richer. Throughout this project, I hope to inspire a new way of courageous leadership among Black church leaders, enabling them to connect with and uplift the next generation.

# Chapter 1- Context & Background

## My Context

I am committed to assisting churches in encouraging, attracting, and retaining youth and young adults within their ministries. This project will focus on fostering the leadership abilities of the young adults at the Community Baptist Church in Englewood, New Jersey, where I serve as the assistant pastor focusing on young adults.

The Community Baptist Church is led by a senior pastor in his sixties who has served in this role for thirty-one years. Under his leadership, the church has grown in membership and scope. Community Baptist Church was primarily a neighborhood church before the 1990s. The founders of Community Baptist Church were African American Englewood natives who served African American families in their town. The church was established on traditional Baptist governance. The structure includes trustees who manage finances, deacons who oversee worship services, and a pastor who provides spiritual guidance and vision for the congregation. Decisions made by these leaders are often influenced by their generational experiences. The church experience remained traditional for the past three decades. The worship experience was so traditional that drums were not allowed to be played in the church until 1994. However, with the introduction of a new pastor who embraced a more modern style of worship and leadership, the church evolved to include more contemporary practices that resonate with younger generations. Community Baptist Church, like other Baptist churches, is self-governed. However, the church is affiliated with both the National Baptist Association and the American Baptist Association. Over the years, the church has expanded its reach and now has membership from New York City,

Pennsylvania, and Connecticut. The expansive reach has rewarded the church with ethnic diversity, although the church is still considered a predominately African American church.

The City of Englewood is considered a city because of its incorporation, but suburban towns surround it. Englewood's proximity to New York City gives it the character of a New York City borough with suburban sensibilities. Englewood deals with underserved schools, violent crime, gentrification, and ever-changing ethnic demographics. It is a commuter city with many residents who commute to New York City to work. Englewood is the city where the legendary hip-hop group, the Sugarhill Gang was formed. Sylvia Robinson, founder and CEO of Sugar Hill Records, distributed the first recorded hip-hop song, "Rapper's Delight." The Robinson family hosted basketball tournaments featuring performances by Hip-Hop artists in our neighborhood. Attending these events had a profound impact on my life. I was surrounded by the sounds of Hip-Hop music and the expressive fashion associated with the culture. This experience left an indelible mark on my identity. I have identified with every part of hip-hop culture from my formative years. It deepened my appreciation for Hip-Hop as an art form and inspired me to embrace its influence on my creativity, self-expression, and community engagement. This experience shaped my understanding of art's power to influence and unite individuals—an important point, as it reflects my inherent connection to hip-hop culture.

Englewood is rich in art and culture and aspiring professionals. According to a report by Church Answers, "the median age of the City of Englewood is 40."[10] It is a city with many young professionals who are interested in giving their children a quality education and positive recreation. According to a *Know Your Church* report conducted by Church Answers, 43% of

[10] Church Answers, *Know Your Community Report* (January 2022), www.ChurchAnswers.com.

Englewood residents rarely attend religious services, while 20% attend regularly. These statistics underscore the opportunity for Community Baptist Church to engage and attract more residents.

## Origin

I am engaged in this work because of my experiences while working with youth and young adults within my church as well as surrounding schools. The idea for this work emerged while I was mentoring students at Janis E. Dismus Elementary School in Englewood. I watched the students as they ran student organizations and held various leadership roles within their classes. And as a youth pastor, I witnessed these same students enter our church and struggle to find leadership roles beyond the youth ministry context. The youth who had leadership experience at school began to disengage with the ministry because they felt that they had no real opportunities to lead or even a chance to grow in their leadership at the church. As a result, I watched youth and young adults who could have been valuable assets to the growth of the ministry leave to pursue leadership opportunities at school or other organizations. These experiences underscored the fact that we are not effectively developing young leaders within our church.

Barna Group asserts that there is a decline in Black Church involvement and interest among youth and young adults. According to the research, the decline began sometime around 2011. "In 2009, church attendance among black young adults was 56%, but it was reduced to 53% in 2011."[11] This study confirms the youth and young adult exodus that I saw in my context. My work is not merely focused on how we can stop youth and young adults from leaving the church.

[11] Barna Group, "Trends in the Black Church: Celebrating Its Legacy and Investing in a Hopeful Future" (Barna Group, 2021), 24–25.

Instead, it is focused on how to provide a place where they can engage in spiritual growth as well as activities surrounding their interests and passions to engage in community empowerment.

## Generational Disconnect

In my ministry context, a notable generational gap exists within the leadership structure of the church. The majority of the church's executive board consists of men from the builder and elder generations, specifically defined by Barna Research as "baby boomers—those born between 1946 and 1964—and elders, who were born before 1946."[12] This dynamic creates a significant disparity in perspectives and priorities.

Although efforts were made in 2021 to introduce younger voices into the church leadership by adding members from younger generations, the gap remains. There is an approximate 30 to 40-year age difference between the executive board and the church's ministry members. As a millennial serving as the assistant pastor, I bring a unique perspective shaped not only by my experiences but also by my identity as a member of a younger generation. I have become aware of the disparities in communication styles, values, and engagement that exist between the established leadership and newer generations within our church community.

The expected and accepted preaching style includes explanation and celebration. The pastor or preachers are trained to present an idea that is rooted in scripture that will give the congregation hope. This presentation must be accompanied by an explanation of how to apply this message to our lives. Finally, this application is followed by a visible and vocal response to the message. This formula has been used in every traditional Baptist church that I have served in. I believe that the church would do well in including a more principle-driven teaching style. It is

[12] Ibid.

my observation that more young people can retain the content of a message delivered with principles. The values of the older generation in the church are more concerned with serving the current congregation. The younger generation has shared their desire to be more involved in their neighborhoods to meet needs. For example, I observed that the price of gas had risen to an alarming price. After hearing the concern of the people in our young adult small group, I sent each group member a digital gas card. The group was so appreciative that they suggested that we, as a church, offer free gas cards randomly at the gas station. I agreed and felt like it was a great way to show our faith by caring for strangers. Additionally, it would serve as an opportunity to present the church to those who might not otherwise enter. After the church executive board allowed me to go forth with the project, we had a successful day of outreach. However, when we returned to Sunday church service, I was met with frustrated church members who felt like the gas cards should have been given out to church members instead.

My own family, which includes my wife—also a millennial—and our two young sons, has naturally attracted other young families looking for a place to cultivate their spiritual lives. These families often join our church seeking not just worship experiences but also engaging in children's activities and opportunities for meaningful participation. They desire a space where their voices are heard and their interests are understood. When young parents arrive at our church, they seek avenues to get involved, contribute, and create community within the church.

However, this generational disconnect often leads to challenges in communication and engagement, limiting the church's ability to fully address the needs and aspirations of younger members. As a result, there is an urgent need to bridge this generational divide to create a more inclusive environment that honors the values and contributions of all age groups. Without intentional efforts to cultivate intergenerational relationships and leadership development, we

risk alienating the very demographic that holds the potential to revitalize the church for future generations.

I aim to encourage change in the leadership in my ministry context. I believe providing leadership opportunities to young adults will keep them involved. If a ministry does not exist that aligns with their passions and interests, we will encourage them to create their own ministry. We will also encourage them to foster relationships with organizations outside the church that address the needs of their generation.

## Background

My conviction for connecting Hip-Hop culture with the Black church comes from my experiences. Although I currently serve as an Assistant Pastor at a Black Baptist church, my adolescent years were shaped by Hip-Hop culture. Hip-hop served as a way for me to navigate my world. I gained pride in my heritage, knowledge about how the world may perceive me, and the persistence to strive beyond my present surroundings. It was on this foundation that I was able to cement the pillars of my faith in Christ. After experiencing life transformation through using Hip-Hop principles to carry my faith, I encouraged others to do the same by leading youth ministries. I witnessed firsthand how Hip-Hop music can help young people grow in their faith.

## Historic Black Church

The Black Church has historically served as a pivotal institution within the Black community, acting not only as a spiritual refuge but also as a crucial center for social organization and political action. However, following the Civil Rights Movement and the subsequent assassinations of key leaders, the church experienced a significant shift in its focus and influence. It began grappling with changing dynamics in Black identity, activism, and theological perspectives that ultimately redefined its role in contemporary society.

In describing the church's importance, Anthea Butler depicts the Black Church as "a place of protection and practicality."[13] African Americans facing marginalization and systematic oppression used the Black church as a place to retreat and gain resilience. W.E.B. Du Bois described the Black Church of his day as "the social center of Negro life in the United States."[14] He goes on to explain that the church building was a multipurpose space serving various social and civic organizations in the neighborhood. Five decades after Du Bois, John Lewis echoed this sentiment when speaking of SNCC meetings: "Every Tuesday night in church, we practiced our non-violent strategies."[15] Remarkably, the Black community Du Bois described had a public social center, considering African Americans in the early 20th century were facing the constant threat of public persecution. Their resilience and bravery must be acknowledged as we examine the enduring importance of the Black Church to the Black community. The Black Church played a vital role in fulfilling the natural, spiritual, and social needs of the Black community.

Nearly three decades after W.E.B. Du Bois wrote *The Souls of Black Folk,* the Great Migration began. This was a period in American history when African Americans moved in large numbers to northern cities. The demographic shift dramatically changed the social and cultural landscape of both the North and the South. "By 1920, roughly 500,000 Black Americans had moved to the North, and by 1930, more than 1.5 million had moved out of the South."[16] The Community Baptist Church of Englewood was formed during this time of migration. In 1932, a small group of African Americans established the Community Baptist Mission, which was later recognized by the Northern New Jersey Baptist Convention and officially became the

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[13] Nicole Hannah-Jones et al., *The 1619 Project: A New American History* (New York: One World, 2021).

[14] W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago: A.C. McClure, 1903).

[15] John Lewis, *Walking With The Wind: A Memoir of the Movement* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015).

[16] Anthony Pinn, *African American Religious Studies: A Critical Approach* (New York: Pelgrave Macmillan, 2019).

Community Baptist Church in 1941. According to the church's history, the membership grew from 35 in 1945 to 105 in 1953. This growth paralleled the migration of family members from the South, joining their relatives in the North. Historian Anthony Pinn sheds light on this pattern, noting, "Newly arrived blacks found their way into established Methodist and Baptist churches."[17] The church often became the first stop for migrating families who arrived with minimal resources. The Community Baptist Church, along with others, provided meals, housing networks, employment connections, and childcare opportunities. Northern churches assumed the role of supplying the services migrant families needed to establish new lives.

Wallace Best notes that Oliver Baptist Church in Chicago created the Bethlehem Baptist Association specifically to support migrant families with essential resources.[18] Migrating with limited resources was challenging enough, but the constant threat of lynching and the systemic brutality of Jim Crow laws made the journey life-threatening. Many of the social services available today did not exist for Black Americans in the early 20th century. In this vacuum, the Black Church became a vital institution, supplying the critical needs of Black families. It provided financial assistance, spiritual nourishment, and avenues for civic engagement—fortifying the community in the face of oppression. It also helped cultivate a collective identity, empowering individuals to assert their rights and advocate for social justice.

The allure for Black people migrating from the South to Englewood, NJ, was its proximity to New York City. Many traveled from rural towns believing they would be treated much better in the North than in the South. However, upon arrival, they discovered that discrimination and racism were also present in the North. As one writer reports, "As blacks

[17] Ibid.

[18] Henry Louis Gates Jr., *This Is Our Story, This Is Our Song* (New York: Amistad, 2021), 113.

moved to New Jersey cities, white residents and major industries and businesses moved out to the suburbs, which were often inaccessible and unfriendly to African Americans."[19] The Ku Klux Klan was a visible threat in northern New Jersey—Bergen County in particular. Graham Hodges writes, "The Klan fever seemed to peak in 1927 when an estimated 5,000 klansmen from Bergen, Hudson, Passaic, and Essex counties rallied in Wood-Ridge."[20]

In addition to being close to New York City, Englewood proved to be close to industrial areas that offered factory and domestic employment. In a documentary on the history of Englewood, Mrs. Edna Floyd described the limited work available to Black people in the area: "My mother was a domestic on the hill and in Tenafly, like many other women."[21] "The hill," as Mrs. Floyd referred to it, was what the Black residents called Englewood Cliffs. Englewood Cliffs was the affluent section of Englewood where many southern migrants worked in private homes as domestic workers.

The Civil Rights Movement in New Jersey reflected a significant local response to the nationwide struggle for racial equality, as communities across the state engaged in activism to dismantle systemic racism and promote social justice. Although there is no recorded evidence of Community Baptist Church's direct involvement in the Civil Rights Movement, Englewood and other towns in Bergen County were active participants. A protest in Englewood, recorded by a *New York Times* reporter in 1962, covered a school desegregation effort. In an article titled "100 at Jersey Sit-In Charge School Bias; 100 in Englewood sit-In Charge Segregation of Negro Pupils," residents were at the forefront of the fight for full integration. Protests began after nine

[19] Graham Russell Gao Hodges, *Black New Jersey: 1664 to the Present Day* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2019).

[20] Ibid.

[21] *Remembering the 4th Ward, Englewood, New Jersey*, 2008, YouTube video, Mr. Samuel Lewis Lee Jr.

Black students unsuccessfully attempted to transfer from predominately Black schools in the Fourth Ward to a new white school in the First Ward. Residents—Black and white—staged a sit-in led by members of the NAACP, Freedom Riders, and the Committee on Racial Equality.[22] According to the article, Englewood had a population of 26,000 people in 1960. "Of these, 7,008 persons, or 26 percent, are Negroes. Most of them live in the Fourth Ward in the southwest corner of the city."[23]

The Community Baptist Church was also established in the Fourth Ward of the city. With its proximity to City Hall and its growing congregation, the church was likely to feel the effects of this protest and other local protests. Englewood was even listed in an article as one of the northern New Jersey cities where riots broke out in response to racial discrimination. "Such manifestations of racial inequality, against a backdrop of rising expectations, caused some of the state's larger black communities to erupt in violence in the 1960s."[24]

As a student in the public schools of Teaneck, NJ, I became aware of Theodora Lacey, a distinguished civil rights pioneer and leader who actively worked to integrate the Bergen County school systems in the 1960s. Lacey's involvement in the Civil Rights Movement began through close collaboration with Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., a family friend. Before relocating to New Jersey, she participated in the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955. During my time at Thomas Jefferson Middle School in the 1990s, Mrs. Lacey served as a science teacher and shared her experiences during a Black History Month event at our school. Her presence underscored the enduring legacy and local vibrancy of the Civil Rights Movement in Bergen

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[22] "100 at Jersey Sit-In Charge School Bias; 100 in Englewood Sit-In Charge Segregation of Negro Pupils," *The New York Times*, February 2, 1962, www.nytimes.com.

[23] Ibid.

[24] "The Impact of Racism in Northern New Jersey: 1940–1980," www.njstatlib.org.

County. In an interview, Mrs. Lacey reflected on her childhood in Montgomery, Alabama: "Schools were segregated. Everything was segregated. You could not go into the public parks to play. So you were reminded constantly there was an attempt to make you feel inferior."[25]

Across the country, leaders admittedly gathered in churches to plan civil rights protests. John Lewis, reflecting on his experience with early SNCC meetings, said, "Every Tuesday night in church, we practiced our non-violent strategies."[26] Similarly, Fannie Lou Hamer, in her biography, recalled attending her first Freedom Riders meeting at Williams Chapel Church in Mississippi. There at 7:30 p.m., she heard, "James Bevel, a young minister with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s, Southern Christian Leadership Conference preach."[27] Hamer was so moved by the meeting that she went to her local courthouse to register to vote. She later joined SNCC and brought her gospel music with her, often leading spirituals at meetings and marches.

Many participants in the Civil Rights Movement have mentioned the deep connection between the Civil Rights Movement and the Black church. Fannie Lou Hamer and others also acknowledged the church as the foundation of their early education. Hamer explained, "Often no schools existed for black children, and classes were conducted in tenant farmers' cabins, stores, churches, or other private buildings."[28] These historical narratives illustrate the vital role the Black church played in developing young leadership during the Civil Rights movement. By encouraging today's youth to share their personal and community stories, we develop a deeper understanding of their heritage. This process inspires them to embrace leadership roles that reflect the resilience and creativity of their predecessors. These stories also highlight the

[25] *Theodora Lacey Interview – 2024 Clara Lemlich Awards*, YouTube.
[26] John Lewis, *Walking With The Wind*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015).
[27] Fannie Lou Hamer, *This Little Light of Mine* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1995).
[28] Ibid.

potential for contemporary Black churches to raise up a new generation of leaders by embracing cultural tools like Hip-Hop. I will be discussing this potential in chapter two.

## Post-Civil Rights Church

The Black church's stable position within the Black community began to shift in the wake of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination in 1968. "For generations, the church had been the primary source of black resistance to white racism and oppression, but Black nationalism unsettled the church's centrality in this struggle," asserts Anthea Butler.[29] Before Dr. King's untimely death, he had already faced resistance from within the Black community concerning his non-violent approach to systematic racism. In 1966, Stokely Carmichael replaced John Lewis as leader of SNCC, introducing "Black Power" as the organization's new slogan. His new slogan was in direct opposition to the non-violent and non-confrontational campaign of the Civil Rights Movement.

Criticism of the church's role in effecting meaningful change prompted many Black Americans to seek alternative views. Anthea Butler explains, "Like many activists, Carmichael had begun to feel frustrated with the slow progress of the non-violent movement, which seemed increasingly out of step with the times."[30] While Black Power resonated with the younger generation, Dr. King warned that the slogan risked conceding to the same hatred it was meant to resist. In his speech *Where Do We Go From Here*, delivered at the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in 1967, Dr. King asserted, "It is leading a few extremists today to advocate for Negroes the same destructive and conscienceless power that they have justly

[29] Nicole Hannah-Jones et al., *The 1619 Project*.
[30] Ibid.

abhorred in whites. It is precisely this collision of immoral power with powerless morality which constitutes the major crisis of our times."[31]

Although Malcolm X was not a minister within the Black church, his contributions to the Civil Rights Movement were no less impactful than Dr. King's. While they did not agree on the same methods, they shared a common goal: the liberation of the Black community. To Malcolm X, the Black church was complicit in the white supremacy that kept Black people inferior. His belief about the church's involvement in the liberation of black people was clearly different than Dr. King's belief. In speaking about the Black church using the gospel, Malcolm said, "I don't care whether it's the religious gospel or political gospel, an economic gospel or social gospel. If it's not going to do anything for you and me right here right now, to hell with that gospel."[32]

Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam were often criticized for their confrontational approach, yet they addressed a deep need for ethnic pride and psychological empowerment within the Black community—needs that many felt the church was not meeting. While the church attended to the physical and spiritual needs of the Black community, Malcolm X championed a broader agenda, seeking not only to meet those needs but also to foster a profound psychological transformation among Black people. The Nation of Islam's teachings uplifted Black identity, rejecting white standards of beauty. Anthropologist Donna Auston summarizes this ethos: "As a black person, the way God made you is beautiful. Don't perm your hair; don't emulate a standard of beauty that's outside of Blackness."[33]

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[31] Martin Luther King Jr., "Where Do We Go From Here?" (speech, Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Stanford University, August 16, 1967), Martin Luther King Jr. Research and Education Institute, Stanford University, www.kinginstitute.stanford.edu.

[32] Henry Louis Gates Jr., *This Is Our Story, This Is Our Song*, 141.

[33] Ibid.

Despite media portrayals that positioned Dr. King and Malcolm X as ideological opposites, their messages to the Black community were similar in the end. In his final speech in Memphis, Tennessee, Dr. King echoed Malcolm's emphasis on immediate, earthly justice: "It's all right to talk about 'streets flowing with milk and honey,' but God has commanded us to be concerned about the slums down here, and his children who can't eat three square meals a day…"[34] Both men were unwavering in their commitment to liberating the Black community from systemic oppression.

Beyond the criticism from leaders within the black community, the Black church's focus itself came under scrutiny. Churches appeared to move away from directly confronting injustice. According to longtime members of Community Baptist Church, the church did not plan civil rights marches. Instead, the church leadership was comfortable participating in efforts in the wider community. For example, the church's auxiliaries hosted fundraisers to support the work of the Bergen County NAACP. As Anthony Pinn notes, "In the civil rights movement, black denominations seemed to regain their progressive politics and activism only to lose this thrust at the end of the 1960s."[35] He further argues that the Black church increasingly relied on social organizations to advance equality, shifting its focus toward individual piety and personal progress. While civil rights and quality of life remained important to the leaders of Community Baptist Church, they appear to have chosen not to prioritize these issues directly. This history confirms Pinn's assertion about the Black church's changing focus.

In the wake of Dr. King's death, the Black community was introduced to a more assertive form of Christian teaching. James Cone developed a theology centered on elevating Black

[34] Ibid.

[35] Anthony Pinn, *The Black Church in the Civil Rights Era* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002).

identity within the fabric of Christianity. His *Black Liberation Theology* served as a synthesis of Dr. King's love mandate and Stokeley Carmichael's initiative to build the esteem of the Black community. According to Anthony Pinn, "James Cone argued that God was ontologically black and anyone who claimed the label Christian also had to become ontologically black."[36] In *Black Theology of Liberation*, Cone asserts, "Knowing God means being on the side of the oppressed, becoming one with them, and participating in the goal of liberation. We must become black with God."[37] The church now had to grapple with a more direct and radical message aimed at the Black community—one that explicitly addressed the need for collective liberation.

Another factor contributing to the decline of the Black Church—and mainline American denominations more broadly—was the wave of political assassinations, including those of Robert Kennedy, John F. Kennedy, and Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. These tragedies caused many Americans to question not only the government but also established religion. According to the Pew Research Center, "We do know that trust in the federal government to do the right thing topped 70% in the late 1950s, only to begin a sharp downward slide in the mid-1960s. That slide bottomed out at around 30% in the late 1970s."[38] In her article "How Robert Kennedy's Assassination Changed American Politics," Maggie Astor interviewed Ross Baker, a political science professor at Rutgers University, who observed, "Kennedy's death really did persuade many people to seek private solutions, to retreat, to achieve a kind of personal redemption, and had a very, very long-lasting effect on American life."[39] The Black church was not the only

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[36] Ibid.

[37] James Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2013).

[38] Pew Research Center, "Trust in Government," October 17, 2024, https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2024/10/17/trust-in-government/.

[39] "How Robert Kennedy's Assassination Changed American Politics," *The New York Times*, June 1, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com.

institution affected by the loss of King. The entire nation  grew increasingly skeptical of established institutions and the voices of marginalized leaders. By examining the enduring legacies of these figures, we can glean crucial insights into leadership and community mobilization—insights that hold profound relevance for Hip-Hop culture today.

## Black Power Link to Hip-Hop Development

Stokely Carmichael emerged as a pivotal figure in the Civil Rights Movement, advocating for Black self-determination and a new vision of leadership. His rallying cry for "Black Power" and emphasis on grassroots organizing resonated with a generation frustrated by the slow pace of change. The desire for an alternative to the nonviolent methods of the Civil Rights Movement created space for new leaders like Carmichael and Huey Newton. As the leader of SNCC at just 25, Carmichael embodied this younger generation, and his approach to liberating the Black community laid the groundwork for the emergence of Hip-Hop culture. Many felt constrained by the nonviolent strategies favored by leaders like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Carmichael's call for a more assertive and radical stance inspired young activists eager to reclaim their agency in the face of systemic oppression.

It is important to note that Carmichael was mentored within the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, which was led by John Lewis, a devout Christian and seminary-trained leader. This mentorship prepared Carmichael for his eventual leadership role. After years of serving under Lewis, Carmichael was appointed leader of SNCC. While his leadership style differed from Lewis's, it was rooted in the lessons instilled by Lewis and other Christian leaders. Their teachings on strategizing and mobilization were foundational to SNCC's inception and enabled Carmichael to guide the next generation of leaders in the 1970s.

This shift in leadership marked a departure from the previous generation, which primarily focused on integration and peaceful protest. The tragic assassinations of influential leaders created a void that propelled youth to pursue a more confrontational approach to civil rights. The gap left by these fallen leaders opened the door for alternative messages that embraced a more militant form of activism, reflecting the frustrations of everyday Black Americans. Many felt that nonviolent protests had not produced the meaningful change they desired.

As the political landscape evolved, the role of the Black church began to transform. Historically, the church served as a bastion of support and organization, but the emergence of new leadership models —embodied by figures like Stokely Carmichael and Malcolm X— compelled the church to wrestle with its relevance in a society increasingly shaped by radical thought. While it remained a space for dialogue and community organizing, the church often struggled to adapt its traditional methods to meet the aspirations of a new generation seeking more dynamic forms of activism. This transformation, in my view, paved the way for the emergence of Hip-Hop as a vehicle for activism. Afrika Bambaataa, often credited as the founder of Hip-Hop, played a pivotal role in uniting the street gangs of New York City. He encouraged them to abandon violence in favor of healthy competition through Hip-Hop art, fostering community empowerment and cultural solidarity.

Carmichael and Malcolm X's philosophies not only galvanized grassroots movements but also laid the groundwork for future leaders in various cultural spheres, including Hip-Hop. The themes of resilience, empowerment, and self-determination they championed became integral to the lyrics and messages of Hip-Hop artists, who sought to address the ongoing struggles within marginalized communities. This connection underscores how the legacies of past leaders

continue to shape contemporary movements, highlighting the necessity of nurturing leadership within the Black community.

In both historical and contemporary contexts, the Black church occupies a unique position to cultivate leadership in young people. By embracing its rich legacy of activism and resilience while also recognizing the need for new approaches, the church can inspire the next generation to engage actively in the ongoing fight for social justice. Through storytelling, freestyling, community engagement, and inclusive practices, the Black church can bridge the gap between traditional leadership frameworks and the emerging voices eager to redefine activism to meet today's challenges.

Ultimately, the evolution of leadership within the Black community, especially through the lens of the Black Church, illustrates a dynamic interplay between historical struggles and contemporary aspirations. By creating spaces for dialogue, empowerment, and activism, the church can continue to serve as a vital institution that nurtures future leaders committed to justice, equality, and resilience.

Afrika Bambaataa, often referred to as the Godfather of Hip-Hop, credits influential figures like Malcolm X for shaping his ability to develop Hip-Hop culture. Drawing inspiration from these leaders, Bambaataa redirected New York street gangs away from violence and toward music, illustrating a transformative shift in community dynamics. Once a gang leader himself, he helped sculpt what we now recognize as Hip-Hop, emphasizing its potential as a vehicle for empowerment and social change. Bambaataa outlined the core pillars of Hip-Hop as "knowledge, wisdom, understanding, freedom, justice, equality, overcoming negativity, science, mathematics, facts, and the concept of a supreme force—referred to by various names such as

Allah, Jehovah, Yahweh, or Elohim"[40] These foundational elements not only define the essence of Hip-Hop culture but also serve as a guiding framework for the leadership development initiatives I explore in this professional paper—The pillars I emphasize—storytelling, emceeing, freestyling, community involvement, and diversity and inclusion—are directly inspired by Bambaataa's vision. By integrating these elements into leadership development within the Black church, I aim to encourage church leaders to nurture individuals who embody the core values of Hip-Hop. In doing so, the church can foster a culture of empowerment, creativity, and social justice—one that aligns with its transformative mission.

The Black Power movement played a crucial role in shaping the cultural landscape of the Black community in the United States, and its influence can be considered a significant precursor to the emergence of Hip-Hop culture. Several writers and scholars have emphasized this connection, asserting that the ideologies and artistic expressions of the Black Power era laid the groundwork for Hip-Hop's development in the 1970s and beyond.

One prominent voice in this discussion is Jeff Chang, author of *Can't Stop Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation.* Chang argues that Hip-Hop emerged as a response to the social and political conditions that were influenced by the Black Power movement. He emphasizes that the movement's focus on racial pride, self-determination, and cultural identity resonated deeply with the youth of the time, who channeled these ideals into the music, dance, and visual art that defined Hip-Hop culture. Chang asserts, "The center of the rap world swung decidedly in a Black nationalist direction. Hip-Hop culture realigned itself and reimagined its roots, representing itself as a rap thing,  a serious thing, a Black thing."[41]

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[40] *Afrika Bambaataa Interview*, YouTube.

[41] Jeff Chang, *Can't Stop Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2005), 229.

Another important contributor to this conversation is Robin D.G. Kelley, whose book *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* explores the intersections of Black art and activism. Kelley discusses how the Black Power movement encouraged a generation of artists and musicians to articulate their experiences and aspirations through creative expression. He writes, "Not surprisingly, the most visionary strand of Hip-Hop also embraces the politics of escape not averse to interstellar time travel."[42] Hip-hop artists and members cultivated a creative ethos that allowed them to imagine freedom, which took them to outer space.

Afrika Bambaataa's 1985 song "Planet Rock" inspired listeners with its lyrics advocating freedom and living life to the fullest: "No work or play, our world is free. Be what you want to be."[43] The track featured innovative, futuristic sounds and space-themed visuals, leaving a lasting impact on music. Even in 2025, its influence endures. In a 2023 interview, Bambaataa remarked, "Hip-Hop can go anywhere in the world. It can go underground. It can go to hell. It can go to heaven. It can go to space."

Additionally, Mark Anthony Neal, in his work *New Black Man*, highlights how hip-hop continues the legacy of the Black Power movement. He argues that the movement's focus on black masculinity, community empowerment, and resistance to oppression is reflected in the themes and lyrics of many hip-hop artists. Neal suggests that hip-hop culture provides a platform for young people to articulate their identities and engage with the ongoing struggle for social justice, echoing the sentiments of the Black Power movement. Reflecting on 50 years of Hip-

[42] Robin D.G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002).
[43] Afrika Bambaataa, "Planet Rock," recorded 1982, on *Planet Rock: The Album* (Tommy Boy Records, 1986).

Hop, Neal asserts, "Hip-Hop made black youth both visible and heard in ways that were somewhat unprecedented."[44] This point is further explored in chapter two of my project.

Furthermore, Tricia Rose's anthology *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* provides an in-depth analysis of the relationship between Hip-Hop and the historical challenges faced by the Black community. Rose argues that Hip-Hop can be seen as a cultural response to the socio-political realities shaped by the Black Power movement. She states, "Rap music is, in many ways, a hidden transcript. Among other things, it uses cloaked and disguised cultural codes to comment on and challenge aspects of current power inequalities."[45] Hip-hop serves as a bridge between the past and present, linking the aspirations of the Black Power movement to the voices of contemporary youth. Scholars like Jeff Chang, Robin D.G. Kelley, Mark Anthony Neal, and Tricia Rose have all articulated the profound influence of the Black Power movement on the birth and evolution of Hip-Hop culture.

In summary, these scholars argue that the movement's emphasis on racial pride, cultural identity, and resistance to oppression laid the foundation for the artistic expressions and social commentary that define Hip-Hop today. This connection highlights the enduring legacy of the Black Power movement and its vital role in shaping the voices and narratives of future generations.

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[44] Mickell Carter, "Hip-Hop as Archival Practice and Form: An Interview with Mark Anthony Neal," August 14, 2023, https://www.aaihs.org/hip-hop-as-archival-practice-and-form-an-interview-with-mark-anthony-neal/.

[45] Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 100.

# Chapter 2: The Interplay of the Black Church and Hip-Hop

## Hip-Hop Culture Defined

When I refer to Hip-Hop culture, I mean that it has become a lens through which a segment of our broader society perceives and interprets the world. This encompasses not only the church community but also various other facets of our culture. Hip-hop culture contains its own shared beliefs that spawn from shared experiences. It also contains shared expression and language. Culture, according to Marcus Collins in his book *For the Culture*, is "the operating system by which we live, and includes identity, shared language, social norms and cultural production—art, movies, fashion and branded products."[46] P. Thandi Hicks Harper notes: "Hip-Hop is an all-encompassing" culture for many of America's youth. It includes forces that affect and influence the choices these youth make in their everyday lives. Hip-Hop represents a strong and unified youth consciousness. It is a powerful and pervasive movement among youth worldwide. Youth, regardless of who they are or where they come from, will very likely identify with at least some aspect of hip-hop culture."[47] It is this influence that Hip-Hop culture possesses that I believe the church can utilize to create a space where young people can develop as leaders and impact their community. While the studies mentioned focus on youth, I believe that the influence of Hip-Hop affects the entire Hip-Hop generation. As stated earlier, the Hip-Hop generation is comprised of individuals between the ages of 18-60. I believe that Hip-Hop culture embodies values that align closely with the mission of the church. At its core, Hip-Hop promotes

[46] Marcus Collins, *For the Culture* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2023).

[47] P. Thandi Hicks Harper, "There We Go That's What I Needed," *SEICUS Report* 28, no. 5 (2000): 19–23.

principles such as "love, unity, peace, and the importance of having fun," as highlighted by Hip-Hop pioneer KRS-One.[48] These values resonate deeply with the church's goals of fostering community, encouraging compassion, and building a supportive environment for all individuals. By embracing the values inherent in Hip-Hop, the church can create a dynamic space where diverse voices are welcomed and mutual respect is cultivated. This synergy between Hip-Hop culture and the church's mission can inspire innovative ways to engage individuals and empower them to live out their faith in meaningful, relatable ways.

I hope to see my church deeply committed to community collaborations, cultural pride, speaking out against injustices, and bringing joy to those living in underserved conditions. In my view, the Black Church, as an institution, can benefit from embracing these values to engage individuals influenced by Hip-Hop culture. Although hip-hop culture was not created with the church in mind, I do believe the culture can serve as a companion with which the church can collaborate. According to Efram Smith,

> Hip-hop culture formed outside the church and has been used for evil, worldly purposes: degrading women, glorifying drug and alcohol abuse and addiction, and elevating violence as the primary means of solving conflict. However, ultimately, we can see that God is the creator of all things, even culture. Everything created by God for God's purposes can be enjoyed by human beings and used for kingdom purposes.[49]

While I appreciate Smith's perspective, I find myself wrestling with the notion that the church should merely use Hip-Hop culture as a tool for spreading Christian teachings. Although I recognize that Hip-Hop has been successfully employed for this purpose, I have observed in my

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[48] AIIG'sReact, "KRS One Hip-Hop Lecture," 2023, https://youtu.be/H8ddsJwz7N4?si=DzliPF1CCg5MB4.

[49] Ephram Smith and Phil Jackson, *The Hip-Hop Church: Connecting With the Movement Shaping Our Culture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 35.

context that its use has not been consistent or widespread enough. It seems to me that the potential of Hip-Hop to connect with individuals on their Christian journey remains largely untapped. I strongly contend that the church should embrace ongoing Hip-Hop methods, engaging individuals at every stage of their spiritual development. I believe that the church can partner with hip-hop culture and find common ground that allows both to thrive together and develop leaders who empower their communities.

## A 30-Year Retrospective

The initial thirty years of Hip-Hop culture represented a significant transformation in music and the expression of spiritual narratives within the Black community. Historically, Black spirituality was largely confined to the church, with expressions often limited to holiday celebrations, which restricted the broader sharing of spiritual experiences. However, as Hip-Hop emerged as a cultural force, it became a platform for voices that had been marginalized, allowing individuals to articulate their spiritual journeys outside traditional church contexts. The beats and lyrics of early Hip-Hop artists intertwined spiritual themes with the realities of everyday life, making these narratives more relatable to younger audiences. Artists such as Kirk Franklin have contributed to connecting different generations, offering a modern and relatable approach to spirituality from the church community's viewpoint. Mainstream artists like DMX, Notorious B.I.G., and Jay-Z shared their faith struggles, encouraging youth to express their spiritual stories publicly. This transformation not only reshaped perceptions of spirituality but also impacted societal views within the Black community, facilitating a broader cultural dialogue that evolved the expression of spirituality beyond conventional boundaries. Emerging from the socio-political landscape of the 1970s and 1980s, Hip-Hop developed as a powerful voice for the marginalized, articulating the struggles, aspirations, and complexities of their lives. Simultaneously, the Black

church served as a cornerstone of community identity, moral guidance, and socio-cultural coherence. However, as Hip-Hop evolved and began to gain mainstream traction, a notable friction arose between these two cultural powerhouses. Early figures in the Hip-Hop community often wrestled with their identities as artists, frequently finding themselves at odds with church leaders who viewed the genre with concern for its impact on moral integrity and community values. This dynamic struggle was illustrated in the public confrontations and dialogues between church leaders like Reverend Calvin Butts and prominent Hip-Hop artists.

Meanwhile, artists such as Kirk Franklin, Kanye West, and Ma$e navigated the space between these two worlds, attempting to blend their faith with the raw authenticity of Hip-Hop. This interaction reveals both the potential for a renewed relationship between Hip-Hop and the church, as well as the challenges posed by generational and cultural divides, ultimately laying the groundwork for a growing movement that seeks to reconcile spirituality and culture in contemporary society. In this section, I am presenting the experiences of various artists and their interactions with the faith community to illustrate the broader experiences of the community. By examining the journeys of influential figures such as Kirk Franklin, Kanye West, and Ma$e, I explored how these artists navigated the space between Hip-Hop and the church. Their attempts to blend their faith with the raw authenticity of Hip-Hop reveal the potential for renewed relationships between these cultural powerhouses. These artists also expose the challenges posed by generational and cultural divides. This analysis will provide a foundation for understanding a culture that aims to integrate faith and culture in modern society.

*Kanye West*

With his debut hit, *Jesus Walks* (2004),[50] Kanye West became the first mainstream rapper to mention Jesus in a song. While using a sample from a gospel song that had been done before and referring to Jesus in lyrics was not new, hip-hop had never featured a song that chanted Jesus' name in a chorus until Kanye. The song's success came during 50 Cent's reign in Hip-Hop, a time when the genre had become violent in tone due to 50 Cent's contentious relationship with Ja Rule. Kanye West presented himself as different from his Hip-Hop peers and label mates in various ways. He was best known for wearing Ralph Lauren Polo shirts and carrying a backpack, creating a wholesome image that starkly contrasted with the New York and Philadelphia-based rappers who worked with him at Roc-A-Fella Records.

Kanye distinguished himself from his peers not only through his fashion but also through his lyrical content. Instead of perpetuating the violence perpetuated by others, Kanye was introspective, conscious of Black history, and at times self-deprecating. Additionally, he was unafraid to profess his faith in Jesus Christ. A decade earlier, the Hip-Hop community would have rejected him; however, after sharing the story of his life-threatening car accident and survival in his song *Through the Wire* (2004),[51] fans were drawn to him as a person. Fans were amazed at his ability to be transparent and authentic. Doctors had to perform surgery on Kanye's jaw as a result of his accident. His jaw was wired shut, and he rapped with the wires in his mouth; he showed pictures of his swollen jaw. Hip-hop had not seen that level of vulnerability until that point. His audience saw *Jesus Walks*[52] as a continuation of the life story of someone they felt they were getting to know. The transparency and acceptance of faith made Kanye more

[50] Kanye West, "Jesus Walks," *The College Dropout* (Roc-A-Fella Records, 2004).
[51] Kanye West, "Through the Wire," *The College Dropout* (Roc-A-Fella Records, 2004).
[52] Kanye West, "Jesus Walks."

than an artist; it made him a relatable figure. This illustrates how the Black Church can adopt elements of Hip-Hop, like transparency, relatability, and vulnerability to cultivate leadership capabilities in young people.

Kanye West was heavily influenced by his parents and the spiritual foundation they provided. His father, Ray West, is reported to have been a former Black Panther who later became a Christian counselor.[53] Kanye's late mother, Donna West, was an educator and chair of Chicago State University's Department of English, Communications, Media, and Theater. These influences were first heard on *The College Dropout* (2004).[54] On tracks like "*Never Let Me Down,*"[55] Kanye shares a line about attending civil rights sit-ins with his mother as a child. Along with his lyrics, the spiritual sounds incorporated into Kanye's music were significant.

The culmination of the spiritual overtones in Kanye's music came when he produced a gospel project entitled "*Jesus is King* (2019)."[56] In January 2019, West began the Sunday Service, an expression of faith developed after he felt rejected by established churches. What started as one-hour sessions to showcase new renditions of traditional gospel music evolved into gatherings featuring his gospel choir, also named Sunday Service.

The issue with Kanye producing a gospel album and hosting Sunday Services around the country was significant because Kanye is not a pastor. The gospel music he produced afforded him and his choir appearances at notable American mega-churches. In 2019, Pastor Joel Osteen and Lakewood Church hosted the Sunday Service experience. For some, this was evidence of

[53] Leah Simpson, *The U.S. Sun*, October 6, 2022.

[54] Kanye West, *The College Dropout* (Roc-A-Fella Records, 2004).

[55] Kanye West featuring Jay-Z and J. Ivy, "Never Let Me Down," *The College Dropout* (Roc-A-Fella Records, 2004).

[56] Kanye West, *Jesus Is King* (GOOD Music / Def Jam Recordings, 2019).

Hip-Hop culture fully endorsing Christian faith; however, others struggled to separate Kanye's controversial comments about race and his presidential ambitions.

Diagnosing the exact factors that contribute to Kanye's evolution into this darker expression of himself is challenging. Some speculate that he has not been the same since the passing of his mother, while others point fingers at his marriage to Kim Kardashian. Although Kanye insists that he is completely rational, he has acknowledged experiencing depression and taking medication. In a *New Times* article from February 2025, he remarks about his mental struggles, "Come to find out it's really a case of autism." While we may never fully understand the root of this change, it is evident that there is a stark contrast between the early Kanye we were introduced to 20 years ago and the artist he has become today. His early work still conveys valuable messages of aspiration. His life exemplifies a personality type that the church can learn from. I believe that the church's response to individuals like Kanye within their congregations should be one of patience and availability. Many people in our churches experience similar transformations. The Christian message fundamentally emphasizes transformation, offering hope and renewal to all individuals regardless of the severity of their past experiences or struggles.

Some interpreted Kanye's actions as another way to promote himself and his businesses. Kanye asserts that his work, *The Life of Pablo*,[57] was a gospel album despite its explicit lyrics and lack of overt faith-based themes. While Kanye's Christian message was powerful through music, his actions often appeared confusing and contradictory.

In 2019, Kanye and his Sunday Service choir were guests at The Greater Allen AME Cathedral in Queens, NY, where they encountered rejection, which was notably different from their reception at Lakewood Church. According to *New York Times* writer Shakira Ibrahim,

[57] Kanye West, *The Life of Pablo* (GOOD Music / Def Jam Recordings, 2016).

audience members walked out during the performance.[58] The Greater Allen AME Cathedral congregation is predominantly African American, and many believed Kanye was attempting to use the church community to regain acceptance into the Black community after his inflammatory comments—such as his assertion during a 2018 TMZ interview that "Slavery, for 400 years? Sounds like a choice to me."[59] This left many confused and questioning Kanye's mental stability, especially after he had spoken at several events where he sent mixed signals to the public. He was notably seen wearing a "Make America Great Again" hat, a symbol of support for the Donald Trump presidential campaign, and met with then-President Trump on October 11, 2018, to share his ideas about America and support Trump's presidency. Despite the success of *Jesus is King* and the Sunday Services, Kanye lost business connections and collaborations due to his antisemitic comments made in 2022.

This encounter between Hip-Hop and the church is extraordinarily complex. While we have never seen a mainstream Hip-Hop artist embrace and promote Christianity as boldly as Kanye, we have also not witnessed the level of confusion, anger, and rejection that these actions have caused. His *Jesus is King* caused many teens and young adults alike to discuss religion. Kanye's actions also serve as a valuable teaching moment for youth leaders to engage in meaningful discussions with their teens and young adults about his journey. His evolution—from a bright and aspirational artist to someone grappling with personal struggles—provides a relatable context for understanding the complexities of life. Youth leaders can use Kanye's story to address important themes such as mental health, the impact of loss, and the pressures of fame. It opens the door to conversations about how we handle our challenges and the importance of

[58] Shamira Ibrahim, "Kanye West and the Cult of Personality," *New York Times* (2019).

[59] "Kanye West Stirs Up TMZ Newsroom Over Trump, Slavery, Free Thought," TMZ, 2018, http://www.tmz.com.

seeking support when needed. By examining Kanye's experiences, leaders can encourage young people to embrace authenticity and vulnerability, reminding them that it's okay to navigate life's difficulties. Ultimately, this dialogue can foster a supportive community where youth feel safe to share their struggles and aspirations. This will further guide individuals on their paths of growth and transformation.

Kanye West's attempt to blend Hip-Hop culture with church culture reveals the complexities that this work entails. Kanye's life presents a unique opportunity for the Christian church to reach the people who identify with Hip-Hop culture. It is the message of forgiveness and acceptance in the gospel that drew Kanye to the church. Hip-hop culture encourages freedom of self-expression and is often presented in a raw form, whereas church culture is typically more regimented and uniform. While church culture promotes speaking truth to power, this truth is often conveyed in structured formats. It's also crucial to recognize that the church itself can benefit from receiving hard truths. Kanye's experience opens the door for dialogue about the church, allowing us to examine its shortcomings candidly. This conversation also invites reflection on the flaws present in Hip-Hop culture. I believe this presents a valuable opportunity for us to discuss how the church can adapt healthy elements from Hip-Hop to foster a more authentic connection with young people.

When discussing the intersection of Hip-Hop music and church, it is critical to recognize that while Hip-Hop may lose its graphic nature when adapted for church settings, it can retain the descriptions of the realities everyone faces on their Christian journeys. I call for the church not to focus solely on Hip-Hop music but to embrace Hip-hop culture and component actions such as storytelling, freestyling, community engagement, and diversity and inclusion. I believe that the church community, particularly the Black church, can establish new ministries and community

programs led by young people who embrace Hip-Hop culture using these principles. I discussed this in further detail in my chapter on application. These experiences have shaped my understanding of the profound intersection between the church and Hip-Hop, a relationship that has evolved significantly over the first 30 years, reflecting both the challenges and opportunities for dialogue, much like the journey of artists such as Kanye West. Before we go further, we must take a look back at Hip-Hop's first interactions with the church community.

*Rev. Calvin Butts v. Rap*

It was the spring of 1994, and I was engaged in my daily after-school routine. When the bell rang at my middle school, my friends and I would stop at the local pizza shop as we walked home from school. After stopping for a slice, we would eat it on the bench at the neighborhood park. After playing a few games of basketball, we would rush home to watch *Video Music Box*,[60] a television program dedicated to premiering the latest local and national Hip-Hop artists.

I can still remember the first time I saw a video from a new group from Cleveland, Ohio. Before this day, I had seen groups from California, Texas, and New York. I waited patiently to hear what a rap group from Cleveland would sound like. To my surprise, I heard a preacher's voice before I heard the first verse from Bone Thugs-N-Harmony. The song begins with these words: "We are not against rap. We are not against rappers, but we are against those thugs."[61]

Bone Thugs-N-Harmony chose to use an excerpt from one of the most notable encounters the church had with Hip-Hop culture to date. The late Reverend Calvin Butts, pastor of Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem, New York, launched a campaign against rap music in the summer of 1993. According to the *New York Times*, Rev. Butts was prepared to show his disdain

[60] *Video Music Box*, produced by Ralph McDaniels, aired on WNYC, 1983–2006.

[61] Joey Perez, "Thuggish Ruggish Bone Calvin Butts intro+more," YouTube, 2015, https://youtu.be/XzZyaYBI-w8?si=uexPzk_g8x2XBNEa..

for rap music by steamrolling cassette tapes and CDs. However, Rev. Butts aborted his plan when he was met by Hip-Hop supporters outside his church.[62] The supporters accused Pastor Butts of "being out of touch" and censoring his own people. "You're steamrolling our dreams, you're steamrolling our aspirations, you're steamrolling who we are," shouted Gary Jenkins, 31, a lawyer.[63]

To end the tense standoff, Pastor Butts decided to dump the CDs and cassettes collected by his congregants on the steps of Sony Studios in midtown Manhattan. Rev. Butts, reflecting on his actions, said that dumping the music at the steps of the music distributors signified that the Black community did not want their "junk."[64]

To be fair, Rev. Butts' entire quote that Bone Thugs-N-Harmony used was directed toward violent rap. He continued, "But we are against those thugs who disgrace our community, our women, who disgrace our culture, and who have absolutely nothing of redemptive value to offer except the legacy of violence, sexual assault, and foul language."[65] However, the entire Hip-Hop community saw this as an attack on all rappers. Rev. Butts attempted to drive his message against violent and misogynistic lyrics by offering to sit down with rappers to share his full point of view. The only rapper he was able to engage with in person was Ice-T. On June 30, 1993, Rev. Calvin Butts and Ice-T sat down to engage in a dialogue about Rev. Butts' rap protest. The debate aired on *Video Music Box.* This program, created by host and producer Ralph McDaniels, was primarily known for showing the latest Hip-Hop videos and creating shoutouts.

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[62] Clifford Levy, "Harlem Protest Rap Lyrics Draws Debate and Steamroller," *New York Times* (1993).
[63] Ibid.
[64] Ibid.
[65] Joey Perez, "Thuggish Ruggish Bone Calvin Butts intro+more."

However, when the protest against Hip-Hop surfaced, the program's producer took the opportunity to air the dialogue between the two prominent figures.

The dialogue proved that the two men were unwavering in their respective points of view. Rev. Butts expressed support for positive rappers and their music, along with disappointment in rappers who, in his estimation, were denigrating their community and race. Ice-T, in his rebuttal, expressed that Rev. Butts' attack on Hip-Hop seemed like an attempt to stop him from engaging in legitimate business. In response to Rev. Butts' comments accusing rappers of lacking redemptive value, Ice-T asserted that his rap career employs 200 African American people. The two men ultimately agreed to disagree on how Hip-Hop and the church impact the Black community.

It is important to note that the first documented encounter Hip-Hop culture had with the Black church was a measured critique of the lyrical content of the music. The late Rev. Calvin Butts was attempting to shield his community in Harlem, NY, and the greater Black community from being exploited by major companies. His campaign was originally aimed at the cigarette and liquor companies that unfairly targeted the Black community with their advertisements. Surveying the lyrics from early 1990s Hip-Hop led Rev. Butts to believe that Hip-Hop artists were being used by record companies to advertise detrimental goods directly to the Black community through songs. This leads to the broader argument for the influence of Hip-Hop on any community. Perhaps Rev. Butts understood the importance of Hip-Hop culture beyond the music and was attempting to encourage rappers to use their platform to uplift the Black community. He is quoted as saying, "Rap is an extremely powerful art form. It is powerful and it

grabs, and therefore as it grabs we want to make sure it also shapes in a constructive and redemptive way."[66]

While the music of Hip-Hop took on the form of sharing the realities experienced in low-income communities, the elders of the Black community were interested in where the culture wished to go. I agree with Rev. Butts' perception of Hip-Hop culture's influence. It is with this same influence that the Black church can create lasting group connections.

Allowing persons who identify with Hip-Hop culture to lead ministry groups and shape the church's future will positively utilize Hip-Hop culture. The inclusion of members from the Hip-Hop community is crucial to ensuring that authenticity shines through in the messages delivered to both Hip-Hop enthusiasts and anyone who embraces the culture. In my conversation with Brandon Cobb, lead pastor at Eden Church in Hackensack, NJ, I discovered that he was incorporating Hip-Hop elements into his ministry without even realizing it. When I asked him how he felt Hip-Hop had influenced his work, he expressed that he had never considered its impact. I pointed out that he often wears a Yankees hat while preaching, frequently shares his church activities on social media, hosts staff meetings in a local coffee shop, and leads his church's regular community outreach. He responded, "That stems from who I am. I do not consciously think of doing a Hip-Hop ministry. I do ministry as myself." Brandon, a native of Washington Heights, New York, who grew up in the 1990s, acknowledges that he was immersed in Hip-hop culture and has a deep love for it. His experience exemplifies the authenticity that Hip-Hop embodies and serves as a reminder that genuine expression encourages others to present their true selves as well.

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[66] Rev. Butts, "Video Music Box," 1993, *20C History Project*, YouTube, 2014.

I believe that Rev. Butts' critique hit a nerve in Hip-Hop culture because it was perceived as an attack on African American identity. Being African American in the inner cities of America during the '90s often meant identifying with hip-hop culture. In that decade, Hip-Hop went mainstream and became embedded in nearly every aspect of American life. For many young Black men, it offered a powerful outlet for self-expression and a platform to share their perspectives with the world. To add insult to injury, Rev. Butts' campaign emerged in New York City—the very birthplace of Hip-Hop. The resistance Rev. Butts received, in my opinion, was layered. On one layer, Rev. Butts was a preacher representing the church to onlookers. This may have been interpreted as another way in which the church seeks to strip Black people of their native cultural identity—much like how African Americans were taken from their native lands and stripped of their languages and culture. I believe that stripping Hip-hop culture from inner-city youth would be considered a form of colonization. That's why, in my work, I am encouraging churches to fully embrace Hip-hop culture. Allowing individuals who identify with Hip-Hop to bring their entire selves to the church experience is vital in exemplifying God's acceptance of the whole person. The second layer can be described as a generational disconnect, where a Black man from an older generation criticizes younger Black men for their cultural representation. Rev. Butts, who represented the older generation that fought vigorously for the uplift of the Black community during the civil rights era, was focused on preserving and extending the legacy of progress made.

In contrast, the younger generation, plagued by unemployment and a lack of education—which led to limited opportunities—was excited about the potential of using their artistic abilities to rise above their impoverished realities. However, they were concerned about how the

dominant culture would interpret the Black community. At their core, both generations were striving for the same change; however, they could not agree on the methods to achieve it.

The approach to protest Hip-Hop for its lyrics can be criticized from many different perspectives. However, I believe that the sentiment to protect the image and growth of the Black community is important. As a child, my uncle often watched a television program called *Good Times*. This show depicted a Black family living in the projects of Chicago, with each episode highlighting their struggles to overcome poverty in various forms. I didn't enjoy watching this show with him because it felt too much like my own reality; it didn't provide me with anything to aspire toward. Instead, I loved watching *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, which portrayed a wealthy Black family who adopted their nephew after he moved in with them from Philadelphia. This show showcased a positive image of the Black family unit and highlighted the growth of the Black community. While some members of the Black community are still relegated to the projects in major cities, there were also Black families thriving in the suburbs. I believe that both narratives are necessary for everyone to see. Unfortunately, the most negative narratives in Hip-Hop music are promoted by the media, while the positive and more listener-friendly music does not receive the same attention. I believe that there should be a deeper examination of how Hip-Hop culture has unified youth and provided economic opportunities amid impoverished experiences for many American communities.

The clash between Rev. Calvin Butts and Hip-Hop culture exemplifies the broader tensions within the Black community regarding identity, representation, and artistic expression. While Rev. Butts' campaign against violent rap lyrics stemmed from a genuine desire to protect and uplift the community, his interactions with artists like Ice-T highlighted the need for generational dialogue and understanding. Both parties shared a vision for the potential of Hip-

Hop as a tool for social change. We witness the importance of creating spaces within the church for voices from the Hip-Hop community. By fostering an inclusive environment that values authenticity and cultural expression, the Black church can play a crucial role in shaping narratives that empower young leaders and contribute to the ongoing dialogue about community identity and resilience.

*Kirk Franklin*

My life took a major turn toward God in 1996. Attempting to apply Christian principles to my life was not easy. I needed to be accompanied by music that I could connect with. A youth worker at my grandmother's church gave me a *DC Talk*[67] CD that she was sure I would love. She knew that I loved Hip-Hop because I was the only teen in the church who sat in the back with my hoodie on, one headphone pierced to my ear. I could not get through one song from *DC Talk* before giving it back to the well-meaning youth worker. Not long after, I saw Kirk Franklin on "Soul Train."[68] "Soul Train" was a music show that showcased secular popular African American artists. Watching "Soul Train" was a part of my family's Saturday house cleaning routine. I was struck by Kirk Franklin's performance because it was the right mixture of Hip-Hop and church. I remember thinking that I could be the kind of Christian that Kirk Franklin and his choir presented. They were dressed in authentic Hip-Hop attire that reflected their cultural connection, and they sang with such conviction that it resonated deeply with viewers.

While I was inspired by Kirk Franklin's appearance on the mainstream show, other Christians in my circle saw something different. The church leaders at my grandmother's church felt that there should be a separation between the church and the secular. This argument escalated

[67] DC Talk, *Free at Last* (Forefront Records, 1992).

[68] *Soul Train*, created by Don Cornelius, produced by Sunbow Productions, 1971–2006.

when Kirk Franklin teamed up with Cheryl James (also known as Salt of the 1980s female rap group Salt-N-Pepa) for his song "Stomp."[69] My grandmother's church community did not believe that a gospel song should feature a rapper. While this encounter may have been controversial to many, it drew many more young people to church and a relationship with God. Kirk Franklin was interviewed by *Jet* magazine in 1998, where he was asked how he felt about his critics. Franklin responded by saying it is their mission "to get as many people to hear the word of God as possible."[70] He went on to say that he believes, "Gospel music is not a sound; gospel music is a message. Gospel means good news. It's good-news music."[71]

Kirk Franklin, despite his critics, found a way to successfully incorporate Hip-Hop culture into gospel music. In a career spanning 20 years, he has won 19 Grammy Awards, performed with numerous artists, and traveled the world sharing the gospel. His approach to ministry has introduced so many young people to God and encouraged others to keep their faith. Despite Kirk Franklin's impact on pop culture using the gospel message, his critics believe that his message is heavily influenced by pop culture instead of being influenced by the church. The clear message from American media and social circles was that there was a separation between the Black church and Hip-hop culture.

The rise of Kirk Franklin signals the need for the church to be relevant to young people. It is evident from the response to Kirk Franklin's approach that there was a need for young people to see themselves represented in church and to be heard. The energy and transparency that accompanied Franklin's music made God immanent and the church more relevant. Kirk Franklin represented vocal leadership in the Black church. As the choir director, he presented songs that

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[69] Kirk Franklin, "Stomp," *God's Property* (Gospocentric Records, 1997).
[70] "Kirk Franklin Talks About His Real Family and Hot Career," *Jet*, vol. 93, no. 25 (February 2, 1998): 56–57.
[71] Ibid.

the whole church heard. Not only did they hear them, but they were also encouraged to sing them as well. This form of leadership inspired other young people in the church to believe that Black church leaders had finally moved them to the center.

Kirk Franklin shows that Hip-hop culture can positively influence youth in the Black church to grow their Christian faith. His success answered a common question: Can we keep our Hip-Hop cultural identity while embracing our Christian identity? Anyone with questions could hear the same concerns in Kirk Franklin's music. They would also hear the struggles in his Christian journey during interviews. Franklin proves that people from all walks of life are attracted to those who authentically share their faith. The Black church, in particular, can benefit from sharing both challenges and triumphs along the Christian journey. Franklin displayed confidence in his faith, which made him a resource for other artists who wavered in their faith. Kirk Franklin's success illustrates how the Black Church can effectively incorporate elements of Hip-Hop to engage young people and cultivate their leadership skills. Kirk Franklin's success illustrates how the Black Church can effectively incorporate elements of Hip-Hop to engage young people and cultivate their leadership skills. His rise to prominence serves as a beacon of inspiration for many within both the church and the broader community. By seamlessly blending traditional gospel music with contemporary Hip-Hop elements, Franklin has created a unique space that resonates with a younger audience, showing that faith can be expressed in diverse and relatable ways.

Franklin's ability to connect with youth through music that reflects their experiences, struggles, and aspirations highlights the importance of authenticity in faith. Young people see in him a figure who unapologetically embraces his cultural roots while passionately sharing his

love for God. This representation encourages others to bring their whole selves into their faith journeys, demonstrating that cultural identity and spirituality can coexist harmoniously.

Moreover, Kirk Franklin's success underscores the potential for leadership beyond the pulpit. He exemplifies how artistry can be a powerful tool for advocacy, using his platform to address social issues and uplift marginalized voices. This inspires young people to recognize that they, too, can become change-makers in their communities, whether through music, art, or other forms of expression.

His journey serves as a reminder that engaging with Hip-Hop culture doesn't dilute spiritual values; rather, it enriches the experience of faith for many. By watching Franklin navigate the intersection of Hip-Hop and gospel, young leaders are motivated to explore new ways of connecting with their peers and to develop their leadership skills. Ultimately, Kirk Franklin's success sparked a vision of what the Black Church can achieve when it embraces creativity and authenticity, inspiring a new generation to step into their calling with confidence and purpose.

*Ma$e and The Bad Boy Era*

Hip-hop took a more violent turn in the late '90s. The media stoked the embers of rivalry between The Notorious B.I.G. and Tupac Shakur. What began as a competition about who could sell more records grew into violent messages in music that spread to real-life incidents. Rappers Snoop Dogg, Daz, and Corrupt were recording a video in Brooklyn, NY, when their trailer was hit with gunfire. Snoop Dogg and the rest of the rappers from California believed that B.I.G. had them attacked. Unfortunately, after months of misguided anger between artists from the East and West coasts and their entourages, both The Notorious B.I.G. and Tupac Shakur lost their lives. As a result of the violence in Hip-Hop and the death of Biggie Smalls, label owner Sean "Puff

Daddy" Combs directed attention to his artist Ma$e. This artist would be more commercially accepted while promoting the lavish lifestyle of the Black community.

Mason Betha, better known as Bad Boy Records recording artist Ma$e, took the world by storm with his debut hits in 1997. Creating songs with infectious hooks and familiar melodies from the '70s, Ma$e had everyone singing his ambitious lyrics. Before signing to Bad Boy Records with Puff Daddy, Ma$e was known as Murder Ma$e. As a teen growing up in Harlem, New York, he wrote about his experiences in the city. He also used aggressive lyrics to cement his name in underground rap circles. However, to gain mass appeal, he created songs that spoke of a lifestyle that he and every young person wished they could live. For example, in his notable hit "Feel So Good,"[72] he describes his lavish lifestyle, which includes jewelry, expensive cars, and luxury trips. As a new artist, Ma$e probably did not possess the things he wrote about, but his confident delivery made his fans resonate with his narrative. In addition to feeling that he had a glamorous life, his listeners, who came from similar backgrounds, wanted to also achieve such a lifestyle someday. This aspirational messaging resonates deeply, particularly with listeners from similar backgrounds who envision achieving such a lifestyle for themselves. This dynamic illustrates a crucial aspect of Hip-Hop culture—its ability to inspire hope and ambition among marginalized youth.

Despite his phenomenal success, after the death of his friend and label mate, Christopher "The Notorious B.I.G." Wallace, Ma$e left his rap career behind. Citing an experience he had at a church in Harlem, New York, where he felt God leading him to the altar to give his life to Christ, Mason Betha believed God was doing a "new thing." In his book *Revelations: There's a Light After the Lime*, Ma$e says that God sent him many signs to leave rap before it was too late:

[72] Mase, "Feel So Good," *Harlem World* (Bad Boy Records, 1997).

"Ma$e didn't wait for God. So I had to get rid of everything that Satan gave Ma$e. I had to cleanse myself of that."[73] He goes on to explain that God opened up a new life for him after he gave up his Hip-Hop life. "Today, I have my own ministry, my own church, S.A.N.E.—Saving A Nation Endangered Ministries."[74]

In his earnest moment to satisfy his soul craving, Mason Betha was encouraged by the pastor of the Salvation Deliverance Church to make a decision. Mason Betha's conversion became the hottest topic in 1999. I still remember my friends and I talking about what Ma$e did. Some of us felt like he made the worst decision ever. We could not fathom giving up fame and riches to become a minister. Some of our conversations centered around questioning if God was asking all of us to take the same drastic measures. Like my friends and me, many other teens in New York and beyond were intrigued by Mason's testimony. As a result, churches soon invited Mason Betha to share his testimony. Church leaders began to create flyers that resembled the same flyers that would invite Hip-Hop lovers to see a rap artist at a club. Not surprisingly, Black churches were filled with teens and young adults who wanted to hear Ma$e's testimony firsthand. Church leaders used the influence of Hip-Hop to draw young people into the church. These encounters—much like Mason's—often led young people to make a decision for God that involved rejecting Hip-Hop culture.

Ma$e dedicated his life to Christ and denounced Hip-Hop. He moved to Atlanta, Georgia, where he joined World Changers Church International. There, he was mentored by mega-church pastor Creflo Dollar before founding his own ministry. Ma$e endured years of scrutiny from both Hip-Hop and the church. Interestingly enough, both the church and the Hip-Hop community

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[73] Mason Betha, *Revelations: There's a Light After the Lime* (Broke & Famous Publishing, 2008), 11.
[74] Ibid.

called for Ma$e to pick a side and stick to it. Over the years, Ma$e would resurface as a rapper in the Hip-Hop community. Before dropping his project announcing his return to Hip-Hop called "*Welcome Back*," Ma$e appeared on Fat Joe's "*Lean Back*" remix alongside Eminem. After releasing his return project, Ma$e left rap once again, stating he wanted to focus on ministry. He would resurface again in the Hip-Hop community, releasing a freestyle addressed to his once-close friend and fellow artist, Cam'ron, in 2017. Currently, Ma$e co-hosts a sports podcast where he and Cam'ron rap and provide commentary on culture and sports. Ma$e has reconciled his new life of both ministry and Hip-Hop by serving as the lead pastor at the Gathering Oasis Church. When asked about how he reconciles his rap career with his ministry, Ma$e says in an interview, "I tell young people that rap is art and entertainment. And they should not try to live what they hear rappers talk about in songs."[75] The sentiment expressed in the interview resonates with my belief that Hip-Hop can be both educational and entertaining. It underscores the importance of recognizing that rap, like any form of art, serves multiple purposes and speaks to different aspects of life. When people want to party and have a good time, they might turn to artists like Drake, who embodies the fun and upbeat side of Hip-Hop. On the other hand, if someone is seeking inspiration while enjoying themselves, they might listen to Kendrick Lamar, whose lyrics often provoke thought and reflection on deeper social issues.

This variability highlights that Hip-Hop is not a monolithic culture; instead, it encompasses a wide range of themes and styles that can appeal to diverse audiences. Whether it's through catchy hooks that get people dancing or powerful messages that inspire change, there is something within Hip-Hop for everyone. This richness allows individuals to engage with the

[75] Mason Betha, "Mason Betha Interview," *Rap Radar*, Tidal, 2017.

culture in ways that resonate with their personal experiences and aspirations, proving that Hip-Hop can educate, entertain, and empower at the same time.

The interesting element in the encounter between the church and Hip-Hop culture in Ma$e's life is that the Hip-Hop fans were as critical of Ma$e's change as the church. The Hip-Hop community often questioned how he could be a preacher while rapping about women, money, and violence. This indicates that Hip-Hop culture has a reverence for God and authenticity. There is a saying in the Black community that goes, "Don't play with God." This phrase explains the criticism from the Hip-Hop community; they were trying to convey to Ma$e the importance of standing in his truth. As a preacher, he would have to speak encouraging words and live according to the precepts of Christianity. Conversely, if he returned to rapping, he would be expected to uphold the truth of an emcee. When Ma$e made his appearance on "106 & Park"[76] (a video show on BET) after leaving rap for ministry, his fans were fully supportive. They encouraged him to live his new truth. However, questions arose when Ma$e displayed ambiguous behavior.

Reviewing Mason's story reveals that he was given an ultimatum by the preacher he met at a church meeting. The minister told him that he could not serve God and be a part of Hip-Hop culture. I believe that the idea of fully dedicating our lives to God is imperative. However, I also believe that serving God through our cultural expressions is equally important. Each of us ministers from our unique cultural lens, and this perspective shapes how we engage with our faith and share it with others. Culture is not merely a backdrop; it is a dynamic force within us and between us. When we embrace our cultural identities in our ministry, we create opportunities for deeper connection and promote genuine expression within our spiritual practices.

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[76] *106 & Park*, BET, 2002, YouTube, accessed June 1, 2023.

By integrating Hip-Hop into our expressions of faith, we honor the cultural narratives that shape the identities of many people today. This approach encourages a theology that is not only inclusive but also responsive to the lived experiences of individuals who find solace, motivation, and a sense of community in Hip-Hop.

Theological claims about God's acceptance and love become more tangible when we allow our cultural experiences to inform our worship and ministry. By doing so, we affirm that God is present in the rhythms, stories, and artistry of our culture. This recognition empowers us to bridge the gap between faith and everyday life, demonstrating that God can work through various cultural expressions to reach and transform lives.

Ultimately, incorporating Hip-Hop as a legitimate voice in ministry recognizes its potential for healing, empowerment, and education. It offers a platform for marginalized voices and encourages meaningful dialogue around faith, justice, and identity. By serving God through Hip-Hop culture, we not only uplift the community but also enrich our understanding of God's diverse creation. This illustrates that faith can thrive in the richness of cultural expression. Additionally, I believe that we represent God most effectively when we embody our entire selves in public, reinforcing the notion of authenticity that has been a central theme throughout my professional paper. I would have told Ma$e to pray about how God could use him within the Hip-Hop community and culture. I would have also encouraged Ma$e to think of ways that he could use his influence to encourage other young people to use their God-given talents. Ma$e's transformative journey underscores the complex relationship between the Black Church and Hip-Hop culture. His journey illustrates how the church can harness the influence of Hip-Hop to engage young people while navigating the challenges of cultural perception and authenticity in faith.

*Biggie Smalls*

While chronicling the encounters between the church and Hip-Hop culture, it is important to point out that many artists have expressed, in their lyrics, their struggles with the church. Most notably, Biggie Smalls, who attended Catholic school as a child, shared his theological struggles in both of his studio albums. His debut project, *Ready to Die*, is rich with messages of despair and hopelessness. Biggie effectively expressed the frustrations of inner-city living, telling tales of betrayal, denial, and economic despair. The project concludes with a track called "Suicidal Thoughts." The pain that accompanies success and the feeling of survivor's remorse left Biggie feeling that death was the only escape. However, in his sophomore project, Biggie returned with *Life After Death.* This project was filled with messages of optimism, along with cautionary reflections on success. Overall, Biggie expressed a deep appreciation for life and a renewed sense of purpose. Unfortunately, he was killed before he could fully experience the future he envisioned.

*Tupac*

Tupac also shared his struggles with his belief in God and his reality. Often criticized for his misogynistic and violent lyrics, Tupac is an example of a tortured soul. He often rapped about looking for a savior who identified with the Black man's struggle. In his song *"Hail Mary*," Tupac writes, "Bow down, pray to God hoping that he's listening."[77] This line encapsulates Tupac's hope for supernatural intervention in the Black community. Beneath the despair felt daily in the Black community, Tupac echoes the sentiments expressed by civil rights leaders of the 1960s and early Hip-Hop pioneers. Rapping about the realities of the Black community often

[77] Ibid.

includes a belief that only God can deliver the change needed. I believe that Hip-Hop culture has always grappled with complex existential questions and the problem of evil. Often expressing the tension between striving for a peaceful life and the lack of positive opportunities for economic stability, rappers have relied on faith to provide answers. Faith in God, most often expressed in Christian terms, is evident in the music of Hip-Hop, where an emcee is often heard praying. The prayers include asking for daily protection from community violence or for forgiveness for crimes committed to survive in their environments. More often than not, rappers pray that God provides a better way of life for the entire community. In all these prayers, we hear a reliance on God. Friends close to Tupac have stated that he attended a church service days before he was killed. According to friends, he intended to dedicate his life to Christ, become a Hip-Hop executive, and promote more positivity in music.

*DMX*

Another rapper who emerged around the same era as Ma$e was DMX. There was no question about DMX's theological tug-of-war. From his album titles such as *It's Dark and Hell is Hot, Flesh of My Flesh, Blood of My Blood,* and *Exodus,* we see how he alluded to Christian themes and subjects. DMX, or Dark Man X, was known for including soul-stirring spontaneous prayers on all of his albums. The prayers displayed his failed attempts to do right by himself and his family. Often asking for God's forgiveness, DMX expressed a deep reliance on God's power. While at the Woodstock Music Festival in 1999, he stopped to pray in front of 80,000 concertgoers. DMX, born Earl Simmons, never encouraged his fans to go to church. Instead, he shared his life's pain and encouraged his fans to have faith in God as well. Years before he died in 2021, DMX announced that he was going to become a preacher. He shared that he wanted to encourage others to be themselves as they pursued a connection with God. This was his way of

providing hope to those seeking God's liberation amidst their challenging realities. DMX expressed similar sentiments during a heartfelt prayer shared on the podcast Drink Champs.[78] In a raw and vulnerable moment, he rapped:

Dear Lord, I need to be rescued

No one can get them except you

Please tell me the test is through

I did my best too

As I could, as I should

Knock on wood

Then I'm hood

Then I'm good 'cause He know my heart

And what grows in the start

glows in the dark

I was chose for this part.

The internal struggle of the Hip-Hop artist resonated with the experience of millions of others. Artists like Tupac, Biggie, and DMX in the 1990s, as well as current artists like Chance the Rapper, Kanye, and Killer Mike, grapple with what it means to be true to their faith in Christ while remaining authentic to their Hip-Hop community. I do not believe that this struggle arises from a lack of personal experience with God. I believe it stems from a comparison to the prescribed experience with God that the church often promotes. Hip-Hop is encoded with authenticity and unique experiences. A person who embraces Hip-Hop might have a distinct experience with God and will gladly share that experience with the public. By recognizing and

[78] *Drink Champs*, 3:13:07, posted by REVOLT, April 16, 2021, https://youtu.be/v6ij6WSySZ4.

integrating the authenticity found in Hip-Hop culture, the Black Church can cultivate young leaders who feel valued and understood, bridging the gap between faith and cultural identity.

# Chapter 3: Application of Hip-Hop in Ministry

## My Ministry View

I have seen how young people naturally form small groups of like-minded individuals within the church, often drawn together by Hip-Hop music. Their ability to be genuine and confident helps them connect with peers. This allows them to continue appreciating Hip-Hop while remaining committed to their Christian values. I have watched these young people mature into leaders who retain their Hip-Hop culture while serving in Christian ministry.

This is why I encourage pastors to implement some of the following strategies in their churches today, as they can help bridge the gap between the Black church and younger generations. One effective approach is to create Hip-Hop ministry programs that incorporate music, spoken word, and other artistic expressions—providing a platform for young people to engage with their faith creatively. Additionally, hosting open dialogue sessions will encourage young members to voice their thoughts and share how Hip-Hop resonates with their spiritual journeys, fostering understanding across generations. Pastors should also integrate relevant themes from Hip-Hop into sermons and teachings to make the message feel more relevant and validating for younger audiences.

Establishing mentorship programs where older church members guide younger individuals can emphasize the importance of faith alongside cultural identity. These mentors can share their experiences while encouraging mentees to embrace both their spirituality and their Hip-Hop culture. Collaborating on community projects that merge Hip-Hop culture with outreach efforts can strengthen connections and demonstrate the church's commitment to youth

engagement. Furthermore, encouraging artistic expression by organizing talent shows or open mic nights gives young people opportunities to showcase their talents, fostering a sense of belonging and acceptance within the church.

Finally, promoting inclusivity in worship by incorporating Hip-Hop elements into services will create an environment where young people feel connected to their faith and culture. By implementing these strategies, pastors can effectively bridge the gap between the Black church and younger generations—creating an environment where Hip-Hop is embraced as a valuable companion to faith and leadership development.

My journey reflects the potential for the Black Church to adopt Hip-Hop principles in ways that cultivate leadership among young people. Hip-Hop is a part of my cultural identity. Just as Jamaicans are closely tied to reggae, so too are African Americans to Hip-Hop. This is why I believe that those who identify as I do should be granted the opportunity to express that identity within the church. I have modeled this by leading successful ministries that incorporate Hip-Hop as a foundation for my leadership.

## Approach

To gain a deeper understanding of the challenge of engaging young adults in church leadership, I adopted several approaches. I began by examining the cultural relevance of Hip-Hop, as it was essential to highlight the significant impact Hip-Hop had made on American pop culture and beyond. This examination provided a foundation for understanding how Hip-Hop could inform and inspire engagement with younger generations. Additionally, I analyzed my ministry context by inviting young adults from the small group I led to participate in a series of discussions. These sessions aimed to elicit their perspectives on leadership within our church while also encouraging them to share suggestions for improvement. Finally, I conducted

interviews with pastors across the United States who lead ministries involved with younger generations, selecting those who operated in contexts similar to mine to gain relevant insights. My goal is to provide a "credible, rigorous, authentic story…giving voice to people in their context."[79]

## Establishing Hip-Hop as a Culture

It was 2006 when my Missions professor called me into his office because he wanted to share what he called a great opportunity. He asked me if I would be interested in going to another country to assist him in teaching a class on mentorship. I responded to him without hesitation because I had never traveled outside of the United States at that point. He proceeded to tell me that he was adding my name to the list of leaders who would be traveling to Ukraine. I was amazed at the cultural differences once we arrived in Kyiv, Ukraine. The most obvious distinction was that I was the only African American in every setting we entered. During a visit to an orphanage, I met a young black girl who had been left there by her father. He was white, and the mother was black, but the baby girl's skin was darker than his family was comfortable with, so they would not accept her. When I entered the classroom to teach my first session, the Ukrainian students had never seen a black person in a teaching capacity.

While at the mall, we received security detail because everyone assumed I was a basketball player, and they swarmed us for autographs. All events led to feelings of ostracism and being singled out. It wasn't until we were in the city square, watching teenagers breakdancing, that I truly found my way of connecting. I joined the Ukrainian teens in some pop-locking, and together, we rapped to the beats on their radio. Though we didn't speak the same

[79] David M. Fetterman, *Ethnography: Step by Step*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 1998), 1.

language, we communicated through dress, attitude, and respect for Hip-Hop music. I refer to these experiences the most when reflecting on cultural exchanges. I believe that we can overcome differences when we find common ground. I often use hip-hop music or other elements of hip-hop culture to connect with others. In my experience, Hip-Hop culture deserves more credit than it receives for uniting nations.

As P. Thandi Hicks Harper notes: "Hip-Hop is a vast and complex system of values and art which has reached worldwide prominence with diverse publics."[80] Hip-hop culture was formed by marginalized, inner-city youth and still gives voice to youth around the globe who experience marginalization in various forms today.

> As Sean McCullom stresses in his article, "Hip-Hop: A Culture of Vision and Voice," "Hip-Hop is more than the artistic elements that form its practice. Hip-Hop embraces these artistic elements most definitely. But it also has blended and transcended them to become a means of seeing, celebrating, experiencing, understanding, confronting, and commenting on life and the world. Hip-Hop, in other words, is a way of living- a culture."[81]

I find myself in agreement with McCullum's assertion that Hip-Hop is indeed a culture. I view Hip-Hop as a cultural movement born from the scraps and remnants of our desolate environments. The Black community in which hip-hop emerged offered little in terms of programs for artistic expression. Yet, despite the absence of formal training, the youth took it upon themselves to use whatever resources they had to create something out of nothing. This, I

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[80] P. Thandi Hicks Harper, "Hip-Hop Development™: Bridging the Generational Divide for Youth Development," *Journal of Youth Development* (2016): 1–14.

[81] Sean McCullough, *Hip-Hop: A Culture of Vision and Voice*, Kennedy Center Website, 2019, https://www.kennedy-center.org/education/resources-for-educators/classroom-resources/media-and-interactives/media/hip-hop/hip-hop-a-culture-of-vision-and-voice/.

believe, is what McCullum captures when he discusses Hip-Hop's embrace of artistic elements. He articulates what I have been arguing: Hip-hop is a culture intricately connected to every facet of one's existence. I speak, dream, father, lead, read, and interpret spirituality through the lens of Hip-Hop.

To illustrate this further, consider a football uniform as a metaphor. The helmet allows a player to see through the face mask and hear through the ear holes, providing a vantage point from which to experience the game. In this way, Hip-Hop acts as a helmet. The shoulder pads protect the player and provide strength to push through obstacles, much like how Hip-Hop bolsters resilience. Meanwhile, the cleats help us maintain proper footing on the field, just as Hip-Hop grounds us, enabling us to navigate life's challenges. During a conversation with Dr. Radcliff, a professor at Fuller Theological Seminary, he shared a compelling phrase: "Hip-Hop hermeneutic." He describes this hermeneutic as the lens through which preachers who grew up in Hip-Hop culture interpret scripture. All these aspects point to the profound impact of Hip-Hop culture on individuals' lives and spirits. Even more, they support the notion that Hip-Hop can serve as material to foster leadership among the next generation.

For my work, I used the functional definition of culture as Marcus Collins defines it: "Culture is a realized meaning-making system that is anchored in our identity(who we are) and made up of these three elements: how we see the world, our shared way of life, and the creation of shared expression."[82] I believe that Hip-Hop contains all of the elements expressed in this definition. It is important to acknowledge that economically disadvantaged Black and Latino teenagers developed this culture in New York City. The rap music created at Hip-Hop's inception was filled with fun, braggadocios, and hopeful lyrics. Most notable is the creation of breakdancing

[82] Marcus Collins, *For the Culture* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2023).

by impoverished teens with limited resources. Breakdancing by b-boys and b-girls is monumental because of the freedom that it represents. Black and Latino bodies have a history of being restrained by the dominant culture. As described by Kat Armas, "One of the greatest devastations of colonization is that it resulted in disembodiment. Bodies were enslaved, detached from the soul, deemed 'savage,' 'uncivilized,' 'evil,' 'lustful.' Our bodies and the songs thereof—once sacred, holders of wisdom, and masterpieces of Creator—suddenly became things, objects to be owned and controlled into submission."[83] Using voice and body in Hip-Hop amounted to a freedom that no one could take away. This freedom can serve as a form of salvation, perhaps not in the conventional sense that one might expect, but in a deeper theological sense that speaks to liberation, self-expression, and the reclamation of identity. It embodies a spiritual awakening that transcends traditional boundaries, fostering a profound connection to one's true self and the Creator. While it was created by and for inner-city youth, the freedom of expression connects on a global scale. This connection makes Hip-Hop relatable and relevant to millions of people from all corners of the globe. Daniel White Hodge, in *The Soul of Hip Hop,* defines Hip-Hop as such:

> Hip-Hop is an urban subculture that seeks to express a lifestyle, attitude, or theology. Rejecting the dominant culture, it seeks to increase social consciousness, cultural awareness, and racial pride. Rap music functions as the vehicle by which the cultural messages of Hip-Hop are sent, and the industry by which Hip-Hop culture is funded and propagated.[84]

Hodge highlights the way Hip-Hop culture gives the marginalized youth of urban neighborhoods a way of expressing themselves. I contend that the church can benefit from young

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[83] Kat Armas, *Abuelita Faith: What Women on the Margins Teach Us about Wisdom, Persistence, and Strength* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2023).

[84] Daniel Hodge, *The Soul of Hip-Hop: Rims, Timbs, and a Cultural Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2020).

people who seek to express themselves and make a social impact. Hip-hoppers readily engage in or are interested in participating in social change, and through this engagement, they experience forms of salvation and uplift. In this way, the church has an opportunity to embrace the voices of youth as they contribute to the mission of uplifting communities and fostering transformation, both for themselves and for those around them. Toby Jenkins suggests, "As a culture, Hip-Hop has always provided a physical space that brought marginalized communities into the center."[85] I believe that the church has attempted to center some marginalized voices in the past. There have been more strides in the Black church to allow women to assume pastoral roles. Also, we see young leaders emerge in the Civil Rights era. However, in the twenty-first century, influential voices for change in the black community have emerged from hip-hop-inspired individuals outside of the church. There are differing opinions on why this is true. I suggest that after the assignation of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, and other prominent leaders, the era of one leader for the entire black community was lost. In recent decades, leaders have come from Hip-Hop because they have influence. This influence comes from their community engagement.

Hip-hop, like any culture, has its flaws. Its expression can be bold, disrespectful, chaotic, contradictory, inspiring, and aspirational all at once. The recent allegations against prominent figures like rapper Diddy highlight the troubling realities that often lurk beneath the surface of the genre. Diddy has faced serious accusations, including claims of abusive behavior and sexual misconduct, which reveal a shadowy side of Hip-Hop that coexists with its vibrant artistry.

[85] Toby Jenkins, *The Hip-Hop Mindset: Success Strategies for Educators and Other Professionals* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2023).

These situations bring to light the need for accountability within the Hip-Hop culture. They affect not only the individuals involved but also speak to wider systemic issues like misogyny, power imbalances, and the weight of fame.

Hip-hop holds significant potential as a medium for self-expression and social change; however, it can also propagate harmful messages and practices that undermine its capacity to create a positive impact. As rap legend and activist Chuck D once stated, “Rap is the CNN of the hood.” He emphasizes that rap serves as a vital platform for sharing social commentary from impoverished communities that often lack opportunities to express their experiences and perspectives. For example, in the 1980s, N.W.A., a rap group from Compton, California—a predominantly Black neighborhood in South Central Los Angeles—used explicit lyrics to address the police brutality they encountered in their community. Later, when Rodney King, a Black man from South Central Los Angeles, was severely beaten by police during a traffic stop, N.W.A.’s lyrics resonated with the shocking footage that America witnessed of the incident. Suddenly, the world was able to see why the rap group used such graphic language. The black experience in the United States is, at times, brutal and tragic. Those describing these experiences do so with the pain and anxiety associated with the traumatic events they experience.

As the Black Church looks to engage with Hip-Hop culture to nurture young leaders, it must wrestle with these complex realities. Recognizing and addressing Hip-Hop’s darker aspects is vital for a balanced understanding of the culture. It is possible to appreciate its contributions while being aware of its drawbacks. The church should listen to the voices in Hip-Hop culture as they convey fears, aspirations, struggles, passions, and inspirations through music. The church has a unique opportunity to engage with Hip-Hop culture and offer hope in the face of their despair. This approach can help the church connect more authentically with the genuine

experiences of today's youth. In my context, I have witnessed many of the same struggles among the young people I serve. They confide in me their fears of sharing their true emotions with the broader church due to the risk of judgment. Instead, they discuss their challenges with friends and on social media, where they can express themselves openly. Hip-hop culture embraces the idea of living in tension; we do not have to be complete but are continuously in the process of becoming. This message aligns with the church's teachings, yet the church often struggles to model this truth effectively.

## Application

The Black Church can harness key elements of Hip-Hop—storytelling, freestyling, community engagement, and diversity—to foster leadership skills in young people. By integrating Hip-Hop into its programs, the Church can create a vibrant, culturally relevant environment that resonates with the values and experiences of today's youth. Below, I propose several effective ways to incorporate these elements:

### *Storytelling*

In both ministry and leadership, effective communication is critical for influencing, inspiring, and motivating audiences. Within Hip-Hop culture, storytelling has long been recognized as a powerful tool for conveying complex ideas and fostering emotional connections. In this genre, artists often use personal narratives to communicate experiences of struggle and resilience, mirroring the transformative messages delivered by ministers rooted in faith.

Despite its importance, there has been little academic exploration into how storytelling functions as a shared skill between these two seemingly different fields. Ministers, like rappers, often use storytelling to shape culture and spark engagement. However, many lack a structured framework or formal training to fully leverage this important skill. This gap prevents both

ministers and leaders from fully harnessing storytelling as a strategic tool, resulting in missed opportunities for impact, influence, and connection. This is especially true for younger audiences, who resonate deeply with authentic narratives.

By integrating storytelling principles modeled in Hip-Hop, the Black Church can cultivate young leaders who are equipped to effectively engage the Hip-Hop generation. This approach helps bridge cultural divides, enriches church life, and empowers youth to share their unique stories of faith and community. Encouraging young people to write and share their own stories empowers them to articulate their experiences, challenges, and faith journeys. In doing so, they deepen their connection to both faith and community, recognizing their narratives as part of a larger tapestry of resilience and belief.

Storytelling can be facilitated through workshops, open mic events, or digital platforms, all of which provide safe, creative spaces for young voices to be heard.

*Freestyling (as defined in Hip-Hop)*

The art of freestyling, or spontaneous rapping, promotes quick thinking and creativity, making it an ideal tool for youth engagement. When incorporated into church programs, freestyling can help young leaders build confidence and sharpen their ability to articulate ideas on a wide range of topics, including faith, social justice, and personal challenges. This practice encourages self-expression while also developing critical thinking and problem-solving skills.

Freestyling requires individuals to think on their feet and respond to changing circumstances, which can translate into real-world problem-solving skills. Interactive sessions that promote improvisation and dialogue allow participants to process and express their thoughts in real-time, creating a lively space for collaboration and reflection. For example, young leaders

might participate in freestyling exercises centered on pressing community issues—brainstorming solutions or voicing perspectives on challenges faced in their neighborhoods.

By embedding freestyling into the Black Church's approach to community engagement, youth can be empowered to approach complex social issues with creativity and confidence. This method cultivates not only articulate and expressive leaders but also proactive problem-solvers equipped to address their communities' needs with innovation and clarity.

*Community Engagement*

Hip-Hop culture has a robust history of addressing social justice and galvanizing individuals around pressing issues. A notable example is Nipsey Hussle, who was not only an influential artist but also a dedicated community activist. His efforts to revitalize his neighborhood in South Los Angeles through initiatives like the "Marlowe Project" showcased how Hip-Hop can serve as a catalyst for meaningful community engagement. Nipsey's investment in local businesses, mentorship programs for youth, and advocacy for economic empowerment exemplified his commitment to uplifting his community.

Young leaders inspired by Nipsey can take initiative on social issues they are passionate about, organizing events and campaigns within the church and the broader community. For instance, they could create programs that merge Hip-Hop and church activities—such as workshops that discuss social justice or health initiatives. By utilizing collaborative practices known as "collabs" or "cyphers," these young leaders can engage with their peers—both virtually and in person—to brainstorm solutions, share resources, and mobilize actions that reflect their collective commitment to justice and equity. By partnering with local churches, they can blend the spiritual guidance of the church with the dynamic expression of Hip-Hop culture,

creating a powerful alliance that addresses both spiritual and social needs within their communities.

I once participated in a transformative event in Washington, D.C., alongside actor and community activist Antwan Glover. He invited me to join because he believed I could address the spiritual needs of the youth and offer them a message of hope. While I focused on nurturing their spiritual growth, Antwan provided crucial insights into navigating street politics and avoiding gang involvement. The event, hosted by the Reid Temple AME Church, exemplified the effectiveness of this partnership. It attracted a diverse group of young people eager for guidance. Together, we created a space where attendees received not only information but also inspiration. The success of the event lies in its ability to empower youth with tools for both personal and communal growth.

By fostering this synergy between faith and Hip-Hop culture, we can continue to uplift and engage young people, instilling in them a sense of purpose and direction.

*Diversity and Inclusion:*

Hip-Hop has long been a powerful testament to the incredible legacy of diversity and inclusion, emerging from the creative expressions of young people from a multitude of cultural backgrounds. From iconic figures such as Eminem, who broke barriers as a white rapper in a predominantly Black genre, to contemporary artists like Jack Harlow, Hip-Hop showcases a wide array of voices and lived experiences. This rich tapestry of artists reflects the genre's foundational ethos of celebrating individuality and promoting inclusivity.

Moreover, Hip-Hop's global appeal transcends geographical and cultural boundaries, allowing youth from diverse backgrounds around the world to connect with its messages of hope and resilience. From the streets of Paris to the townships of South Africa and from the

neighborhoods of Brazil to cities across Asia, young people find inspiration in Hip-Hop's themes of struggle, empowerment, and social justice. This universality brings together varied experiences while affirming that the fight for dignity and equality knows no borders. It also creates opportunities for healthy dialogue among Christians and those from other faith traditions, encouraging common ground and mutual understanding. This legacy serves as an inspiring model for young leaders within the Black church, encouraging them to embrace and celebrate the diversity present in their communities. By fostering an inclusive atmosphere, young congregants are empowered to bring their unique cultural expressions—through music, fashion, art, or language—into church life.

In 2019, I had the privilege of hosting Youth Sunday at Community Baptist Church alongside my dedicated youth ministry staff. We worked closely with the teens to design the service, giving them ownership and creative freedom. One of their ideas was to have everyone wear Adidas sweatsuits, a choice that not only reflected their personal style but also fostered a sense of unity and belonging. They even created a vibrant flyer and a social media post inviting the entire congregation to dress casually, breaking away from traditional norms and making everyone feel included.

During this special service, we recorded a music video where the teens introduced themselves to the church community. It was a powerful moment—one that allowed them to express their identities and connect with the congregation on a personal level. They also participated actively in worship, singing alongside the choir and our guest DJ, blending contemporary music with traditional praise in a way that resonated with their peers. We encouraged the youth to share their spiritual journeys in creative ways. They chose to use large pieces of cardboard to illustrate their struggles on one side and the ways they overcame those

challenges on the other. This visual storytelling not only gave voice to their experiences but also sparked meaningful conversations within the congregation.

As a result of this inclusive and empowering environment, young people felt free to share their stories. Several were inspired to explore their faith more deeply, engaging with the church in new and meaningful ways. This experience demonstrated the profound impact of allowing young congregants to express themselves fully and authentically. It fostered a culture of openness and connection within our church community. By embracing their diverse cultural expressions, we nurture a vibrant and dynamic church life that resonates with the next generation. Such inclusivity not only enhances the church's cultural fabric but also promotes a deeper sense of belonging and acceptance among all members.

In light of recent trends toward the rollback of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programs across the United States, the church is uniquely positioned to fill that gap. It can play a pivotal role in creatively supporting the Black community and other marginalized groups. By championing diversity and inclusion, the church can become a sanctuary where all voices are heard and valued, reinforcing the notion that every individual contributes to the collective strength and resilience of the community. Through programs that celebrate the legacy of Hip-Hop and the importance of diversity, young leaders can help cultivate an environment that honors the multiplicity of experiences and perspectives. In doing so, they position the church as a beacon of hope and unity in an increasingly divided society, reflecting the global spirit of Hip-Hop that resonates with youth across cultural and national boundaries.

The Black church stands at a crossroads, with the opportunity to reclaim its position as a vital institution for nurturing leadership among young people. Young people, in the context of this project, refer to the Hip-Hop generation as defined in Chapter One. By embracing the rich

cultural heritage of Hip-Hop, the church can create an environment that empowers the next generation to pursue social justice, engage in community building, and experience spiritual growth. This integration not only honors the historical significance of the Black Church but also responds to the evolving needs of today's youth. By utilizing the elements of Hip-Hop to develop leadership skills in young people, the Church can remain a relevant and transformative force in their lives. Through this commitment to leadership development, the Black Church can play a crucial role in shaping the future of the Black community and advancing the ongoing struggle for justice and equality.

## Churches who adapted Hip-Hop into ministry

The relationship between Hip-Hop culture and the church can be controversial for some. Throughout my studies, I have encountered numerous writers and scholars who critique the integration of Hip-Hop into church ministries, often citing concerns about its messaging or cultural implications. While I respect their viewpoints and understand their concerns, my focus lies elsewhere. I prefer to highlight the innovative churches and pastors who have embraced Hip-Hop as a vital thread in the fabric of their ministries. These leaders recognize the potential of Hip-Hop to engage younger generations and address contemporary issues relevant to their congregations. By weaving elements of Hip-Hop into worship, outreach, and community engagement, these churches are not only breaking down barriers but also revitalizing their mission to connect with individuals in meaningful ways

In this section, I will explore several examples of churches that have successfully incorporated Hip-Hop into their ministries, showcasing how this dynamic cultural expression can serve as a powerful tool for transformation, connection, and spiritual growth. Through these

examples, I aim to demonstrate that when embraced thoughtfully, Hip-Hop can enrich the church's role in the community and foster a deeper engagement with faith among young people.

*Crossover Church*

Crossover Church in Tampa, Florida, is led by Pastor Tommy Kyllonen, also known by his rap name, Urban Disciple. Before becoming the lead pastor, Tommy used rap as a medium to inspire and encourage others to live a life devoted to the Christian faith. As an accomplished artist and author, he has touched the lives of many young people who identify with Hip-Hop culture, helping them to navigate their faith journeys while embracing their cultural identity.

While Crossover Church's website (crossoverchurch.org) does not explicitly label itself as a Hip-Hop church, Pastor Tommy emphasizes that it is committed to serving individuals in urban areas influenced by Hip-Hop culture. This intentional focus allows the church to adopt diverse methods to meet the needs of its community and promote the Christian faith effectively. The church's worship services are designed to be engaging and relatable, featuring a dynamic worship team, a drama team, and visuals that enhance the overall experience. Pastor Tommy believes that these creative elements make the Christian message more accessible, particularly to those who resonate with the energy and expression of Hip-Hop.

One of the standout features of Crossover Church is its annual leadership conference, Flavor Fest. This event caters to a predominantly young adult congregation, with attendees mostly under the age of 45. Flavor Fest is not only a celebration of leadership but also includes classes that equip participants with practical skills and insights. The conference concludes with a lively rap concert, showcasing talent and creativity while reinforcing the church's commitment to connecting with the Hip-Hop community.

Another cornerstone of the church's outreach is the "Love Your City" campaign. This initiative provides faith-based organizations with opportunities to address real needs in the community. By partnering with local sponsors and other organizations, Crossover mobilizes volunteers to serve their city in tangible, impactful ways. This commitment to community engagement reflects the church's belief that faith should be lived out through action, serving as a bridge between the Gospel and the realities of urban life.

Through its innovative practices and focus on Hip-Hop culture, Crossover Church exemplifies how a contemporary ministry can adapt to meet the needs of its community while staying true to its mission. Under Pastor Tommy Kyllonen's leadership, the church not only inspires young people to grow in faith but also empowers them to embrace their identities within the vibrant tapestry of Hip-Hop.

*Pastor Chris Jones, Baptist Church in Hillside, NJ*

Pastor Chris Jones leads the Baptist Church in Hillside, New Jersey, where he has made a significant impact by integrating Hip-Hop culture into the church's ministry. Before entering the ministry, Pastor Jones was an accomplished Hip-Hop producer, which gave him a unique perspective on how to engage with the younger generation. His congregation is predominantly made up of Millennials and Gen X, reflecting the shifting demographic of the surrounding community. During my interview with him, it became clear that he is not only passionate about his faith but also deeply committed to connecting with youth through cultural expressions they resonate with.

One of the most notable aspects of Pastor Jones's approach is his innovative use of communication tools. He creates eye-catching flyers to promote ministry events, ensuring they grab the attention of young people in his community. These flyers are more than just

informative—they reflect the vibrant energy of Hip-Hop culture, making the church's activities feel fresh, relevant, and exciting. Beyond traditional methods, Pastor Jones has embraced the power of social media to reach young people where they are. He understands that today's youth are digital natives, and he actively engages them through platforms they frequently use. By sharing relatable content—whether sermon titles, inspirational quotes, or community updates—he creates an online presence that resonates with the lives of those he leads.

Pastor Jones's efforts go beyond communication; he intentionally engages with young people on a personal level. He takes the time to listen to their stories, understand their challenges, and thoughtfully incorporate their experiences into his sermons. This relational approach fosters a deep sense of belonging and community, encouraging young individuals to express themselves and engage with their faith in ways that feel genuine and meaningful to them.

In addition to his pastoral work, Pastor Jones is a published author. His recent book, *Sacred Storms*, explores the intersection of faith and contemporary life, reflecting his commitment to addressing pressing issues and guiding his community through them. He also teaches at Princeton Theological Seminary, where he inspires the next generation of leaders to develop Hip-Hop-inspired ministries. His method for developing leaders in his church involves giving young adults a significant role in sermon series development, allowing them to contribute their voices and ideas to the spiritual life of the congregation.

Through his work, Pastor Chris Jones exemplifies how Hip-Hop can be meaningfully integrated into the church setting to create a more inclusive and engaging environment. His innovative strategies not only attract young people into the church but also empower them to take ownership of their spiritual journeys. By meeting them where they are— both culturally and

relationally—he is helping to bridge the generational gap and build a thriving church community that reflects the richness of Hip-Hop culture.

## Conclusion

Let us examine Kendrick Lamar's "Alright." The black-and-white aesthetic of the music video reveals that the world is often seen in stark contrasts. This visual choice highlights the racial tension in America and the disparity between right and wrong. The police frequently enforce the law against Black people under the guise of defending the laws of the land. However, their actions often violate the rights of Black and brown individuals, leading many to question whether justice truly exists. The video features images of young people dancing on a police car—a moment I interpret as a symbol of their aspiration for victory over a system of brutality perpetuated by law enforcement. In contrast to these joyful images, the video also delivers clear and unsettling messages of injustice.

In one particularly striking scene, an older white police officer attempts to handcuff a young Black man. The young man breaks free and runs away, and the officer then pulls his gun and shoots at him. We see the bullet discharging in slow motion. Although we don't see where it lands, we can infer—based on countless real-life tragedies—that the young Black man was likely killed. Kendrick uses these visuals to express the anxiety, pain, and frustration that permeate Black life in America.

The chorus of "Alright" is so cleverly written that many people, I believe, miss its deeper nuances. Kendrick writes:

Wouldn't you know

We been hurt, been down before,

When our pride was low

Lookin' at the world like, 'Where do we go?'

And we hate po-po

Wanna kill us dead in the street for sure,

I'm at the preacher's door

My knees gettin' weak and my gun might blow

But we gon' be alright.[86]

He begins with a line that reminds Black people of their history. The statement "we've been here before" nods to the centuries of enslavement and brutality that Black people have endured in this country. Acknowledging that "we've been down before" further suggests that, while we have made significant strides as a people, we are still all too familiar with being pushed back into positions of oppression and subservience. He then bluntly names the hatred Black people feel toward the police—a hatred that is not misguided but born from the repeated experience of violence and disregard. It stems from a system that often seems to desire Black dying. The reality is clear: Black people are the frequent targets of unfair treatment at the hands of a corrupt and violent police force.

The last two lines of the chorus truly encapsulate the core sentiments of this entire project: "I'm at the preacher's door." Young people facing insurmountable odds daily often become overwhelmed and find themselves at the preacher's door. On the surface, we might assume that the person in the song is at a church, signaling that young people still see the church as a bastion of hope. Alternatively, if the person is at the preacher's home, it could suggest the preacher's accessibility. Either way, the sad reality is that the person is met with a closed door. While it would be comforting to believe that the church or the preacher opens the door, we can't

[86] Kendrick Lamar, "Alright," *To Pimp a Butterfly*, directed by Colin Tilley and The Little Homies, released June 30, 2015, YouTube video, 6:55, https://youtu.be/Z-48u_uWMHY.

know for sure. This leaves us with a deeper issue: vulnerability. Young people often let their guard down, seeking help from church leaders, only to be met with a closed door—whether due to generational gaps, lack of cultural understanding, or missed opportunities for meaningful engagement.

The frustration and strength emerge through resilience in the next line. "My gun might blow" reveals that this person has taken matters into their own hands to secure safety. Here, Kendrick gives voice to the young Black experience in relation to the Black church. After seeking guidance and solidarity from the church and not receiving it, many have turned to self-determination. They sought acceptance from the church before attempting to change themselves. In other words, the church has often been guilty of trying to alter how young people dress and express themselves before making an effort to understand them.

I believe that we can all sing "We gon' be alright" if we take the time to allow young people to share their stories. We need to hear their narratives to know how we can assist them. We must be prepared for them to express themselves as freely as a Hip-Hop freestyle. They may not have their thoughts fully worked out, but they are sharing their experiences in the moment. Just like freestyle rap can change rapidly, young people's expressions of their aspirations and feelings do as well. However, the desire to engage with their community remains a constant. Although their passions for specific injustices may shift, their commitment to improving life for others persists. They are so dedicated that they are open to including a diverse range of thoughts within their communities. This understanding of the global community is illustrated through Hip-Hop culture. All these elements have the potential to help the Black church sing in unison, "We gon' be alright!"[87]

[87] Ibid.

Guided by the raw, freestyle power of youth voices, I transformed this belief into action by designing a survey for my church. This survey provided young adults with an opportunity to share their experiences without expectations, allowing their voices to be heard by a receptive audience. The purpose of this survey was clear: to gain objective insights into whether young adults felt they had a voice in the church and to understand their views on leadership roles. Over the past ten years, no survey has been conducted to gather the opinions of young people in our congregation. This lack of outreach left many feeling disconnected and uncertain about their place within the church community. It became increasingly evident that their insights were needed to help bridge the generational divide.

The survey collected responses from 38 young adults at Community Baptist Church (CBC) aged 23 to 36 years. Among the participants, 21 identified as female and 17 as male, with membership durations ranging from 8 months to 29 years. This demographic diversity provides a valuable snapshot of our church community and enriches our understanding of the perspectives of young adults within it.

When I shared the survey with potential participants, I was met with an enthusiastic response. Many young adults expressed excitement about the opportunity to share their thoughts and experiences. Their eagerness highlighted a strong desire for connection and for their voices to be heard in the church. It also underscored the importance of creating intentional avenues for engagement that empower young adults to contribute meaningfully to the church's mission and leadership.

In this section, I will present the findings from the survey, exploring the key themes that emerged from the responses. By exploring these insights, I hope to shed light on the experiences

and expectations of young adults in our church—ultimately identifying ways to enhance their involvement and leadership opportunities. Through this exploration, I aim to foster a more inclusive church environment that values and integrates the perspectives of all generations.

The survey conducted among young adults at Community Baptist Church revealed valuable insights into their experiences and perspectives, highlighting both opportunities for engagement and challenges within our church community. The responses from 38 participants, aged 23 to 36 years, with varied lengths of membership, offered a rich mix of viewpoints that shaped the findings.

When it came to leadership experiences, it was clear that while some young adults have taken on leadership roles within the church, many have not. Those who have been involved in leadership emphasized the need for mentorship and guidance, indicating a strong desire for more opportunities to grow in this area. One participant shared that he was unaware of any formal process to become a leader. He knew how to join a ministry team, but he was interested in creating a new ministry. This reflects a desire for more innovative outreach at Community Baptist Church, which we will discuss later in these results.

Responses regarding the perception of a generational gap within CBC were mixed. A few participants recognized the existence of a gap, while many others felt connected to church leadership and activities. However, for those who did see a divide, there were concerns about differing values and communication styles between younger and older congregants. This feedback pointed to an area in need of improvement, particularly in how young adults express themselves during worship services. Several participants called for more contemporary music that resonates with their experiences. One of the church musicians pulled me aside to share his frustrations. A young adult eager to express his opinions about the music, he felt discouraged

when attempting to introduce more contemporary styles. He believed that the lack of young people in the choir was connected to the church's traditional style of music and shared his desire to start a mentoring program for youth interested in music. His experience illustrates the generational gap and the resistance to change that is present within the church.

Representation in leadership and activities was another significant theme. Many young adults expressed a desire for better representation of their generation within church decision-making processes. They highlighted the importance of transparent communication about leadership roles, which could help foster deeper engagement and ensure that their voices are heard.

The survey results regarding outreach awareness showed that many participants are aware of the existing youth programs and outreach efforts, like food drives. However, there is a clear need for more diverse programming, especially in areas like mental health support services. This interest underscores a critical gap in community engagement that CBC could address by expanding its outreach initiatives to better meet the needs of young adults. One participant shared that they rely on the church for their spiritual needs while they depend on their sorority to provide community outreach opportunities.

The survey results regarding satisfaction with current church activities painted a mixed picture. While some respondents expressed positive feelings, a significant number felt neutral about what CBC offers, suggesting that existing programs may not fully meet their needs or expectations. Participants voiced a desire for activities that are more engaging and relevant to their lives, highlighting the need for the church to adapt its programming.

The survey findings reveal a modest level of engagement among young adults at CBC, with many expressing a strong desire for opportunities to lead and participate in community

events. Participants emphasized the importance of integrating modern music and art into worship and enhancing communication through social media. They believe these strategies could significantly boost young adult engagement and foster a sense of ownership within the church.

The results of the survey were not too different from what I suspected. The findings support the private experiences that young adults have shared with me: they come to the church because of the engaging Sunday morning experience, but they grow disenchanted when they seek other engaging activities that fulfill their need for social connection. Additionally, the survey results align with national trends, reflecting the decline in church attendance among Black young adults. Key factors contributing to this disconnect include the church's insufficient attention to the specific needs and interests of young adults and a lack of clarity regarding pathways to leadership. Addressing these challenges is crucial for revitalizing connections within the church community and ensuring that young adults feel empowered, valued, and heard.

I would love to see CBC attend more closely to the needs of young adults. I believe the church has the potential to enhance its sense of community by allowing and empowering young adults to lead. A few adjustments could make a big difference. First, I would add younger leaders to visible positions, such as greeters, choir members, ushers, preachers, and sound engineers. Then, I would give young leaders the opportunity to propose new ministries that could meet the needs of younger church members. Lastly, I would partner with local organizations that already offer mental health and social awareness programs to expand CBC's outreach efforts.

## Theological Implications

Utilizing elements of Hip-Hop to cultivate young leaders in the Black church carries significant theological implications. By embracing the cultural expressions found in Hip-Hop,

the church can create a more inclusive and relatable environment for youth, encouraging them to connect with their faith in a meaningful way.

When I took on the role of youth minister at Community Baptist Church, I quickly recognized the impact of my teaching style on the teens. I approached our sessions as dialogues, encouraging them to share their insights and experiences while guiding them through the stories of biblical characters. The lessons resonated with them because they were relevant to their lives. For example, instead of simply asking them to memorize dates, scriptures, and terms, I assigned a creative project: the teens created a profile for Jesus as if he were launching an Instagram or Facebook account. Activities like this truly engaged them and made learning both meaningful and enjoyable.

As a longtime sneaker collector, I started wearing a different pair of sneakers to church each week. The teens noticed, and suddenly, they weren't just listening to sermons—they were guessing which Jordans or Dunks I'd wear next. Playful debates over my "fits" earned me the nickname "The Sneaker Preacher." What began as lighthearted curiosity became a bridge for deeper conversations. Discussions about sneakers revealed personal issues, such as one teenager expressing a desire for shoes that his family couldn't afford, while another shared that, although her parents bought her sneakers, they didn't spend time with her. This experience helped me realize that ministry isn't about projecting perfection. Instead, it's about embracing your true self—sneakers, quirks, and all—to create a welcoming space where others feel free to do the same. When we stop forcing connections and let them grow naturally through shared interests, we build trust that allows real stories and growth to unfold.

This approach not only allows young people to develop their leadership capabilities but also aligns with the church's mission to reach all individuals, regardless of their background.

Engaging with Hip-Hop culture fosters a dynamic dialogue between faith and contemporary expression, emphasizing that the message of the Gospel can resonate across diverse cultural landscapes.

It is believed that both cultures involved will be positively affected in several key areas: authenticity and vulnerability will be encouraged through dialogue, fostering deeper connections; community and identity formation will thrive as young people find their place within the church; and the theology of liberation will empower individuals to break free from societal constraints. Additionally, intergenerational dialogue will flourish as different age groups engage with one another, while missional engagement will be enhanced as the church reaches out to those who feel disconnected. The role of creativity in worship will also be elevated, allowing for new expressions of faith, and holistic spiritual growth will be nurtured as young leaders develop their gifts. Lastly, critical engagement with culture will promote thoughtful reflections on how faith intersects with contemporary issues.

By integrating these elements, the church can fulfill its calling to be a transformative force in the lives of young people, empowering them to become active participants in their faith journey while promoting a sense of community and belonging within the church.

1. **Reimagining Ministry - Cultural Relevance**

This project proposes that the Black church can revive its cultural relevance by integrating elements of Hip-Hop. By doing so, the church can engage a younger generation that identifies with this vibrant form of cultural expression. Reimagining ministry in this way will foster a more inclusive church atmosphere—one that honors diverse cultural backgrounds while affirming core Christian teachings.

The integration of Hip-Hop culture encourages authenticity and vulnerability, both of which are essential for creating a welcoming environment. As stated in 2 Corinthians 12:9, "But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me." This verse highlights the importance of embracing one's true self and recognizing that grace is found in both authenticity and vulnerability.

By embracing authenticity—both in light of Scripture and through the cultural expressions found in Hip-Hop—the Black church can cultivate a vibrant and inclusive community. This calls us to be courageous in revealing our true selves, allowing God's grace to shine through our weaknesses and transform not only our lives but also the lives of those around us. In doing so, we embody the very essence of the Gospel, which invites us to come as we are, trusting that God's power is sufficient to carry us through our challenges and propel us into a future filled with hope and purpose. By integrating Hip-Hop into its ministry, the church can form a powerful alliance that uplifts young voices and fosters a culture of authenticity, healing, and empowerment.

**2. Theology of Liberation - Empowerment through Expression**

By adopting elements of Hip-Hop culture, the Black church can promote a theology of liberation that emphasizes empowerment, self-expression, and social justice for a new generation. This approach builds on the historical foundations of Black liberation theology as described by James Cone, which seeks to confront systemic oppression and advocate for marginalized communities. Within this framework, Hip-Hop becomes a powerful vehicle for articulating the lived experiences of young people, particularly those from historically marginalized backgrounds. Luke 4:18 states, "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has

anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free." This verse highlights the mission of Jesus to liberate and empower individuals who are often overlooked and oppressed, aligning perfectly with the principles of the theology of liberation.

3. **Community and Identity Formation: Collective Identity**

Hip-Hop culture fosters a strong sense of community and collective identity among young people. This was notably evident during the protests following George Floyd's murder, where demonstrations around the world were often accompanied by Kendrick Lamar's song, "Alright". The song served as a source of encouragement and comfort for those experiencing injustice, emphasizing themes of hope and resilience.

The Black Church can draw on this cultural phenomenon to strengthen a Christian identity that resonates with its members' lived experiences. By embracing this community-building aspect of Hip-Hop, the church can reclaim its role as a nurturing space for young leaders, offering a supportive environment where their voices and experiences are valued. Hebrews 10:24-25 reinforces this idea, stating, "And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching." This passage emphasizes the importance of community in forming a collective Christian identity, highlighting that the church can create an inclusive atmosphere that not only affirms the cultural expressions of its members but also builds growth and engagement in their faith.

4. **Authenticity and Vulnerability: A Theological Reflection on Authenticity**

The embrace of Hip-Hop culture can challenge traditional notions of authenticity in the church. When the Black church integrates Hip-Hop culture into its ministry, it not only honors

the authenticity celebrated in this genre but also creates a space where young people feel empowered to share their stories. By fostering an environment where individuals can express their struggles openly, the church allows the transformative power of grace to work through their vulnerabilities. This approach aligns with liberation theology, which emphasizes addressing systemic oppression and advocating for marginalized voices. It challenges the traditional expectation of presenting oneself as entirely transformed by Christ and instead affirms the truth that spiritual growth is an ongoing journey sustained by grace.

Recognizing the genuine and candid expressions inherent in Hip-Hop can enable the church to cultivate an environment that encourages vulnerability—a place where congregants feel safe sharing both challenges and triumphs. This openness can lead to a more profound understanding of grace and redemption in the Christian faith. James 5:16 supports this idea, stating, *"Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective."* This verse highlights the importance of vulnerability and authenticity within the Christian community, suggesting that sharing struggles can lead to healing and spiritual growth. By integrating Hip-Hop culture, the church can create a space for deepening relationships and developing a more inclusive and supportive faith community.

5. **Intergenerational Dialogue: Bridging Generational Gaps**

This project underscores the importance of intergenerational dialogue within the church. By incorporating elements of Hip-Hop culture, different generations can share knowledge and build mutual understanding and respect. Such dialogue can spark vibrant discussions and contribute to a more engaged community. As emphasized in Titus 2:1-2, *"You, however, must teach what is appropriate to sound doctrine. Teach the older men to be temperate, worthy of*

*respect, self-controlled, and sound in faith, in love, and in endurance."* This scripture encourages intergenerational teaching and dialogue, highlighting the responsibility of older generations to impart wisdom while remaining open to the insights of younger members. By fostering this exchange, the church can create a richer, more dynamic community that honors both the legacy of its elders and the fresh perspectives of its youth.

6. **Missional Engagement: Outreach Opportunities**

Engaging with Hip-Hop culture offers new missional opportunities for the Black church. By connecting with young people through music, art, and cultural events, the church can reach individuals who may feel marginalized by traditional church settings. This approach aligns with the Great Commission's call to make disciples by meeting people where they are. Matthew 28:19-20 states, *"Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you."* Known as the Great Commission, this passage emphasizes the church's mission to actively reach out and engage with all people, regardless of their backgrounds. By embracing Hip-Hop culture, the Black church can fulfill this mission and create a welcoming environment that invites young individuals to explore their faith in a relatable context.

7. **The Role of Creativity in Worship: Worship as a Creative Expression**

Incorporating Hip-Hop elements into worship can greatly enhance the church's creative expressions of faith. This approach offers theological implications by understanding worship not only as a form of reverence but also as a vibrant expression of culture and identity. By embracing Hip-Hop, the church encourages congregants to actively participate in worship, using their creative gifts and talents. Psalm 150:4-6 beautifully illustrates this idea, stating, *"Praise him with the sounding of the trumpet, praise him with the harp and lyre, praise him with tambourines and*

*dancing, praise him with the strings and pipe, praise him with the clash of cymbals, praise him with resounding cymbals."* This psalm celebrates creativity in worship, urging believers to explore diverse forms of praise and expression. Integrating Hip-Hop culture into worship allows the church to cultivate an inclusive atmosphere that honors various artistic expressions and deepens the worship experience for all.

**8. Holistic Spiritual Growth: Integrating Experiences**

By recognizing the value of Hip-Hop culture, the Black church can offer a more holistic approach to spiritual growth. This integration allows young people to navigate their faith journeys while embracing their cultural identities, fostering a deeper connection to God through their lived experiences. Colossians 2:6-7 NIV states, *"So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness."* This verse emphasizes the importance of holistic growth in faith, highlighting how the integration of life experiences is essential for spiritual development. By incorporating elements of Hip-Hop, the church can nurture a faith that is not only rooted in scripture but also reflective of the diverse experiences of its members, leading to a more vibrant and meaningful spiritual journey.

**9. Critical Engagement with Culture: Constructive Critique**

This work advocates for a critical yet constructive engagement with contemporary culture. The Black church can challenge negative stereotypes associated with Hip-Hop while celebrating its potential for positive impact. By doing so, the church can foster a more nuanced understanding of how culture shapes theology and community. 1 Corinthians 9:22 (NIV) highlights this approach, stating, *"To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some."* This verse encourages

believers to engage with culture critically while remaining true to the Gospel message. By embracing aspects of Hip-Hop culture, the Black church can connect with young people in meaningful ways, demonstrating that faith can be relevant and transformative without compromising its core values.

In summary, the theological implications of this work highlight the potential for the Black church to adapt and thrive in a changing cultural landscape. One significant example of this change is the dominance of social media and digital communication. Platforms like Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok have transformed how people interact, share information, and express themselves. This shift has been particularly impactful for younger generations, who use these platforms not only for social connection but also to advocate for social justice, share personal stories, and engage with cultural movements. As we navigate a world shaped by diverse voices, the church stands at a pivotal crossroads. The church can either embrace the digital age—cultivating the spiritual and digital development of its members—or risk fading into irrelevance by clinging to outdated forms of worship. Integrating Hip-Hop culture can be a transformative force. By embracing this vibrant expression of faith and identity, the Black church can reclaim its relevance and forge deeper connections with younger generations.

The Bible offers many examples of adaptation and renewal. Paul's approach in 1 Corinthians 9:22 (NIV) illustrates this well: *"To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means, I might save some."* This verse emphasizes the importance of meeting people where they are and adapting our methods while staying true to the core message of the Gospel. Hip-hop culture embodies this spirit. Artists weave their narratives, struggles, and triumphs into their music, creating a tapestry of shared experiences that resonates deeply with audiences.

The current state of the Black Church presents both challenges and opportunities. Many congregations have experienced a decline in attendance among younger members, who often feel disconnected from traditional practices. However, this disconnect can be bridged by recognizing the cultural significance of Hip-Hop. As a powerful vehicle for storytelling, self-expression, and community engagement, Hip-Hop offers tools that can revitalize the church's mission. Artists like Kendrick Lamar address issues of social justice and identity—topics that speak directly to the concerns of younger generations. Their work can help reestablish a sense of belonging for young congregants and inspire renewed engagement with faith.

As stated earlier in this project, the Church can draw inspiration from the creativity within Hip-Hop culture. Just as Hip-Hop artists use their platforms to address social issues, the Black church can reclaim its prophetic role. Micah 6:8(NIV) calls us to *"act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God."* By embracing Hip-Hop's emphasis on justice and authenticity, the Church can inspire young people to engage in community activism and become agents of change in their neighborhoods.

Imagining the future of the Black church means envisioning a space where creativity and faith intersect. Worship services can be infused with Hip-Hop elements, allowing young people to participate not only as congregants but also as co-creators of worship. This could include spoken word performances, rap, dance, and other artistic expressions. Young people should also be involved in the decision-making processes of the Church. They can help usher in programs focused on economic empowerment, environmental justice, and other pressing issues. These culturally resonant forms of praise allow individuals to express their faith in ways that reflect their identities. Additionally, churches can host workshops and community events that foster

open dialogue around social issues, encouraging young leaders to develop ministries that align with their passions.

The Black church can also serve as a hub for mentorship. Seasoned leaders can guide young adults on their faith journeys while embracing their cultural heritage. Proverbs 27:17 (NIV) reminds us, *"As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another."* Through intergenerational collaboration, the Church can become a dynamic space where wisdom and fresh perspectives coexist—enriching the entire community.

Ultimately, the theological implications of integrating Hip-Hop culture into the Black Church go beyond mere adaptation—they represent a powerful opportunity for renewal and revitalization. By embracing the authenticity, creativity, and social consciousness of Hip-Hop, the Black church can cultivate a thriving, inclusive community. Young people will feel empowered to explore their faith while celebrating their unique identities. This journey toward a more inclusive and vibrant church not only upholds the rich legacy of the Black Church but also positions it as a beacon of hope and transformation in an ever-evolving world.

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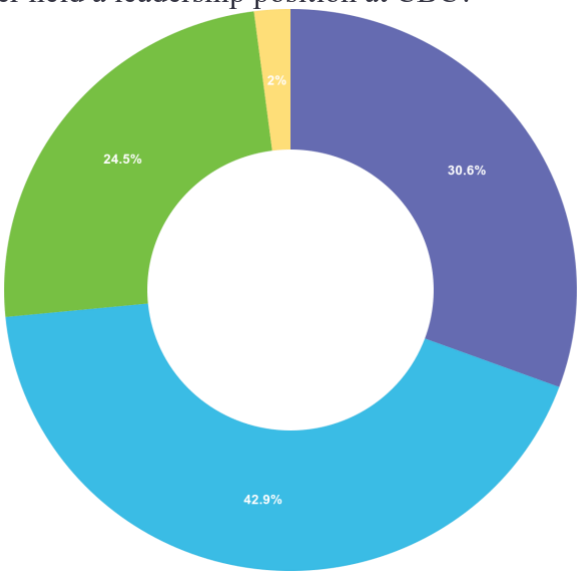
YouTube. Afrika Bambaataa Interview. YouTube video.

YouTube. Theodora Lacey Interview – 2024 Clara Lemlich Awards. YouTube video.

## Appendix

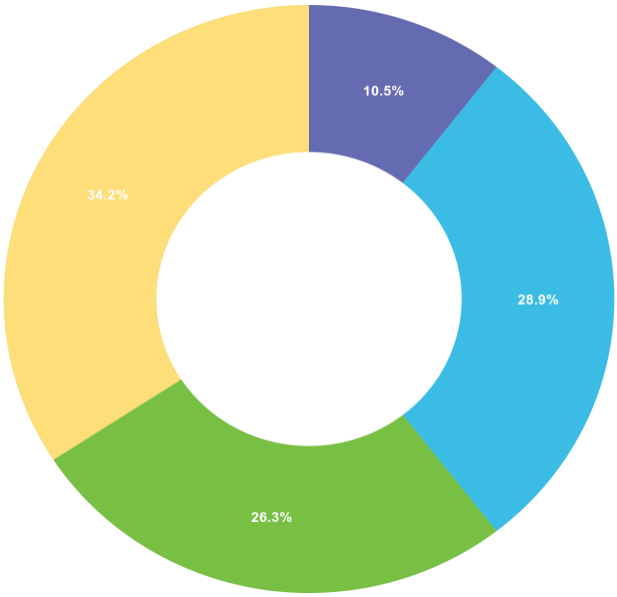
Survey Questions:Leadership Experience:
Have you ever held a leadership position at CBC?




**Answered:** 38 **Unanswered:** 0

| Choice | Total |
|---|---|
| Yes | 15 |
| No | 21 |
| If yes, specify: | 12 |
| __archived__ | 1 |

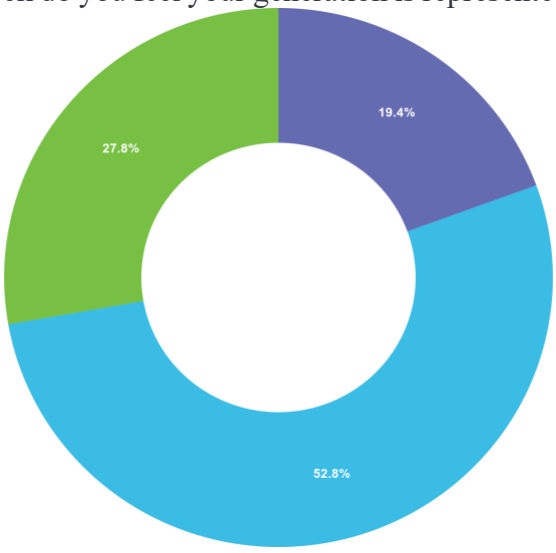
**Q3** Generational Gap:
Do you believe there is a generational gap at the Community Baptist Church?




**Answered:** 38 **Unanswered:** 0

| Choice | Total |
|---|---|
| Yes | 4 |
| No | 11 |
| Unsure | 10 |
| If yes, please briefly describe your thoughts on this gap: | 13 |

**Q4** Representation:
How well do you feel your generation is represented in the church's leadership and activities?

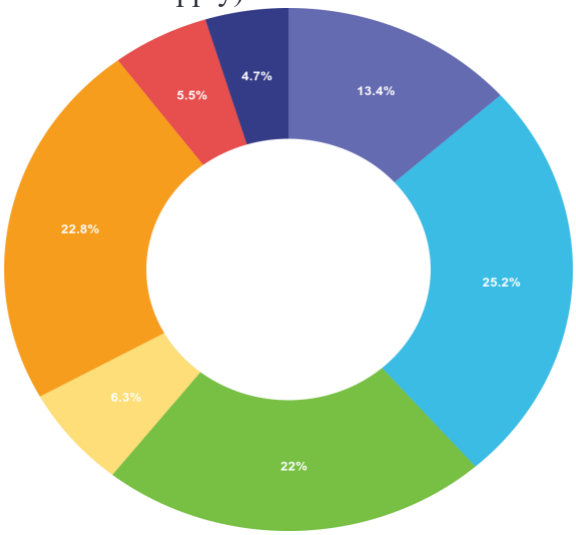



**Answered:** 36 **Unanswered:** 2

| Choice | Total |
|---|---|

| | |
|---|---|
| Very Well | 7 |
| Somewhat well | 19 |
| Not Sure | 10 |

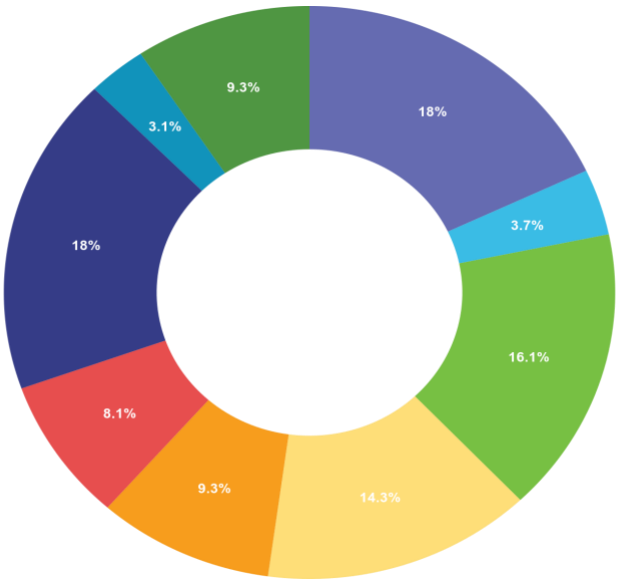
**Q5** Outreach Perception: What kind of outreach does the church currently do that you are aware of? (Select all that apply)




**Answered:** 38 **Unanswered:** 0

| Choice | Total |
|---|---|
| Community service projects | 17 |
| Youth programs | 32 |
| Educational workshops | 28 |
| Employment resources | 8 |
| Food drives | 29 |
| **Choice** | **Total** |
| Mentoring programs | 7 |
| Other (Please specify): | 6 |

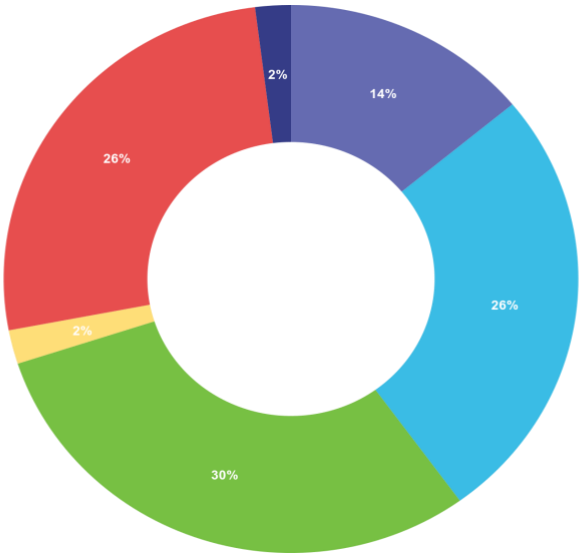
**Q6** Community Engagement Suggestions: What areas of community engagement do you think the church should be involved in? (Select all that apply)*




**Answered:** 38 **Unanswered:** 0

| Choice | Total |
|---|---|
| Mental health support | 29 |
| Substance abuse awareness and support | 6 |
| Job training and career development | 26 |
| Racial justice and activism | 23 |
| Environmental initiatives | 15 |
| Gender and equality activism | 13 |
| Family support services | 29 |
| Other | 5 |
| __archived__ | 15 |

Q7 Satisfaction with Church Activities: How satisfied are you with the current activities and programs offered at CBC?



**Answered:** 37 **Unanswered:** 1

| Choice | Total |
|---|---|
| Very satisfied | 7 |
| Satisfied | 13 |
| Neutral | 15 |
| Dissatisfied | 1 |
| Very dissatisfied | 0 |
| Please provide feedback on what you would like to see changed or improved: | 13 |
| __archived__ | 1 |

**Q8** What specific actions or programs does CBC have to give young adults ages 18-25 a voice?