

The Call to the City

Have We Lost Our Urban Youth?

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Standing on the sidewalks of the city's largest low-income housing complex, a group of cocky young men chided the elderly woman walking past them on the way to church. "Ya gonna hoot and holler in the pews today, sister?" one said. "Hold on to you pocketbook, cuz the preacher man ain't lettin' you out 'til you help pay for his new car!" added another. "Say a prayer for me," heckled yet another. All laughed at their prowess and fearlessness to ridicule the sacred symbols of religion. Most had only darkened the doors of the church when their moms forced them to go as young boys. None planned on returning.

The urban centers are hardly lacking for churches. In fact, four separate congregations circle the perimeter of this housing complex. But none of the four reach out to the subsidized residents, and certainly not to these bad-mouthing kids. Instead, the congregants come from outside the neighborhood and the pastor lives in the suburbs and rarely comes downtown except for church services. Despite the proximity, it's as if the two worlds never meet.

Spiritual Angst in the City

Meme Webb, 19, grew up in a tough, low-income neighborhood. Like many children, she was dragged to church in her early days but wondered what the church had to say to her generation—to whom God was acceptable but the church was considered out of touch. She writes:

Hood Kids

hood kids
but good kids
not bad kids
just misunderstood kids
watch mom shoot up
and dad shoot bullets

and combat the words
that scream that I'm useless
I'm not
just hot
and mad at dad who split
and mom who took him back
even though he split
her lip the third time
I watch from the sidelines
and grow full of hate
from parents' guidelines
and you, pastor
push me faster
to hate
taking our crumbs to fill
your already full plate
your frock is stained
you mock the name
of He who commissioned
cuz you're more concerned
with titles and pensions

than the mission to save me
don't forget the babies
don't be so lazy
cuz I need you greatly
it's not about parking spots
and who pays a lot
but who gives a lot
and who prays a lot
for me
the lost sheep
but nobody's looked for me
don't you know God made
the Good Book for me?
but I need direction
some protection
much affection

not rejection
I...NEED...YOU
man of God
woman of God
be of God
and keep your eyes peeled
for real
we're crying
and dying
but still trying
though momma ignores us
and daddy abuses us
I'm sure that God still
wants to use us
when momma doesn't hug us
and daddy slugs us
I'm confident that God
still loves us
cuz I'm a hood kid
but a good kid
not a bad kid
just misunderstood kid
and I need your help
before it's too late
and I walk the same path
that my parents made
look at us
behind the chain linked fence
pain wrenched kids
such tainted kids
who were struck
but never fainted kids
we live hellish lives
but can be saintly kids
if you just try TRY!
until then
we'll continue to die
continue to cry
the hood kids
that no one really cares about
it's so obvious that no one
really cares about 'em...

Yet in these deep longings of the urban youth, the voices of the streets seem louder than the faint cry of a church stuck in institutional patterns of the past. A growing "non-church Christianity" is growing up where God-talk is hip but church is out.

Underwhelmed and Gone

Though some return later in life when they have children, the challenging years of being an urban teen generally occur without the church. They leave for a myriad of reasons, but some of the most common include criticisms of impotence, hypocrisy, and being out of step with a culture that's more hip-hop than hymn-like.

Church Hypocrisy

In his book *Noah Where Are You? Why Black Men Don't Go to Church*, Kawanza Kunjufu says African-American churches are 75 percent filled with women and girls and most of the remaining 25 percent are elderly men and young boys. In his effort to understand the mindsets of the young adult black males, he lists some 21 reasons that his sampling of the unchurched gave for giving up on the church. These included a general disdain for the clergy—often perceived as taking advantage of weak-willed old women who support the pastors' fancy cars and new suits. The church sold out and is more concerned for its own self-preservation than the needs of the urban poor.

"Most hard living people do not accept traditionalist approaches, and most churches that do work with the poor operate from this stance," writes Tex Sample (*Mainstream Christians and Hard Living People*). Though middle-class suburban churches often fare no better, the bitterness of the urban poor who feel abandoned by the only institution that historically cared for them intensifies. "They don't care about me, they just want my body in a pew and my money in a plate," said one teen.

Hip-Hop Culture

In a phenomenon that too few city missionaries recognize, the counter culture of rap and hip-hop became the language of the streets. Birthed in a type of urban poetry laced with feelings, protest, and brutal vulgarity, urban youth found a way to speak their minds in a public forum—a forum that took over the music world. While many older churchgoers think hip-hop is an African-American phenomenon, most don't realize that over two-thirds of all CD purchases are by white youth and current sales put hip-hop music as the number one genre in popular music. But while advertising agents and market experts have patterned commercials and display ads around this street culture, the church has resisted. It's the same old generational struggle of contextualizing the truth in the language of the unchurched in a church world often trapped in a 1950s worship format.

In the midst of the sinking traditional church in the urban centers, signs of hope are also emerging. In Chicago's North Lawndale neighborhood, urban minister Phil Jackson has helped establish an outrageous hip-hop cultural expression of worship that has packed out buildings in late night Saturday celebrations filled with rap, dance, street lingo, multimedia, and pounding music. Others like Without Wall's Club X in Tampa offer the mics to teens telling their stories through rap. From New York City (Club Life) to West Palm Beach (Urban Youth Impact's "Bow Down") to an Episcopal church in southern Virginia doing "hip hop Eucharist," urban youth groups are adapting the eternal message of the good news to a youth culture living in bad news.

These passionate city dwellers recognize that the Gospel must take on new forms or "wineskins" to reach today's disenfranchised youth. Taking hip-hop's protest, vulgarity, and anger themes out to be replaced by revolutionary and redemptive themes, scores of Saturday night urban youth congregations have sprung up that attract the unchurched in a participatory worship. They capitalize on young people's frustration with America's culture of materialism and reshape the biblical message of purpose and meaning in the harsh and honest language of the streets.

Postmodern Pundits

Perhaps far more pervasive and dangerous than the hardness of the inner-city youth on the corner, the encroaching postmodern mindset is repelling more youth away from today's churches. For decades, Western Europe has watched a steady stream of teens leave the established church in what they deem a "post-Christian" era. Rejecting absolutes and embracing relativism as a standard, most reject any claim that suggest there is only one way to God. Many have become nihilistic and atheistic, while more wandered into a practical atheism that lives as if there is no God. Growing numbers of young adults and teens in America have followed suit. Content to sip coffee and discuss life issues, they often reject the post-Enlightenment's rationalism and embrace an experiential truth.

Again, growing numbers of churches have acknowledged this critical trend and are seeking to recreate worship forms that provide meaning to the postmodern mindset that prefers dialogue, art, and creative music to sermons and hymns. Often meeting on couches in upstairs lofts on Sunday evenings, the atmosphere is

strange to the traditional churchgoer. Defending the "old time religion," congregations tend to see such wineskins as a sell out to secularism. Postmoderns, however, recognize that there's a freshness of truth in this post-Constantinian emerging church that rejects a type of stoic civil religion and replaces it with honest searching where experience is welcomed.

Secularists

Today's unchurched youth are lured by competing opportunities on Sunday. Far from the times when the first day of the week was primarily set aside by the culture for worship, youth today have numerous alternatives to choose from on Sunday. Besides the ever popular "sleep in 'til noon" option, recreation leagues, television, video games, the Internet, pick up ball games, shopping malls, special events, and other opportunities lure those who do arise before noon. Sunday morning church has traditionally been hard for teens to get excited about due to their late-night time clocks. Add dress up clothing and a boring Sunday school lesson, and few teens who have a choice will choose that experience. Parents who attend and weekly fight their adolescent children to get up and go often give in after the resistance continues each week.

Unchurched Christians

Finally, some of the competing forces against vital Christian faith have emerged in the church itself. In the growing evangelical culture, which highlighted individualism and privatization of faith, many youth have accepted a distorted message of salvation that supposedly secures the eternal future in heaven with little expectation on the earth. Reducing the Gospel down to what Bonhoeffer called "cheap grace," a new Gnosticism has grown up which validates a quick conversion with no discipleship required. Many of today's unchurched teens consider themselves born-again Christians but have no sense of obligation to attend church or even Christian activities. Their lifestyles and values are clearly pagan, but their belief system says that they have taken care of the religious business and are enjoying life until the blessings of heaven later. Since belief is a private matter in this view, few church leaders press them with the biblical call to not "forsake the gathering" of the Body. Youth groups built around an entertainment strategy may pick these kids up for a youth lock-in or trip to an amusement park, but rarely engage them outside of their consumerist hedonism. Unparalleled wealth, amounting to over a billion dollars

a week in discretionary spending, has allowed most of these urban materialists to go and do and buy as they please with little thought of sacrifice, servanthood, or service. Many of these teens exhibit strong patterns of selfishness, yet record numbers (six million under the age of 12 in the U.S. alone) suffer from depression and take medication for it.

What Next

The church in the city is in trouble. Though signs of hope and a few new models emerge around the nation, most congregations aren't even asking the questions of what changes they must make to reach a growing disenfranchised urban youth culture. Those that do most often retreat to institutional answers that worked a generation ago and hope a new youth minister can reach "those kids" with Bible drills, youth choirs, and Sunday school refreshments. Little do they realize that the mere existence of the church is unlikely in a couple of decades as irrelevance and postmodernity continue to erode their struggling congregations.

The hope of the church is in the urban youth. In a world where over half the globe now live in cities, new models and wineskins must ramp up soon. Though the same spiritual needs of a 14-year-old exist in suburbia

and the ghetto, the forum to meet those has changed. The church must struggle once again to recognize that the Gospel can and should be contextualized to reach the present generation. The Apostle Paul spoke to the philosophers of Greece, to the sailor city of Corinth, and to the blue-collar workers of Philippi in languages each could understand about the eternal good news.

Christian colleges and seminaries must break free from their entrenchment in European classical academia to train passionate students with solid doctrine in the language of the streets. Congregations must dare to risk Saturday night services that are loud and participatory in order to reach the urban adolescent. Youth leaders must be set free to hang out in clubs, barrios, and inner-city schools to build relationships with a churchless generation that is still willing to talk about the deeper things of life.

What lies ahead is still uncertain. But the call to the city is unquestionable.

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