

EXCERPT

IVP Books

Church Forsaken

Practicing Presence in Neglected Neighborhoods

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Jonathan Brooks ("Pastah J") is senior pastor of Canaan Community Church in Chicago's Englewood neighborhood. He has a master of divinity in Christian community development from Northern Seminary, was an art and architecture teacher with Chicago Public Schools, and is a recording artist with the hip-hop group Out-World. He and his family live in West Englewood.

The Forsaken Culture of Hip-Hop

Not only has the church forsaken individuals but often entire cultures. One culture that the church has done a poor job of connecting with is hip-hop. Even in this age of multiculturalism and ethnically diverse worship practices, hip-hop music and culture are still considered a novelty. I will admit that I am a bit biased and maybe there are other cultural representations that have been equally misrepresented. However, I can say unequivocally that there is no culture in the world that has a broader reach than the hip-hop culture.

This culture that began as a rebellious cry from the streets of the Bronx in New York has become a global phenomenon. It has influenced every area of popular culture such as music, dance, language, fashion, and much more. In a time when the Bronx was being heavily neglected not only by the society but by the church as well, this culture was created to bring peace, love, and unity to a community that had been filled with hopelessness. The culture was all about taking lemons and making lemonade. With little investment in music programs or musical instruments, the creative disc jockeys began to take their parents' records and use the breakdown of the popular disco music of the time to loop two records and create their own music to dance and perform over. Buildings were dilapidated and were being burned daily, but the graffiti writers used their spray cans to create murals in order to beautify their own communities. Breakdancing was created as an alternative to gangs and fighting. If you had a problem with another breakdance crew you did not fistfight, you battled it out on the dance floor. The emcee had the opportunity to not only energize the party but poetically narrate the true conditions of these neglected neighborhoods. These are the roots of this culture. It is important for the church to realize that the three tenets of hip-hop—peace, love, and unity—are very much in line with our Christian beliefs.

I have traveled internationally and domestically to both large urban centers and remote rural villages, and the impact of hip-hop reaches them all. I remember being in the rural villages of the Massai in Kenya, standing inside a tiny wooden hut with a tin roof and seeing spray painted on the ceiling "Nelly iz here," an homage to the St. Louis-born rapper Nelly. When I traveled to Nairobi to visit pastors living and doing Christian community development in Kibera, the largest slum in the world, I heard the sound of the latest hip-hop blasting from barbershops and corner hangouts. It does not matter where I travel—Asia, Europe, Africa, North or South America—the reach of hip-hop is dramatic and sustainable everywhere. I can always find amazing graffiti murals, a club with hip-hop as its main attraction, as well as those whose fashion is clearly impacted by this culture. The ethos of the culture has been passed on for generations and doesn't look to be going away anytime soon.

What worries me about the church's relationship to hip-hop is that we still consider it a novelty that appeals to youth or young adults. The church just uses it as an attention getter. There was even a push to speak of hip-hop culture as a tool used to reach young people for the purpose of bringing them into the Christian faith. Allow me to make a comparison in order to prove how problematic this approach is. A family of Indian ethnic descent visits a local congregation. The next Sunday the church sings songs infused with traditional Indian sounds and serves the cultural foods of India. Regardless of their ethnicity, everyone dresses in traditional Indian garb as a tool to win them to Christ. We recognize this to be problematic and patronizing because we know that culture is not a separate tool for manipulating individuals; it is a core

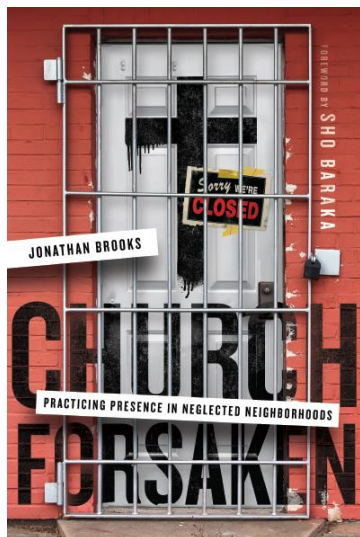


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part of their human identity. We would never want to offend them or make them feel as if we do not value the beautiful culture they bring into our congregation. However, repeatedly I am asked to come to local congregations for their hip-hop services or events to get the young people's attention so that the message of Christ can be shared. Pastors will "dress down" for this event and try to use language they otherwise would never use to "reach" the young people in their congregation or community.

While hip-hop still speaks to youth culture in an overwhelming way, it is now over forty years old. There are pioneers in the culture who are well into their sixties and consider this the culture with which they most identify. It is frustrating and condescending for this global culture to still be considered something specifically for youth and young adults, when many hip-hoppers are now middle-aged adults. Churches that have not recognized the importance of this culture will find themselves not only struggling to relate to youth and young adults but to the middle-aged adults in their congregations and communities as well.

In 2015 I had the opportunity to lead worship for the Christian Community Development Association conference in Memphis, Tennessee. One of the first requests I made was to have a DJ on the stage with me as part of the band during the worship set. Too often DJs are used as novelty acts before things get started, but then the worship leader will naively say, "Now everyone, it's time to worship," as if the DJ were not just worshiping God using the turntables. My friend Pastor Terence Gadsden, aka DJ Rock On, was an integral part of the worship sets that year and we were able to infuse elements of hip-hop into the worship experience seamlessly. While I am sure some were uncomfortable or surprised by this infusion, many others shared with me how encouraged they were to see hip-hop represented from the main stage during worship. It helped them to worship in the way that spoke most clearly to them.

Having someone who loves God and hip-hop culture as the worship leader that week was the reason that the elements authentically spoke to the hearts of the hip-hop worshipers in the audience. I did not have to manufacture anything; there was no language to learn or cadences to memorize. I was able to be authentically who God designed me to be, and because of that, this culture, which has long been forsaken by the church, was able to be received by its representatives in its purest form. People of all ages, ethnicities, genders, and communities were positively affected and for the first time felt included.

—Taken from chapter seven, "No More Outreach"



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