

PREFACE

The idea for this endeavor began a year or two before enrolling in the D. Min. Urban Mission program at Westminster when I was on the board of Cross Movement Ministries (the speaking / teaching branch of the seminal Christian rap group, the Cross Movement). In October 2004, members of C.M.M. and Rock Soul Ministries teamed up with Samuel Boyd, president of the Student Missions Fellowship at WTS, to host a missions conference titled, “Contextualizing without Compromise: A Case Study in Reaching the Hip-Hop Culture.” The event brought together a collective of Christian street-oriented communicators (rappers, visual artists, label executives, producers, etc.), students and professors from the Seminary, as well as pastors and church leaders from around the Delaware valley. Although student attendance was less than hoped for, there was no shortage of excitement among those attending from outside the school about the possibilities for continuing the three-way conversation between the street, the church and the academy. The original proposal centered on setting up mechanisms to enable the conversation to continue, but over time (as a result of several momentum-shifting changes that had taken place within two of the three entities we had hoped to see involved), the initial proposition became less tenable and doable. I went with another approach – the result being this effort, *TGTS 2.0* (formerly *Rapologetics*), which is basically an extension of what we were trying to do at (and then after) the 2004 missions conference.

So what are we looking at here? The first chapter sets out in preliminary fashion some of what’s going on out on the street (a more in-depth treatment appears in chapter three), and the critical need for finding fresh, workable and durable strategies for effectively connecting and communicating with those involved in hip-hop / youth / street culture. A course of study is proposed, which resulted in a comprehensive curriculum that first examines and then sets out ways to respond to those influenced by, involved in or dominated by street / hip-hop culture.

The second chapter (Biblical and theological foundations) examines Scripture from an oral perspective – a paramount consideration for those seeking to be more effective communicators in cultures of orality. We look closely at a number of Old and New Testament poetic passages – some obvious, others not so – discovering their surprising connectivity, relevance, bearing and application to street and hip-hop contexts. Jesus was (and is!) a masterful oral Communicator, so it shouldn’t surprise that His use of rhythm, rhyme and a number of other poetic / mnemonic devices allows Him to be characterized as a rapper – using the Hebraic / Aramaic forms, conventions and sensibilities of His time “locked down” in time and space in 1st century Palestine. How many barriers, borders, boundaries and conventions does He cross / transcend when He spoke with the Samaritan woman at the well? We’ll also look at how Paul’s Athenian Areopagite address is packed with material ripe and right on time for skeptical street contexts.

Chapter 3 deals with the street (hip-hop’s birthplace). Where are the roots of street culture? From whence does “the street” come? And what exactly *is* going on out there (here) in street / hip-hop / urban youth ‘n’ young adult contexts today? What does our response to rap music and hip-hop culture (much more so to its originators!) reveal about us as individuals? As the church? As a nation? These matters constitute the third chapter (historical precedents and current cultural conditions). We head out to the street for an insider’s view of the marginalized people group that pretty much wrought rap music and hip-hop / street culture literally from the ground up to the global juggernaut¹ it is today. The chapter also seeks to humanize and personify an often vilified, “thuggified,” demonized people group – anonymous street-oriented young urban Black males – laying out a comprehensive overview of the historical, sociological, economic, cultural and anthropological issues and challenges facing this

disenfranchised group.² Using an empathetic approach to describe the dire nature of their situation, we meet 25-year-old Mykhael, a street-oriented young urban Black male – a composite character drawn from literally hundreds of real-life young men and their life stories and experiences. While Mykhael and his “tribe” have been the subject of many a research and sociological study over the past number of decades, rarely, if ever, has it been done from a Christian perspective. He tells his story “acavernaculardemic”-style,³ toggling between a street-oriented, 1st person narrational flow (using African American [Vernacular] English and usually found in the body of the text), and the academic research documentation supporting his statements (which will generally be confined to the footnotes). African American voices from throughout American history punctuate the chapter – from Phillis Wheatley’s stunning poem regarding her enslavement (1773) to Kendrick Lamar’s portentous “conversation” with Tupac Shakur (2015). The material in this chapter is intentionally presented as a street convo (conversation) and the reader is heartily encouraged to read sections of the text that catch his or her attention out loud whenever possible, as it is meant to be both a replication and explication of street culture’s preference for orality. While this chapter is lengthy, the writer offers no apologies. Truth is, it takes a great deal of time (*years!*) to get at all the deep things going on in out there on the street, and while there are no quick ‘n’ simple solutions to its multitudinous situations, it is to the glory of God that His people at least try to have a good ‘n’ hearty go at it. (Matt 28:18-20)

The fourth chapter (ministry model) describes the development of an urban youth ministry course (taught at both the undergrad and graduate levels) which offers an anthropological, socio-cultural, missiological and apologetic approach for reaching those in street / hip-hop culture. It employs an “ideational and expeditionary” curriculum, replete with a substantive set of resources, sculpt-able blocks of organized content readied for presentation and discussion, sections of which are found in the appendices. The intent is not to present the last possible word on street / hip-hop culture (impossible) but rather to provide the reader / student / reacher of the culture enough to start them on their way.⁴

The concluding chapter is a Macedonian call to the saints to step outside our comfort zones, follow the Lord Jesus into street contexts (finding Him already out there!), and building up disciples as we go – seeing His church built up in the process.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am deeply indebted to Dr. Elijah Anderson for his friendship through the years, for his writing, as well as for his encouragement regarding the third chapter. I’m grateful for author and activist Bakari Kitwana for our convo regarding “Origins, Development and Emanative Reach of Rap Music and Hip-Hop Culture.” Thanks to the late James W. Sire, for permission to re-work some material laid out in his 1990 book, *Discipleship of the Mind* (“complex but clever, detailed but understandable”), as well as Philip Yancey, who graciously received and wrote a helpful critique of an unsolicited manuscript I brought to his house on a wintry cold Chicago night back in 1988. Thank you, Elder Barry McWilliams, for permission to expand and build on your chart. I’d be remiss not to honor and thank the late Harvie M. Conn whose masterful teaching showed us how to successfully combine day-to-day ministry with academic studies. He then went on to publish several articles I had written for his classes in *Urban Mission* and encouraged me to write a book. I am profoundly grateful and count it a great honor to have been one of his students. Thank you, Dr. John Perkins, for taking us through the ‘hood in Pasadena, CA. Thank you, John Piper, for your WTS 2014 Gaffin Lecture – combined confirmation, affirmation and encouragement to persevere (see chapter 5). Thank you, Dr. Kimberlee Johnson, for bringing me on-board at Eastern University to help write the curriculum for and then teach in the

Master of Arts in Urban Studies program and to the folks at the Center for Urban Theological Studies for the opportunities to present, shape and refine this material over the past seven or 8 years.

Big, BIG “THANK YOUs” to Delise Mitchell for her patience in calmly guiding me through WTS’s academic processes, to Karen Mehlbaum at Biblical Theological Seminary for her gracious help with the manuscript, and to Justin Rainey at WTS for his help with getting this effort “reader-ready” – several times over! A very special “thank you” to my sister Debbie and her husband Jim and to my brother Ed and his wife Nicole and their families for all you are, have been and have done in putting up with me through the years. [Ed’s spent most of his career writing computer code while I’ve spent most of mine trying to read the street’s. Thanks for the “Hepkat Station” logo!] I thank the Lord Jesus for arranging us to all be in the same family. Of course, I cannot thank the late Manny Ortiz (R.I.P) and Sue Baker enough for all they did long ago in getting me to go at this thing (and possibly surprised I stayed at it), and certainly to WTS professors John Leonard, Timothy Witmer and R. Kent Hughes, who graciously and generously helped me get this project finished. Thank you, J. Kelvin Jackson, for your friendship through all these years, and for your life, testimony, work and witness there in Grand Rapids. I salute you. A huge shout-out and thanks to all the members of the Cross Movement: William Branch (The Ambassador [especially so as he became this project’s external reader – thank you, Timothy Brindle, for recommending that]), Brady Goodwin, Jr. (The Phanatik), Virgil Byrd (T.R.U.-L.I.F.E.), Cruz Cordero, John Wells (The Tonic), the late Juan James (enock), the late Nelson Chu (DJ Official) and Cleveland Foat (Earthquake). I’m amazed you put my photos on your CD covers, my music into your albums, my face in the place in a video, and allowed me a spot on the C.M.M. board. Quoting Neo in *The Matrix*, “Whoa.” A special thank you to Carl and Sharon Nilsen for your generosity and gracious hospitality to all of us in the extended Cross Movement ministry family.

My deep gratitude to the Lord Jesus for the late Rev. Dick Goupille, Pastor of the St. John Bible Church in St. John, Maine, and to his dear wife Marie, who together with their children took this fresh-out-of-college, newbie high school teacher into their home and family, and lovingly disciplined me deeper into the Christian faith.⁵ My profound gratitude to all the saints at Hawthorne Gospel Church (Hawthorne, NJ), Fardale Trinity Church (Mahwah, NJ), the Evangelical United Methodist Church (New Holland, PA), Cosmopolitan Mission Service Baptist Church (Philadelphia, PA), Great Commission Church (Philadelphia, PA), Third Eternal Baptist Church (Philadelphia, PA), Madison Ave. CRC (Paterson, NJ), Faith Chapel (Paterson, NJ), to Stephen D. Miller and his family, Jerry and Karen Callaghan, and so many other individuals who have encouraged and supported me in ministry for some 36 years. This project is a small part of the result of your ministry as well. Big ups and madd massive shout-outs to each and every student in our classes at the Center for Urban Theological Studies, Eastern University and Biblical Theological Seminary, who wrestled through most of this material, helped me hammer it out and kept asking when the book was coming out. Well, here it is. Now it’s your task to stay at the task and take where I could never go. Lastly – which in God’s economy makes them first – my profound gratitude and deep indebtedness to each and every formerly anonymous street-oriented young (and young at heart) urban Black man whom I’ve had the privilege and honor to interact with – especially Walt Stewart, one of the first – who helped me see what’s going on out there. Forgive me for where I came up short – and continue doing so – in this and all prior endeavors, but I can’t thank the Lord enough for you all and for your friendships. I really do hope to see you again – if not here – nor there – then in the air – co-heirs – with the One Who is not ashamed to call us “brothers.” (Heb 2:11) To God alone be all the glory, the honor and the praise!

Endnotes

¹ A fascinating word metaphorically capturing all that hip-hop culture is and does: “juggernaut (n.), 1630s, ‘huge wagon bearing an image of the god Krishna,’ especially that at the town of Puri, drawn annually in procession in which (apocryphally) devotees allowed themselves to be crushed under its wheels in sacrifice. Altered from *Jaggernaut*, a title of Krishna (an incarnation of Vishnu), from Hindi *Jagannath*, literally ‘lord of the world,’ from Sanskrit *jagat* ‘world’ (literally ‘moving,’ present participle of *jagati* ‘he goes,’ from PIE [Proto-Indo-European] *gwa-* ‘to go, come’ (see *come* (v.)) + *natha-* ‘lord, master,’ from *nathate* ‘he helps, protects,’ from PIE *na-* ‘to help.’ The first European description of the festival is by Friar Odoric (c.1321). Figurative sense of ‘anything that demands blind devotion or merciless sacrifice’ is from 1854.” “Juggernaut,” *Online Etymology Dictionary*, accessed January 17, 2015, http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?allowed_in_frame=0&search=juggernaut.

² Dr. Elijah Anderson, Lanman Professor of Sociology at Yale University, writes, “young black men are in a dreadful state, an urgent crisis that becomes ever more compounded, while the socially and economically impoverished among them continue to be the most reviled and misunderstood group of the city, and are further marginalized for this reason, which then further deepens their crisis.” Elijah Anderson, email message to author, September 17, 2014.

³ Precedent for this technique is evidenced in Luke’s writing, as noted by Albert L.A. Hogeterp: “In linguistic terms, my case study argues that Luke’s Greek should be considered as a ‘corpus mixtum’ [a mixed body of writing]. Luke addressed a Greek-reading audience not only with standard *κοινή* Greek, but he also included a Semitized variety of Greek which was probably more informed by factors of stylistics of ancient Greek Bible translation and revision of Semitic and Graeco-Semitic language situations than previously assumed.” Albert L.A. Hogeterp, “New Testament Greek as Popular Speech: Adolf Deissmann in Retrospect: A Case Study in Luke’s Greek,” *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 102, no. 2 (January 2011): 200, accessed March 5, 2014, <http://www.degruyter.com/view/j/zntw.2011.102.issue-2/zntw.2011.012/zntw.2011.012.xml>.

⁴ Appendix B contains the first of 5 Modules of the TGTS 2.0 course curriculum while Appendix C contains Modules 2-5. There are 18 appendices containing supplemental material for the course as well as additional resources pertaining to urban youth ministry. Most of the material in the Appendices was not included in the original submission to Westminster Theological Seminary due to size limitations. More information is available at the TGTS 2.0 / YUBM Ministries website (<http://hepkat.wixsite.com/tgts>). Contact me directly at bob.hepburn@gmail.com if there’s any way I may be of assistance to you.

⁵ For more on this awesome family and their ministry see Marie Goupille, *Our Long Summer: Forty Years in the St. John Valley* (Hartland, New Brunswick, Canada: John Hoag, publisher, New Brunswick Bible Institute, 2009). Wasn’t aware of it at the time, but the Goupille family and the saints at St. John Bible Church (on St. John Road near the St. John River in St. John Plantation, Maine), saw me through my first cross-cultural experience, living 2 years on Maine’s northern border with Canada, immersed in French Acadian culture (which, in turn, has connections to New Orleans), while teaching high school instrumental music and leading a college-community choir at the University of Maine at Fort Kent.