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Christian rapper Elden Kaeo
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## RAP REDEEMED:

# Teen minister takes to stage as 'Bloodbought'

**By Jenny Hartgraves**

*Staff Writer*

DUMAS—A Texas Baptist youth minister is “rapping” the gospel in a new package.

Elden Kaeo, youth minister at Temple Baptist Church of Dumas, has taken on the name Bloodbought as a Christian rap artist.

His mission is “to expose adults and young people alike to the dangers behind secular rap” and provide a “God-glorifying, lyrical substitute in rap form to our Christian youth and those seeking an answer for the truth of life.”

In 2002, rap music outsold all genres of music worldwide. Eminem, a white rapper-turned-actor, had the biggest commercial hit of 2002 with “The

Eminem Show” selling 7.6 million albums, according to retail figures by Nielsen SoundScan. Eminem's movie “8-Mile” ranked fifth in take for the year, grossing more than \$114 million.

To Kaeo, the success of Eminem and other secular rappers proves that America's children and youth are headed for trouble.

At his concerts, Kaeo demonstrates rap's influence on children by staging a variation of “Name That Tune.” He offers a free CD to any child who can identify a rap artist upon hearing a few lyrics.

Without fail, children and youth rush the stage after only a few words. Kaeo deliberately picks the smallest child who came forward to prove a point. Parents, he said, are appalled to see the expansive knowledge of lyrics coming from children as young as 6.

Kaeo then recites a simple Bible verse and asks again for volunteers to identify the phrase. Normally, fewer than five or six kids know the answer, and they respond timidly.

Kaeo's mission as Bloodbought grew from his own experience as a child and youth. Now 27, he was born in Killeen to a military family. His father was heavily involved with drugs, both using and selling on military bases, and he paraded the family across the country during his relocations.

The family's life changed one day, however, when his father went for a haircut and the barber shared the gospel. His father became a Christian that moment.

Outside the base barber shop, Kaeo's father had enough drugs in his car to “put someone away for life,” Kaeo said. His father immediately went to the dumpster and unloaded the drugs. Moments later, drug dogs arrived onto the base, the first his father ever had seen there.

His father made a drastic life change and led his son to become a Christian at 6 years of age. Despite his father's moving testimony and strict Christian upbringing from that point forward, Kaeo was a rebellious teen. He moved out of the house at 16 and started rapping in underground clubs in Missouri.

Like his father's previous life, Kaeo soon developed a debilitating addiction to drugs, even after accepting a scholarship to play basketball at Baptist Bible College of Springfield, Mo.

"The only way you can explain why I was never locked up was because of God's love and mercy," Kaeo said. "His love supercedes all of that."

Kaeo met and married his wife, Dana Melia, in 1998 and began working at Mount Vernon Treatment Center, a maximum security unit for youth who have committed felonies.

Ironically, what put Kaeo in a dark place and what brought him out was one in the same thing—rap music.

While working the night shift at a juvenile detention center, Kaeo experienced God's love through rap music. In the dark, lonely quarters of the detention center, Kaeo played a CD his wife had bought him. He expected to make fun of the Christian rappers Brothers Grimm.

Instead, he immediately connected with their powerful lyrics.

"I was just crying uncontrollably," he said. "I realized these guys had experienced the same lifestyle I had lived, and the song just broke me."

Soon, he and his wife sold all their belongings, packed the car and drove off in search of God's will for their marriage and their lives. During those rocky months, Kaeo said, God provided for them along the way.

His marriage struggled. Eventually, the couple attended a marriage

seminar in Springdale, Ark., where they met Jay McGaughey, pastor of Temple Baptist Church in Dumas.

When McGaughey met Kaeo, "I saw a young man with opportunity," he said. "When he told me he was looking for a job, I invited him to come and stay with me in Dumas while he worked to save money for seminary."

In Dumas, which McGaughey called a small "cowboy-oriented community not more than two miles long and a mile wide," Kaeo felt strangely out of place. While Kaeo was visiting McGaughey, the church's youth minister left the congregation unexpectedly and quickly.

Kaeo stepped in to fill the void. "The kids just kept asking, 'Brother Kaeo, what do we do? Why is this happening?' and I felt called to stay," he said.

He's been there nearly two years now, and "the youth department is like it's never been," McGaughey said.

"Kaeo is a tremendous and wise counselor, and he has a burden for these kids unlike anything I've ever seen. He's an excellent preacher and Bible teacher, and the kids really admire him."

Despite his gift for teaching, Kaeo still believed God was calling him to do something with his passion for rap music. He asked: "How can I use these desires for God's work? How can I glorify the kingdom?"

He was soon overwhelmed with God's quick response, he said.

Every year, Temple Baptist Church holds an annual Crusaders conference, a week-long "invasion of the Lord," McGaughey said, that started in 1984. Last year, the special performer was Kaeo, who billed himself as Bloodbought.

In his first-ever performance of Christian rap, 156 people dedicated their lives to Christ—not just kids but people of all ages, 12 to 42 years old.

“Dumas is the last place you'd think a rapper could make an impact, but he did. He made a big impact,” McGaughey said.

“I knew then that this was a legitimate, God-glorifying ministry,” Kaeo said.

Inspired by the success of that event, Kaeo began researching the effects of rap music in today's culture, spending more than 80 hours in books and data to build his defense. He dedicates himself to helping parents understand how rap affects their children.

“I understand the sensitivity in the area of Christian rap in some circles, but I have answered God's calling to fight Satan in this area, and it's a very serious matter to me,” he said.

His research shows that 80 percent of secular rap's music buyers are Caucasian, destroying all preconceived notions of racial preferences in rap music. Nine out of 10 16-to-24-year-olds watch more than five hours a week of MTV. More than half that group (67 percent) report buying a new rap CD after seeing the music video on MTV.

As Bloodbought, Kaeo believes his music is a call to fight Satan's hold over secular music.

“The Bible must be brought out in Christian music to combat subliminal messages, and the key is bringing it in forms of music that our young people will listen to,” he said.

Bloodbought released his first single April 11, with three songs-“Jesus,” “He Gotz the Whole Wide World,” and “Do U Wanna Come With Me.”

“He Gotz the Whole Wide World” has been a hit in the Christian rap community. While juggling a busy summer with the youth in Dumas, including three youth camps, Kaeo also has made plans to perform in Puerto Rico, the Philippines and, closer to home, in Dalhart.

Last year alone, Bloodbought led 216 people to faith in Jesus Christ through his concert ministry.

“I don't care how much money (he gets) or how many people come. If God provides me with a place to perform, then I'll go,” he said. “God's literally dropped all this in my lap, and he's provided me with opportunities all along the way.”

One of his biggest problems, he said, is that he can't seem to sell any of his CDs. He gives them all away. He enlisted his wife to manage the sales, but she couldn't turn down the kids either.

“I just can't stand to sell this to young people who really want to listen,” he said. “I want all kids to have a chance to discover how God can use this music to speak to you.”

The greatest reward, Kaeo said, is not just hearing his music on the radio, but hearing his music come from the lips of his kids. “They never ask me for my autograph, because I'm too hard on them. But I know they like the music.”

“They really admire him,” McGaughey said. “He's winning over some rough kids in this community.”

Elden Kaeo takes the stage name Bloodbought to perform Christian rap.

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