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NASHVILLE, Tenn. (BP)—The popularity of Christian rock groups such as Switchfoot, MercyMe and Casting Crowns has signaled a growing trend for the gospel music industry, which reported a sales total of 43.4 million units in 2004.

"Gospel music will always be unique for its wide-ranging music styles and diverse audiences, and black gospel and praise and worship continue to be powerful categories of Christian music, but there has definitely been a measurable shift towards rock, alternative, hip-hop, urban and other styles of music particularly popular with younger customers," said John Styll, president of the Gospel Music Association.

"This is a great sign that a new generation of music fans has discovered these and other artists and hopefully indicates a continued bright outlook

for gospel music."

Switchfoot joined Columbia Records, a mainstream company that helped push their single "Meant to Live," to No. 5 on Billboard's Adult Top 40 and caused a surge in both their Christian and mainstream retail sales, GMA representatives said.

"Switchfoot is reflective of our newer generation of Christian artists—artists whose lives are greatly influenced by their Christian faith, who write and record music that is informed by those beliefs, but don't use Christian rhetoric that might otherwise limit their audience," Stylls observed.

"From the start of their music careers, Switchfoot has been making their groundbreaking style of music, which speaks eternal truths in a way that relates to their generation and have patiently persisted until finally the world has taken notice."

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