

Black seminaries embrace hip-hop to reach out to young people

November 25, 2011

WASHINGTON (RNS)—It's hard enough to get young people out of bed and into the pews on a Sunday morning, but two leading black seminaries think they have found a way to grab the next generation—hip-hop.

"If we're going to take young people seriously, we have no choice," said Alton B. Pollard III, dean of the [Howard University School of Divinity](#).



Christian hip-hop artist Sean Simmonds performs at a convocation at Howard University School of Divinity. (RNS PHOTOS/Courtesy Sandy Waters/Howard University School of Divinity)

"When we talk about what's happening in the lives of young people, that's a subterranean culture that some of us just don't know how to get with."

Howard's recent annual convocation featured the rocking beat of Christian hip-hop artists Da' T.R.U.T.H. and Sean Simmonds, and professors are

using spoken word—rap poetry performed as social commentary—to examine the New Testament.

At [Vanderbilt University Divinity School in Tennessee](#), several professors analyze hip-hop music in their classes as they study protest music. At Northern Seminary in Illinois, the 2005 book [*The Hip-Hop Church*](#) is used in courses on youth ministry.

"In order to be relevant, in order to do youth ministry, you can't do ministry without engaging hip-hop," said Maisha Handy, who has taught a course on hip-hop and Christian education for two years at Atlanta's [Interdenominational Theological Center](#).

Howard's Pollard concedes seminaries "have come a little late to the dance," but says its better to embrace hip-hop rather than be intimidated by it.

And though some might cringe at the genre's misogynistic, violent and drug-related undertones, it's not all that different from the church's initial reaction to jazz or the blues.

"Some artists do definitely exhibit egregious behavior, and that behavior should never be condoned," said Joshua Wright, a sociologist at the [University of Maryland Eastern Shore](#), speaking at a hip-hop panel at Howard. "But this does not make all hip-hop artists devil worshippers."

Wright pointed to Christian hip-hop artists—self-described "misfits" who are caught between two worlds—as an example of how hip-hop can be harnessed for good.

Michael Eric Dyson, a [Georgetown University scholar](#) who teaches a class on hip-hop superstar Jay-Z, said religious critics of hip-hop need to look at their own leaders.

"As much as you want to dog a rapper and steamroll his or her lyrics, steamroll some sermons, too, of the bishops and the imams and the rabbis," said Dyson, who was headed to a concert featuring Jay-Z and Kanye West.



Georgetown University professor Michael Eric Dyson speaks at a panel on hip-hop and black churches at Howard University School of Divinity. (RNS Photo)

Dyson spoke in an open collar, and advocates say dressing down is just one way some churches can indicate an openness to hip-hop culture.

"Maybe we need some fitted caps on Sunday," said Willie J. Thompson Jr., an assistant pastor of a Presbyterian congregation in Springdale, Md., who helped coordinate Howard's Christian hip-hop concert. "Maybe we need to dress down. Maybe we need to change some of the things that we've become accustomed to."

Hip-hop artists say part of the problem is that churches are too traditional, too rigid.

"I am young, gifted, eccentric and artistic, but I am not religious," said Oraia, a white female spoken-word artist who appeared onstage at Howard between black male artists. "I don't worship tradition."

Kayeen Thomas, a first-year student at Washington's [Wesley Theological](#)

[Seminary](#) and a hip-hop performer, said the church has much to learn from hip-hop's Christian and not-so-Christian aspects. One tends to focus on the suffering of Jesus; the other on the suffering of the streets.

"The last time I performed, I did a Christian rap song, and I did a song about Troy Davis," he said, referring to the recently executed Georgia inmate who became a rallying cry for alleged racial disparities in capital punishment.

Thomas, who comes from the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, eventually hopes to lead conferences on hip-hop as a tool for evangelism.

"It does have the ability to be used not only to bring souls to Christ but to also change lives, to also inspire people to do better," he said. "For you to ignore a medium that has a potential to be so powerful is a huge, huge mistake on the part of the church."