

Crossing Over to Club Culture

Crossover Community Church in Tampa, Florida, is using innovative methods to impact the coastal town's hip-hop scene.

More than 100 teen-agers gather in a darkened room on a Thursday night in Tampa, Florida, bouncing to a hip-hop beat that thumps deep in the bass register. The graffiti-covered back wall is illuminated with colored lights. A man in his late 20s hovers over two turntables and spins vinyl records of looped R&B instrumental music. He deftly switches between them, occasionally using the needle to scratch one or the other to the rhythm of the bass.

Fifteen young men, facing a sea of expectant faces, stand in front of a six-piece live band and begin "freestyling"—speaking rap-style to the crowd in made-up-on-the-spot rhymes. Sometimes two of the rappers freestyle at once, trading verses and interjecting questions—"What? What?"—for the other to answer, all in time to the rhythm.

In the back of the room three gifted break-dancers spin, sometimes on their heads, on makeshift mats. In the front, three girls—one Hispanic, one African American, one Caucasian—link arms and hum along, swaying enraptured with the music.

All in all, it seems like a typical night at a hip, urban-music nightclub. But there are not-so-subtle differences here.

For one, this is a scene from Crossover Community Church. No

one is making plans for a late-night rendezvous. No one is drinking alcohol. There is a feeling of peace throughout the room.

And instead of spewing profanity and misogyny, the artists on the stage are leading the crowd in a most atypical breakdown chant: "Crossover, crossover. All day, every day, representin' Christ."

The music slows down. A young worship leader steps to the microphone and leads more than 100 teen-agers in singing "Jesus, Draw Me Close." Then he stops it for a moment and addresses the crowd.

"This hip-hop culture teaches us to be hard," he says. "But let me tell you something. Christ is all you need. Let's press in. Let's praise Him."

The people press in. Soon the room is filled with quiet, except for the occasional cry of a teen-age mother's baby or a whispered word of praise. It is a reverent moment, an experiential one. People are entering the presence of a God big enough to overcome difficult circumstances.

There are real needs in this room: a girlfriend was shot in the face last Sunday and faces extended hospital time and reconstructive surgery; roommates have been speaking to each other out of anger; and more. One by one, each circumstance is met with prayer. There are expressions of repentance, forgiveness and gratitude.

Two hours into the service, a tall, skinny young man who led the rapping approaches the microphone. His name is Tommy

Kyllonen.

He is not a gifted speaker, but he shares simply—first from his heart and then from the book of Hebrews. He talks of his own struggle of the last 4-1/2 months, about how he has been asking God hard questions about a massive brain hemorrhage that left his father in a coma for two months.

“We’re running a race,” he tells the crowd. “It’s a long race, and we must finish strong.” Without God the race will be too hard, he adds, and there is only one thing to do—“Press in further. Press in further. Press in further.”

Kyllonen, 27, has had to “press in” just to make sure some of these teen-agers are here. Earlier, he had been aboard one of the church’s vans, stopping in Tampa neighborhoods to give kids a ride to the church, showing an interest as each one hopped aboard.

“Hey, Tommy,” said 15-year-old Brandon Robertson as he climbed into the aging white van that reads “Crossover” in brilliantly colored graffiti.

“Brandon!” replied Kyllonen. “You got some rhymes for the open mike tonight?”

Robertson smiled broadly. A year ago, he was too shy to take the microphone in front of everyone else, but he has been taking an “MC” class at Crossover, learning from a caring adult how to rap. Tonight he was one of the shining stars when the freestyling started.

The van made another stop. Two girls jumped in. A woman waved from her doorstep, and Kyllonen asked her about her family.

Another stop. As each teen-ager boarded the van, Kyllonen asked them about school, work, their interests and their families.

Many of the riders have found a niche at Crossover. One talked about a new skit she is helping to create in drama class. Another is thinking of joining a break-dancing class.

These activities provide the youth a place of connection with adults who care for them. They also spark hope and a sense of self-worth in a community where 80 percent of the children are fatherless and where drugs are widely available.

“You can present the gospel in so many ways besides preaching,” Kyllonen told Charisma, underscoring a value that is an important part of Crossover’s ministry philosophy.

It is one of his core approaches to ministering to people—and it’s a conviction that’s helped to bridge his ministry with the club and urban culture since he first started working without pay as a youth leader for Crossover.

Hip Enough for Hip-Hop

Tommy Kyllonen grew up in a neighborhood much like this one in Tampa, on the northeast side of Philadelphia. He developed an

interest in inner-city ministry there during his first years of college in the early 1990s.

He soon transferred to Southeastern College in Lakeland, Florida, to study youth ministry.

It was there that he met his wife Lucy, now 29, a brilliant, passionate social-work major from Queens, New York.

After graduation in 1996, he was offered the youth pastor job at Crossover Community Church and started work that year. It was no dream job.

For one thing, the tiny church had no young people. They had no facility, no budget for programs, no history with the teenagers in the community and no idea how to reach them. And the church was unable to offer the newly married couple a salary or benefits. It was a test of faith for Lucy.

"I was thinking, No way—we can't do this. They had told [Tommy] he wasn't guaranteed a salary. It was very difficult for me at the beginning," she says.

After much prayer and discussion, the couple accepted the offer. Lucy worked full time to support the family financially, even as she pursued a master's degree in counseling.

Tommy asked the senior pastor if he knew any teen-agers and was introduced to two 12-year-old girls who were neighbors to the church. They invited two friends, Kyllonen ordered some pizza, and a youth group was born.

More kids started coming, two or three at a time. The Kyllonens went to the bank to open a checking account and invited the teller to the church. She came and brought her three teen-age daughters. The oldest eventually married, moved north and became a youth pastor.

The little church was making up the rules as it went along, and the Kyllonens were free to experiment. At first, they held only Wednesday night Bible studies, with sharing and games. More students started coming, and relationships of trust were established.

Older young adults in their late teens and early 20s started showing up, and they were made welcome, too. Often, the young adults would encounter Christ, become radically changed and become youth leaders a year or two later.

Kyllonen started a basketball league with the local park service and several local businesses, offering free pairs of Nike shoes to teens who completed the two-month program. Almost 100 teen-agers signed up for the league, and more than 60 completed it. Once again, Kyllonen bought pizza, invited the players to the church, and 70 kids showed up.

Kyllonen had been developing a unique brand of hip-hop music on the side, and Christian record labels were starting to notice. He placed a song on a compilation album, then landed a record deal with Seventh Street Records, eventually releasing two full-length albums as rapper Urban D.

The records, wildly successful in the financially unrewarding world of Christian hip-hop, barely broke even. But the attention opened doors for Kyllonen to perform around the

country. He was able to share the message of Christ while making enough money to supplement the small stipend he had begun to receive from the church.

The youth meeting moved to Thursday nights and continued to grow, but with the growth came very real obstacles.

Most of the new attendees had never set foot in a church before they came to Crossover. They didn't know how to respect church property or behave in a worship-service setting. Kyllonen and his growing staff of adult leaders had to set a standard and try to figure out how to enforce it.

And lives did not always change quickly. There were dramatic conversions accompanied by instant change—but more often, change followed a long process of Kyllonen speaking truth, setting an example and praying constantly.

“Bottom line, you gotta keep loving people,” Kyllonen says. “It might take a year or two to see results. It's not an overnight thing.”

Eventually, as musicians and disc jockeys began receiving Christ, the Crossover staff began integrating the hip-hop sound into their worship times. A street-graffiti artist accepted Jesus, and Kyllonen allowed him to paint a mural in the sanctuary and on the three church vans that shuttled weekly into local neighborhoods or housing projects. Skilled break-dancers called “B-boys” came to Christ and began teaching their art to younger kids.

The little church was becoming known locally as “the hip-hop church,” a place where everyone would be accepted and loved no

matter how they were dressed or what they had done. The Tampa Tribune ran a front-page story that praised the church's positive impact on the inner city. The largest TV news operation in Florida brought a crew to film the Thursday night proceedings.

Seeing the way that the hip-hop sound attracted the curious, Kyllonen began to book national Christian rap acts at the church. Soon, groups like Cross Movement, KJ-52 and One Way considered Tampa the hot spot to perform in Florida.

Many who came the first time for a concert began attending Crossover's Thursday night services. Some gave their lives to Christ at the concerts. Before long, the young people of the church outnumbered the original adult membership.

Kyllonen's concert schedule picked up, and he had to make some hard choices. He decided the youth ministry was his priority over being a rap celebrity, and he never booked a show on a Thursday night.

The schedule was grueling. Adult leaders tell stories about Kyllonen returning from a faraway show and showing up at the church to scrub the sanctuary floor the next morning.

From the early days when the group was small Kyllonen had known that the work of ministry was too much for him to do alone. His wife had always been an integral part of the outreach, and he regularly had given responsibility to new adult leaders, empowering them to use their talents and spiritual gifts to serve and build relationships with kids.

Now Crossover was bursting at the seams, tearing out offices in the church building and turning them into large meeting rooms. They were ministering to more than 150 kids each week.

Crossin' Over With the Gospel

The attendance was significant but very small when compared with the number of students in just one Tampa high school, Kyllonen realized. And Tampa, he knew, was small compared with the millions of teen-agers living in inner cities throughout the country.

He decided to start teaching others to do the kind of urban ministry Crossover was pioneering. He began taking key leaders with him to inner-city outreaches in other cities, exchanging ideas with local leaders.

Last November, Crossover leaders launched a conference for urban youth workers called Flavor Fest. Eighty people traveled to Tampa from New York, Atlanta and Philadelphia, as well as from New Jersey, Ohio and other states. They were greeted by a staff of 20 teachers who were as eager to learn as the registrants.

Workshops filled the morning schedules. Participants equipped one another to do specialized ministries and learned how to deal with human need. Record-label owners taught young hip-hop artists how to navigate a music industry filled with financial- and personal-integrity minefields. Christian disc jockeys and B-boys swapped moves.

But the real learning at Flavor Fest was hands-on. Each afternoon, participants loaded into vans and threw a block

party at the Riverview Terrace housing project.

The project, wedged between Interstate 275 and the Hillsborough River, represents abject poverty. The drug trade thrives within the dull pink walls, and everything is broken, leaky or poorly repaired.

“No human should live the way they live at Tampa’s Riverview Terrace,” the St. Petersburg Times stated last year.

But the Riverview Terrace Block Party was a party indeed.

The Flavor Fest crew set up an outdoor stage and a sound system next to the mailboxes. Will Bogalis, popularly known as DJ Knuckles, spun music on the turntables, and Christian graffiti artist Darren “Rains” Price sprayed a mural on one of the Crossover vans in the parking lot. The B-boys pulled out the break-dancing mats, and the chefs cooked free hot dogs on portable grills.

“In the ‘hood, a crowd will draw a crowd,” Kyllonen explains. “We brought 100 people, and 150 more showed up.”

After some hip-hop microphone work, one of the conference participants told the gospel message to an attentive crowd. At each outreach, an altar call was given, and people accepted Christ each day.

In addition to the ongoing commitment to community evangelism at Crossover, there also is a new emphasis at the church today on prayer. A few young men and women meet on Thursday nights in a back room, interceding for those who come looking for

something that might give their lives meaning.

They start an hour or so before the service begins and continue throughout. Teen-agers wander in and out of the prayer sessions all night. The intercessors have set up a prayer box in the back of the sanctuary, and the kids bring requests every week, confident that they will be lifted to God.

Even after a few years of seeing hundreds of lives changed, Tommy Kyllonen believes God is just beginning to move at Crossover Community Church and dozens of churches like it in other cities.

Lucy Kyllonen is amazed at the things that God has done at Crossover.

“It’s not like we sat down and said, ‘This is what we want,’” she says. “We’re not worried about the graffiti on the wall, the rap music, the nontraditional setting. We’re concerned about the fact that these are lives without Jesus. They need to know Him.

“That’s what we do here,” she adds. “We show them Jesus in a way they can understand.”

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Return of a Street Veteran

Al Palmquist, who once quit the ministry to be a cop, now pastors a hip-hop church—and loves it.

In an American ministry culture dominated by leadership conferences that encourage senior pastors to be strong, charismatic, top-down leaders, senior pastor Al Palmquist of Crossover Community Church in Tampa, Florida, is a refreshing exception.

Palmquist takes only a part-time salary at the church, preferring that the church's meager financial resources be invested in full-time youth and children's pastors.

"I guess it's like the tail wagging the dog," he says. "The most important ministry at this church is the youth and children's ministry."

On Thursday nights before the weekly youth meeting he drives one of three vans to local housing projects to give kids rides, sets up chairs in the sanctuary to accommodate overflow crowds of rowdy teen-agers, talks to kids and does a lot of hugging.

When Palmquist, 57, was in his 20s he signed on with New York Teen Challenge, an influential urban ministry founded by evangelist David Wilkerson. Palmquist had a gift for reaching angry young men, and he rose quickly through the ranks of Teen Challenge leadership, eventually assuming the day-to-day operations of the ministry when Wilkerson was out of town.

He moved to the Midwest and began working as an associate

pastor at predominantly white suburban churches. The people were not hungry for God like they had been in the cities, and

Palmquist quickly grew disillusioned with the racist attitudes he encountered. He quit his job and became a police officer, working with local inner-city ministries, even as the head of a vice squad.

The police work led him to Tampa, where he attended a tiny Assemblies of God congregation called Crossover. He drifted further from urban ministries and began devoting his extra time to umpiring baseball.

Palmquist met Tommy Kyllonen while the young man was interning at a Bradenton, Florida, church. The two became fast friends, and Palmquist, still a layman, lured Kyllonen to Crossover as its youth pastor.

Last July, Palmquist—who says he is not “given to dreams”—had a very vivid dream in which God convinced him to become the pastor at Crossover.

The natural fear of the youth leadership team at Crossover was that a new pastor who would not understand the unique nature of the ministry might come into the church, paint over the graffiti on the sanctuary walls and the vans, reign in Kyllonen, and drive away the kids who were just beginning to learn about Christ. But Kyllonen and others were eagerly embraced by Palmquist.

“A lot of the churches are really resistant to the hip-hop music,” Palmquist says. “And when I go out of here, and I turn on my radio, I’m not going to turn on hip-hop. But this is the No. 1 musical style in the country—this is the language that

kids speak. Some of the traditional pastors see [hip-hop worship] as the gangsta rap—the filthy stuff that’s on the radio. But this is something new. This glorifies God.”

Things have taken off since Palmquist’s arrival.

Attendance at the Thursday night meetings, which now averages 160, has nearly outgrown the Sunday morning services are an extension of the Thursday night outreach—a time to dig into Scripture and to be taught the basics of the faith.

” coming from completely nonchurched backgrounds,” he explains. “So I try not to assume anything or get too complicated.”

Palmquist hopes to build a gymnasium on the property, and he plans to create vocational training programs for the young adults. Other Assemblies of God pastors in the area have been supportive of the new ministry paradigm at Crossover. Palmquist hopes the spirit of openness to the new things that God is doing will encourage more churches in his denomination to reach deeper into the cities.

He is quick to divert any credit for Crossover’s success from himself and Kyllonen and toward God. What excites him most is the person from the inner city who visits the church with a friend, starts coming to learn more on Sunday mornings and finally decides to become a Christian.

“That’s it,” Palmquist says. “The Spirit of God is here, are being changed.”

Talkin' About a Faith Alliance

For E.J. Bayonet, believing in God came easy after he met some Christians who spoke his language.

E.J. Bayonet was curious, so he accepted a friend's invitation to a CD release party for Urban D's new hip-hop project at Crossover Community Church in Tampa, Florida. The music was great, the people were warm and friendly, and he could tell something was different. When the rapper told the crowd the story of Christ and invited them to accept Jesus as their Savior, it made sense to Bayonet.

He started attending the Thursday night worship services. A talented artist who was studying graphic design at a local community college, Bayonet would occasionally "piece up"—illegally spraying his hip-hop name (Spec) on walls and street signs, something he learned from his cousins while growing up in New York. But something had changed inside him.

"My eyes were opened," he says. "I realized that God has given me gifts, and I should give them back to Him."

So Bayonet started doing graphic design for Crossover's flyers and brochures and for local compilation CDs from Christian rap artists. His work was top-quality, and it got the attention of national record labels.

He went on to design the cover for what might be the biggest Christian hip-hop album in history, Cross Movement's Human Emergency. He also became a youth leader, pouring his life into the kids in his neighborhood.

Meanwhile, Crossover youth pastor Tommy Kyllonen (Urban D), had created a local record label and concert promotion outfit called the Flavor Alliance to promote Christian hip-hop in the Tampa area. He had no time to run it, so he called Bayonet.

After much prayer, Bayonet accepted the job and became the CEO of Flavor Alliance, running its day-to-day operations, designing its Web site and organizing the Flavor Fest urban youth-ministry conference.

He finds the work to be rewarding. "Crossover is taking a new approach to the gospel," says Bayonet, 21. "Nobody forces kids to come to the youth services. They come because they want to. Seeing kids worshiping the Lord, basking in His glory—that keeps me going."

It is a story that has been repeated many times at Crossover. A young man arrives at a hip-hop concert, experiences salvation, grows in Christ, becomes a youth leader and begins to pour himself into the lives of others, showing them the love of God.

Bayonet wants to follow the example of the love he learned from Kyllonen: "He's always making people who don't feel wanted, feel wanted."

Obstacles to Urban Ministry

The inner city is a modern mission field—complete with its own unique barriers to communicating the gospel.

One of the greatest mission fields in the United States is the

inner city. Suburban churches, which tend to be wealthier than urban ones, often overlook cities as a ministry destination when sending missionaries or formulating missions budgets. When legitimate efforts are taken to reach the inner cities from the suburbs, true opportunities for ministry often are missed because there is no real understanding of people's needs in urban areas. Youth pastor Tommy Kyllonen, who has helped pioneer the inner-city ministry of Crossover Community Church in Tampa, Florida, identifies four of the greatest obstacles to urban ministry:

1. Finances: "An urban ministry doesn't bring in a lot of money because the people don't have a lot of money to give. We have old vans, and they all need insurance. Little things become challenges, like fixing up the buildings, painting walls."

2. Family breakdown: "About 80 percent-plus of these kids are fatherless, and they're not encouraged to go to church—they're not encouraged to go to school. One positive about that is that none of the kids who come to our youth ministry are forced to come here. On the flip side, most of their parents don't care where their kids are. They don't even know where their kids are. Twelve kids in the drama team will invite their parents to come see them perform one night, and one kid's mom will show up."

3. Lack of commitment: "A lot of churches don't understand the urban culture. They want to reach people, but they don't know how. It's great to do an outreach in the inner city, but most people do that one week, and then they're gone. It needs to be consistent. You need to be there every day, caring for

people.”

4. Cultural differences: “[The inner city] is a different culture. A lot of urban people haven’t been in church before. They don’t necessarily know how to respect a church building. That can scare an established church. But if you set a standard, people will respect it. And don’t try to be something you’re yourself.”