

Church and Dancehall: Challenges to mission among young people in the Churches of Jamaica

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Summary

This paper will attempt to examine the theological and practical difficulties of bringing Dancehall culture into Christian life. Starting with the assumption that Dancehall should be included, I will suggest ways in which the church could incorporate aspects of Dancehall into its worship. There is a sublime aspect to Dancehall which is overlooked by detractors and critics alike, which I hope the church will not overlook. Dancehall DJs, having converted to Christianity, are using the Dancehall style of music to proclaim the Gospel, such as minister 'Goddy Goddy' and DJ Nicholas whose ministry statement is: 'To minister the undiluted word of God uncompromisingly with power through the language of the Caribbean music in a most professional way to the furtherance of God's kingdom'.¹ Not all aspects of Dancehall are appropriate in worship, so great wisdom and judgment are needed to determine which aspects are suitable from theological and practical perspectives.

Dancehall

Dancehall is a popular Jamaican musical genre which is multi-layered and multi-spatial. The main feature of Dancehall is its pulsating dub 'riddim,' the term used locally for the rhythmic movements of the drums and bass in the music. The power and ferocity of the 'riddim' is facilitated by huge sound boxes placed in strategic positions, echoing mega-watt reverb at volumes that may be quite unintelligible and annoying to uninitiated. Deejays (DJs)² ride the 'riddim' by singing, chanting, dubbing or rapping out uncensored lyrics over the music.

Dancehall evolves out of the struggles, fears, pain, tears and experiences of the marginalized urban poor and serves as a means of economic and social mobility and liberation for young people from urban ghettos. Norman Stolzoff notes that 'dancehall is ... an alternative sphere of active cultural production that acts as a means through which black lower-class youth articulate and project a distinct identity in local, national, and global contexts'.³

Dancehall vibrates with tensions of, nudity, hedonism, gun violence and subversive political overtones and is commonly denigrated as homophobic, homicidal and chauvinistic. The dances are funky, ferocious, and filled with raw energy, with scantily clad females gyrating to the beat of the 'riddim.' Dancehall has a penchant for inventing new dances for every occasion. Dances like 'daggering,' 'dutty wine' and 'pon de replay' are difficult to describe in this paper, but hip hop dances are actually hybridized versions of Dancehall.

Dancehall is highly participatory. Although predominantly a youth culture, it is a well-ordered way of life which knows no boundaries. It transcends age, class, gender, ethnicity, social, physical abilities and challenges. Dancehall confronts all Jamaicans in the bars, at community events and sporting activities, in public spaces, taxis, busses, shopping malls, and intimate spaces, and market places, political forums, in the homes, schools and in the church at weddings, funerals and fund-raising events. It is music for all places and all occasions thus embracing all persons. Secondly, Dancehall uses contemporary language to communicate its message. This is a distinct Jamaican vernacular which couches innuendoes and euphemisms of all kinds, but importantly, it is a language understood by all. Politicians, ministers of religion, lawyers, doctors and other influential figures borrow from it from time to time. Thirdly, Dancehall creates a common space for the release of pressure and stress in the lives of its adherents and supporters.

Incorporating Dancehall into Church life

The Church frowns upon Dancehall disparaging it as low culture, unfit to be embraced and incorporated into Christian life. Why does the church reject an indigenous popular cultural genre such as Dancehall

¹ <http://www.myspace.com/ministergoddygoddy> and <http://www.djnicholas.net>

² A Deejay or DJ is the person who sings, chants, raps, or speaks over the instrumentals, and this is to ride the riddim.

³ Donna P. Hope: *The Culture of Dancehall* (August 2008) cited in <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dancehall> accessed December 3, 2010

even though it performs such useful functions to its adherents? I would like to propose two reasons. One is how the church perceives and interprets its mission and ministry in the world and the other is the ways in which the Church has always viewed culture generally.

Church: Mission and Ministry to the World

It is said that the Church is essentially missionary by nature. But what is mission? The Chambers Dictionary defines mission as 'an act of sending, especially to perform some function.'⁴ In the context of the Church's mission, this would translate into the Church being sent by God into the world to perform some function on God's behalf. Mission, however, is defined in other ways that do not involve movement from one place to another. Some of these definitions are: the actual work and activities carried out by missionaries, a strong commitment and sense of duty to achieve something, a building or group of buildings where missionaries work, conversion of non-Christians, evangelistic services, and the founding of new Churches among others.

The contemporary mission paradigm in my context is in crisis. The mainline churches define mission in terms of the maintenance of structures, institutions, and traditions of the colonial past. In trying to maintain the purity and integrity of those traditions, forms and liturgies, the churches have become insular, irrelevant and lacking in missionary zeal. This creates a mission void which is being filled by the proliferation of new and evangelical churches influenced by North American fundamentalism. These churches are more aggressive in their evangelistic thrust and attract adherents through the promotion of the prosperity gospel. While both groups squabble over doctrinal issues, engage in sheep-stealing and denominational superiority, supporters, producers and fans of Dancehall and others are relegated to the margins of society, feeling neglected by the church and the God it proclaims. How can the church reclaim its missionary nature and fulfill its missionary mandate?

Richard Bauckham develops a biblical hermeneutics of mission which he believes will enable us to project the Church into the missionary focus of the Bible. In this focus, God's mission moves from the particular to the universal.⁵ Bauckham traces four biblical thematic trajectories of God which begin with a single choice for the purpose of extending God's blessings to many others. Firstly, God chooses Abraham to be a blessing to all the families of the earth, (Genesis 12:3). Secondly, God singles out Israel as a nation through whom God would reveal God-self to all nations of the world (Exodus 19: 4-6a). Thirdly God singles out Jerusalem, the city from which God's universal reign would extend to all the earth through Jesus Christ, (Deuteronomy 12:5).⁶ In all three trajectories the mission appears to cross personal, national and geographical boundaries and frontiers to mediate God's blessings to all. In the supporting references, Abraham and Israel were not asked to cross boundaries and go to other lands or people. On the contrary God promised to make Abraham into a great nation as well as to bless him (Genesis 12:2). To Israel God promised to make them God's treasured possession out of all the nations and a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. The other nations were not asked to go to Jerusalem to receive God's blessings, only Israel was asked to go there.

This mission paradigm of the particular to the universal is not limited to these trajectories since there are other particulars listed in the Bible. Citing Paul's first letter to the Corinthians 1:26b – 29, Bauckham argues a fourth trajectory which is 'to all by way of the least.'⁷ This stresses how God singles out the poor, the marginalized, the insignificant and the powerless over the wealthy, powerful and social elite, in order to begin God's work in them. Again, it is God who chooses the least in order to reach all. A clear picture is emerging whereby the mission of the church is the mission of God's choosing or the *Missio Dei*, a term used to describe the purposes and activities of God in and for the whole universe. Mission is universal because God is universal. The whole world is God's and God loves the whole world. In its mission, the Church cannot be indifferent to the inequalities and injustices of the world into which it is sent. This means that in addition to the geographical and numerical extension of the church in mission there must also be 'a downward movement of solidarity with the people at the bottom of the social scale of importance and wealth.'⁸ The Church exists in the world to mediate God's love, grace and blessings to all, to serve God's purpose and to be a sanctuary for the poor and oppressed. The Church

⁴ The Chambers Dictionary (new 9th ed. Edinburgh: Chambers Harrap Publishers Ltd 2003) p. 951

⁵ R. Bauckham, *Bible and Mission: Christian Witness in a Postmodern World* (London: Paternoster Press and Grand Rapids: BakerHouse Company, 2003), p.11

⁶ Bauckham, *Bible and Mission* (2003) p. 27-49

⁷ Bauckham *Bible and Mission* (2003) p. 53

⁸ Bauckham *Bible and Mission* (2003) p. 54

must see its mission from no other perspective than that it exists ‘entirely for the purposes for which God called it into being. It has no liberty, therefore, to invent its own agenda.’⁹

Church’s view of culture

The second theological difficulty with the church in embracing Dancehall is how the church has viewed culture generally. As part of its colonial heritage, the church has been socialized into viewing local cultural elements as anti-God, anti-Christ, anti-Christian, evil and of the Devil, totally depraved and to be shunned, and so the two shall not meet. David Bosh speaks of the church becoming the bearer of culture after Constantine, and that its missionary outreach was a ‘movement from the civilized to the “savages” and from a “superior” culture to “inferior” cultures – a process in which the latter had to be subdued, if not eradicated.’¹⁰ If the missionaries viewed the local people as ‘savages’ and their cultures as inferior then the natural supposition is that great pains were exercised to erase, expunge, eradicate, deride, deface and denigrate everything local and indigenous. Their names (replaced by the so-called Christian names at baptism), habits, dress, food, customs and cultures were all erased. The people, having been demoralized, denuded and deluded had but one option. That was to mimic the customs, lifestyles, dress and cultures of the missionaries seen as ‘superior’ and the culture of the gospel.

William Watt, in a lecture delivered to a Seminar of the Anglican Church of North America and the Caribbean in Miami, Florida, 1979, pointed out that one was more likely to find classic and untainted expressions of European denominationalism in the Caribbean than in Europe. He highlighted how the liturgies, architecture, church governance and traditions reflect foreign importations which have long outlived their usefulness.¹¹ This negative view of local culture was reinforced by H. Richard Niebuhr, who in his classic book *‘Christ and Culture’* introduces and interacts with five prevalent views of how Christianity has responded to culture.¹² Charles Kraft, influenced by Niebuhr develops a God-Against-Culture position. The concept behind these views is that God or Christ is totally against culture. Supporters of this view use passages like 1John 2:15 and 5:19 to reinforce that Christians should hate the world because it is under the control of the Devil. Kraft, like Niebuhr highlights the theme of separation from the world as the hallmark of those who support this view. It is an either or option, whereby commitment to God constitute a decision to oppose, resist, withdraw, insulate or separate oneself from culture

Niebuhr rejects this position as inadequate as Christianity has never and can never separate itself from the world.¹³ Kraft, writing from the perspective of an anthropologist and a missionary supports Niebuhr’s position. He argues that is quite possible to alter our use of culture. We may transform, add to, innovate or replace it but we can never escape from it. Our culture is within us and we are ‘inalienably bound to and by it.’¹⁴ He summarizes that those who believe God or Christ to be anti-culture are caught in a dilemma. They cannot escape from culture and even if they try to escape from it, and believe that they are free from it, unconsciously they still carry it with them.¹⁵

The church should not reject Dancehall as a local cultural element because the gospel stories tell us that Jesus was always in confrontation with the religious leaders of his time. Yes, Jesus did condemn them, calling them hypocrites, sons of hell, blind fools, descendants of murderers, snakes and brood of vipers and likening them to white washed tombs.¹⁶ From a casual and surface reading of this passage it would appear that Jesus was against culture. On the contrary, Jesus never criticized popular culture such as dance, theatre, banquets or celebrations. He participated in a wedding in Cana of Galilee, miraculously producing one hundred and eighty gallons of wine when they ran out.¹⁷ Christ was not against culture but Christ was opposed to a religious establishment which excluded, oppressed, marginalized and judged the lowly of society. Christ was against the religious elites who were exclusive, hard-hearted, critical, and

⁹ A. Kirk, *What is Mission?* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd 1999) p.31

¹⁰ J. Bosh, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books 1991) p. 448

¹¹ William Watt, *From Shore to Shore Soundings in Caribbean Theology* (Kingston Jamaica: Golding Printing 1981) P.19

¹² H. R. Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1951)

¹³ Niebuhr: *Christ and Culture* p. 78

¹⁴ Kraft: *Christianity in Culture* p. 106

¹⁵ Kraft: *Christianity in Culture* p. 106

¹⁶ See Matthew 23: 13-36 in *Life Application Study Bible, NIV* (Carol Stream, Illinois and Grand Rapids Michigan; Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., and Zondervan 1997) p. 1583-4

¹⁷ See St. John 2:1-11 (NIV)

judgmental, who tithed grains and herbs but lacked faithfulness, mercy and compassion and failed to do justly.¹⁸

Andrew Kirk also supports the view that God or Christ was not against culture. He argues that the gospel transcends culture but can only be culturally expressed and 'has to be transported from one culture to another in a rich variety of ways'.¹⁹ Kirk states that God personally engaged with culture when God became flesh in Jesus Christ. Being born of a natural birth, Jesus lived in culture, spoke the language of his people, worked at a trade and went through the relevant customary ceremonies and rituals. Jesus 'was educated in the law, he participated in the yearly festivals...he celebrated his *bar mitzvah*, attended synagogue, was steeped in Jewish history, and as a story teller, showed considerable artistic talents'.²⁰

No society is strictly mono-cultural and so any understanding of culture must include not only the social, theological and anthropological components but also the diversities and complexities of sub-cultures. It cannot be denied that in any given society the elderly, the young, the oppressed, the marginalized poor, the affluent and ethnic groups have their own sub-cultures. Therefore the gospel has to be expressed in both the traditional and sub-cultures.

Church's rejection of dancehall

While the Church is trying to maintain its purity for fear of contamination by the vulgarity, rawness and hedonistic elements of Dancehall, the decrease in its membership, empty pews and absence of young people testify against its failure to mediate God's love and graces and blessings to all. This has not been substantiated, but it is alleged that my country is highlighted in the Guinness Book of Records as having the most number of churches per capita in the world. Juxtaposed against this is the steady increase in crime and violence, murders, poverty, injustice and corruption in the society. The irony is that in ignoring or isolating Dancehall the church is caught in a worse dilemma. Like the God or Christ against culture supporters, the church cannot isolate, withdraw, reject, escape, or insulate itself from Dancehall. For whether the church is conscious of it or not it carries the Dancehall culture within its very fabric. The church is not an abstract entity but is made up of persons, who are products of various sub-cultures influenced by Dancehall.

If the Mission of the Church is the *Missio Dei* then it does not exist in the world to protect itself against the world rather it exists to do God's business. Part of this business is to "go and make disciples of all nations..."²¹ It is through its members that the church both embodies and spreads the gospel. Christians are in all sectors of society. Has the church's mission impacted society through its members who are so widely dispersed? It is not insulation from culture that will make the church's mission effective but its engagement with culture. Through word and deed Jesus Christ did not seek to eradicate cultural diversity but to use them for God's service. The church is called to do the same.

Dancehall and Church's mission

There is much that the church can learn from Dancehall about effective mission strategies and much Dancehall can learn from the church about spiritual, moral and social wealth. Dancehall can teach the church how to be a more participatory, inclusive gathering community, how to empower the marginalized, disenfranchised poor and oppressed among many others. Due to the constraint of this paper I can only discuss one of those strategies for effective mission. Dancehall events are well attended and supported unlike many church services and prayer meetings. The question is why? Why do poor young fathers and mothers leave their babies alone at home, buy expensive outfits they cannot afford, and stay out all night dancing to the music? In my opinion it is because Dancehall offers and delivers something that they desperately need. It is a space to articulate and vent their frustration and concerns on political, social and economic issues which affect them, and to be with others who are like them and will not judge them.

What does the Church offer? Unlike Dancehall the Church is reticent in promoting and delivering what it has to offer. Dancehall has engaged and transcended the local culture, sold its genre to the world and has attracted international participants, spectators, adherents and events.²² People all over the world have been influenced by Dancehall, an indigenous, local cultural genre in Jamaica. If the

¹⁸ Matthew 23:13-36 (NIV) p. 1183

¹⁹ Andrew Kirk: *What is Mission?* (London: Darton. Longman and Todd 1999) p. 75

²⁰ Kirk: *What is Mission?*: (1999) p. 76

²¹ See the Great Commission in Matthew 28:18 (NIV)

²² [http://wn.com/international_dancehall_queen_2009_competition_in_jamaica_amzone \(accessed December 17, 2010](http://wn.com/international_dancehall_queen_2009_competition_in_jamaica_amzone_(accessed December 17, 2010)

church could only be a little more creative, bold, in proclaiming Christ rather than protecting and defending its territories then it could be more effective in its mission to non-members.

Difficulties of bringing Dancehall into the Church

While Dancehall can make significant contributions to the Church there are some practical difficulties in bringing it into the church without a comprehensive analysis of the impact it would have on the church's mission. The first practical difficulty is the noise level. In the description of Dancehall I mentioned the mega-watt reverb, the vibration and ferocity of the music. It would disturb the community and actual violate the 'noise abatement act.' The noise level could affect the hearing of the young and the elderly who are the most vulnerable in this regard. It may also marginalize some of the church members who could be disturbed and offended by the mega-watt reverb.

Secondly, Dancehall uses inappropriate and inflammatory language such as gun-talk, violence, obscenity, vulgarity, anti-gay lyrics, subversive political language, sexual innuendos and slackness.²³ In condoning language that can potentially offend, incite violence, degrade and dehumanize others would compromise the church's mission of peace and reconciliation. Gun talk and anti-gay lyrics not only incite violence but can be used as a tool to socialize people into hating others who are different from them. The church is about brotherly and sisterly love and respecting people for who they are.

The X-rated dress code and lyrics that are disrespectful to women make it difficult to incorporate Dancehall into the church. Female dress code in dancehall is more about spotlighting than concealing since transparent underwear can be worn at events. Videotaping gyrating females in transparent underwear can be viewed as s pornography. Carolyn Cooper however, argues that it is actually a joyous display of the female body, and that transparent undergarments are somewhat like the emperor's new clothes in Greek culture.²⁴ Perhaps this would attract more people to the pews but would it foster or contradict the Church's Mission? What message would the Church be sending to its members, especially the children?

A theological perspective

In the gospel of Matthew one is confronted with contradictions and tensions between Jewish and Gentile missions. The gospel commences with a genealogy in which four non-Israelite women who could be cited for sexual impropriety are included. Rahab, a harlot; Bathsheba an adulteress, Tamar got pregnant by her father-in-law and Ruth slept all night by Boaz's feet.²⁵ Genealogies were normally traced through the male descendants and the women's inclusion gives us insight into Mathew's understanding of mission. The genealogy links Jesus with the despised of society. The women were not the only sinners. Many of the patriarchs and others listed in the genealogy behaved in ways that would be consider 'ungodly' today. The genealogy serves to show that men and women alike are sinners, and that Jesus came to save all persons regardless of their sinful state.

Matthew, a despised tax collector was on the social and spiritual margins of society. Jesus called him as he was and by walking with Jesus his life was transformed. Matthew was not afraid to expose these contradictions in his gospel. His theological position was that a mission to the Jews and a mission to the Gentiles need not exclude, but were to embrace each other.²⁶ Consequently, he culminates his Gospel with the Great Commission 'Go and make disciples of all nations...' ²⁷ Discipleship would be the way by which nations were made to experience the graces, love, and mercy of God universal mission. Could the church be brave enough in its mission to embrace Dancehall as it is in the hope that by the Church's nurture, love and care Dancehall could be transformed into and instrument for Christ glory? The Church in Jamaica is not called to go to a distant land but into the highways and byways of the cities and ghettos and mediate God's love and blessings to all. So the Church's mission to its members and to the adherents of the Dancehall culture can be mutually embracing.

Proposals for the Church and Dancehall in the future

²³ Slackness in Dancehall is lyrics which describes in a graphic way the genitalia and the sexual act.

²⁴ Carolyn Cooper. *Lady Saw Cuts Loose: Female Fertility Rituals in Jamaican Dancehall Culture*: (Published in the Proceedings of the Dancing in the Millennium Conference, Washington, DC, July 2000,) compiled by Juliette Crone Willis <http://www.jouvay.com/interviews/carolyncooper.htm>

²⁵ Joshua 2:1, Genesis 38, 2Samuel 11:1-5 Ruth 3: (NIV)

²⁶ Bosh: Transforming Missions (1991)2005 p. 60

²⁷ Matthew 28:18-20. (NIV)

I now turn to the future engagement between Dancehall and the church. My proposal for the church is to develop a 'Dancehall hermeneutics of mission.' In doing this the church seeks to interpret and understand the dynamics of Dancehall, leading to embracing the qualities that can assist the church in its mission. One of the things the Church would discover is that dance can occupy the chancel as well as the street, and urban spaces. Music and dance were integral to Old Testament worship especially times of corporate religious celebrations and annual festivals.²⁸ They were means by which worshippers expressed their appreciation, love, gratitude, praise and thanksgiving to God. The psalmist praised God with various musical

instruments and dance which made Israelite worship lively, noisy and God-centered.²⁹ Dance in Jewish/Christian tradition is 'dance rich in detail, surprise and relationship, dance engaged with the human world of time and space and therefore with contemporary issues; personal, political, theological.'³⁰

Liturgical dances feature in many church services. What if a liturgical dance could be turned into a liturgy of Dancehall? At the beginning of the service the procession could be a dance. The offertory of money, the bread and the wine could also be done in dance. However, it should be a rigorous dance of the type featured in Israelite worship with skipping, leaping and twirling accompanied by singing and a variety of musical instruments; drums cymbals, and dancehall 'riddim.' The lyrical genre of Dancehall could be harnessed by rapping and chanting out core Gospel messages in understandable and memorable ways. This would resonate well with the young, the elderly and the non-readers in the church and makes the worship lively, appealing and contemporary. The Church could also use Dancehall's multi-spatial feature to touch the lives of people in every sphere of society. A Dancehall liturgy can assist the church in moving away from its talk-oriented style to a more participatory and relaxed form of worship.

In implementing this relationship my suggestion is that the Church begins with a service incorporating Dancehall and its adherents outside of the regular Divine Worship for its members. This is not to promote segregation or to further denigrate Dancehall. It would be a gradual way of socializing Dancehall to the Church's culture and of the Church to Dancehall's culture. A new mission paradigm could begin to emerge from this mutual understanding and sharing of resources. The church could go to Dancehall and DJ the Gospel while the Dancehall could come to Church to learn about the peace, reconciliation, liberation they can experience in God.

²⁸ See Exodus 15: Nehemiah 8:10-12,

²⁹ See Psalm 150

³⁰ Judith Rock, Norman Mealy: *Performers as Priest and Prophet, Restoring the Intuitive in Worship through Music and Dance* (New York, Harper and Row Publishers Inc. 1988) p. 29