

FOREWORD

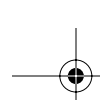
I am not a member of the hip-hop generation. I cannot rap. I cannot scratch. I cannot deejay. I cannot emcee. I cannot flow. I am, however, one who believes deeply in and am inspired by the hip-hop generation.

I am a member of the “soul” generation, offspring of those spirituals and blues and gospel and R&B and jazz children hewed out of hard living down in the Mississippi Delta, the Louisiana Bayou, the low country of South Carolina and Georgia, the Black Belt Prairie of Alabama and more, who migrated to Chicago, Detroit, New York and D.C. and to all points east and west. I am the transmission of ancestral memory. I am the premonition of hip-hop.

The soul children came of age during the era of Civil Rights and Black Consciousness, a time of well publicized black resistance and protest. The spirit of God was everywhere and made manifest in our music, our people, our worship, our very lives. The leadership of Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, Fannie Lou Hamer, Rosa Parks, Angela Davis, Ella Baker, Kwame Nkrumah and Jomo Kenyatta empowered us. The poetry of Sonia Sanchez, Gwendolyn Brooks, June Jordan, Nikki Giovanni and Amiri Baraka inspired us. The sounds of James Brown, Aretha Franklin, Nina Simone, the Impressions, the O’Jays, Marvin Gaye, Stevie Wonder, Bernice Johnson Reagon, Gill Scott-Heron and the Last Poets moved us. To these leadings and promptings and more I listened and learned and danced—and prayed.

The same divine presence that was at work forty years ago is





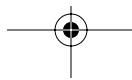
no less evident today in hip-hop music and culture. Regrettably, not everyone agrees with this assessment. Now more than ever, the great divides of race, gender, sexuality and class seem to fall along the fault line of intergenerational misgivings and distrust. This is most certainly true for Americans of African descent. All too often the civil rights generation is ready to decry the amnesia and irresponsibility of the hip-hop generation. With equal eloquence and defiance, the hip-hop generation trumpets the death of all civil rights sensibilities. Somewhere between these oppositional truths lies the much-needed recognition that we as a people are only as strong as our weakest link. Simply stated, we need each other.

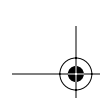
Civil rights is black America's sacred legacy. Hip-hop is this era's sacred hope.

A number of social realities define the world of the hip-hop generation, from globalization and resegregation in the public sphere to deradicalization and commercialization in the churches. Despite what some have said, today's young people are no less spiritual than their predecessors, but they live in a time when the loss of faith in social institutions—no less religious ones—is understandable and epidemic. Many hip-hop heads speak truth to power saying, "I'm spiritual but I'm not religious." Theirs is the passionate quest for something deeper and more authentic than what often passes for religion.

If the black church would serve the present age it requires a greater commitment to social struggle and a deeper dedication to its own. Questionable theology, dubious politics, hierarchical practices, excessive materialism and an utter captivity to custom are the hallmark of many black churches in the twenty-first century. Hip-hop had to be born because, among other reasons, the black church was no longer being faithful to its own calling.

The black church and hip-hop are the two greatest repositories of our culture. Flawed messengers convey right and exacting mes-





sages in both. Flawed adherents immerse themselves fully in the experiences of both. The time is right for the two to be joined where coexistence is possible and betrayal is not to be had.

Here and there across the land in urban, suburban and rural contexts the spoken word is indeed going forth. The gospel ministries and work artfully described in this volume by Efrem Smith and Phil Jackson, who pastor hip-hop churches in the Twin Cities (also my home) and Chicago respectively, are successful, exciting and real. In preaching, music, worship, counseling, social analysis and more these congregations offer vibrant insights that may transform the values, beliefs and traditions of hip-hop America—and enrich us all. The dominant message of hip-hop—of speaking your own mind and breaking down barriers—has long and variously been proclaimed by Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, KRS-ONE, Biggie, Tupac, Queen Latifah, Rakim, Lauryn Hill, Mary J. Blige, Jill Scott, Anthony Hamilton and Kanye West, just to name a few. For the hip-hop church movement, at the center of this message, always and without question, there is Jesus.

What these two churches have done, other churches can do. Strategies for effective outreach and ministry are found throughout the text. This work is pioneering and it is empowering, it is contextual and it is caring. Here is to a new movement in black and multiracial America—the hip-hop church—keepin' it real and keepin' it right.

Alton B. Pollard III, Ph.D.

Director, The Program of Black Church Studies and Associate Professor of Religion and Culture, Candler School of Theology, and Chair, American Religious Cultures Graduate Division of Religion, Emory University

