

DESEGREGATING THE CHRISTIAN MUSIC

By Doug Gentile

One of the recent projects that my racial reconciliation nonprofit, James 2 Association, was to help bring greater racial/ethnic diversity to the Christian music. Until fairly recently, the Christian Contemporary Music (CCM) was almost all-White, to the point that some could refer to it as the Jim Crow of pop music. Such a characteristic is understandable, given that for decades the industry and radio stations ignored or rejected African American or other people of color Christian musicians who could easily fit into the CCM format, that has eclectic musical styles, from upbeat rock to soulful sounds to ballads to electronic music, and even occasionally hip-hop. This dilemma goes back to the 1970's when the Reverend Al Green could have been adopted into the CCM market. After all, there is not a whole heck of a lot of differences between Al Green's music and some of Lauren Daigle's music. Yet I've never heard Al Green being played on a CCM radio station—just one example among many (and yes, I am showing my age).

That began to change this decade. Two huge Christian contemporary networks, K-LOVE and Air1, began to add more diversity to their playlists, as well as more diversity features on their programming and Websites. Then Boost came along, a Christian hip-hop network, mixed in with some CCM songs. Before Boost, Christian hip hop artists such as Lecrae and Trip Lee did not have significant musical platforms because their music was often considered too edgy for many Urban Gospel stations and too rappy for CCM. (Air1 forayed a little bit into hip hop).

Yes, myself and James 2 Association were key in advocating with networks like K-LOVE and Air1 (owned by the same company). The beauty of this, however, is that we in James 2 Association cannot beat our chests about our success. It was all God's successes, because there were other positive forces at work to move the CCM in the direction of God's commands in Revelation 7, about God being Lord of all nations, races, etc.

The Gospel Music Association began to push racial diversity in the Christian music, and many of the Christian artists also stood strong for racial inclusion in the CCM. No one I believe, had a greater impact on diversifying CCM than Maverick City Music. I am so encouraged that God was speaking very clearly to so many different people about the importance of racial inclusion, as this embraced God's heart and Biblical teachings. Just as millions of Christians are humbly latching onto Jesus re: Biblical commands on racial reconciliation, justice and inclusion, many of these spirit-led Christians are now standing strong for showing the world—Christian and non-Christians—that the Gospel music is just not for White people, especially in an era where Christians need to be taking the lead on race relations issues, given persistent racism and racial injustices in America. James 2 Association was riding a Godly wave as we spoke up, but we also witnessed so many other efforts to bring racial diversity and inclusion to the Christian music.

Apart of from Biblical commands on racial inclusion, unity and justice (Galatians 3:28; Daniel 7:14; Zephaniah 3:9 among dozens of other Scriptures), there is another powerful reason for racial diversity in the music: Bible-believing Christian churches remain largely segregated by race. Desegregating the Christian music adds to the momentum of greater multi-ethnic Christian realities. Where you have predominantly White churches, the praise and worship format is usually CCM. If the CCM remains virtually all-White, that just slows down the racial inclusion in churches, as many Christians of color may feel unwelcome because of the lack of music familiar to their backgrounds. But when churches throw in some Tauren Wells, Mandisa, Iveth Luna, and dozens of other CCM musicians of color, then some different eyes may light up for comments such as, "Hey, we may have a nice place here at this church."

Diversifying the CCM remains a work in progress, however. I compare the dynamic to my time enforcing the Federal Civil Rights Act, beginning in the 1970s. I remember my Black supervisor telling me that he had just got back from a civil rights investigation in the Deep South—and woke up one morning to find bullet holes in his US Government vehicle. This was 13 years after the 1964 Civil Rights Act, and it was a great lesson about the needed persistence in bringing about positive change, as racism and racial injustice did not disappear with putting an authoritative signature on a Federal law. Although we have made significant progress in race relations, we still have racism and racial injustice—and the Christian church still must be visible confronting these injustices and personal hardships.

The same dynamic is at work with desegregating the CCM. The gradual diversification of large organizations such as K-LOVE and the Gospel Music Association has not totally trickled down to some of the plethora of CCM stations across the USA. Unlike resistance to the Civil Rights Act, which was driven largely by racism, the resistance of CCM diversity I believe falls more in the category of wallowing in a racial comfort zone, and not being sensitive to change, or to God's heart or commands on this issue.

Case in point: A while back I was on a ministry trip. Out of grace I will not mention the location or the radio station involved. As I was driving, I found a local CCM station. For two hours they played only White CCM musicians. By fortune, or God's providence, the radio station was only three blocks away from me. I also learned that they live-fedded the same program into other radio broadcasts.

Determined to show Christian love rather than hostility, I walked into the radio station and was greeted by a White young woman who was very friendly. After some nice conversation, I asked her if the radio station was open to outside suggestions on musicians they would play. The woman answered yes, and so I wrote down a list of about 10 CCM musicians of color. She pointed to two of the names, and said gleefully, "We already play them!" She had never heard of Maverick City Music. And this was in 2022.

That reminded me of positive education on the issue that is needed by concerned Christians who love praise and worship, and CCM. Recently I had a conversation on

CCM diversity with a dear brother in Christ, a wonderful guy. His comments was, to the effect, that Black Christians have Urban Gospel, so that is why the CCM is the alternative for White Christians.

No, no, no! The comparison is not valid. Urban Gospel is to be contrasted with Southern Gospel, not to CCM. Urban Gospel and Southern Gospel are specific genres, not pop. Whites are drawn to Southern Gospel because of the style, and Blacks are drawn to Urban Gospel because of the style. Of course, history also played a part in the different musical styles. There are a few Whites in Urban Gospel and a few Blacks in Southern Gospel—but not many in either case. A secular equivalent is comparing Blues with Country. There are a few Whites doing Blues, and a growing number of Blacks in country—but not many, again tied to music styles and music history. Again, these are specific genres of musical style.

The equivalent of CCM in the secular world is secular pop. Historically, secular pop has featured more racial diversity than CCM. And that is terrible Christian witness to a non-Christian world. And yet Christians keep wondering why the Christian church is so weak and ineffective in so many ways, when these racial eyesores and indifference or disobedience to God's commands on unity and racial inclusion are so prevalent.

Diversifying CCM remains a long-term work in progress, and it's not just for Black Christian musicians. There is an absence of other Christians of color in CCM—Hispanics, Asian Americans and Native Americans, when many of these musicians are clearly CCM in format yet remain ignored. So dear Christians, let's get to work.