

# **Speaker: Black worship should incorporate hip-hop, other styles**

BUFFALO, N.Y. – Kevin Johnson had one hand on a piano keyboard as the other guided a room full of participants through seamless key changes from one gospel song to another.

“I could go on and on playing just song after song,” said Johnson, associate professor of music and chairman of the music department at Spelman College in Atlanta, as he led participants in “African-American Catholic Worship” through the greatest hits of that worship.

The July 13 workshop was part of the 10th National Black Catholic Congress, held July 12-15 in Buffalo.

Although innovation, musical evolution and songwriting have not stopped, few publishers are producing new black Catholic music, Johnson said during his workshop.

To inject new life into Masses at black Catholic parishes, he suggested parishioners seek out new music and new directions in music, such as hip-hop or rhythm-and-blues influences, to reflect what is popular among today’s youths and young adults.

Johnson said he has been making music ever since receiving a toy guitar in childhood. He learned how to play the guitar and piano in seventh and eighth grades and has directed a variety of Atlanta-area choirs. He has had his choral arrangements and compositions published by a variety of musical publishers and has started a music-publishing company called Lion and Lamb Publishers.

Though he has worked at churches of various denominations, he said being raised Catholic helped him feel most comfortable with the Mass.

“It was at my core,” he said. “I was always at home at Mass. I don’t care what Mass it is. Liturgy is in me. It’s where I find my connection with God’s people and God himself.”

Johnson called for church leaders to build upon the work that musical pioneers Father Clarence Rivers, Sister Thea Bowman, a Franciscan Sister of Perpetual Adoration, Leon Roberts and other composers shared.

“Quality worship increases church attendance and membership,” Johnson said. “Churches that were barely operating and on the verge of collapse are bustling

churches where African-American worship is done well.”

Johnson said several problems can crop up in music ministries, including instances where a parish leader imposes Eurocentric models of the Mass on black parishes.

He said another common problem occurs when a non-Catholic music director may not be familiar with the parts of the Mass or may not realize when a song is expressing ideas that are not authentically Catholic. In this case, he said, parishes may need to train directors on Catholic liturgy and beliefs or give them feedback to resolve this concern.

Johnson also reviewed the history of black Catholic music. He said contemporary music in the 1980s and 1990s helped to create a resurgence in church attendance in some traditionally African-American Catholic parishes, drawing a racially diverse, young audience. However, that resurgence has tapered off, in part because of a lack of continued innovation in worship music, he said.

“If a church doesn’t do that (musical innovation), young Catholic men and women will be drawn to places where their songs are being sung and their stories are being told, i.e., the megachurches,” Johnson said.

Marlyn Robinson, a member of St. Benedict Church in Philadelphia, said that although her parish has not incorporated hip-hop into its regular Masses one parishioner performs that style of music at youth revivals.

Cherry Seabrook, a choir member at Our Lady of Mercy in Charleston, S.C., said music helps enrich her life and strengthens her faith.

“I know I’m feeling more faithful and I want to get back to my church to let them know more about the things I have learned here,” Seabrook said.