

Focus Magazine
Children of Innovation: A Street-Side Affair

By Amber Riney

The crowded streets of a big-time town glows with neon signs and blinking car signals. The city radiates with buses honking, people talking and sirens singing. It's not unusual to pass a struggling violinist or a six-piece band playing for tips. Impersonators and magicians may even stop you in your steps to try to entertain you. However, the real magic flows in the hearts of an eager youth group ready to steal your attention.

"We're a presence in the city – all dressed alike and walking together," Junior Motion student Ellen Butler said.

Butler is a dancer and actress for Motion, a high-energy outreach program involving street-side performances. She and her friends are doing what they love to do. Combining worship with fun brings glory to God, she said. Worship can be dancing on the streets or just talking to different people. Many people passing by have asked her who they are and if they are performing for money. As soon as she gets a chance, Butler seeks the opportunity to discuss the meaning of their actions and share her faith.

Motion is a mission-driven worship team expressed through modern music and dance. A group of nearly 100 Waco middle and high school students travels abroad to make the street their stage. One group dives into dances while the band, rappers and singers create a melody to marvel the crowd. At the end of each performance, the students immerse themselves in the cluster of spectators to reveal their ultimate message.

"You can worship God in any way, shape, form or fashion if your heart is in the right place," Jordan Dunnington, Motion assistant director, said. "It's putting God's Word in motion."

The idea of modernizing worship through Motion began at First Baptist Church in Euless. The worship pastor wanted a way to relate to people outside the church. Descending from the first worship team called "Broken Ground," Motion spread to other areas around Texas. The troupe made a stop at Waco's Highland Baptist Church in 2007. This Motion group adds the elements of theater to the mix, which highlights the talented teens' artistic abilities.

One man approached Dunnington after a performance. The man openly said he was not religious, but that the message these kids are sending is something he's never heard before. It's pure.

“People see their purity and motive and the passion in their heart,” Dunnington said. “That’s something people won’t argue with in comparison to religious do’s and don’ts.”

Dunnington is a sophomore at Baylor University and was a member of “Broken Ground” before he was called to Highland Baptist Church to help ignite the program in Waco. His background in nontraditional worship extends beyond the church. Dunnington taught dance classes at a studio in high school and participated in hip-hop missions in Euless. By teaching the choreography to the students and leading a weekly devotional, he gets to be a part of something bigger than himself, he said.

The style of the performance depends on the message Motion is sending, Dunnington said. If the message is one of hope and deliverance and freedom, then the movements need to reflect that. If they’re singing about being a soldier for Christ, then the choreography will exude more rigid, sharp motions. It’s about quality because that’s what draws people in, he said.

“Motion is a new branch of worship,” Dunnington said. “The purity of the kids’ hearts and the message that they’re sending is what makes it unique.”

It’s important to go outside your comfort zone to have experiences you wouldn’t normally have, he said. But it’s equally as important to make those same stretches when you feel back at home. There are needs for mission trips in cities all over the world, but there are also local needs in Waco, he said.

“We didn’t have as much success as far as outreach opportunities [at the church],” Senior Motion student Scotty Swingler said. “Motion gives us a better opportunity to be blatantly in the public. People wouldn’t stop if we were all in a line, singing hymns.”

Swingler, who’s dreamed of being a musician since he was little, plays the electric guitar, sings and raps in the choir. After being “thrown into rapping,” he started watching YouTube videos of contemporary Christian artist Toby Mac to improve his rapping skills. By adding modern styles of music to the choir, more students wanted to join. He takes charge on the stage as he runs back and forth with lots of energy, yelling “Get up!”

“It’s a lot of practice in the shower,” Swingler said with a chuckle. “People don’t expect it from me. It’s been fulfilling and really humbling to perform in front of so many people.”

Motion travels to big cities around the nation. The troupe walks down the street and occasionally stops to drop the beat. Crowds swarm around them as they put on a powerful show of dramatic entertainment. Over the last two years, the group has traveled to Boston and Chicago, where they succeeded in sharing their faith with hundreds of people. Those who watch and listen are the true spectacles at each

performance. Memories of discussing Christianity and salvation with those who watch their performance are engraved in the students' hearts.

In Chicago, Swingler explained who Jesus was to a Hispanic woman who spoke no English. With only a couple years of Spanish classes in high school, he was able to discuss the meaning of the final theatrical performance called the "Life House Skit." This dramatic presentation portrays a person who's strayed from Jesus and turned to drugs, alcohol, money and sex. The student actors and actresses personify these struggles and the act shows God's mercy and offer of salvation.

Students in Motion face many pressures as they travel to cities across the nation and perform several times a day. In addition to scheduled performances, the directors organize two to three hour practices to be held once or twice a week for each segment of Motion. If a student's involved in more than one area of Motion, they have to attend each group's practice. The students embrace each practice, rehearsal and show as an opportunity to make a difference in someone else's life. The artistic expression of worship allows these students to show their love to the world in a surprising and intriguing manner. People who are eating at a restaurant close-by or walking down the street are exposed to the harmony of young children's voices.

"There are always complications that arise and make the trip not go as planned," Butler said. "We value each show, knowing that even if it impacts one person, it's worth it. People see the joy in our faces and want some of it."

Butler experienced the meaning of missions firsthand in an encounter unrelated to their performance in Boston. While she and the rest of the group were eating dinner one night, she noticed a woman crying. Without hesitation, Butler offered first aid and shelter to this lost Irish woman, who had a blister from trudging in the rain all day. Motion uses art as a platform to reach those in need, both spiritually and physically.

So what makes Motion different than other youth groups?

Director Candi Stryker believes Motion teaches the students how to share their faith and share what they believe, she said. As soon as they decide which city they will be traveling to, Stryker and the students begin praying for the city and preparing their hearts for those divine appointments. When the students in Motion grow up and go off to college, they will own their faith, and it will become relevant to their lives, she said. Every show conveys each student's confidence as it rises like the energy in the crowd that watches.

"It's fun to see kids be able to dance, especially in a Baptist church," Stryker said. "In the church I grew up in, we wouldn't lift our hands."

The students and directors agreed that some people question hip-hop's role in church missions. Some might not understand how hip-hop conveys the Christian

faith. It's normal to see people trying to earn a dollar on the street with an edgy and entertaining show, but Motion performs to inform. Waco's Highland Baptist Church completely supports Motion and the avenue it takes in bringing people to Christ, Stryker said. More efforts to serve the community are in the near future for the worship team. Activities through Mission Waco's King's Club and other neighborhood outreaches including the church's Fall Festival are the first steps to broadening the scope of what Motion has to offer.

"It's not the straight-up 'you have to wear the WWJD bracelet.'" Senior Motion student Brian Crowder said. "There are other ways to worship."

Crowder plays the drums and performs in both the drama group and stomp group, which is a form of music created from tin cans, drums and other unconventional instruments. The cool part of Motion is being in a group of people who love to express themselves with worship, he said. It's a great way to meet other people and build new relationships. When others ask him about his hobbies or his involvement in Motion, he gets the chance to explain why he does what he does, he said.

While working with a vacation Bible school program in Chicago, Crowder talked to two guys before the show. He felt like he needed to pray for them throughout the performance. He approached the two guys after the show and got to witness them accepting Christ as he gave them each a brand new Bible.

"These were just two guys I'd never met and I may never see again," Crowder said. "It was one of those cornerstone moments of my faith that I'll never forget."

Whether you're a member of Motion or just a spectator, you get to witness the raw expression of young individuals pumped up about what they believe. The excitement overflows out of the students' hearts and pours into the cities. These are children of Motion - children of innovation, who use their gifts, no matter what they are, to express themselves.

"It's all about being a blessing to someone else," Butler said.