

What's Behind the Bad Press About Hillsong?

Hillsong. For years, what most people outside Australia thought of when they heard that word was music—and small wonder. Hillsong isn't just big in terms of Christian music. As one of Australia's biggest music exporters, it's big in terms of *all* music. According to Christian Copyright Licensing International, more than 50 million people per week sing songs by Hillsong. That's a lot of music.

And a lot of scandal, you may be thinking. The news that has rocked the megachurch and the Christian world over the past weeks and months has highlighted long-standing concerns. But as we examine the problems, let's also look at what Hillsong is, where the Hillsong movement came from and how we can respond as it seeks to move forward in redemptive faith.

This is the fascinating story of how one church impacted the global church. The story of how that church spread from one location to dozens as it brought the hope of Jesus Christ to community upon community. And typical of all stories this side of heaven, it's a story filled with joy and sorrow, sin, repentance and forgiveness. But by the grace of God, it will also be a story of grace and restoration.

I remember the first time I heard a Hillsong worship anthem. It happened back in 1992, and the song was "Power of Your Love," sung by David Evans. He sang with Darlene Zschech at the church then known as Hills Christian Life Centre on the outskirts of Sydney, Australia.

I will never forget that moment. That song. That melody. That sound. I had to get the album, which I did. I admit—I played it until I knew every song by heart.

I'm sure many others will have a similar Hillsong story,

whether with “Shout to the Lord,” “Oceans” or “What a Beautiful Name.” These are the “Hillsongs” that have impacted more than one generation of Christians.

Of course Hillsong stands for much more than just songs. Sure, “song” is a part of the global megachurch’s name, but that was incidental. The church changed its name to Hillsong because that’s what everyone else called it. In other words, the overwhelming success of the songs, CDs and conferences resulted in a complete rebranding of the original church.

Despite the nomenclature and the popularity of its music, Hillsong still views itself, first and foremost, as a local church. Founding Pastor Brian Houston emphasized this: Hillsong is a local church that meets local needs first.

So how did this local church become a global church with campuses in 30 countries on six continents? Once we Australians got beyond our shock, we came to expect the growth that seemed unstoppable. By 2022, Hillsong had 150,000 weekly attendees in more than 100 locations, formed its own denomination and seemed on the verge of much more.

And then the crisis came. But more about that later.

Pentecostal Heritage

Many *Charisma* readers may wonder if Hillsong is Pentecostal, but Hillsong has always considered itself to be a Pentecostal church. For 35 years, it was a critical part of the Assemblies of God in Australia (now known as Australian Christian Churches). In fact, Brian Houston was the national president for 12 years. The fact that Hillsong dedicated an entire page of its 2020 Annual Report to Pentecostalism makes its identity quite clear.

The Australian public sees Hillsong as Pentecostal, too. In fact, to the typical Aussie, Pentecostalism and megachurches are one and the same. As Andrew Singleton, associate professor

of sociology and social research at Deakin University, says, “Australia’s largest churches in every capital city and in the regions are all Pentecostal churches.”

While there are plenty of small to medium-size Pentecostal/charismatic churches, there is more than enough impact from Hillsong and similar churches to change the narrative. Like Hillsong, the growth of the Pentecostal church within Australia seemed unstoppable.

The Rev. Denise Austin, Pentecostal historian and professor, says Pentecostals within Australia have increased from 40,000 members in 1976 to over 400,000 in 2016. This huge increase contrasts with the decline of 4% in the overall Christian community. She says Hillsong and other similar churches are “models for real-world faith, community engagement and contemporary worship.”

Yet Hillsong has long had its detractors. There are the Reformed evangelicals who regularly speak against its theology and ecclesiology. There are the secularists who roar against a church that is big enough to have the ear of the prime minister (who attends a Pentecostal church). And there are other Pentecostals who bemoan the shortcomings of the megachurch model. But none of this changes the firm placement of Hillsong within the Pentecostal/charismatic stream of the body of Christ.

Global Concerns

What about the scandals?

Scandals have impacted Hillsong throughout its history. Geoff Bullock. Frank Houston. Pat Mesiti. These historic names all had a massive influence on the church in its early years—so much influence that people wondered if the church would recover from their respective departures. But Hillsong continued its exponential growth. Of course, these names were all local, and those stories were largely Australian stories.

Until Carl Lentz

The Carl Lentz controversy went far beyond just an Australian or an American church problem. It was a global problem. It reminds us that the pastors who attract the kind of worldwide attention that comes with a crowd, especially a celebrity crowd, will attract even more attention when there is a fall. Google “Carl Lentz fall,” and you will see over 1.4 million results.

This was the kind of publicity Hillsong did not want. Or need.

Then, just as the dust from the Carl Lentz disaster finally seemed to be settling, the New South Wales State Police charged Brian Houston with allegedly failing to report the pedophilia crimes of his father, Frank Houston. This matter is due to go to court later in 2022.

Any pastor would struggle with the horrific realization that the biggest role model in their life, their father, was a pedophile. The shock of this seemed to hit Brian Houston hard, as he took extended leave from his role with the church.

Then, during his leave, more statements emerged from Hillsong, including allegations of substance abuse and inappropriate conduct against Brian himself. You can read more about this in one of the many articles that have been published. You’ll also read that Brian resigned on March 23, 2022.

We may wonder about repentance, but only God knows who is or isn’t repentant. What we do know is that Interim Global Senior Pastor Phil Dooley is leading the church that way.

“We are sorry,” Dooley has said. “Not just sorry. We are repentant in our hearts and seek forgiveness, that those who have been hurt will find healing.”

May God have mercy.

Grassroots Ministry

It's as though two Hillsong worlds existed simultaneously. One was the world of the rich and famous, the crowds that came to Hillsong NYC because Justin Bieber or Selena Gomez or other celebrities would be there. And then there was the world of the average Joe or Jill, the people who belonged to a local Hillsong church for other reasons. They came for the community. They came to worship God. They keep coming because they believe this is where God planted them.

Many of these grassroots members are highly active. They are involved in outreach. They responded quickly to help flood victims in South East Queensland, Australia. They volunteer with homeless services. They are involved in advocacy work for refugees, which includes a ministry campus at Villawood Detention Centre, a church inside a refugee camp in a suburb of Sydney.

This kind of work is spread across the continent. In Perth, Hillsong houses an alternative education program. In Darwin, its youth team partners with local high schools to run mentoring programs. In Melbourne, Hillsong helps with food provision. And yes, Hillsong writes worship songs—lots of them!

Hillsong's local ministry doesn't get the secular media press attention because the headlines don't line up with what the public expects to hear. In addition to the work of members, the church as a whole has responded by giving to global issues such as those in Afghanistan and Ukraine. Hillsong countered the mental health challenges of COVID-19 by training 321 staff in suicide prevention and response. And the church continues to train young people through a variety of accredited training programs.

All this occurs through programs that belong to Hillsong directly as well as through the significant partnerships the church has developed with leading Christian organizations: Compassion International, Alphacrucis College, Alta-1 College,

Micah Australia, Ethical Voice, The Salvation Army and The Storehouse. As Dooley says, "Our church is ... full of good people doing their best to love Jesus and follow Him ... [who] do their very best to make a positive contribution to the community [that] they live in."

No one who knows of the relationship between secular journalism and the church will find it surprising that most articles focus only on the negatives of Hillsong. But what about all the good things God is doing there? What about the tens of thousands of committed Christ-followers who faithfully serve Him day after day? How can we respond to the challenges they're facing? How can we support them?

Spirit-Led Response

1) Pray: We should pray for Hillsong. Scripture calls us not only to pray for ourselves but for one another. Let's remind ourselves that while Spirit-filled believers have far more in common with Hillsong than with cessationists like John MacArthur, God calls us to pray for both.

It's clear that Hillsong is hurting right now. As the apostle Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians 12:26a (ERV), "If one part of the body suffers, all the other parts suffer with it."

As the body of Christ, we are all suffering with Hillsong. Some of that suffering may be self-inflicted. Some of that suffering is due to a world that hates any mention of Christ. Some of that suffering is due to the way we as Christians tragically attack our wounded.

One Hillsong pastor spoke openly about the pain in the church caused by the flood of derogatory comments and negative articles, but this doesn't solve the problem. We need less gossip and more prayer.

If you are part of Hillsong, we are praying for you. A large portion of your *Charisma* family is praying for you. We love

you. Let's pray for our family at Hillsong!

2) Prophecy: The prophetic voice of the Pentecostal/charismatic world is one that, by the power of the Holy Spirit, edifies and encourages the body of Christ. Hillsong needs to hear that voice now.

Sadly, the pastors, leaders and members of Hillsong have already heard from the cynics. "I told you so," "I knew it" and other such comments don't help; they only serve to make the pain worse.

Let's be honest: Stating what's wrong doesn't require a prophetic voice. That's merely an observant one. But stating the promises of God that have come through a prophetic word can greatly encourage our friends at Hillsong as they look to the Lord. The members, leaders, pastors and whole family of Hillsong need us, their Pentecostal/charismatic family, to align our words with what God is saying to them right now.

3) Learn: We can learn from Hillsong. Hillsong has meant a great deal to many of us in the contemporary Pentecostal church. We've been singing their songs, attending their conferences and listening to their voice.

There is something supernatural about Hillsong, something I've known ever since I heard that first song. There's a creative edge, a prophetic voice, a new wineskin that God has used not only to form Hillsong itself but also to impact the contemporary Pentecostal church in Australia and beyond.

It's as though Hillsong has been a thermostat used by God to set the temperature for many churches and Christians who have moved out of legalism into a genuine freedom in Christ. This has brought about a paradigm shift: a focus on leadership development, a move to practical ministries outside of Sunday services, new creative expressions, networking across denominational lines and more. We are right to thank God for how He has used Hillsong.

But the Hillsong of 2022 is more than just a thermostat. It's a bellwether church. God has used it to influence us, and now He is using it to show us that further paradigm shifts lie ahead. I would suggest that as we watch Hillsong respond to this current crisis, we will see the church move into something new. I imagine it will be far more of a grassroots organization, far more "ground up" than ever before.

Part of this will come in the way Hillsong has begun both the investigation process and the revision of governance. Many groups that operate with a founding leader who is an apostle have that person as both the key leader and board chair. Hillsong has already removed this arrangement from its charter. No doubt there will be more adjustments as the church seeks good governance and health as a faith community.

Other lessons will come, but the point is that we need to remain humble. Without humility, we won't be able to learn from either Hillsong's successes or its failures.

The song I mentioned earlier is one I pray will be true for the people of Hillsong in this season: that God will hold them close, that His love will surround them, bring them near and draw them to His side. That as they wait, they'll rise up like the eagle, and they will soar with Him as His Spirit leads them on—in the power of His love.

May this be our prayer, and may this be their reality.

Strang Report: Get Stephen Strang's perspective on the Hillsong controversy in the *Strang Report*.

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