

Another Hillsong Church Breaks Away, Is the Megachurch Model Failing?

Another Hillsong church has decided to step away from the global megachurch network, this time in San Francisco. Hillsong San Francisco, led by pastors Brenden and Jacqui Brown, will now operate independently under a new name. The announcement, made by Hillsong Global Senior Pastor Phil Dooley and Hillsong California Lead Pastor Sam Lopez, comes after a period of reflection and planning.

“After much prayer and thoughtful consideration, we’re announcing that Brenden and Jacqui Brown will be taking on the leadership of our church community in San Francisco as a separate church,” Dooley said in a remote broadcast to Hillsong California. He emphasized that this transition is an exciting new season for the Browns and their congregation, with Hillsong’s full support.

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On the surface, this seems like a natural move—church leaders feeling called to something new, stepping out in faith. But given Hillsong’s recent history, it’s hard not to see the bigger picture. As reported by The Christian Post, this marks the 11th church to depart from the Hillsong network in the U.S. since a wave of scandals rocked the megachurch. The most high-profile of these was the 2020 firing of Carl Lentz, former lead pastor of Hillsong NYC, due to “leadership issues” and moral failings, including infidelity. Since then, allegations of deeper cultural problems, including mishandling of abuse claims, have come to light—some of which were exposed in the 2022 documentary “Hillsong: A Megachurch Exposed.”

Despite the history, Lopez insists there's no hidden drama behind Hillsong San Francisco's departure.

"In my conversations with a couple of people in our church, I'm starting to realize that this isn't very normal. ... The tone I keep getting is like, 'So what happened?' And let me tell you, nothing happened," he said. According to him, the Browns simply have a "fresh vision" and are following God's calling.

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It's understandable that people might be skeptical. When a church experiences multiple departures in a short time, it raises questions. Is Hillsong undergoing a natural transition, letting go of campuses that are ready to stand on their own? Or is this another sign that the megachurch model—especially one as centralized as Hillsong—just isn't sustainable in today's world?

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