

Hillsong and Humility: Why ‘Celebrity Status’ Can Seduce Anyone

A number of years ago, shortly after Hillsong’s worldwide rise to fame, *Charisma* did a cover story on Brian Houston, the Australian church’s senior pastor. Hillsong rose quickly to international prominence because of its worship band’s string of worship hits, namely its first hit, “Shout to the Lord,” and more recently “Oceans.”

Our former *Charisma Leader* magazine also did a Q and A with Houston in 2007. You can read that [here](#).

As the church’s songs gained global influence on church music, Hillsong’s lead pastor, Brian Houston, gained a similar scope of influence on church leaders. And from what I’ve seen, he used his notoriety to instill the importance of community outreach and good works in many churches around the globe. He and his leadership team also moved the church away from a lot of the legalism that had tended to turn many people off.

When I visited a Hillsong service in 2007 I thought to myself, “This is a lot like the church I go to now.” They lowered the lights for worship and made it a little bit more like a concert. Their praise band was jumping around on stage, and being a lifelong Pentecostal myself, I enjoyed it.

Australia is a very secular country. My wife went to high school in Sydney, Australia, because her dad served there as a pastor, and I’ve been told that more than half of Australians would never go to church back then, not even on Easter and Christmas. Protestantism was pretty small, and Pentecostalism was even smaller, but a lot of that changed with Hillsong’s rise.

Because of Hillsong's rapid growth in a largely unchurched nation, many pastors implemented Brian Houston's winning strategies for planting and growing sustainable churches. Some pastors even partnered with Hillsong to plant churches around the world, including Carl Lentz, the former Hillsong NYC pastor. Lentz and his church attracted celebrities like Selena Gomez, Kyrie Irving and Kevin Durant. He was even known nationally as Justin Bieber's pastor for a couple of years. Because of Lentz's rising fame, Katie Couric, *The View* and *GQ* magazine interviewed him.

Hillsong has always had its critics, and most of them already criticized Pentecostals in general, but a number of scandals, starting with Lentz's well-documented affair and alleged sexual abuses, began to rock the global church in November 2020. Lentz was fired almost immediately.

Then, in an even more shocking turn of events, Houston stepped away from leadership to fight a court battle in which he was being prosecuted for allegedly hiding his father's pedophilia, and then he completely resigned after two allegations of "inappropriate behavior" surfaced with two separate women.

After Houston resigned, the documentary *Hillsong: A Megachurch Exposed* debuted on Discovery Plus. Since then, several Hillsong churches have withdrawn from Hillsong to apparently distance themselves from the troubled denomination. The music was affected too as Hillsong's bands cancelled their tours, and some churches questioned whether they would even play Hillsong music in their worship services. At one time revered as the gold standard of worship music, preaching and church planting, Hillsong's brand tanked.

A well-known TV preacher said one time, "Everyone's made mistakes, but only some of them have become public." As a journalist, I've seen the nature of some very flawed superstar preachers over the years. They have the anointing, and people respond to their message, but behind the scenes they act like

high-ranking politicians or Arab sheiks. I don't think the Lord is pleased with that. To some extent, all of us are probably guilty of getting away with certain things, but we have to realize that sooner or later these things will catch up with us.

I don't think Carl Lentz, Brian Houston or any of the other Hillsong pastors are irredeemable. They became celebrities, and just like when a small-time politician hits the national stage or when a small start-up founder grows into a big tech CEO, it's easy for them to let it go straight to their head, especially when everyone keeps telling them how great they are.

I don't know everything about Hillsong, but from what I've observed, it's easy for successful ministries like Hillsong to focus on their success and ignore all of their critics, but I suggest a more humble approach for pastors and Christian leaders. My longtime mentor Jamie Buckingham used to say, "You can learn something from your worst critic because at least they see something that you don't see."

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