

Australian Leader Tells How Hillsong Scandal Hurts That Church in Spite of the Good It's Done

Over the last 30 years, Hillsong's conferences, worship music and emphasis on helping pastors build strong local churches have deeply impacted John Finkelde, former pastor and CEO of Grow a Healthy Church in Perth, Australia.

Around the world, Hillsong has been known for its worship music, but according to Finkelde, Hillsong's lesser-known work with the poor is equally significant.

Because of the widespread respect for Hillsong's work on both global and local levels, the news of Hillsong's scandals and former senior pastor Brian Houston's resignation overwhelmed many Australian pastors

"I think there is a sense of shock, a sense of, 'My goodness, how could this happen?'" Finkelde says. "At the moment, there's a sense of lamenting and mourning."

Soon I will opine about the three-part Discovery+ documentary, *Exposé of a Megachurch*, and what Christians can learn from this sad story. But first I wanted to report on how it was seen by the Australian church. You can hear my interview [here](#).

In January, Houston stepped down from all "ministry responsibilities" at the church while dealing with legal charges that he concealed his father's child sex offenses. The New South Wales police force accused Houston in August 2021 of covering up information about an incident where his father, Frank Houston, abused a boy in the 1970s. It came to light in the 1990s.

Then, early in April 2022, Hillsong's global board officially announced Brian Houston's resignation because of inappropriate behavior involving two women, one of whom was a former staff member. In an email of apology to the board and to members of the church, Houston also admitted to using alcohol to cope with "many years of constant pressure, opposition, challenges and attacks, accompanied by my personal turmoil over my father's evil."

Finkelde acknowledges the deep hurt that both situations must have caused the victims, but he also takes time to reiterate the love that most of the Australian church still has for both Brian Houston and his wife, Bobbie Houston. "Brian and Bobbie have done some magnificent things to shape the Australian church in really good ways over the last 30, 40 years," Finkelde says.

"Brian has expressed deep apologies as well, and I think that's helped to some degree, but I still think when these situations happen, people do shake their heads and wonder, 'What's going on? What is really happening here?'" he says.

In Finkelde's estimation, not only was Houston left unaccountable, but Hillsong's rapid growth outpaced its ability to govern, lead and oversee the pastors of the churches bearing the Hillsong name around the world. He believes that lack of accountability led to the tragic rise and fall of Hillsong NYC's former pastor Carl Lentz, who had multiple affairs and a manipulative leadership style.

Because of Hillsong's prominence, Finkelde believes that, with the disbelief and mourning of the scandals, the Australian church has also gained a valuable lesson about the need for accountability.

In regard to the pastors he counsels, he would now tell each of them, "Pastor, sharpen up your levels of connection to your boards, to your ministry friends, to counselors."

“Sharpen those areas up so that you don’t end up in a place of being unaccountable and just leading a lifestyle that will lead you to some really tragic ends,” Finkelde says.

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