

Carl Lentz Shares Hillsong NYC's Unique Approach to Being Spirit-Filled

What does it mean to be a Hillsong church? Many might identify the worship. Others would point to the church's accessibility and "come as you are" mentality. Perhaps they might even mention Hillsong's "coolness". But Hillsong NYC Pastor Carl Lentz believes what defines Hillsong is an emphasis on Jesus' gospel and a willingness to let the Holy Spirit move—without being weird or off-putting.

That last part may be an underrated key to Hillsong's success. The Spirit-filled international congregation has been embraced by many believers who would otherwise recoil at the idea of prophecies, miracles and speaking in tongues.

Lentz discussed with *Charisma* how Hillsong founding pastor Brian Houston taught him to engage the supernatural and the gifts of the Holy Spirit, as well as the church's overall framework for ministry.

This is the first part of a two-part interview with Pastor Carl Lentz. It has been edited for clarity and readability. For more from Lentz and the Hillsong team, check out the April issue of Charisma, available for purchase [here](#).

In 2010, you founded Hillsong New York. So where did you first get that idea and how did that process go for you?

We—Brian [Houston]'s son, Joel, and I—did Bible college together when we were like 20. We had a conversation, as I was headed back to Virginia, about "Do you think that Dad would ever do something in the States?" and we were both like, "Nah. Probably not." Because at that time, it wasn't talked about. But we said if he ever did, we would have to do it together.

We shook on it, hugged, laughed and then almost 10 years later, I flew up to New York to see Joel because he had something he was doing up here. And he just told me, "My dad wants to start a church in America. He wants to do it here in New York." And pretty much right away I was like, "Oh my gosh, we've got to be a part of this."

And that was it. From there we started that direction moving, and that's as cool and simple as it was. It was Brian who had the idea. He never offered Laura or me a job or any part of it. Actually, we came to him, like, "We want to be a part of it in any way. Because we believe in it."

Brian told me during an interview that God has obviously been a huge part of Hillsong's success because He's made it more successful than anyone involved could have imagined. But he said another key part has been the people involved and the decisions made at crucial moments. With Hillsong New York growing and being as successful as it is, are there any key moments, decisions or hires that stick out to you as really important for bringing it to where it is today?

That answer can probably be traced back to Brian and his leadership, because I couldn't point to one big decision. I can point to a bunch of little ones that he has given us the freedom to do, whether that's to make a good call or a bad call.

What I love about Brian is that he is such an encouraging, releasing leader. I mean, he's tough. He's a tough cookie. But he gives you the freedom to just make decisions because he trusts you. So if I feel like Brian has asked Laura and me—and at the time, Joel—to be his eyes, ears and carry his heart, then I've got to make decisions.

Now, every big decision I would make—and even a lot of the small ones—I would run through Brian. But one of the first things he told me and Joel when we got here was "I'm going to

give you the framework of what I want our church to be in New York, but I'm not going to tell you how to paint the picture. I'm not going to tell you what colors to use. I'm not going to tell you what style to use. The framework is the framework—meaning, this is who we are. This is our culture. These are our semantics, what we believe. But within that, that's why I picked you. You know things that maybe I won't know."

That has always really freed and released me to lead this, because I knew that he trusted me. So I can't point to one thing that was a big [turning point], but I will say any decision that represents our church, Brian makes those. And I fall in line with that. Sometimes there have been people who wonder if I make my own call—"Do you disagree with Brian on some things?" My answer is always easy because it's always no. If I'm making a statement that ends up having a little bit of impact nationally or even globally, whatever it is, that's a statement that is Brian's part. Always. I'm never going to make my call, and be like, "I think Brian might like this." It doesn't work like that.

You said that when you started, you were given the framework, but then you could approach the style any way you wanted after that. So for you, what is the framework of a Hillsong Church?

The culture of our church is that this church is about Jesus. It's about getting people to Jesus, and it's about teaching people how to live and follow and walk like Jesus. These are our core values, right? So everything comes out of that.

I think one of my favorite parts of our culture is we have a "welcome home, all are welcome" mentality, meaning there aren't barriers that sometimes naturally stop the church. We don't have those because we really want everyone to get a chance to hear the gospel. So part of our culture is that you can come as you are. You know, our faith and belief teach us that if we can get you in the doors, the Holy Spirit can do

the rest, and Jesus' name will be lifted higher than whatever you previously may have thought. But I am always grateful that I am part of the church that allows anybody.

No matter where you're from or what you believe, you're going to have a chance to sit in this church and hear the truth in love. To me, that's one of my favorite values of our culture. But that's it: Our culture is the Holy Spirit flowing, not some big rules and regulation culture. It's a passion, commitment and reverence culture.

There's a lot of life in our church. There's a lot of fun in our church too. That's what stuck out to me 20 years ago when I walked through the doors of Hillsong Sydney as a brand-new Christian. I just couldn't believe that the place was so much fun, because I was trained in this American religiosity, where it's like the more you smile, the less sanctified you are. So to walk into Hillsong and see this Australian pastor preach with passion and fire but with this joy, it really stuck out to me. I think that's one of the things that really got me to think about doing this for life. Because I never thought I could fit into a church. Ever. I couldn't stand churches. And then when I walked into Hillsong, I was like "I could actually come here. I wouldn't mind coming back." And that was a new feeling for me.

You mentioned that a big part of Hillsong is the Holy Spirit flowing in the place, and obviously at *Charisma* that's an important factor for us. But one thing I find interesting about Hillsong is that even though it is undeniably charismatic and Spirit-filled in its theology, it's also very accessible—compared to how some churches in the Spirit-filled denomination can seem weird or off-putting to people.

No, not "seem." They are.

Can you talk about that? How do you go about approaching that?

Brian has a teaching that he's always done, and it really made

sense to me early on. He said, "I want to talk about the supernatural—and before you go any further, when you say the word 'supernatural,' what do you think about? You think about mystical weirdness. You think about magic and the supernatural. But if you break down the word, it's 'super-natural.' It's just 'natural' with 'super' on it. That means everything's enhanced, everything's better, but it's still natural."

So our thing is not to make the supernatural this otherworldly thing that you access. No, this is something you possess, and you have the right to access it anytime you want. But it should affect you in your natural world. So if the only time you're feeling the Holy Spirit's presence is when you're speaking in tongues at your charismatic altar-call service, you're missing the point. Supernaturally accessing the Holy Spirit is on the subway, when God gives you a word of knowledge, or when you get a prophetic word to speak life over somebody or when you might want to pray for somebody that you don't know. I think to me that's the beauty of the Holy Spirit; it's not contained to the church world.

Brian was one of the first guys who made me able to actually see that, because I was always spooked out by weirdness. I think we are part of a church movement around young people that are trying to let people know—if I say "I'm gonna talk about the supernatural" in Manhattan this week, people will come out in droves thinking we're going to be looking for gold dust, and we're going to have 40-hour services of laughing and dancing. That's people's mindset. They think that's what it is. I totally disagree.

So what I love about our church is that our style is to make this super-natural: we're natural, God and the Holy Spirit's power is super powerful, and somehow these two things can mesh. If that makes sense. So what we're always trying to do is make this practical. Don't make the supernatural a place that you visit. It's a present that you live with.

Is there anything else you feel readers should know about Hillsong's leadership?

I think people should know that Brian is an extremely humble, transparent leader. I don't know if it's possible to see someone walk more humbly when God increases their profile, but honestly, I think Brian is getting a little bit better with age. He's the proof that you can ask God to use your life, and He will. We've got a guy from Australia who started a church on a wing and a prayer, and we're talking about him in Manhattan. That just doesn't happen. Yeah, he's gifted. But I think it's more of an availability and a willingness to be controversial, and a willingness to be sacrificial at times. I think he deserves the honor he's given.