

Carl Lentz Talks Next-Generation Revival and ‘Celebrity Pastor’ Claims

Since its opening in 2010, Hillsong NYC has made headlines for its celebrity attendees. Justin Bieber, Selena Gomez and Kylie and Kendall Jenner have all been seen at the church. In 2013, NBA star Kevin Durant was baptized at Hillsong’s New York campus.

But Pastor Carl Lentz dismisses claims that he’s a “celebrity pastor.” Instead, he says, he’s trying to build a local church where anyone from the most famous to the least famous can learn and grow in relationship with Christ together.

“I think that our church represents what’s possible, something that is only possible in the local church where you can reach somebody who has nothing right next to somebody who has everything,” Lentz says. “To me, that’s what Jesus did. I think if anything we’re breaking down some walls of who you thought you could reach.”

Lentz talked to *Charisma* about Hillsong’s growing influence and congregation, why it’s dangerous for church leaders to coast off of reputations, and how he sees opportunity for revival among the next generation.

This is the second part of a two-part interview with Pastor Carl Lentz (the first part is available [here](#)). 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](#).

There are few if any churches today that are as influential as the Hillsong movement. For you at the New York church, some of that you inherited, and some of that you’ve cultivated while

you've been there. How do you shepherd that influence and use it for the kingdom?

It's funny when you plant a church that has a name attached to it that people know. It's a really awesome benefit in some ways, and then in others, it can be a detriment if you allow it to be. If you come to New York and just expect the name of Hillsong Church to get somebody to stay or be committed, you're in for a rude awakening. The name might get somebody to check the church out from the Christian world, but that doesn't get anybody to stay, first.

Second, nobody who is outside the Christian world really cares about Hillsong Church or Bethel—nobody cares! Nobody, not one time in New York, have I told somebody that's outside of the Christian bubble, "I pastor Hillsong Church" and they say, "Amazing! I'm going to come." They'll say "Hill what? Hill say?" It's incredible, because that isn't what grows a church.

What it does give you, though, is a covering, and it gives you a reference for the fact that, yeah, this is 30 years in the making, and we have to steward it wisely. It gives you a foundation. But you've got to build it very, very wisely. Because you don't want people to take the easy out either. That's what I always tell the church: If we're using the name of our church to be our biggest evangelistic weapon, we're in trouble. That's not what's going to bring revival.

So, yeah, what we've cultivated off the foundation of Hillsong Church I think is just a continuation of what it's always been: a simple church, filled with ordinary people who love Jesus. And we're going to get dignity in dying, and we're going to work together. That's Hillsong Church all over the globe.

For you personally, when you're in your quiet time and spending time with God, what are you really passionate about right now? What are you praying for?

I pray for wisdom a lot, and I pray for awareness. I think that on like a leadership level, I would pray for wisdom. On a personal level, I would say I think the Holy Spirit can use eyes to see blind spots, to see things that, because you're doing life so fast, you can miss or look over. I think God's been really gracious and faithful to bring people in our lives to help us see it, or He'll show you Himself. But to me, my passion is just to stay completely focused on our call, which is to just be submitted, repentant, humble followers of the God who saved us. So that's my private cry.

My public leadership cry would be "God, give me wisdom to lead the most amazing people in the world with the passion that they deserve, because our churches are the best, and they're worthy of me staying on my face in prayer, making sure that I do everything I can do, in a very fallible, broken way." We all are just works in progress, but I've got to do the best I can.

You have famously had a lot of success reaching the next generation—and that obviously includes some high-profile names—with the gospel. Some people have called you a "celebrity pastor." I'm just curious, given your success reaching the next generation, what do you see God doing in that generation?

Our church gets some of that odd publicity ... [but] we don't have to accept what people call us, for positive or negative. We can do nothing about the fraction of people who say, "You're a celebrity pastor." We know we're not. We hang around real celebrities. We know what real fame is. So that's a joke to us. We can't stop people from calling us anything, but as long as we don't necessarily digest good or bad, we're fine. So I don't think that for one second. I live a normal life. There is an aspect of our life that has a huge profile, we get that, but we know what that is. We don't take it for more than that.

But I think that our church represents what's possible, something that is only possible in the local church where you can reach somebody who has nothing right next to somebody who has everything. To me, that's what Jesus did. I think if anything we're breaking down some walls of who you thought you could reach. We've just always thought, *We don't really care. We don't care if you're a reporter for Charisma or if you're a reporter for CNN. I don't care if you're an illiterate homeless person or you're an Oxford scholar. You both need the same thing.* The way we get it to you will be different, but that doesn't mean either one of you is special, it just means we care about you so much.

The flipside, the negative side of all this: "Oh, you guys cater to people." I say, absolutely not. We do what Jesus did. So if you're in a wheelchair, we'll go put you in a row where everyone can see you. If you're famous, we're going to put you in a row where nobody can see you. This doesn't mean you're special. It just means you're incredible and different, and we have to do everything we can to serve.

I hope our church has shown the younger generation that you don't have to have what the world tells you that you need to have to have influence. You do need to be totally locked and loaded in this relationship with Jesus. And that's the only card you need to really make a difference. Yeah, some of the other stuff's incredible, but I think the key ingredient is that we're Christians. You have the answer that our world is dying for. And that doesn't take money. That doesn't take fame. It just takes somebody to actually believe it. And we do.

Pastor Brian Houston said during our interview that he could see the seeds of revival among the next generation. He believes young people are really hungry for Jesus. Is that something you've seen?

Yeah, I think he's right. I think anytime culture has an

extreme swing, it's always a benefit for something that's consistent. So right now, the culture has swung to just like a place of "Everything is tolerated except for people who love Jesus. There is no definition of anything. You can be this and you can live this way."

I've never looked at that as a problem. I say, "Thank you! Please keep doing that. Please keep going that way, culture, because that is such an empty, hollow, broken way to live that it actually highlights who we are even more."

Because people are smart. They're created by God. They're stuck inside that box against awful cultural wisdom. And I think in the past, during these opportunities, the church hasn't been loud enough or hasn't been appealing enough.

So [people are] always looking for a way out of this toxic highway that [culture] is giving people. But there's nowhere to go. So my job is to create local churches that are right there off the highway. You can see them from a mile away. If you choose to take this exit, and you give it a shot, I don't think you'll have to get back on the cultural highway.

I've got teenagers in my house. I don't think they're looking at this culture going, "Man, this is amazing." I think they're going, "What is going on in the world? Like this is insane. I don't even know. You should see my school, Dad."

I think it's a really important time for us to not do anything different but to do everything as passionately as we have been and create as many avenues as we can to get people in the house, because we have the answers people are looking for.