

Hillsong Launches New York Congregation

Australia's Hillsong Church is launching its first U.S. congregation in New York City, with weekly small-group meetings beginning Sunday night.

Known for its popular worship music, Sydney-based Hillsong has planted churches around the world, including in London; Paris; Stockholm; Cape Town, South Africa; and Kiev, Ukraine.

Hillsong founder Brian Houston said the new congregation will not compete with other established churches in New York, the most populous city in the U.S.

"We acknowledge that there are already many great churches in greater New York, and we are excited to see how we can come alongside and be a blessing to these leaders and their congregations," Houston wrote in a blog earlier this year. "As the story of Hillsong New York unfolds, our mandate will remain the same: We desire to build a church that loves God and loves people."

Hillsong New York will be led by Carl and Laura Lentz and Hillsong United frontman Joel Houston. Although Joel Houston will be based in New York, he will continue to serve as creative director for Hillsong's global outreach and minister with Hillsong United, a youth-oriented worship band that has sold millions of albums worldwide.

Roughly 250 interested members currently meet occasionally in "connect groups" as Lentz and Houston continue to search for a venue in a city known for its pricey real estate. Regular worship services are expected to begin no later than January, Lentz said. And an introductory Encounter Night featuring Brian Houston and other key international leaders is scheduled for Oct. 17.

But more than its location or worship music, Lentz hopes the New York church will be known for members who are committed to serving others.

“Church is not just a service, it’s a community of believers dedicated to preaching the gospel and helping people,” Lentz wrote in a recent blog. “Churches have services, and we plan on having some amazing, soul-winning, Jesus-glorifying services, but this community of believers is more than a weekly meeting.”

A graduate of Hillsong’s Bible school, Lentz was a minister at Wave Church in Virginia Beach, Va., before he and his family moved to Brooklyn, N.Y., in July. He said the city that never sleeps has been keeping him up at night – and that’s a good thing.

“It’s been very difficult to sleep and not because of the honking taxis, but because of the possibility,” he told *Charisma*. “It’s just like, ‘Lord, help us to have the kind of vision that’s required for a city like this.’”

Though some question whether there’s a need for another church in New York, Lentz said with the number of people living in the city, 8.4 million to be exact, there’s room for thousands of churches.

“I’ve personally been able to invite probably around 30 people who have never been to church – never,” Lentz said. “And that has shocked me.”

“There are just so many people to reach,” he added. “When you’re here, you understand you’ve got to link arms with as many churches [as you can] because every church has a lane that they run in, and we need all churches clicking on all cylinders.”

Lentz said he’s found New Yorkers to be surprisingly kind, and they’ve forced him to broaden his vision for the Big Apple.

“New Yorkers are known for being ... gruff, [but] we just haven’t seen that,” he said. “New Yorkers are busy and they’re passionate about what they’re doing, but we’ve found people to be very open. I think if anything’s happened since we’ve been here in this month I’ve felt convicted to have a bigger dream and to believe for more influence because people are so open.”