

Hillsong Pastor Carl Lentz Asked to Step Down, Cites 'Moral Failure'

In an email reportedly sent by Hillsong founding pastor, Brian Houston, to church staff and members of Hillsong East Coast on Wednesday afternoon Nov. 4, Houston announced the termination of Carl Lentz, the lead pastor for the New York City location of Hillsong East Coast.

The email, which was obtained by RNS, cited the reason for termination as "leadership issues and breaches of trust, plus a recent revelation of moral failures."

"I know this will come as a shock to you, but please know that this action was not taken lightly and was done in the best interests of everyone, including Pastor Carl," Houston wrote.

"Please understand that it would not be appropriate for us to go into detail about the events that led to this decision. However you can be assured that this decision was made in order to honor God and pastorally care for you, our East Coast family, Pastor Carl and his family," Houston continued.

Lentz, 41, was one of a number of pastors GQ Magazine has described as "hype priests" who lead churches frequented by celebrities. Friends and congregants include Justin Bieber and his wife Hailey Baldwin Bieber, as well as the Jenner sisters.

Lentz, along with Houston's son Joel, began Hillsong NYC, the first Hillsong East Coast church, in 2010. The church, part of the global network of Hillsong churches, quickly drew attention for the long lines waiting to be "let in" on Sunday mornings—and for the demographic waiting in those lines. The worshippers who flocked there were—like their lead pastor—young, hip and dressed looking more like they were

headed to a rock concert than to Sunday morning church. Indeed, their venue, Irving Plaza in the Gramercy neighborhood of Manhattan, was a church by day and concert hall by night.

Lentz, relatively unknown before taking the helm of Hillsong NYC, drew the attention of major media outlets for his hipster dress, his tattoo-covered arms and his celebrity congregants, including Justin Bieber, who according to GQ was baptized by the pastor in the bathtub of Tyson Chandler, a New York Knicks player at the time.

Lentz was raised in Virginia and played basketball at North Carolina State, where he told the *New York Post* he was “doing my own thing, being my own god.” He moved to Los Angeles to attend King’s College and Seminary, then headed to Australia to join Hillsong’s training program, Hillsong College, where he met his wife, Laura. He worked in youth ministry in Virginia Beach before moving to Brooklyn’s trendy Williamsburg neighborhood to launch Hillsong’s first U.S. location, according to media reports.

“While I have no doubt in my heart that this is the right course of action, I must mention Bobbie’s and my personal sadness, as we have known Laura her entire life and Carl for well over 20 years,” Houston wrote in his letter.

Pastors Brian and Bobbie Houston founded the original Hillsong Church in 1983 in the suburbs of Sydney, Australia. It now has locations in 28 countries around the world and, pre-pandemic, saw an average 150,000 attenders each week, according to its website.

Hillsong is also known for its popular worship music and conferences.

Neither Hillsong nor Carl Lentz immediately responded to requests for comment.

Copyright 2020, Religion News Service.