

More Accusations Surface Against Hillsong Co-Founder Brian Houston

The board of directors of Hillsong, the global megachurch and music empire co-founded by Australian pastor Brian Houston, released a statement Friday (March 18) addressing two complaints about Houston, including an accusation that the married pastor had spent time alone in a hotel room with a woman in 2019.

In the statement, which came as the story was breaking in the Australian press, said the Hillsong board has been “dealing with two complaints made against Pastor Brian over the last 10 years,” and said each was investigated by a board member, or “a body appointed by the global board,” and dealt with confidentially.

The other complaint related to an accusation that Houston had flirted with a staff member over text message a decade ago.

Prior to the statement being released, Hillsong reportedly held a video meeting with 800 Hillsong staffers around the world in which interim senior pastor Phil Dooley, who is leading the church while Houston is on leave due to ongoing legal troubles, discussed the complaints for the first time with the church at large. Dooley explained the texts, according to Australia’s ABC News, as being to the effect of, “‘If I was with you, I’d like to kiss and cuddle you,’ words of that nature.”

The second incident, as reportedly detailed in the staff meeting, took place during Hillsong’s annual conference in Qudos Bank Arena in Homebush, New South Wales, in 2019. According to ABC, Dooley said Houston had been “drinking with a group.”

"Later that evening, Pastor Brian attempted to get into his room but didn't have his room key and ended up knocking on the door to the woman's room," Dooley reportedly said. "She opened the door and he went into her room."

"The truth is we don't know what happened next," ABC reported Dooley telling the staff. "The woman has not said there was any sexual activity. Brian has said there was no sexual activity, but he was in the room for 40 minutes."

Upon request for comment, Hillsong pointed to the public board statement.

The Hillsong board statement said that Houston, 67, had become "disoriented" after taking more than the prescribed dose of an anti-anxiety prescription, mixed with alcohol. "This resulted in him knocking on the door of a hotel room that was not his, entering this room and spending time with the female occupant," read the statement.

The board's statement said Houston was also under the influence of sleeping medication—"upon which he had developed a dependence"—at the time he sent the inappropriate texts. The text messages ultimately led to the staff member resigning, according to the statement.

In the staff meeting, Dooley reportedly said the staff member had made a complaint at the time to Hillsong general manager George Aghajanian. After resigning, the staff member was unable to immediately find employment and, Dooley said, Houston personally paid "a couple of months salary" as compensation.

The board statement said Houston apologized to the staff member. "We also worked closely with Pastor Brian to ensure he received professional help to eliminate his dependency on this medication, and this was achieved successfully," the statement read.

After the hotel room incident, the board said there was an investigation “by the integrity unit,” and that, “although all parts of the complaint were unable to be sustained, important elements of the complaint were sustained, and the conduct was of serious concern.”

The board’s statement also said they agreed to refund money the woman had donated to the church, “in order to bring resolution in a spirit of love and care,” and to “abide by her request for confidentiality.” The statement said Houston repaid the money to the church.

At the time, Houston agreed to step down from leadership for a period and “take specific action,” but ultimately, according to the statement, he did not take all of the agreed-upon steps, “which resulted in the board taking further action in late 2021.”

The statement did not indicate whether Houston would return to his position at the church.

The incidents are the latest controversy to engulf Hillsong, a Pentecostal powerhouse Houston founded with his wife, Bobbie, in 1983. The church, which draws a reported 150,000 to services in 30 locations, has also produced some of the most popular worship songs used in evangelical churches around the world, including “Oceans,” “What a Beautiful Name,” and “Shout to the Lord.”

In January, Houston announced he was taking a leave from his pastoral duties during 2022 in order to prepare for his trial in Australia on charges that he failed to report sexual abuse.

“The result is that the Hillsong Global Board feel it is in my and the church’s best interest for this to happen, so I have agreed to step aside from all ministry responsibilities until the end of the year,” Houston said in the Jan. 30 video announcement.

Houston was charged in August 2021 with concealing a serious, indictable offense of another person. Police say his late father, Frank Houston, also a preacher, indecently assaulted a young male in 1970. Court documents allege Houston knew of his father's abuse as early as 1999 and, "without reasonable excuse," failed to disclose that information to police.

Houston has long denied covering up his father's abuse.

"I think I'm quite a tolerant person, but one thing I've really never had any tolerance for is sexual abuse, and especially child abuse," Houston said in a 2005 interview with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. "So, I don't think you could have kicked me in the guts with a bigger blow, in some ways."

According to Australian news sources, Houston's trial will be held in late 2022.

More recent concerns have arisen over how Houston and Hillsong have handled allegations of abuse within the church and about the conduct of its pastors, some of whom are celebrities in their own rights.

Carl Lentz, former lead pastor of Hillsong NYC, was fired in November of 2020 for "leadership issues and breaches of trust, plus a recent revelation of moral failings." Lentz subsequently admitted to having an extramarital affair. Soon after, Ranin Karim, a Brooklyn jewelry designer, discussed her relationship with Lentz on *Good Morning America*. The following month, comments from Brian Houston, in which he called Lentz "a narcissist," suggested the affair was not Lentz's only transgression.

Six months later, a former staff member at Hillsong alleged she was subjected to "bullying, abuse of power and sexual abuse" over the course of the seven years she worked as a nanny in Lentz's home. Lentz denied the allegations.

Reed and Jess Bogard, lead pastors of the Dallas location, abruptly resigned in 2020 as well, leading to the Dallas church being shuttered for the foreseeable future. The couple had served in New York with Lentz and “failed to meet the commitments and standards of Hillsong Church,” church leaders later said.

In April 2021, Darnell Barrett, a pastor for the Montclair, New Jersey, Hillsong campus, resigned after sharing revealing photos of himself on Instagram stories to a group of friends that included a woman who once volunteered for him at the New Jersey church.

Anna Crenshaw, an American student who attended Hillsong College in Sydney, told RNS earlier this year that she was inappropriately touched by a Hillsong staffer, Jason Mays, the son of the church’s human resources chief, at a party in early 2016. Crenshaw didn’t tell Hillsong leadership about the incident for two years and told RNS in May that she believes there is “a lack of institutional accountability” and a cultural tendency at Hillsong “to value those ‘higher up’ or more connected.”

Crenshaw said that while Hillsong leadership took her accusations seriously, they were slow to take action and that Houston seemed initially dismissive of Mays’ behavior, saying Mays was “just young, drunk, stupid and in a bad situation.” Mays pleaded guilty to indecent assault in 2020 and received two years’ probation and mandatory counseling. {eo}

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