

Unconventional Hillsong NYC Pastor Says Critics Give 'Fuel for the Fire'

Sporting tattoos and a half-shaved head, Carl Lentz is not a typical pastor. But the leader of Hillsong Church NYC says critics of his unconventional style just give him "fuel for the fire."

"If you're new to our church, we love you," the 34-year-old said in a Thursday report from the Associated Press. "Don't be alarmed by the craziness you see."

Lentz's evangelical church, which is a branch of the Australia Pentecostal church, draws an estimated 5,500 people every Sunday at its Irving Plaza location near Manhattan's Union Square. Its ballroom-style concert venue has hosted bands such as U2 and the Red Hot Chili Peppers.

"People squeeze into whatever space they can find and take notes on iPhones as Lentz marches across the stage, peppering his sermon with Bible verses, jokes, pop music lines and street slang," the AP said.

Hillsong NYC, which started a little more than two years ago, hosts at least six services each Sunday, sometimes adding more due to the large crowds that show up.

"It's unconventional, but we're not a conventional city. This isn't the Bible Belt. This is New York," Steve Dagrossa said. The 31-year-old recovering heroin addict recently spent 12 hours attending all six sermons.

Church member Meredith Anderson, who also works as an assistant to Lentz, says the church's style has presented a unique opportunity.

“If it was a church that was all buttoned up, you know, what everybody thinks about when they think about church ... that’s not necessarily something that would speak to me,” she said, according to the AP. “But because it’s young people, because there are young people there, I feel more comfortable.”

Though some have expressed concerns that a modern church that appeals to young people may allow Christ’s message to be overshadowed, Lentz insists he won’t let that happen.

“This church is always only about Jesus,” he recently said in a statement. “It’s always, it’s only about Jesus.”