

8 Lessons the Global Church Can Learn From the Hillsong Scandal

Whether it be a historic denominational church or an independent evangelical church, it's always unfortunate whenever there is a scandal in the church.

Often, when the media reports a Christian scandal, they report only the salacious details, neglecting the many thousands of lives that the power of Jesus Christ has transformed. This is certainly the case regarding the public deconstruction of the Hillsong brand.

One report says that Hillsong has lost at least half of its American campuses in the last two weeks! Whether this movement survives is totally up to the response of its leaders as God says He will lift us if we humble ourselves. Consequently, there are at least eight lessons we can learn from Hillsong:

1. We cannot build a church upon mega personalities. Many of the Hillsong churches, including NYC, were built upon the mega personalities of their lead pastor. Whenever a church is built upon one person's charisma and influence, it becomes dangerous because its foundation dissipates if that pastor resigns.

2. The lifestyle of the top leader filters down to the ecosystem of the whole church. The Hillsong NYC Pastor, Carl Lenz, had to resign because he was caught in an adulterous relationship. The reports I read also cited numerous affairs amongst the staff in the church. Recently, the global lead pastor, Brian Houston, had to resign because of a flirtatious text to a staff member. He was also caught in a woman's hotel room, whom he met at a conference. Unfortunately, culture starts at the top of an organization, and whatever is practiced and tolerated filters from the leader down to every

other part of the entity.

3. We cannot build on a bad foundation. I remember when Hillsong Church started in New York City. They had concerts every Sunday night for several months until they built up a critical mass. Then, one Sunday evening, they announced they were starting a church the following week during Sunday morning hours and encouraged everyone to attend. I heard that this was their *modus operandi* in other cities of the United States and beyond. Consequently, they planted churches based on the strength of their worship band, gathering crowds taken from other smaller feeder churches. This merely transfers growth and does not expand the kingdom of God.

4. Every local church needs local church governance. Pastor Terri Crist in Arizona resigned from Hillsong recently because he claimed they do not allow local churches to be autonomous. According to the *New York Times*, "For Mr. Crist, leaving Hillsong was the culmination of several years of doubts about the institution. He objected a few years ago, he said, when a global church restructuring disbanded his board of local leaders and put him directly under the authority of the Australia-based global board." This is a gross violation of the biblical model we see in the New Testament. Every local church should be governed by indigenous leaders who understand the context of their city and culture. They are usually best equipped to give oversight to the congregation.

5. The brand of a movement can tarnish all the churches so branded. Many leaders like Pastor Sam Collier resigned because it was too difficult for him to raise a new church with all the scandals distracting from his purpose of preaching the gospel. Whenever a local church connects to a movement and is forced to take its name, it is taking a chance that the brand of said movement will be a positive and not a negative one when moving forward.

6. A church can have an excellent Sunday presentation but poor

infrastructure. Hillsong put on some of the greatest Sunday services in the world, especially because of their extraordinary worship. Unfortunately, this presentation often hid the fact that they had poor infrastructure, lacking a healthy, biblically-based culture amongst the staff and leadership. Just because a church has a big crowd and exciting services doesn't mean they comport with the New Testament pattern for processing and vetting its leaders and staff (1 Tim. 3:1-15).

7. You can have a megachurch with a few disciples. The bottom line for determining if a church is influential is if they are winning new converts and making them disciples of Jesus (Matt. 28:19-20). A church that is built upon attracting people because of great music, without biblically-based solid teaching from the pulpit, will have difficulty producing genuine disciples of Christ. (To be fair, there may be exceptions to this with some substantive biblical preaching in some Hillsong campuses, but I am referring to the primary way they plant churches and keep drawing people.)

8. A leader or church should not cater to or focus on celebrity culture. It is important to reach all people, including celebrities, with the gospel. NYC Pastor Carl Lenz was known as the hipster, cool pastor to the celebrities. However, when a lead pastor seems to be enamored by celebrity culture and caters to "power people," they violate the command against showing partiality (James 2). Young, "cool," attractive pastors who are close to famous secular people have to be careful. They must guard against being seduced by lust for fame and an illicit lifestyle.

The apostle John warns us to "not love the world or the things in the world because if anyone loves the world, the Father's love is not in them." The love of the world includes the "lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life" (1 John 2:15-17). In conclusion, my prayer is that all the thousands of sincere Christ-followers, including some of the

leaders in Hillsong, will have wisdom from God as it relates to continuing the Hillsong movement and redeeming their witness for Christ.

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