

Brian Houston: How Hillsong Grew From a Small Local Church to an International Movement

Though Senior Pastor Brian Houston may recoil at the term “megachurch,” it’s an accurate descriptor for the Hillsong movement he founded. He says no one but God could have predicted the international fame and impact his once-small, local church would have.

In 1983, Houston and his wife, Bobbie, planted Hills Christian Life Centre in Sydney, Australia. Forty-five people attended its first service. Within four years, 900 people attended weekly services, and the Houstons started the Hillsong Conference, an annual event dedicated to raising up the next generation of Christian musicians. Worship leaders like Darlene Zschech and Geoff Bullock emerged from that conference, which grew so popular that in 1999, Hills Christian Life Centre changed its name to Hillsong Church.

Today, Hillsong is not just one of the largest churches in the world but a megachurch that spawns other megachurches. Every week, roughly 130,000 people attend one of the 123 Hillsong campuses, spanning 24 countries on six continents. People from another 183 countries have watched the Hillsong Channel, which broadcasts nonstop to nearly 164 million households worldwide. In 2017 alone, over 33,000 people came to salvation in Jesus as a result of a Hillsong ministry or service. The movement has also launched three distinct worship bands, three annual conferences, several international social justice initiatives and a college.

Until last year, all of this was done under the umbrella of

the Australian Christian Churches (ACC)—the Australian branch of the Assemblies of God denomination. From 1997 to 2009, in addition to his responsibilities at Hillsong, Houston served as the ACC's national superintendent and president. But in September 2018, Houston announced Hillsong was leaving the ACC to form its own international denomination. He describes the decision as a pragmatic one.

"The ACC would have no idea who our pastors are around the world," Houston explains. "How would they deal with issues related to a youth pastor in Portugal, for instance? It was almost solely about being able to credential our own pastors."

Houston has also consistently emphasized that Hillsong bears no ill will toward the ACC, saying they still share a close "associate relationship." Nor was this a way for Hillsong to flex its size and power by becoming an autonomous organization. If anything, Houston seems uncomfortable calling Hillsong its own denomination.

"I hate the word 'denomination,'" Houston says. "I don't actually think denominations are as important as they used to be. I think relationship is so much more important than denominationalism."

Instead, he prefers to describe Hillsong with a word picture: "We consider our church to be 'one house, many rooms,' which is something my wife came up with once. I was speaking of the church, and she described the church that way, and that's how we see it: Hillsong is a single house with many rooms, and that's how we function."

Welcome to Hillsong

Carl Lentz first attended Hillsong Church in Sydney as a brand-new believer in 1999. When he walked through the doors, he says he couldn't believe how much fun Hillsong had made church.

"I was trained in this American religiosity, where it's like the more you smile, the less sanctified you are," Lentz says. "To walk into Hillsong and see this Australian pastor preach with passion and fire but also joy, it really stuck out to me. ... I never thought I could fit into a church. Ever. I couldn't stand churches. But when I walked into Hillsong, I thought, *I could actually come here. I wouldn't mind coming back.* That was a new feeling for me."

Lentz did more than come back. He befriended Houston's son, Joel, during Bible college, and the two dreamed of launching a Hillsong campus in the U.S. Ten years later, Joel called Lentz and said his father wanted to plant a church in New York City. Lentz immediately knew he needed to be a part of it. In 2010, Lentz and Joel co-founded Hillsong NYC in Manhattan.

Lentz still remembers when Pastor Brian imparted the Hillsong vision to him.

"I'm going to give you the framework of what I want our church to be in New York, but I'm not going to tell you how to paint the picture," Houston said. "I'm not going to tell you what colors to use. I'm not going to tell you what style to use. The framework has to remain the framework. This is who we are. This is our culture. This is what we believe. But within that, that's why I picked you. You know things that maybe I won't know."

Lentz says, "That really freed and released things for me to lead this, because I knew that he trusted me."

So what is the essential, uncompromising framework of a Hillsong Church? Each Hillsong leader phrases it a bit differently, but at its core, Hillsong is devoted to preaching the gospel, listening to the Holy Spirit and living supernaturally—in a way that remains accessible to everyone, from the hardcore believer to the skeptic who wandered into church.

That stems from a commitment to living out the Bible. In January, Houston participated in a YouVersion Bible study called "30-Day Shred." Inspired by the popular workout program of the same name, the study is designed to be a rigorous spiritual workout—one which has participants read the entire Bible in 30 days.

Houston read through the Old Testament in 11. He says it was amazing.

"So often we look at the Bible and we study the leaf," Houston says. "But this is like looking at the whole tree. It's such a different way of reading the Bible—reading it through the way you'd read a book. I've been amazed at how much I picked up. ... For example, on this reading, the one thing that stood out to me, right from Adam and Eve all the way through, is to be obedient. I think you see in the Word that when people were obedient to God, He blessed them."

For Hillsong's leaders, obedience means following the Holy Spirit's guiding, no matter where He leads. Lentz says Houston taught him how to develop a healthy perspective on the supernatural.

"When you say the word 'supernatural,' what do you think about?" Lentz says. "You think about mystical weirdness or magic. But if you break down the word, it's 'super-natural.' It's just 'natural' with 'super' on it. That means everything's enhanced, everything's better, but it's still natural. So our thing is not to make the supernatural this otherworldly thing that you access. No, this is something you possess, and we have the right to access it anytime you want. But it should affect you in your natural world. If the only time you're feeling the Holy Spirit's presence is when you're speaking in tongues at your charismatic altar-call service, you're missing the point."

For Hillsong, Lentz says, the supernatural is not meant to be

a place you visit. It's a present you live with. And that philosophy started with the church founder.

"Brian was one of the first guys who actually showed me that, because I was always spooked out by weirdness," Lentz says. "If I say 'I'm going to talk about the supernatural' in Manhattan this week, people will come out in droves thinking we're going to be looking for gold dust and we're going to have 40-hour services of laughing and dancing. That's people's mindset. They think that's what the supernatural is. I totally disagree."

Part of the secret to Hillsong's success has been making Pentecostal theology accessible and even attractive to people who might be otherwise turned off by "weird" charismatic elements. Houston credits Hillsong building relationships that span national and denominational lines. He also says the church's famous worship has played a key role.

"I think the worship is one of the key things that has broken down the walls," Houston says. "For whatever reason, people have always identified with our worship. People sense the Holy Spirit through the lyrics, music and worship. For us, it's definitely been one of the things God has used to draw great groups of people from various parts of the Body close."

Pastor Russell Evans, founder of Planetshakers Church, credits Hillsong with using worship to change how society views church in general.

"I look at Hillsong and I see what they've done globally to help transform the church into being hungry for worship," Evans says. "It's pretty amazing, out of Australia, that God would raise up people like Brian Houston and Hillsong to help change how church is done globally."

Once people are in the doors, Hillsong's leaders strive to make sure every person hears the gospel—whether they're rich, poor, famous, unknown or anything in between.

“We really want everyone to get a chance to hear the gospel,” Lentz says. “So part of our culture is that you can come as you are. Our faith and belief teach us that if we can get you in the doors, the Holy Spirit can do the rest. ... No matter where you’re from or what you believe, you’re going to have a chance to sit in this church and hear the truth in love.”

Plenty of churches around the world have dedicated themselves to preaching the Word, following the Holy Spirit and making themselves accessible to everyone. So what’s made Hillsong successful? Frankly, Houston says, “it’s a miracle” only made possible by the grace of God. But he says he sees two things—getting the right people at the right time in the right places and making wise, Spirit-led decisions at critical moments—as the most important elements of Hillsong’s success.

The Right People

As a leader, Houston strives to train more leaders. He looks out for promising young people in his church, mentors them and then empowers them to make decisions and lead the local church.

“The way our church functions, we’ve always built up a team of people that we’re looking to mentor,” Houston says. “I think a lot of churches have a senior pastor who takes a strong place in the organization of the church, and everyone else is very clear that they work for the senior pastor. Well, we’re a little different. In one way, it’s clear that Bobbie and I lead the church, but we’ve always felt perfectly comfortable with releasing other people. I think that’s really helped us.”

Rev. Mike Pilavachi, co-founder and leader of the U.K. ministry Soul Survivor, says this approach to discipleship is the secret to Hillsong’s incredible success: “I’ve had the joy of speaking to Hillsong Sydney. I love them. I believe their secret is that even though they’re a big church, they do raise up sons and daughters. Some people think it’s a show, but it

isn't. So many leaders at Hillsong are Brian and Bobbie Houston's spiritual sons and daughters. They've invested in them. People look at the outward manifestation, and they think that's the key to a church's success. But the reason some of these churches reproduce so well is they're raising up sons and daughters."

The first step to Houston's process is finding the right people. He says he looks for people who are passionate about service, have Holy Spirit anointing on their lives and have a proven track record of helping others. Circumstance and timing are equally important.

"When it comes to global churches, we've found that if you get the right people in the right place at the right time, it works," Houston says. "In other words, churches need all three to grow forward. If you only get two of that trifecta, oftentimes it's not going to work so well."

Houston says sometimes these people became externally famous and successful, like Lentz and Zschech. Other people were just as anointed but only ever known internally, keeping things running behind the scenes. Every part of the body is vital.

Once these leaders are identified, the Houstons are intentional about mentoring them. They hold regular staff meetings where the whole leadership team worships together and Houston teaches about life, faith and leadership.

Then these young leaders are given real responsibility and freedom to fail and learn from their mistakes. Houston says, as he grows older, he has to be increasingly intentional to empower the young and not defer to the older or more experienced team members.

"I think you have to be careful as you get older," Houston says. "I'm 65, and as you get older, what you see as being young is not that young. I was leading the Australian Christian Churches when I was 43 years old, and now I look at

a 43- year-old, and I think of them as a young person. What I want to do is give people the opportunity to do the things I did when I was in my late 20s or early 30s.”

In return, Houston has the respect and support of his team, many of whom view him as a spiritual father. Lentz calls Houston encouraging and transparent.

“I don’t know if it’s possible to see someone walk more humbly when God increases their profile, but honestly I think Brian is getting a little bit better with age,” Lentz says. “He’s proof that you can ask God to use your life, and He will. We’ve got a guy from Australia who started a church on a wing and a prayer, and we’re talking about him in Manhattan—that just doesn’t happen. ... I think he deserves the honor he’s given.”

The Right Decisions

Any church movement as large, successful and international as Hillsong is bound to court controversy at some point. Houston says a megachurch based in Australia is especially scrutinized.

“In Australia, you know, the idea of the megachurch is a real mind-bender for Australian society, because Australia is a secular country,” Houston says. “It’s a small population, and an even smaller population of Australians go to church at all. ... People have an idea that a church will be small, wimpy, old and irrelevant. So for it to be large, mega, young and relatable to people, I think that has drawn a lot of scrutiny.”

Hillsong has dealt with its share of scandals over the years, but the church has emerged from the fires stronger than ever.

“The decisions you make in the tough times or in the crisis are the most important decisions,” Houston says. “We’ve been blessed with a really great church board. So we’ve always had

a properly functioning board, which I believe has been amazing blessing, and I think it helped us, especially when we've been under any kind of scrutiny to make wise choices."

Houston says it's important to stay humble and not overreact when the inevitable attacks come.

"I think just be true to yourself and be authentic, be honest, be open where it's possible to be open and don't hide things," Houston says. "Sometimes it takes a commitment to not living reactionary—always fighting back and so on—but instead just taking higher ground and staying true to who we are. By doing that, our church has really come through many trying seasons, and the church has stayed strong and just kept going forward."

He says the best way to weather any controversy is to build roots of trust with your church congregation. But those roots can only be grown slowly through years of dedicated local church ministry.

"It's kind of a miracle, really, the way our church has weathered all kinds of storms over the years," Houston says. "The church and staff have stayed healthy. I think being the kinds of leaders that people can trust—not just Bobbie and I, but the team in general—is important. So that no matter what the media say, no matter what swirls around these people, your people know who you are."

"You are building trust with people, which is one of the great strengths of long-term pastoring. You have the opportunity to build credibility and put some roots down deep. It doesn't matter what people might read or see if they know who you are and know that you have been consistent over a long time. They trust in you."

Finally, he says, it's important to always take time to ask the Holy Spirit to reveal the right way to respond in each season. Houston says Hillsong has gone through tough times, but God has been faithful and has always brought them through.

"I really believe in being vocal, being true to who we are and outlasting our critics," Houston says. "I thank God that our name is pretty well known even in secular society these days. That's definitely different than 30 or 40 years ago, when really no one else would have known an Australian megachurch around the world."

Future of Hillsong

Houston says Australian church congregations trend younger than most other countries' congregations. So perhaps it's no surprise that Hillsong churches skew young. The largest age group at most Hillsong campuses is 25-40 years old.

"I think young people are hungry for God," Houston says. "Our heart at Hillsong is to connect to people and believe in young people again."

Lentz believes the cultural shift toward progressivism and postmodernism presents a massive opportunity for believers.

"I think that anytime culture has an extreme swing, it's always a benefit for something that's consistent," Lentz says. "So right now, the culture has swung to a place of, 'Everything is tolerated except for people who love Jesus. There is no definition of anything. You can be this, and you can live this way.' I've never looked at that as a problem. In fact, I say, 'Thank you. Please keep doing that. Please keep going that way, culture, because that is such an empty, hollow, broken way to live that it actually highlights who we are even more.'

"[People] are always looking for a way off of this toxic highway that [culture] is giving people. But there's nowhere to go. So my job is to create local churches that are right there off the highway—you can see it from a mile away. You can choose to take this exit, and if you give it a shot, I don't think you'll have to get back on the cultural highway."

Houston believes the next generation is ripe for revival in all aspects of life.

"I just really feel like we're in a season of—the word 'revival,' I think, can conjure certain things in people's minds, but I think it means freshness and movement and momentum," Houston says. "And I feel like revival's in the air. When I speak about revival, I'm not talking about the traditional Pentecostal revival meetings, but God just really breaking into the atmosphere of people's lives. I think people are being won to the name of Christ. Revival in pretty much all walks of life—that's what I'm believing for: revival in people's families, their marriages, their relationships, their finances and just across their lives. That's what's been in my heart and what I've been praying for our people this year."

Lentz believes Houston is right—young people are ready for a change, and that change could lead them to Christ.

"I've got teenagers in my house," Lentz says. "I don't think they're looking at this culture going, 'Man, this is amazing.' I think they're going, 'What is going on in the world? This is insane.' ... I think it's a really important time for us, not to do anything different but to do everything passionately as we have been and create as many avenues as we can to get people in the house, because we have the answers people are looking for."

What does that mean for Hillsong's future? Still humble, Houston says he's more committed than ever to championing the causes of local churches around the world. After all, Hillsong—with all its colleges, TV channels and touring bands—is still just another local church.

"I think our responsibility is to go to people and share our testimony," Houston says. "People know who we are. When it comes to our role, I think if we can just be a healthy local church that others can look to and learn from, then that's a

great thing. I see the fact that God's given us influence as a church as a Holy Spirit-driven thing. It's been quite miraculous, really, for a little church down under to have global impact." {eo}

Taylor Berglund is the associate editor of Charisma magazine.

CHARISMA is the only magazine dedicated to reporting on what the Holy Spirit is doing in the lives of believers around the world. If you are thirsty for more of God's presence and His Holy Spirit, subscribe to CHARISMA and join a family of believers that choose to live life in the Spirit. [CLICK HERE](#) for a special offer.