

Church Down Under

Before I visited AUSTRALIA recently, my stereotypes of that nation were typically American—kangaroos, Crocodile Dundee and Outback Steakhouse. Of course I also knew of Darlene Zschech's "Shout to the Lord," which has made Hillsong a household word in Christian circles worldwide.

What I discovered after meeting with key Christian leaders is a vibrant church, strong relationships among leaders, a focus on reaching youth, the ability to reach out to a very secular culture and a willingness by the church to embrace change. I came away feeling that the rest of us have something to learn from the church Down Under.

As recently as the 1960s, Pentecostals were a beleaguered minority in Australia—so much so that my late father-in-law, Harvey Ferrell, who had pioneered several large churches in the U.S., answered a "missionary call" to pastor in Sydney. Then in the late 1970s Andrew Evans, a pastor in Adelaide, became general superintendent of the AOG, as the Aussies call the Assemblies of God. He invited Korean pastor David Yonggi Cho to speak to pastors. Cho chided them for their lack of vision and lack of leadership.

Pastors changed, and their churches began to grow. By the time Evans turned the AOG over to Brian Houston of Hillsong Church in 1997, the AOG, with 830 churches, was second in size only to the Roman Catholic Church in Australia.

"The Assemblies in Australia is vastly different," said Evans' son Ashley, who now pastors the church in Adelaide. "Part of our secret is it allows for complete functional autonomy, and at the end of the day is a fellowship of churches rather than

a denomination.”

Houston, who continues to pastor Hillsong in Sydney as he leads the AOG, said the movement has grown due to “a commitment to authenticity; cultural relevance; spiritual passion; the courage to be innovative and to try new things; and the release of young people, as keys.” Today the AOG has 1,115 churches.

A man who has seen this change is my friend Vince Esterman, an Aussie evangelist who recently moved back to Australia after pastoring in France for the last 21 years. ” ‘Change’ is the operative word, and no one seems to be afraid of it,” he said. “What a contrast to how church is traditionally seen. And there is an increasing emphasis on the social responsibility of Pentecostal churches.”

That social responsibility has moved to politics.

Today Andrew Evans has been elected to a seat in his state parliament under the Family First party, founded by him and his son Ashley, which we’ve reported on in Charisma. Now the party holds three seats, including one in the national parliament.

Phil Pringle of Christian City Church International (with 200 congregations) points out that in Australia Pentecostal Christianity is mostly local-church oriented rather than “ministry” oriented. “We have empowered the next generation to take hold of the ministry of the churches and let their influence be felt throughout the whole church,” he said.

What I saw seemed healthy and outwardly focused. The Aussies

are very relational. And I'm not the only American to notice. Matt Dawson—son of author John Dawson, international president of Youth With a Mission—fell in love with Australia when he trained there.

“These guys really know how to work together. Loyalty, friendship, laughter, brutal honesty and togetherness are words that come to mind when I think about the church here in Oz,” he said.

Australian churches must reach a secular audience—only 5 percent attend a Protestant church on Sunday.

Ben Woods, a bright young pastor whose AOG church is one of Newcastle's fastest-growing, explained: “We must reach out—presenting Jesus like He has never been presented because, in reality, to most of our nation He hasn't been.”

This also means Aussie Christians must “represent the kingdom in the 21st century [rather] than a church with a traditional mind-set,” said Andrew Evans' son Russell of Planetshakers in Melbourne. “Hence the church is contemporary with a first-class attitude to how church can be done.”

One of the most encouraging predictions came from Matt Danswan, whose two magazines cover the Christian scene: “All of the publicity surrounding Hillsong has really put Christianity on the map here and people are really opening up to it. So I think our country is on the verge of a revival.”

Let's pray that happens in the rest of the world, too.

Stephen Strang is founder and publisher of Charisma. To view an uncut version of this column, more quotes and links to Australian ministries mentioned here, log on at