

How Do We Respond to the Hillsong Scandal?

Hillsong has been the most popular name in Christian worship for more than two decades, and the Hillsong network of churches has planted congregations in 30 countries since it was founded in 1983 in Australia. Its global membership is estimated at 150,000. But a series of scandals has rocked the movement in the last two years, prompting founder Brian Houston to resign last week amid charges of sexual impropriety and an alleged coverup.

The tarnishing of the Hillsong brand began two years ago, during the height of the pandemic, when Carl Lenz, celebrity pastor of Hillsong's church in New York City, was fired in November 2020 after it came to light that he had engaged in an extramarital affair.

Then last week, a documentary called *Hillsong: A Megachurch Exposed*, was released by Discovery Plus. The three-part film claims that the church not only mishandled accusations of sexual misconduct but exploited young ministry interns for cheap labor. In the film, former members of Hillsong share stories of feeling betrayed, manipulated or abused by church leaders, and the word "cult" is sometimes thrown around to describe the Pentecostal church.

Brian Houston, 68, resigned on March 23, a day before the documentary was released on the streaming service. He has been accused of sending inappropriate text messages to a staff member and of spending time in a woman's hotel room.

In legal proceedings in Australia, Houston has also denied that he covered up accusations of alleged sexual abuse by his father, Frank Houston, who was a minister in the Australian Assemblies of God for many years. The documentary alleges that

Frank Houston abused boys from 1965 to 1977, and that Hillsong leaders swept the reports under a rug.

The release of the documentary, along with Houston's resignation and the Lenz fiasco, prompted some Hillsong leaders to pull their churches out of the network, including Pastors Terry Crist of Hillsong Phoenix and Sam Collier of Hillsong Atlanta. Hillsong's location in Dallas, Texas, closed a year ago after allegations that its pastors, Reed and Jess Bogard, misused church funds.

It's always tragic when a church leader fails, but the impact seems so much worse when the ministry is as high-profile as Hillsong is. How do we respond in these situations? Here's my advice:

– **It's okay to grieve.** We don't have to live in denial—as if this ugly scandal didn't happen. People sometimes bring reproach upon the church because of their sins. The prophet Jeremiah wrote an entire book lamenting the sins of Israel. He said in Lamentations 5:16: "The crown has fallen from our head; woe to us, for we have sinned!" But then he said in verse 21a: "Restore us to You, O Lord, that we may be restored." Grieving should lead us to hope.

– **Don't throw out all the good that Hillsong has done.** We tend to think of the massive mother church in Sydney, Australia, when we think of Hillsong, but the network has dozens of smaller congregations all over Australia. For almost 40 years, faithful members of the Hillsong team have spread the gospel in that nation, and from there they have taken the message of Jesus to every continent.

Besides that, the impact of Hillsong on Christian music has been nothing short of phenomenal. Hillsong's worship choruses are sung by an estimated 50 million Christians in 60 languages. We don't have to cancel the church—or those special songs—just because some leaders made serious mistakes. Paul

told the Thessalonians: “Hold fast to that which is good; abstain from every form of evil” (1 Thess. 5:21b-22).

– **Let’s learn from the mistakes made.** I have mentors who taught me much about God, leadership and ministry. But I also have learned a lot from watching the mistakes leaders made. If someone in ministry hurts you, make a mental note: “That is *not* the way I want to treat people.” You can actually turn your disappointments into blessings if you learn from them. Perhaps from this tragic scandal we can learn afresh that God calls us to pursue humility rather than celebrity.

– **Pray for those who have been hurt.** Whenever I hear about a church failure, I begin praying for the people who were closest to the scandal. Some may feel so betrayed that they are tempted to walk away from Jesus, or give up on church altogether. Pray that they will find the grace to forgive those who mishandled money, lacked integrity or took advantage of the innocent.

Since I heard about Hillsong’s problems I’ve gone back to some of my favorite Hillsong choruses, and I’m singing them over the situation. One of them is “The Power of Your Love,” written by Geoff Bullock in 1992. My prayer is that Jesus will hold the Hillsong family close during this time of testing, and that they will soar once again.

Lord I come to You / Let my heart be changed, renewed

Flowing from the grace/ That I found in You.

Lord I’ve come to know/ The weaknesses I see in me

Will be stripped away/ By the power of Your love.

Hold me close / Let Your love surround me

Bring me near/ Draw me to Your side.

And as I wait/ I’ll rise up like the eagle,

And I will soar with You / Your Spirit leads me on /

In the power of Your love. {eo}

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