

Hillsong founder denies covering up father's sex abuse

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October 15, 2014

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NEW YORK (RNS) Days ahead of an annual conference in New York City's Madison Square Garden, the founder of the Hillsong music and church empire is facing strict scrutiny for what he knew about sex abuse allegations lodged against his father.

Hillsong is an Australian megachurch that has exported its influence to major global cities and into churches' music across the U.S.

In 1999, Brian Houston's father, Frank Houston, who was also a minister, confessed to sexually abusing an underage male at his New Zealand congregation 30 years before. In response, the younger Houston, who was then president of the Assemblies of God in Australia, fired his father, took control of the church and merged it with Hillsong.

The elder Houston died in 2004.

On October 9-10, the son took the witness stand in Sydney and denied any attempt to cover up the allegations. Brian Houston will be in New York City for the church's conference Thursday through Saturday at Madison Square Garden.

In his testimony, Brian Houston denied trying to hide his involvement in a \$10,000 compensation payment made to a man who was abused as a child by his father.

"I acknowledge the courage of the victim in taking the stand today to outline the trauma he has suffered by Frank Houston," Brian Houston said in a statement. "However I disagree with his perception of the phone call with me, and I strongly refute that I—at any time—accused him of tempting my father. I would never say this and I do not believe this. At no stage did I attempt to hide or cover up the allegations against my father."

Through what's called a royal commission, the Australian government is scrutinizing how institutions—including the Pentecostal church network that gave birth to Hillsong – have handled sex abuse claims. A royal commission is Australia's highest level of inquiry.

Frank Houston never faced prosecution for crimes committed in the 1960s and 1970s. The Assemblies of God in Australia allowed Houston to resign quietly with a retirement package.

"We believe that exposing child sexual abuse and the response of institutions to that abuse, and allowing survivors to share their traumatic experiences, is a powerful step in the healing process," Brian Houston said in a statement. "Having to face the fact that my father engaged in such repulsive acts was—and still is—agonizing."

Hillsong congregants, based in western Sydney, gave him a standing ovation after he delivered his sermon on Sunday (October 12) addressing his father's sexual abuse.

"They have done the journey with us so there'd be very few people (at Hillsong) with any surprises," he told Australia's *Today* show. "I've never hidden it from the church."

Brian Houston told the commission he first became aware of the abuse allegations in 1999, but learned in 2000 there were additional claims involving six boys in New Zealand. He said there may be more victims who have not yet come forward.

The 30-year-old Hillsong multisite church based in the outskirts of Sydney mixes Christian rock and charismatic energy in shaping Christian churches in major cities across the globe. Hillsong's ubiquitous praise songs such as "Shout to the Lord" can be found in many U.S. churches on any given Sunday.

More than 50,000 people attend Hillsong offshoots in London; Cape Town, South Africa; Paris; Kiev, Ukraine; Stockholm; Amsterdam; Barcelona, Spain; Copenhagen, Denmark; New York City; and most recently Los Angeles. Its American congregations received front-page attention in *The New York Times* last month.