

Australia's Hillsong Church exports its influence through praise and preaching

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SYDNEY (RNS) The ubiquitous praise song “Shout to the Lord” can be found in many U.S. churches on any given Sunday. What fewer people probably realize is that it comes from a megachurch on the outskirts of Sydney, which over the past 30 years has emerged as one of the most influential evangelical bodies on the world stage.

Combining Christian rock, charismatic energy and Australian accents, Hillsong Church has found a winning combination that is shaping Christian life in major cities across the globe.

Perhaps most remarkable is that the church could flourish at all in Australia, where in 2011 nearly a third of Australians said their religious affiliation was either ‘no religion’ or not stated.

“In a country where 55,000 people indicated ‘Jedi’ as their religion (from the 2006 census), and most denominations are in decline, Hillsong’s continual growth is stunning,” said Ed Stetzer, president of Nashville-based LifeWay Research and a close observer of evangelicals.

Thriving amid abuse scandal

On a recent Sunday at Hillsong’s main campus, children and adults swarmed a petting zoo and coffee stations as volunteers handed out balloons as part of the church’s 30th anniversary celebration. A racially diverse crowd streamed into services in jeans and sunglasses or backward ball caps on their heads, raising their hands while singing along with the iconic band.

In any given week, Hillsong estimates that more than 30,000 people will attend one of its six Australian campuses.

But an even greater number, estimated at more than 50,000, attend Hillsong off-shoots in London, Cape Town, Paris, Kiev, Stockholm, Amsterdam, Barcelona, Copenhagen and New York. A new campus is slated to open soon in Los Angeles.

The Hillsong empire is overseen by founders Brian and Bobbie Houston. Their son Ben will oversee the Los Angeles branch, while their other son Joel leads the New York congregation, which has become one of the city’s fastest-growing churches, attracting celebrities like singer Justin Bieber and Oklahoma City Thunder forward Kevin Durant. “I’m a Jew, raised by a family full of nonbelievers, but I have to admit, I was tempted,” wrote Max Chafkin, a New York Times reporter who recently visited Hillsong in Manhattan.

The church and its New Zealand-born founders have faced bumps on its road to success after starting with about 70 people in a school.

In 2000, Brian Houston's father Frank Houston, also a minister, confessed to sexually abusing an underage male at his New Zealand congregation 30 years before. In response, Brian 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.

"I think I'm quite a tolerant person, but one thing I've really never had any tolerance for is sexual abuse, and especially child abuse," Brian Houston said in an interview with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. "So, I don't think you could have kicked me in the guts with a bigger blow, in some ways."

His father died four years later.

Added challenges and controversy

While widely admired, Hillsong is no stranger to criticism. Some question the church's support of women pastors. Creationism proponent Ken Ham has decried Brian Houston for not adhering to a belief in six-day creationism. Others scrutinize the church's traditional teachings on homosexuality and gay marriage. American evangelical John MacArthur has criticized the church's Pentecostal teaching that the Holy Spirit enables spiritual gifts, such as speaking in tongues.

The church has a tricky relationship with the Australian media, with each treating the other with great suspicion. "If anybody is an expert in media opposition, it's me," Brian Houston said in his sermon, later referring a reporter to a church spokesperson to answer questions.

Theologically, some say Hillsong treads near the "health and wealth gospel" found in other Pentecostal churches. Brian Houston, for example, wrote a book titled "You Need More Money." But observers say he has dialed back on prosperity gospel-sounding theology, focusing more on stewardship than success.

"It is dominated by a more contemporary style than many older 'traditional' Pentecostal groups," said Scott Thumma, a megachurch expert at Hartford Seminary. "I know there has been some concern about Hillsong's preaching of prosperity but that has been tempered."

Hillsong's driving dollars

One of the biggest criticism Hillsong faces is its finances, which under Australian law are not required to be publicly disclosed. Proposals to tax a congregation like Hillsong remain controversial.

Hillsong's Sydney location reported \$64 million in revenue in 2010 (the last year available), but its report does not reveal income from its worldwide music sales.

The church spent almost \$10 million on "welfare, missions and overseas aid," \$6.2 million on a Bible college and \$6.7 million on conferences.

In 2010, Houston disclosed a salary of \$300,000 (\$285,000 U.S.) from Hillsong and its related global outreach ministry, and he said his wife's salary is "significantly less than mine." A church spokeswoman did not respond to a request to view financial details of the larger Hillsong organization.

One of Hillsong's largest exports is its conference business. Its most recent U.S. conferences featuring the band Hillsong United sold out the iconic Radio City Music Hall, Hollywood Bowl and Red Rocks Amphitheatre.

Cassandra Langton, the director of Hillsong's creative ministry, said this summer that every week more than 45 million people sing songs written by Hillsong in U.S. churches, an estimate most likely based on the number of churches paying licensing fees. A non-commercial church reproduction license for worship usage includes \$10

per song for 12 months.

Charismatically influential

The church remains politically and socially influential in Australia, attracting a parade of politicians. It also seems to be shaped by leading American evangelicals; the church's bookrack features many U.S. megachurch pastors, including Joel Osteen, Max Lucado, T.D. Jakes and Ed Young.

"We believe a basic charismatic/Pentecostal theology, but we don't build strong on theology," Brian Houston said. "We make it about Jesus, about the grace of God, and we try to have a net so it's broad, not narrow."

Because he believes in targeting Hillsong's growth in less religious large cities, Houston said it's unlikely he'd ever try to plant a church in the Bible Belt. "I really have a passion for big centers of influence," he said. "I think the message is timeless, but the methods have to change if we want to keep reaching society and not become an insular little island."

A musical might

Despite some of the controversy surrounding theology or finances, there's little doubt that Hillsong's greatest influence is its music label. The church was originally known as Hills Christian Life Centre but the music became so famous that the church appropriated the Hillsong name.

To date, the Hillsong United label has sold more than 14 million albums. Its recent album "Zion" debuted at No. 1 on iTunes' overall albums chart in the U.S. and in seven other countries, and was listed at No. 5 on the Billboard 200.

Hillsong music's Twitter account has more than 680,000 followers, and more than 4 million Facebook fans. Its popular songs include "Mighty to Save," "God is Able" and "God is in the House."

"I always wanted to have the kind of church which influenced the way people do church," Brian Houston said. "People may be divided on doctrine and theology and other things, but worship tends to transcend all of that."

At 59 and 56, Brian and Bobbie Houston are fashionable grandparents. At New York's Radio City Music Hall show, he wore skinny green pants and a denim shirt. Finishing her mascara backstage, his wife wore wedge sneakers and all black ensemble that would fit in at any rock concert.

While his church is known for its music, Brian Houston is not a musician.

"I was the church drummer until — this is a true story — in New Zealand, as a kid, the organist one time got very frustrated, jumped up off the organ, walked over, grabbed both of my drumsticks, and sat on them on the organ stool," he said. "That was the end of my drumming career."

Local and global social impact

Hillsong is also active in local and international aid projects, with ministries in Cape Town, South Africa, and Mumbai, India. The church gave \$500,000 toward the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami relief efforts and frequently partners with other evangelical organizations including Compassion International and the Salvation Army. The leader of Hillsong's A21 campaign that fights sex trafficking, Christine Caine, is a featured speaker at many U.S. and global conferences.

“I think sometimes people miss the social care, which is the undergirding foundation of our church, but really that’s the fuel,” Bobbie Houston said.

John Cleary, a religion journalist for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, noted that Brian Houston’s father was initially an officer in the Salvation Army, where his son became a Christian. Hillsong is part of the Australian Christian Churches, formerly known as Assemblies of God in Australia.

“They’ve got the Salvation Army’s musical sensibility. They’ve stripped it of the uniform and strict disciplines and what emerges is a charismatic praise concert,” Cleary said. “It’s only in recent years Hillsong has recovered the Salvation Army’s emphasis on social work.”

Because Australians take a dim view of self-promotion, the Houstons tread the marketing line carefully. While some U.S. megachurches revolve around celebrity clergy, Hillsong’s influence extends well beyond the husband-and-wife team at the top.

“I’d guess that globally, they’d be in the top 10 influential evangelicals in the English-speaking world,” Stetzer said.

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