

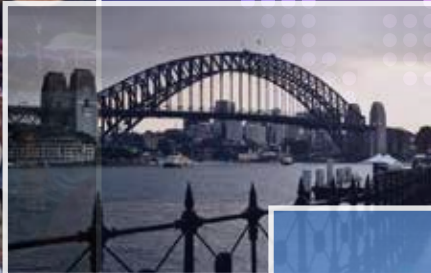
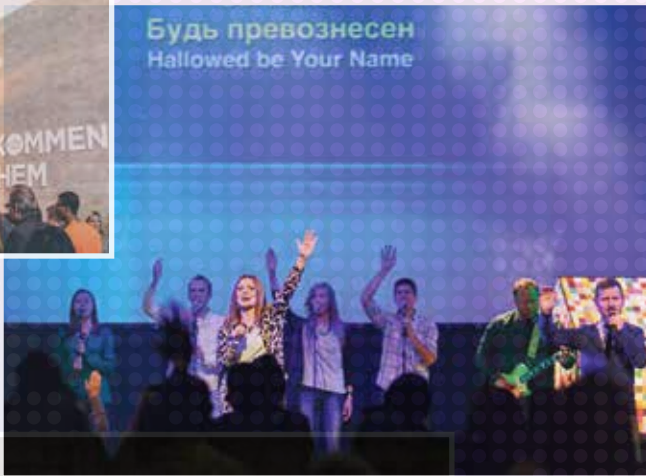


# *The Hillsong Experience*

*AN INTERVIEW WITH BRIAN HOUSTON*

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BY JOY NETANYA THOMPSON



Music might be the first thing that comes to mind when one thinks of Hillsong Church based in Sydney, Australia. Hillsong's worship bands have enjoyed worldwide success, their worship music sung in dozens of countries and languages. And then there's the upcoming film, *Let Hope Rise*, about the band Hillsong UNITED. But anyone involved with Hillsong knows their music is simply one manifestation of a community known for its vision to reach and influence the world for Christ.

Today, under the senior pastoral leadership of Brian Houston and his wife, Bobbie, Hillsong has campuses in 15 countries, from South Africa to Spain to Sweden. Here, Brian Houston discusses the beginnings of this global megachurch and what it's like to stay true to the church's unique calling and identity while extending its reach on five continents.

**In the introduction to your new book *Live, Love, Lead*, you say that from a young age, you felt called to build the church. What did you understand as building the church back then, and how has that definition grown or changed over the years?**

My father was a tent revivalist, and in New Zealand growing up, he would go into remote areas, and the tent would go up and he would preach the gospel. That's where I first walked down to the front—literally walking the sawdust trail as a 5-year-old boy and committing to Christ. I remember it very clearly. I got serious about serving God when I was about 17, but from those early days I would watch my father going off on an airplane somewhere to preach, and always I thought, *One day I'm going to do that.*

So I wasn't thinking necessarily of building my own local church, though that was always going to be a possibility. It was much more about preaching the gospel. I grew up with a sense that I was on earth for a purpose bigger than myself, and that I wanted to do something with my life. It's been a huge advantage, to never have any doubt about what I'm called to do.

**You relate sitting in your office in the “run-down warehouse” where Hillsong Church started, and you said you had a vision in your heart of a church full of people. How has that vision changed since then?**

It's an interesting question because I don't feel like it has changed. Our church is 32 years old, and when it was 10 years old, which was in 1993, I sat at my desk one day and I wrote what is called “The Church That I See.” It really is a mission statement, and it's very visionary—it was scary, really, because our church looked nothing like that. But you look at that statement and our church now, and in many ways it's become a description of the church we lead, not just a mission statement. So a few years ago, when the

church was 30 years old, I wrote “The Church That I Now See”—both statements are in the book *Live, Love, Lead*.

We never have detoured from what we're about. Obviously it's matured and become much bigger, and in some ways it's evolved, and I'm a very different leader than I was when I was 30—hopefully a little wiser, a little more mature and so on. So in all of those ways, yes it's changed—there's so much more width and depth to it these days. But we're still effectively the same church with the same vision that we had 32 years ago.

**That's pretty amazing, to see all of that come true.**

I had been in America, and I had been exposed to some ministries and to some things that really inspired me and challenged me. And I remember going to a conference in South Africa too where I was so inspired about what God could do in Australia. But I didn't necessarily have the confidence to believe God could actually do it, so it was very much a faith statement. But I knew that it was prophetic, and it was scary sharing it with people because it was, at the time, so different from the church that we had. I will say though, you get what you go for. If you aim at nothing, you hit it every time.

**From that run-down warehouse in Sydney all those years ago, Hillsong now has locations in 15 countries, all around the world—from Los Angeles to Kiev to Cape Town. How does your team decide where to start a new location?**

I've learned that it's the right person or people, at the right place, at the right time. When we've got that right, it has always worked. It's never just about the place. It really is the person and the place. And most of those we've sent out have been sons and daughters of our own house, our church, and that's what works for us.

**You and your wife, Bobbie, are identified as the senior pastors of all of these churches. How does that work organizationally? Are these churches considered campuses or sister churches or daughter churches of Hillsong?**

It's a little bit of all of those. My wife once put it best—she talked about us being one house with many rooms. And so that's kind of how we all look at our church. It's a single church around the world. In each country, we call them churches—so for example in England, in London, it's Hillsong London, and Hillsong London has five campuses. The way I explain it to the lead pastors at these different churches is that their church is a canvas, and the parameters of the canvas are Hillsong culture and Hillsong's DNA, and it's up to them to paint the picture. So really, when it comes to reaching New York, it's up to



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Carl [Lentz] and Joel [Houston] to paint the picture on that canvas.

**How much oversight do you have when they are painting that picture? Does it ever happen where a Hillsong pastor in another location is painting their picture and you say, “Whoa, that doesn’t really work for us”?**

We have conversations all the time, and we’re very relational in our approach. So if I feel strongly about anything, I will say so. And all of those guys are called lead pastors, globally, and I’m their senior pastor, so they look to me for their lead.

**Hillsong is planting in unchurched, even post-Christian places, such as Northern Europe. Was it a conscious choice—a strategy—to move more into the North and the Western world in general, as well as fairly unchurched cities in America, like LA and New York?**

I’ve always been passionate about big, global cities, cities that have influence within nations, within continents. And for whatever reason, God seems to have graced us and blessed us to reach those cities where maybe others have struggled—they’re not Bible Belt cities! It is incredible.

Even Australia itself, the United Nations lists it as a secular country, not a Christian country. So, even in Australia, it’s quite an anomaly, really, to have a church like Hillsong in that culture. And that’s kind of worked for us

everywhere.

Spain, for example, is a spiritual wasteland, but we’ve got a young couple in their mid-20s in Barcelona, who in just two years have built the church to a thousand people, which in Spanish proportions is historic. It just kind of works. Here in America, New York and Los Angeles are not necessarily easy cities. I feel like it’s a grace on us, and it’s also a strategy. Sometimes other churches or other pastors look at Hillsong Church and think it’s easy. But it’s actually not as easy as it looks.

**All these places where you’re planting are really different. So what do you do when you are starting a Hillsong church in these various cities, in these various cultures? Do you simply airlift a model into these cities, or do you tailor each experience to the culture, letting local leaders raise it up organically?**

London’s a great example. When the pastor, Gary Clarke, went to London about 17 years ago, many people were quick to tell him what a London church should look like. Yet Gary was committed to not build a London church, but to build a Hillsong Church in London. Even if you were to go to Moscow or Kiev, the same atmosphere, the same demographic, the same spirit is reflected in our church in all of these different places, and I think it’s really important. I mean, without sounding, you know, cocky or anything—London is full of London churches, and I feel like we’re called to be Hillsong Church. There are little nuances, obviously, that change from place to

place, but big picture, we just go in and be ourselves, and that's what's worked for us.

**So if Hillsong just goes into these places and is itself, what would you say to someone who is a missiologist and values doing things in an indigenous way, doing things for the nationals, by the nationals, in different countries? Do you feel like you are completely ignoring the culture, or are you letting that culture have its own manifestation of Hillsong?**

The thing is, our pastors in Moscow are Russians and our pastors in Kiev are Ukrainians and in Barcelona are Spanish, and in Amsterdam are Dutch. But they mostly have either been through Hillsong College, and spent time in Australia, or have just leaned into us to the point where they have become, like I said, sons and daughters of the house. But it's not like we ignore culture. Certainly if something were anti the culture, we wouldn't do that, something that was rude inside the culture. But I think that we lose our distinctiveness if we try to be what everyone else thinks we should be. If we are just ourselves, which is all we can be—and it worked for us in Moscow or New York—it will work for us everywhere.

**In places like Sweden, where they have a strong conformist culture and pressure for everything to be the same, and for no one to stand out, if Hillsong comes in and allows freedom from that, it could be a huge draw, couldn't it?**

In Scandinavia, we're in Sweden and we're in Denmark, in Copenhagen; we are very much countercultural in that sense. Because I know exactly what you're talking about, where they have that philosopher [Aksel Sandemose, who wrote about] the 10 rules everyone lives by, and I feel like that is a very restrictive and limiting thing. When we're building there, we're building on Swedish and Danish pastors, but not on that cultural expression, that's for sure.

**Among these diverse cultures, one thing people coming to your church might have in common is a familiarity with the Hillsong name because of Hillsong music. It's been reported that each week, Hillsong music is sung by over 50 million people in 60 different languages. How much does that name and brand recognition play into starting churches all over the world?**

No doubt about it, Hillsong is a strong brand. It's well known, and that does draw some people initially. But my experience is people may be drawn initially by our music,

but it's not what's going to keep them. What people really care about is the community, the sense of family, their children being looked after well in children's ministry, and teenagers in youth and so on. You don't build a church on the music; you build a church by being a church—keeping it about God and people. One of the little themes we have is, Hillsong church is not built on the gifts and talents of a few but on the sacrifices of many. I think we also try to remind ourselves, a pretty big church, that Hillsong ultimately is about “the one”—it's always personal.

The interesting thing with our churches, in the early stages, no doubt, people are drawn by the music. But if I was to look at New York, for example, there are literally thousands of decisions for Christ. If you were to walk down the streets of Manhattan, the people you see, they're the people who are coming in and building our church. We have a strong emphasis, obviously, on evangelism and salvation, and that's ultimately what's building our church.

**For you, what is the relationship between Hillsong music and Hillsong the church?**

To be honest, if there wasn't a church, there wouldn't be any music. I've always seen the praise and worship from our church going out around the world as an arrowhead to a greater message—obviously the message of Christ, but it's the message of his church, as well. These days, no doubt, when our songwriters are writing songs, they're thinking about the impact they'll have globally, but mainly, they've not written songs for the world, they've written songs for our church. And my experience is, if the songs work inside Hillsong Church, they're going to work everywhere. So I always feel like the worship is the sound of a healthy church. As long as the church stays healthy, the impact of those songs will continue, I think, and they'll have sort of a hope to them, a life to them, that blesses people.

**About 10 years ago I had the opportunity to visit Hillsong in Sydney, and I remember being blown away, because I hadn't understood there was an actual church behind the music.**

That was true especially 10 years ago. Many people, especially in America, had no idea that Hillsong was more than just music. I find that's changing pretty rapidly, and people are discovering the life of the church; and I'm sure here in the USA, planting in New York and in Los Angeles has helped that. But, like I said, the worship, the music is something of an arrowhead for the

*“I've always been passionate about big, global cities, cities that have influence within nations, within continents.”*

greater message. We're passionate about the local church—not just our church, but about *the* church. For example, our conferences—Hillsong Conference, which we have in Australia and in London and now in New York—champion local churches everywhere. We're very much about the local church.

**Hillsong is an outward-focused, global-reaching church. How do you weave that into the DNA of your church, from the leadership to core volunteers all the way to the person who has only been attending a few Sundays? How do you create a culture that is excited about evangelism and global discipleship?**

Many years ago when our church was very young, we sat one day—probably for a whole afternoon—coming up with a single sentence vision statement for our church, and it's still our vision statement to this day, and the first six words are: "To reach and influence the world." The rest of it is, "... by building a large, Christ-centered, Bible-based church, changing mindsets and empowering people to lead and impact in every sphere of life." So we've always been a church that's high on vision. I've found that people are up for that. Our church gets inspired by vision, all the way through to the mums and dads who just come along each weekend.

Vision Sunday in our church is literally one of the biggest Sundays we have all year. It's generally the first Sunday of February, which in Australia is when school goes back; it's like September in the U.S. We link to Vision Sunday globally, so it's rolled out to all our global campuses from Australia, and it's a huge highlight. Our church just seems to be up for expansion, for vision. I think we have a church that realizes what they're part of is bigger than the [individual] part they play. People look at the music or look at the leadership or whatever, but

in my mind, the real gold of Hillsong church has always been the people. We have an incredibly generous congregation and a church that's making a difference around the world.

**What are some differences you've come across in doing church in the U.S. versus Australia? Any insight you have of American church culture, as someone looking from a different perspective?**

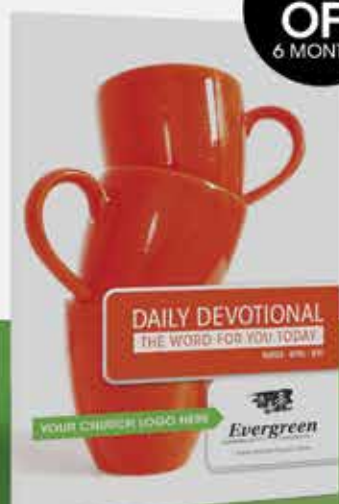
America obviously is far more church-ed than Australia or most of the other places where we are. We've definitely gone to some of the least church-ed cities [in the U.S.]. But I notice here—I'm in Orange County [California]—it's not uncommon at all to overhear a conversation, people talking about church or even see someone reading the Bible or doing a devotional, whereas in Australia, if you heard another table say "church" your ears would perk up because it's not normal.

So, America is more church-ed, but I think that has its strengths and weaknesses, because Christianity can develop a lot of gray—a lot of people who are kind of Christian. Whereas, in Australia and in many of the other countries which are nowhere near as Christian-based or church-cultured, it's much more black and white; you either are or you're not, there's not much in the middle. So I see that as a difference.

Again in America, historically maybe, even more than today, often the only way you would get people to play in the worship on the weekend was to pay them. We've never paid the worship team in our church anywhere; it's all based on a volunteer heart, and a passion for the church. Certain things like that are where we're refusing to bow to the culture and continuing to be ourselves, and I have to say it's working for us.

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