**The Hillsong experiment is over. Christianity was never meant to be cool**

**[Cherie Gilmour](https://www.smh.com.au/by/cherie-gilmour-p536li%22%20%5Co%20%22Articles%20by%20Cherie%20Gilmour)**

Freelance writer

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There is a version of the Bible called *The Message* by Eugene Peterson. It translates ye olde King James verses like “Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” into “Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me, and you’ll recover your life.” Growing up Christian, I loved this modern adaptation because it revived words I knew so well and made them fresh.

Hillsong is a church famous for its contemporary take on Christianity – for turning a 2000-year-old religion into something relevant to hipsters in skinny-leg jeans who tell you that God is “so into you”.

On May 19, four-part documentary *The Secrets of Hillsong* premiered on Hulu, featuring fallen Hillsong pastor Carl Lentz. It expands on [Vanity Fair’s 2021 investigative article,](https://www.vanityfair.com/style/2021/02/carl-lentz-and-the-trouble-at-hillsong) which did a deep-dive into Lentz’s abrupt firing from Hillsong following his extramarital affairs and the depth of dysfunction within the church including [Brian Houston’s alleged cover-up of his father’s paedophilia](https://www.themonthly.com.au/issue/2023/february/elle-hardy/hillsong-and-life-brian#mtr), which returns to court in June and which Houston denies. Australian dates for *The Secrets of Hillsong* have not yet been released.

When I was a teenager, I joined Christian City Church or C3, and eventually joined the arts and theology school that was attached to it. C3 was on par with Hillsong, or so we liked to think. I fell headfirst; it was exciting and shiny, and everyone was so cool. Jesus was cool! The concert-bright lights were worlds away from those old, stuffy Anglican or Catholic churches.

There were celebrities, at least within Christian circles. We knew all the names of the televangelists with their gold watches. Darlene Zschech, the worship pastor of Hillsong, once came into the coffee shop where I worked. It was like Mariah Carey had just walked in – except that I was the only one who knew who she was. We were young, affluent and #blessed. Every girl (and maybe a few guys) wanted to marry Joel Houston, the son of Hillsong founder Brian Houston.

In 2008, one morning during class at C3, we were called out for a special meeting. Mike Guglielmucci, the worship pastor for a similar pentecostal church called Planetshakers, had just revealed that his recent cancer diagnosis – about which he wrote the song *Healer –* [was, in fact, fake.](https://nypost.com/2021/04/01/pastor-who-faked-cancer-to-hide-porn-problem-starts-charity/)

These spectacular falls from grace from people in prominent positions seemed to be happening with alarming regularity. Was it reflective of human nature, or was it indicative of a larger culture that promoted image over integrity?

Journalist Katelyn Beaty writes about how the cult of celebrity has gradually warped well-meaning evangelical preachers. In her book *Christians for Jesus*, she talks of how Billy Graham, the iconic evangelist famous for his crusades,was one of the first preachers to latch on to radio and television to “spread the word”. “Even as he resisted celebrity, his approach to ministry helped fuel the dynamics of celebrity that now pervade evangelicalism,” [she writes](https://www.amazon.com.au/Celebrities-Jesus-Personas-Platforms-Profits/dp/1587435187).

Cut to 2010, when pastors like Hillsong’s Carl Lentz jumped on Instagram to promote their ministries to hundreds of thousands of followers. There he is posing with his mate Justin Bieber, sprinkling in Bible verses and “shout-outs” to his wife (who he later cheated on). He was a man on a mission, in designer shoes. The line became blurred about exactly what he was promoting – was it Hillsong’s ministry or himself?

Hillsong has done many good things in the world, among them a [long-term partnership with World Vision](https://hillsong.com/bwc/worldvisionau/) to provide international aid, although that story isn’t being told in the current media frenzy about [Brian Houston’s moral failings](https://www.9news.com.au/national/brian-houston-charged-drink-driving-usa-before-hillsong-church-resignation-senior-pastor/d6c429f6-23d8-4d4c-919b-34985f7a329d). But many of us are no longer swayed by charismatic preachers in skinny jeans or inspired by their lifestyles drenched in material excess and pseudo-celebrity. “Reaching as many people as possible” does not justify churning people through a church that due to its size and world-conquering mission acts like a corporate machine, [richly rewarding those at the top](https://www.vanityfair.com/style/2021/02/carl-lentz-and-the-trouble-at-hillsong) while the underlings do the unpaid volunteer work.

I used to do this thought experiment: I’d imagine that Hillsong had secured Jesus as their guest speaker for an upcoming conference. The buzz would be off the charts, with slickly produced ads every week during church services for the upcoming event, a full security detail, and a green room packed with good food and people lucky enough to mingle with the special guests. In this scenario Hillsong would be living its belief of “honouring” leaders, a stance that helps it account for [inordinate spending on lavish things](https://www.9news.com.au/national/hillsong-under-investigation-by-charity-watchdog-church-lavish-spending/026c630e-3b44-486b-bbe9-e7812f7082cd) such as first-class flights from Jerusalem.

I think Jesus would look at the hype and say, “No thanks.” He’d head to the streets and hang out with the lonely and unloved. He’d go to soup kitchens and women’s shelters and catch up with the embattled LGBTIQ community. Jesus was deeply counter-cultural when it came to power and literally cracked the whip at religious leaders who thought they were God’s gift to mankind. “If you puff yourself up, you’ll get the wind knocked out of you,” *The Message* translation of the Bible says.

Perhaps now that Hillsong has been cast out of the Garden of Eden, the hundreds and thousands of people who are and have been members can find their way forward. The future of the church will depend on its next move. But for all saints and sinners alike who need grace, it’s worth remembering there was only one man who said, “Follow me”. And he wasn’t on Instagram.

**Cherie Gilmour is a freelance writer.**