

The City is my Parish?

Understanding the Hillsong Model

John Wesley is well-known for his 'world' outlook –

I look upon all the world as my parish; thus far I mean, that, in whatever part of it I am, I judge it meet, right, and my bounden duty to declare unto all that are willing to hear, the glad tidings of salvation. This is the work which I know God has called me to; and sure I am that His blessing attends it. (Journal: 11 June 1739).

Among Pentecostal churches, Hillsong* is the most widely known in Australia and internationally. The weekly attendance at its Sydney services alone is more than 20,000, making it the largest mega-church in Australia.

There are some parallels in the Hillsong development to the growth of Methodism in the 18th century, and the Salvation Army in the late 19th century. The parents of the senior pastor, Brian Houston, were, in fact, Salvation Army officers in New Zealand. Hillsong has inherited some of its patterns of leadership and organisational discipline. Also, like these former movements, Hillsong focuses on city areas, works on establishing and developing groups and networks, and uses contemporary means of communication in that process.

While early Methodists and The Salvation Army focussed on working-class people, Hillsong focusses

* Hillsong refers to Hillsong Church and is distinguished from Hillsong Conference which has evolved as a distinct identity, though of course clearly part of Hillsong Church.

on the middle-class. However, this reflects the change in the dominant social group in Australian cities.

City focus - cities of the world

Hillsong has moved from a Sydney focus to a world focus. The world is clearly noted in Hillsong's Vision Statement:

To reach and influence the world by building a large Christ-centred, Bible-based church, changing mindsets and empowering people to lead and impact in every sphere of life.

From the City (Waterloo), the Hills campus, South West and Brisbane, Hillsong now has churches in London, Kiev, New York City, Stockholm, Amsterdam, Moscow, Paris, Konstanz, Copenhagen, and in August 2012 a Melbourne gathering was commenced. Hillsong also has a number of extension services in regions of Sydney, making it easier for people to connect to the Hillsong Church. However, Hillsong has remained highly focussed on having one or a few centres for worship in each major city rather than having many centres throughout suburban, regional and rural areas.

What are some features that are helpful to understanding the increasingly global phenomenon that Hillsong has become?

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Organisational and Entrepreneurial Leadership

Brian Houston and his wife, Bobbie, have been senior leaders of the movement from its inception. In the developing international network, Brian Houston remains the 'elder statesman'.

The church services are the public face of the movement and nothing is left to chance, with teams of volunteers and staff overseeing all areas. There is a high degree of precision and professionalism and the teams demonstrate strong levels of commitment. Given the large attendances at events like the main campus services and the conference, everything has to run to a certain military precision to ensure order and reasonable breaks. Every aspect is committed to God in prayer before each event.

Music – But Not One Style Now

What do people think of now when they hear the word Hillsong? Probably, most people think of music. The Hillsong name was formally chosen in 1999 to reflect this way of branding the movement. Hillsong titles are used in churches throughout Australia and the world.

The services allow for a variety of reflection, from full-on rock style, to general contemporary and also opportunity for milder and quieter reflection. Music has been the key to Hillsong's development with the congregational music of Hillsong Live and the Hillsong United band. Hillsong United, a band arising out of the former named Hillsong Youth, is now a band focus in its own right. (Note: their website <http://www.hillsongunited.com/> is worth viewing for the style and look that has developed, though it is not suitable for anyone with epilepsy).

Over time there has been more discussion about the role of music. Hillsong has never seen it merely as entertainment, even though there are cultural connections that link to the entertainment model. Ben Fielding (2012), one of Hillsong's music leaders, has written:

Music reflects the creativity and beauty of God; its ultimate purpose is to bring enjoyment and cause us to draw near to our Creator.... An important distinction must be made between the emotional experience of music and the presence of God; they are not synonymous, but nor are they necessarily mutually exclusive. We do not worship a passionless God, nor should our worship or faith be void of passion, lament, joy and heartfelt devotion. But we must be clear about this: it is the presence of God that brings lasting change. In musical worship we can experience change, be convicted by the Spirit of God, experience freedom, repent, surrender areas of life we have held back from God, and, importantly, develop unity as we agree in Jesus' name.

Volunteer Base

Church members are encouraged to be volunteers, and do so enthusiastically, especially in relation to the services at the two main campuses in Sydney.

Volunteers are encouraged to help at one service and attend another for worship. Volunteers also help with the range of Hillsong social and community services and events and ministries.

The peak volunteer time is at the annual conference when 4,000 volunteers are recruited for an amazing array of areas, from the technological side to ushering and putting material on 20,000 seats.

Extensive Use of Technology

Church news at services and the use of video and music in all areas of the life of the church highlight the contemporary nature and their multimedia focus. The video production is very professional and the teams clearly understand how to communicate within a visual culture for today. Church services use these resources regularly, especially for the testimony stories.

Hillsong has its own television channel. Websites and music are all linked so they can draw and build on each facet of the organisation. They reflect the convergence of technology that is moving rapidly now where the TV will be the web, and iTunes and apps will be accessible in all ways. Live streaming was begun for selected Hillsong Conference material this year.

Standard Protestant Patterns of Worship

Hillsong church services follow a pattern of worship with similar elements to standard Protestant worship: music, prayers, offering (announcements) church news, sermon. Unlike many denominations though, Hillsong ensures a dedicated time for an evangelical 'altar call', and commitment prayer and then a final music item.

Technological changes are evident in worship as the whole Hillsong network of churches can be reached through technology – multiple campuses can view the same service or material, thus experiencing, for example, the same message from Senior Pastor Brian Houston.



*Hillsong Conference in Worship
(Photo by Peter Bentley)*

As Hillsong has become more main-stream in the church arena, it has developed different styles to cater for a larger variety of people. A key example is the chapel service provided at Hills and City in Sydney with its more reflective and quieter musical base. Interestingly the larger services can also provide anonymity for those who want to attend without being asked about their own life. I found people wanting different things and Hillsong has a range of services and styles that suit a variety of people and their needs at different times in their life.

Barista-made coffee is readily available, and the hospitality and welcome areas provide an immediate way of relating. Newcomers have opportunity for as much contact as they wish. An initial connection can be made through the concierge arrangement on their website and a personal connection is made when you arrive (this gives you an understanding of the city focus as good city hotels have concierges). Courtesy (free) transport is available to the City and Hills campuses from the closest major railway hub. Food is also available for purchase at certain services and campuses, sometimes related to fund-raising for specific groups, but also allowing people to arrive early or stay after and catch up with family and friends.

Local Connections — Extension Services and Groups

Hillsong has also developed a range of 'extension services' in Sydney that allows a more local level of involvement. Several of the services are in languages other than English. Due to the size of even some of the extension services, more personal connection is undertaken in the Connect groups. These provide an opportunity for members to relate on a more intimate level, for prayer and fellowship and study. The meta-church model has always encouraged such cell-based groups, and the model has a significant historical link with the Methodist class meetings founded by John Wesley.

The group focus is also evident in its young adults work (Powerhouse) and 25-35s (Frontline), that has a significant social component.

Cross-Cultural Facilities

As well as the use of translation facilities at certain services, it is evident that its internationalism, coupled with the music focus, provides an entry into the lives of people from other cultures. Music is a common denominator and the music is well-known by the members, having been downloaded, bought on CD, and listened to until it is quite familiar.

The breadth of cross-cultural interaction is also seen at Hillsong Conference, with over 70 countries represented. One aspect, though, the broader cross-cultural dimension, is not yet significantly featured in the overt leadership (music and preaching) of Hillsong, reflecting its historical development to date.

Family Orientation

Hillsong has a well-developed programme for children and youth, with different groups ensuring good age-appropriate learning and activities. It is also clear that Hillsong provides good facilities for families in terms of bathroom amenities and access arrangements. Child protection is taken very seriously and technology enhances keeping track of children and liaising with parents as needed. All the family can be at a service time, though in different parts of the facility, coming together to perhaps have meals or times with other families afterwards.

The Hillsong Conference has a dedicated Kidsong stream, catering for all ages, allowing parents to attend the conference. 2011 Kidsong Ark (preschool programme) had Veggie Tales involved as a key part.

Hillsong also conducts a wide range of seminars and events about family relationships and parenting, connecting in a practical way to issues for people. The Hillsong Conference has particular electives in these areas.

Social Justice Focus

Hillsong has moved into considerations of social justice in a more defined way over the last decade. The 2012 Hillsong Conference had a clear social justice component, focussed around the A21 campaign, with Hillsong Leadership team member Christine Caine as a dynamic and popular proponent. Women are leading or developing many aspects of the social justice programmes within Hillsong. A21 <http://www.thea21campaign.org/> is aimed at ending sex trafficking. Other aspects include resourcing Aboriginal education and providing international aid. The I-Heart website lists a variety of projects and ideas: <http://www.i-heart.org/>.

There is a definite move to get members involved in an area of social justice. I noted one explanation on the website:

So what does God's relentless love for each of us mean for how we're supposed to live? And what does this have to do with social justice? Jesus came to earth not only to bring salvation, but also to show us how to live. Rather than live on earth for 3 days, He lived and walked among us for 33 years creating a new order. He showed us how to raise disciples and create a new culture of administering justice.

Hillsong has developed local area programmes through its Citycare that provides a range of social services and referrals. There are also strong links with organisations like Compassion.

Training and Development

Many mega-churches have founded their own training institutions. This enables them to keep members 'in-house', as well as providing a continuing culture

and connection of leaders who may go on to develop and establish other churches as part of the original church or at least connected to the original church. Hillsong Leadership College has expanded rapidly over the last ten years, and will provide full-time courses at the Brisbane campus from 2012. Part of its strength is its practical ministry orientation. It also has substantial modern technology resources and a centre for those wanting to be involved in TV and media. Over 3000 are involved in part-time and full-time training (over 1000 full-time) and people come from over 70 nationalities, often connecting to the College initially through Hillsong Conference.



Hillsong Conference (Photo by Peter Bentley)

Broadening theology and mainstream application

I have perceived a deliberate confronting of the idea that Hillsong focussed on the prosperity doctrine (Hillsong disputes the view, arguing it was mainly a misunderstanding, especially related to the title and content of Brian Houston's early book on the matter of money.) In any case, confronting this issue has been a key as well to broadening the public perception of Hillsong, as well as enabling them to broaden their general Christian content. There has been a move away from a focus on the ecstatic and emphasis on certain Pentecostal 'distinctives'. This is a new era compared to the Toronto Blessing time. The services I experienced had a more significant depth to the preaching than is often characteristic of Pentecostal teaching, with more common Christian themes developed, particularly related to personal stories that were 'grace' centred, highlighting God's forgiveness, love and mercy, and also avenues of Christian service and justice. Most of the services I attended had much in common with general Protestant evangelical churches in Australia today.

It appears to me that Hillsong has been taking more moderate Protestant theological positions than in the past, positions that would be acceptable to people from different denominations. They have been trying to make their presentation of faith understandable to those with little or no church contact or understanding of ecstatic gifts. The main campuses now hold special services and times for healing during the year. In ordinary services, people are invited to fill in cards for special prayer and healing before-hand and the cards are 'offered to God'.

There is always an acknowledgement of giving, but it was highlighted in a 'generous way' that simply made it part of the Hillsong commitment for members.

Hillsong: a Mega-Church Movement

Hillsong fits into the non-denominational international base that is at the centre of most of the contemporary mega-church based movement. There is cross-fertilisation of speakers and also members who attend conferences, programmes and events in different parts of the world. A large Singaporean group from New Creation Church came to Hillsong 2012 to be with their pastor Joseph Prince. English is a key language for the mega-church movement, and Hillsong is well-placed with its international style.

Hillsong Conference

The use of technology enables more significant larger events today and of higher quality. These events build on the past evangelical tradition of crusades and large gatherings, with potential numbers being based around the available facilities, such as the Allphones Arena at Olympic Park for the annual Hillsong Conference. There are many key events, including programmes and a conference for men, and the Colour conference for women. The Colour Conference is a major focus and drawcard now with more than 15,000 women attending on multiple campuses.

The big focus for the year is the annual Hillsong Conference held in Sydney. Around 20,000 people pack the night events, with around that number registered as delegates (including the volunteers), meaning even some of the elective sessions have thousands attending. While the worship sessions and keynote speakers are probably the draw-card, the electives are a significant component and cover a wide range of topics. There is only limited focus on the traditional Pentecostal areas, though there is a strong orientation to music and worship overall. There is a defined social justice theme and several seminars dedicated to areas and projects which have developed out of Hillsong. One of the

seminars I attended on sexual trafficking may have had nearly 1000 people. Many electives are practical – helping people with preaching, pastoral matters, family and health and well-being matters.

One would expect the main group of attendees to be people from the Australian Christian Churches and Assemblies of God networks. According to statistics provided by Hillsong, these people accounted for (38%) of those attending in 2012. Among others who attended, 15 per cent were Anglican, 10 per cent were Catholic, 2 per cent were Baptist and 1 per cent were Uniting. Many other denominations were also represented including: Apostolics, Brethren, Christian City Churches, Christian Outreach Centres, Churches of Christ, Foursquare Gospel Churches, Elim, Lutherans, Methodists, Presbyterians, Salvation Army, and Seventh-day Adventists.

Hillsong Conferences are now international, with Sweden and the Netherlands holding conferences in October 2012.

The move by Hillsong to link and network with local churches has prompted a broader range of contacts and a wide range of attendees at the annual Hillsong Conference. The Hillsong Leadership Network is now a strategic part of the whole Hillsong Conference arrangement and links into the concept of Partnership offered to local churches under the theme of "Championing the cause of the local church." The Hillsong Conference is seen as an integral part of this and is oriented as a service for local churches. Local churches are encouraged to bring a group to the conference. This is also developed under the Home theme and 'At Home' at the conference where Brian and Bobbie and other leaders share about Hillsong Church, and relate this to local church issues. These aspects are also highlighted in the Hillsong Vision:

Jesus is building his Church across the earth and your local church is a key piece in His plan.

Once church members looked to their denomination for support and resources. Now they consider inter-denominational connections and, in particular, the mega-church for large inspirational events. The growth in independent churches and churches linked to umbrella groups also feeds into the need to connect with something larger than one's own sphere, and Hillsong Conference and various networks are building on that development.

The theme for the Hillsong Conference in 2013 is 'Revival'. The revival base raises older images of the popular crusade times, but Hillsong utilises contemporary technology and style to express it in its own way.

The sense of a vibrant worldwide church with Hillsong at the centre is clearly stated in the Hillsong Mission statement - *'The Church I See'*. The statement is closely connected to Brian and Bobbie Houston and designed almost as a modern creed,

able to be personally proclaimed and affirmed.

THE CHURCH I SEE

The Church that I see is a Church of influence. A Church so large in size that the city and nation cannot ignore it. A Church growing so quickly that buildings struggle to contain the increase.

I see a Church whose heartfelt praise and worship touches Heaven and changes earth; worship which influences the praises of people throughout the earth, exalting Christ with powerful songs of faith and hope.

I see a Church whose altars are constantly filled with repentant sinners responding to Christ's call to salvation.

Yes, the Church that I see is so dependent on the Holy Spirit that nothing will stop it nor stand against it; a Church whose people are unified, praying and full of God's Spirit.

The Church that I see has a message so clear that lives are changed forever and potential is fulfilled through the power of His Word; a message beamed to the peoples of the earth through their television screens.

I see a Church so compassionate that people are drawn from impossible situations into a loving and friendly circle of hope, where answers are found and acceptance is given.

I see a people so Kingdom-minded that they will count whatever the cost and pay whatever the price to see revival sweep this land.

The Church that I see is a Church so committed to raising, training and empowering a leadership generation to reap the end-time harvest that all its ministries are consumed with this goal.

I see a Church whose head is Jesus, whose help is the Holy Spirit and whose focus is the Great Commission.

Yes, the Church that I see could well be our Church — Hillsong Church.

The growing significance of Hillsong is not without some contradiction. Over the past decade the Pentecostal churches across Australia have not sustained the rapid growth of previous decades. As Hillsong becomes more main-stream, it will increasingly face main-stream institutional issues, including nominal affiliation. Also, older denominations and churches now have many levels of bureaucracy which service their organisation and service arms, but also often make them deeply indebted to doing things in certain ways. Institutionalisation is always a challenge to an organisation that has responded quickly to new situations and has been able to develop new ways through strong direct leadership.

It will remain to be seen whether Hillsong Church will witness significant growth in future years. One form of growth may be as a broad umbrella-type organisation providing resources to and networking a wide range of larger and smaller churches in Australia.

Peter Bentley

References:

Fielding, Ben (2012) 'Culture', *Eternity Newspaper*, 8th July.