



# Hillsong Church

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## Religion Media Centre

Collaboration House, 77-79 Charlotte Street, London W1T 4LP |  
[info@religionmediacentre.org.uk](mailto:info@religionmediacentre.org.uk)  
Charity registration number: 1169562



- Hillsong Church is an Australian Evangelical “mega church” with branches in 23 countries worldwide, including the UK.
- It is a Pentecostal Church affiliated with the largest Pentecostal movement in Australia, Australian Christian Churches, previously called the Assemblies of God in Australia.
- It is known for its original music under the three labels / groups: Hillsong Worship, Hillsong United and Young and Free. Under these labels, Hillsong has produced 66 albums.
- Hillsong claims to have a weekly global attendance of 130,000.

## HISTORY

- Hillsong Church has its origins in the leadership of Pastor Frank Houston (1922-2004), father of the current leader, Brian Houston (born 1954).
- Frank Houston, a New Zealander, served as superintendent of the Assemblies of God in New Zealand from 1965 to 1971.
- In 1977, Houston moved to Sydney and founded his own church, known as the Sydney Christian Life Centre. Affiliated churches were quickly established.
- Brian joined the church network in 1978 and was leading his own congregations from 1980.
- In 1983, Brian, with his wife Bobbie, founded Hills Christian Life Centre, and the associated music label, Hillsong, in the Hills District of Sydney, Australia.
- Affiliated churches were established through the 1980s and 1990s, and spread to other countries. The London church was formed in 1992.
- In 2000, Brian and Bobbie merged the Christian Life Centre churches under the new name of Hillsong Church, partly because of the success of the music label.

## BELIEFS AND PRACTICES

- Hillsong subscribes to the [belief statement](#) of the Australian Christian Churches – described as “Bible-loving, evangelical and Pentecostal, and are about connecting people to Jesus Christ.”
- The Bible is taken as “God’s word” and as authoritative. Members are baptised and the “gifts of the Holy Spirit” are accepted – including speaking in tongues and healing.
- Members seek a personal relationship with Jesus – only acceptance of Christ can lead to reconciling with God. Jesus Christ will return as promised.
- Members meet together regularly in a local church and the focus is on creating a close-knit community feel. Meetings include both Sunday services and midweek Bible study and dinners as well as many other events and social engagements.
- An annual Hillsong conference is held in three countries simultaneously each year. In July 2019, however, it was held only in London and Sydney, as Los Angeles had been cancelled.
- Members are expected to be involved in the church’s special interest “collectivities”, depending on their own interests, strengths and skills. These include education, business, media, and social justice, among others.
- The church is keen to raise the next generation of Christian leaders.
- Members contribute financially to the movement.
- Hillsong has a contemporary worship style, particularly through its live, original music.
- It is youth-oriented, with children’s events and the Young and Free music label. A large concentration of members are millennials in their twenties and thirties.
- It has its own online television platform, Hillsong Channel, and is also found across social media.
- It has a number of celebrity followers, including Justin Bieber and his wife Hailey Baldwin, who attend Hillsong in New York, led by Pastor Carl Lentz. Kylie and Kendall Jenner, Kourtney Kardashian and Kanye West have also attended services.
- Kanye West’s “Sunday services” are partly inspired by Hillsong, according to media reports.

## HILLSONG IN THE UK

- In the UK, Hillsong was first active in London: the London Christian Life Centre was “planted” as an independent but affiliated church in 1992 by pastors Gerard and Sue Keehan. “Planting” is the term used for the establishment of a new Christian church, independent but usually part of a network.
- In 2000, it changed its name to Hillsong Church London, in line with the name change of the movement as a whole.
- In 2019, there are 12 branches in the UK (Central London, North London, New Bermondsey, Croydon, Reading, Guildford, Tonbridge, Oxford, Newcastle, Birmingham, Liverpool and Edinburgh).
- The branches tend to meet in rented accommodation for Sunday services – for instance, the Central London branch meets in the Dominion Theatre in London’s West End.
- Hillsong in the UK has a registered address in Fulham, southwest London and is registered with the Charity Commission (charity number 1120355).
- In 2017, it had an income of more than £18 million, raised through voluntary donations and other charitable activities.

## CONTROVERSIES AND CRITICISMS

- In 1999, while Brian Houston was president of the Assemblies of God in Australia, he became aware of allegations that his father, Frank, had sexually abused a boy during trips to Australia in 1969 and 1970.
- In response, Brian Houston replaced his father as leader of the Christian Life Centre Churches and took the information to the Assemblies of God leadership. They released a statement regarding Frank Houston’s retirement / resignation, but did not approach the police with the allegations.
- Frank Houston died in 2004 without having faced any criminal charges. He had paid a small amount of compensation to the victim.

- In 2015, the Australian Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sex Abuse looked at the response of Sydney Christian Life Centre, Hills Christian Life Centre and the Assemblies of God to Houston’s admission as [“Case Study 18”](#).
- The commission concluded that the situation was mishandled by the churches in numerous ways: that no official written records of meetings or disciplinary proceedings were kept; neither the complainant nor perpetrator was interviewed; and that neither the complainant nor perpetrator had a contact person other than Brian Houston.
- The commission concluded that Brian Houston was in a position of “potential or perceived conflict of interest”.
- In 2015, Hillsong published a [response](#) to the commission, making clear that the victim, now in his mid-thirties, had not wanted to go to the police.
- Hillsong’s position on LGBTQ issues is another point of controversy. As an Evangelical Bible-based movement, it considers homosexual practice sinful and does not allow LGBTQ people a position of leadership in the church. In February 2019, Hillsong issued a [statement](#) claiming that it was an “inclusive” church. Previously, Houston had claimed that Hillsong accepted gay people who do not have a “homosexual lifestyle”. Such statements have been criticised by both LGBTQ and others.
- Other criticisms of Hillsong relate to the general theological positioning of the Pentecostal movement. Former members have criticised the focus on tithing and further generous donations that are believed to bring God’s grace into members’ lives, as well as an emphasis on faith-healing and that a lack of healing represents a lack of faith on the part of the individual.
- Former members have also claimed that the church does not support questioning and criticism of its leadership.

## ACADEMIC EXPERTS

- Dr [John Maiden](#), senior lecturer in religious studies, the Open University
- Dr [Tom Wagner](#), visiting lecturer in music at Royal Holloway University of London
- Dr [Tanya Riches](#), Department of Theology and Religion, University of Birmingham and Hillsong College, Sydney, Australia (academic and member of Hillsong).

## REFERENCES

- Miller, D. E. (2016). Hillsong: Australia's Megachurch. *The Handbook of Contemporary Christianity: Movements, Institutions & Allegiance*. S. Hunt. Leiden, Brill: 297-316.
- Riches, T. and T. Wagner, Eds. (2017). *The Hillsong Movement Examined: You Call Me Out Upon the Waters*, Palgrave Macmillan.