

[Transcript] Faith on Trial: Hillsong / Miracles tonight

I've learned a little bit about Hillsong so far, about allegations it exploits as volunteer workers, and the sheer amount of money the church makes off the back of its faithful. But is there another side to this story?

Why do so many people go to Hillsong Services all over the world every week?

I've been in Melbourne, right in the middle of the city, and I'm going to a place called Festival Hall, and this is a site that Hillsong bought a couple of years ago.

Now I spent about \$18 million on it to pick up this actual hall, it used to be a boxing venue in the 60s.

Years ago I used to come here to watch concerts, and the crowd on either side of me today has that same feeling of anticipation, as if they're looking forward for the show to start.

The last time I was here I went and saw a band, and it was actually the first place I saw a band, a sort of regurgitator, back in about, I'm going to say like 95, 96, they played with Tism, and it was heaving, it was 5,000 people in this venue, and I was probably 14, 15, and it was just an amazing experience, now it's been turned into a church.

As I get closer to Festival Hall, there are young people all around me, I see smiling faces, lots of young people, you can see they're excited.

I'm going in there with my mind open, I've got no idea what to expect, but I'm thinking, what is it?

What's going on inside there that's drawing all these people in?

Just for a bit of contrast, I went to a Catholic church earlier this morning, one in the suburbs, that was built in the 60s I think, it's a pretty big church, it's a cream brick, it's a big crucifix of Jesus on the altar, there's the priest, there's this old guy in his 60s wearing the traditional vestments, and I just did a head count and there was about 56 people there.

It's a mix of ages, a couple of younger families, but maybe three kids, hardly any, what you call, young people, and the other thing about that service this morning, there was no music, so I think that might be a little bit different when we get into this Hillsong service.

That church was maybe 20% full at Hillsong, it's overcrowded.

As I approach Festival Hall, there are big professionally printed signs, they say, welcome home, they are held by young smiling women, beyond them, I can see what kind of looks like an airport lounge, it's dark in there, but I can see inside that it's luxurious and sleek, with TVs on stands dotted around the area, I can't record inside, so I'll turn the tape recorder off now, and we'll see, I'll come out and in on my thoughts afterwards. And that's the thing, what goes on in Hillsong isn't secret really, but I didn't have permission to record it, and when I tried asking the church, I got no answer.

And I get it, that's their choice.

But it also raises the question, what happens when someone inside Hillsong tries to bring something from inside the church out into the light?

And he walked out, and I just sat there going, oh my god, did that just happen?

What was that?

That was incredibly weird.

And I was just shocked, but you'd see things at Hillsong fairly regularly, that you just went, what the hell was that?

I'm Stephen Drill, and this is Faith On Trial, episode 4, Miracles Tonight.

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So we're two hours later.

I'm now standing outside to Festival Hall, and just the music in there was just incredible. I was really taken away with how well produced that really was, and I was extremely stunned at how well I did that.

And it was, the lights, the stage show, the singing.

I shouldn't really be surprised.

The service is exactly what so many people in Hillsong had told me it would be like, but there are still some things I find unusual.

Like, just how much time they spent talking about money.

The guy who was talking about tithing, he was talking about his family and how his kids came up and were helping him, and he offered that love, and he wanted to give that love back to his kids, and that was what God was like.

It was really, like, it was a really, a fair bit of pressure being put on.

They went and said that there's a cash box down the front now, cash in sort of 2023 is a bit redundant.

But they also randomly had a QR code, and I was looking at it, and you could actually scan the QR code on the screen while you were there, and it worked.

It went to a web page where you could donate.

And they spent a lot of time at the start asking people what they were praying for.

There's almost a laundry list of prayers.

They pray for visas, a new home, for a new job.

Who knows?

Maybe they work.

It seems a bit transactional though, like the unspoken message is, if you donate, you might get that new job.

I've been to Harlem to one of those church services of the African-American churches, and they were sort of really upbeat and enthusiastic and that music was there, but this was sort of different.

It was different, but the music is so good.

The sermon was long and, to be honest, it was confusing.

But the delivery was enthusiastic.

Some of the guys standing next to me had their hands in the air, waving in adulation.

I didn't pick them as the type when they first took their seats.

Towards the end, I find myself singing along to the music.

The words are on the screen, and the notes are easy to sing.

It seems like they're all based around middle C. I'm tapping my foot along with the music.

When I walked out of spoke to a younger woman who gave me a Bible, it was a white Bible, and then she showed me a QR code and talked about what, if I wanted to join Hillsong, how that would look, and she said there was a connect group.

Now, she described this connect group as like a way to catch up with people during the week.

It was kind of like a way to talk to people and become friends outside of the church.

And who doesn't want new friends, right?

Especially new friends like this woman.

It's like people have told me, Hillsong puts the glamorous people in the front rows and

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in the newcomer-facing roles.

Hillsong is genius at the way that they've actually set that up.

Now, I know the Catholic Church has the schools and all the rest of that, which has really built into the fabric of society, but to get people on the night to go and grab a Bible, put their name down, they automatically join a connect group, it's such a really seamless way to get them to be part of a church and to sort of get the church to become a huge part of their lives.

Speaking of my new Bible, I speak to another one of the volunteers.

He's a guy in his 40s wearing simple black pants and black t-shirt.

He's got wavy, dark hair, not long, but he's not the kind of guy who's spending every minute standing in front of a mirror.

He's extremely polite.

I say I'm a journalist.

I tell him I'm doing a podcast on Hillsong.

He says he can't speak for Hillsong, but he goes inside to ask the pastor if he can come out for a chat.

A couple of minutes pass, a stream of young, well-dressed people walk past me on their way home.

Everybody is friendly, everyone seems happy, but the moment I say I'm a journalist, nobody wants to talk.

Super polite guy wearing black returns and says the pastor's too busy to talk right now.

He says he will pass on my number.

No one ever calls though.

I speak to other people and only get more knockbacks.

Even one young woman agrees to chat.

The woman asks me not to use her name.

Our producer, Andrea, will also tell me off later because I've only got one microphone so the recording isn't great.

Why did you come here tonight?

When did you come here tonight?

Mostly I'd been having a rough time and I find coming to Hillsong does help me to sort of, I feel different when I go there, I feel different when I come out, I feel better.

And yeah, it is a very emotional experience, it's very emotionally confronting I would say.

Did that sermon speak to you tonight?

Actually yes, it almost felt like a reply to a sermon I'd heard earlier in the day at a different church.

So that was an interesting experience for me.

So you went to a different church this morning?

Yeah, yeah, I like to go to a few.

You get different experiences if you try different churches.

Well, in the morning what I heard was about how if you have bitterness inside you, you speak bitterness.

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And then I come here and they talk about how, you know, that bitterness can be changed to something else and so it felt, yeah, I felt very changed.

I felt a lot better.

Yeah, yeah.

Thank you so much.

I really appreciate it.

Yeah, glad to.

All right, thank you.

So Hillsong does change people.

For some people that change works.

And actually being here, seeing Hillsong for myself, talking to people who aren't only the church's critics, has changed the way I think too.

I wouldn't say I'm converted.

I'm not going to be one of those people walking up to the stage at Hillsong for an altar call.

But almost despite myself, I can see the appeal.

Maybe it's the attractive young people handing out bibles, or the promise of new friends, or the music.

Like I said, the music's good.

It makes you think that everything is going OK, that life can be amazing, that God can deliver you that new house, or that new job.

That's the promise Hillsong makes you.

Oh, there's only one name.

We lift up a shout.

We lift up a shout.

But what happens when the music stops?

He then comes up behind my office chair.

And so the desk was one of those corner desks.

So it had a slight U-shape where the person would sit at the desk in that little U-shape.

And he came up and pushed the chair right up into the desk and just started humping the back of the chair five or six times.

And he walked out.

And I just sat there going, oh my God, did that just happen?

What was that?

That was incredibly weird.

And I was just shocked.

This is Amy, another one of Hillsong's volunteers, although she left the church.

She's talking about how she was treated by one of Hillsong's pastors, who isn't Bryant Houston, someone who had a position of power.

The two of us are sitting in the offices of my newspaper in Central Sydney.

And Amy's nervous, like the last Hillsong member I spoke to.

Amy has asked me not to use a real name.

She's asked Andrea to alter her voice.

That's why it might sound a bit strange.

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I'm trying to think of a good way to describe her.

Amy has long, wavy hair.

It's one of her standout features.

That becomes a key detail in her story.

But occasionally you'd see things at Hillsong fairly regularly in my capacity that often just you just went, what the hell was that?

But we're constantly taught to think the best of people.

One thing I notice about Amy is that when she's talking about Hillsong, she says, church, not the church.

Even just to work at church, to be tapped to get a job at church, even in the cafe is seen as like, oh my God, you're on staff.

It's amazing.

Lots of Hillsong people do this, but with Amy it stands out.

Maybe because she talks about being at church so often.

There were approximately 100 volunteers for that service and it was one of the biggest services in Hillsong.

Amy is at church every weekend.

During the week, she's there too.

And so it took a lot of organising.

Those volunteers and those volunteers were primarily responsible for meeting and greeting, taking new Christians, people that had just made a decision at what's called an altar call during the service through a basic explanation of the gospel and making sure that they are connected into the life of church.

Amy spends her nights volunteering for Hillsong.

It's like spending her whole life at Hillsong, as if she's playing roulette at a casino and has put all her chips on church.

And so it took a lot of organising outside of church hours, so I was there most nights of the week after my own full-time job, which was a fairly high-pressure job in the corporate world for a major multinational company.

So back to that day when Amy is sitting in her office chair, when a pastor suddenly walks up behind her.

Yeah, I went to report what happened and how the supervisor of the pastor that I worked with, who was also another pastor, had sort to intimidate me and slander me, or she certainly threatened to slander me.

We made a very veiled threat that I would be made out to be crazy, and that I would have to write all this up in a report and then my name would be on that report and senior pastors would see that report.

Amy tells me she was frightened.

All she wanted was for her church to listen, but not like this.

And the way that she worded it, the inference was very clear that I would be the one that appeared in the wrong, that I would be seen as an accuser, and that was not a position that I would want to be in at Hillsong Church.

The reaction makes Amy second-guess herself.

And I just thought, well, maybe he thought what he was doing was funny.

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Maybe there was no sexual connotation behind that.
He was just being playful, and it came across a bit weird to me.
Maybe Amy got it wrong, she's thinking.
Amy her pastor is a good man.
Remember, she's gambled everything on Hillsong.
She doesn't want to lose.
So again, I doubted myself, doubted my instincts, and let it slide.
So Amy rolls the dice again.
She asks another Hillsong pastor, a man this time, for his opinion.
I was in that particular pastor's connect group, and I said to him, tell me about so
and so.
Do you trust him?
He gives me a bit of a vibe that isn't quite right.
And this older male pastor said, no, I know, he's great.
He's fantastic.
And so again, I unfortunately doubted my better judgment, which they essentially conditioned
you to do at Hillsong all the time.
Just imagine for a moment that you're Amy, you're devoted to Hillsong.
Your pastor, someone you look up to, walks up behind you and, in Amy's words, drives
your chair.
It's not the worst thing that can happen, but it isn't pleasant.
And it's sexual.
You complain once, get told your name will go on the report.
Other pastors will see it.
You try again, get told the pastor is a great guy.
The male pastor saying that is in your connect group, that's the small prayer group where
people visit each other's houses.
Would you try to complain a third time?
Doing so might mean being labelled an accuser.
Someone in your connect group don't feel comfortable inviting into their houses in the future.
Is it easier to just let it go?
I went up to the volunteer work area, or sorry, the staff work area, which is a big open plan
area.
And he came out of his office, unbeknownst to me, came up right behind me when I was
at this filing cabinet and grabbing some papers, and he came up behind me and he grabbed me
on the side of my chest, right near my side boob, right up underneath my arms, because
my arms were up grabbing papers out of the filing cabinet, and grabbed me there, kind
of like a tickle, and to scare me, because I didn't know he was behind me, and I turned
around and he was inches away from my face, grinning maniacally, like he really got off
on that.
This time, Amy reacts.
And I of course screamed the moment he did that, and then turned around and it was him,
and I was really shocked and taken back, and I think he really enjoyed that as well, seeing
that reaction on my face, and everyone in that open plan area stood up and turned around

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to see what had happened, and would have just seen us two standing there looking at each other.

But not the only time this slippery kind of hug happens.

Amy says the pastor sees her at a supermarket.

I was out shopping, and we all lived, you know, and I lived quite close to the church, and we all used to see each other here and everywhere, it was like, we called it Little Hillsong in that area, and I was in the freezer section, and I was getting some frozen peas and looking at it, all of a sudden, he did exactly the same thing, grabbed me up under my arm, side boob, scared the crap out of me, I may or may not have screamed, I can't remember, and then, you know, I was like, oh, it's just you when we start talking, and then two minutes later, his girlfriend comes around the next hour pushing a trolley, like he'd actually snuck off from her to come and do this.

Listening to Amy, I'm thinking, her recollection is so clear, and it's full of mundane details. The frozen food aisle in the supermarket, buying peas, the pastor's girlfriend pushing a trolley.

Essentially, he was my boss, and unfortunately, in our generation, and being a woman, this, I hate to say this, but this stuff happens all the time, and we minimise it.

I didn't see the pattern that was emerging.

Amy tells me the pastor keeps mentioning her hair.

Like he'd say things to me, oh, I really want to have kids with your hair colour, and I'd be like, okay, that's a random, it's super, super creepy.

The pattern continues.

He says other things that Amy thinks are creepy.

Late one night, the pastor comes up to her in the office where she's volunteering at Hillsong.

I could feel him behind me, like a presence, really, really close, you know, when someone steps into your personal space, and I've just turned around, and he's got me cornered in the scooped out section of this corner desk, and he goes, give us a hug.

I didn't want to give him a hug.

Like I just felt there was something wrong about it, and especially since it was late at night.

But I acquiesced because I didn't want him to think I had ill will towards him, or I was harboring grievance, or I was bitter.

Listening to Amy, I immediately think back to the woman I met outside the Hillsong service in Melbourne, who also talked about being bitter, and how the church had taught her that bitterness could be changed.

That's something you really have to watch out for at Hillsong, apparently.

Anyway, I acquiesced, and he hugged me, and then I realised he wasn't letting go.

His hug was continuing, and he had his arms right around me, and I've got quite long, wavy hair, and it was sort of down my back, and then he starts praying while he's holding me, while he's actually hugging me.

The pastor starts playing with Amy's hair.

And he starts praying, and he goes, oh God, I pray for a long and great future for us together, and I'm just inside rigid with revulsion, just going, oh no, no, no, no.

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And I could feel him sort of on my upper back and in my shoulders, kind of like a tapping sensation.

And then I realised while he was praying, he was grabbing handfuls of my hair, picking it up and letting it go while he was praying, and I was just like, oh my God, what is he really doing that?

And I was in this state of disbelief, like, okay, this is definitely not okay.

How many finished and kind of tagged and released, essentially, and just walked out.

Later, Amy decides to again make a verbal complaint to a female official at Hillsong.

She basically jumped down my throat immediately, and was incredibly, incredibly threatening and hostile.

Again, imagine that you're Amy.

She feels like a victim.

She's pretty powerless.

She's nobody in the Hillsong hierarchy.

A volunteer.

Later, the woman who Amy went to where they complained about the pastor seems no longer angry.

She seems friendly.

In fact, they start to spend more time together.

And I'd known of her, but we weren't really good friends, but she came up to me and she's like, hey, I really want to be good friends with you.

Like I think, you know, we both work in corporate and, you know, I work in corporate doing contracts.

And I, you know, I think it'd be great for us to be friends and hang out.

And so I was like, great, I could use any friend that I could get.

One night, they're at dinner.

The drinks are flowing, or at least they are on this woman's side of the table.

Amy herself is not a big drinker, so she has a clear memory of what happened.

And she just kind of lurches across the table and slurred at me, and she was like, you really need to get over this.

You really need to, you know, like, because, you know, things happen.

Things happen at church, you know, and I just, and then she stopped and I've stopped and I've looked at her and she's looked at me and she's, she's the look on her face.

She was like, oh my God, I've just let the cat out of the bag.

Amy says the woman is a paid Hillsong employee.

She remembers that conversation every time she sees Hillsong say anything in public about standing up for women.

They just did something the other day in their services to sort of show that they're wanting to be support for people that have been victims of domestic violence, that they're wanting to be a safe space for domestic violence victims.

And I just, I was, it just took the breath out of me that a church that has so little awareness of trauma that has so little awareness of how to look after victims to then think that they have the ability, the systems, the safe people, the processes to care for people that are far more vulnerable than even I was in that circumstance is just breathtaking.

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Amy tells me she left church, meaning she left Hillsong.
Nothing ever changed as a result of her verbal complaints, she says.
She never did put anything in writing.
She has spoken to lawyers.
Some time has passed now.
She still wonders if it's all too hard.
So I was an incredibly vulnerable person going through incredibly difficult things at that time in my life, but they allowed that to happen to me, knowing everything else that I was going through.
And they still treated me who was essentially a victim of sexual harassment and bullying like that at the most horrific time of a person's life.
After we finished the interview, I can see she's still nervous.
As I think of having the courage to tell me about what happened and we walked downstairs to the front door of the building, I have two very different images of Hillsong in my mind.
There was that service in Melbourne, all those happy, friendly people, the one I speak to outside who talked about bitterness, the sign for telling the faithful, welcome home.
And Amy, trapped up against an office table, a Hillsong pastor stroking her hair.
The other woman, a paid employee of Hillsong saying, things happen at church.
Saying goodbye to Amy, I walk back inside the office and at my desk, I pick up the white Bible I was given outside of Festival Hall in Melbourne.
I flick through it, trying to make sense of the two images of Hillsong I have in my head now.
Is this the church of Psalms, chapter 82 verse 3, which talks about protecting the weak and upholding the rights of the oppressed?
Or is it the church of Timothy, chapter 2 verse 11 and 12, which say, women should learn quietly and submissively.
I do not let women teach men or have authority over them.
It's hard to know.
The pastor at Festival Hall never does call back, and Hillsong doesn't respond to written questions.
Then one day I get a random email, the subject line says, all in its report.
There's two attachments.
My work computer asks me if I think the documents are safe to open.
To be honest, I'm not sure, but I take the risk.
I open the attachments.
Four times there, I almost started crying and wanted to stop.
This is genuinely upsetting for me.
It's making me.
It's just every story I've ever heard before, but in a setting that is a church.
That's next time on Faith on Trial.
Faith on Trial is a True Crime Australia production.
For more on this story, visit faithontrial.com.au.