

[Transcript] Faith on Trial: Hillsong / Slave Labour-ish

At this point, I'm just calling everyone I can think of, trying to find out more about Hillsong.

Okay, I've got three women, they're all saying the same thing.

Three's not enough, you're gonna have to get more.

It's Andrea, the producer of this podcast, and that's when I realise I have to go back to that woman I first met at the restaurant in Sydney.

We meet up again, she gives me a list of people, I start working through them.

Now, these aren't the big people in Hillsong, Brian Houston's name isn't on the list, nor is Bobby, his wife, they're the little people, the ones who get things done, and it's those kind of people that actually make the world work.

Like how every big hotel has a back entrance, where hard working staff are collecting deliveries, or the way every big gig has roadies, never seen, who make this show spectacular.

They didn't keep a track of it, you were just there.

Hillsong has them too, they're the guys and girls running the production.

You were on call, you were needed, you were there.

Organising the lighting.

And if you weren't there, oh well, that's gonna go against your grades.

Reading newcomers to the congregation.

It was very slave labour-ish.

Because Hillsong relies on those people, without them, the church wouldn't be able to put on its Sunday services, it wouldn't have spread so fast to 30 countries, and without them, the church wouldn't be nearly as successful, it wouldn't be making millions of dollars every year, but the little people, they don't see much of that money, because the little people, they're not always getting paid.

My name is Stephen Drill, and this is Faith On Trial, episode 2, Slave Labour-ish.

You could go to an ordinary church.

It won't be as much fun.

He will never let me down, he will never let me down, he will never let me down, he will never let me down, he will never let me down.

People that I know that I went to college with worked themselves to the bone.

Luke Hilton was the guy I was talking to in that park in Melbourne, near his office, where the council gardeners are cutting the grass, and we're about to get kicked off the park bench.

You can hear the lawnmower in the background.

Luke gave his 20s to Hillsong, attending the church's dedicated college in Sydney, and paying for the privilege.

People that I know that I went to college with worked themselves to the bone, to the point where they were working 16-hour days, especially when we got to Hillsong Conference, when they started doing Hillsong Conference at the Sydney Superdome, it was ridiculous, it was ridiculous. Hillsong Conference, it's religious marketing genius.

The conference is often held at a stadium that was built for the Sydney Olympics.

It has a 21,000 seat capacity.

I can't get my head around how a church in Australia can fill that many seats.

There was hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of college students who were literally running

the whole conference, but the whole thing was built on the back of college students working for free.

At this point, talking to Luke, I'm new to all this.

When I think of volunteering, I think of helping at a homeless shelter, or doing a fun run, raising money for sick kids.

Luke says that that's not what volunteering is at Hillsong.

And they glamorised everything, you know, oh, you're the toilet cleaner, no, no, you're working in guest relations, you're cleaning up the facilities.

Because when you hire a big building like the Sydney Superdome, you have cleaning costs and obligations that you have to pay back to the company that owns the, that manages the building.

You have to pay these cleaning costs, not if you're Hillsong, you just use all of your college students to save you that few grand.

Looks pretty fine up about this issue.

You can hear it in his voice.

He's angry because he says he was exploited.

Toilets picking up rubbish, running the merch stand, like literally hand over fist, taking money from customers, because that's what they are, customers, they're not congregants, taking money from customers, selling the latest Hillsong CD, so that CD ends up charting on the Aria charts, like literally watching hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of merchandise being sold.

And the people who are selling that merchandise are free labour.

So you know, it was a bit ridiculous.

Some people I spoke to for this podcast didn't want to go on the record, but their stories match again and again, I hear the same details.

Look, I was, I was at least doing 10 hours.

I think it was probably closer to 12 or 13 hours.

And obviously, you know, you're travelling to and from the Sydney Superdome for a job that you're not getting paid for.

So you're obviously paying those expenses as well, you know, your food or like, they're not feeding you.

They're not like, I think from memory, we were getting bottles of water, but there was nothing.

Absolutely nothing.

It's not just college students who feel they gave too much to Hillsong.

Another person who spent quite a bit of time at the church didn't want to be identified.

So I asked Andrea to read out what she says.

When you were a greeter, you would get new Christians phone numbers.

You would call them back after one week, three weeks, and then six weeks.

If they were followed up, people would be 76% more likely to stay.

There were three levels at Hillsong, those who went to church sometimes, those who were volunteers, and those in leadership.

It was all designed to keep pushing you up the ladder.

That's what one of the people who spoke to me said, what's your thoughts on that when

you're reading it?

It just sounds like it's kind of like a machine getting people through.

They get them in and then those people get called up to stay and they get further up the ladder.

And then they start calling us people who come in behind them.

Like it's, I don't know, it just reminds me of like when you're an intern and you and then you go up the ladder and you train new interns and just becomes just like a elaborate system, it just sounds like a business.

Hillsong is not just a church for 45 minutes on a Sunday, it's for life and it becomes your life.

Oh, we will trust, we will see you more, for the good.

There are prayer groups during the week, they're called connect groups now, they have some prayer but they're also a big sort of friendship circle.

There's youth groups, everything is structured and all of this requires volunteers.

Some of those volunteers will even pick up your kids from your house, take them to Hillsong and then drop them back after their youth group.

For some families, particularly those who are struggling, I can see how free babies sitting with a little bit of religion on the side can be attractive.

We were exploited in terms of our volunteer time and skills.

It's Grace, it's not a real name but it is her real voice.

Grace has left the church and come back into what she and so many in Hillsong call the secular world.

She too says she feels kind of used by the church.

You know, you were told that volunteering your skills and expertise, so like my talents were creative, were musical, artistic, charisma, events, you know, we were kind of told that the highest power was to serve and give them those skills for free back to God who gave it to you, not to go and make a career out of it.

Some people I speak to in Hillsong say that a lot of folk want to volunteer, that it's their choice to serve God, but when Hillsong is your whole world, how easy is it to let those people down?

Are you letting God down?

I just keep looking back at how much time and that's what I want back, that I'll never get back.

Unlike Luke, Grace wasn't cleaning toilets, she was up on stage with the Hillsong rock band taking pictures.

I think people got, get so swept up in, oh my gosh, I took a photo and this photo went all around the world or ended up on the back screen of a conference that's now live.

So there's no doubt about it, the power of the fame was always part of the suite of cards that you got dealt and that you were chasing.

Today, Grace says she's still processing a lot of what went on when she was at Hillsong. Leaving the church is a big deal.

I get the sense that she's almost grieving, it's like she's conflicted, Grace says that Hillsong can be a force for good, but it's lost its way.

You know, humans always ask the question like who am I, what's my purpose, where do I go

when I die, those sorts of really big questions and if you still don't know, if you don't have values, what do you have as a human, like how do you operate, that makes me sad. Grace says she tried to speak up when she was at Hillsong to help the church get on the right track, but people didn't listen.

I wish it was taught more balanced and yeah, values like unconditional love, unconditional positive regard, aka respect for others, faith, hope, peacemaking, self-control, gentleness, kindness, these are all values that we should be embedded in society.

Hearing Grace's story, I start to wonder, why do people do it?

Some of the Hillsong volunteers I speak to say they're crushed, they talk about constant exhaustion, doctor's visits, serious health problems, but always something is driving them on.

People were driven by anxiety, so they were like oh my gosh, I've got to keep somebody happy and do everything they say, because I know they've got a level of influence as to my fate.

Carol Helsall is a high-powered US executive.

She runs her own consultancy company, which advises hotels and the hospitality industry.

Carol says the same thing that happened in Sydney was also happening in New York.

Here's the thing that drives me nuts from a non-profit.

Particularly, what drives her nuts is this prepaid credit card.

It's called a PEX card.

As a volunteer, she's supposed to have money to pay for food for events where she helps married couples deal with their problems.

If Color Conference came, if Hillsong Conference came, all of our money was gone off of our PEX card because they would just use it to buy gifts for pastors or whatever.

The Color Conference is a women's event.

It's the brainchild of Brian Houston's wife, Bobby.

The Color Conference is a women's conference that God put in your spirit, put in your heart to birth, and now why even do a women's conference?

Why even do it?

Okay, I mean, big picture I did it because I felt God really compelled me and give me a very clear instruction and mandate.

I felt God challenged me to step up and take tangible responsibility for the feminine heart within our church.

We were in a Hillsong Leadership Conference, and I just remember looking at the young women on the stage, and the Spirit of God just spoke to me.

So we would be like, go to spend money for the marriage ministry, and there's no money on our PEX card, and they're like, well, there's no money, and so we would just go pay for it.

So then we would have a marriage ministry of, you know, 25 couples on a weekend plus 10 people leading a day and a half course, and they would want us to feed them dinner on Friday night, breakfast, lunch, and dinner on Saturday with snacks for like \$500.

At this point, I'm only just starting to look into Hillsong.

I'm still working through that list of people I was given.

I don't want to prejudice the church, but I can't help thinking, was Hillsong really

looking after all these people?

Luke tells me that money's coming in, money for books, for CD sales, all these conferences, donations, but where is all that money going if it's not being spent on the people who actually turned up to church, the ones who are doing God's work?

It's only afterwards that you recognise that the culture is fundamentally manipulative.

This is Nathan Zambronio.

He lives in the Hawkesbury River area of New South Wales.

We're chatting on a video link.

The wall behind him is full of books and paperwork.

There's an old picture of a Second World War era aircraft hanging there too.

Nathan's wearing glasses with a thin red frame and a shirt with small checks.

He has a small mustache.

He looks exactly like a schoolteacher, which is what he is.

So you'd be going to four services on a Sunday and you'd be serving in some voluntary capacity.

You'd be working in the technical ministries.

You'd be working on sound or audio or you'd be a musician on the stage or you'd be an usher or you'd be offering hospitality or you'd be working in children's ministry.

Nathan's church wasn't directly branded Hillsong, but he has a voice in this podcast because the church was linked, inextricably linked.

Brian Houston's dad, Frank, was sent there to, quote, retire after he admitted that he had sexually abused a young boy.

And trust me, we'll come back to that in a later episode.

That's going to take a lot of digging into.

You would forgo other social opportunities, other career opportunities, other learning opportunities because you were doing something that was, you were committed to something that was bigger than you were, and it was a good feeling.

The question is whether that's healthy, whether that's representative of a balanced life, whether it can get to the point where any minister has the wisdom to say, dude, you just need to go and sit under a tree and spend some time with your family because, you know, you're giving too much and you're going to burn out.

Nathan says that didn't happen.

When people started to burn out, when they needed their pastor, no one was there to tell them to go and sit under a tree.

And the most common experience that you get from people that go through the revolving door of a charismatic or Pentecostal church, especially a larger one like Hillsong, is that they gave it their all.

And as soon as they started to encounter a tough time with their mental health or financially or the utility to the organisation flagged, they were spat out, they were told that they were no longer to have fellowship with that organisation and they were discarded.

And that's a very distasteful thing.

At this point, I don't quite know what to make of what I'm hearing.

I'm sitting in the office, going through my notes, thinking, no, this sounds great, but is it really that bad?

Andrea, the producer, she walks in.

Hey, how's it going?
Is it good yourself?
Yeah, good, good.
What's up?
Well, I've gone through this list and I've looked at sort of all the names, but I don't really know what to make of it.
Wait, which one this one?
Have you spoken to all these people already?
I haven't spoken to them all.
There's still one name that I have to have to speak to.
Well, just call them.
And that's how I meet Ylandi.
Look, I went to Hillsong when I was in Cape Town at first.
This is Ylandi Bosch, the last name on the list I was given.
I studied film at a film school in Cape Town.
Ylandi would fit right in on a film set.
She has long black hair and movie star confidence.
Ylandi's hard to pin down from an interview.
She works for a high-flying recruitment company, and she's always busy.
A lot of the students at our campus were going to Hillsong at that stage.
I was already a Christian by that time, so I was looking for a church that was a little bit more alternative than a traditional church.
She falls in love with Hillsong, like thousands of others.
Ylandi decides to move across the world to attend Hillsong College in Sydney.
I thought, okay, this is really cool.
They were at the peak of their popularity in the world.
They had their movie coming out.
They had just a lot going for them in terms of the media being very generous to them, I guess, in the way of saying they're doing a lot of good.
So I thought, okay, great, I'm going to go over there.
Moving from South Africa is a big deal.
It costs a lot of money.
So she decided to visit Australia for a couple of weeks, just to check it out.
I think I was around about 19 years old, and then I went back home.
I continued to study, and I just continued to work and make enough money to go to Hillsong, and then I applied.
Getting a visa to come to Australia is tricky.
You have to prove that you have money to support yourself.
You have to show us an amount to immigration before you're allowed.
But that's not all you need money for.
Once you get to Sydney, you need to find a place to live.
Sydney's a great place to visit, but the rents are astronomical.
It really piles up because you're paying for your boarding,
you're paying for your tuition fees, you're paying for a lot of things at Hillsong as well.

And that leaves her financially vulnerable.

Also, she's setting up a new life in a country where the only people she knows are part of Hillsong. They want you to buy their merchandise.

They want you to buy their books, which isn't always included in the actual fee that they give you. So it ends up, it can end up anything about \$250,000 to \$100,000.

For people like you, Landy, Hillsong becomes their world.

In some cases, it's also their landlord.

So Hillsong, essentially what they do is they're very clever with property matters, right?

So they rent out a group of properties from individual homeowners, and then they rent out the rooms, and they usually put two, three or four girls into one room, depending how big the room is.

So in our house, one room, so in our house where I used to stay, we had four girls in the one room and they would pay, let's say, \$150,000 to \$200,000 for a bed, basically.

And then they start to pay utilities and things on top of that.

So Hillsong's making money out of this because they're obviously putting a mark up on the price.

How many people in the house then?

So we had about eight girls.

So hang on, you're living with up to eight girls from Hillsong College.

They're from all around the world.

You never met them until you started sharing a bathroom with them just a few weeks ago.

They're volunteering too.

And so how do you say no when Hillsong asks you to volunteer?

How do you be the odd one out in that share house?

How do you say no?

I'm just going to watch some TV tonight.

I don't like the term slavery, to be honest with you.

I think it's more institutionalized abuse.

I like calling it that.

I know I also called it institutionalized slavery at some point, but I've changed the wording of it now because I know that that's probably insensitive to people that have gone through slavery.

But I think it's definitely a sense of institutionalized abuse within.

So they misuse the students that come through.

I think the students were the workforce that saved them millions of dollars each year.

I think they would take a thousand students.

They would do the admin in the office.

They would do the accounting in the office.

They would do the coffee cart runs.

They would do whatever you need them to do, right?

In terms of running the whole operation would be the students running the operation.

They would have a limited staff members who would be the lecturers, you know, some of the pastors and some of the worship leaders.

But the main people that were really running the show and still are running the show on this

premise of volunteering and doing it for God.
And a part of their fieldwork is the students.
So they are essentially just not paying anyone salaries.
It's such a nice way of saving money for them.
So you're paying to go and do volunteer work?
Yeah.
And how many hours a week would it be?
Like, what did you do when you were there?
Some people did 40 hours a week.
And then remember, they still have to...
Volunteering.
Volunteering.
Remember, some people are sponsored to be in Australia.
So they come through on a sponsor where they don't have that full \$40,000.
They're, you know, running out of money after a while because they need to do a lot of different things.
So they're working.
So they're doing 40 hours a week and they're working on top of that.
Inside Hillsong, everyone's just expected to keep going.
But your land is also trying to hold down another job.
My boss actually at the time came to me and she said,
I can't, like, what's happening there at Hillsong?
Because, I mean, she was the CEO of a big, bigger company who had kids shoes.
And she said, I can't really, like, keep you on because you're really good.
But I see this with a lot of students from Hillsong.
Like, what's going on?
Everyone's too tired to work.
I know a little bit of what it's like to be a landie.
I worked a couple of jobs when I was at university.
Sometimes I did double shifts.
Once or twice, I worked a split shift at a pub kitchen.
Then I'd drive into town and work at a nightclub and be back at the pub kitchen for lunch service the next morning.
That was busy, but it wasn't like this.
It can become 50 hours a week, 60 hours a week.
You'd be running on basically such a low.
I know people that were at such a low at their lowest point where they wanted to commit suicide because they couldn't handle the pressure of going to class, working, and then doing full nights where you would finish at 2 a.m. in the morning.
What your landie is saying here is, it's serious.
It goes beyond normal workplace stress.
People are thinking about taking their own lives because of the demands of volunteering for Hillsong.

What you're about to hear has come up so many times
in the conversations I've had with women who were at Hillsong College.
And if you don't do it, they'll come back to you and say,
well, you're not serving enough.
So how much do you need to serve to please them?
So they'll actually pick you up on it.
They wouldn't.
They would, yeah.
How was it over pressure to do these volunteer work?
And to me, personally, it came to a point that over pressure
where I actually collapsed and had a kidney problem.
Your landie says that Hillsong sent her to a doctor who's linked to the church.
Then I think, hmm, is that a conflict of interest?
She will tell you what they want you to know.
And I started realizing that it went to a city doctor.
And the city doctor said to me, hey, you obviously are super tired.
Look at your feet, look how tired you are.
I was so overrun.
He was like, you need a rest.
And I was like, I can't because then I get kicked out of college.
The second doctor gives you landie an ultimatum.
He's like, well, it's your health, all this.
Your landie chooses the church.
And then I ended up being so sick.
I had kidney stones and I ended up going to an actual Hillsong conference.
And I was so sick, I went to the sick bay and they were like,
well, you don't serve hard enough.
I haven't been at a sick bay since I was at school.
But my memory of that small room is the receptionist checking in on you
while she calls your mum to pick you up.
The problem for your landie and for other college students
is that their family isn't there.
They're alone in Sydney.
They're broke.
I've tried to reach out to the church to get their responses to the claims in this episode.
To Hillsong church, your call is important to us.
Please hold the line and we will be with you shortly.
Please note that your call may be recorded unless you notify our team otherwise.
If you would like to read our privacy, we'll see.
Please visit our website, Hillsong.com.
Every time I come running.
Due to deaf or resurface difficulties, we are unable to connect your call at this time.
Please call again later.
They haven't got back to me.

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But after talking to your landie, I really think they should.
Talking to your landie has left me wanting to know more.
If I was interested in Hillsong after that first conversation at the restaurant in Sydney,
now I'm fascinated and kind of worried.
This time, I didn't need Andrea to give me a push.
I've worked my way through the first list of names I was given.
Then, one of those people I spoke to comes back to me with another list.
This one has 57 names on it.
I start calling.
The number you have dialed has been disconnected. Due to deaf or resurface difficulties,
we are unable to connect your call at this time.
Not everybody answers, but some do.
And one of those people will change the way I think about Hillsong forever.
I mean, for goodness sake, Hillsong used to teach conferences the millionaire mindset.
But in many cases, the people who were giving can't put food in their fridge.
Miss Moses said that a cover-up is often worse than the crime.
That's next time on Fight On Troll.
Fight On Troll