

[Transcript] Faith on Trial: Hillsong / The Affairs

Hey, just a quick note. In this episode we talk about allegations of sexual assault in more detail than we have in previous episodes, so it might be more confronting to listen to.

It's almost in my hands.

How many are there?

51 pages.

I've just been emailed this document. This is the report Hillsong doesn't want you to hear about.

So this is it. This is the report that we've heard about or I've heard about a fair bit.

People have been talking about this Karl Lentz report in New York and it's looking into his affairs really and you heard it there. It's like what how long? Two minutes to print it out.

It's that big. It's 51 pages. I'm in my newsroom in Melbourne with Andrea, a producer.

We've ducked into a little private room because we probably don't really want to be talking about this in the middle of the newsroom. Now, can I just show you a few things?

What unfolds over the next half hour is uncomfortable.

Four times there. I almost started crying and wanted to stop.

This is an internal investigation report put together by lawyers hired by Hillsong.

This is genuinely upsetting for me. It's just every story I've ever heard before,

but in a setting that is a church. They've been asked to look into the church's affairs

following the downfall of one of its favorite sons, a New York pastor called Karl Lentz.

It's infuriating to be honest. But it digs so much further.

A pastor in America, he wanted this report to be made public, but Hillsong's global headquarter said no and he actually quit Hillsong. He took his church out of Hillsong. He'd cut all ties

as a result. So some people say that white is the best antiseptic, but Hillsong didn't

want this out there. Let's step back for a moment. Who is Karl Lentz?

And how did his dismissal in 2020 create such deep divides within the church?

Its popularity exploded in the US with the high profile of the quote celebrity pastor,

Karl Lentz, whose recent downfall has triggered a wave of scandals for the church.

Karl was once seen as the new generation, a shinier, sleeker version of Hillsong's founder,

Brian Houston. GQ magazine called him a hyper priest, which I'm not sure is a real thing.

After studying at Hillsong College in Sydney, he moved to the Big Apple,

where he became the lead pastor. He was a spiritual advisor to A-listers,

like Kendall Jenner and Selena Gomez. When you give somebody so much power,

or they become God to people, and I think people forgot the concept of religion and beliefs,

and I think that people look at Karl like he's God to them.

But here's what happens sometimes when people fly too close to the sun.

Mega church minister Karl Lentz nicknamed the rock star pastor.

Well now, without a job and trying to repair his marriage, his former mistress tells us her side.

Karl Lentz speaks out about what happened that led to his firing from Hillsong NYC.

Celebrity, sex and fame. Stop me if you've heard this story before.

Eventually, Karl Lentz was sacked by the man he'd once been thought to emulate, Brian Houston.

Brian said there were, and I quote,

leadership issues and breaches of trust, plus a recent revelation of moral failures.

Brian was saying there is no place in Hillsong for that kind of behaviour,

like Karl was a bad apple. Only the documents I've just been sent suggest that isn't right.

That, in fact, Hillsong's leadership was rife with abuse, sexual misconduct and secrecy.

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I'm Stevan Drill, and this is Faith on Trial. Episode 5, The Affairs. You're called to stay married to the same person. You're called to live sexually pure. In a sex-saturated culture. Good luck doing that on your own. He is the advocate. He is the counselor. He is the waymaker. He is the chain breaker. That's Karl Lentz, the way he might want us to remember him. He is the one that picks your weary self up when you don't want to go on any further. He's the one that lights up the way when everything around you is dark. At the time this clip was posted on YouTube in August 2020, Karl was married with children. I remember the day I saw Laura Lentz. I remember the jeans she had on. Hashtag, hey girl. And I remember I started at the church stock, like everywhere she was. I ended up being there. Oh, I can't believe we're worshiping together in the same row. What's up, girl? Hillsong is big on being faithful to your marriage vows. But according to this report, I've just been emailed. At this time, Karl had already been having an affair for a few months. Hillsong hired these lawyers, Zuckerman, Gore, Brandeis and Crossman, to look into what Karl Lentz did. And I've heard about this report. I hadn't seen it before. It says to Hillsong Global, attention George Agagianian. Now, he's the general manager in Sydney. I'd been chasing this report for months. It finally arrived from a random email address. Like the person who sent it didn't want anyone to know where it came from. There was a 51 page report. And then a second document, just four pages long. Let's have a look at them. A lot of this is about Karl Lentz, but there's quite a bit of detail that I think actually is broader than just the New York church. It talks about Karl Lentz's ability to lead with so poor, he had insufficient supervision, supervision. And he kept on saying, according to this report, Australia is dead to us or comments to that effect. And the lawyers who are investigating this say the Australian mothership appears to have, the Australian mothership appears to bear some responsibility here, since it never established effective oversight and accountability of its New York lead pastor. So this is actually from the document. Lentz submitted to three affairs, but the report has a whole section on how other Hillsong leaders behaved and how the church then dealt with those complaints. It's got different categories of findings like cover ups, retaliation, wage and hour violation, conflict of interest, and self-dealing. Two separate sections deal with penis photos. Sexual misconduct. This includes incidents of consensual and non-consensual sexual interaction between church leaders and congregants, congregants, staff, volunteers, or non-churchgoers. To be honest, I don't know the answer. That question, like so many others about Hillsong, remains unanswered. By now, I've been looking into Hillsong for months, and they are still not responding to my questions. Should I continue? I don't think I want to. It's actually pretty full-on. Let me paraphrase that part of the lawyer's report. It details a sex act. So what's his relationship to her? She's his nanny. She's like looking after his kids. So he's his nanny. So he's married? Carl's married. They've got kids. I'm not sure how many kids they have at this point in time. This woman's working as a nanny for them. She's not living in the house, but she's there quite a bit. And this is what's going on. I wonder how old she was. She's in her 20s at this stage. She's married as well at this point. Poor thing. Andreia's face is filled with concern as she reads these pages. It's like her reaction is more compassionate than mine was, like she's putting herself in this woman's shoes. It makes me think about the differences between men and women, between Andreia's and my reaction, between Carl

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Lentz and his nanny, because Carl is a superstar in Hillsong, and he is a boss. She's almost living at the Lentz house. And then I think about another woman, Carl's wife, Laura. Laura then walked into the room and caught them. At this point, they were at Tyson and Kim Chandler's house. Now, I didn't know that name when I first saw it, but then I googled it. And that's like Chandler is an NBA star. And they'd been drinking. And this was the first time this woman, the nanny, had had marijuana. So she's saying she's practically passed out on the couch. Like Andreia, I'm trying to process what I'm reading. They're in the home of a sporting superstar. Carl is a celebrity pastor. Australian born Laura is his trusting wife. And the nanny, she's on the couch disorientated after having smoked pot for the first time. So basically, the wife walks in on the nanny and Carl, the nanny's almost practically passed out. And then Carl runs outside with the wife and leaves the nanny inside, who was touched on basically unconscious. And so this is the point that says in the brackets, it's Carl, Leona and the nanny all agree on these points, including the fact that the nanny seemed to be nearly passed out or asleep. Just to emphasize, these allegations are in a report written by lawyers engaged by Hillsong. The lawyers say Carl, Laura and the nanny all agree on this description. Laura hasn't directly addressed specific allegations made in this report in public. And there are some things in it we are not going to repeat here for that reason. Last year, she did go on social media though, saying quote, when the time is right, we will have a lot to say about what has happened as well as speaking directly to the relentless lies, accusations and hypocritical scapegoating that has sadly been so prevalent. Carl and Laura, who were still married, have also released a statement saying they quote, vehemently deny the allegations and, in addition to that, have irrefutable proof the events did not happen as they are being described. I just have to say I feel really horrible for this poor nanny because I'm just imagining the scene when like the wife runs in and everyone stands up and she doesn't quite understand what's happened and she's probably feeling a lot of guilt. Andrea wants to know if this interaction between Carl and the nanny was a one-off. The documents actually put a number on it. Anyway, I could stay on this forever because why would he do that when his wife was home and that makes me think how many times stuff like that happened when she wasn't? Well, like that's in here. It says that this happened 80 to, we're doing 20 times and 800 times. So not that they said they have sexual interaction, now not intercourse, but everything, but between 20 times and 100 times. 100 times? Over how long? Over a period of years. The Lawyers Report talks about Carl using a phrase, manipulated intimacy, and that at the time of his affair, he was not even aware of the term power dynamic. I can see Andrea unpacking this in her mind as she reads through the document. The nanny is in Hillsong and her job is to work for its celebrity pastor. It's like an abusive relationship with a partner where you just can't leave because you're so tied to them. The church is like their partner. It's making me physically ill, reading this, by the way. I'm getting almost a bit teary because it's just like seeing it black and white as well. For context, you're 26. So can you put yourself in this babysitter's shoes? Yeah. I mean, I'm not going to go into too much detail, but most of my friends have had some kind of experiences with people who are older. The documents reveal the nanny had moved countries to be part of Hillsong in the States. She left life behind her to be here. And she's in New York and she's from Australia. I came to Australia from Norway and I ended up in workplaces with

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disgusting people because you didn't have any money and didn't know where else to go and your family wasn't there. You don't have that safety net? No. I remember there was one job I wanted to leave for a long time and I just couldn't. You're just like, yeah, not in journalism, in hospitality, but still.

The nanny did tell Carl she wanted to leave, according to the lawyers report, but she told the lawyers that Carl warned her that she wouldn't get another job.

There are other details about what happened between Carl and the nanny in the report, but I prefer not to read them verbatim. I don't want to ask Andrea to either.

Which is interesting seeing you flick through like we're leaving things up, but just because it's a bit too much, right? It's just too heavy.

I've tried to reach out to the nanny, but she didn't get back to me. However, there isn't insight to her thoughts on a blog post written in 2021. These are her claims.

Anyone who knows me knows that I've always loved being in church. I grew up in church.

I longed to be old enough to help in the kids program. I loved worship. I loved summer camp.

I loved being baptized. I loved it all. This woman was a committed Christian.

She details how she came to work with Carl and Laura in New York.

While there was joyful moments during that time, no one knew that I also experienced a great deal of pain. During the years I spent serving them, I was subjected to manipulation, control, bullying, abuse of power, and sexual abuse. Carl denies these claims. I've tried contacting him, but he didn't get back to me. I didn't speak up. I felt uncomfortable,

and I also felt guilty for feeling uncomfortable. I wondered if I was the problem,

and I wasn't sure anyone would believe me anyways. Like many women in the workplace,

I never dreamed that I would have to guard myself from my boss, and in my case, my boss was also my

pastor. Maybe this is the heart of the problem. Her boss was her pastor. One of the first things it says in this report, now remember it was commissioned by Hillsong, is that the church had a quote, culture of submission. Summer of 2017 was the second time in the house when my pastor sat me down and said he took full responsibility for taking advantage of me, and for putting me in a situation that was so heavy for me. He told me that I should feel free from him, and the shame I've been carrying around. He said he thought about confessing to leadership, but after talking it through with his wife, they decided they didn't have to, because it wasn't necessary, and we could just move on. He said that his wife would come and talk to me about the boundaries we would have moving forward. You've got to wonder if the lawyers Hillsong hired to investigate the church, but also kind of angry when they wrote the report. Let me read what Hillsong's lawyers say about the culture of the church.

Quote, from its beginning, Hillsong NYC has encouraged a culture of hierarchy, in which the pastoral leaders are treated as superior to church staff, staff, superior to volunteers, and volunteers more highly valued than parishioners. That's the executive summary of the report. It's actually the first paragraph. That was probably the most disturbing thing I saw was just the cycles of dependence. This is Hannah Frischberg, a reporter at the New York Post. They put these vulnerable people who really just were attracted to the church into where, you know, first they're having these college students who are new to New York babysit their kids for free, but, you know, in exchange, they're offering them services like food or housing, and then suddenly and they're isolating these people from their families and their connections.

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It's like kind of the same patterns you see in a lot of abusive relationships. Hannah's reporting became almost the Bible version of the Carl Lentz affairs. Everyone referenced her stories, and there were other Hillsong people in tricky situations like Carl's nanny, not the alleged abuse, but certainly lack of power or control over their own lives.

That's what Hannah found when her phone ran hot after her initial story.

And then after a few years of this, these people are like, they're so deep and they have no resources and they're not connected to their families or someone who can say, hey, you know, we warned you there were red flags and they're just getting redder. And now they're, you know, they're only, their job, their income, their life is based around, you know, being kind and service to these pastors and it came really hard to break out of the cycle. Young women, Hillsong churchgoers, were giving up their twenties to work as nannies for Hillsong pastors. They were cleaning up and changing nappies, Hannah reported for the post. Often the problem was that they were graduating or leaving the Hillsong college with, you know, debt from their tuition in addition to trauma from the horrors that they experienced while they were there. And then they go on to say, this hierarchy has benefited the church, for example, by motivating many parishioners to devote greater time and effort

to the church, such devotion being offered in an attempt to improve their own standing.

That's obviously a good thing, but this report also says it creates problems.

Church leaders frequently held staff and volunteers to a standard approaching perfection, but no one

is perfect. And the problem with a culture of submission is what happens if the people in charge are the ones who aren't perfect. This culture of hierarchy often encouraged staff and volunteers to be invisible in the presence of senior pastors. Leaders also taught subordinates to maintain a wall of silence about the going on's at the homes and in the private lives of the pastors. A wall of silence. That's where you get problems. Ultimately, this culture found expression in the sexual subjugation and abuse of multiple female staff and volunteers. While the hierarchical requirements of secrecy prohibited or at least inhibited reporting of such misdeeds, it also appears that when instances of misconduct came to the attention of management, a common response was to attack the victim by shaming them, refusing to believe them and by encouraging them to leave the church.

Sexual subjugation. Victims being shamed. Being encouraged to leave the church.

In one case, the report identifies one former Hillsong member alleged to have sexually assaulted someone at a party. That was reported to Hillsong officials. The alleged offender apparently met with a pastor and was given a Bible. That doesn't sound like a punishment and it certainly doesn't sound like an automatic report to the police, which is what I would imagine if I was in that position. I would hope I would do. I've been looking into Hillsong for months now and I've come to this with an open mind, but I keep hearing these claims again and again and again and they're just stacking up and Hillsong isn't responding to my questions. They're not responding to my calls, so we just can't find out if they condone this, if they care about this or if they want it to change. There's more. There are other accounts in this internal report of alleged sexual assault not being followed up or of one Hillsong member, quote, receiving sexual favours and being reported. The decision was made not to fire him, but to put him on probation. When one woman

came forward and said this man was behaving inappropriately, another Hillsong official said

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to her allegations were quote, crazy and later admitted he just took the man's word for it. I can't imagine what it would be like to be the woman in a situation like that and not to be believed. Like I've had friends who've been told by the police like this isn't worth it and I've also had a friend who went to the police in Australia and they said to her, well you're not a citizen and this could take longer than your citizenship, so we urge you to not take this forward. So she didn't because the police said to her, this is going to be too hard for you because you're going to have to leave the country. So it just, yeah, it just makes me really angry because that doesn't help.

Here's another allegation contained in the report by the lawyers working for Hillsong. A woman reports a Hillsong member she believes is a quote, sexual predator. She's told not to rock the boat and that nothing is going to change. Andreia is still trying to get her head around that early allegation that a man accused of sexual assault can get away with a meeting with his pastor and just be given a Bible. I also think that this person who's done this, it's been acknowledged that it's happened. You know, they haven't said, they haven't taken, since they say she can go to the police, they haven't taken his side and said he has not done this. So there's kind of a knowledge that he has, but he still stays in the church, which means he'll continue to go to these parties and see girls. They know that and they give him a Bible and he had a meeting with a pastor. Like, what did that pastor say to him? Don't rape again. Like, I don't know, but seriously though, and he probably, probably already had a Bible. In another case, a woman who was part of a connect group was allegedly raped. She's followed up one or two times, but nothing after that. A Hillsong leader does say they would support the woman if she went to police, according to the report. So this is happening in America. We don't know where this woman is from. And they're saying that if she goes to the police, they could support her. Going to the police is incredibly hard when you've been sexually assaulted. Like, every odd is against you. I remember chatting to a Catholic priest about 20 years ago. I was working in a local paper. I went out to his parish to interview him about hot cross buns. They were going on sale in January, a long way before Easter when they are traditionally eaten. It's a classic summer story. Not a lot else was happening in the news. It ended up being picked up across the country by TV networks. The priest and I got chatting after while the photographer took his picture. We started to get on to other, more serious topics about the church. Talking about other priests, some of those higher up the chain, at the top of the hierarchy, or close to it. The priest said there's a danger in religion. He described it as the security blanket of certainty. What he meant, I think, is that if you always believe you're right, then it can stop you asking questions. Maybe you stopped doing something you might do otherwise, because those people who share your religion must also be in the right, always. The church should implement a reporting mechanism designed to provide any church member with a safe avenue to make a complaint regarding alleged sexual harassment of any kind. That's what the report tells Hillsong to do. Their report is dated January 11, 2021. That's the day it was sent to George Agagianian, Hillsong's general manager in Sydney. There's pages and pages of recommendations, sensible and, frankly, simple suggestions. They could make a real difference. Because this to me looks really good. Like, this should have been always in place. This should always be in place. But perhaps they thought, you know, sometimes you don't fix things until you know there's a problem. But this is January 2021. What's happened?

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Oh, that's two years ago. It's two years ago. We're in 2023. I forget. That's two years ago, almost to the date, two years and a month. So yeah, so they haven't gotten back to you yet, right? We don't know. I mean, I'll go and try and search myself to see if there is that structure. But could you call someone who's in Hillsong and ask them? Yeah, I can call something. Yeah. I find a mobile for the chief financial officer, Peter Ridley, and he did call me back.

Steven Grylls speaking.

Oh, thanks. Thanks so much for coming back to me. I really appreciate your call.

He's polite. We chat briefly. Peter wants to know how I got his number. I tell him I've been speaking to a lot of people. Peter didn't agree to an interview and he wasn't really up for a long chat. He wasn't aware of my attempts to reach Hillsong. Peter simply asked me to forward on the questions I've been sending through for a few weeks already. I'm still waiting for an answer. There's another part of the lawyer's report that I think is important. It says, quote, protecting the church's reputation requires not only positive change, but the awareness of positive change by the church's members. At present, years of managerial misfeasance and neglect have created an ocean of ill will, concern, hurt feelings and despair, end quote. It seems like the lawyers want Hillsong to be more transparent too. But then they add this. At the same time that PR is important, it's not necessary and not desirable to throw open the doors of the investigation to bear all of the church's dirty laundry. Some matters from the past could cause liability or embarrassment to the church. It makes me think. You could probably put the words Catholic Church

in that last sentence. It would probably fit. Let's go back to where this internal investigation report started and where this episode started. Even if you don't feel like it, even if nobody recognises it, even if you feel like it, the same old you, you are not because God is working in your life. You're getting better. Carl Lentz, Hillsong's high-flying celebrity pastor who ended up getting fired by the church's founder, Brian Houston, for what were described as moral failures.

Carl Lentz is just one person. Everybody fails at something. And the Bible is big on forgiveness.

What's harder to forgive is an institution that allows people to fail again and again and again.

After failing to hear back from Hillsong's head office, I keep calling other Hillsong people.

And that's when I find another leak. This time it's a video call. There's 800 Hillsong leaders on the chat. Brian Houston's wife, Bobby, is there too. And what's contained in that leak video will shake the foundations of Hillsong. There are two incidents involving Pastor Brian that, as they thought, we have had to deal with. 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