

[Transcript] Faith on Trial: Hillsong / The Big Eagle

Hi there. Before we start, just know this podcast contains some confronting material. There's also some bad language, including from me. He restores my soul. What a powerful thought that is. Hillsong founder Brian Houston is a religious rock star. I love the idea of restoration. At his height, when preaching to audiences measured in their thousands, he's arguably one of the most powerful pastors in the world. The true believer is in that congregation called Brian, the Big Eagle. God is working. He works everything, everything, everything, everything. It wasn't always like this. The church Brian Houston founded grew from humble beginnings in a warehouse in cities out of suburb, before spreading to 30 different countries. It had plants, that's what he called them, on six continents. As well as making Brian famous, Hillsong's brand of hands-in-the-air Pentecostal Christianity became a cultural phenomenon. Know the power of brotherhood and sisterhood, which couldn't have bluntly been a part of a church community a church family provides. It has its own rock label. Its songs are sung by millions, preaching a message of peace, love and acceptance. Flying high, when the Big Eagle walked out on stage, people screamed. Today, Brian Houston is sitting alone in a Sydney courtroom. He's facing a charge of allegedly concealing child sex abuse, committed by his own father. He's pled not guilty. The allegations threaten the very foundation of everything Brian has built to date. I've been digging deep into those foundations and what I've found is disturbing. Hillsong founder Brian Houston has quit the mega church following an internal investigation. Hillsong, the church in the headlines for the wrong reason. Brian will face court in December charged with knowingly concealing information about alleged child sex offences. They didn't resign because of my mistakes. Twelve months ago I was charged with a crime that I'm yet to defend and that I will fight. I found claims of lies, betrayals and financial practices that you wouldn't expect from a place of worship. Financial gifts were being given to the leaders of the church. As well as a trail of true believers who say marriages are arranged and broken by church officials. It was a bit stepford wives-y. You could tell that the the men were sort of the young guys were sort of looking for the perfect Christian wife. And that one church leader, who isn't Brian Houston, told women in the church they should physically submit to their husbands. You know he would discuss the way that he, he gets his wife to submit to him and he said even if she doesn't feel like having sex with him he would force her on a Sunday for instance to have sex with him. I've spoken to dozens of people including many who've been forced out or fled Hillsong. Some of them have never spoken to anyone before and they say things that have never been said.

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I was thinking why the hell did we give so much money this place?

What in the fuck were we involved with?

And what this podcast discovers leads to action.

If these allegations are found to be true then I would assume that's a serious crime.

We're sure to explain why just yesterday I've referred the allegations to the New South Wales Police Commissioner.

I'm Stephen Drill and this is Faith On Trial Episode 1 The Big Eagle.

This story starts with me sitting down in an Italian restaurant in George Street,

Sydney, drinking Negronis and talking to a woman who used to be part of Hillsong.

Now I've been a journalist for about 20 years and until now had never ever thought about Hillsong before. But then one day in October 2022 I found myself reporting on the enforced resignation of a CEO of a local footy team in Melbourne which is my hometown.

For anyone who doesn't know Aussie rules it's pretty much a religion in this city and Essendon has one of the biggest football congregations.

I lived near their training ground so to me this scandal was close to home.

Andrew Thorburn is only in the job for 24 hours before he's forced to stand down because of his religion. He was part of the controversial City on a Hill Christian Church.

I found myself asking really? Really? Can any church be that important in this day and age?

So I started talking to people which led me to this restaurant.

It's the kind of place that has those pretentious glasses that don't actually have a square base.

They're so easy to spill they make you look drunk. The woman I'm sitting with is telling me about her life inside another controversial Christian church. This time it's Hillsong. What I didn't do was record our conversation. I didn't realise it was going to be important. Instead across on a groaning soaked table she told me how she turned her back on the church and how she finally came to question if everything she once believed in was a lie. For me answering that question will dominate the next six months. To start with you've got to go back to 1983.

Back when the internet has only just been invented Billy Jean by Michael Jackson is on top of the charts. Bob Hawke famous for sculling a yard of beer at Oxford University is prime minister and the average wage is \$121 a week. Amid all of this out there in Bulkham Hills a leafy and well-heeled suburb of Sydney a gangly 29 year old called Brian Houston decides to start a church.

We went along and this was in the very early days like 1980 I think about 1985 and you know it was that there weren't that many people there we were in the warehouse. This is Melissa Kennedy. She says in the beginning Brian's church was called the Hills Christian Life Center. It was a plant of his dad Frank's church the Sydney Christian Life Center that was in Waterloo right in the middle of Sydney. Mel was an unusual convert. I started going to Hillsong when I was about 14. Her family wasn't evangelical. It was a friend of mine who lived down the street and her older sister said oh you know you should come along if you don't come I'll tell your mum that you're smoking cigarettes. This isn't the most Christian of ways to turn someone into a Christian but it worked and once she joins up Mel is transfixed by Brian Houston's style of worship. It's so different from mainstream churches. Even in those early days it was more like kind of like a concert. Firstly there's the music. I remember Darlene at the front beautiful lady beautiful voice I was mesmerised by Darlene in those early days like I think maybe a lot of people would. Darlene Czech has star quality. She releases her first studio album in 1987. It's called Make the Choice.

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I remember buying her first one of her albums from the church and listening to it all the time and yeah but it yeah it didn't feel like a church at all. The name of Brian's church originally came from its music. The tunes are literally songs written in the hills. That's how people in Sydney shorten the name of the suburb Bulkham. The songs work. People want to listen. Friends bring along their friends. The congregation grows but unlike other churches, unlike old-fashioned Christianity, Hillsong isn't just 45 minutes on a Sunday. It becomes the centre of followers lives.

Some start to lose touch with those outside the church.

Even at that young age you can kind of feel people were wanting to, wanting to draw you in. They were wanting to pull you in. They were wanting to, I don't know what their motivations were but took towards later in through time. I think that that became stronger people wanted to. I don't know, pull you into the flock it felt almost like. Hillsong gets slicker as the 80s go on.

Their marketing improves. They start to run conferences, five-day shows that draw people from all around Australia and eventually the world. Brian's church is part of the wider Pentecostal church group, the Assemblies of God. But Hillsong's the best. It's the most successful. Its conferences are dynamite. Brian is joined on stage by his wife, Bobby. The two of them together are a sensation. So here's Bobby driving a 25-seat Toyota High Ace, the church bus.

Rusty old bucket, it was. But I was happy. The Lord is good. Amen.

Big picture life didn't always look like it does now.

I remember Brian and Bobby, they went to America. I think it was their first trip and like this in the 80s and you can imagine they used to dress very kind of like the 80s, like kind of like Dags. We all did and then they went on this trip to the US and apparently they were going there to learn how to raise funds to build a new church or to build a building that they owned, that we all owned. So they went to the United States to learn how to do this. And I remember like when they came back, Brian was in Armani. He had these fancy suits. He totally changed like and Bobby started to dress up and look really like Americans. Now, Brian is bringing a touch of Hollywood to his stage appearances. It seems like he's doing the Lord's work, but to do it, he needs money. Lots and lots of money. Followers are asked to give and to give again. And then the whole services were about right. Now, we're going to encourage everyone to start. We're going to create a building fund. We're going to all encourage you to everybody to give you money because we're going to build our own church. It was all exciting. Mel says there's something intoxicating about being in Hillsong in the beginning. Even I gave my money to the building fund. Then Australia has a recession in the early 1990s. Unemployment hits 11%. Interest rates are up to 17%. Banks collapse. We continue the way we're going. We're heading for a disaster. Generally, the standard of living will go down to where you'll be eating bread and jam agave or dripping. That's what we're going back to. By now, there's a new prime minister, Paul Keating. People are suffering. Keating tells Australians. The accounts do show that Australia is in a recession. The most important thing about that is that this is a recession that Australia had to have. But in the midst of all this upheaval, Hillsong just kept getting stronger. Its followers are encouraged to hand over a tithe, 10% of their income to the church. You're a better Christian if you gave before tax. Mel says that she was happy to give money to the church. I felt like a really good person. I felt like I was doing the right thing. I was a true seeker. A Hillsong church is planted in London in the early 1990s. I am here to bring the Word of God and I'm very excited. That's Nicola Douglas. She's wearing a cosy grey jumper, preaching on stage at one of those services in London. And I have to say at the moment when you put on the news or you open a

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newspaper, there is a lot of things, words, narratives that would love to get us discouraged in the UK. But I love that we are not just, it says we are actually not citizens of earth, we're citizens of heaven. They also plant in Kyiv, Ukraine, in the early 1990s. That's just a couple of years after the collapse of the Berlin Wall. For seven decades before then, the Soviet Union, which controlled Ukraine, unofficially bans religion. But somehow, Hillsong won people over. By the mid 1990s, Australia is coming out of that recession. These are the boom times. A former solicitor with bushy eyebrows, by the name of John Howard, replaces pork eating. Howard passes on the benefits of the country's newfound wealth. Hillsong is reaching new heights too. Brian Houston is filling churches, preaching that if you believe, God will reward you financially. He writes a book called, and this is the real title, You Need More Money, God's Amazing Plan for Your Financial Life. When I checked Amazon, the gold-covered paperback was selling for \$100. The tagline says, Brian challenges you to look beyond yourself. Live according to the principles of God and see his blessing on your life as you become a money magnet. Mel heard Brian spread that gospel of gold. God wants you to be rich. He wants you to be rich. I mean, why? I'm not really sure, but he, that's the whole message of practically every sermon. Like almost. Like Brian especially was like, you know, God wants you to be rich. He wants you to be wealthy. He wants the kingdom to be wealthy. You know. And he would use those words like rich and wealthy. Be successful. Otherwise, not everyone can be successful. It's like not everyone can win the Melbourne Cup. There's one winner, you know, and everyone else tries. But the more successful the congregation is, the more money they make, the richer they get. You know, that to me, that's why they encouraged it. That's why it really what it was all about. It wasn't really, I mean, it wasn't really about helping people. Like the people who did see it church who were like more like outcasts or didn't fit in in some way. They were kind of pushed to the side. I've spoken to dozens of people for this podcast. Some didn't want to go on record. But one of those conversations is worth sharing, even if it's not on tape. A former member said that Hillsong is like a horoscope in a newspaper. As if what they said was so vague, you could make it fit to any frame you wanted. You adjusted the message to suit your circumstances. Some of the people I spoke to thought Hillsong celebrated and elevated the wealthy in their services, giving them prominent positions in front rows of the church. Yeah, good looking people, the rich people. Yeah, they were the cool ones of the church. That's true. They were making it. They were doing good. They were great. They were, you know, like the pastors that we put on the pedestals, they were all doing really good financially. They were all pretty rich, you know, nice cars, nice homes. And I mean, really, who doesn't want to be rich? The Hillsong congregation just keeps growing. By now, the Balkam Hills Church is huge. It could really be called a stadium. Brian's son Joel is part of that church. His band, Hillsong United, becomes huge. It tops the Christian charts in the United States. And that's a really big market. So initially growing up in a very Pentecostal Christian family, I started out at a little church in the western suburbs of Sydney called Berea Christian College and Christian Church. It was a part of the apostolic movement. This is Luke Hilton. He's one of the many people who gave his life to Hillsong. Luke and I met on a park bench in Clayton Reserve in Melbourne. It's been raining, so it was hard to find a quiet place to ourselves. But we finally found a dry spot. There's a lot of movement in the Pentecostal church right now. A little bit loud. But we didn't get it for long. While we were talking, two women came and sat down right next to us, engaging in a very intense conversation. So we decided to move. Clearly, his women

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wore records. They protected the turf. I mean, if you want, we can hop into my office. I have a very big building. Sure? Yeah, yeah, yeah. Let's do that.

I put the microphone in my bag and we walked towards his office.

We find a quiet room and take a seat.

It's a bit too echoey. Well, let's see what it's like on the lounge there,

because this is a bit of an empty room. Yeah. Yeah, beautiful. Back in the beginning, when Luke started going to church, the numbers at Hillsong were growing minute by minute.

Hundreds, thousands, thousands and thousands. Have you been to the property at Hills? No. Okay.

It's

two huge auditoriums. One fits about two and a half to three thousand. The other one fits about five and a half ish thousand from memory. At one point there, they were holding seven services a day on Sundays. That second building, that smaller building, was their original building on the Hills campus. And that's now used as an overflow building. And more often than not, overflow was open. So they literally have a Sydney Entertainment Center size facility going on there. So you've got seven services on a Sunday and then you've got youth on Friday night and then you've got a whole bunch of things going on Saturday like it's... So I saw Billy Eilish at Northern Park a couple months ago. So you had three nights, four nights. That'd be like 40, probably 40, 50 thousand people.

Oh yeah, Hillsong. Hillsong can do that in a week. Hillsong is also getting political influence.

When Brian officially opens his expanded Bulkham Hills campus in 2002, John Howard was there to mark the moment. My best guess is this was smart politics. Brian's stadium size congregations vote.

That gives something Brian, he hasn't had until that moment. Power. I was a supporter, a donor, and I participated in Hillsong Church for about 10 years personally. I also spoke at Hillsong Church at conferences on media and public relations and political lobbying. So I know Brian very well personally, I knew him back in the day. So I was there in the first format of 10 years or so.

Alex Spencer is a former executive at the body that oversaw Hillsong, the Assemblies of God, which later became Australian Christian churches. And so my contribution there was just basically how do you get the eyes and the ears of political leaders and of the media?

Because I was involved in charities and I had a lot of traction, just because I was doing stuff.

I was actually running programs, welfare programs, crisis houses. I was a doer and I became Young Queenslander of the Year in the 80s. And because I was getting traction within the political policy development and the distribution of finances to the charity sector,

so they saw me as an opportunistic sort of an expert to advise the churches on how to get traction within the political sector. In 2007, Hillsong plants a church in South Africa.

They buy a nightclub and turn it into a place of worship. It's a tactic they'll use globally.

A branch opens in Moscow about the same time. Hey Hillsong, Moscow and St. Petersburg, really want to thank pastors Vatican and you for asking me to speak to your people today.

Sweden a year later.

And then comes the big move, the states. I asked my colleague in New York to try and find some people who've been at Hillsong since it started in Manhattan.

Why do I come to Hillsong because God told me to. Yeah, how long have you been coming here for?

Since the first, I think the second year Hillsong landed in New York.

Tom and the church goer who didn't want to give his name are standing outside a Hillsong service on a busy New York street. So I started growing in 2012. Yeah, okay. Had you gone to different

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church variously or is this kind of just like what? I was raised a Christian one day. This girl invited me to church that took out on the date and she was like, Oh, meet me at church and I met her

at church and at the end of service. We said a prayer and I started crying to give the church a foothold in the US. Brian sent his son Joel, the musician to New York. It's a big bold move. But now Hillsong has social media. The church becomes a global influencer off the back of that New York base. Yeah, I'd say the peak for me was around 2014, 2017 around there. It seemed to be like when it was really pumping at the peak. That's a man I'm calling Peter. He didn't want me to use his name, but he confirmed in writing that we could use his audio. He's chatting to me on the phone at a park in Sydney. It's school holidays. I can hear his kids in the background riding bikes. Peter says he's not really a key figure at Hillsong. He worked behind the scenes. But I think he's been modest. Peter was with the church for more than a decade. He works as a film producer and also taught at Hillsong's college. He's there in Hillsong's peak period. Why those years do you think? I guess they were just expanding into America and it just had a fair bit of momentum at that stage. How did it feel when you were there in those years?

It was exciting. You know, some of the best filmmakers in the world were working there and so I was working around these guys and learning a lot off them. I was working at the business section of the Wall Street Journal based in 6th Avenue in New York in 2013. There I witnessed the power of social media which Hillsong has harnessed. The newsroom was still buzzing about how Facebook had purchased Instagram a year earlier. The tech titan knows the power of the platform. Its filters make people look good. It's new, shiny and wildly popular. Brian Houston probably saw the same potential. Look, these people, they're well known. They're influential. So, you know, when you write a song and it gets sung all around the world, people want to follow you. And I think Hillsong is quite iconic. In the grand scheme of things, they're not actually that big. You know, maybe a few hundred thousand people but it's more the influence. So, you know, they say every week 50 million people sing Hillsong songs. So, you would find nearly every modern contemporary church would be singing the songs that Hillsong would write. Instagram helps Hillsong

cross into countries that are completely unexpected. You can go to the middle of Saudi Arabia and there'll be someone singing Hillsong. It could be anywhere and that's kind of the amazing thing about it. Peter says that Hillsong's slick production is one of the keys to its success.

Every sphere of the world, they're someone singing Hillsong songs because they are one of the best when it comes to worship. The quality of what they do is very, very high.

Hillsong spreads its message wider than just their branded churches.

They create sheet music, the stuffy and piano lessons with quavers and crotchets and they share their songs with the Christian world. Well, there's a big audience and every church is looking to sing songs every week and so you tend to gravitate to the songs that feel, you know, to be the best.

Hillsong inspires Christian cover bands. So, it's almost like pub bands singing famous songs in the local pub. Hillsong moves with the times. The music played at church reflects what's being played on the radio and the followers keep coming. And what happened was a lot of the guys at Hillsong, they'd be listening to bands like Nirvana or Pearl Jam and going, you know, how come our music doesn't sound like that? And so they started writing songs in that kind of genre and interpreting rock music into Christian music. Yeah, and they've even done it now in sort of 2010s where they've got a bit more hip hop and rap music. There's a different Hillsong band, haven't

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they? They've always updated with the trends of the time. Yes and no, it really is generational. By this time, Hillsong is making \$100 million every single year.

Brian Houston is in his 60s about to head into retirement. From that warehouse in Balkam Hills, he's become famous right across the Christian world and the secular world too. He must have been thinking, this is it. I've done it. Maybe it's another 30 years of adulation and then when the time comes, it's the express lane right to the pearly gates. But that doesn't happen. The big eagle crash lands. As for me, I've learned a lot since that first conversation in the restaurant in Sydney and I'm hooked. I keep looking into Hillsong and what I find is shocking. The culture is fundamentally manipulative. People were driven by anxiety. So they were like, oh my gosh, I've got to

keep somebody happy and do everything they say. And if you weren't there, oh well, you know, that's that's going to go against the grades. It was very slave labor-ish. 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