

## [Transcript] Faith on Trial: Hillsong / The Missing 40 Minutes

I have the responsibility of sharing with you some news that I wish I didn't have to share with you.

This is the leaked video of a Hillsong All-Staff meeting.

It was held on the 18th of March 2022, 800 of the church's leaders around the world are on this call.

I want to start by saying again that I love our church and I love Pastor Brian and Bobby.

The speaker is Phil Dooley, one of Hillsong's most senior pastors.

He's got long blonde surfer hair, a goatee beard, black-framed glasses and he looks nervous.

Phil's been involved in the church since the late 90s, alongside its founder, Brian Houston.

We have such an incredible church of amazing, faithful people.

Watching this video, which was first reported by Krikey, it looks like Phil's about to start crying.

There are two incidents involving Pastor Brian that, as a board, we have had to deal with.

At this point, Brian Houston has stepped aside temporarily, apparently for his health, and Phil has taken over the leadership of Hillsong.

The first incident involved Pastor Brian text messaging with a female member of staff, which ended in an inappropriate text message.

The first incident involved Pastor Brian text messaging with a female member of staff, which ended in an inappropriate text message.

That text message was sent a decade ago to a woman who was a member of Hillsong's staff and who was not Brian's wife.

Along the line of, if I was with you, I'd like to give you a kiss and a cuddle or a hug, some words of that nature.

At the time, the woman left her job with Hillsong.

Brian Houston remained in charge of the Miggat Church, the person his followers called, the Big Eagle.

This particular staff member came back because she couldn't get work, came back a few months later and said, I'm really struggling to get a job.

I feel it's unfair that I had to leave my job the way I did and I would like some compensation for that.

When Hillsong decided to give the woman a couple of months' salary, Brian paid it personally.

I was not aware of that as was the majority of the global board until the end of last year.

But that's only the first incident that Phil called this meeting to talk about.

The second incident happened in 2019 and what happened there, there was a complaint

received that Pastor Brian was at Hillsong Conference in 2019 late in the foyer after

one of the conference nights drinking with a group.

Phil's choosing his words carefully.

Brian's wife, Bobby, is on the call too.

You can see her in the video, wearing a baseball cap pulled low over her face and watching.

And there was a woman part of that group who was part of our church, not on staff or anything.

And later that evening, he went to attempt to go to his room, didn't have his room key

and ended up knocking on the door of this woman's room.

And she opened the door and he went into her room.

So this is the official Hillsong version of the story.

There are 218 rooms at the Pullman Hotel where the conference delegates were staying.

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By chance, Brian used to knock on the door of a woman who was with him in the hotel bar earlier that evening.

The reality, the truth is, we don't know exactly what happened next.

Phil has part of an explanation for what happened.

Brian had also been taking anxiety tablets.

Just like Phil has part of an explanation for why Brian sent that text message 10 years before about wanting to give a woman a kiss and a cuddle.

With the text messaging, at that time, Pastor Brian had also been struggling with taking sleeping tablets.

But none of that actually explains what actually happened inside that hotel room.

I'm Stephen Drill and this is Faith on Trial, episode 6, The Missing 40 Minutes.

This is the Pullman Hotel where those Hillsong conference delegates were staying that night in 2019.

So we're sitting here right now.

The bar's pretty fancy.

So when you walk in, it's on the left, then there's, on the right hand side, there's reception and then if you go around the corner, that's where the lifts are.

So you'd actually have to go past security to get to the lifts which would be getting to someone's room.

I'm here with Andrea, our producer, trying to work out how Brian Houston actually did that.

I've never actually gone out drinking and ended up in the wrong hotel room.

Like, it's kind of, I know the doors all look the same, but has that ever happened to you that you've actually ended up in the wrong hotel room?

I can't even like possibly imagine that happening.

And that's obviously what's been said here, right?

And it was an accident, but he was in there for 40 minutes.

Andrea tries to come up with explanations.

Yeah, no, I can't imagine.

The only thing I could think about was like when I was a kid and we were like on camp playing basketball and you'd run around to people's hotel rooms.

Like, that's one thing, but when you're an adult, being in a bar with, especially with a man, like I can't, someone who's kind of a mentor to you or someone you look up to, like me and you, for instance, you know, you wouldn't just, that wouldn't happen.

When Houston wasn't a kid at camp, he was a married man in his 60s and he's the founder of Hillsong Church, arguably the most important influential person in the hotel that evening.

I went over to the reception to ask them, just hypothetically, I said it was a journalist, that what would happen if I came up here and asked you for a room number?

What would you do?

The manager said it wouldn't happen, no matter who was asking.

And he was really strong.

He was like, there's no way we would give out anyone else's hotel room number to anybody else.

We wouldn't say this person's staying there.

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And he said that, even if you did, even if you came up and said, oh, I'm waiting for my wife or my partner and can you tell me which hotel room she's in, he'd be like, well, he'd had screening questions.

He would say, well, how do you know this person is there?

Can you show us some ID?

And in some cases, he said they just will turn people away because people will try and come in and get into the places they shouldn't be.

And he was very, very strict on security.

I asked Andrea what she would do if she was drinking at a hotel bar.

Would she tell someone her room number?

All I can say is considering the fact that she's complained about this, I don't think she was kind of aiming at that to happen in the end of that night.

So I would kind of do the opposite.

I'd probably give a fake room number or I would, yeah, no, there's no way where I would give away my room number to an older guy at a hotel when we're sitting at a bar talking if I get any kind of weird vibe or just in general.

You just don't do that.

Women are careful.

And women are taught not to do that.

Like, we are very careful all the time, just in general.

All of which does make you think, yeah, okay, maybe Brian Houston did end up knocking on a hotel door by chance after all.

But that doesn't explain what he did when he was in there.

Let's go back to that other incident discussed in the Hillsong video call.

The first incident involved Arthur Brian text messaging with a female member of staff along the line of if I was with you, I'd like to give you a kiss and a cuddle.

It's taken a full decade for the details of that message to come out publicly.

And it's really only happened by chance.

Really, we're probably only hearing about it because of the pandemic.

Lockdown changed the way we talk to each other.

People made video calls and they started to record them, but it's a bit like the official explanation of what happened in that hotel room.

I'm not sure kiss and cuddle is a full description of that text Brian sent in 2013.

Andrea is also pretty skeptical.

From what we've heard so far, I definitely think that many people saw him as a kind of God who couldn't do anything wrong.

And even if people knew that he had done something wrong, they wouldn't admit to that, you know, because he was such an important figure for them as well.

Like he, although we've spoken to many people who have left Hillsong and didn't have the best experiences of Hillsong, there's still hundreds of thousands of people who love Hillsong and who think that Hillsong has helped them.

For months after his resignation and that video call, Brian Houston stayed silent.

When he did speak, it was in another video put online one morning in November 2022.

The same day Brian was due in court to face separate allegations of concealing child abuse

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committed by his own father.

I made the hardest decision of my life and that was to offer my resignation to the Hillsong Church Board after pioneering the church in 1983.

This video is different to Hillsong's normal films, which you can see on YouTube.

There's no slick production, no music, no audience reaction, no applause, just Brian sitting alone with a five o'clock shadow in what kind of looks like a makeshift studio.

I guess a big part of me hoped that the board knowing the pressure I was under would reject my offer and continue to fight for me, but that was not to be.

Brian rejects claims that he abandoned his flock.

We adore the people of Hillsong Church and to be honest, we miss you all terribly.

I've often said the real gold at Hillsong Church is not the music, the lights and all those external things, the true gold is the people.

Brian says it wasn't those 40 minutes in the hotel room and it wasn't the text message about kissing and cuddling that led him to walk away from the church he founded.

The media and others incorrectly say I resigned because I breached the Hillsong Code of Conduct, but that's just not true.

I didn't resign because of my mistakes.

I resigned because of the announcements and statements that have been made, which Bobby and I felt made my position untenable.

He's saying he didn't resign because of his actions, but because of what people said about his actions.

Sadly, in the statements and announcements made, there was enough detail to pour ultimate shame and humiliation on me, but enough ambiguity to leave people to make their own conclusions about what did or didn't happen.

Frankly, in many cases, those conclusions are wrong.

In fairness, it's difficult for people to draw their own conclusions because Hillsong has never publicly exactly said what happened in that hotel room.

And just to note here, while the woman went to Hillsong, there was no criminal complaint.

The only real account we've got is from Brian's replacement as the head of Hillsong, Pastor Phil Dooley, in that leaked video call.

I asked Andrea to read out what Phil said.

This woman has not said there was any sexual activity.

Brian has said there was no sexual activity, but he was in the room for 40 minutes.

He said that he doesn't have much of a recollection because of the mixture of anxiety tablets and the alcohol, and Phil said that the woman had also been drinking, so her recollection is not completely coherent either.

Interestingly, Brian also challenges the narrative that what happened in that hotel room was because of alcohol.

In my heart, the apology to the people of Hillsong Church and to the church at large, I spoke about alcohol as having not proven itself to be my friend.

But sadly, that has built a narrative out there that I'm an alcoholic, and a story is about my alcoholism that are the result of gossip and whispering and innuendo.

The narrative that I'm an alcoholic is false.

In fact, I've been told by an expert therapist that I do not display the behaviours that

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are typical of an alcoholic.

What we do know is that the woman in the hotel room had been a major financial donor to Hillsong, and after that night in 2019, she asked for her money back, and Brian Houston himself offered to pay for it.

In the notorious night in 2019, where I mixed a double dose of anti-anxiety tablets with alcohol was a one-off occasion.

But then, watching this video of Brian, something interesting happens.

So I don't have an ongoing problem with anti-anxiety tablets or any other prescription medication, and I respectfully ask you to please not label me that way or blindly accept that narrative.

Just like Brian Houston is getting angry about his treatment by the church, he found it.

He talks about his wife, Bobby.

To then find herself ostracised just three short weeks later, and the lack of support that she's received since then has been devastating for her.

He talks about his three adult children.

They've all also been profoundly impacted by the events of 2022.

There's so much false narrative, gossip, speculation, and all sorts of rumours out there.

Not just about me, actually, but even to a point, judgmental attitudes toward our family.

According to Pastor Phil, Brian agreed to step back from preaching for 12 months while he fought his court case.

By Brian's account, he lasted nine months.

By the end of August, I started speaking in various cities every week in the USA, which has been a rich tonic for my soul.

Here's the thing, not everyone gets to enjoy that rich tonic.

It feels like Brian got to control how and when he talks about these things in public.

You can hear it in that leaked video from Hillsong.

There's a bit of tension in Pastor Phil's voice when he's talking about Brian agreeing not to talk about it for 12 months.

Then Brian posts a video online, giving his side of the story, asking people not to judge him.

And look, I get that, that's fine.

But this is 10 years after he first sent that text message.

In all that time, no one knew the details.

We still don't know exactly what he said then, or what did happen in that hotel room.

Unlike Brian Houston, not everyone in Hillsong gets to control what people know about them.

Thanks to this, yeah, so I just jumped into a different room, so you're just to double check, just so confirm, you're okay if we record this audio, just not video, just audio, and do you want me to use your name or not use your name, what's your, what do you feel comfortable with?

I'd rather not use my name.

Can I call you Zoe?

Is that all right?

Yeah, Zoe's cool.

Last time I spoke to Zoe, she didn't want to be recorded.

That was before the first episode of this podcast dropped.

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Now it's out there, I called her again.

This time, she wants to do an interview.

I was, I was at Hillsong College from about middle of 2009 to about 2014.

I did the three years of college and then I stayed to serve an extra little bit as well, so I'd say my biggest struggle was in that first year, sort of getting used to being in a different country, and because obviously in America, we don't, we didn't know what Hillsong as a church, we just knew Hillsong as a band really, but you know, I had gone along to one of their, one of their like worship nights or whatever, and they do a lot of marketing, and essentially they had advertised the college, and I thought about it, you know, I felt like maybe I could do that, maybe I could come to Australia, it's always been on my bucket list of things to do, so maybe I could, this would be a way to get there, and maybe I could, you know, maybe God's calling me to something.

So Zoe's moved her whole life here, she's on her own in Sydney, no family, she's worshipping at Hillsong, studying at Hillsong, and Hillsong is a landlord too, they have a system where they bring students in and cram them into homes or apartments, students share rooms, there's bunk beds, but they're charged about the same rate as if they were renting a whole room in a share house by themselves, you'd think that'd be a bit cheaper, but Hillsong doesn't give discounts, students say.

After I paid for basically a couple months worth of rent and got myself some groceries, I had like two pennies to rep together for the next three months until I found a job, but then it was really hard to find a job because I had to be in class all the time and there was this very strong expectation about how much you had to serve on the weekends, so I couldn't do like a hospitality job because obviously Saturday Sundays are like the most busy times for hospitality and that's also peak church time.

Zoe's story is so familiar, it almost feels like I could finish the end of her sentence when it comes to Hillsong's rental deals, I've spoken to dozens of people, made hundreds of calls, and this situation where Hillsong controls everything about your life keeps coming up, you're an international student, you land in Sydney and Hillsong is your college, your church and your landlord, the only people you know are in Hillsong, it's almost like they planned it this way, I can't help thinking back to when I moved to college, my dad had died literally the week before, but I had it easy compared to Zoe and the other Hillsong college students that I've interviewed, I had a fortnightly government payment, a car and my family were only 90 minutes up the road, Zoe's on the other side of the world, she's got no money, her only friends are those from Hillsong and she says they're overcharging her on rent, it just makes me a bit angry hearing stories like Zoe's so many times, she wasn't able to get a job because Hillsong pressured her into volunteering on weekends, she had no way out.

A safe space, that's what Zoe thought she was in at Hillsong, with a professional counsellor, well unless that's what she believed.

Well I just assumed it was a counselling session, then I found out later no she's not a counsellor, when I spoke to her I had opened up to her about a lot of things I had gone through in my childhood, I had a bit of assault trauma and all of this other stuff and I said to her you know I was basically being abused from the age of 7-12 and she says to me well you're ex age now and so that means that you've not been abused for about almost 20 years

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and why are you still living under that?

This is just wrong, plain and simple.

You're safe now, why are you still so hung up on it, essentially was the message, she might have used different words, she did use a whole lot of Bible verses because I remember at one point she said I need you to open the Bible every single day and go to this verse and it says I've pulled you out of the muck in the mire and she says what you're doing by carrying this with you is continuing to wallow in the muck in the mire.

A Bible verse, hearing this makes me realise how little the Bible can do, there's nothing the pastor says to Zoe about the Bible that sounds to me like it will help her.

At the time I was terrified and so it was just really damaging advice to basically say put it back on me, the victim, to say well it's your responsibility to heal yourself.

When I'm hearing this I'm thinking this is a big deal, is Zoe okay?

And is she sure she's okay that I share her story?

It's her life, it's her trauma, she needs to have control over how it's discussed.

And then years later I found out that basically none of these conversations that we were having with pastors were actually confidential, that a lot of the things that we would tell pastors made it into a student file.

Those student files, I've heard so much about them.

Anything that a student has done wrong or is controversial is written down in them.

As many as 50 people on Hillsong staff can access the files, students claim.

It could be much more.

It's one of those situations where you just feel like wow what did I say to this person that made it in there and it really makes you second guess every interruption that you had with people because you then realised oh this person was using me differently, could it be because they saw something about my file.

There is nothing that no one above

Oh come be with us, Holy One.

There's one conversation that makes Zoe convinced her personal details, her story, was shared without her having any control.

My tutorial leader says you know it's possible that God brought you to a safe place to heal.

And I'm like okay well that came out of nowhere, I was like what?

That implies that she's got some knowledge of the conversation.

Exactly.

I think at the time I was discussing an assessment with her or something that it had no relevance to what she had said so it definitely makes you think wow did these people just share everything.

So we asked for a student file to see if there was a written record of her really personal details being kept without her permission.

She never received an answer to her request.

Then one day Zoe heard something that I still can't believe.

She had a friend who was told that because of her past she too was a victim of sexual abuse.

He also said it would be inappropriate for her to work with children.

You need a little bit more support than just being told yeah you're a danger to children,

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you can't work with children.

I really want to swear right now that's just fucked, that's just fucked, really.

Well, it is, I agree, it is fucked.

They definitely prey on you in the sense of using the prompting of the Holy Spirit to get you to confess to these deep dark sins and then all of a sudden it's like well by the way now that you've said this to us here are the consequences of that.

I have a friend who had a similar story to mine when it came to her past childhood and she was told well you can't work with children.

I'm in a bit of shock.

Someone who's abused has gone to Hillsong told them about that when they've been prompted by the Holy Spirit to be honest that's what's said in these courses and they're not allowed to work with children.

They're the victim and they're not allowed to work with children.

How is that okay?

I definitely don't think it is.

It's more than just not being okay.

It's hypocrisy.

Like Hillsong has one system for those in charge where their text messages don't get talked about for a decade then they get invited back on stage into the open embrace of believers all around the globe but for other people there's a different system.

They're the little people like Zoe who don't have a lot of influence because they were lying on Hillsong.

It's their church, their school, their landlord, their far more private secrets get shared around without their knowledge.

Yeah that makes me angry for Zoe.

I know I'm going on a rant here but hypocrisy makes it hard to keep faith with those in power and make no mistake Hillsong is powerful.

I made a commitment to my faith in an early age and have been greatly assisted in both the pastoral work of many dedicated church leaders in particular the Reverend Ray Green and pastors Brian Houston and Lee Coleman.

It's Scott Morrison, Australia's previous prime minister.

It's from his maiden speech to parliament in 2008, saying how much he'd been helped by pastor Brian Houston.

The relationship didn't always only go one way though.

It's reported in the Wall Street Journal that an invitation was sought to the White House for Hillsong pastor Brian Houston, a friend of yours and that was knocked back.

Can you tell us what happened?

No I don't comment on gossip honestly.

So it's not true.

It's all gossip.

This is a decade later in 2019 when Morrison has taken the top job and he's in charge of the country.

So in Australia this is big news.

Let me clear something up with you because I promised my listeners I would.



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It relates to your trip to Washington last year and whether or not you asked the Trump administration to invite the Hillsong founder Brian Houston to the White House state dinner. This is 2020, a year after the prime minister dismissed it as gossip.

He's being interviewed here by Ben Fordham, one of the biggest radio stars in Sydney.

And full credit, Ben isn't backing down on this one.

You didn't really give a straight answer when asked about it.

You dismissed it as gossip.

So I wanted to clear it up once and for all and keep the promise that I made to my listeners.

Did you seek an invitation to the White House state dinner for Brian Houston?

Well I've known Brian for a long time and the Hillsong church has a very big network of churches all across the United States and the ministry when it comes to their music and so many other things have been very big.

It's probably the single largest church organisation that is known in the United States.

And so Brian Houston actually turned up to the White House a few months later at the invitation directly of the White House.

On that occasion we put forward a number of names, that included Brian, but not everybody whose names were put forward were invited.

So well, thanks Mr Morrison, it turns out it wasn't all gossip.

Well, here I am at the White House, never say never.

This is Brian Houston smiling wearing a navy suit, crisp white shirt and maroon tie on the lawns of the White House.

It's taken from his own Instagram account.

It's a great honour of course to have had the chance to go into the cabinet room, even into the Oval Office and pray for the President of the United States of America.

Let's just repeat that, Brian Houston went into the Oval Office to pray for the President of the United States, and not just any President.

To me it's not about the politics, it's about the position and a significant man like the President of the United States can give him all the prayer we could possibly give him.

This is Donald Trump he's talking about.

Maybe this is why I did get worked up about hypocrisy and power.

Because in Hillsong, those at the top get invited to pray for presidents.

They get to decide what they say, and when they say it, about things that are private to them.

While people like Zoe don't even feel able to let me use her real name.

That's what power means to me.

Not having a voice, not being confident to speak out, and it's exactly that where young women like Zoe didn't feel confident to speak out about what they were taught at Hillsong College that we'll get into in the next episode.

How have you had sex, how have you drunk, how have you masturbated?

The only word I can come up with that it made me feel icky.

It made me feel like I was a middle schooler being monitored by grown-ups to make sure we weren't going to run off in the bushes and have sex.

It was very toxic in terms of I think that it was something that the rape culture was being reinforced from both the male and the female side of things.

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What we find has already been referred to the police.

It's self-evident that the allegations on the table are apparent, which helps to explain why just yesterday I've referred the allegations to the New South Wales Police Commissioner.

That's next time on Faith on Trial.

Faith on Trial is a true crime Australia production.

Bye you.