

2015 Hillsong Church to release Let Hope Rise in

BY: VICTORIA CRAW

FROM: NEWS.COM.AU

MAY 01, 2015 6:31PM



An image from Hillsong's annual report shows the huge crowds it attracts. *Source: Supplied*

STADIUMS packed with screaming fans, tattooed rockers with skinny jeans and twinkling phones capturing the scene.

It might look like a pop concert but this is a day in the life of Hillsong United, an **11-piece band that is the world's biggest Christian rock group, listened to by 50 million people around the world.**

It's led by Joel Houston, the son of Hillsong mega-church leaders Brian and Bobbie Houston, and is the subject of a documentary to be released next month. [Let Hope Rise](#) is directed by Michael John Warren, the man behind Jay Z's "Fade to Black", and covers the band behind the scenes as they produce their next album.

But while the production is as slick as any Beyonce video with official [Instagram accounts to match](#), the members aren't paid or partying in their downtime. They're full-time employees or volunteers at Hillsong, with proceeds from their albums going towards educating children in India's slums, community development in India or helping victims of human trafficking.

Sound too perfect a scenario? It is, says Tanya Levin, the author of *People in Glass Houses: An Insider's Story of Life in and Out of Hillsong*, which purports to detail her experience of the church she joined at 14 when it was a group of 300 people in Sydney's western suburbs called the Hills Christian Life Centre.

Since then she's watched the Pentecostal church grow into a global mega-brand that **operates in 14 countries from Europe to South America** and counts megastars like [Justin Bieber](#), Selena Gomez and Kendal Jenner among attendees.

She's recently released an updated chapter to her book looking at the progress of leader Brian Houston and describes the church as a place filled with "terror and guilt" that has an unhealthy focus on building an empire.

"The goal has been relatively explicit ... he wants to fill cities and have incredible influence. They're the same as any religious group ... they just have nice teeth," she said of Brian, the son of paedophile Frank Houston who founded the Christian Life Centre which merged with Brian's Hills Christian Life Centre and was renamed Hillsong in 2001.



Tanya Levin joined the church at 14 but left after becoming disillusioned with it. Source: Supplied

Ms Levin left the organisation at 19 but said Hillsong is a "very easy religion to be a part of".

"They don't ask anything of you personally. They don't talk sin, forgiveness, they literally say we don't ask people to change."

"It's incredibly exciting and incredibly rewarding. There's a very big community element to spirituality, possibly greater than an individual experience. You're being told that you're part of changing the world, you're part of making the world a better place. There's always that feeling that something exciting is about to happen, be it Jesus coming back or a new speaker on stage."

However she said once people start questioning the leadership they are quickly shut-out in a technique she said can drive families apart.

"It's not necessarily fear of hell, it's a much more subtle fear which is the fear of not being part of the movement, being seen as someone who as enemy of good."

“As soon as you leave you're instantly forgotten and you have no contact and you're viewed as a bad person. Even a person who has been a really committed attendee. People sort of disappear and a shadow is cast over their disappearance. The assumption is they've done something wrong, lost their face.”



Josh
@Josh3Estrada7

[Follow](#)

Justin Bieber and Kendall Jenner at hillsong tonight

3:25 PM - 10 Nov 2014

333 156

Hillsong's lead pastor Brian Houston disagreed, telling *news.com.au* Ms Levin's book has "no credibility in terms of accurate commentary on Hillsong Church."

"Tanya is a self-appointed expert on Hillsong Church who actually knows nothing about the inner workings of Hillsong and has not attended regularly for around 20 years. She clearly wants to profit from the success of Hillsong."

He described the church as an "amazing modern day Australian story" which bucks the trend towards declining church attendance around the world.

"At a time when church attendance is falling, a relevant church that teaches the bible in practical ways and that people can relate to and apply to their everyday lives, shows there is still a spiritual hunger in people. We are unapologetic about wanting to reach as many people as possible with the good news of the Gospel, and ultimately, healthy things grow."

Grow indeed. Hillsong's [annual report for 2013](#) shows how its transformed under the Houston's leadership from a simple suburban church to a mega-centre for worship that provides counselling programs, food and care for refugees across Australia.

They've hosted events with the Cancer Council and McGrath Foundation, while donating hundreds of thousands of dollars to those affected by Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines and building "state of the art" facilities in Sydney, Melbourne and Newcastle.

Hillsong United lead singer Taya Smith

tayasmith • 1 month ago

Follow

12.3k likes

159 comments

Its survived the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sex Abuse where Brian Houston testified and later [admitted it was wrong](#) not to report his paedophile father Frank, to police. The church was also forced to distance itself from now-defunct [Mercy Ministries](#) — a group Hillsong supported which promised medical advice to young women and ended up giving them Christian counselling and forcing them to sign over Centrelink benefits.

For now, Hillsong's growth appears to be focused on a huge creative offering that includes digital teams to support eight million online visitors annually and songs that regularly top music charts in Australia on iTunes and the Christian Radio charts. They've even engaged a Hollywood agent to boost viewing numbers for their television offerings which are currently seen by around [10 million people](#) annually.

Grace Hill Media producer Jonathon Bock was quick to point out the *Let Hope Rise* film was his idea and the church did not fund the project.

“I approached Hillsong about my desire to make a concert documentary that told their story. It was entirely my idea — not theirs. All financing for the film came from investors in America, and Hillsong did not invest a penny in the making or marketing of the film. No one that you see on screen from Hillsong Church was paid for their participation in the film. Lastly, final cut of the film’s content resides solely with the studio and myself,” he said.

Mr Houston said the band members agreed because they saw the subject as worthwhile and said any profits would go towards the church’s non-profit work.

“The movie would have to sell a lot of tickets before there are any profits, and it is unlikely that Hillsong will receive any revenue from the movie. This was not our motivation when we agreed to participate. Any profits would go to the distributors, investors, and producers. If ultimately any profits do come to Hillsong they would go toward the non-profit work of the ministry,” he said.



Musician Joel Houston is the son of lead pastors Brian and Bobbie Houston. Source: News Limited

Exactly how much Hillsong makes has seen the church come under fire many times over the tax-free status it enjoys while raking in nearly \$86 million in revenue in [the year to December 2013](#). One of the main sources of this is tithes and offerings from churchgoers — which grew 21 per cent in that year alone — with the congregation urged to donate via [direct debit](#), [text message](#) or [app](#).

With the church now looking to expand across the US, South Australian Senator Nick Xenophon has renewed calls for greater transparency when it comes to its accounts.

“I think they need to demonstrate [and] be clear about the work they do and obviously a spiritual benefit is something that is taken into account but if they're upfront about their arrangement about what certain members are being paid and the benefits they receive, it would go a long way to silence their critics,” he said.

“Members of the church should have a basic right to ask how the money is spent and who is getting what. This is not about religious belief ... I just think there has been a distinct lack of transparency and that worries me.”

“After all, every Australian taxpayer is in effect subsidising them. With the privilege of being tax free, I believe that comes with a certain responsibility.”

Let Hope Rise will be released across the US in 2015

victoria.craw@news.com.au
