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Hillsong Megachurch Network: Christianity in Global Cities

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Initiated by the Pentecostal Hillsong megachurch in Sydney, Australia, a rapidly growing global network of new churches has emerged in urban centers in Europe such as London, Paris, Copenhagen, and Amsterdam, and also in South Africa's Cape Town and recently in New York City and Los Angeles in the United States.¹ This transnational network of churches, characterized by entrepreneurial charismatic leadership, displays a vibrant form of neo-Pentecostal Christianity that is accessible and appealing in its use of music and multimedia.²

From a missiological perspective, the Hillsong megachurch and its network raise a number of questions. How are we to understand and evaluate the current expansion of global Pentecostal networks founded by megachurches that plant new churches in different parts of the world? Furthermore, since this global movement is largely an urban phenomenon, how does a megachurch network such as Hillsong relate to multiple local city contexts? How is the success of Hillsong Church to be understood in light of the missiologically acknowledged importance of contextualization?

In this case study I raise the question of contextualization of global megachurch networks, based on my research in 2013–14 in Hillsong churches in Amsterdam and New York City.³ I will argue that although Hillsong can easily be looked upon as a consumerist and commodified form of Christianity, in practice Hillsong is able to minister to a particular "tribe" encountered in global cities today. While missiological and theological reflection is not explicitly encountered within the Hillsong churches, global megachurch networks acknowledge the dynamism of global cities and the rise of a new cosmopolitan class around the world. As a consequence, the rise of transnational megachurches poses an important challenge for further missiological reflection as they introduce new issues into the discussion of contextual theology. Global churches such as the Hillsong network underscore the need for concepts of culture and context to be understood in light of the dynamic ways the world is becoming a global network.

Contextualization and Global Networks

In mission studies and contextual theology, contextualization is a key concept for discussing the communication of the Gospel. Contextualization serves as a corrective to former mission methods that contained elements of cultural imperialism and exported a Western religious culture along with the Gospel. Not only is contextualization an integral part of cross-cultural ministry, but its importance for carrying out new church planting ministries in secular contexts such as Europe and the United States is also increasingly recognized.⁴ The cultures and worldviews of those who have not heard the Gospel are no longer taken for granted; rather they now are the

subject of considerable research using sociological concepts, anthropological insights, and similar research methods. Because of growing awareness of the need for contextualization, church planters in large cities today move into neighborhoods and invest in relationships and friendships. They seek to experience life together with, and live out the Gospel among, those with whom they desire to share the Gospel.

Contextualization, however, can take different forms and convey different meanings. As Stephen Bevans has argued, contextualization involves interplay among Scripture, experience, tradition, and context. The ways these four elements are valued and taken into account in contextualizing the Gospel varies among theological traditions. The prophetic call from liberation theologians in giving voice to the oppressed and marginalized is quite different from the understanding of contextualization displayed by evangelical theologians. The latter often approach contextualization via a communication model, as translating the Gospel authentically and relevantly for another culture.⁵

Within neo-Pentecostalism, the fastest growing Christian movement in the world, discussions on contextualization are rare. The rapid growth and spread of the movement in many parts of the world seem to confirm that God is at work and leave little time for theological reflection. After all, neo-Pentecostals may think (if not say), harvesttime is probably not the best season to do so. Moreover, the evangelistic zeal of Pentecostals leads to innovative practices in the use of popular culture and new media, most visible in the integration of popular music and technology into church services, evangelistic campaigns, and conferences, and in Pentecostals' being among the first to use online media for the sake of the Gospel. According to their own understanding, the message of the Gospel is the same, while the form of presenting it is adapted to the local context and unreached groups.

Interestingly, Pentecostals (and evangelicals) often regard media technology in a positive light, providing access to mass audiences for their message. The use of media enables them to extend their influence and their mission of spreading the Gospel and planting churches. The current media revolution seems to accelerate this trend as religious life is expressed through a multiplicity of media practices and networks.

The emergence of successful media-saturated, multiethnic churches, found in European capital cities such as Amsterdam, as well as in the United States, but having their center in the Hillsong megachurch in Sydney, signals a trend: global cities are breeding grounds for new modes of global Christianity. The expansion of the Hillsong network from Australia into Europe, the United States, South Africa, and now Latin America brings cities together into one theological framework having its center in Australia. The Hillsong case illustrates the ability of neo-Pentecostal churches to produce, as well as be embedded in, transnational media circuits that shape religious imaginations, messages, and modes of worship in various localities around the globe. It is noteworthy that these church networks assume a shared global context rather than acknowledging the local contexts of the cities involved.

Hillsong's Megachurch Network

Hillsong's megachurch network began as a local church in Sydney, founded in 1983 by Brian and Bobbie Houston. In the 1990s Hillsong Sydney became known worldwide among evangelical and Pentecostal churches for its music ministry. With its music albums Hillsong Sydney is one of the leading producers of contemporary Christian music today. The church has grown into a megachurch of more than 20,000 in weekly attendance and has expanded in a

number of satellite churches in Australia. At the turn of the century, the first Hillsong church outside Australia was planted in London, which became the home base for further expansion in a number of capital cities in Europe. Hillsong also planted churches in South Africa (2008) and recently in the United States, in New York City (2010) and Los Angeles (2013). Although Hillsong's beliefs and practices are rooted in Pentecostalism, the church downplays its Pentecostal identity, not presenting itself as Pentecostal but rather identifying itself as a contemporary and relevant evangelical church.⁶

Hillsong is unique in creating a globally shared church experience without much regard for local contexts, which suggests even a neglect of the local context and a form of decontextualization. The movement's member churches display a remarkable similarity in worship space, liturgy, sound, leadership style, and organizational structure.

Characteristic of Hillsong churches in global cities around the world is their selection of key locations for their meeting sites. For example, Hillsong New York City rents a theater near Broadway, and the London church is located at the heart of London's theater district. Hillsong Amsterdam gathers at Escape, the city's most famous club, which is nationally renowned for being the best place to party on a Saturday night. Location clearly matters for Hillsong; the physical space of the buildings advertises that church is entertaining, exciting, accessible, and fun. The locations chosen signal Hillsong's response to the urban context, with awareness of the ways that urban dwellers meet together.⁷

The liturgy followed in Hillsong church services is standardized according to the script developed at Hillsong Sydney. A typical Hillsong church service begins with four songs, followed by a word of welcome, another song, a minisermion for the offering, announcements for upcoming Hillsong events, another song, sermon, altar call, and song of closure. Use in Hillsong network churches of the same inspirational videos, identical lighting schemes and smoke effects, and even replication of bodily gestures and language expressions on stage leaves little room for experiment or improvisation on the part of the various Hillsong churches.

The way Hillsong standardizes its music is a key factor in meeting the challenge of communicating to a transnational audience.⁸ By restricting the music repertoire in church services to Hillsong worship songs, the church is able to create a "global sound," a sound defined by the annual release of studio-recorded Hillsong albums with new worship songs. Each local Hillsong church reproduces this global sound by mixing the sounds of live local worship bands with studio-recorded tracks of vocals, instruments, and other sounds supplied by Hillsong Sydney. The production of the "Hillsong sound" is perhaps the most striking example of how media technology can be functionally applied and strategically used within a global church network. The Hillsong sound plays a critical role in the construction of community and religious identity, confirming that suitable aesthetic forms are powerful modes of bonding and means for creating commitments.⁹

The performance style of Hillsong pastors is another striking similarity found across the Hillsong churches. The pastors, who foster a young and hip style of dress and body image, embody a combination of stand-up comedian, motivational speaker, and revival preacher. Although senior pastor Brian Houston occasionally wears a suit, generally the young Hillsong pastors are dressed according to the latest hipster style, with a preference for skinny ripped jeans, black leather jackets, and most likely tattoos. In 2014 CNN referred to Carl Lenz, pastor of Hillsong New York City, as New York's Hipster pastor.¹⁰ He is known for being a friend of Justin Bieber and for being the informal pastor of New York's professional basketball team, the Knicks. And like other celebrities, Hillsong pastors use social media to present and promote

themselves in different roles, juggling between pastor, husband, father, and “cool” friend among their peers.

With their informal and entertaining presentation, Hillsong pastors bring a positive and encouraging Gospel message. The topical sermons address the struggles of everyday life in light of God’s promises for blessing, miracles, and a fulfilling life. The messages are accessible, exhibiting a *lingua Christiana* which assumes that attenders are acquainted with the Christian tradition. The recurring practice of the altar call underscores Hillsong’s revivalist roots.

Organisationally, the formal power center of the Hillsong network is located in the Sydney megachurch. Brian and Bobby Houston together with the board of elders in Sydney supervise Hillsong churches around the world. These churches are to be seen as extensions of the mother church as it is expressed in the vision statement of Hillsong “One house with many rooms”.¹¹ The central role of Sydney and the Houston’s is enhanced by the fact that most Hillsong pastors have been trained at Hillsong’s bible college and that the Houston’s children are appointed at key positions in the church: Benjamin Houston is pastor of Hillsong Los Angeles and Joel Houston is co-pastor in New York City next to his leading role of the Sydney based band Hillsong United.

In terms of contextualization, the Hillsong megachurch network can be looked upon as a church that consciously accommodates the Gospel to the shapes of popular culture by integrating elements of entertainment, popular music, and celebrity culture. But to understand the dynamic growth of global megachurch networks, a closer look at global cities and their inhabitants is needed.

Reaching the Emerging Urban Creative Class

Based on my ethnographic research in the Hillsong churches in Amsterdam and New York City, it is clear that Hillsong churches are reaching a specific cultural tribe inhabiting global cities today. Visitors to both Hillsong churches are in their twenties and early thirties. The diversity of visitors is striking, with all ethnicities and cultural backgrounds represented. Hillsong’s core group of volunteers and active participants reflect the so-called creative class, a social stratum centering on professions dealing with creative tasks that has only recently gained recognition by sociologists. According to Richard Florida, members of the creative class are geographically mobile and tend to concentrate in global cities that are diverse and offer a wide range of lifestyle options.¹² They are found, for example, in the media industry, where they may be app developers, web designers, or photographers. These well-educated millennials are confronted with a labor market in which holding a college degree no longer guarantees one will find a job.¹³ In order to see their dreams and ambitions fulfilled, aspiring middle-class members of this generation find it necessary to manage their own careers and often have no choice but to be self-employed. As “individuals increasingly become entrepreneurs regarding their own public selves,” the flexibility and uncertainty of what is often called the “new economy” encourage millennials to “brand” themselves and engage in self-promotion.¹⁴

Most Hillsong attendees have a Christian background and have moved to the city to study or to find a job. They have already heard about Hillsong through the music repertoire of their former evangelical churches. Being new in the city, they find that Hillsong offers a warm welcome and easy access to a large network of new friends. The contemporary style of worship and the practical sermons are much appreciated. Interestingly, both in Amsterdam and in New York City, I regularly met students and young adults whose parents were immigrants. A

recurring theme in their stories is one of outgrowing their background, including the ethnic church of their parents, and becoming uncomfortable with the cultural rules and practices of their mother church. Hillsong offered them a place where they felt at home and were able to experience a deep sense of belonging, which they frequently expressed in words like, “At Hillsong I can be myself.”

In this context of geographic, educational, social, and professional mobility, social networks are the key mechanism for mobilizing resources. These networks give millennials access for finding a place to live, locating jobs, meeting new people, and encountering new ideas. Hillsong definitely caters to the needs of this creative class. As an “urban tribe,”¹⁵ creative-class millennials move in close-knit groups of friends who replace the role of family. They are often to be found at so-called third places or third spaces, areas that are neither home nor work but venues in urban neighborhoods where people hang out, meet new friends, and find an experience of community.¹⁶ While coffee shops, bookstores, and cafés often serve as third places, Hillsong meets similar needs for those who are new to the city. It is a welcoming place that they can call home, and it provides an extensive network in an unstable labor market with uncertain employment. Furthermore, Hillsong creates many opportunities for volunteers to develop various skills, for instance, creative skills by joining the photography team, technical skills as members of the production teams, media skills in the media teams, and so on. While acknowledging that a critical mass of volunteers is necessary to operate the church, the rewards for being a volunteer go beyond the advantage of learning new skills. Volunteers themselves stress the importance of belonging, the value of being with friends, and the privilege of being part of a church “where God is present and at work.”

Hillsong’s positive and uplifting weekly messages display a Pentecostal discourse of personal empowerment, stressing that God has big plans for your life and that your past does have to not define your future. The recurrent altar call underscores that new beginnings are always possible. This stress on the new and on a break with the past reveals Hillsong’s revivalist Pentecostal roots. From a historical perspective, one could argue that Hillsong has brought the old-time revival tent meeting into the twenty-first century. It is questionable, however, whether those responding to the altar call are new converts. During the course of my interviews and informal talks with fifty Hillsong attendees, I met only a few people who had no former church background and were first-time believers. From the missional perspective of church growth and planting churches in global—often secularized—cities, this finding is rather disappointing.

Clearly, Hillsong offers a new generation of believers a Christian community where they feel accepted and empowered and where their faith is encouraged. Indeed, for Christian members of the mobile creative class in global cities—a group in risk of leaving the church—Hillsong offers a place they can call home. But because the unstable job market fosters a nomadic lifestyle, Hillsong churches are confronted with high turnover. People are constantly coming and going, which creates a unique dynamic of dedicated short-term volunteers who are willing to invest their time and skills but who may be present for only a limited period of time. This new mode of community formation, emerging in global cities, challenges existing concepts of church growth and the church as a bounded and sustainable community.

The rise of megachurch networks indicates that Christianity today in urban settings often functions as a network of interactions in which social relationships and structures and patterns of belief become increasingly global and interconnected.¹⁷ As a consequence, church planting ministries in global cities need to evaluate the relevance and meaning of the concepts culture and ethnicity in developing a contextualized theology. As the Hillsong case demonstrates, the

dynamics and mobility of specific groups in global cities call for an approach beyond an ethnic lens.

Notes

1. On February 8, 2015, in presenting the vision statement “Hillsong Church 2015,” senior pastor Brian Houston announced the expansion of Hillsong Network into the Latin American cities of Buenos Aires and São Paulo; www.youtube.com/watch?v=22wRTk4g18I. Assessed February 10, 2015.
2. Since the 1980s, the terms “New Pentecostalism” and “neo-Pentecostalism” have been used by independent churches to distinguish themselves from denominational Pentecostal churches such as the Assemblies of God. See Allan Anderson, *An Introduction to Pentecostalism: Global Charismatic Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2004), 158.
3. My research has been conducted as a fellow of the Congregational Studies Team, funded by the Lilly Endowment, www.hirr.hartsem.edu/cong/congregational_studies_fellowship.html.
4. For example, see Timothy J. Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012). Keller is a Presbyterian pastor in New York City.
5. Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2002), 47.
6. Hillsong is a member of Australian Christian Churches (www.acc.org.au/about-us), an alliance of Pentecostal churches previously known as the Assemblies of God in Australia. Renamed in 2007 under the leadership of Brian Houston, who was president from 1997 to 2009, Australian Christian Churches has “over 1,000 churches with over 280,000 constituents.”
7. Geraldo Marti, *Hollywood Faith: Holiness, Prosperity, and Ambition in a Los Angeles Church* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers Univ. Press, 2008), 114.
8. Tom Wagner, “Branding, Music, and Religion: Standardization and Adaptation in the Experience of the ‘Hillsong Sound,’” in *Religion as Brands: New Perspectives on the Marketization of Religion and Spirituality*, ed. Jean-Claude Usunier and Jörg Stolz (London: Ashgate, 2014), 65.
9. Ibid., 63. Miranda Klaver, “Worship Music as Aesthetic Domain of Meaning and Bonding: The Glocal Context of a Dutch Pentecostal Church,” in *The Spirit of Praise: Music and Worship in Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity*, ed. Monique Marie Ingalls and Amos Yong (University Park: Pennsylvania State Univ. Press, 2015), 110.
10. CNN, June 2, 2014 <http://edition.cnn.com/videos/living/2014/06/02/ac-harlow-pastor-carl-lentz-long.cnn>. Assessed April 21, 2015.
11. <http://hillsong.com/vision>. Assessed April 21, 2015.
12. Richard L. Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class: Revisited* (Philadelphia: Basic Books, 2012), 285.
13. Neil Howe and William Strauss introduced the term “Millennial Generation” to describe the generational cohort born after 1982; see their *Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000).

14. Marti, *Hollywood Faith*, 180.
15. See Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes: Finding Religion in Everyday Life* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2013).
16. The concept “third space” was introduced by Ray Oldenburg in his book *The Great Good Place: Cafés, Coffee Shops, Community Centers, Beauty Parlors, General Stores, Bars, Hangouts, and How They Get You through the Day* (New York: Paragon House, 1989).
17. Heidi A. Campbell, “Understanding the Relationship between Religion Online and Offline in a Networked Society,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 80, no. 1 (2012): 64–93.