HOW, WHEN AND WHY HILLSONG BANNED 'EX-GAY' REFERRALS

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Much has been written in the media about Hillsong and conversion "therapy". Most of it is ill-informed and poorly researched. This is an honest, and behind the scenes account of Hillsong's involvement with ex-gay/reparative/conversion "therapy" practices and organisations, even going back to before the church was founded. I'm grateful to the many people willing to be interviewed and who shared their stories with me.

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A recent controversy

It is not unusual for Hillsong Church to be involved in controversy.

A recent controversy this year involved

- Chris Pratt, a church-attending, award-winning actor, famous for his roles in “The Lego Movie,” “Jurassic World,” and “Guardians of the Galaxy”;
- Ellen Page, a multi-award-winning Canadian actress who is a declared atheist and been an out and proud lesbian since 2014;
- Pastor Brian Houston, the founder and head of the Hillsong Global Church;
- …and of course, Hillsong Church itself.

It all began innocently enough on *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*.[1] Pratt was there to promote his upcoming movie. During the conversation, Chris Pratt mentioned that he’d just finished his 21-day Daniel diet/fast where he only ate fruits, vegetables, and unleavened bread. Some people might be impressed with this, but I fasted for 40 days (twice) on only water and orange juice to show God how serious I was about ridding myself of homosexuality and praying he’d take it away. BTW…..I’m still gay. But I digress.

Chris Pratt didn’t even mention what Church he attended. The Hollywood Reporter tweeted.

Somehow Ellen Page got triggered by this and took to twitter

Hillsong is not anti-gay Ellen. Unless you live in a binary world like former President George W. Bush, who, after 9/11 said: "Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists." For some, it is black and white. Sadly, not everyone understands or accepts the concept of journey. We could all be condemned for the ignorant racist, sexist, homophobic things we once said or did. Thank God we didn't stay there though. People, societies, organisations change and so do churches. Some take centuries; some decades. It's a journey.

Our article on "Welcoming, accepting, affirming - don't get stuck" went viral during the recent Page/Pratt/Hillsong drama and was shared over 30,000 times on social media.

1. What is an anti-gay church?

For many of us from faith backgrounds, we really know what 'anti-gay' looks like. You can't even get through the front door without repenting of your 'sin', your 'homosexual lifestyle' and be committed to 'praying the gay away'. I can think of lots of examples of anti-gay churches and preachers. Churches and preachers who consistently sprout anti-gay rhetoric and work against any progress in LGBTI equality.

Recently, a friend of mine in Adelaide was looking for a church community to join and enquired of a large Pentecostal church if he'd be welcome as a gay man. He was given a

book to read called Pathway. Pathway is used to disciple newcomers into the church's beliefs and culture. In the section on sin, the booklet makes clear that the church doesn't believe anyone should identify as LGBT and that being gay means you automatically are living a 'lifestyle of sin'. Of course, it includes a reminder of the often-quoted and poorly translated verses of 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 which says that along with the list of evildoers like drunkards, queers won't get to heaven. The same verse quoted on social media by the Australian rugby star Israel Folau[2].

I thought this little section in Pathway, reinterpreting biblical language into today's idiom, was amusing.

> *"A 'lifestyle of sin' does not refer to sin that has been dealt with. It refers to ongoing sin that we love, enjoy and plan to continue. When we walk with Christ, sin is no longer our strongest identity message, because it is no longer our lifestyle.*
>
> *Biblical terms for sin are almost a foreign language in today's society and culture. A term like fornication is traded for 'sleeping around'. Sexual immorality becomes a 'mutually consenting relationship', and adultery 'just happens'. A gossip is a 'socialite', a slanderer is a 'constructive critic', a glutton is a 'foodie', a drunkard 'just loves to party', a liar is a 'good storyteller', a thief 'loves a bargain, a pervert just 'enjoys online content' and homosexuality is celebrated."*

When my friend replied to the pastor that he'd found an affirming church that accepted him for who he was as he embraced his true authentic self, the pastor replied

> *"Being your true authentic self just doesn't cut it. The human heart is the most deceitful of all things, and desperately wicked. The reality being that like all people, I am a sinner, if I lived authentically to my natural nature and true to myself, I would lie, cheat, steal, look with lust, commit murder in my heart (hate), covet what my neighbour has etc…"*

Really? If that is the case, then I think we are all glad the pastor has become a Christian. Imagine someone that corrupt running around unsupervised.

The pastor reassured my friend, *"you would be accepted and loved with us no doubt. I pray you are genuine to being open to dialogue and not having predetermined outcomes"* ….but from what has been said and stated plainly in the Pathways manual, there is an already "predetermined outcome". Strange how he didn't see that.

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Clearly, Edge Church in Adelaide and their satellite congregations are anti-gay. There's no wiggle room there. You probably wouldn't know that, however, until you began the discipleship program. But what about Hillsong?

2. BH and AVB - the early days

I've known Brian Houston since he arrived in Australia in 1978 to join his father Frank. Frank had arrived in Sydney in 1977, out of the blue (which we now know why), to pioneer an independent church, Christian Life Centre (CLC). There's three years difference between Brian and me. I was born March 1951, he was born February 1954.

In 1978, the same year when Brian arrived in Australia with his new wife Bobbie, my wife and I launched out with a caravan, a baby and a toddler to evangelise and pioneer churches in New South Wales and Queensland. By 1983, like Brian, we had pioneered churches and my wife and I moved to Sydney to found a new national evangelistic ministry, Every Believer Evangelism. In the same year, Brian commenced Hills Christian Life Centre, an outreach church from the city congregation.[3]

Before this, Brian had been somewhat under his father's shadow. Frank was dynamic, charismatic, funny, inspiring and extremely personable. It's hard to shine as a preacher's son when Dad's everyone's hero and takes up all the oxygen in the room. I remember conversations with other fellow budding preachers like myself wondering if Brian really had the goods or, was he just trading on his father's reputation. Of course, Brian has far surpassed any limited thinking we had about him and in our wildest dreams could never have imagined he'd build, not only the largest churches in Australia but a global empire.

Brian and I were colleagues, in that we were both passionate young Pentecostal preachers. We were friends by association on many levels, but not close friends. It was a passion for Christian service and Christian faith that connected us. We spent time together when I preached at his church, camps and denominational conferences, and our children played together. Brian's church contributed financially to our evangelistic ministry and I preached regularly in his growing church.

At that time, preaching against the gays was rarely, if ever, a sermon topic. The big threats were considered the new age movement, heterosexual sexual activity before marriage, keeping marriages together, the occult and the demonic/satanic power of rock music. Youth preacher, Pat Mesiti, regularly encouraged young people to burn their rock albums[4]; something many came to regret later.

3. The 'ex-gay' story begins

In 1986, Sy Rogers came to preach in Frank Houston's Christian Life Centre (CLC) church at Daneford House on the corner of Riley and Goulburn Streets, Darlinghurst. Sy Rogers is/was a 'former homosexual' or "former transgender'. There are many versions of his testimony that have evolved over the years. Then Sy Rogers appeared as a self-professed 'former homosexual' and 'former transsexual' [5] and was the President of Exodus which had been founded 10 years earlier.

As an itinerant evangelist I was elsewhere in the country preaching, but I heard about Sy's visit. I had no desire to meet or connect with Sy as I was secretly struggling with my own sexuality. I didn't want to become an ex-homosexual 'poster boy' or focus in this narrow

area and connecting with other 'struggling' homosexuals was confronting and would raise too many questions.

It was Rogers' visit in 1986, along with the growing reality of AIDS, that ensured there was a group at CLC who were ready to have an 'ex-gay' ministry in the church. There are varying versions of the exact history but around 1986 or 1987. Exit Ministries was founded at Christian Life Centre, at Daneford House. The group was commenced by Laurie Murphy, or Pastor Loz, as he was affectionately known.

Exit Ministries was founded to support gay guys who'd previously been Christians and 'come back to the Lord', homosexuals in the congregation, and some recent converts. Their specific needs were not being met by the regular ministry and therefore required a more specific approach. Laurie was not your average straight-laced pastor. He was more alternate, straight but alternate, and people found him very relatable, but not necessarily his young pastor peers. At a recent conversation he told me that as a straight man, he really didn't know how to help these guys with their struggles with the 'gay lifestyle'. Sy was the one who helped him through this. Laurie also went to the US and had training in the Living Waters program (more about LW later).

Within just over one year about 40 people had gone through the program according to a *Sydney Morning Herald* article. Pastor Laurie was also quoted as saying *"If someone calls themselves a Christian and is totally satisfied about their homosexuality. well that's fine. I'm not interested. I'm not going to argue with them"*[6]. When Fred Nile and the Festival of Light tried to get Exit to join the crusade to wipe out homosexuality with their infamous 'Cleanse Oxford Street March'[7] in 1989, Pastor Murphy refused. Kudos to Pastor Murphy; unlike their extreme right wing conservative relatives, gay bashing was not Exit's ministry. Exit lasted a couple of years then closed down.

Ian Lind, a layman in CLC Waterloo and an 'ex-gay' himself, had gone to the US to explore the Living Waters (LW) program[8]. It was a six month Christian 'inner healing' program, developed by Andy Comiskey, another 'ex-gay', who was linked with the Vineyard charismatic megachurches in the US. Lind returned to Australia and ran LW under the auspices of CLC Waterloo in 1989, which had moved from Darlinghurst the previous year. Lind tells me the program was very successful having 300-400 enrolled in the weekly, 30 weeks course and sometimes there was standing room only. One of their pinnacles of success was a conference of 3,500. Others question those figures as 'evangelastic', an over-enthusiastic recording of real numbers.

Lind is adamant that the LW program was not exclusively an 'ex-gay' program but for Christians seeking healing for a range of issues such as sexual abuse, addiction and dysfunctional relationships, which attendees will attest to. According to Lind and Murphy, about 40% were LGBT however, which is a substantial amount. Over the years some attendees kept recycling through the program for another 30 weeks, hoping that eventually, they would stop being attracted to the same gender, others gave up and left. A few married believing God had healed them, or that a heterosexual marriage would complete their healing. Some remained situational heterosexuals while for others, like most mixed-

orientation marriages, ended in separation, heartache and divorce. No records were kept, and everything is anecdotal.

In 1998, Lind was burnt out, running several groups, working full time in a secular job and with a wife and family that needed his devotion, and he ceased the LW ministry in the church. There is another story however about why LW closed down. The growth of Brian's church surpassed that of his fathers, and they rebranded from Hills Christian Life Centre (HCLC) to Hillsong in 1999. It was in the same year that Brian took over his father's city church (CLC) and merged the two; one Hillsong church, two campuses.

At the time of the merge, according to Pastor Brian, the 'ex-gay' ministry was closed down in the city campus. From comments made to me, this wasn't because they didn't believe the program worked, that is converting people from gay to straight, but because it was felt that having all those homosexuals talking about their temptations and failures was a breeding ground for hook-ups. This was a problem worldwide actually.

Andy Comiskey (LW) himself, aired concerns about the constant battle in the 'ex-gay' movement, where the biggest worry at every 'ex-gay' convention is that the 'ex-gays' will 'fall' during the convention. As ex-'ex-gay' leader Rick Notch has put it, *"You pick a prayer partner the first night of the convention, you pray with him the second night, and by the third night your prayers are answered."*[9]

In 1999, Ron Brookman took over the LW franchise and based out of the Uniting Church he was pastoring in Ramsgate, Sydney. For the next 15 years, Brookman lead LW Australia[10] till he resigned, and it was closed down[11] in 2014 under a cloud of unanswered questions.

It would be nice to think that all the silly nonsense about "you can't be gay and Christian" and "God changes people from gay to straight", and same-sex orientation is caused by a lack of parental love or sexual abuse, was over when the LW program ceased in 1999.

4. The undercover years 1999-2005

When you have a church full of people, and leaders, who believe homosexuality is a sin as opposed to an orientation, there'll be problems. No longer having LW ministry a part of the church didn't stop pastors, volunteer leaders and members referring gay people to local or overseas 'ex-gay' ministries.

Two prominent ministries in Sydney at the time were Liberty Christian Ministries (Sydney Anglican Diocese backed) and LW based in Ramsgate (more information on these two ministries HERE). A US-based online 60-day program called Door of Hope[12], run by Setting Captives Free[13] was being enthusiastically offered by some individuals. There were also other, pastoral, youth and home group leaders, who were all too ready to offer prayer for healing, deliverance and change for gays and lesbians 'bound', 'tormented' and 'broken'. The belief that God makes gays straight was further reinforced by numerous visits by Sy Rogers preaching his message of brokenness along with his tapes, videos and DVDs being sold and distributed throughout the congregation.

There are many secrets in Hillsong, as there are in all churches. Especially about LGBT people, their struggles and how they were treated. It will always be up to these people to tell their stories. As I highlighted in our report on Conversion Therapy in Australia[14], no one is in a place to tell their story immediately. I call it the 'ex-ex-gay closet'.

For some, it will take years or decades for them to feel comfortable talking about what has been for many, the most traumatic years of their lives. Having worked with conversion therapy survivors since 2000, I know many will never tell their stories for personal reasons, such as the trauma attached, wanting to forget what happened and move on, or the fear of repercussions.

One person who was prepared to talk about his experience during the undercover years (over a decade later) was Andrew[15]. Andrew was heavily involved in children's ministry in Hillsong. At 20 years of age, he shared with the leadership that he was attracted to guys. Even though he had never acted on those feelings he says:

> "*My world instantly collapsed. Leadership asked me to leave the worship team. I was asked not to tell anyone and as a result I became incredibly isolated in my sin.*
>
> *I sobbed most of those days. I felt numb. I feared that this sense of evilness and isolation would never end. My friends of 10 plus years were not able to offer support or love because they were kept totally in the dark.*
>
> *I was encouraged to exercise to enhance my masculinity, we prayed the demons off my back and I was sent to an outside minister for counselling who had a specialisation in homosexuality and more earth-shatteringly for me child sex offenders.*
>
> *I felt evil beyond words. I felt demons crawling all over my body and the depths of despair cannot be described here in this speech. The identity I had curated within God's eyes had vanished overnight.*"
> (You can read or listen to Andrews full story HERE.)

I know the pastors who referred Andrew to this psychologist. They are a lovely couple. Kind, loving and caring individuals - but obviously appallingly ignorant about sexuality. That is the huge danger that exists in Pentecostal/Evangelical churches all around the world; leaders who might be good at quoting bible verses but who are ill-informed, uneducated and ignorant about sexuality and gender identity. I've said it a thousand times and bears repeating once again here:

> "The enemy is not individuals, churches, 'ex-gay' organisations or political parties; **the enemy is ignorance.** Progress is made by focusing our energies on changing the latter instead of attacking the former."

As Andrew told me recently about the trauma he went through.

> "The conversation with the psychologist was my first sexual conversation too! We didn't talk about sexual identity at church. The psychologist is the reason I'm alive today I reckon as he helped get me out of Hillsong. But he still specialises in paedophilia. It's the biggest burden I carry"

It doesn't take much to imagine other even more tragic outcomes that could have come from this. And of course, had that happened, very few would have known the real reason why he would have taken his life; remember, he'd been sworn to secrecy. Those that did know however would have remained silent. "*Another troubled young person dealing with 'sin' and his relationship with God? At least he's now at peace with Jesus*" would have been the response, I imagine.

5. Reaching out

I had my own traumas to deal with after the scandal of my exposure as a gay man, resigning from the ministry and the humiliation of the public confession[16]. It took me years to work through the pain, issues of multiple trauma and no longer believing I was going to hell for 'giving in to my homosexuality' as numerous Christian conservatives had written.

Seven years after I'd walked away from everything, unexpectedly I found the resolution that had eluded me all my life. The sense of peace and wholeness was overwhelming.

At this time a strong sense of mission grew in me, that I should tell my story. It wasn't easy going back to most painful moments of my life and putting them on the page for a reader to grasp the darkness of many years of struggle and self-loathing but in April 2004 '*A Life of Unlearning – coming out of the church; one man's struggle*' was published.

As Brian was the then president of the Assemblies of God, I wanted to meet with him to let him know my intentions in telling the story. It was not about being vindictive, nasty or bitter; something people are frequently surprised about. *A Life of Unlearning* was an honest account (for some, it was too honest) of my struggle, against all the odds, to eventually find peace and resolution. I was grateful to have made it out the other side; many don't.

Brian and I had planned to meet at the Hills campus on the 28th of April. You may think it strange that I remember that date 15 years ago. I remember as I got a phone call that morning from Brian's PA telling me that, Hazel, Brian's mother had had a heart attack at McDonalds on the Central Coast and passed away. We met a few weeks after that, from memory, just after my book launch.[17]

Our meeting was warm and relaxed (surprisingly relaxed), and most of all, respectful. I wasn't there to convert Brian, and Brian wasn't trying to convert me. A safe space of conversation with no agendas. I told him about my journey of reconciliation since we'd last had contact 12 years earlier and the reasons I'd written my autobiography. It was good to reconnect but as it is with meetings like this, the PA politely interrupted to announce Brian's

next appointment had arrived; the subtle message of your time is up. Where did that hour go? It felt like we could have easily chatted another hour or two.

Brian could see that I hadn't stormed into his office as a militant gay activist, waving a rainbow flag, condemning the Christian church and making demands for change. People were shocked that I would even have done a thing like this as if I was meeting with 'the enemy'. Others expected Brian to attack me and demand I repent. Nothing could have been further from the truth for either of us. We weren't there to have a debate or argument, it was an informed, respectful conversation, something many seem very challenged to have on these issues.

We agreed that it would be of value for us to continue our conversation and meet semi-regularly. We did that over the next few years, at least annually. Mostly I initiated the meeting, but not always.

Knowing how easily conversations like this can be highjacked by others, it was also agreed that the content of those conversations be kept confidential between Brian and me. I could, however, say that we were meeting. Media and others were, of course, keen to find out more, but betraying that trust/agreement would end our conversations and of course, I was neither Hillsong's or Brian Houston's spokesperson on issues of sexuality.

I learnt a lot about dialogue and bridge-building during those meetings; sometimes the hard way. Two key lessons are that trust, and confidentiality are paramount, as well as not making too many assumptions. I knew my past connections with Pastor Brian had given me a privileged level of access to discuss LGBTI issues with the pastor of the largest church in Australia and leader of the denomination; not something one takes lightly or abuses.

6. Meeting with the Assemblies of God Executive

Within days of my autobiography hitting the shelves in 2004, my inbox was literally flooded with emails from readers, and these messages have continued to arrive regularly since then. Most began with '*Your story is my story*' and then the reader poured out their hearts about their life of struggle and particularly the way they had been treated by Christian family, friends and their church. Too many tragic stories that frequently reduced me to tears at my computer screen. To date, I have responded to every email from readers. If they have been touched by my story and taken the time to write and share so intimately, it is the least I could do.

Within twelve months several categories of harm caused by ex-gay ministries were abundantly clear to me. I had to try and do something. So in May, I summarised these in a letter to the National Executive of the Assemblies of God[18] detailing the areas of harm, making recommendations and requesting a meeting. When they agreed to meet, in my excitement, I talked with a journalist in the gay press about the meeting, making sure that the tone and messaging was in line with my intentions. That was my mistake; I should have kept it confidential.

I met with Brian and the National Executive in October 2005. Sadly, the meeting was clouded by an email campaign against me[19], initiated by right-wing Christian extremist group, the Salt Shakers, once they discovered the article in the gay press which announced, Assemblies of God in Gay Talks[20]. Considering the barrage of emails sent to all the executive members as the Salt Shakers suggested, condemning the meeting and myself, it's a wonder it even went ahead. It did though, and I received a reasonable, polite reception. None of the recommendations were accepted, except for a change in the Assemblies of God position statement on homosexuality (1992 & 2006).

7. The dialogue continues

Pastor Brian and I continued our occasional conversations sometimes via email or phone but mostly face to face. Over the next few years, there were numerous negative media reports about Hillsong as Australia was coming to terms with the new phenomena of megachurches.

The megachurch phenomenon has always been viewed by Australians with suspicion and believed to be an American import. We might have had a few grand cathedrals in major cities, but we didn't have megachurches. Mostly we had little 'God Boxes' dotted throughout city suburbs and rural towns or sitting as lone sentinels in country paddocks or on hilltops. Sacred spaces, reminding us of another era when Australians gathered once a week to worship, or for once a year celebrations like Christmas and Easter or for weddings, christenings and funerals. Over the decades many have been abandoned or converted into homes, offices and restaurants and used daily instead of a few hours a week.

Some of these media articles about Hillsong included stories of disgruntled previous members. These were not hard to find, especially LGBT members who, like Andrew, had suffered trauma. They'd suffered because of the outdated beliefs about homosexuality and ignorance about human sexuality that remain commonplace in Pentecostal and Evangelical churches. Brian was frustrated because the 'ex-gay' stories were dated. Brian was claiming that these all happened before the LW program closed down in 1999 and therefore Hillsong was being targeted unnecessarily. There was some truth to this. Then the Mercy Ministries controversy[21] hit in March of 2008.

8. Mercy Ministries

Mercy Ministries worked with young girls and women with eating disorders, drug problems, unwanted pregnancies, self-harm, etc.. Obviously, the ministry had had some successes in these areas which was why it was growing.

Media and others were quick to make Mercy Ministries an extension ministry of Hillsong, but it was an American ministry founded by Nancy Alcorn in Memphis Tennessee. Hillsong had connections through staffing, board members and funding. Actually, funding and support came from many areas beside Hillsong, including Bunnings, Rebel Sport, LG, Sydney Kings, the Balmain Tigers and Australian Opal Cutters, along with Gloria Jeans.

The newspaper articles, containing stories of recently departed inmates revealed poor duty of care, lack of professional staff, and an extreme spiritual framework that included exorcisms. After three days of intense media scrutiny, the headlines the next day read God's cure for gays lost in sin[22].

Was Mercy Ministries an 'ex-gay' ministry? No, but like so many of these situations, a same-sex orientation gets bundled in with addictions, mental health issues, etc. – all evidence of humanity's 'brokenness' that Christ came to heal. Part of the healing and rebuilding of their lives for Mercy participants was to confess and renounce any same-sex activity or relationships they'd had. Based on a highly questionable biblical premise[23], these 'soul ties'[24] were broken. If you don't know what 'breaking soul ties' is all about, think of it as new-age mumbo jumbo meets deliverance light.

In the article, former Mercy participant Naomi Johnson said, '*While I was there, we received much teaching on the evils of gay and lesbian lifestyles. In particular, there was an ongoing teaching video series by Sy Rogers, an "ex-gay" - now reformed - married Christian*'.

Mercy Ministries denied they were running an 'ex-gay' program. Technically, like LW, there weren't: it was a comprehensive program of healing 'brokenness'. But Mercy Ministries denial was actually a bald-faced lie. They knew exactly what they were doing up there in the Hills. I later found out that an Assemblies of God minister had sent his daughter to Mercy, specifically to cure her after she'd fallen in love with another girl and come out as a lesbian. Mercy Ministries closed down, tried desperately to revive itself, then retreated back to the US and eventually rebranded[25] to Mercy Multiplied. But the controversy continued[26].

9. Lifting the lid on the underground

Through the 2008 Mercy Ministries scandal, Hillsong was again implicated in 'ex-gay' activities and these were denied once again by Pastor Brian Houston. But I knew differently. As I mentioned earlier, my autobiography had produced a steady stream of emails from LGBT people who'd either left or been thrown out of churches. A substantial amount was from Pentecostal churches and some from Hillsong. At this time Hillsong was around 12,000 people.

There was no way Pastor Brian had control of what every individual, paid or volunteer, leader was doing or what they believed for that matter. I knew from the people I'd worked with and emails I'd received that some pastors, leaders and other individuals were referring people to 'ex-gay' organisations in Australia and overseas. It was time to let Brian know what was happening under his nose.

Through a national LGBT support network[27] I'd built, I'd worked with a number of both former and current Hillsong attendees who shared their stories with me and helped them find resolution of their faith and sexuality. One of those was a young person who'd read *A Life of Unlearning*, emailed me and asked if we could meet up to talk. This individual was on the journey to self-acceptance but still very confused and troubled.

Over coffee in Oxford Street, they told me that, as a 15-year-old, they'd begun attending Hillsong. Knowing there were differences with others of the same age this person had prayed and cried out to God to change until the internal torment became too great and they shared their struggles with the youth group leaders. This resulted in prayer by youth leaders, but this was soon escalated to more senior youth leaders who believed homosexual demons could be cast out of people. There was more prayer, more exorcisms, more desperate attempts to change. For those of us who know what this is like, it's exhausting.

Several youth leaders were connected with a US-based 'ex-gay' ministry called Setting Captives Free[28]. The young person was offered mentorship and the 60-day online course called Door of Hope[29]. The drop-down menu beckoned *'Are you trapped in homosexuality and want to get out? Enrol in this course and find out how Jesus can open the cell door and make it a Door of Hope'*.

The Door of Hope program was undertaken; more than once. You can imagine the result? Shame, confusion, depression, self-harm and suicide attempts, as reported by others[30]. You'd think that would have been enough. No. This teenager was referred to an external Christian counsellor who attended Hillsong but had 'helped cure many other guys of homosexuality'.

Once again, nothing was changing and one night, opening up to the home group leader on what had now been years of torment and struggle the home group leader's only offering was *"You can change just like Sy Rogers…these demons in you are fighting…don't let them win"*. Another well-intentioned, ignorant layperson, not realising that their 'encouragement' is driving an LGBT person to the brink of despair.

It's a bloody miracle this person still lives considering they'd been subject to such appalling ignorance at every turn over 4 years. But of course, I'd heard this story over and over again from more people than I could count. Christians' ignorance about sexuality and gender identity has been killing us, driving us crazy for years, decades in fact. I was experiencing the same thing in 1971[31].

How would I let Pastor Brian know about the harm being caused by members and leaders in his congregation?

I documented everything I knew in an email and attached a letter from the young person I'd been helping along with a letter from his parents. The parents were not Hillsongers themselves, but strong Christians. The young person had only come out to the parents 12 months before with a letter I'd helped them construct. Instead of finding suitcases packed on the veranda as expected, when they came home, two teary parents were waiting with open arms, apologies and promises of unconditional love. At last, Mum and Dad had an explanation for their child's erratic behaviours over the years, as the secret struggle, trapped in a prison of constant shame, was revealed. The parents were devastated. Without having all the answers to their questions, they became instant allies.

In my email to Brian, I reminded him that this one story was only the tip of the iceberg, how this situation had the potential to end in tragedy more than once, and that like Mercy Ministries drama, the blame would have been laid at the feet of the Hillsong leadership.

I also asked how he would feel as a parent to discover the teen you'd entrusted to the care of another church had been poorly and ignorantly counselled and led to years of mental health torment and suicide attempts. What if it had been one of his own children? What if they had suicided, and like other pastors who've tragically lost their children, he had no answer to the question WHY?.

Knowing that Hillsong's understanding of sexuality and the Bible verses used to condemn LGBT individuals and the community still had a long way to go, I made some recommendations for a way forward. One step at a time.

10. Hillsong bans referrals to 'ex-gay' ministries

In 2011 I was helping a student journalist out with their assignment[32] by doing an interview with them about 'ex-gay' ministries. They also interviewed Ron Brookman who, at that time, was running Living Waters Australia. Brookman claimed that even though Hillsong no longer ran the LW's program, the church continued to have a good relationship with his program and still makes referrals. Haydn Sennitt from Liberty Christian Ministries had made similar claims[33].

I told the student that if there were any referrals going on it would have been unofficially by leaders still holding on to the outdated 'change is possible' belief.

To the student's credit, they contacted Hillsong for clarification. *"Neither Pastor Brian Houston nor Hillsong Church have ever supported Living Waters. Under Pastor Brian's leadership, it has been made clear to all the pastoral team that they are not to refer people to such programs. We are unaware of what Mr Brookman is referring to"*, the Hillsong spokesperson stated.

This was the first time I had ever heard that statement made publicly but discovered that this statement had been given previously when media inquired about Hillsong and their stand on 'ex-gay' programs. So sometime in 2010, an official policy had been issued to all staff by Pastor Brian Houston that no one in Hillsong is to refer people to ex-gay/reparative/conversion therapy programs. The strategy had worked.

It would be naïve to think though that in a global church now of 100,000 attending weekly in 23 countries across six continents, that the 2010 edict banning referral to conversion therapy programs is continually reinforced and implemented. In some countries, Hillsong congregations exist within some very conservative societal, cultural and theological norms which also has its influences.

11. The gay issue never goes away

In 2013 Pastor Houston talked with the global congregation on Vision Sunday about the pink elephant in the room where he acknowledged for the first time publicly, the harm being inflicted on LGBT people because of the church's ignorance. Not much had changed though from previous statements about being challenged by the tensions of theology and people's lived experience. Like this one made eight years earlier.

> *"I think that the homosexual question and sexuality generally is one of the most challenging questions there is for the church in the 21st century. And it's one where I feel conflict myself, as a believer in the Bible and specifically the New Testament, I think that marriage is God's idea, and I think it's for a man and a woman. But I also represent a God that's merciful and gracious and kind, and having to connect those two things I think is one of the great challenges for me as a church leader."*[34]

By 2014, homosexuality had been removed from the Hillsong International Leadership College student handbook section on Code of Ethics which listed reasons why students would not graduate or could be expelled.[35]

It now read: '*Abstain from biblically immoral practices including; drunkenness, stealing, slanderous or profane language, dishonesty, occult practices and sexual sins (premarital sex, pornography, adultery ~~and homosexuality~~) or any other behaviour that is considered detrimental to Christian character and witness.*'

And where are Hillsong now on the journey?

12. Welcome but……..

During the Ellen Page/Chris Pratt/Hillsong controversy, when Hillsong was being accused of being anti-gay, Pastor Brian Houston issued a media statement.[36]

In this, he stated, "*Hillsong Church was founded in 1983 by our Senior Pastors, Brian and Bobbie Houston and in all those years Pastor Brian has been a vocal opponent of gay conversion therapy and has made it clear to our pastors that we do not support that approach.* "

"*A vocal opponent of gay conversion therapy*"? Personally, I'm not aware of that ever happening. It has been stated on numerous occasions however, that the LW program was shut down at the city campus in 1999. There is a vast difference saying I shut down a program and the apology of former Exodus leader Alan Chambers, acknowledging the horrendous harm created in countless thousands of lives and his ongoing crusade to see conversion therapy banned. Alan didn't just say "I closed Exodus down", he's actively and publicly doing things to correct the wrongs[37].

In the same recent media statement, Brian says, 'We are an **inclusive** Christian church that loves, values and welcomes all people, regardless of their background, ethnicity, beliefs, values, or personal identity' (emphasis mine).

The word 'inclusive' is problematic in this context. Brian should have known that, but maybe not. He has used inappropriate wording in the past. In his 2015 blog post 'Do I love gay people',[38] where he'd attempted to affirm that neither he nor Hillsong was anti-gay, he used the term 'gay lifestyle'[39] repeatedly. Even though it has been claimed that it was read by over a million people in a very short time and gave them clarity, from where I stand, many of those who'd clicked and read it were enraged by offensive term 'lifestyle'. Straight people have 'lives' but gays have 'lifestyles' according to some people. If you want to communicate something to the LGBTI audience a little bit of help from those who know, goes a long way and will cause less harm.

Using the term 'inclusive' in the media release, once again, instead of quelling the storm, added fuel to the fire, as 'inclusive' generally refers to 'affirming'. If you aren't aware of the differences in the terms, 'welcoming', 'accepting' and 'affirming', as it relates to churches and LGBT people, you can read about that **HERE** (as did over 30,000 over that weekend of the Page/Pratt/Hillsong social media storm).

If Hillsong was affirming/inclusive they would accept LGBT people into leadership roles, but Brian has stated repeatedly that this is not the case.

> *"Put clearly, we do not affirm a gay lifestyle and because of this we do not knowingly have actively gay people in positions of leadership, either paid or unpaid."*[40]

As an LGBT person, you can attend, pay your tithe, sing, praise the Lord, go to Bible studies and your age/gender/interest-specific group but there is a rainbow ceiling.

Brian stated in his recent media release *'No matter where you are in the world, when you enter our doors, you will be greeted with a sign that says, "Welcome Home".'* That is true.

'Welcome home' is very touching actually, and I'm sure has brought a warm feeling or even a tear to many a weary stranger who's walked into the Hillsong auditoriums for the first time looking for answers to life's challenges. But the stark reality for LGBT people however is, there is a caveat. Over time, you have your 'Rosa Parks' realisation that, yes, you can ride the bus, but you have to sit at the back.

Can you be out and proud at Hillsong?

If you are gay, lesbian or bi, it becomes a guessing game of who to be open and authentic with. Mostly you hide your true self for fear of negative reaction. You are either pretending, not correcting people's assumptions you're straight, or living 'don't ask, don't tell'. It's just different expressions of the closet and we all know just how unhealthy they are for your sense of self and mental health. Living that life is dishonest and stressful.

Being out and proud is frowned upon as it is perceived as 'promoting homosexuality'. '*Your identity is in Christ, not your sexual orientation*' you'll be told. Or as one of the leading pastors said to me repeatedly, '*I don't call myself a straight Christian so why do you call yourself a gay Christian?*' Straight people rarely understand gay pride because they have never had to live with gay shame. They just don't get it. And of course, they're never aware that every moment of every day they are unconsciously 'flaunting' their heterosexuality.

So from my experience the gay person, over time, no matter how much they love the worship, the music, the ministry, the sense of community… they eventually leave[41]. They can be open and authentic at work, some sports contexts, with their families, but not at church. The contrasts, conflict and sense of fragmentation become too much.

When you initially walked through the door there were lots of smiles, hugs and handshakes but your exit out the back door will mostly go unacknowledged or even noticed, and maybe that is the way you want it.

13. Conclusion

So where is Hillsong on the journey from welcoming to affirming (genuinely inclusive)?

They are stuck somewhere between welcoming and accepting. Actually, it's the same place they have been for over a decade and will continue to dance the homosexual hip hop until the final breakthrough comes.

Will Hillsong ever become completely affirming?

Of course they will, but it won't be soon.

If you've been around as long as I have, then you've observed the changes that have already happened in the Pentecostal world over the last 50 years. Things that were once considered taboo, evil and unscriptural are now accepted without question. Divorce, drinking alcohol, dancing, rock music, tattoos, body piercings, wealth, yoga, academic pursuits, women preaching and teaching in the church, women wearing pants instead of dresses, long hair on males, going to the movies. playing sport on Sunday, wearing the latest fashions are just some examples of the dramatic shifts that have occurred over those five decades. Once, all of the preceding was fiercely and biblically condemned as **unchristian**.

If we could beam up and transport one of the congregants from Petersham Assemblies of God, the first Pentecostal church I attended in 1969, into Hillsong's Sunday morning service, they'd literally run screaming from the building, cursing the devil as they went. The lighting and music alone would make them believe the church had been deceived and handed over to Satan. Actually, there are people today who preach that[42].

What did the Pentecostals do with their previously held beliefs about the bible verses condemning the previously mentioned behaviours? They shelved them, redefined them, justified them as no longer relevant. No one uses them any more to defend their 'biblical' position.

Are there people in Hillsong who are affirming?

Yes. There are people at all levels who have already come to understand that the term 'gay Christian' is not an oxymoron, but they are in the minority. That includes Pastors, leaders, musicians, singers and congregants. Of course, they would never declare this publicly for obvious reasons. Getting anywhere in Hillsong is about conforming to the brand. Alternate views, beliefs etc put you on the outer. It will take time for things to change, just as it has in western society. Factors that created change in society were visibility (people coming out), a growing acceptance of science, and the defiance of LGBT people. The defiance to reject the labels placed upon them by the law that they were deviates and perverts who should be locked away and by mental health professionals that they were sick and in need of healing.

How will Hillsong change?

The church doesn't change so much by the things mentioned above; more by osmosis. People in the congregation who have LGBT friends, brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles and work colleagues who they love change....slowly. Attending a few same-sex engagement parties and weddings will help break down preconceived ideas and stereotypes. In these situations, there are often more LGBT people than they have met in their entire lives and the celebrations are based around love, not sex. Who would have thought? What was once an issue has become a person.

Another factor will be conversations with willing pastors and church leaders. Behind closed doors, confidential, respectful conversations that can't be high-jacked by conservative Christians or the media.

As I wrote in the epilogue of A Life of Unlearning's recent edition.

> *It's important to remind churches that having a conversation about us without us will usually be nothing more than a recycling of preconceived ideas and misconceptions. Imagine a group of male church leaders discussing the role of women in the church without females present? We would call that misogyny. Or church leadership discussing indigenous issues without consulting indigenous people themselves. How could they have any insight into what their life experience is really all about? We would call that white supremacy/racism/elitism.*
>
> *The church has done a great deal of talking about us but rarely has spoken with us. So when church leaders discuss LGBT people, relationships and the community without speaking with or spending time getting to know LGBT people it does beg*

the question why. What is there to fear? Why the exclusion? Is this further evidence of homophobia that is regularly denied?

It's time for the church to invite LGBT people into the conversation. For some this is a conversation about their thoughts and beliefs but for us it is about who we are. You can ask questions.

'What was it like to sit in church and hear the word abomination used to describe you?'

'What was it like to get to the point of accepting that you were gay and coming out, knowing you might be rejected by those you love and the church and God you've served?'

'How did you find the resolution of your Christian beliefs and your sexuality?'

'When you came out to your Christian friends at church and they told you that you could never fall in love or have a partner for life as they could – how did that make you feel?'

'What did it feel like when your mega-church pastor said you couldn't serve coffee to people after church because you'd shared with him you were in a committed, monogamous three-year relationship?'

'How did you feel when you confided in your pastor that you thought you might be gay, resulting in him removing you from the kid's ministry you loved so much, even though you had never acted on those feelings?'

In listening to our stories, you will learn.[43]

With a willingness to dialogue, osmosis, conversations, and the visibility of more evangelical leaders and churches coming out about their changed understanding we will reach a tipping point. But don't expect that tomorrow. No matter how innovative or progressive Hillsong claims to be it is not ready for that seismic cultural shift.

In the end, though it will take courage, humility and leadership. Humility to say we were wrong, and we are sorry for the harm we've caused. Leadership that takes the movement on a new path and courage to stand strong no matter what the backlash and weather the inevitable storm. If Alan Chambers, who was the President of the largest 'ex-gay' organisation in the world can do it, so can Hillsong.

The eternal truth is that all people no matter what their gender, colour, ethnicity, sexual orientation or gender identity, all are created equal in the sight of God and treating others as lesser was never a part of the Divine Plan.

PS…….and if you are LGBT and attended Hillsong since 2012 …..and if someone, in either paid or volunteer leadership, referred you to an 'ex-gay' organisation, program or therapy, you can contact that church and report the person who did that. They not only have gone against the lead Pastor's direction and church policy, but they also placed your life at risk.

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