

---

# Global Church Planting in the Media Age: Hillsong Church\*

von Miranda Klaver

## Zusammenfassung

Globalstädte in aller Welt schaffen die Bedingungen für das Wachstum der Netzwerke von Megachurches. Zu diesen zählt Hillsong. Charakteristisch für diese Community ist die Verbindung von Musik und Medientechnologie bei der Präsentation eines zeitgenössischen Stils von pentekostalem Christentum, das junge Menschen verschiedener sozialer Herkunft anzieht. Der Beitrag untersucht, inwieweit der Prozess von Globalisierung und Mediatisierung bei der Transformation von Religion in Globalstädten im Spiel ist. Das unterschiedliche Auditorium, wie man es in der Hillsong Church in Amsterdam und in New York antrifft, ist ein Beleg für die verschiedenen Möglichkeiten der Zugehörigkeit, die Hillsong seinen Besuchern anbietet: von der lokalen Kirche bis zum freien christlichen Event. Die Entstehung der Hillsong Church zeigt die Bedeutsamkeit ästhetischer Erfahrungen auf und macht sichtbar, dass Strukturen und Muster des Glaubens zunehmend global und vernetzt sind.

## Schlüsselbegriffe

→ Hillsong Church  
→ Pentekostales Christentum  
→ Mediatisierung von Religion  
→ Megachurchnetzwerke  
→ Religion und Kirche in Globalstädten

## Abstract

Global cities around the world are breeding grounds for the multiplication of megachurch networks like Hillsong. Characteristic of Hillsong Church is the confluence of music and media technology in presenting a contemporary style of Pentecostal Christianity that attracts young people from different backgrounds. This article discusses the processes of globalization and mediatization at play in transforming religion in global cities. The diverse audience encountered in Hillsong Amsterdam and New York City demonstrate the various modes of belonging Hillsong offers to its visitors: from local church to a free Christian event. The rise of Hillsong church indicates the importance of aesthetic experiences and that structures and patterns of belief become increasingly global and interconnected.

## Keywords

→ Hillsong Church  
→ Pentecostal Christianity  
→ mediatization of religion  
→ megachurch networks  
→ religion and churches in global cities

## Sumario

Las ciudades globales crean en todo el mundo las condiciones para el crecimiento de las redes de las Megaiglesias. A éstas pertenece Hillsong. Propio de esta comunidad es la unión de música y tecnología mediática en la presentación de un estilo contemporáneo de un cristianismo pentecostal, que atrae a jóvenes de diferente origen social. El artículo analiza en qué medida el proceso de globalización y mediatización juega un papel en la transformación de la religión en las ciudades globales. El variopinto auditorio, que se encuentra uno en la Hillsong Church de Amsterdam y de New York, es una prueba de las diferentes posibilidades de pertenencia, que Hillsong ofrece a sus visitantes: de la iglesia local hasta el acontecimiento cristiano libre. El origen de la Hillsong Church muestra la importancia de las experiencias estéticas y visibiliza que las estructuras y los modelos de la fe cada vez están más globalizados y conectados.

## Palabras clave

→ Hillsong Church  
→ cristianismo pentecostal (Pentecostalismo)  
→ mediatización de la religión  
→ redes de Megaiglesias  
→ religión e iglesias en las ciudades globales

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Since the turn of the century, the Australian Hillsong megachurch network has successfully planted new churches in global cities around the world. In the city of Amsterdam, the growth and success of Hillsong Amsterdam is astounding in light of other church planting initiatives. No other initiative has resulted in such a thriving young and multi-ethnic community over a relative short period of time. Over the course of the last 7 years, Hillsong Amsterdam has had more than 1500 visitors on a regular Sunday.

Megachurches like Hillsong offer spectacular highly customized and multisensory worship events by the employment of digital media. As a result, new styles of Pentecostalism are emerging with a confluence of popular culture, entertainment and religious renewal.<sup>2</sup> Different from migrant churches, these megachurches create cosmopolitan spaces of community and identity formation beyond categories of ethnicity and race. They foster a cosmopolitan, consumerist lifestyle and predominantly attract upward mobile young professionals, creative, fashionable youngsters who share a postmodern urban subculture.<sup>3</sup>

According to some scholars, Hillsong is a good example of commoditized Christianity in the age of neoliberalism. Weber's thesis on the relationship between capitalism and Protestantism is often used by scholars to explain the rise of megachurches like Hillsong as a late modern expression of Christianity in the context of neoliberal capitalism in various parts of the world.

As the sociologist Maddox<sup>4</sup> points out, growth-oriented churches like corporate megachurches share an entrepreneurial spirit and share hierarchical corporate structures and use marketing techniques of entertainment, conversion and branding).

The expansion of the Hillsong megachurch network could also be analyzed by in light of what Ritzer<sup>5</sup> has described as a form of *McDonaldization*, a feature of globalization observed in the values of efficiency, calculability, predictability and control. With its standardized concept, Hillsong seems to adopt a religious franchise model neglecting the diversity of cultural contexts and bringing a form of decontextualized Christianity. For example, all Hillsong churches share the same mission statement as formulated by the global pastor Brian Houston: »To reach and influence the world by building a large Christ-centered, Bible-based church, changing mindsets and empowering people to lead and impact in every sphere of life.«<sup>6</sup> The shared global vision formulated in Sydney (where Hillsong church has its headquarter) and standardized local churches demonstrate the global nature of Pentecostalism. In the words of the missiologist Paas these new churches are therefore »local expressions of a global culture«.<sup>7</sup>

Clearly, Hillsong could serve as a great example of the commercialization, commodification, and branding of religion. Yet, I am not overall satisfied with simple analyses like these. As an anthropologist, I am interested in investigating Hillsong's practices and the views of the visitors of this church. Who are they, where do they come from and how does Hillsong church relate to the local context?

\* Article based on the paper presented in Münster, October 7, 2017 at the Conference »Transnationale Missionarische Bewegungen, Narrative und Akteure, Medien und Öffentlichkeiten«, 5-7 October, 2017, Münster; organized by Deutsche Gesellschaft für Missionswissenschaft (DGMW) and the Internationale Institut für Missionswissenschaftliche Forschung (IIMF).

1 Over the period of 2013 to 2017 I conducted qualitative research in Hillsong Amsterdam and in Hillsong New York City. This project was in part funded as Engaged Scholars Fellow by the Lilly Endowment 2013.

2 Robbie B. H. GOH, Hillsong and Megachurch Practice: Semiotics, Spatial Logic and the Embodiment of Contemporary Evangelical Protestantism, in: *Material Religion* 4/3 (2008) 284-305.

3 Brett MCCracken, *Hipster Christianity, When Church and Cool Collide*, Surrey 2010.

4 Marion MADDOX, In the Goofy Parking Lot: Growth Churches as a Novel Religious Form for Late Capitalism, in: *Social Compass* 59/2 (2012) 146-58, here 155.

In my paper I start with some remarks about transnational networks in light of processes of globalization and mediatisation of society. Then I briefly discuss the context of the expansion of the Hillsong network through global cities in different parts of the world. In the second part of my paper I will take a closer look at the Hillsong experience at the local level and will give an overview of diverse audiences encountered at Hillsong churches based on my ethnographic research in Amsterdam and New York City. In my concluding remarks I address the question of the missional impact of Hillsong churches.

## 2 Globalization and media

Megachurch networks like Hillsong demonstrate that processes of globalization are deeply embedded in Christian mission and church planting movements. We do live in a globalized world which has led to increased interactions and relations between churches and movements internationally. Transnational networks of churches are in itself not a new phenomenon, as they have existed for centuries. Generally speaking, Christian mission has provided for some of the oldest forms of associations connecting distant local cultures, drawing people into one global Christian community through conversion. Yet, as many scholars argue, in the last decades we encounter a radical restructuring of the religious field as a result of an intensification of global interconnectivity. The rapid development of new media technology together with the introduction of the Internet has led to what some describe as the mediatisation of society.<sup>8</sup> Appadurai proposes to analyse the impact of globalization through various global flows which he describes as *-scapes* including *mediascapes*.<sup>9</sup> The so-called rise of global media *scapes* are deeply tied to new institutions and technologies of communication. They have altered the socio-temporal context of social life, knowledge and practice, and of cultural identity of difference. Recognizing the intrinsic and historic relations between mediated communication and religion, more than ever before processes of mediatisation have extended and stretched religion beyond the geographical boundaries of local communities.

Throughout their history, Evangelical and Pentecostal movements have been at the forefront of integrating new media technology in their practices.<sup>10</sup> Informed by their mission zeal, they were among the first to embrace the possibilities of television giving rise to the phenomenon of televangelist.<sup>11</sup> With the introduction of the Internet a similar development took place, as many saw the Internet as a God-sent medium to finish the Great Commission and reach the world with the gospel.<sup>12</sup> The integration of digital media by Pentecostals and evangelicals goes beyond a more extensive use of media technology but has rather taken it to a new level. According to Horsfield, they have relocated Christianity within a »different sort of media culture« electronic, visual, spectacular, mobile, sloganeering, dynamic and fluid.<sup>13</sup>

5 George RITZER, The »McDonaldization« of Society, in: *The Journal of American Culture* 6/1 (1983) 100-107.

6 See mission statement Brian Houston 2014, <https://hillsong.com/vision/> (4-4-2016).

7 Stefan PAAS, Mission from Anywhere to Europe, in: *Mission Studies* 32/1 (2015) 4-31.

8 Nick COULDRY/Andreas HEPP, *The Mediated Construction of Reality*, Cambridge 2017.

9 Arjun APPADURAI, Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy, in: *Theory Culture Society* 7/2-3 (1990) 295-310.

10 Peter HORSFIELD, *From Jesus to the Internet. A History of Christianity and Media*, New York 2015, 248.

11 *Ibid.*, 251

12 Heidi CAMPBELL, *When Religion Meets New Media*, London 2010, 38.

13 HORSFIELD, *From Jesus* (fn. 10), 273.

The Hillsong megachurch network is one of the leading examples of how this new type of media culture takes form in a mission context, as it expands its network through initiating new churches in different parts of the world. This network of churches displays a vibrant form of neo-Pentecostal Christianity that is accessible and appealing in its use of music and multimedia. Hillsong has created a powerful media presence through several media outlets. This is foremost established through their music ministry. More recently, Hillsong has been among the first to create a powerful presence online through their website, including the Hillsong TV channel, websites of the local Hillsong churches, and extensive use of social media by Hillsong pastors such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter.

### 3 Global Cities

The Hillsong megachurch network with its center in Sydney Australia, has successfully initiated a number of new churches in Europe in the past two decades. Hillsong has also expanded to South Africa and the United States in New York City (2008), Los Angeles (2012), and Phoenix (2016). In 2015, Hillsong set foot in Latin America by initiating churches in São Paulo, Brazil and in Buenos Aires, Argentina.

The geographic expansion of the Hillsong network reveals a preference for so called global cities. In the mission statement on the Hillsong website, senior pastor Brian Houston clearly reveals his vision for the global city: »Positioned in the heart of culture, in great diverse urban centers, I see buildings that struggle to contain the increase of all that God is doing; occupying land and places that are miraculous in provision and impossible to ignore. [...] I see like-spirited churches in cities of influence that exemplify faithfulness manifested in bricks and mortar.«<sup>14</sup>

Global cities – characterized by global cultural flows, economic influence and highly developed communication infrastructures<sup>15</sup> – represent the world as a global village. They are the places where processes of globalization, enhanced by the rapid development of new media technologies, intensify ever-closer interconnection, foster increasing uniformity, and raise resistance against an intrusive global culture. Here we encounter nodes in transnational networks, the hubs in transnational flow of diverse groups of people like highly skilled labor, cultural elites, expats, migrants, and tourists. These structural and social conditions of urban life are formative for the diverse modes of urban religion encountered in global cities. The rise of global megachurch networks like Hillsong in a number of European cities and beyond are therefore not just typical of what is happening in a city context but the outcome of a dynamic engagement of religious traditions with the particular conditions of the city.<sup>16</sup> It is not surprising that the transnational mobility of city dwellers fosters the rise of expressions of religion in the forms of religious networks and alliances beyond the boundaries of the nation state. It is in the context of global cities that processes of globalization

14 Mission statement Brian Houston 2014 (fn. 6).

15 Saskia SASSEN, *The Global City*, New York/London/Tokyo 2013.

16 Robert A. ORSI, Introduction: Crossing the City Line, in: ID. (ed.), *God of the City: Religion and the American Urban Landscape*, Bloomington 1999, 1-78.

17 Robert SCHREITER, *New Catholicism: Theology Between the Local and the Global*, Maryknoll 1997, 26.

18 Robert SCHREITER, in: Craig OTT, *Globalization and contextualization: Reframing the Task of Contextualization in the Twenty-First century*, in: *Missiology* 43/1 (2015) 43-58, here 47.

19 Kate BOWLER/Wen REAGAN, *Bigger, Better, Louder. The Prosperity Gospel's Impact on Contemporary*

*Christian Worship*, in: *Religion and American Culture* 24/2 (2014) 186-230.

20 *Ibid.*, 205.

21 *Ibid.*, 208.

22 Hillsong Church is member of the Australian Christian Churches, formerly known as the Assemblies of God. The name was changed in 2007. See <http://www.acc.org.au> (29-11-2015).

and mediatization at play in the transformation of religion in the western world are most visible today. Consequently, rise of transnational megachurch networks like Hillsong raise important questions about the role of contextualization. Following Schreiter, I believe that these global networks thrive because global cities are hybridized, deterritorialized, and hyperdifferentiated,<sup>17</sup> meaning their dwellers identify themselves with multiple groups and participate in various communities at the same time and that there is multiple belonging.<sup>18</sup> Therefore I would argue that Hillsong's preference for and success in global cities is not just a local expression of a global culture, but also a local expression of the shared contours of global city contexts around the world.

#### 4 Hillsong megachurch network

Brian and Bobby Houston founded Hillsong (which began as the Hills Christian Life Centre) in the suburbs of Sydney in 1983. In the 1990s Hillsong became renown among the evangelical/Pentecostal churches around the world for their worship music. (Noticeable was the Hillsong album »Shout to the Lord« with worship leader Darlene Zschech released in 1996.) By the turn of the century Hillsong music was among the leading Christian producers of worship music in the English-speaking world. It was also the time that the Christian worship music industry transformed into a celebrity platform.<sup>19</sup> Bowler and Reagan describe the popularity of worship leaders and their songs and the power of megachurches as »celebrity synergy« between pastors and worship leaders.<sup>20</sup> The shift in musical style and performance resulted in a liturgical transition, meaning the combination of renowned worship leaders and famous pastors became the necessary ingredient for attracting large audiences and church growth of prosperity megachurches.<sup>21</sup>

Since the late 1990s the Australian Hillsong megachurch expanded its network outside Australia. Local Hillsong churches are regarded as extensions of the Sydney megachurch as the Hillsong network is understood as »one house with many rooms«. The Hillsong megachurch network operates as one independent church although it is a member of the Australian Assemblies of God.<sup>22</sup>

Due to the global success of Hillsong worship music and the global tours of Hillsong's bands Hillsong United and Hillsong Young and Free, Hillsong has become a popular brand for among evangelical/Pentecostal believers in many parts of the world. New churchplants therefore attract the attention of many young Christians as they are already familiar with Hillsong's music distributed through digital media and concert tours. Hillsong's church planting model is therefore based on the merger of Hillsong's worship music industry and multiplication through connect groups or home groups as the Dutch case illustrates.

In 2006, the band Hillsong United from Hillsong London was invited at the celebration of first centennial of Pentecostal churches in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. This concert boosted the popularity of Hillsong music among evangelicals and Pentecostals youngsters and gave publicity to the Hillsong church planting activities in Europe, and especially in London. A few years later a staff member from Hillsong London church started a »connect group« in Amsterdam as an extension of the Hillsong London church. The new appointed pastor from the London church, an Australian from Dutch descent, flew back and forth from London to Amsterdam for the weekend. Using social media and a publicity campaign through Facebook, the Hillsong connect group increased in number and Sunday church services started in a rented restaurant next to the Anne Frank house in 2010. In the beginning, through webcasting, part of the service was shared with the London church. The new church plant expanded

rapidly and gathered enough resources in volunteers, musicians, and money to start their own services. The pastor and his wife then moved to Amsterdam and a larger premise was found in an Amsterdam club. Today, the church attracts between 1500 to 2000 visitors on a regular Sunday, spread over three or four services. In 2016, the Amsterdam church initiated a second church plant in the city of Rotterdam also by first starting a connect group in Rotterdam.

## 5 The Hillsong Experience

All Hillsong church services are predictable and uniquely similar. As I have attended services in Stockholm, Copenhagen, London, Amsterdam, and New York City, at times it was hard to remember in what city I actually was. Through the design of the worship space, the use of media technology, the structure of the church services, the language, the soundscape, and the performance on stage, Hillsong is able to create a highly standardized church experience which evokes the experience of a pop concert.

The worship spaces of Hillsong churches around the world are found at key locations at the centre of global cities. The rented clubs and theatres advertise that church is entertaining, exciting, accessible, and fun. It signals how Hillsong relates to the urban context: it seeks the heart of the cities, the places where people gather and meet each other.

The liturgy of Hillsong is highly scripted and standardized. A typical Hillsong service begins with four songs, followed by a word of welcome, another song, the offering, »commercial break« or announcements for upcoming Hillsong events, another song, sermon, altar call, and song of closure. Globally shared inspirational videos, identical lighting schemes, and bodily performance on stage leave little room for experiment or improvisation on the part of the various Hillsong churches.

Key attraction for visitors is the Hillsong band and the music. Through the use of media technology and by restricting the music repertoire to Hillsong worship songs, Hillsong standardizes its music and creates a global recognizable sound similar to the sound defined by the annually released studio recording of the Hillsong bands. Sydney supplies studio-recorded tracks that are mixed with the live performance of the live worship band in each local Hillsong church. The production of the »Hillsong sound« demonstrates the importance of media technology in creating a global aesthetics functioning as a means to render new modes of binding and creating commitment.

The performance style of Hillsong pastors is another striking similarity found across the Hillsong churches. The young pastors, who are often trained at Hillsong College in Australia, foster a young and hip style of dress and body image. 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. Similar to celebrities, Hillsong pastors use social media to present and promote themselves being »cool and hip«, crossing boundaries between celebrity culture and being a pastor, as pastor Carl Lenz from Hillsong NYC demonstrates. His popularity of being an inspirational speaker and pastor has increased since it is known that he is a personal friend of Justin Bieber and other celebrities.

With informal and entertaining presentations, Hillsong pastors bring a positive and encouraging Gospel message. The thematic sermons address the struggles of everyday life

23 Richard FLORIDA, *The Rise of the Creative Class Revisited*, New York 2011.

24 At Hillsong there are volunteer jobs available for everyone, but not everyone can do all volunteer jobs. For jobs with more responsibilities,

beliefs and lifestyle matter. Here the boundaries of being an inclusive church are encountered.



like jobs, money, relationships, and psychological issues like how to deal with disappointments and fear. The overall messages can be summarized in the slogan »Yes you can – with God«. The recurring practice of the altar call underscores Hillsong's revivalist roots and stresses that new beginnings are always possible.

## 6 Inside Hillsong Church: Multiple Audiences

One of the striking features of the Hillsong churches in Europe and the USA is that they are attracting a young and multi-ethnic audience. Based on my ethnographic research, several groups can be distinguished. The most active participants, expressed through their commitment in volunteering at the church, are young evangelical millennials. This group consists of Dutch youth (predominant white) raised various churches from mainline Protestant to Evangelical and Pentecostal church backgrounds. They resemble what Richard Florida calls the »creative class« that tend to concentrate in global cities.<sup>23</sup> They are the well-educated millennials, geographically mobile and predominantly working in the creative sector like the fashion industry (NYC) and the media industry (Amsterdam). Many of them are self-employed though not always by choice. They are the generation that, in spite of college degrees, is confronted with the new economy including the flexible labor market that does not offer stable jobs or long-term contracts. A second highly active and committed group of young people is those with a migrant background and originates from migrant churches to which I will turn later. Thirdly, Hillsong attracts international students who stay temporarily in the city. Their involvement varies but can be highly committed due to the easy way Hillsong connects to newcomers. The fourth group encountered consists of older »disappointed« evangelicals. They have been part of other churches but are looking for a place where their faith can be renewed and revival is taking place. The last two groups consist of Christian tourists and visiting youth groups. As Hillsong churches are located in favorable locations for city trips and Hillsong music is a popular Christian brand, Christian tourists like to add a visit to Hillsong to their »to do« list. Furthermore, as Hillsong holds church services throughout the day, youth pastors from other churches in the area like to bring their youth to Hillsong on Sunday afternoons.

The presence of multiple audiences demonstrates that Hillsong church services are appropriated in different ways. While the core groups relate to Hillsong as local church, for the latter two groups, Hillsong offers a Christian event and a free Christian concert. In terms of commitment and modes of belonging, a large number of the visitors are only temporarily involved; some drop by only once (tourists), others a few months (international students), while other highly mobile attendees visit certain months of the year.

An important benefit of the standardized liturgy and production of the Hillsong church is that it lowers the threshold for mobilizing visitors to participate as volunteers within the church. Participation is encouraged to the point that everyone can volunteer, in spite of one's beliefs.<sup>24</sup> One of the key values of Hillsong is to be an accepting and inviting church, making Hillsong excellent at establishing relationships with newcomers. Interested visitors who sign up for more information with their email address are invited for extensive networks of connect groups, social events, midweek bible study gatherings, etc. The church facilitates easy access to an extensive social network that enables people to find friends, jobs, housing, etc. Particularly for newcomers to the city and those who stay only temporarily in the city, this aspect is most valuable.

The question is why Hillsong, different from most other new churches, is able to attract a multiethnic audience. In conversations with migrant youth, I recurrently heard life stories of being raised in an ethnic migrant church of their parents. Yet it is because of the ethnic identity

of their former church that they have moved to Hillsong. They talk about the strict rules, the traditional practices, and the denied access to influence and participation because of their age. As I was told many times: »at Hillsong I can really be myself, here I feel appreciated and accepted«. These well-educated young people have outgrown their cultural background and experience ethnic boundaries as a hindrance for their aspiration for upward mobility. Alternatively, Hillsong offers a mode of cosmopolitan identification, based on inclusive religious discourse and shared economic aspirations; in other words, a socio-religious identity and lifestyle beyond ethnicity.

Hillsong presents itself predominantly as a »global« church. This is expressed in the visual rhetoric observed on the Hillsong website and in the videos shown during the services. By presenting a universal cityscape with fast moving and alternating iconic images of Hillsong's other locations, the world seems to blend into one global city as a place of opportunities, excitement, leisure, with at its center, the Hillsong church.

Hillsong's worship music with its emotional appeal and its aesthetics are most important in creating an inclusive cosmopolitan community. It demonstrates the impact of the global flow and circulation of worship music and the critical role of media through which religions are globalized.<sup>25</sup> Rather than formal ties of membership, worship music creates modes of binding across local and national boundaries and operates as an important identity marker.<sup>26</sup>

The banners »Welcome Home« at the entrance of the church and on the walls inside the worship space underscores Hillsong's intention to be an inviting community and to offer a place to belong. With the church's core metaphors of »Family« and a place called »Home«, Hillsong presents itself as an intimate, welcoming, open, and inclusive space where diversity is celebrated yet ethnic differences are neutralized. Also on stage, the ideal global village is evoked as the worship team – band and lead singers – represent Caucasians, Blacks, Asians, and other ethnic groups of color. Hillsong seems to consciously stage ethnic diversity to make sure that the diverse audience feels included.

However, when it comes to leadership positions and processes of decision-making, a different politics is observed. Here Australian pastors and »white« American and European volunteers dominate leadership teams.<sup>27</sup> The unspoken and unquestioned power difference and racial hierarchy within the global church network organization masks the limits of this expression of cosmopolitanism. Paradoxically, several interviewees with a migrant background, while having a job and career, expressed their future dream to have a paid position at Hillsong. In order to pursue their dream to be on staff at Hillsong, they are highly committed as a volunteer. But the only way to reach that goal is to be asked by the leadership of the church. They invest their time in many hours of volunteer work in the hope to gain a leadership position and eventually one of the few paid positions. In practice, I heard several conflicting stories of those who felt pressured to invest more time in the church but because of their studies and jobs were not able to do so. Hillsong's effort of creating

25 Thomas J. CSORDAS, *Modalities of Transnational Transcendence: Essays on Religion and Globalization*, Berkely 2009, 6.

26 Miranda KLAVER, *Worship Music as Aesthetic Domain of Meaning and Bonding: the Glocal Context of a Dutch Pentecostal Church*, in: Amos YONG/Monique INGALLS (eds.), *The Spirit of Praise: Music and Worship in Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity*, University Park 2015, 97-113, here 111.

27 Hillsong's gender politics displays an open pulpit for women. Hillsong promotes empowerment of women through their women's ministry called Sisterhood but within the boundaries of complementarianism. Women in leadership positions are always under the authority of men.

28 An exception is pastor Carl Lenz who has explicitly addressed the issue of race in the NYC church by publically supporting the black lives matter

movement, see for example [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2016/10/06/why-this-white-pastor-is-not-saying-all-lives-matter/?utm\\_term=.341c92c7f948](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2016/10/06/why-this-white-pastor-is-not-saying-all-lives-matter/?utm_term=.341c92c7f948) (2-4-2018).

29 Personal conversation with the pastor of Hillsong Amsterdam.

30 BOWLER/REAGAN, *Bigger, Better, Louder* (fn.19), 211.



an inclusive space of community and identity formation beyond categories of ethnicity and race supports migrant youth's resistance to be recognized by their ethnic identity and their aspirations for social mobility. But at the same time, because cultural differences are downplayed, uneven power relations and unequal social positioning are hardly addressed within the church.<sup>28</sup>

This demonstrates how Hillsong's attempt to stress a global identity and a form of Christian inclusive cosmopolitanism is at odds with diversity within the family of God. Furthermore, it hinders critical reflection on differences in power, forms of exclusion based on race, color, gender; in society as well within the church.

Stressing Hillsong's global identity as an inclusive term creates new boundaries as the Hillsong case in Amsterdam demonstrates. When Hillsong church in Amsterdam got started, Hillsong sought no contact with existing churches in the city. Recent established church plants were confronted with a number of their young people moving to Hillsong. According to the Amsterdam Hillsong pastor, his first goal was to build to church and demonstrate to help other churches »how to do church«. <sup>29</sup> From his perspective, Hillsong offers a hopeful concept of what the church in the 21<sup>st</sup> century should look like. Consequently, Hillsong's global outlook on the world leads to drawing new boundaries by excluding those churches who do not share their vision and their way of »doing church«.

## 7 Conclusion

The Hillsong megachurch network displays a globalized, mediatized expression of neo-pentecostal Christianity, which is the outcome of the dynamic engagement with the globalized context of cities. At Hillsong, one encounters a mode of performative prosperity gospel. The selection of iconic theatrical spaces cultivates a spiritual imagination of entertainment, excitement, fun, pleasure, leisure, and living the good life. The high quality of the production of the church services supports the narrative of success, the gospel of abundance, and reinforces the overall optimistic message of possibilities and empowerment. It is the God who identifies himself with youth and beauty, who wants believers to prosper, to be blessed, and be successful. In transnational church networks like Hillsong, Christian faith is connected to everyday life and empowers young peoples to pursue their dreams for the future. In the words of Bowler and Reagan, churches like Hillsong offer «... a sensory experience where beauty, celebrity, and marketing are fused into a soundtrack for the blessed». <sup>30</sup>

In spite of the conversionist rhetoric, most attendees of Hillsong church already have a church background yet they do experience a renewal of their faith. Based on extensive qualitative research, the number of new converts both in Hillsong Amsterdam as well in Hillsong NYC is very low. The results of the evangelistic efforts of Hillsong consists in part of offering a welcoming place for young Christians who without a contemporary church like Hillsong, might loose the connection with a Christian community. For ambitious migrant youth with a Christian background, Hillsong is a welcoming alternative for integration in the surrounding society as they experience the ethnic migrant churches or their parents as a hindrance for their aspirations in life. Hillsong, offering an inviting and welcoming community, can be a blessing for those Christians who stay in the city for a limited time. The rise of megachurch networks like Hillsong in global cities demonstrates the impact of globalizing processes today, changing boundaries of territory by boundaries of difference and reveal how people find belonging in networks of interaction, in which social relationships and patterns of belief become increasingly global and interconnected. ♦