Sarah moved from New Zealand to Sydney to attend university, and when she finished her degree, she decided to ‘do Europe.’ She had been living and working in London for three years when I met her on a Sunday morning in August 2011. When she arrived in the United Kingdom (UK), Sarah was lonely. It was hard making local connections while she worked temporary office jobs, so she took every opportunity to go out. Sarah started drinking. Regularly, and a lot. Then late one Saturday night—or more accurately, early one Sunday morning—Sarah found herself in a bathroom cubicle in a nightclub, her head spinning and her stomach heaving. She told me that she thought, “this isn’t right”. And then she looked up. On the back of the cubicle door was a poster inviting visitors to attend a service at one of Hillsong’s London churches. She had not been to church since she was young, but thought, “why not?” Sarah went to church that Sunday and has attended services nearly every week since. She has made friends through her church, she does volunteer work in the church’s community and, having found a permanent job, Sarah renewed her British working visa and prepared to live in the UK permanently, telling me “I’m so blessed.”

Sarah’s open and frank response to my simple question “when did you start coming to Hillsong?” is typical of many of the stories congregation members have shared with me when I attended Pentecostal and Charismatic church services in Australia and internationally. Building a personal conversion narrative seems critical to the conversion experience, and sharing this story becomes almost a compulsion. The words spill out. What makes Sarah’s experience so interesting is that her path from New Zealand to Sydney to London mirrors that of Hillsong Church, Australia’s biggest and best-known megachurch.

Brian Houston, founder and current head of Hillsong, explains that when he was a child, his parents left their positions in the Salvation Army in New Zealand to join a Pentecostal church “with nothing, really, at that time. We grew up in what would be a Housing Commission house”. Following this, Houston’s father “got filled with the Holy Spirit, so it was from there that he

1 The name has been changed.
became an Assemblies of God minister in New Zealand” (Australian Story: The Life of Brian 2005). It was this ‘filling’ with the Spirit that marks a turning point when Brian tells his story.

Today, Houston is the Senior Pastor of Hillsong Church, which his father, Frank Houston, founded as the Christian Life Centre in 1977 in Sydney. Brian, together with his wife Bobbie, ‘planted’ the Hills Christian Life Centre in 1983 from Frank’s original church. The Houstons merged the two centres—with other smaller churches that had, in turn, been planted from them—in 1999, when Frank Houston was stripped of his ministerial credentials after it was revealed that he had sexually assaulted a teenage boy thirty years earlier in New Zealand (Gibbs 2004). Brian oversaw his father’s removal from the church. After the scandal, he rebranded this ‘family’ of churches simply as Hillsong (Hillsong Family 2014).

This family of churches has since grown rapidly. In 1992, Hillsong planted international churches in London and Kiev and there are now Hillsong churches in South Africa, Sweden, Denmark, Spain, the United States (US), Germany, France, Russia, and the Netherlands. While definitions of ‘mega-church’ vary, if we take a megachurch as one with a weekly congregation of over 2,000 people, Hillsong clearly fits this category, and it was one of only twenty-one megachurches in Australia as recently as 2012 (Hughes 2013: 7). As a member of a Hillsong, Sarah has found herself part of a community that is bigger than many small cities in Australia. The Christian Life Centre may have held its first meetings in the homes of its forty-five members, but the church now has a congregation of around 20,000 in Sydney alone. A further 10,000 people attend their services in other Australian cities (O’Malley 2013).

Australia’s megachurches all represent Christian denominations, and all but three are Pentecostal churches—clearly the two phenomena are closely linked. As Sam Hey notes, the three megachurches that are not Pentecostal have practices and traditions strongly associated with Charismatic religion (2010: 26). These megachurches operate in much the same way that large businesses operate—they have warehouse-like buildings, large numbers of highly trained staff, large capital and investments, and an eye for exploring new markets, locally and internationally. Indeed, Hillsong Emerge—a church-based not for profit organisation—started a “Christian Business Directory” in 2000, which they sold in 2006 to a corporation that publishes similar directories in the US, UK and New Zealand (“Find a Christian Business,” 2014).2 This directory is explicitly aimed at helping consumers find businesses owned or managed by Christians, and also aims to allow “Christians in business to reach a loyal, targeted audience

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2 Hillsong Emerge is now known as Hillsong City Care.