



Soaring Down Under

by Jonathan Aitken

“WE PRIDE OURSELVES in punching above our weight here,” said the Australian minister of justice at a recent seminar in Hobart, Tasmania, on prisoner rehabilitation. His words ring true across a whole range of political, economic, social, and spiritual issues in this increasingly important country still known in the Northern Hemisphere as “Down Under.”

A three-week speaking tour across six Australian states has given me an upbeat perspective on Down Under, from its churches to its culture and character. Yet the Aussies themselves are often surprisingly downbeat, or at least restrained, when it comes to explaining their burgeoning sense of successful nationhood. They mutter gloomily about “the GFC” (global financial crisis) as if they had not noticed that their banks, their currency, their small deficit, their debt, and their mining industry have been largely unscathed by it. Perhaps it takes a visitor to analyze why the new Australia has been so little afflicted either by the pessimism of old Europe or the self-doubt of contemporary America.

Since the national religion here is sport, the role of God in Australian society is easily obscured. All glory, laud, and honor is more frequently accorded to cricketers than to Christians. Yet despite a general secularism, many churches are full. There is even a Bible Belt, the northwestern suburbs of Sydney, where the younger generation flock to evangelistic places of worship, most notably Hillsong, whose Sunday congregation exceeds 20,000.

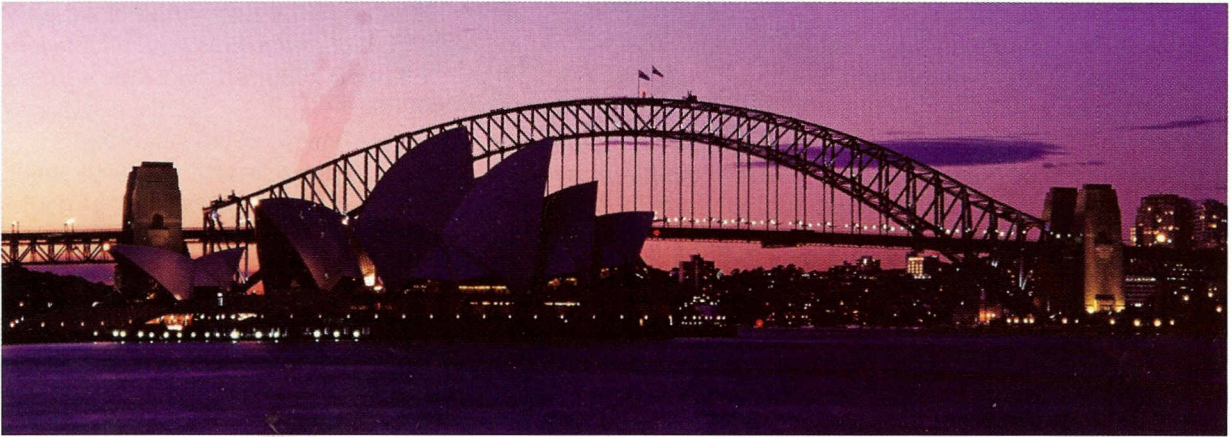
Hillsong is an octopus of a church whose Pentecostal tentacles have created six Australian campuses and two international worship centers in London and New York. I spoke at Hillsong’s hub, which is a modernist complex of buildings set in a business park 30 miles north of Sydney Harbor Bridge. At this location its principal auditorium seats 3,000. When it was opened by former prime minister John Howard, more than 7,500 worshippers turned up, most of them in their teens and early twenties. The astonished prime

minister, himself a dutiful Anglican, kept inquiring: What is happening? Why are these young people coming to this church in such huge numbers?

These questions are asked by many other Australians in tones that range from the envious to the imitative. Yet there is no great mystery about Hillsong’s appeal to the rising generation. The church has been led for the past 20 years by a dynamic pastor, Brian Houston, whose style has much in common with U.S. church leaders like Rick Warren and Bill Hybels. The preaching is biblical and spirit-filled, placing much emphasis on the relevance of church life to daily working life. More than 500 small groups, which Hillsong calls connect groups, act as a network of spiritual links to the main campuses. This network is energetically organized from the hub. So is church giving to good causes. At one recent Sunday service the Hillsong congregation donated \$160,000 in a single offering to a charity that fights the trafficking of Asian women into prostitution.

Asians loom large at Hillsong and in the national consciousness. Long gone are the days of White Australia and its racially exclusive immigration policy that would not even allow Asian spouses to become citizens by marriage. “In this country two Wongs don’t make a white,” cracked a 1960s minister as he refused to grant entry to the wife of a locally born Chinese Australian footballer. The quip accelerated the demise of White Australia. Today more than 12 percent of the country’s 24 million population are Asians—and rising. So are Asian businesses and students. At every venue on my speaking tour, particularly at universities, the largest element in the audience consisted of ethnic Chinese participants.

Australia’s churches are being revitalized by Asian believers. The country’s second city, Melbourne, used to be notoriously staid in its ecclesiology. This was heavily influenced by Scottish Presbyterians and Baptists, who exercised a puritanical hold on licensing laws, Sunday shop closures, and pub opening times. Not anymore. If a resurrected Queen Vic-



toria could come back to modern Melbourne, she would surely be amused by the high-spirited enthusiasm that sets the tone of the place. She might even go dancing in the aisles of once-gloomy churches built by the austere divines of her reign.

One ponderous inner-city edifice of 19th-century Anglicanism has now been reborn and renamed as the CrossCultural Church of Christ. Half of its services are in Mandarin and two-thirds of its worshippers are immigrant families who hail from Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia, Macau, and mainland China. These new Australians are exuberant and expansionary in their faith. In the prosperous suburbs it is common to find church notice boards in Chinese calligraphy. At the bottom of one of them I read the telling line: *English language service 10am every third Sunday.*

WHY IS THIS HAPPENING? Cynics say that God must have a sense of humor to preside over the rescue of European Christianity by representatives of the once-feared Yellow Peril. A more positive explanation is that spiritually minded Chinese, when liberated and geographically remote from the anti-Christian restrictions of the PRC, become on fire with thanks and praise for the blessings they receive in their new homeland.

Australia has well been described as the lucky country. It became prosperous in the 20th century as a farm for the British. Now it is booming as a quarry for the Chinese. But these material riches are only one part of the story.

As an island continent of climatic extremes, Australia has developed its own spirituality of survival and good neighborhood. Bush fires, cyclones, tidal waves, droughts, earthquakes, floods, and pestilences are an integral part of life here. A people who cope regularly with the eccentricities of God are

more tolerant and forgiving toward the eccentricities of man. One of the areas where this inclusiveness shows up is in the treatment of convicts. They have an affectionate status here, because they were the original settlers as deportees from English jails.

I was touring the country to celebrate the 30th anniversary of Prison Fellowship Australia, the antipodean offshoot of the charity founded by Charles W.

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Colson. His vision of offender rehabilitation and redemption is perhaps more vibrantly fulfilled here than in any country of the world. That is because from the Hillsong campuses to the old cathedrals and the new Chinese churches there seem to be plenty of dedicated Christians willing to volunteer to help the prisoners described by Christ as “the least of my brethren.” Their work adds an impressive dimension to the spiritual life of Australia. ✪

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