

Prophet.

**Pentecostal churches are not
waiting to inherit the earth.
They are taking it now, tax-free.**
By Adele Ferguson



-minded

This weekend more than 200,000 Australians will flock to Pentecostal churches to worship God, clap, sing, speak in tongues, faith heal, and donate 10% of their pre-tax weekly earnings. Some will buy CDs, books, DVDs, mobile-phone tunes, T-shirts, fridge magnets and even a children's DVD featuring Jesus as a superhero. Others will tune into their TV channels and web sites, visit their art galleries, schools and medical centres and even move their savings into church cash management trusts that hold millions of dollars but are unregulated. All of this is helping to fuel an industry that is turning over more than \$500 million a year and growing at warp speed.

Welcome to the new, commercial breed of Christianity that is sweeping Australia and spawning churches that are among the country's fastest-growing, most entrepreneurial and slickest enterprises. So powerful are the new Pentecostal churches that they are changing politics, influencing business, and turning their founders into millionaires.

Critics of Pentecostal churches say they look more like shopping malls than churches. But their members love it and the churches argue that their ballooning revenue is going back into the community.

In less than a decade, Pentecostalism has become Australia's fast-growing brand of Christianity, represented by churches such

as Hillsong Church, Paradise Community Church, CityLife Church, Christian Outreach Centre, Christian City Church, and former Wimbledon champion Margaret Court's Victory Life Centre.

Demand for their product is so strong that a new Pentecostal church is opening every four days, and figures from the National Church Life Survey (NCLS) show that Pentecostal churches — most of which come under the Assemblies of God (AOG) umbrella — now have the second-largest church attendance — 198,000 — outstripping the Anglicans, Uniting Church, Baptists and Lutherans, but behind the Catholic Church, which at last count had 764,800 practising parishioners.

If the Pentecostals continue to grow as they have in recent years, theirs will be the nation's biggest church within a decade. This is nothing short of a phenomenon, given that traditional churches have operated in Australia for hundreds of years. So the Pentecostals are a force to be reckoned with, particularly given the penchant of many of their leaders to mobilise their army of believers into politics and the business world. And they could become a bigger force overseas; there are plans to export, or plant, churches all over the world.

Bigness is part of their story, and they are success-oriented. The churches are also big on growth targets. Christian City Church is the most ambitious, with plans to open 1000 churches, with an average of 500 members each, by 2020. The AOG wants to increase the number of its churches nationwide

by one-third, to 1500, and appoint 2000 more ministers in the next couple of years. Hillsong wants to increase its membership of 18,000 and Paradise wants to lift its membership from 6000 to 10,000 in five years.

They are playing a powerful role in politics. The AOG set up its own political party, Family First, which won a Senate seat at the last federal election, and it has devotees in the Liberal Party. Some of the bigger Pentecostal churches, such as Hillsong, have the clout to attract regular visits from Prime Minister John Howard and Treasurer Peter Costello, and the Australian Labor Party has signalled its interest in doing more with these churches. Politicians are keenly aware of the growth of these churches — many of which are situated in the swinging voter areas, also known as the "mortgage belt" — and the influence they have over their members (see SECTS AND POLITICS, page 39).

Links with business are also growing. Hillsong, for example, has close links with Gloria Jean's Coffees, one of Australia's fastest-growing franchises (see THE BRAINS OF THE OPERATION, page 41), and companies such as National Australia Bank (NAB), QBE Insurance and Aon Australia are targeting the members of these churches.

The power of the Pentecostal churches can only increase in the business world. They are tapping into the business market with religious fervour. Many offer business directories, networking groups to help members set up small businesses and network existing ones, conferences and monthly breakfasts. Phil Baker, the pastor of Riverview



Heaven's half-dozen

Brian Houston

The founding pastor of the wealthiest church in Australia, Hillsong Church, and president of the Assemblies of God (AOG). Houston owns a waterfront property in the eastern suburbs of Sydney, a house in Glenhaven, and he is a silent partner in various property developments. He makes part of his money from overseas speaking engagements at other charismatic churches. He also receives the royalties from the "Christian resources" sold at the front of the church. Houston rides a Harley-Davidson motorcycle, appears on his own television programme, which is broadcast around the world, writes books and has the pulling power to attract visits to Hillsong by the Prime Minister, John Howard, and Treasurer, Peter Costello. Hillsong has 18,000 members and made \$40 million last year.

Nabi Saleh

Elder of Hillsong Church, a director of Southern Cross College of the AOG, a director of Jerry Savelle Ministries International, and a director of Kenneth Copeland Ministries Eagle Mountain International Church.

He has a 50% share in the fast-growing coffee shop franchise Gloria Jean's Coffees, which is valued by *BRW* at more than \$40 million. The other partner, Peter Irvine, is a member of Hillsong. Saleh has stakes in many businesses (see *THE BRAINS OF THE OPERATION*, page 41).

Phil Pringle

Pastor of Christian City Church at Oxford Falls in Sydney, which has a congregation of more than 7000 and revenue of more than \$38 million a year. He has set up churches all over the world. Pringle makes most of his money selling books and travelling the world, speaking at other contemporary churches. Pringle is an artist who sells his art through the church's gallery at Oxford Falls. His church is not part of the AOG.

Phil Baker

Pastor of Riverview Church in Perth and president of the coalition of charismatic and contemporary churches Australian Christian Churches. Baker appears on television every week in 50 countries, writes books,

Church in Perth, is hosting a series of business breakfasts around the country entitled *Leadership Lessons from the Roman Empire*. One such breakfast, held in Melbourne in May, attracted 500 business people, including some top executives from the NAB. Christian Outreach Centre is offering its members a five-day Business Achievers conference on Daydream Island in August at a cost of \$500. Its brochure says: "In just one week you will develop the strategies, skills and motivation to take your place among Australia's eminent business leaders."

Like all religions, the Pentecostals have a big advantage over the commercial world in that they do not have to pay tax, they do not file tax returns, they get government concessions and grants, much of their workforce is voluntary so they have relatively small wage bills, and there is little accountability and transparency about what they do or how they spend the money.

'Hijacked'

It is these tax breaks, the millions of dollars rolling in the doors of these churches, and the lack of accountability, that is fuelling a growing body of critics.

Philip Powell, a Pentecostal preacher and a former general-secretary of the AOG, is concerned by the more flamboyant Pentecostal churches. "It is my conviction that the present Pentecostal leaders like Brian Houston [pastor of Hillsong] and Phil Pringle [pastor of Christian City Church] have hijacked the godly movement, which was simply a fellowship of churches. They have turned it into a hierarchical denomination for selfish purposes and ends. It has become a fellowship of ministers, not churches," he says.

"Many of these ministers have made themselves multi-millionaires. They are no more than business magnates who benefit from the tax-free status of corporations that they lead. They are not 'pastors' but business managers who have cashed in on a loophole in the Western governmental tax system."

Houston says he is not an entrepreneur but considers himself a visionary. He says Hillsong's message is not about personal wealth, "but rather it's about personal effectiveness. We encourage people to live resourceful lives, enabling them to reach beyond themselves. It's the difference between faith to put food on your own table and the commitment to look beyond your

table and put food on the tables of others," he says.

Politicians are usually wary of antagonising such powerful churches, but not Carmen Lawrence, the national junior vice-president of the ALP. She has been asking questions in Federal Parliament about the lack of accountability and transparency.

Lawrence says she worked out that Hillsong had received almost \$800,000 in grants from government departments to fund various programmes, including family workers, youth activity services and "emergency relief". "I suspect the figure is larger than that. We haven't pinned down some of the questions, and the answers we are getting [from the Government] are evasive," she says.

Lawrence says it is essential that if taxpayers' money is involved, the grants and the use they are put to should be made public. "The real problem is that it isn't clear what the constraints and controls are, or the criteria for monitoring these grants, so we don't know whether the funds are being used to proselytise," she says.

But the churches themselves say there is nothing to worry about. They say the money



gives motivational speeches to business leaders and travels the world as a guest speaker at contemporary churches. Baker has a congregation of more than 3700, which generates more than \$3.5 million a year in revenue. His goal is to create a new brand of church that is non-denominational but brings together all contemporary churches, as well as some Uniting and Baptist churches. This organisation would replace the Australian Christian Churches and represent at least 400,000 people. Baker would head the new body, which he says will be launched within the next five months.

Ashley Evans

Pastor of Paradise Community Church in the Adelaide suburb of Paradise, and an executive director of the AOG. Evans has doubled the size of Paradise to 6000 members in five years. It generates annual revenue of more than \$5.3 million. Evans makes much of his money from “love offerings” paid to him by other Pentecostal churches when he appears as a guest speaker. Evans works on the basis of visions from God. The previous

pastor of Paradise was Ashley's father, Andrew, who left to set up the Family First Party. He won a seat in the South Australian Legislative Council. His brother Russel is a director and senior pastor of the Pentecostal Planetshakers City Church in Melbourne.

Neil Miers

International president of Christian Outreach Centre. Miers was one of handful of people who built up this church into one of the biggest Pentecostal groups in the country. In 1977, he founded the Suncoast Christian College and church. Today there are more than 1000 churches under the Christian Outreach Centre umbrella, located throughout Australia and overseas. The church in Australia generates more than \$48 million a year in revenue. In his role as international president, Miers has helped export the church to New Zealand, South Africa, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Germany, South America, Tonga, Western Samoa and Spain. Miers travels the world as a guest speaker at various conferences and churches.

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is being re-invested in community services — relevant community services. Houston says: “As a not-for-profit organisation, all our income goes back into the church and extensive services we provide. Last year our total turnover was \$40 million. Of this, 60% went directly towards helping people; 28% was for buildings and infrastructure, which is ultimately about people too, as you have to put 18,000 people somewhere; and 12% was for general administration.”

Whatever the case, the popularity of Pentecostal religion is unquestionable. Pastor Ashley Evans from Paradise Community Church says: “We are scratching where people are itching.” That itch has a lot to do with the way Australians are feeling.

Ruth Powell, a manager at NCLS Research, says there are many theories about why the Pentecostal churches are so popular. Some theories centre on their contemporary style of worship and the experiential nature of their approach to faith. Other theories centre on the churches' ability to offer certainty in times of change.

The more popular Pentecostal churches are tapping into a void in people's lives, offering a sense of community, fun, and a way to

alleviate financial responsibility. They do this by selling a message that is easy to buy: that Pentecostalism is about enjoying life now. In other words, if you embrace this brand of God, you will be rewarded financially and spiritually in this life, as well as the next. It is much easier to think that wealth and worldly success are signs of God's favour than to wait for happiness in the afterlife, as most traditional religions preach.

The New Zealand-born Houston, pastor of the biggest Pentecostal church, Hillsong, is one of the main proponents of prosperity theology. The author of *You Need More Money: Discovering God's Amazing Financial Plan for Your Life*, Houston writes: “Prosperity is definitely a result of applying God's word to your life.” In section two of the book, he adds: “It's God's will for you to prosper.”

Houston's wife Bobbie reinforces the here-and-now in her books and CDs, the most eye-catching being a CD entitled *Kingdom Women Love Sex*, which talks about everything from having a great sex life to keeping slim.

Father James McEvoy, a senior lecturer in theology at Flinders University, says this type of religion, prosperity theology, is a reinven-

tion of the gospel. “It is a distorted reading of the gospel,” he says. “The central symbol of the Christian faith is a failure.”

But the idea of having a good time on earth — financially and personally — is one reason Pentecostalism is so popular. It is entertaining, and the preachers, like all shrewd marketers, know how to reach their market.

David Millikan, a lecturer at Charles Sturt University and a minister of the Uniting Church, says the average suburban church is quiet to the point of being dull. He says charismatic churches have tapped into this and are the complete opposite: they are theatrical, alive and entertaining. They also target specific groups: children, women, men, teenagers and business leaders. This marketing and service is creating brand loyalty that most companies can only dream of.

Houston says: “The Church has been criticised for being small, empty, old and irrelevant, but it seems also to threaten some when it's big, successful, young and relevant.”

Technology plays a big role in helping these churches communicate with members and keep track of them. Many provide a transcript of the weekly sermons and an

events calendar on their web sites, as well as selling products and accepting online donations. Mobile phones, e-mail and web sites all enhance the way mega-churches work.

Extending the franchise

Like any good business, some Pentecostal churches are franchising their name, locally and overseas, by planting new churches, and they are big proponents of brand extensions, offering everything from financial services to paraphernalia. Hillsong has opened up in London and Kiev. All up, Hillsong's global empire, including assets, is estimated to be worth more than \$150 million. It broadcasts to 160 countries and the Houstons spend part of the year travelling the world, giving speeches at conferences and other charismatic churches.

Christian City is also frantically exporting and extending its brand. It did not exist 25 years ago and now it makes \$38 million a year in Australia. Globally, its revenue is believed to be more than \$100 million. It has more than 100 churches operating in Australia, New Zealand, Europe and the United States. The head church in Australia, Oxford Falls, which is run by Phil Pringle, includes a television studio, a cafe, art gallery, auditorium, two schools, as well as Oxford Falls Grammar School. Its Young Pathfinders is a business/life course run by successful business professionals to educate and empower young people for a prosperous life. It provides information on business principles. It sells online CDs, DVDs, videos, audio tapes, songbooks, and books that cost up to \$135.

Christian Outreach Centre, set up in 1974 and now a presence in 30 countries, makes \$48 million a year in Australia alone. It has 588 centres around the world, with 193 in Australia. The head office, Citipointe Church, is one of Australia's largest and fastest growing churches. It is located in Mansfield, Brisbane, on a vast 40-hectare property, with two auditoriums (one seats 3000), a chapel, a cafe, schools, a college and a day-care centre.

This is in sharp contrast to traditional churches, most of which were created overseas and imported to Australia.

All this growth, plus the tithing (giving 10% of pre-tax salary to the church), and not having to pay tax, is translating into prosperous churches whose leaders are flush with cash. A traditional Australian suburban

PENTECOSTALS AT A GLANCE

1 Pentecostalism is the fastest-growing segment of Christianity in Australia and the world.

2 More than 200,000 Australians attend Pentecostal churches each week, making it Australia's second-biggest church, after the Catholic Church.

3 Early Pentecostalism emerged at the beginning of the 20th century. It had a revival in the 1970s during the so-called charismatic renewal.

4 Most Pentecostals believe in exorcism, speaking in tongues, faith healing and, in general, they seek supernatural experiences. Many of the pastors of Pentecostal churches make decisions based on visions from God.

5 Prosperity theology is practised by the bigger Pentecostal churches, including Hillsong, Christian City Church and Paradise. This promotes the idea that wealth and worldly success are signs of God's favour.

6 Most Pentecostal churches are cash rich and expect members to tithe 10% of their pre-tax income. They also take weekly donations. Most services pass the plate three times and accept credit cards. An armoured truck arrives at Hillsong each Monday morning for the weekend takings, usually more than \$300,000.

7 There are few barriers to entry to set up a Pentecostal church because there is no overarching authority, the way the Vatican is the headquarters of the Catholic Church. Every four days a new Pentecostal church is planted in Australia.

church typically has fewer than 100 members and an annual budget of less than \$50,000. The average Pentecostal church has revenue 10 times that, and many of the pastors have become millionaires on the talk circuit and from the sale of books and DVDs. Powell says the royalties received and money earned from speaking overseas go to these pastors, but their profile comes from the church. "It is a bit like the Pope charging for speaking engagements, and then keeping the cash," he says.

Phil Baker, pastor of the Riverview Church, says people buy the medium before

the message. "Music is a part of that, so that is how you talk, using contemporary illustrations, getting rid of ritualism, so that it isn't boring," he says. Riverview has more than 3700 members and has more than \$3.5 million a year in revenue.

Ashley Evans, pastor of one of the biggest Pentecostal churches in the country, Paradise, says the success of Pentecostalism can be attributed to offering a service that people want. "We have a great band, a great service, which is full of life illustrations. We make it unpredictable with lots of surprises. Each service has lots of object lessons, a drama, songs, a story from someone. It breaks the whole thing up and keeps people listening," he says.

Paradise has a congregation of 6000, turns over more than \$5.3 million from its various business ventures and is about to run a fashion parade in Adelaide. "It will attract 2500 to 3000 women, making it one of the largest fashion parades in the country," Evans says.

Show and sell

Why are the Pentecostal churches so successful? Kate Mannix, editor of *Online Catholics*, says there have been many offshoots in the history of the Christian church. As a rule, this has occurred because the established church becomes stale, lacks piety, or loses energy. A charismatic leader emerges to enliven the church and often becomes the founder of a new denomination. But she says what is different about the Pentecostals is their aggressive partnership with capitalism and their "worldly" focus. "Pentecostals understand that their worship is the 'show' that brings in the punters, who then buy the merchandise," she says.

This is religion for a material age. And it partly explains the Pentecostals' move from obscurity to prominence, in numbers and in financial muscle, in Australia and the rest of the world in the past decade.

Marion Maddox, a lecturer at the school of art history, classics and religious studies at Victoria University in Wellington, New Zealand, says the marketing of the mega-churches would put a lot of commercial enterprises to shame. She says they use contemporary music, "the church is built like a barn with the ambience of a shopping mall, plasma screens, cameras, the feeling of attending the theatre, a casual dress code, a community feeling — all to make the

Sects and politics

Religion and politics have always made an unholy alliance, but in the past few years, that relationship has become increasingly powerful — and disturbing — in the United States and Australia. This was no better demonstrated than in the US, when President George W. Bush attributed his electoral victory to the votes of the evangelical movement.

Pentecostalism is the fastest-growing brand of Christianity in the world. Many of its beliefs are based on visions from God rather than on strict text. For instance, Bush does not call himself a Pentecostal, but rather a “reformed Christian”. Nevertheless, he believes in visions and inspiration from God. “I’ve heard the call. I believe God wants me to run for president,” he told *George* magazine in September 2000. In June 2003, he was quoted as saying: “God told me to strike at al Qaeda and I struck them. And then he instructed me to strike Saddam, which I did.” This received worldwide coverage but he never denied saying it.

Australia is similarly experiencing the influence of Pentecostal devotees. At the 2004 federal election, Pentecostal churches made a push into the secular world of Australian politics by taking seats in Parliament.

They did this in two ways: through the creation of the Family First Party, which was spawned by members of the Pentecostal Assemblies of God (AOG) church, and by joining the ranks of the Liberal Party. Marion Maddox, from the school of art history, classics and religious studies at Victoria University in Wellington, New Zealand, and author of *God Under Howard, the Rise of the Religious Right in Australian Politics*, says the election of a Family First senator heralds the growing power of the religious right.

Maddox says there is a strong thrust in these churches that the country should be run by Christians. For this reason, she says, the Pentecostals are not only gaining ground in politics by forming their own party, they already have a loud voice in the Liberal Party.

In South Australia, the founder of Family First, Andrew Evans, won a seat in the South Australian upper house on his first attempt. Evans is the former pastor of the Pentecostal



PETER COSTELLO:
A Hillsong visitor

WIDE LAURE

Paradise Community Church. His son Ashley took over the role, and another son, Russel, is a pastor of a Pentecostal church in Melbourne.

The Pentecostals' Liberal Party members include Louise Markus, a lay worker and member of Hillsong, who was approached by the Liberal Party to run for the Labor-held seat of Greenway in New South Wales. She won the seat, thanks to the support of her 18,000-member church. It was Hillsong that Treasurer Peter Costello addressed in June 2004, and in the week after the 2002 Bali bombing, Prime Minister John Howard opened the church's new \$25-million complex.

It was there that Howard noted Hillsong's rise. “You started with 45 members, I am told. I don't believe it. I cannot believe that there were only ever 45 in this congregation. You've gone from 45 at your first service in 1983 to 14,000 [now 18,000]. I've got to tell you that I don't think there's any side of Australian politics that could do a branch stack as good as that.”

The Liberal Party's state director in NSW, Scott Morrison, is a Hillsong member, as is NSW Liberal Party MP Alan Cadman. Cadman is also a strategist with the Lyons Forum, a group of right-wing Christian MPs who have a strong voice in developing Liberal Party policy.

Family First fielded candidates for most states at last year's federal election. Most missed

out — this time. Just days before the election, the Liberals struck a preference deal with the Family First Party, helping the Government secure at least four marginal seats.

But given that Pentecostalism is growing exponentially, it is only a matter of time before the church increases its presence in Parliament by mobilising its members to run and vote. It is no great political secret that governments these days are largely won or lost in the handful of marginal seats on the outer edges of our capital cities. Most of the bigger Pentecostal churches, with big congregations, are planted smack in marginal territory, the outer suburbs and the regions, such as rural Queensland and the central coast of NSW.

When Family First members presented themselves to the Australian public they went to great lengths to say the party was not being funded by AOG or any churches, but there are strong ties on the fund-raising side. The Electoral Commission's annual returns show that Family First has not declared anything at a federal level.

Philip Powell, former general secretary of the AOG and pastor of Pentecostal church Christian Witness Ministries, says Hillsong is a religious replica of Howard's political philosophy. “Hillsong is the Howard Government at prayer,” he says. “They are both individualistic in their approach; they don't believe in the deserving poor, and the charitable model is to go to poor people and show them how to become rich,” Powell says. “It is a potent mix when money, religion and politics join forces.”

IT IS A POTENT MIX WHEN MONEY, RELIGION AND POLITICS JOIN FORCES. PHILIP POWELL

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experience as little about God as possible”, she says.

The pastors of these mega-churches act like chief executives and use aggressive business tactics to build their congregations. Hillsong’s constitution reads like the sort of corporate constitution most chief executives can only ever dream of. It allows the pastor, Brian Houston, to act as the chairman and choose the board. It lists a set of objectives, few of which mention God, and if the church is wound up, the assets are sold off to pay creditors and the rest are transferred to a similar institution chosen by the board. It does not stipulate that the remaining assets have to stay in Australia.

Theoretically, this means Houston and his hand-picked board could wind Hillsong up and transfer any remaining assets to a country of his choice. Given that some Pentecostal pastors say they make decisions about the church based on visions that come to them from God, this type of constitution brings into question the organisation’s corporate governance — or the lack of it.

The churches also lack scrutiny. For example, the AOG has a business arm, Australian Christian Services, which provides advice, assistance and products in four main areas: investment, finance, insurance and fleet management. It offers a cash management fund, called AOG SmartSaver. The advertisements for SmartSaver call for people to invest their “nest eggs”.

Because SmartSaver is categorised as a not-for-profit fund, it is unregulated by the Australian Securities & Investments Commission. To qualify to operate a cash fund as “unregulated”, the fund must have a sponsor body. In this case, it is the AOG, which is responsible for managing and underwriting the investments SmartSaver holds. This allows it to make some interesting comments in its marketing brochures: “In this way, apart from investing our own cash into this fund, the Assemblies of God in Australia stands behind the investments,” it says.

It goes on to say that most cash management funds are not specifically guaranteed, rather they are prudentially managed and sponsored. But the biggest statement it makes is: “For example, even one of the big four banks could collapse and there would be no underlying guarantees for their cash management funds. However, in the light

of the mandate of our fund to only invest in secure, very low-risk, liquid investments, any loss of capital is extremely unlikely,” it says.

The country’s big four banks make public their annual returns every six months, make profits of billions of dollars a year and are likely to be bailed out by the Reserve Bank of Australia if anything were to go wrong, so some see the AOG’s statements as outrageous, particularly given that the AOG’s annual report for 2003 reveals a surplus of \$63,000 in 2003 and net assets of \$288,531, compared with a loss of \$1 million in 2002. Notes to the accounts reveal that the bulk of the liabilities are to do with SmartSaver and most of the money is held in “investments”. The report does not specify what type of investments they might be.

NUMBER TWO WITH A BULLET

Changing patterns of church attendance, 2001

DENOMINATION	WEEKLY ATTENDANCE	% CHANGE SINCE 1996
Catholic	764,800	-13
Pentecostal	198,000	30
Anglican	177,700	-2
Uniting	126,600	-11
Baptist	112,200	8
Lutheran	40,500	8
Presbyterian	35,000	-3
Salvation Army	27,900	-7

SOURCE: NATIONAL CHURCH LIFE SURVEY / CENSUS

Michael Wyatt, the chief executive of Australian Christian Services, denies that the web site says SmartSaver is safer than a bank. “Like every investment, there is some level of risk. We would never suggest otherwise. However, we conservatively invest and manage our funds and make every effort to ensure the investment is safe,” he says.

Wyatt says the AOG Development Fund (AOG SmartSaver), in the period to March 31, 2005, had \$19.4 million invested. “We would like to see this figure grow significantly,” he says.

He says Australian Christian Services distributes all profits annually to the Assemblies of God in Australia group, a not-for-profit entity. “These funds are then distributed to a range of AOG national entities including our state offices, Teen Challenge, Youth Alive, Southern Cross College and church

planting initiatives. This leaves ACS with a marginal net asset position of approximately \$50,000.”

Media messiahs

Tanya Levine, a former member of Hillsong, who has been commissioned by Allen & Unwin to write a book on her experiences, says: “As technology skyrocketed in the 1990s so did Hillsong. They capitalised on people’s willingness to engage with technology as a necessary currency.”

Levine says the thrust of Hillsong’s marketing is about success. Success is aligned with salvation and heaven, failure is aligned with sin and hell. “All you have to do is follow your demographic’s rules, and you are guaranteed a formula for all manner of success. And what could more appealing than being successful for God?”

She says Hillsong, and churches like it, with the vigorous support of conservative “Christian-based” governments, are clearly asserting that they own the rights to the copyright of God. “The monopolisation of God/truth by these big churches in God’s name suggests they have acquired the intellectual property rights to God. While they would assure you that other brands provide healthy competition, Hillsong are hoping to be to church what Band-Aid is to adhesive bandages. God’s ‘Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval’ follows somewhere after that as a benefit of the product sold.”

Mannix says Pentecostals are canny when it comes to evangelism. She says they appeal to the young, the vulnerable, and the singles — particularly those with high disposable incomes.

Much has been made of the rise in numbers of people attending Pentecostal churches, but less well known is the high drop-off rate. According to the NCLS, 28% of Pentecostal members arrive, disaffected, from other churches. But 15% also switch out, returning to former allegiances or choosing new ones. And 17% drift out of the church altogether after their Pentecostal experiences. So although there has undoubtedly been an increase in Pentecostal membership, it is not as great as is claimed, and many are lost to Christianity altogether.

The next census will be conducted in 2006 and all religions are waiting with bated breath to see the collateral damage Pentecostalism is wreaking on traditional churches. ●

The brains of the operation

If the mixture of business, politics and religion is one of the most potent forces around, then Nabi Saleh is someone to watch. Saleh is an elder (or director) of Hillsong Church and a director of two of the most powerful United States religious groups. He is also a 50% shareholder in the fast-growing Gloria Jean's Coffees franchise, which has grown into a business with 327 stores in 13 countries and annual sales of more than \$100 million.

Saleh is the business brains behind Hillsong, the richest and biggest church in the country, which is becoming more political and influential (see SECTS AND POLITICS, page 39).

Saleh is able to mix business with religion because he is a strong advocate of prosperity theology, which preaches that wealth and worldly success are signs of God's favour. That means good health, prosperity, and a place of respect and power in society. Gloria Jean's Coffees is valued at \$40 million, according to *BRW*.

In a recent article, Saleh said: "We are committed to building a unified family [at Gloria Jean's]. Everything we do is based on family and family values. Once you are family, you are always family — it is no different from how it is in your real family. There are times for reprimanding and times for learning, and times for setting the record straight, but our goal is to equip our family members with success, and out of their success comes ours."

A search of the Australian Securities & Investments Commission (ASIC) database reveals a complex web of company structures, trusts and nominee companies. Although there is no legal connection between Hillsong and Gloria Jean's Coffees, there is certainly a strong commercial connection. Some of the best Gloria Jean's franchises are owned by Hillsong members, which helps Hillsong because they give 10% of their pre-tax dollars to the church. There are also Gloria Jean's coffee stalls at the many Hillsong conferences held each year, along with Gloria Jean's outlets at the Hillsong Church at Baulkham Hills. Saleh uses his Assemblies of God connections (he is a director of the AOG Southern Cross College) to promote Gloria Jean's at other Pentecostal churches such as Paradise Community Church in Adelaide.

ASIC reveals that Saleh has many business interests, including Gourmet Foods Australia, Petra Gourmet Coffee, Brothers Gourmet Coffees, Maranatha Import Export (which sells private-label coffee to supermarkets), and he is

a director of Tea & Coffee Traders. Saleh does not own Gloria Jean's directly, but his wife, Angela Saleh, and daughter, Nicole Saleh, own equal shares in Tea & Coffee Traders, which owns 50% of Jireh (the owner of Gloria Jean's). The other 50% of Gloria Jean's is owned by Peter Irvine, whom Saleh met at Hillsong many years ago. The pair recently spent \$US16 million buying the 150-store Gloria Jean's chain in the US. They will pay a further \$US7.3 million in licence and consulting fees over the next six years.

The clever branding and franchising of Gloria Jean's is mirrored at Hillsong. Hillsong has only two churches in Australia, yet it has attracted the big men of Australian politics, John Howard and Peter Costello, on more than one occasion.

Saleh is highly skilled when it comes to business. In the NSW Supreme Court in February 1992, *Columbia Coffee & Tea and Another v. Churchill and Others* trading as Nelson Parkhill, reveals a complex set of claims, cross-claims and defences. Saleh was a shareholder and director of Columbia Coffee and a director of another private company, Donyoke.

Nelson Parkhill was the auditing firm retained by Columbia to prepare its June 1987 audited

accounts. In September Saleh, who was running Columbia, wanted to buy the shares of one of the directors of Columbia, Bruce Saunders. A few months later he changed the deal to Donyoke buying them. But Columbia was in a worse financial position than the accounts showed. The deal was aborted and Columbia and Donyoke sued the auditor, alleging breach of contract. Donyoke sued for \$2.6 million. Nelson Parkhill cross-claimed against Saleh and Saunders. Saunders sued Donyoke for breach of contract and sued Saleh and others for breach of contract.

The court found that the auditors should pay limited costs because they were not made aware of some salient features of Columbia, including overseas income. The court found that Saleh knew more about the company than the auditors, as he was running the company and was the main source of information. The court ordered Donyoke to pay the auditor's costs. It ordered the auditors to pay \$1 to Columbia and pay Columbia's costs. The Saunders proceedings resulted in the Saleh companies being ordered to pay Saunders \$420,000 plus interest of \$135,803.17, plus costs.

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