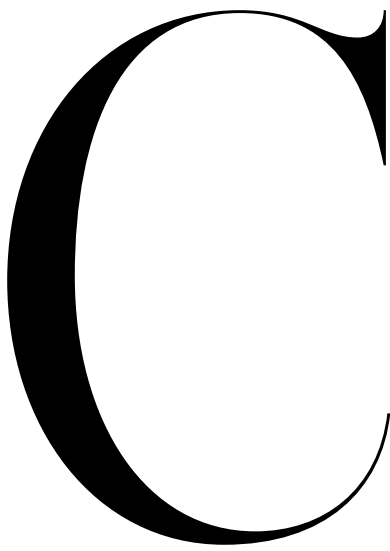




# THE SWAGGERS 'S AR

WITH THE LORD AS HIS SWAGGER COACH, **PASTOR CARL LENTZ** IS TURNING HILLSONG CHURCH IN NEW YORK CITY INTO A PENTECOSTAL POWERHOUSE AND A DESTINATION FOR THE IN CROWD. DRAWN BY HIS CONCERTLIKE SERMONS AND POP-IDOL LOOKS, LENTZ'S FAST-GROWING FLOCK OF GROUPIES INCLUDES JUSTIN BIEBER, NBA SUPERSTARS, AND YOUNG HOLLYWOOD CELEBS. BUT WHOM, EXACTLY, IS THIS NEW APOSTLE OF COOL SEEKING TO GLORIFY?

**BY HOWIE KAHN  
PHOTOGRAPHS  
BY ROBBIE FIMMANO**



**CARL LENTZ STEPS INTO A CLOUD OF SILVER-BLUE** light and hits the stage at the venerable New York City concert venue Irving Plaza, primed to bring the Word. The 34-year-old pastor of Hillsong Church NYC is wearing his Sunday best: black YSL wing-tip boots, black Nudie jeans, and a short-sleeved All Saints denim work shirt. He's backed by an 11-piece rock band that sounds like a born-again Coldplay and a neon-lettered projection: ALWAYS. ONLY. JESUS. Sweeping back his mohawk as shreds of rainbow disco-ball light pass across his bearded face, Lentz revs into his first 45-minute sermon of the day. "Going to church doesn't make you a Christian, just like going to Krispy Kreme doesn't make you a doughnut"; then, "If you think I'm one of those weird stalker pastors . . . you're right." Lentz scans the two-tiered auditorium packed with congregants—they're mostly in their twenties and thirties, with a smattering of recognizable actors and athletes. But the range of true believers here also encompasses suburbanites, hurricane-devastated families from the Rockaway section of Queens, and people praying to beat cancer or to find financial stability. They hang on Lentz's every word: "We're in the control-freak capital of the

world, where people want everything but want to give up nothing. When it's always only Jesus, you're not the boss—He is."

As Lentz paces the stage on this sweltering mid-July afternoon, balancing quick, sharp movements with sudden moments of reflective stillness, he comes off as less feverish holy roller than cool Pentecostal populist—his message being that of love, acceptance, and total surrender. Lentz delivers it in expressions of faith so pithy and catchy they play back in your head like a pop song: "You don't have to believe to belong here." "It's not a *feel*-better message, it's a *be*-better one." "We don't want your money, but God wants *everything*." They drive his preaching style—what he calls his "homiletical habitude." Lentz, who was born into a devout Christian family, spent his early years in a white-collar suburb of Chicago, but when he was 11, his dad, a television-ad salesman for Pat Robertson's Family Channel, took a job at the network's headquarters in Virginia Beach—that's where Lentz picked up his slight southern twang, which intensifies when he preaches. "I'm going to say things that disrupt you," Lentz says, wrapping up his sermon. "It's the full Gospel—I have to do it. I owe you that as the pastor of this church." On cue, the house band strikes up, and Lentz quickens his cadence to match the building bass line. "We're going to sing our way out of here," Lentz says. The crowd sways to the music, raising their hands in surrender. Lentz blesses them all, then exits stage left.

"He is going to be *huge*," predicts today's guest speaker, Priscilla Shirer, a 38-year-old minister. A rising star in her own right, Shirer was flown in from Dallas to lighten Lentz's load. He normally preaches at all six Irving Plaza services, beginning at 10 A.M., with lines of devotees wrapped around the block for each


one. But today he is leading only the last three services because he's running on three hours of sleep, having just returned from the annual Hillsong Conference in Sydney, Australia.

Hillsong NYC exudes a start-up vibe, but the church is actually a franchise. It's an extension of the Australian Pentecostal megachurch and multimedia conglomerate Hillsong, which has more than 20,000 members in the Sydney area, chart-topping musical acts, DVDs, books, and satellite churches in 11 countries—and took in \$58.3 million in 2012 (including \$25.9 million from tithes). After initially receiving financial support from the mother ship, Lentz says, Hillsong NYC, which passes around black donation buckets at every service, is now self-sustaining. Lentz was educated in the early 2000s at Hillsong International Leadership College, where he met his future Hillsong NYC partners: Laura Lentz, his wife and fellow pastor, and Joel Houston, the 33-year-old son of Hillsong's cofounders, Brian and Bobbie Houston. But it's Lentz, with his supernatural magnetism, who is the face of Hillsong's first foray into American Christendom. "People call New York the church-planting graveyard," Lentz says. And yet, just three years after its launch, Hillsong NYC draws 6,000 people to its services every Sunday and has just added two more at a chapel in the Gramercy Park neighborhood. "I see our church taking ground in a major way," Lentz says. "In five years, I want a giant version of what it is now."


Lentz has already shared the pulpit with megapastors like Joel Osteen and T.D. Jakes at Christian conferences. This month, he'll preach to sellout crowds at Hillsong's debut conferences in America, first at New York's Radio City Music Hall, then at the Nokia Theatre in Los Angeles. Meanwhile, Lentz's digital persona is going viral. He has 65,000 Instagram

FAITH'S  
NEW  
WAVE

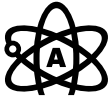
Five next-gen gurus who are disrupting religion's status quo.




**NONDENOMINATIONAL CHRISTIANITY**  
**ROB BELL, 43**  
House of Worship: N/A  
A recent Los Angeles transplant, Bell—the founder and former pastor of Mars Hill Bible Church in Grandville, Michigan—is now a roving, skinny-tie-wearing preacher. He's questioned whether hell is real, lectured at L.A.'s Viper Room, and been an outspoken supporter of gay marriage.




**JUDAISM**  
**YEHUDA AND MICHAEL BERG, 41 AND 40**  
House of Worship: The Kabbalah Centre, L.A.  
The deceptively schlubby sons of founders Rav and Karen Berg serve as codirectors of the A-list-packed organization. Yehuda is a spiritual adviser to Ashton Kutcher, while Michael is the cofounder—with Madonna—of the charity organization Raising Malawi.



**ATHEISM**  
**CHRIS STEDMAN, 26**  
House of Worship: Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts  
An ex-evangelical Christian turned openly gay atheist, this tat-sleeved lightning rod is leading the charge—through his frequent panel appearances, his 2012 memoir, *Faithist*, and his activism against religious intolerance—to include his fellow faithless in interfaith dialogues.



**SUNNI ISLAM**  
**USAMA CANON, 36**  
House of Worship: Ta'leef Collective, San Francisco  
After embracing the Koran in 1996, this square-jawed former Christian with a fondness for natty duds began reaching out to converts as an in-demand lecturer. In 2005, he founded his nonprofit educational center—a "safe space" for exploring the boundaries of Islam.



**SOUTHERN BAPTIST**  
**STEVEN FURTICK, 33**  
House of Worship: Elevation Church, Charlotte, North Carolina  
Since launching his church in 2006, Furtick has expanded his flock to seven campuses of nearly 15,000 evangelicals combined. Congregants love his boy-band good looks and can be seen wearing the church's black rubber rings and toting *Greater*, his 2012 best seller.

SETTINGS EDITOR: SARAH SCHUSSEIM. GROOMING BY ENRICO MARIOTTI AT SEE MANAGEMENT. ILLUSTRATIONS BY TODD DEWILDER.



# THE CIRCLE OF LOVE

CARL LENTZ HAS A KNACK FOR MAKING FAMOUS FRIENDS, FROM TRUE BELIEVERS TO ADORING ADMIRERS.



**1 ANNASOPHIA ROBB**    **2 KEVIN DURANT**    **3 SCOOTER BRAUN**    **4 DAMON DASH**    **5 JEREMY LIN**    **6 VANESSA HUDGENS**    **7 JUSTIN BIEBER**    **8 TYSON CHANDLER**

The Colorado-raised *Carrie Diaries* star uses Hillsong NYC as a cure for homesickness and now lives in the same apartment building as Lentz.

Lentz baptized the NBA superstar and serves as his spiritual counselor; the two hit the gym together whenever they're in the same city.

Braun's first reaction to Lentz? "That guy is definitely not a pastor!" Now Lentz has the full trust of Bieber's Svengali.

The Roc-a-Fella Records cofounder recently visited Hillsong NYC, telling Lentz: "That was like a rock concert with a message."

When he's back in New York, the former Knicks and current Houston Rockets point guard often attends Lentz's services.

The *Spring Breakers* co-star and her actor boyfriend, Austin Butler, are Hillsong NYC regulars and friends with Lentz's whole family.

Last year, Lentz and the King of Teen Pop bonded over pickup b-ball; now they exchange texts about Scripture every day.

With his wife, Kimberly, the Knicks' star center traveled with the Lentzes to this year's Hillsong Conference in Sydney, Australia.

followers, who "like" it when he mugs beside a tank-topped Justin Bieber (the two trade Scripture-based texts daily) or poses with the newly baptized—by Lentz—NBA superstar Kevin Durant and Jay-Z (snapped on the day Durant, with Lentz's spiritual counsel, signed with Roc Nation Sports). Lentz conveys a hip, iconoclastic image: religion in a designer wrapper.

"It's a reaction against the fundamentalist evangelical culture of the eighties and nineties," says Brett McCracken, the author of *Hipster Christianity: When Church & Cool Collide*. "Dynamic speakers have always risen to the top, from Charles Spurgeon to Billy Graham. The difference now is pastors like Lentz wear skinny jeans and beards and quote Jay-Z. They gain authenticity from caring about the same things as you do. Part of the brand is saying

you don't think about the brand."

Lentz is aware that endorsements from Bieber and Durant, especially when tweeted and Instagrammed, pay dividends. "I'm an advertiser," Lentz reasons. "You are God's ambassador—as if He is making his appeal through you. We're essentially His commercial."

**IN THE PENTECOSTAL WORLDVIEW CARL LENTZ** subscribes to, all human talents are expressions of the Holy Spirit. Lentz believes his swift ascent is part of God's plan, his past full of portent. His earliest memories involve working in a soup kitchen and ministering to prisoners with his father. As a teenager, he says, he gradually turned away from God—toward basketball, earning a walk-on spot as a shooting guard at North Carolina State. "I was teammate of the

year," Lentz says, "breaking up fights, signing guys out of jail." But he left the team during his sophomore season. "Something in my heart shifted," he continues. "I felt like if I stayed, I couldn't serve God. I felt like I was going to die."

At age 20, Lentz lit out for California, where he attended King's Seminary in Van Nuys while working part-time at the Gucci store on Rodeo Drive. His pastor in Virginia Beach, Wave Church's Steve Kelly, suggested that Lentz check out Hillsong International Leadership College. Attending Hillsong after King's, Lentz says, summoning a basketball analogy, was "like going to UNLV instead of Princeton. Princeton wins with backdoor cuts, whereas UNLV is running, gunning, getting dunks, and popping their jerseys on the way back up the floor. That's the way I wanted to relate to Jesus."

"I see our church taking ground in a major way,"

After marrying Laura and graduating in 2003, Lentz moved back to Virginia Beach and jumped into the ministry at Wave Church, where he rapidly built a following with his hip-hop-infused “Soul Central” services. Then, on New Year’s Eve 2009, Lentz flew to New York to meet Joel Houston—who was already well known as the frontman of the Christian-rock band Hillsong United—to discuss a scenario that the two had dreamed about in Sydney: a Hillsong church in Manhattan. A couple of months later, when they got the go-ahead from Joel’s parents, Lentz jumped at the opportunity, which he views as a manifestation of God’s plan. The night Lentz, his wife, and their three young children pulled into Brooklyn, he says, the family car was broken into. “We couldn’t find a place to live, because you have to prove you make, like, 900 grand a year,” Lentz says. “So by God’s grace, some real-estate agent, who just loved us, found us a spot in Williamsburg. It was a brand-new building, and the dude cut us a deal. We have a doorman, which was all my wife wanted to feel safe.”

In the beginning, Hillsong NYC was less a church than a series of informal meetings on park benches and in pizza joints. Lentz recalls canvassing the streets with Houston, talking to whomever they could about Christ. The size of their meetings grew, and after one attendee fainted in an overcrowded TriBeCa apartment, Lentz decided it was time to seek a larger venue. A Hillsong contact who works for the concert-promoting group Live Nation helped Lentz secure Irving Plaza, and Hillsong NYC held the first of its weekly services there in February 2011.

As his church grows in numbers and notoriety, Lentz knows he’ll be subjected to intense scrutiny—not least because of Hillsong HQ’s controversial past. There was the admission from Joel Houston’s grandfather Frank Houston, a leader in the Australian Pentecostal movement and Hillsong’s patriarch, that he had sexually abused a boy in New Zealand. Hillsong Church is also the target of widespread allegations of homophobia. Lentz says gays are welcome at Hillsong NYC, but he declines to address the topic of same-sex marriage with me. It’s clearly not worth the risk. Lentz maintains that his job is more about uniting people than dividing them. “It’s harder to feel welcome in some local churches than it is to meet Jesus,” Lentz says elliptically. “If Jesus walked into New York City, he wouldn’t be able to get into some of the places they profess to worship him in.”

**WHAT SOME PEOPLE CALL SWAGGER, CARL LENTZ** calls the grace of God. Justin Bieber’s longtime manager, Scooter Braun, says Lentz “has that X-factor, that thing you’re born with that makes people gravitate toward you. I’m a proud, practicing Jew, but you don’t have to be Christian to be moved by Carl’s words and his passion.” When Braun and Bieber met Lentz for the first time—introduced by a mutual friend, the Seattle pastor Judah Smith, backstage at a Bieber concert in New Jersey—Braun was wary. “I’d had bad experiences with people claiming they were all about God,” Braun says. “My reaction was just to get him out.” But when they met again at a pickup basketball game at Shaquille O’Neal’s house in L.A., the two men bonded. “Carl has never asked for anything other than friendship,” Braun says, “and has given nothing but friendship in return.”

Lentz has earned the trust of many young famous Christians. At that same 5 P.M. service in mid-July, the 24-year-old actress Vanessa Hudgens and her 21-year-old boyfriend, Austin Butler, were seated in the front row, with Butler’s costar in *The Carrie Diaries*, AnnaSophia Robb, 19, a row back. As Lentz began to preach the Word, Robb tapped out notes on her iPhone. When the pastor left the stage, Robb, who recently moved into the same apartment building as the Lentzes, turned to me and said, “You can feel the favor of God in this church.”

After his sermon, upstairs in Irving Plaza’s greenroom, Lentz meets with a grieving couple who just lost their 4-year-old son in a car accident. Lentz prays with them, huddling in a tight circle, finishing just in time to change back into his stage clothes and deliver again at the seven o’clock service. When Lentz hauls himself back to the greenroom 45 minutes later, he’s gutted. He shuts the door and sits gingerly on a couch, alone, brushing his hair back. He leans forward, elbows on knees, hands joined, eyes closed. He’s sweating and sniffing; a tear runs down his cheek. One more service to go.

Lentz quickly collects himself and opens the door to find Roc-A-Fella Records cofounder Damon Dash waiting, unannounced, with an entourage of two.

“That was like a rock concert with a message,” Dash says, introducing Lentz to someone he refers to as “the biggest DJ in China.”

“You mind if I get your details?” Lentz asks. “Give you a holler? Grab a coffee?” The two exchange numbers, and Lentz heads back downstairs to preach his final sermon of the night.

“Jesus,” Lentz says, bathed again in silver-blue light, “I pray tonight you have your way. There will not be one of us who leaves here as we walked in.”

**FOUR DAYS LATER, LENTZ HITS THE ROAD:** There’s Hillsong’s European conference at London’s O2 Arena; an event in Joplin, Missouri, called Project Restoration, to which Lentz was personally invited by a woman who’d driven to New York just to ask him to heal her tornado-ravaged town; and a trip to preach in New Zealand. On the day Lentz returns to New York, nearly three weeks later, he heads to Harlem to coach his church’s basketball team in a game at storied Rucker Park. He rolls uptown in a caravan of Chevy Tahoes filled with former and current NBA talent, including the Golden State Warriors’ All-Star forward David Lee. Justin Bieber’s onetime “swagger coach” Ryan Aldred, a.k.a. Ryan Good, sits in the back of one SUV. “All the other teams are sponsored by rap labels and drug dealers,” Lentz says. “We’re the only church team in the history of the league.”

During the game, Lentz, in a loose-fitting Ksubi Baddies tank top and a camouflage baseball cap, sits anxiously on the bench, eyes narrowed, turning his cap forward then backward. He appears even more intense than he does in church. By the fourth quarter, Lentz’s squad of ringers, the Hillsong NYC Hustlers, have a 15-point lead. When Lee seals the deal with his third dunk in a row, Lentz shoots up off the bench and exchanges a flying body bump with his Warrior. His commitment to winning is total.

That was made clear four Sundays earlier, during his final sermon of the night. Wiping sweat from his brow under the disco ball, Lentz cited John 6:53 and spoke of a total commitment to Christ: “Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and *drink His blood*, you have no life in you.” He then explained the meaning of Jesus’ words: “When you take a bite of me, when you really follow me, *everything* in me goes in you—you can’t pick and choose.” Lentz leaned out over the edge of the stage, his voice rising. “You have to be *consumed* with this. I’m talking about *flesh of my flesh, blood of my blood*, everything in me, in you, and if you’re not about that, you need to go follow somebody else.”

Lentz was ostensibly talking about his savior, but it almost sounded like he meant himself. “Because this is not a game. I am not a circus. I am not just traveling around doing cool things. I am after followers.” ■

Lentz says. “I want a giant version of what it is now.”