

Disgraced evangelist in hiding after being stripped of licence, Kelly Burke, SMH 2002/03/27

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Disgraced evangelist in hiding after being stripped of licence

Kelly Burke, Religious Affairs Writer
SMH, Wednesday, 27 March 2002, Page 8
NEWS AND FEATURES
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He was one of Australia's most prominent and internationally lauded evangelists a champion of Christian youth and a motivational speaker who convinced thousands that the pursuit of money and fame was a godly business. Now Pat Mesiti is in disgrace and in hiding, sacked as national director of Australian Christian Churches and stripped of his licence to minister.

Gone is the Pat Mesiti Ministries signage that distinguished the entrance of his Castle Hill mansion. But the 4000-strong congregation of the Assemblies of God church Hillsong, where Mr Mesiti is based, remains in the dark. According to Assemblies of God (AoG) documents obtained by the Herald Mr Mesiti was sacked after allegations of sexual misconduct. It is understood the allegations were not of a criminal nature.

We are aware that the above information may be a surprise and shock to some of you and therefore we have deliberately chosen to restrict this letter to our ordained and probationary ministers, the confidential document said. We cannot see any reason for this to be announced to your church or further afield.

The national president of AoG, Brian Houston, who is also Hillsongs senior pastor, denied there was a cover-up. This whole area of sex abuse and predatory behaviour is devastating ... but I believe we have tried to deal with this issue with integrity and honesty, said Mr Houston, speaking from Los Angeles. But the scandal may prove devastating on more than one front for the church, which has spent two years rebranding itself as Australian Christian Churches and persuading other less powerful pentecostal denominations to climb on board.

In 2000 Mr Houston was forced to sack his father, Frank, after he confessed to what the church's national executive has described as serious moral failure while he was an AoG minister in New Zealand. Mr Houston senior was NSW's most senior AoG figure and the man credited with converting the champion jockey Darren Beadman, who later trained as an AoG pastor.

The AoG's national executive vice-president, John Lewis, conducted the Frank Houston investigation at the invitation of his son.

Mr Lewis said the offences were so serious that Mr Houston senior, now in his early 80s, was not even given the option of quietly retiring. The Herald has been contacted by one of Mr Houston's alleged victims, who is now considering legal action against the church.

Brian Houston said that of the AoG's 2000 Australian ministers, no more than five in any year were exposed and disciplined for sexual misconduct. He went on to defend the former AoG New Zealand general superintendent Jim Williams, who serves as a pastor in Brisbane but whose licence in New Zealand was permanently revoked for sexual misconduct. Mr Mesiti is undergoing what the church terms a three-year restoration process.

CAPTION: ILLUS: Glory days ... Pat Mesiti of Australian Christian Churches. Glory days ... Pat Mesiti, former national director of Australian Christian Churches. (Appeared in the Early edition only).