

THE PHYSICS ROOM

CONTEMPORARY ART SPACE

Building as Body by Kate Pickering

A response to *Shelter House* by Grace Crothall

God is building a home. He's using us all—irrespective of how we got here—in what he is building. He used the apostles and prophets for the foundation. Now he's using you, fitting you in brick by brick, stone by stone, with Christ Jesus as the cornerstone that holds all the parts together. We see it taking shape day after day—a holy temple built by God, all of us built into it, a temple in which God is quite at home. (Ephesians 2:19-22)¹

Leaving the outside world behind, you enter through the doors into a vast, brightly lit auditorium in which a crowd of many bodies has gathered. You join them in rows of tiered seating to face a wide stage. A well-dressed man is speaking to the crowd with a warm familiarity in his voice. He begins to tell you a story you have heard before. His tone is one of confident authority. His performance builds, he brings it to life with passionate gesture and dramatic emphasis, and this time it takes on a new resonance. Now a choir stands, dressed in co-ordinated, rainbow-bright outfits, while youthful, polished performers take the stage. The music is overwhelmingly loud. It is upbeat and contemporary, it feels familiar. The lyrics tell you that all things are possible. You feel hope swelling within as the vibrations from the loudspeakers travel up into your body. You join in with the others in the crowd to sing that God is with you, He is on your side, He will help you overcome your troubles. The atmosphere of expectation in the room is tangible. Believers hold up their hands, reaching out to the presence that seems to have materialised within the space above them, brought into being by the effervescent song. Although it does not yet make sense in your head, your body is powerless to resist this message; that you are being made new. You are open, and your belief that all will be well, as small as a mustard seed, is growing. Emotion stirs deep within you. A lump forms in your throat, tears sting at the back of your eyelids and you feel a tense concretion of feeling inside your stomach. As you sing and shake with emotion, the children are being filtered out, away from the adults, directed into the interior space of Children's Church ...

In *Shelter House*, Grace Crothall forensically examines the displacements and separations of contemporary Christianity—specifically expressions of the charismatic Pentecostal movement of the 1990s—through an irreverent method: categories

of holy and unholy, insider and outsider, adult and child, and knowledge and innocence collide. Crothall deliberately brings these separations into a disquieting and playful entanglement. Visual, material, spatial, and auditory representations from charismatic Pentecostal culture are juxtaposed. As a former insider, Crothall describes her approach as that of an autopsy, aiming to reveal the hidden and contradictory inner life of the type of church to which she once belonged.

The global megachurch Hillsong, part of the charismatic Pentecostal movement, began in Australia in 1983 and has been influential on the development of Antipodean Protestantism.² Characteristic of this type of church is the centrality of belief in the authority of the Bible—presented as a coherent narrative—as a foundational ground on which the church community is produced and sustained. This creates a culture where leadership, in their retellings of and preaching from a text that is considered inerrant, functions as a stand-in for divine authority. To doubt or question the leadership or the church culture—as shaped by the leadership—is to invert the “natural” order of God over man. To assert yourself through critical, independent thinking is viewed as unbiblical, unholy, and “worldly.” It is to view yourself as both equal to the leaders (you are not) and is also to question God (which is sacrilegious). Divergent thinking, or thinking for yourself, threatens the integrity of the unassailable logic of the institution. Believers are encouraged to hold firm to Bible verses that promote a child-like faith. In the biblical books of both Mark and Matthew Jesus tells us that we must become like children in order to inherit the Kingdom of God, and 1 Corinthians reads: “[for] God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise.” (1 Corinthians 1:27)³ Uncritically following Church leadership is part of the same culture where the believer also swallows the contradictory elements and elisions of the Bible, reordering it into a coherent whole that foregrounds the good news of the redemption story through which salvation is found. It is a culture in which norms of adult and child are, on occasion, reversed. The adult believer has access to a stable ground of existence through this authorised good news narrative. From this stable ground their eyes are fixed on the heavenly, eternal world, and not material reality that surrounds them. The difficult, challenging, problematic or complex is excluded and the feel-good story is clung to. The child however, is immersed through Sunday School or Children’s Church into the less coherent and sometimes troubling violence of Old Testament Bible stories, in which God punishes his wayward people with plagues, he orders genocides on non-believing nations, and pronounces the death penalty on children who hit or curse their parents.

The children are following Christiana, this week’s Children’s Church assistant, out of the auditorium and into the cosy confines of an inner room. Today they are being told a story of Jonah and the Whale. Later they will colour in pictures of Jonah trapped inside the whale’s belly. Some will draw in little fish and sandwiches and apples and sweets all swirling around inside the interior along with poor old Jonah. Some will think that he was naughty and got what he deserved. Some will think about the punishment with which God threatens the city of Nineveh, and the punishment inflicted on Jonah, all green with whale bile and scared, hungry, and waiting to be vomited up. They will grow frightened. They will internalise this story. It will sit within them like a stone in the gut and a bilious fear will rise when they next consider stepping out of line.

Churches such as Hillsong are typified by an insistence on high levels of participation. Seekers are strongly encouraged to join and are quickly encompassed within the life of the church. Sociologist Matthew Wade writes that Hillsong, “aspires to be a ‘full-service’ Church, where, once sufficiently integrated, life within the church can become ‘all-encompassing’ for the individual.”⁴ Churches provide a framework for life, embedding seekers within the culture, often meeting their needs for community, work, and leisure. Hillsong churches are described as campuses: alongside weekly services, a range of other activities are offered, including bookshops, cafes, childcare, groups for teens and students, and voluntary work. Within the charismatic Pentecostal movement at large, once a person has committed their life to God, faith becomes the lens through which everything is viewed, whether in work, at home, in relationships, or during free time, all aspects of life are brought within the purview of sustaining and spreading faith. Church is not confined to two hours on a Sunday; participation occurs around the clock through weekly groups, voluntary work, and evangelism. Christians are encouraged to have quiet times with God before the day begins, to prayerfully consider each decision, to invite God into their relationships and marriages, and to see their workplace as part of their mission. Faith becomes the foundation for life; it is everywhere and in everything. Charismatic Pentecostal churches enable these totalising paradigms of faith.

Wade states that the aim of churches such as Hillsong is to achieve the exclusive and undivided loyalty of its members by “tying the organisation and all its activities to a higher, collective purpose, namely that of ‘saving’ the ‘unsaved’.”⁵ Slowly, other more secular activities are discouraged unless they are part of a member’s outreach to the unsaved. Congregants are aware of desired behaviours, and accordingly self-regulate. Whilst there are no overtly stated rules, there are certain expectations in regards to social and behavioural mores. Deviation from certain norms risks disapproval and exclusion. The church maintains a soft exterior, enabling the unchurched and religious seekers to join in without the cultural tension that traditional churches provoke, but at the heart of the church there is a hard core of power hierarchies, expected behaviours and cognitive dissonance in normalising the contradictory aspects of a good news story of a loving Father with a biblical history of violence.

You are making your way out from the rows of seating to join the queues of people waiting to receive communion. You tear off some bread and place it on your tongue. Your teeth and saliva chew it, mash it down, make it slippery. You swallow it. This small morsel of nourishment represents a body: the God-man protagonist at the heart of the good news story you have just internalised. A body-story consumed by a body. A ritual of remembrance and identification. You are becoming what you eat. The wheat cells break down and are digested in your gut, shifting across the intestinal membrane, entering your bloodstream and working their way through you.

You move at a languid pace, through an endless tunnel. The interior is a pale pink with a network of dark red veins, and is slick with wetness. Contractions in the walls propel you forwards, interminably on through this folded interior. You are a concretion of matter, a bolus whose edges are slowly loosening, being absorbed.

Inside the church, the good news story creates a world in which believers who have found the truth live and thrive. The church is a container in which a particular embodiment of faith, one that is certain and unassailable, forms a collective culture. The surety of the believer, based on the authorizing text of the Bible, resists the shifting beliefs of the secular world around it. The church, functioning as a kind of body, creates a culture of inside and out, holy and unholy, believer and those yet-to-be-saved.

The charismatic Pentecostal church is a body-like container for many bodies; its boundaries separating the bodies inside from outside bodies, but the doors are always open to new believers. A superficial sheen of modernity casts an appealing glow through the use of contemporary music and technology, bright, corporate-looking interiors, non-religious architecture, and an avoidance of typical religious symbolism. A global belief system that has morphed and shifted through two millennia of societal change is presented as a shiny, happy family in which the body, viewed as a volatile, leaky, desiring presence is always policed, repressed, and negated by a wholesome culture. Church is not the place of the imminent animal body, it represses flesh that is leaky, porous, and desiring. It is, instead, the place of a body that must transcend its embodiment; it must be sky-bound, eyes fixed on the heavens. These separations allow the church body to function. In the relentless focus on a transcendent imaginary—the desire to escape earthly finitude and reach God—the body is overlooked as merely a channel, an empty vessel for God’s glory. And yet the body and its desires, fears, and repressions are continuously and contradictorily summoned within the cultural space of the charismatic Pentecostal movement. The congregation sings passionately, dances, lays hands on those who need prayer, in addition to the embodied experience of being filled with the Holy Spirit, speaking in tongues, shaking, weeping, and many other fervent bodily experiences. This culture performs a paradox: certain activities are acceptable because they are oriented toward God, whilst others such as any expressions of sexual activity outside of heterosexual marriage are condemned.

In her book *Powers of Horror: An Essay in Abjection* philosopher and literary critic Julia Kristeva writes of the necessity of the bodily repressions and taboos we enact socially in order to function. We cannot stand the site of bodily waste and effluent, it is made private, shameful, fearful. Balls of hair, flakes of skin, human waste products such as blood, vomit, and excrement cause revulsion and dismay because they remind us that our bodies are not discrete, do not have integrity, our bodies leak and flake and wound and ultimately, perish and decay. They are fearfully permeable, the outside finds its way in and the inside works its way out. On the deep sense of horror that the leaky or wounded body provokes, Kristeva remarks: “These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being.”⁶ The sight of the abject propels the viewer into the destabilising, liminal space of the boundary. Neither out nor in, it is a place where the symbolic order with which we are usually able to placate ourselves collapses. Kristeva echoes anthropologist Mary Douglas whose work on religious purity rituals foregrounds the significance of “matter out of place” and the seemingly human need to create boundaries, to make binary distinctions of pure/impure, clean/unclean.⁷ This is

translated within religious ritual into holy/unholy or sacred/profane where the impure is expelled from the bounds of both the individual and collective religious body. For Kristeva, it is both religion and art that deal with the abject: “The various means of purifying the abject—the various catharses—make up the history of religions, and end up with that catharsis par excellence called art, both on the far and near side of religion.”⁸

In *Shelter House* we become the church body as we enter into the quasi-church site that Crothall has created. She makes us a stand-in for the congregant, a temporary part of the crowd of believers. However, Crothall subverts the norms of charismatic Pentecostal culture by literally depicting the interior of the body, referencing a messy and disturbing visceral world; a place where things are not static or fixed but in a process of becoming, transmuting, forming. Through foregrounding the gut in her colonoscopy images, through imagining the Children’s Church within the belly of the whale, Crothall’s work reframes the church, inverting it, re-thinking it as a site that reflects life in all its fearful complexity. In placing the viewer as a stand-in for the believer within this site of uncertainty, of change, of liminality, we are offered the opportunity to be open to difference, to face the realities of our embodied experience, to be inclusive rather than exclusive. This forms a provocation not only for those within the comforting confines of charismatic Pentecostal Christianity, but also for all of us in our human desire to seek the security of binary thinking.

¹ Eugene Peterson, *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language*, (Colorado: NavPress, 2018).

² See: Tanya Riches and Tom Wagner, “Introduction”, in *The Hillsong Movement Examined*, ed. Tanya Riches and Tom Wagner (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2017), 1–17, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-59656-3_1; and Steven Stockwell and Ruby Jones, “Jesus, help me get a visa: How megachurches are redefining religion in Australia” ABC News [Online], 28 August, 2019, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-08-28/pentecostal-megachurches-are-redefining-australian-religion/11446368>, accessed: 29 March, 2021.

³ *The Holy Bible*, New International Version, (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2015).

⁴ Matthew Wade, “Seeker-Friendly: The Hillsong Megachurch as an Enchanting Total Institution,” *Journal of Sociology* 52, no. 4 (2015): 667, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1440783315575171>.

⁵ Wade, “Seeker-Friendly,” (2016): 669.

⁶ Julia Kristeva and Leon S. Roudiez, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2010), 3.

⁷ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 1966; 2005).

⁸ Kristeva and Roudiez, *Powers of Horror*, 17.