

IF YOU DON'T LIKE WHAT CHURCH HAS BECOME...
THERE IS A BETTER WAY

OUT OF THE 4TH PLACE

MATT BROWELEIT WITH DUDLEY CALLISON



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To Katie, I love you.

The best things are created in community. Thank you to everyone who took part in reading and refining my writing. Here's to rich conversation, gentle mocking and fresh perspective.

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PART 1

INTO THE **4**TH PLACE

The Medium Is the Message

The *third place* is somewhere between home and work. Starbucks is a *third place*. In fact, that was the whole point. Howard Schultz was so inspired by the coffee culture of Italy that he wanted to share it with America. And it wasn't just the superior espresso. It was the environment surrounding the espresso—the laughter, community and romance of the Italian *piazza*. Schultz didn't just want people to enjoy a cappuccino, he wanted them to taste the flavor of the *third place*.¹

Third Place Books in Seattle is among my favorite spots to connect with people, grab a bite to eat or discover a new book.

Where did this term, *third place*, come from? Sociologist Ray Oldenburg invented it and wrote about it in his book, *The Great Good Place*. According to Oldenburg's model, the *first place* is the home—*private life*.

¹“Company Information.” Starbucks. Accessed October 15, 2015.
<http://www.starbucks.com/about-us/company-information>.

The *second place* is work or school—*productive life*. The *third place* is where we go to unwind. It's what Oldenburg calls *informal public life*. He writes:

Great civilizations, like great cities, share a common feature. Evolving within them and crucial to their growth and refinement are distinctive informal public gathering places. These become as much a part of the urban landscape as of the citizen's daily life, and invariably, they come to dominate the image of the city. Thus, its profusion of sidewalk cafés seems to *be* Paris, just as The Forum dominates one's mental picture of classic Rome. The soul of London resides in her many pubs; that of Florence in its teeming *piazze*.²

Maybe you have a favorite pub. A coffee shop you like to frequent. A park. We go to *third places* to laugh, to get lost in the music, to sip on something fantastic. We all understand *third places*. They are a welcome part of our life.

But I'm not writing about *third places*. I'm writing about church. Where do church buildings fit into Oldenburg's model?

Are they *first places*? No.

Are they *second places*? Only for church employees.

Are they *third places*? No, people don't usually go to church buildings just to hang out. They go there for scheduled events.

So...where do churches fit? Hint: they don't.

Churches are part of the *fourth place*.

² Ray Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo, 1989), xviii.

And just to get it out of the way early, that's not a good thing for the church. It's actually quite a large problem. Being in the *fourth place* is part of the reason churches are misusing resources, millennials are leaving, and pastors are burning out. I'll explain why in a minute.

First, I want to address the obvious question, "What in the world is the *fourth place*?" If the *third place* is *informal public life*, then there must be a fourth category, *formal public life*. You can't have the category *informal* without its counterpart category *formal*, so I am adding a category to the model: *formal public life*—the *fourth place*.

The *fourth place*, then, would include such institutions as country clubs, temples, stadiums, and yes, churches. Where else would any of these fit in Oldenburg's model? Nowhere. They are *fourth places*, formal public institutions—places of insiders and outsiders, those with tickets and those without. If you have ever wondered why your church felt like a country club, this is likely the reason.

For some of you the wheels are already turning and you are already thinking about all of the issues in the church that might be explained by us being in the *fourth place*. That's good and we'll talk a lot about that. Others might be thinking, "Okay, so what? Yes, we're in the *fourth place*. Isn't that where churches belong? Isn't that normal?" Though it may feel completely normal, we only think so because we are so accustomed to it.

The Wrong Place

Why is being in the *fourth place* such a big issue? For starters, because Jesus intentionally moved church *out of the fourth place*. Remember the Old Testament temple? It was a big building that people went to in order to worship God. The temple was a *fourth place*.

Jesus changed that. Jesus *is* the temple. Remember, when he said, "Destroy this temple and I'll raise it in three days" (John 2:19), Jesus

wasn't talking about a building. He was talking about his body. In other words, Jesus took something that used to be a *fourth place*, the physical temple, and he moved it right into the normal rhythms of his culture. The temple became human and walked around the neighborhood.

Not only did Jesus move the church out of the *fourth place*, so did the early church. The early church didn't have their own place. They had no temples or other religious buildings. And not just because of persecution—we'll talk about that in Chapter 3. They self-identified as exiles, strangers, a people without a place of their own. Persecution was certainly a part of it, but they actually stayed in culture on purpose. Just like Jesus.

The early church lived and gathered within culture, not separate from it. They met in *first places*—homes. They met in *second places*—workspaces, farms, shops, military camps. They met in *third places*—river banks, theaters, catacombs. Solomon's Colonnade, where they met in Acts, was a busy place full of people coming and going. It was both a *second* and a *third place*.

If Jesus and the early church avoided the *fourth place*, why is it so normal for us?

Now don't worry. If you think I am just going to offer the solution, "We all need to read Acts 2:42 and sell our buildings," that's not where I'm going. I am not going to argue that we simply copy the early church. A lot of books do that. But times have changed. Cultures have changed. It's not just a building thing. Can our buildings be part of the problem? Of course. But the problem is much more complex and interesting than that.

Why is church in the *fourth place* such a big problem? Why write a book on it?

Here is why: the *fourth place* is preaching messages to our world that we would never want to say with our mouths.

The Medium Is the Message

Perhaps you have heard the principle, *the medium is the message*. Marshall McLuhan, a professor and early media theory expert, coined this phrase in the 1960s.³ It means that the form, or medium, that contains a message often speaks louder than the message itself.

Medium can refer to art. For example, a sculpture will by its very nature speak a different message from a watercolor painting. *Medium* can also refer to types of technology. Television will communicate differently from print media. A tweet is different from a conversation.

The medium is the message isn't just about art and technology. All kinds of media can affect the messages we hear. The word "relax" sounds different during a massage than during a colonoscopy. I respond differently to the words "trust me" when coming from my loving wife than coming from a used car salesman. A contract isn't as firm when signed with a pink glitter pen. A steak isn't as fine when served on a paper plate.

You get it. The medium dramatically impacts the message. It may even overshadow the message. It may even *be* its own message.

This same principle applies to our churches. Pastors will spend hours, even days, crafting a single sermon, but may not be thinking about the "sermon" the forms themselves are preaching. What message do people hear when they drive past the church facility? What about when they see how people dress? What about when they see who is on stage? What does having a stage in the first place say?

³ Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, *The Medium is the Massage* (New York: Bantam Books, 1967).

Now maybe you are a pastor, maybe you are a student, maybe you attend a church, or maybe you have lost interest in church. Regardless of where you are coming from, most of us have some level of interest in the messages of our churches. We want our messages to speak of Jesus. To reflect him. To help people understand him.

But what messages are people actually hearing? What is the *fourth place* saying behind all of the songs and sermons?

I want to suggest in this book that we have a big problem, probably bigger than we realize. I want to suggest that our mouths are preaching the greatest messages in the history of the world: reconciliation with God, restored community with each other, purpose in the world.

Our forms, however, are often preaching the exact opposite messages: separation from God, separation from each other, separation from the world.

Why? Because the medium is the message. Whenever you put religion in the *fourth place* it will automatically start speaking for itself. And it will sound just like a temple.

Remember, Jesus moved the church out of the temple—*out of the fourth place*. Unfortunately, the church moved back in. When did that happen? How did we move back into the *fourth place*?

I will explain this in detail in Chapter 4, but the short answer is that in fourth century Rome, Constantine helped to rebuild the temple of stone that Jesus had turned to flesh. When Constantine made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire, he rebuilt Christianity not as a living temple scattered throughout all of the cultures of the world, but instead as a place of its own religious culture. Rather than expressing the beauty and diversity of the cultures of the world, the church would express the culture of the *fourth place*.

Christianity changed. What used to reflect the life and love of Jesus now looked more like Rome. They only spoke Latin—in France. They wore hot robes—in Africa. It wasn't all Constantine's fault; the change was gradual and in fact, was already happening before he came to power. Christendom then took the torch and built on Constantine's foundation for century upon century. It's a complicated history. Regardless, Christianity changed. It moved out of the *first*, *second* and *third places* and back into the *fourth place*. A religious place. A place of political power. A place of its own culture, language, strange hair styles and cheesy music.

Constantine placed the church into a category it was never meant to occupy; the *fourth place*—*formal public life*. Most religions have temples. Temples are religious buildings where people go to do religious activities. That is how most religions work. That is how the Old Testament temple worked. But not the New Testament temple. Christianity was supposed to be different. We were supposed to be the temple of the Holy Spirit. We were supposed to be a living temple. A temple that lived among its culture like exiles, like strangers, like salt and light in the world.

We even say these things with our mouths in our services. "You, people, are the temple. You are the dwelling place of God. You, congregation, are the church." The problem is not so much what we are saying with our mouths. The real problem is that our medium is speaking its own message. We are not doing it intentionally. We usually don't even realize we are doing it.

Outsiders are noticing. They know we don't look or sound much like Jesus. What if they are right?

What if our words are telling people to love their neighbors, but our forms are telling them to fear them?

What if we are telling our people we care about the poor, but our media are telling them we mostly care about the beautiful and talented?

What if we are preaching grace but our forms are preaching legalism?

What if we are telling people to be disciples but our forms are telling them to be consumers?

Is it possible that all of these disconnects are the primary reason people—especially millennials—no longer trust the church? What if these mixed messages are the main reason that pastors and church leaders are getting frustrated, struggling and burning out? Would that matter to you? I hope so. It really matters to me. That's why I am finally writing this book. I resisted for a long time, but felt compelled. My friends, mentors and I thought this message was worth sharing.

My Background

I'm guessing you have never heard my name before. Reading something from a no-name can be a bit risky. I confess I rarely do it myself. I am not going to try to impress anyone with my resume. In fact, you will find as you read this book that I believe celebrity leaders are part of the problem, not the solution. But I want to give you some of my background so you know the variety of experiences that are informing this book.

I am a father of four and a husband to the best wife ever. I live a mentored life and a life in community. I am an artist and a thinker. I try my best by God's grace to practice the things I am convinced matter.

I went to public school in Seattle and an extremely liberal university. I am used to being a person with more conservative values and theology in a world sometimes hostile to those ideas. It is natural for me to build relationships across racial, denominational and political lines. After college I lived in and helped run a home to transition homeless and

addicted men back into life. I have spent significant time in “secular” professions, including seven years in technology at an investment company.

I graduated from Denver Seminary with a Masters of Divinity degree, though I have yet to master any divinity. I like to study and read broadly from many perspectives. I have worked in churches for many years—leading worship, preaching and teaching groups of all sizes—small, medium and megachurches. Some have been charismatic congregations, some evangelical (whatever that means anymore), and some more liturgical. All these perspectives have given me a passion for unity in the body and a deep sense of grief over our division.

I have also helped to start churches outside of the building-centered context. Authors in the missional dialogue, justice movement and spiritual formation resonate with me particularly.

Most importantly, I love Jesus. I love the Bible. And I love the church.

Why write a book? Because through all these experiences, I continue to see the same patterns and issues emerge over and over again. I have watched, served, studied, read, discussed and prayed. And I have come to some conclusions.

A Systems Issue

Many people assume there are quick fixes to the types of issues I have brought up. Millennials are leaving? Culture hates you? Just preach better sermons. Hire a new pastor who gets it. We simply need a worship leader who is relevant. We need a bigger building. Better programs. More staff. Greater tithing.

It's not that simple.

Before working full-time for churches, I worked for a company called Russell Investments. On my team we had a policy that when a big mistake was made, our team would sit down and dig into the issue together. We wanted total transparency so we could fix it. We put problems in two main categories—human error and systems issues. When it was a one-time problem, there was a decent chance it was a human error. Maybe we needed to coach our employees better. Maybe we needed a new team member. However, when the problem occurred over and over again, there was a better chance that it was a systems issue—a problem in the underlying computer code, a process that was broken, a structural problem.

The types of issues we are experiencing in the church are systems-level issues. They are not isolated events. There are patterns. Pastors are burning out at alarming rates. Staff members are having affairs. The church feels fake. There is alarmingly poor allocation of resources toward community needs. People are consistently being used and hurt.

These are not “preach a better sermon” nor “hire the right pastor” types of issues. We are experiencing a systems-level epidemic and we need to treat it as such.

Many great books, blogs and curricula are being thrown into the discussion to figure out what is going on and what to do about it. This book is my small attempt to add a simple idea into this ongoing dialogue.

I am convinced that a major player in the discussion needs to be the disconnect between our medium and our message. We are trying to follow an incarnate Christ from the *fourth place*. We are attempting to live out a gospel of reconciliation on a church platform of separation.

And it isn't working.

Nagging Questions

We have a lot of issues as a church in the West. Maybe you relate with some of the questions and concerns I am bringing up. Maybe you have experienced the painful fruit of these issues for yourself. For me, the questions just won't go away. Way back in college, I started feeling that something was off, but it began to come to a head after graduation.

I went to the University of Puget Sound in Tacoma, Washington. Six other guys and I were in a small group for all four of those years. We were part of a wonderful ministry called Lighthouse. Our group of friends was so tight that we decided to continue to meet together after college. Eventually, we all got married, started having kids, and moved into an urban Tacoma neighborhood within a few blocks of each other. We wanted to see if we could continue some of our college community experience and also make an impact on our little part of the city.

It wasn't always easy, but the plan actually worked. We served neighbors, threw block parties, hung out a lot, studied the Bible and poured our lives into a local public elementary school. We intentionally shared life and mission. In the process, we saw abused kids receive hope, races intermingle and some neighbors meet Jesus.

At the same time, I was leading worship at a local church. None of our neighborhood friends was a part of that church. I was living in two church worlds—my neighborhood world and my worship-leading world.

And I started to have so many questions.

Why are we spending so much time and money on big events at church when I see so much more lasting fruit from a neighborhood block party?

Why do I feel like my neighborhood life is building up my family while my church life is tearing me away from them?

Why am I working so hard for great musical productions while half of the team's marriages are blowing up?

Why do I feel like we're using people for their talents but don't have time to care about their real life?

Why am I spending so much time in this building when the people we're trying to reach are outside of it?

I hear from people all the time who are wrestling with the same types of questions. I myself went to Denver Seminary to study them. I processed them through my years as a small groups pastor at a megachurch. I read everything I could get my hands on related to the topic. Today, I am still wrestling with the questions, but I have also come to some clarity; thus this book.

I am convinced that a large part of the problem is connected to our *fourth place* medium. We are using temple structures to run a relational church. And they are at odds like oil and water.

Who Is This Book For?

If any of the questions I have asked resonate with your experience, this book is for you.

Maybe you are a church planter and are dreaming and praying about how and where to start. A major focus of the book is planting churches based outside of the *fourth place*. How do you plant churches in the *first*, *second* and *third* places of culture? We will talk at length about this new paradigm and examples of where it is already being practiced in the world today.

Maybe you are an existing church pastor, worship leader or staff member. Chances are, you have already felt the need as a church to simplify, focus on small groups or missional communities, and help

people grow as disciples in their world. This book will expand what you are already doing, give you language to help you talk about your challenges and perhaps take you several steps beyond what you were already planning.

Maybe you used to like church and have become a bit disillusioned with the whole thing. You like Jesus but struggle with his followers, the institution or the politics. This book will help you process your frustration and perhaps even find hope again.

Maybe you work with a parachurch organization and are concerned with the partnership between church and parachurch. This book will explain why you feel this and what we can do about it.

Maybe you aren't even a Christian, but wonder why Jesus seems so amazing but Christians give you the heebie-jeebies—like they are part of some strange subculture. This book will help you understand the disconnect.

This book is for anyone who wants to understand the purpose of church, how we veered from Jesus, and how we can get back again.

Where Are We Going?

We are going on a journey of church media; church forms.

PART 1 of the book will explain how we got into the *fourth place*. If we are going to get out of the *fourth place* we need to understand how we got there.

You may be tempted to skip Part 1, but I'd encourage you to dig deep through these early chapters. Chapters 2, 3 and 4 are critical. You might not realize how deeply we are affected by temple forms and how much Christendom plays into everything we do today.

The first chapters will challenge your understanding of the Bible and will build the theological foundations we need for the rest of the book.

You may be surprised that even long-time students of scripture will find they have been interpreting it through the lens of the *fourth place*. Prepare to be stretched.

PART 2 of the book is deconstruction time. Here we come to grips with the impact of the *fourth place* on the modern church. It affects everything we do. In order to understand the solutions we first need to understand the extent of the problems. And sometimes it gets a little ugly. However, while Part 2 deconstructs and points some fingers, it also gives hope.

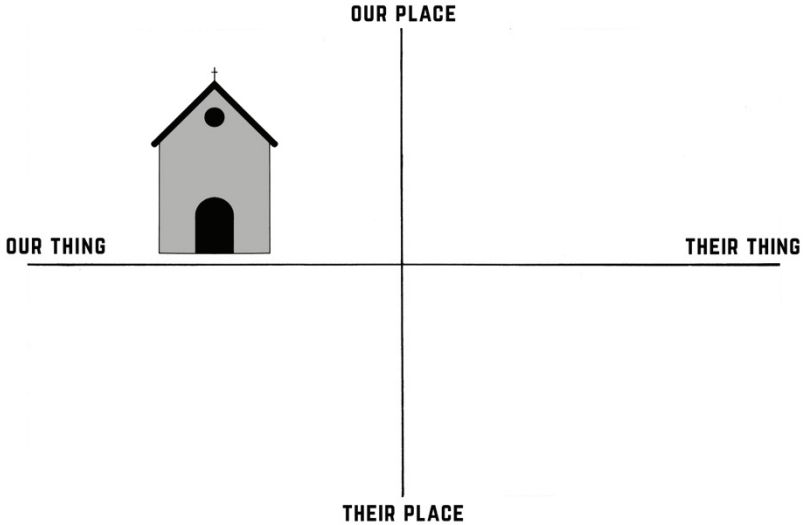
All of us are starting from different places—different types of churches, polity, structure and liturgy. Each of the chapters in Part 2 will help you to identify your own unique starting point so you know with clarity what it looks like for you to move out of the *fourth place*.

PART 3 contains some solutions. How do we get out of the *fourth place* and what exactly does life look like once we are out? We will discover that our churches have often been designed for the wrong function, or purpose. We will unpack the true function of church and the forms that will help us accomplish that purpose.

When I read a book like this, I always want to know a little about where we are going before I can commit. So, at risk of giving away some of what is to come, I want to give you a short summary of what the solutions look like.

Again, the solutions are not simple. The problems are enormous. Regardless, the following graphics will help us understand a framework for how to move forward.

You will get familiar with this chart as we go along. The little church building in the top left corner is sitting in the *fourth place*. That's the top left quadrant—where we do our thing, in our place.

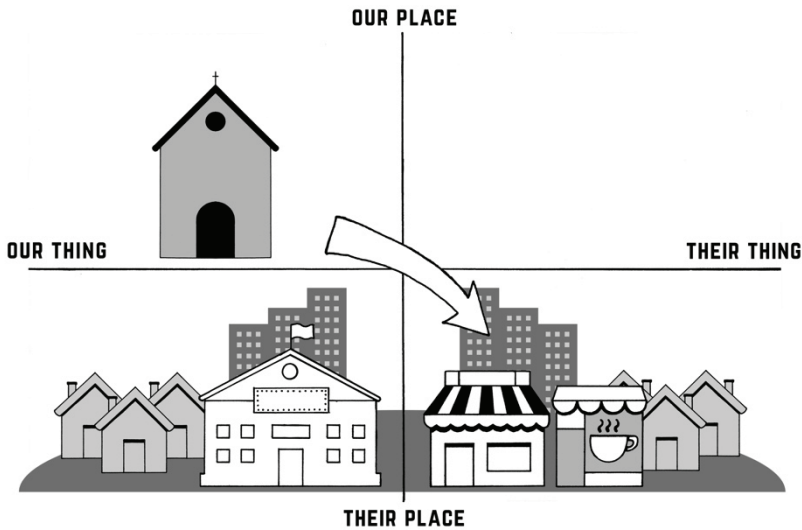


You will notice that there are two lines, or axes, on this chart, **PLACES** and **THINGS**. **PLACES** refers to **WHERE** we do what we do. The top half is the church building. I simply call it **OUR PLACE** because we own it and that's where we do our religious gatherings. The bottom half is **THEIR PLACE**, the *first, second* and *third* places of culture—the places we all live, eat, sleep, work and play.

THINGS refers to **WHO** is running it. If our church is running it, then it's **OUR THING**. If it's something the rest of the culture is doing, it's **THEIR THING**.

The church in this chart is in the **OUR THING, OUR PLACE** quadrant because that's where we're used to it being. For most people in the West, this is how we see church. It is **OUR PLACE** where we do **OUR THING**. Church is an event in a building. A religious place

for religious activities. Just like a temple. But like we said, that's not where Jesus put us. Jesus put church here:



Jesus took the temple and he moved it into culture. The temple became flesh. So, how do we get out of the *fourth place*? Do we just throw out the building? Do we scrap the institution—as if the church needs no structure or organization? It depends where you are starting from. We will present two major pathways forward.

1. Out of the Fourth Place

If you are starting from scratch, we will spend a lot of time talking about planting and maturing churches outside of the *fourth place*. This does not mean church without buildings. It means church without *religious* buildings.

If you are ready for something a little more radical and less like the traditional church, we want to provide you with a map for what that can look like. To help guide the discussion of new church media I have asked my good friend and mentor, Dudley Callison, former President of *Communitas International*, to help us. *Communitas* is a global

missional church planting organization; many of the churches they've planted exist in culture without their own religious buildings. These churches do not lack structure; they simply use a fundamentally *different* structure. Dudley will contribute his experiences and stories from the many missional initiatives, church plants and mature communities that are a part of their movement.

Communitas plants churches globally, including in the Americas, but primarily in post-Christian Western Europe. In other words, they are used to planting churches where people don't like church. Therefore, they are ahead of the learning curve for what the culture is quickly becoming in the United States. Dudley will not only contribute stories to Part 3, but will also comment along the way in the earlier chapters so that we continually mix real world application with the theological framework we are developing.

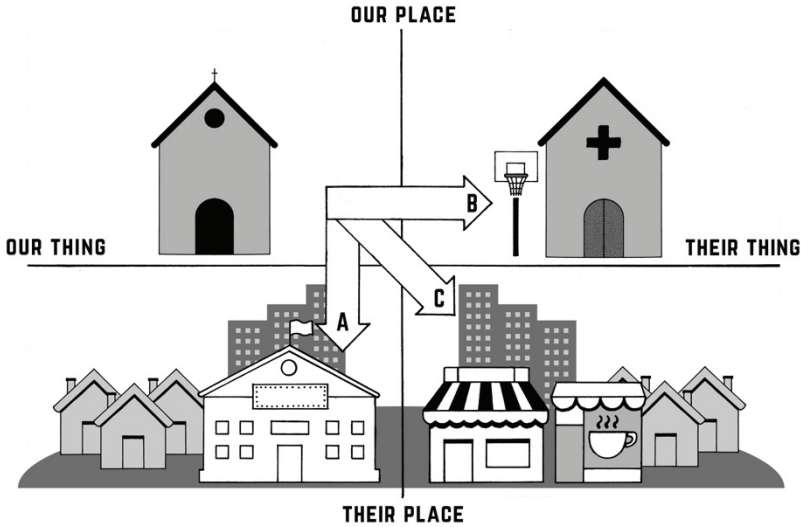
Two Expressions

by Dudley Callison

Growing up in suburban Dallas culture, I participated in two expressions of church. Park Cities Baptist Church was easy to identify. It has a large campus with beautiful architecture, a loving staff and effective programs. This “static” version of church helped me grow in faith and I'm truly thankful. I also participated in my high school Young Life club. We worshipped Christ together and we shared in authentic community. Maybe most importantly, we were organized around a shared sense of mission—to reach our peers at school who would never show up at church. We didn't ever call Young Life our church, but for many kids it was the only version of church they could relate to. It was their spiritual family. It was mine too, and it did more to shape my future understanding of “dynamic” church planting in the post-Christendom world than I could have ever imagined.

2. Repurposing the Fourth Place

If you are starting with an existing building, we will talk about how any church can take incremental steps toward integration and away from separation. There are three main directions for growth that you can apply without selling the facility. Here they are:



Chances are you have moved in one or more of these directions already without even knowing about the *fourth place*.

A. Maybe you started small groups or missional communities and you got people meeting in homes. Maybe you're doing a venue church or meeting in a school. Those are movements along **Arrow A**.

B. Maybe you are converting your *fourth place* into a *first*, *second* or *third place*. If your church opened a public coffee shop or gym, you just opened a *third place*. If you have tenants working out of your building, you just opened a *second place*. Maybe you are housing the homeless or renting out parts of your building for income. You just created a *first place*. Maybe your church building doesn't look like a church building. Your building is a functional hospital, warehouse, office building or

community center. If your building includes *first*, *second* or *third* places, you are moving in the direction of **Arrow B**.

C. Finally, maybe you are simplifying the Sunday event so that you can better walk with people in the context of real life. You are helping people learn to take responsibility in their own world to care for their neighbors. You are helping people live like Christ in the workplace.

Now I'm not just talking about preaching on those topics. That's a fine start, but I'm talking about your media—staff time and resources. What does this look like practically? It means you are structured at least in part like a parachurch ministry. Young Life, InterVarsity and others work in coffee shops, spend intentional time at schools, and treat the normal lives of people as if they are worth spending ministry time and money investing in. If you are engaging with people in their world on purpose you are moving down **Arrow C**.

This is a high-level summary and I am throwing a lot at you quickly. Don't worry, we will explain all of this in depth and provide many examples for what this looks like. Whether you are ready for radically new forms or whether you want to apply the principles at a slower pace to an existing system, this book will provide the direction you need to move forward.

There are several ways out of the *fourth place*. Some involve ditching the building or meeting in a non-religious space. Others involve repurposing the building, the job description or the worship service. All involve becoming more like Christ in the world.

When Jesus came to earth he left his own place. He entered our world. Maybe it's time that we follow him there. Maybe it's time to get *out of the fourth place*.