



THE TABLE I LONG FOR

Learning to Participate
in the *Mission and*
Family of God

SHAWN
BRACE

"*The Table I Long For* is beautifully written, compelling and biblical. It doesn't just talk about mission, it demonstrates it through stories and personal experience. Inspiring and practical, this book could forever change the way you approach your life and church. Although there's a point or two I could dispute with Shawn, the book gave me a deep breath of fresh mission air that we all so desperately need."

—Gary Krause, Director, Office of Adventist Mission, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists

"Shawn Brace offers a refreshingly candid reflection on his journey of discovering how Christian mission and discipleship are inextricably bound up with ordinary life, the joy of mutual relationships, the pursuit of justice, and learning—simply yet profoundly—to love one another well. One need not share all of Brace's assumptions and convictions to benefit from the stories and insights he offers because the book itself reflects the open posture of missional church that he proposes."

—Nicholas Zork, PhD, Minister for Worship and the Arts, Church of the Advent Hope, New York City

"In a time where so many things seem to either be changing too fast or stuck in the past, Shawn Brace brings a biblical, fresh and intentional perspective to the ecclesiology conversation. I can't wait to recommend this book to every pastor in our field. Adventist to the core and incredibly timely—pick this book up!"

—Roger Hernandez, Ministerial and Evangelism Director, Southern Union Conference of Seventh-day Adventists

"*The Table I Long For* traces Brace's journey as he leads his congregation away from program and performance to people and community. The main stage of the book is not a church building, but homes, parties, barbeques, recovery groups and coffee shops. Brace weaves experiences of joy, meals, broken hearts, addiction and local life into the story of God's continuous action in the world. He paints a beautiful picture of what it might look like when Christians commit to be a faithful, loving presence in our local communities. He does not shy away from the missteps of the project, or his own mistakes, pulling the veil back to reveal a pastoral heart ignited by love for people."

—Andreas Beccai, Lead Pastor, Walla Walla University Church

"Shawn Brace's *The Table I Long For* is the 'must read' book of the year for anyone interested in the church and its mission—especially in our secular age. Shawn writes with clarity, conviction and a depth that keeps you engaged page by page. He challenges our assumptions about church and takes us back to the

Bible over and over again with an invitation to settle no more for what is, but to pursue with holy abandon, what can be. I could not recommend this book enough. Two thumbs way up from me.”

—Marcos Torres, Pastor, Perth, Australia

“Shawn Brace provides Christians with a stirring call to spread the gospel through an invitation to live life together, creating new communities that include those on the margins and allow us to work together for the good of the Kingdom of God. His writing brings together practical theology, personal revelations and pastoral experience. The intimate nature of his story-telling and analysis allows the reader to process the challenge of his argument without feeling defensive or overwhelmed. It’s encouraging to have such a welcoming vision of discipleship and discipling provided in this accessible way.”

—Lisa Clark Diller, PhD, Chair of the History Department, Southern Adventist University

“This doesn’t feel like just another book on church growth. Shawn Brace draws on his rich experience in pastoral ministry to help us reimagine what church could look like in a post-pandemic age. Real-life stories intertwined with robust yet relevant theology make this a simultaneously accessible and thought-provoking read.”

—Kevin Wilson, Pastor, TikTok Influencer

“If you are a member of any church, this book will mess with your head in the best and most necessary kind of way. The fact is, the church in the West is in a state of emergency. We are standing on quicksand in a culture that finds what we’re doing and how we’re doing it completely irrelevant. Shawn Brace’s journey is a hopeful new direction that has the potential not only to save the Western church from extinction but to transform it into a positive force to be reckoned with. But this new way of being the church just happens to be the old way by which the apostles turned the world upside down. Brace yourself, because *The Table I Long For* will no doubt challenge some of your most deeply held assumptions about what it means to be a Christian on mission for Christ in the world.”

—Ty Gibson, Author, Director/Speaker, Light Bearers Ministry

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PREFACE

A word to readers: you're about to read about one person's journey. My journey. Though the chapters are mostly topical in nature, they follow a trajectory. Back in 2016, my whole paradigm of what it meant to be a pastor and Jesus-follower came crashing down. My understanding of what church is, on a fundamental level, toppled.

In some ways, this is a story about deconstruction, which is a popular genre these days. But it is also a story about a beautiful reconstruction—of learning what it means to truly understand the gospel, at least as I've come to see it, and to live it out in ways that are vibrant, embodied and contextualised. This is a story about what it means to stop “doing” church and to instead start “being” church.

To that end, you will read lots of stories from my life over the past few years. That is a little outside my comfort zone. I am always self-conscious about talking about myself too much. And yet I decided to include all these stories because the concepts and ideas I share came as a result of my journey of self-discovery. I also find that it is so much better, and more inspiring, to see how these theories and concepts work in real life. It gives them flesh and makes them practical. So I share them to that end—not presuming that everyone has to do it the way I've done it, but as an example of what it has looked like for one person.

You will also read many stories that involve other people. All of the stories are true. All of the people are real. Most of the names are accurate—except where people specifically requested I change their names or where it was obvious that I needed to. I am appreciative to all those who graciously allowed me to include parts of their stories as I shared mine.

I am a pastor in the Seventh-day Adventist Church and this is the context I am writing from. However, I have tried to write in a way that makes relevant aspects of my faith community accessible to anyone who is interested in the mission of the church. I also hope that writing in this way will help readers from my own faith community reflect on how we explain and invite others into the doctrines, practices, traditions and assumptions of our particular church community.

Lastly, this book details an ongoing journey. Neither I nor my church have completely arrived. It's one of the reasons why I chose the title I did: it's the table I *long* for. It's always a work in progress. One of my favourite chapters of Scripture of late has been Hebrews 11, where the author notes how all the great heroes of faith died having never received the promises, "but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced them and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth" (Hebrews 11:13). That is the story of the Jesus-way: this side of eternity, we are always on the journey, feeling a certain restlessness and incompleteness, and never quite arrive. And yet we press on.

So you will read about a part of my journey: about how in 2016 my whole paradigm of church came crashing down, and how since then I've continued to learn what it means to be the church and what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. We replanted our church in 2018—what we called a "restart"—but in many ways, we continuously experience mini-restarts (especially when we crashed into an unprecedented worldwide pandemic), as we learn to more faithfully align ourselves with and embody the gospel.

I hope this humble story can captivate your imagination and propel you into new heights as you reconsider the much larger vision God longs for his church to experience—the table *He* longs for us to sit at and invite others to.

RE-IMAGINING CHURCH

To the casual observer it wouldn't have appeared very significant, but my whole world began to shift that fateful Friday night in March, 2016. A small group of us were sitting around the living room at my in-laws' house, singing, sharing, studying Scripture together. I'd invited them to embark on a journey that was a long time in the making.

The results would prove cataclysmic.

For many years, I'd led a pretty traditional ministry. Pastoring was preaching, visiting my church members and trying to maintain doctrinal integrity. There were certainly the typical stresses of church attendance and financial challenges, but overall life was good.

But then I started noticing a crack in the dam. I became overwhelmed with a sense that something wasn't right. Something was missing, but I couldn't put my finger on what it was. The traditional pastoral formula—preach good sermons, visit your parishioners—just didn't seem to be working for me. I felt like a glorified manager—that my job was to keep the saints happy, pursuing the status quo at all costs.

I began seriously wrestling with my calling. It wasn't that I doubted I should be in ministry. I was struggling with what *type* of ministry.

Eventually, I landed on the idea of academia. I'd always been passionate about deeper study and had harboured the idea of someday pursuing a doctorate in Old Testament studies. Just as significantly, I couldn't shake my ambivalence about what I was supposed to be doing as a pastor.

So for the next two years, I prepared to apply to various PhD programs at top universities. It quickly became everything I breathed and dreamed about—all the while doing just enough in pastoring to get by. I was obsessed with the thought of someday walking the hallowed grounds of Harvard, not too far from where I grew up, debating the nuances of Hebrew with classmates and professors.

But spoiler alert: I didn't get accepted—not into Harvard, not into Duke, not even into Boston University. One by one, the rejection letters came, and each time I crashed to my knees, confused about what God was doing.

A couple of days after the last rejection letter, something really strange happened though: I felt peace—like a heavy burden had been lifted from my shoulders. And instead of preparing to apply again the following year, I sensed that God had something else in mind. I didn't know what exactly, but I'd soon find out it was something far better—and far different—than I could ever imagine. I was about to discover what my friend Ben Lundquist has tweeted, that “God often uses our deepest pain as a launching pad for our greatest calling.”¹

My wife Camille and I initially assumed it involved moving. We'd been anticipating a change of scenery anyway if I got into a doctoral program, so even though that didn't work out, we were already halfway out the door emotionally. It had been one of the snowiest winters in Maine and despite being hardy New Englanders, we were ripe for a move to a warmer location.

“I think I could live in Maryland,” Camille said one day, a week or two later.

When a well-positioned friend in ministry randomly called me the next week, asking if I'd ever consider pastoring in Maryland, we figured it was a sure sign. So for the first time in my ministry, I threw my hat in the ring for a church far away from the land I loved.

And then I waited. And waited. And waited—occasionally getting updates, telling me my name was slowly making its way to the top.

But then I waited some more.

And then something mysterious happened: while waiting and wrestling, I became overwhelmed one morning during prayer with the sense that I was not done in Maine. God still had more for me to do in Bangor. I didn't know what exactly, but I knew it was something.

I suddenly felt incredible peace. And by the time I finally heard back from the church a couple of months later, telling me they'd chosen someone else, I didn't care anyway. I was where God wanted me.

But I also knew this: if I was staying in Bangor, it wasn't simply to do more of the same thing. I knew God had gifted me with abilities and passions to do more than simply maintain the status quo. In fact, I knew if I was going

to survive ministry and maintain my sanity, I'd have to start following a different path.

Little did I know it would actually be more like blazing an entirely new trail, with no road map, and many harrowing twists and turns.

At that point, the only thing I could think that meant was to plant a new church. Which makes some sense. I'd grown up in the home of a man, one of my great heroes, who'd experienced his own ministry crossroads three decades earlier and come to the same conclusion. Similarly dissatisfied with traditional ministry, my dad left the comforts of a sizeable church in rural Massachusetts to start new churches in secular Boston, arguably the least-religious city in America.

His family, with me the youngest of three, went from the luxuries of traditional rural religious life to worshipping in dingy basements of rented Lutheran churches in poor Boston neighbourhoods. Many times, my dad's eyes welled up with tears as he peeked into the children's classrooms on Saturdays, seeing little me there all by myself with only the teacher for companionship, wondering if he'd made a mistake by pulling his family away from the large Christian community he'd left behind.

I guess the upshot of it was that somehow, unknowingly, it had gotten into my DNA. I somehow knew that status quo church is no church at all—that the Christian faith is one of movement, refusing to ever feel too content in one's station.

And so I felt the strong conviction that if we were going to stay in Bangor, it would be a creative venture. It couldn't be business as usual. Through a series of conversations, I roped my church into apprehensively agreeing to plant a new church.

Which is what led to that Friday night.

The church had formed a planting team to plot the course, venturing into the unknown. And that's exactly what it was—the unknown. Despite being raised by a man who'd started three churches, the nuts and bolts had somehow eluded me. And my one seminary course on church planting was a faint memory also, leaving it all a black box to me.

So I started consuming everything I could. I listened to podcasts, read books and spoke with experts, including my dad, trying to crack the code. The best I could come up with was that we needed to form a planting team, which would prepare to launch the church a few months later. We'd need to

get organised to start off with a bang—finding a place to rent, recruiting a great music team, preparing a killer children’s program. We’d have to send out flyers, inviting our city to the first service, hoping to draw in lots of strangers. It all sounded exciting, if not a little stressful.

When we met that first night, a dozen or so of the church’s finest, there was a buzz in the air. We sensed something epic was happening, at least in our minds. But little did we know just how epic.

We were there to organise ourselves to launch a new church, but the Spirit had another agenda altogether. We thought our task was figuring out how to put on the best program we could put on, but the Spirit started the process of making us the best people we could be.

As we sat around the living room, reclining on couches and overstuffed chairs, laughing, sipping hot drinks, praying, studying Scripture together, sharing our hearts with one another, suddenly it hit me like a bolt of lightning, seemingly out of nowhere: *Why does church have to be more than this?*

The question wrecked me.

And I’ve never been the same.

I’d come upon an idea—not original to me—that was revolutionary. It was one that had never occurred to me before, mainly because I’d never experienced it before.

To that point, church—faith, religion—had been about putting on a program. It had been about showing up at the right time to the right holy building, sitting quietly in a pew, listening to one person talk. It had been about organising complicated committees and worrying about budgets. It had been about spending hours each week carefully crafting sermons and practising catchy ditties or elaborate arias, hoping to dazzle with our performances. It had been about strictly policing dogma, thinking that was the church’s primary mission. It had been about spending thousands of dollars on maintaining a building, all because we called it “God’s house.”

But what I began to realise that night is that we’d really overcomplicated this whole church thing. Somewhere along the way we began thinking church was about putting on programs and maintaining buildings—when it’s really about being with and investing in people.

I went to bed that night with my head in the clouds and my heart captivated. My imagination ran wild and I couldn’t sleep.

That night, in that living room, something profound had happened: I started falling in love with what church really is.

THE CHURCH OF ACTS

The irony, of course, is that this vision had been staring at me all along in the pages of Scripture. But I'd somehow missed it.

I couldn't miss it this time though as I read the book of Acts afresh. It was there as plain as day. Soon after Pentecost, when the fledgling group of Jesus-followers were launched by the Spirit into cosmic-sized mission, Acts shares this insight about the life of the church:

They spent their time learning from the apostles and they were like family to each other. They also broke bread and prayed together. . . . All the Lord's followers often met together, and they shared everything they had. They would sell their property and possessions and give the money to whoever needed it. Day after day they met together in the temple. They broke bread together in different homes and shared their food happily and freely, while praising God. Everyone liked them, and each day the Lord added to their group others who were being saved (Acts 2:42–47, CEV).

It's pretty simple, really. There's no mention of buildings that needed renovating, committees to nominate nominating committees, introits, benedictions or Personal Ministries leaders. There's nothing about elaborate mission statements or organisational flow charts. Church wasn't a fancy program one attended but a community one belonged to.

The New Testament church spent a lot of time together—they ate together, learned together and prayed together. They became family. And amazingly, astoundingly, awesomely, the result was explosive growth! “*Each day* the Lord added to their group others who were being saved.”

This was actually what God's vision for His people had always been. When He created the world, He created a family—Adam and Eve, together reflecting His image. When they turned their backs on God, they also turned their backs on each other, fracturing the family, ultimately leading to a scattering of all peoples across the earth. Togetherness became separation.

It was for this reason God called Abraham out of Ur, away from his family. God wanted to create a new family—a family that would bless all the

families of the earth, displaying God's glory to the world. That's what Israel was to be—the family of God, reflecting the God-family—Father, Son and Spirit. They were to be a picture of how God could restore togetherness to the world, how people from all nations could join in fellowship and community, becoming one people again.

Ultimately, Jesus came to earth to do what Israel failed to do. He gathered to Himself a group of disciples “that they might be with Him” (Mark 3:14), demonstrating what the family of God was to be. The disciples ate with Him, walked with Him, went everywhere with Him. He invited them to leave their own families, promising they would experience family a hundredfold. He called them His own brothers and sisters and mother, sending them into the world to announce that everyone was a child of God, all invited to sit at the same table together, experiencing God's kingdom of love.

It didn't take long for our church-planting team to catch this vision. We'd tasted something intoxicating and wanted more, not quite sure where it would lead. What we did know was that Scripture was inviting us to keep it simple. Instead of putting on fancy programs and starting complicated ministries, we were going to simplify and focus on the core scriptural principles of church—being family, encouraging one another and inviting others in.

Over the next few years, what that all looked like came into greater focus, slowly and messily and beautifully unfolding.

TC, THE SEVENTH-DAY AGNOSTIC

No-one epitomises this early part of our journey more than TC, someone we quickly came to love and adore. TC was married to Avery, one of our planting members, but was himself not a Christian. Raised in a Catholic family, he left religion behind when he went to college, with a stop along the way in Judaism. Through medical school, he ultimately landed on an agnosticism that seemed to at least admire Jesus.

For 30 years, Avery prayed for TC but never pushed her faith on him. He respected her religious commitments and even occasionally showed up to church, but it ultimately wasn't for him—the dogma, the sitting quietly in a pew, the rituals, the preacher preaching at him.

That first night Avery came to our meeting, TC curiously asked her where she was going. When she told him, he asked her why he couldn't go, and she promptly said it was because he wasn't invited. As she later recounted the exchange to us, we immediately burst out in unison: "Avery, tell him he's invited! This is why we're meeting. We want people like him."

The next week TC showed up.

He never stopped coming.

He quickly endeared himself to us and we to him. Despite having a ton of religious baggage, he realised something was different about our group. We weren't there to peddle religion; we were there to be God's family. We were there to talk about Jesus, whom he'd loved all along, to listen to each other's hearts and stories, and encourage one another.

This didn't mean we were interested in a Scripture-light experience. Not at all. We were never more serious about pursuing the heart of Scripture, wrestling deeply with what it meant to be Scripture-informed people in the present world. And TC loved all of it, offering incredible theological insights that left us all baffled, wondering how a self-proclaimed agnostic could have such a rich and beautiful grasp of concepts that had eluded many life-long Christians.

We soon realised that TC was a poignant example of someone who hadn't really rejected *church*; he was someone who'd rejected our *version* of church, which wasn't even scriptural. When we implicitly define church as a program that takes place in a building, full of rituals and traditions that have little scriptural basis, rather than the dynamic family of God, we leave behind a bunch of people who are attracted to Jesus and His mission but have no interest in sitting quietly in a pew for an hour, being talked at with dogma.

Pretty soon, our connection with TC turned into more than just a weekly thing. We started spending holidays together, watching football together, travelling together, crying together. When TC and Avery's youngest daughter, whom we'd met just a few times before, got engaged and needed someone to perform her wedding in Ohio, TC didn't hesitate. "Shawn will do it," he said, without even consulting with me. He knew because I was his pastor—but even more significantly, I was his family.

It all really started sinking in that this journey had seriously reshaped TC's understanding of church when one day Avery delightfully reported what

he'd said to her extended family as they sat around a table one day. Avery had trained them to never bring up religion with TC for fear of offending him, so it came as a shock when out of nowhere, TC, with a gleam in his eye and in his endearing way, casually announced to everyone, "Well, I've become a church planter."

You could have blown everyone over with a feather, Avery told us, including herself.

We all had a good laugh when she recounted the story to us. But we knew: TC had been drawn into the orbit of God's love and into His family. He was a testament to what I've heard Eric Pfeiffer say: people today aren't looking for a church—at least as we've wrongly defined church—they're looking for family.

So in our own clumsy and bumbling way, putting one foot in front of the other without much visibility beyond the next step, we started on a new and exciting journey—a journey to become the family of God, inviting others into the ever-widening circle.

WHY I'M ALWAYS HANGING OUT AT BAGEL CENTRAL

Not long after that fateful Friday night in March, I found myself at Bangor City Hall one evening, attending a city council meeting. I had recently become friends with Ben, who was the mayor of Bangor at the time, and he'd invited me to attend a meeting. Having never attended before, and being somewhat intimidated by stepping into the public square—which I was largely unaccustomed to doing, having lived my whole life in an insular religious environment—I sheepishly slid into the back row of the meeting and settled in.

It was eye-opening to see the inner workings of public life, to hear the issues that mattered to my neighbours and fellow residents. It was sobering to realise not everyone in the world was debating the religious minutiae I'd devoted much of my life to studying and arguing about.

One particular agenda item stood out to me the most. A measure was proposed that would give the city's first responders the ability to use Narcan when responding to individuals who'd overdosed from opiates, thus effectively saving their lives.

Though it was obvious the proposal would pass, Ben shared a gripping story about one of his young neighbours, William, who'd died from an overdose a few days before—a tragedy that could have been easily prevented if first responders had Narcan. As he shared the story, I noticed a few people in the audience in tears and I later learned they'd known William quite well.

William's story was not isolated, of course. I soon learned that Maine had the highest rate of prescription opiate addiction in America—a point that had caught the attention of many citizens. It was a huge epidemic that had

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