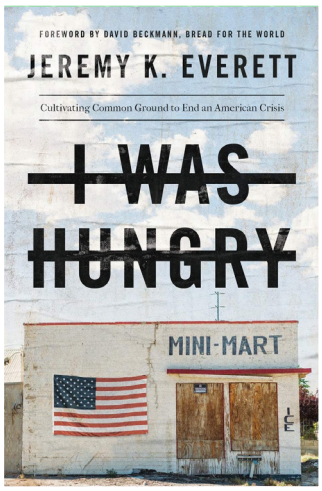
CBF Book Discussion Guide

by Alexis Weaver



I Was Hungry: Cultivating Common Ground to End an American Crisis

By Jeremy K. Everett

Overview

Hunger is one of the most significant issues in America. One in eight Americans struggles with hunger, and more than 13 million children live in food-insecure homes. As Christians, we are called to address the suffering of the hungry and poor: "For I was hungry, and you gave me food . . ." (Matthew 25:35). However, the problems of hunger and poverty are too large and too complex for any one of us to resolve individually.

Jeremy Everett founded and directs the Texas Hunger Initiative and the Baylor Collaborative on Hunger and Poverty, a capacity-building anti-hunger project within Baylor University. He also serves as a congressional appointee to the National Commission on Hunger. In this book, Everett calls on Christians to work intentionally across ideological divides to build trust with one another and impoverished communities and effectively end America's hunger crisis. Everett tells stories to help Christians of all political persuasions understand how they can work together to truly make a difference.

Introduction

Before discussing *I Was Hungry*, let's begin with a conversation about what food means to you. What is your favorite meal? What are the treasured recipes passed down in your family? What does it do to the fabric of a community to be able to bring a meal to a grieving friend, new parents or to a church potluck?

Now, imagine you can no longer offer that gift of food, memory and care. How might losing access to that opportunity affect an individual or a parent? How might it change a child's perspective if their parents are not able to offer that?

Alexis Weaver is the Senior Manager for Partner Network Capacity at Atlanta Community Food Bank. She has nearly two decades of experience working within the nonprofit sector to increase capacity for communities to respond to hunger and poverty effectively, including partnering with Jeremy Everett and the Texas Hunger Initiative in McLennan County, Texas, from 2010 to 2013 as co-organizer of the Food Planning Task Force. Weaver serves on the board of NETWorks Cooperative Ministry and is a deacon at Smoke Rise Baptist church in Tucker, Ga.

Book Discussion Questions

Chapter 1 – Disaster: What I Learned from a Hurricane about Tackling the Hunger Disaster in America

- The awareness of broken systems became real for Jeremy Everett during Hurricane Katrina. When did your own awareness of systemic brokenness enter your consciousness? As we navigate the COVID-19 pandemic, how do we think about the ways that national and global disasters might impact systems and the problems of poverty/hunger for individuals and families?

- Everett asks the question: "How might the Spirit of God move if we came out of our silos and chose collaboration for the common good over contention to rescue our stranded neighbors abandoned by the storms of hunger and poverty?" What does it mean to rescue versus weather the storm with those going through it?

- How do our own silos affect rationales for responding to hunger? In what silos do you find yourself or your congregation? What might it take to move toward collaboration?

Chapter 2 – Broken Streetlights: Finding Our Commonality amid Crisis

- Why should we address hunger instead of the other pressing issues facing our nation?

- If solving hunger is so achievable, why do we still have hunger? Thoughts on "broken streetlight" theory—does solving hunger really open the door for all other economic opportunity?

- Everett quotes Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (p. 23)—"The arc of a moral universe bends towards justice." In light of increasing political divisions in society, can or should we take solace in these words?

Chapter 3 – A Priest and a Prostitute: It Really Does Take Nearly Losing Your Life to Find it

- Everett describes an early experience paralleling that of St. Francis—living among the poor (in poverty). He describes taking all his possessions and giving them to the homeless. It's only in returning to encampments and people that he begins to learn more about their stories. Eventually, he develops a stronger relationship with the poor in his community. What stood out to you about the way Everett describes his prayers versus the prayer of James (the prostitute).

- Even though Everett has had these personal experiences with his poor and homeless neighbors, years later he asks Father Gutierrez, "How does one have solidarity with the poor?" What does the response of the Father Gutierrez "Commit your life to their cause" mean to you?

- Explore further in the story of the Rich Young Ruler in Luke 18:18-23. Does this story leave you hopeful? Or sad? What parallels do you see between Everett's story and yours, and the rich young ruler?

- Do giving and serving benefit the poor or you? What does it mean to have a transformational experience? Is it a personal transformation for transformation's sake or to equip us to transform systems?

- Where are you experiencing God's radical transforming power in your life? Are there areas where you feel/see opportunities to begin to engage systems or people?

Chapter 4 – The People: Finding Citizenship in the Right Kingdom

- Were you aware that there are places in the United States that still do not have access to safe living conditions (water, electricity) such as what Everett details in his conversations with residents in the colonias?
- One of the concepts that stands out as I read these stories of interviews with households on the border is dignity. Where in their stories do you see the concepts of dignity and shame? What might it mean for your psyche as a parent or leader in your family to be unable to provide consistent meals for others? In what ways have you judged or seen others in your community or congregation criticize those who haven't been able to provide for themselves or their families?
- Everett highlights several of the root causes of hunger. Were any of these surprising to you? Was anything missing? In his discussion on underemployment, he also discusses medical and health issues of a neighbor. Often, people experiencing food insecurity are balancing the multiple tradeoffs they face on a day-to-day basis. But a medical crisis (such as a hospitalization or need for medication) can send them into a downward spiral from which they are unable to recover without external help and resources.
- Sometimes, those of us with the privilege of food security can subconsciously separate those seeking help into the categories of "deserving" and "undeserving"—making them, as Everett says, the scapegoats. Where do those mindsets come from? What is the overarching narrative that has led us to blame those facing food insecurity for the situation they are in? What questions or observations should we make to help us identify the ways that "systems are stacked against the poor?"
- Everett spends a brief segment of Chapter 4 noting the tradeoffs that food insecure families make. These tradeoffs—the constant pressure of being forced to make no-win decisions each day—can lead to decision fatigue and eventually trauma. Many individuals experiencing poverty and food insecurity are also living with both acute and chronic trauma, which can further exacerbate their decision-making ability. One of the reasons these tradeoffs are so challenging is that they are being made with scarce resources. What might the signs of trauma and scarcity might look like for individuals coming to a food pantry or for children receiving free breakfast or lunch?

Chapter 5 – The Desert: Moving from Mind-Sets of Scarcity to Abundance

- Think of a time when a resource has been scarce for you. What made it harder to make decisions during that time? Were you able to accomplish everything you wanted? Did you remember everything you needed?
- Families facing food insecurity experience actual scarcity of access to food or even time (for planning, decision-making, etc.). However, the U.S. is a country with an abundance of food—although the logistics of getting food to places can sometimes be complicated. Many charitable organizations exacerbate a scarcity mindset and limit what one family can receive (even if they have a need for more), out of worry that there may not be food for a potentially hungry family next week. What might look different if food pantries trusted God to provide enough for each day (like the manna provided to the Israelites in the desert) and emptied their stockpile for anyone who needed it?
- Public policy and advocacy makes a difference. Everett discusses the impact of free breakfast and lunch as well as the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP). In early 2021, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) extended free school breakfast and lunch for all children through the end of 2022. The USDA also recently increased the amount of SNAP that families would receive by 25 percent (about $36.24 per person per month). These two policy changes, coupled with the monthly Child Tax Credit, have had and will continue to have a significant impact on keeping children out of poverty. What are reasons you have heard for why those programs should not be expanded or why they should even be cut?

Chapter 6 – Organize: How a Shared Response Can Create Scalable Solutions to Our Communities' Greatest Social Challenges

- Everett describes the five steps needed for organizing of Hunger Free Community Coalitions. Which of these steps will be the easiest for your congregation to achieve? Which will be the most difficult? What information do you still need? From your own personal experiences, are there any steps missing?

Chapter 7 – The West Side: Once You Engage a Community, Fear Cannot Hold Out Against Love

- Consider the phrase, "With, not for." What might you have to sacrifice to work with, not for, the poor?
- What is the first step in serving "with, not for" food-insecure families in your community?

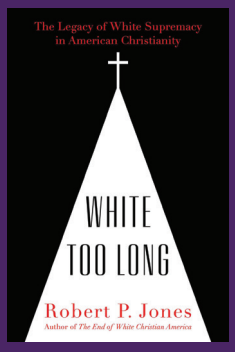
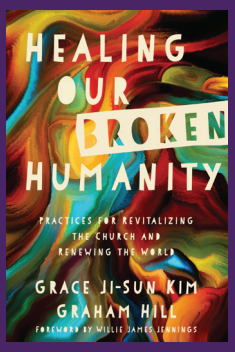
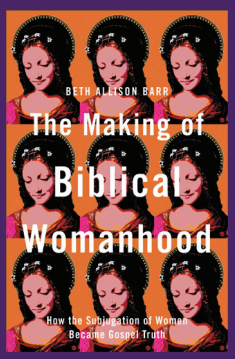
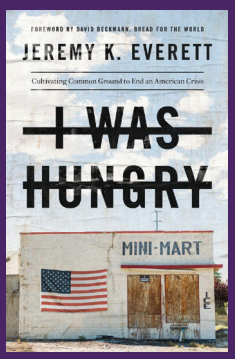
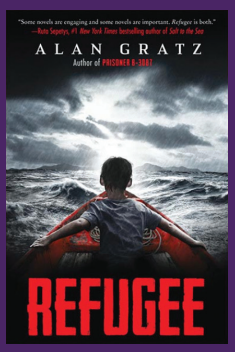
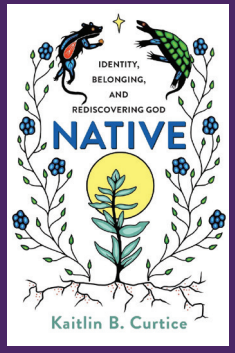
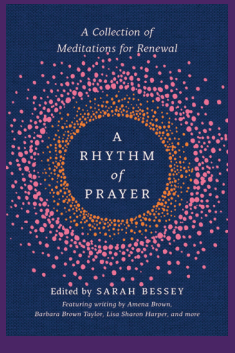
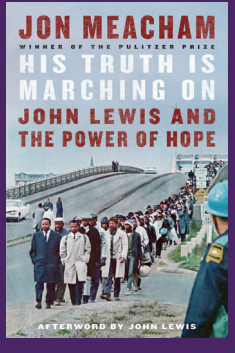
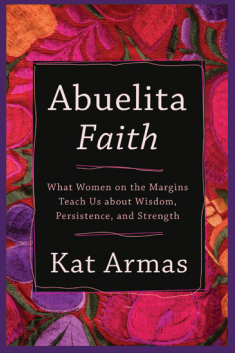
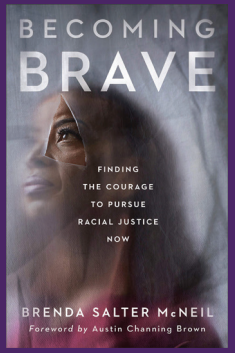
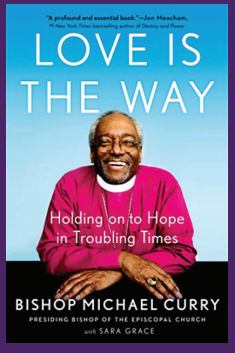
Chapter 8 – Politics: Searching for Consensus amid a Landscape of Contention

- What aspects of this chapter do you most relate to? Where did you have a hard time connecting?
- Do you believe that consensus can be found in order to fulfill Jesus' call to action in Matthew 25?

Chapter 9 – Together at the Table: The Texas Hunger Initiative's Story of Organizing a Systemic Response to Hunger; Chapter 10 – Justice: Our Cultural Moment to Find Common Ground for the Common Good

- Everett sets out in the beginning of the book to turn "social awareness into social activation, to build hunger-free communities, and to end the systemic hunger disaster in America." After having read this book, where do you feel you are on that spectrum? What resources do you have in order to take action or for your church to take action?
- What is there about your personal experience which connected (or disconnected) you from the stories and/or call to action? Have any of your personal views changed because of this book? If so, how?

CBF Book Club 2021-22

We're excited to announce selections for this year's book club. With new subjects, great authors, more comprehensive reading guides and Fellowship-wide virtual events. We invite you and your congregation, Sunday school class or small group to join us as we read and learn together.

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