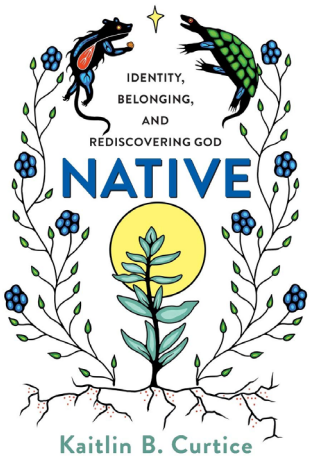
CBF Book Discussion Guide

by Meg Lacy Vega



Native: Identity, Belonging and Rediscovering God

By Kaitlin B. Curtice

About the Author

Kaitlin B. Curtice is a lifelong Christian, and a citizen of the Potawatomi Nation. The Potawatomi are a federally recognized Indigenous tribe that was traditionally an Algonquian-speaking Eastern Woodlands tribe, now located in the state of Oklahoma. As a Christian, and an Indigenous woman, Curtice offers a unique perspective on spirituality and faith, and particularly the decolonization needed within the church. Curtice has worn many hats: worship leader, poet, mother of two little ones, and author of two books: *Native* and *Glory Happening*, a collection of fifty essays and prayers about finding the sacred in the ordinary. Curtice lives in Atlanta, Georgia, with her family.

About the Book

As you may have noticed during your reading of *Native*, it is a genre-bending book. It weaves together many elements: story, poetry, memoir and imagery, Christian history and theology, Indigenous traditions, faith, culture, and everyday life. This blending feels like an expression of the diversity that Curtis herself embodies, the stories, places, cultures, and traditions that have shaped her life and her faith. The book unfolds in five parts, inviting the reader on a journey of discovery along the way. Part One, Beginnings, helps us find a place to start by locating where we are now, both literally on the land and metaphorically in our hearts and minds. We must see where we are before we can identify where we are going. Part Two, Searching for Meaning invites us to see old stories in a new light, and to be unafraid of the hard truths that we may have previously avoided, particularly when it comes to the Christianity's role in colonization, and our own ignorance about it. Part Three, The Struggle for Truth, invites us to wrestle with these hard truths, both individually and collectively. It it an invitation to hold pain, create space, and make a path forward that leads to healing. Part Four, Work, explores what the work of holding and healing really look like: how do we bear witness to the story of our Indigenous brothers and sisters? How can we better care for the earth? What does it look like to build a path toward a different kind of future? Part Five, Bearing Fruit in the World, challenges us to be a part of decolonization in the church, and in the world around us, unearthing a new, more vibrant, and more holistic spiritual experience.

Rev. Meg Lacy Vega is a writer, speaker, yoga instructor and retreat leader who is passionate about creating spaces for rest and spiritual renewal. Meg lives outside of Chattanooga, Tennessee, with her husband and two pups, Ruth and Olive. You can find Meg on instagram at @meglacyvega.

A Word about How to Use this Guide

The discussion questions below follow the pattern of the five movements in the book: Beginnings, Searching, Struggling, Working, and Bearing Fruit. However, you can use the guide in many ways. Do not feel that you must move through these questions in the linear fashion in which they are written. If your group will be meeting only once, instead of trying to cover all the questions, pick one or two from each section. If your group will be meeting multiple times as you read, you can organize your conversations around these five parts, or choose other themes that seem resonate with your group and connect the dots between the five parts. Allow space for quiet and reflection as you lead. You may even consider encouraging your group to journal on some of these questions as prompts, or trying one of the activities together. **By creating space for participants to explore, grapple, wrestle, and question, you are creating space for each one to tell his or her story and for each one to find a place of belonging.**

Book Discussion Questions

Part One - Beginning

What happens when a journey begins? How do we prepare ourselves for the adventure that awaits? We ask Questions. We honor what we have come from and where we are going. We own our place in the story. —pg. 37

1. Where do you find yourself, literally — geography and physically? What is your sense of connectedness to the land around you — the land you live on, or the land on which your church is located? Curtice says that "physical places are spiritual places" (p. 6-7). Spend time reflecting as a group on how the physical spaces around you shape your spirituality.

2. What is your creation story? In order to begin, Curtice suggests that we consider our own history, both personally and collectively. We must understand where we come from to understand who we are. Share with the group something about where you come from—the place, the heritage, the ethnicity or culture you were born into.

3. "I engage in a holistic faith in which I cannot compartmentalize or separate the various parts of who I am or what I believe, which means journeying must include all of me, all of us." (p. 16) Do you ever feel you must compartmentalize a part of your identity in order to be a person of faith? Is there a part of you that you don't feel is welcomed into your spiritual life and journey?

Activity: Read George Ella Lyon's poem "Where I'm From" aloud together (it can be found with a quick Google search). Then take 5-10 minutes for participants to write their own "I am From" poem. Remind your group to enjoy the experience — it is an exercise meant to aid reflection, no make them worried about the quality of their writing! You may choose to invite participants to share their poems with the group or simply close with this exercise.

Part Two - Searching

While we are searching for who we are, we are also searching for how we must respond to things of the earth that we don't understand. Searching, digging, praying... The search leads us to truth. What we do with the truth is up to us. —pg. 76

1. "There is one "root," Curtice says, at the base of all the "weeds" in Christian culture: White Supremacy (pg. 44). What do you think she means? Do you agree or disagree?

2. Curtice says that "language is the thin thread that holds cultures together," (p. 60) and that one of the church's biggest blind spots has been ignoring the stories of those on the outside (pg. 66). What would it look like for you church community to lift up the stories, experiences, and language of Native Christians in your region? How do you think this would be received?

3. The word for America, Curtice tells us, is kchemokmanke, which translates "white person with long knives" (p. 64). How does this make you feel? What has been your biggest blindspot concerning the church's role in the colonization and erasure of Indigenous populations?

Activity: In Chapter 8, Gifts of Prayer, Curtice speaks of a deep connection to nature and the land, as a form of prayer. Invite the group to move outside for this portion of your time together. Find a quiet spoke to discuss chapter 8: what stood out to you, what you learned. Then offer time for the group to wander around the outdoor space you are in, to pray. Reconvene for a few moments to share about your experiences before closing.

Part Three - Struggling

Truth is somehow both the uncovering what we didn't know was there and the work of seeing what we knew was there the whole time. Truth is taking off the bandage so the wound can really heal. —pg. 110

1. Invite participants to pull out their phone or tablet and do a little bit of research: Which indigenous tribe previously inhabited the land on which you live, or on which your church resides? Spend time reading some of the stories of the tribe. Discuss together how can you show honor to their history and experience?

2. Sometimes struggling is about seeing a truth we have long avoided. Curtice states: "As long as we make these foods that keep us tethered to who we are and to the land, our holidays will mean something other than the myths we tell in American to make white people feel good about history" (p. 87). Consider "the myths we tell" - what hard truths were exposed to you in your reading of this section? How does Curtice's story help you better understand our nation's history, and the church's history? Then, invite participants to share about the recipes and culinary traditions that have been passed on to them from their ancestors, and how these tradition ties us to those who have come before us.

3. In Chapter 12, "The Pain of Church Spaces," Curtice shares how difficult it has been for her to be both indigenous, and a part of the church. What did you learn from her story that might reshape the way you think of your own faith, or your church's approach to diversity?

4. "Talk of reconciliation alone, especially when it sounds like a call to forget the past and move on, threatens not only the future of particular communities but individual identities as well" (pg. 92). How would you define reconciliation, in light of this statement?

Part Four - Working

Work, as it turns out, isn't always what we think. Work is a gift. It is in writing letters and sitting in the sun watching a grasshopper. It is marching in protest or protesting by drinking morning coffee and being present with one another. —pg. 143

1. Curtice suggests that part of "the work"—of both reconciliation and belonging— is bearing witness to indigenous stories. Did you follow the story on the Dakota Access Pipeline in 2016, and the resistance at Standing Rock? Why or why not? How do you feel called to bear witness to the experience of Indigenous communities in the future?

2. In the Baptist community Curtice grew up in, "the only time [she] heard anything about the earth was when a preacher talked about the call to 'subdue it.'" (pg. 129). In your own church tradition, what were you taught about humanity's relationship with the land? How has Curtice's perspective caused you to rethink our responsibility to care for the earth?

3. For those of us who are not indigenous, the onus is on us to do the work of understanding the native story and becoming part of the solution to the harms that have been done in the name of Christ. Curtice offers a number of suggestions for how we can play a part: by paying attention (pg 132), by making amends (pg. 135), or by engaging in tiny acts of resistance (pg. 139). Which of these actions do you feel most stirred to try (or what other action do you feel compelled to engage)?

Part Five - Bearing Fruit

What if all of this is the work of knowing and being known? What if, at the beginning and end of everything, the only thing that matters is that we saw, and called it good? —pg. 179

1. "Our spirituality is directly tied to institutions that police the spiritual lives of others... what does it do to our spiritual essence to know that we will be punished for expressing our ways of knowing Creator?" (pg. 156) Curtice calls us to a decolonization of spirituality. What do you think this means? What might a future "decolonized church" look like?

2. Curtice ponders a path to collective reconstruction"how do we deconstruct and reconstruct as a people, as kin?" What do you think? How can we reimagine a new way together?

3. The irony of bearing fruit is that this is not an end, but a new beginning. Curtice proposes many ways we can return to mystery, again and again, on page 166 (fourth paragraph). Read this list together. How do you feel called to "return to mystery" after reading this work?

Activity: Curtice challenges us to distinguish between the person of Jesus, who was by nature a de-colonizer, and the institution of the church that has so often supported the American way of assimilation to Western and white values (see pg. 163). As a group, make a list of the traits you most associate with Jesus, and a list of the traits you most associate with the church. Compare the two lists and discuss.

More Resources to Explore

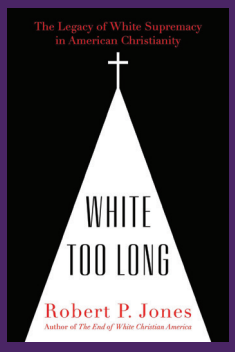
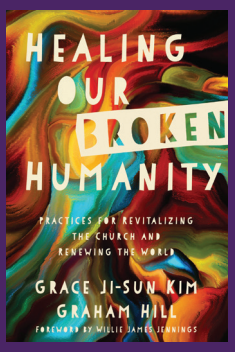
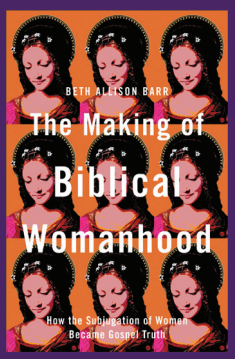
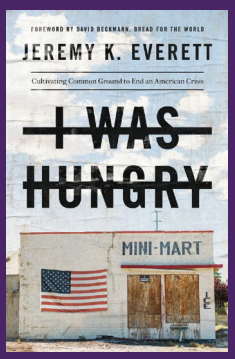
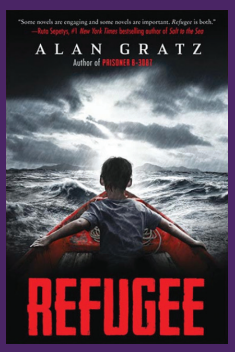
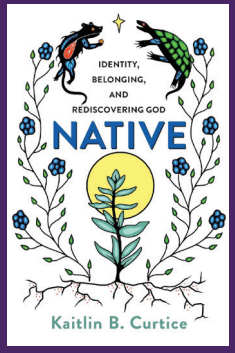
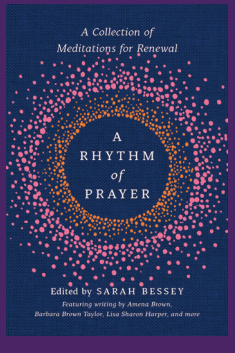
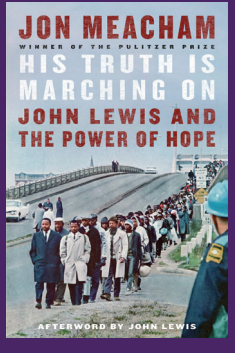
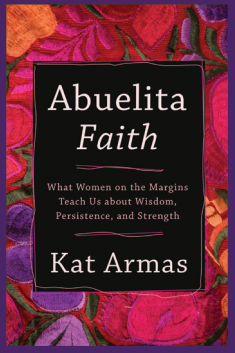
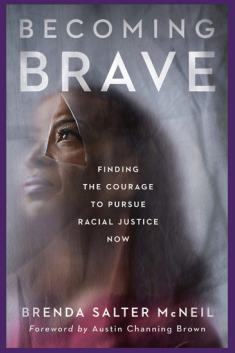
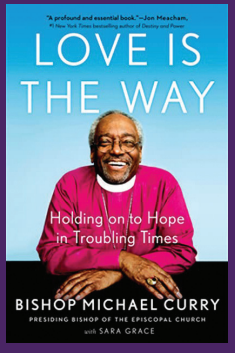
You can find a traditional telling of the Sky Woman Creation story from the New World Histories Channel on Youtube under “Sky Woman: A Haudenosaunee Creation Story.”

You can learn about the Indigenous Land you live on through the Native Land app or Website (***https://native-land.ca/***)

Further Reading

- *“All the Real Indians Died Off” And 20 Other Myths About Native Americans* by Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz and Dina Gilio-Whitaker (Nonficiton)
- *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants by Robin Wall Kimmerer* (Nonfiction)
- *Colonial Entanglement* by Jean Dennison (Nonfiction)
- *Postcolonial Love Poems* by Natalie Diaz (Poetry)
- *Rescuing the Gospel from the Cowboys: A Native American Expression of the Jesus Way* by Richard Twist (Nonfiction)
- *The Marrow Theives* by Cherie Dimaline (Young Adult Fiction)
- *The Night Watchman* by Louise Erdrich (Fiction)
- *The Sioux Chef’s Indigenous Kitchen* by Sean Sherman and Beth Dooley (Cookbook)
- *There, There* by Tommy Orange (Fiction)

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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