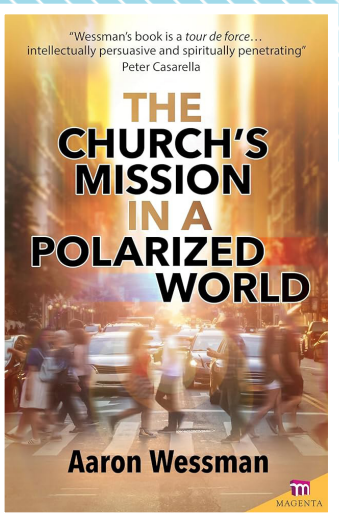
CBF Book Discussion Guide

by Meg Rooney



The Church's Mission in a Polarized World

By Aaron Wessman

About the Author

Father (Fr.) Aaron Wessman is a priest of the Roman Catholic Church, the vicar general, and the director for the Glenmary Home Missioners. With a Ph.D. from the Catholic University of Louvain in Systematic Theology, Fr. Wessman guest lectures at St. Meinrad Seminary and School of Theology on Christianity and polarization. Fr. Wessman serves on the editorial board for Review for Religious and the advisory board for the Conference of Major Superiors of Men Religious (CMSM). He also serves two prison systems. He is a contributing writer to *American Magazine*.

About the Book

In his work, *The Church's Mission in a Polarized World*, Fr. Wessman explores political polarization within the United States and strategies to overcome hateful divisions. By explaining the roots of polarization sociologically and psychologically, Fr. Wessman argues that social media has incredibly impacted polarization. He encourages readers to self-reflect, engage with diverse viewpoints, and promote understanding and curiosity to bridge divides. Fr. Wessman invites Christians to consider social media's influence on their lives and relationships with hopes of bridging harmful divides.

Questions for Conversation

INTRODUCTION

- What is your response to the emotional prosperity gospel? Does How have you witnessed polarization with your family members and friends? What about in your community? Your church?
- How do you think polarization has permeated church life and relationships? What are the potential dangers of unchecked polarization for individuals and communities?
- What chapter(s) are you looking forward to or interested in the most? Why?

CHAPTER ONE – WHAT IS POLARIZATION? SORTING, HOMOGENIZATION AND INTENSIFICATION

- Wessman defines and discusses sorting, homogenization and intensification as the primary roots of polarization. How have these roots impacted your ability to be in community with others? What have you lost as a result?
- Wessman writes, "People are unlikely to have meaningful conversations with members of another political party that could deepen thought or challenge assumptions through the exchange of hopes, values, stories, or dreams" (29). When was the last time you had a conversation with someone from another political party? How did it go? What did you take away from the conversation?
- This chapter emphasizes the influence of online media platforms and algorithms on sorting, homogenization and intensification. What online platforms do you use regularly? Which particular algorithms or features lead to your own polarization? Can online platforms be used differently?

CHAPTER TWO – WHAT IS POLARIZATION? INTENSIFICATION

- How have belonging and group identities changed since the COVID-19 pandemic? What do you see as influences on that change?
- How have you created meaning, belonging and your identity? How does this identity relate to others? What has the most influence on your identity and group belonging?
- What has been your experience with the us vs. them mentality in politics that Wessman describes?

CHAPTER THREE – THE CHURCH AND POLARIZATION

- What are your responses to the following questions posed by Wessman on page 94?
  - "When I cast a vote for a political candidate, do I consider the importance of my unity with Christians who perhaps cast a different vote?"
  - "When I am about to share a political post on social media, am I haunted by the overwhelming evidence in the Christian tradition that calls me to be a person who promotes unity within the Body of Christ?"
  - "Do I regulate the time I spend watching media outlets whose business model rests on creating division and intensifying animosity?
  - "Do I recognize that my Christian identity, flowing from my baptism, is more important than any other aspect of my identity?"
- Have political party issues made it difficult for you to embrace the body of Christ or extend love to the world? Why or why not?
- What do you consider the driving force of your morality? Do your values come more from politics or religion?

CHAPTER FOUR – RESPONDING TO THE STORMS OF POLARIZATION

- In this chapter, Wessman uses a war metaphor in evangelization and mission work. How is this metaphor problematic? Where have you seen it used before in your church or context?
- How does the war metaphor define the "other" as an enemy? What are the impacts of this?
- How can you hold your identity in Christ "even as the hurricanes of polarization wreak havoc within the country and the Church?" (153).
- What could be the impact of the incarnational movement in your relationships? On social media? In your church? At work? Do you know someone who embodies this metaphor already?

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CHAPTER FIVE – DISCIPLESHIP AS CROSSING OVER

- What does it mean to "cross over" and engage with those holding different views, as exemplified by Jesus' interactions with marginalized groups?
- How will you go out of your way to "cross over"? What steps can you take each day to be in spaces where people are different from you?
- What could happen if you choose to "cross over"? What could you lose? What could you gain? Would you want someone to "cross over" to you?

CHAPTER SIX – DISCIPLESHIP AND SALVIFIC ENCOUNTER

- What does a ministry of presence mean to you? Where have you seen a ministry of presence modeled? Does CBF value a ministry of presence?
- Where can you be more flexible? How can you adapt freely and spontaneously to the complex situations and people that are present when one approaches others in a ministry of crossing over" (199)?
- Where can you be more curious and reflective? Where have you struggled to do so in the past?
- How can you better cultivate prudence in your everyday life? What places do you think need prudence the most?

CHAPTER SEVEN – HOPE IN THE STORM

- Which courageous individuals resonated with you the most? Why? What did you learn from them?
- Which organizations have taken up the challenge to cross over? What was the result?
- How can creativity help individuals and organizations build bridges even in times of intense polarization and division?
- How can you seek to "provide a way out, to facilitate moments of crossing over, and to bring about the Kingdom of Unity" (250). What gifts or passions do you have that could assist you in this pursuit?