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## Common Ground for the Common Good: A Review of I Was Hungry

Abby M. Foreman

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## Common Ground for the Common Good: A Review of *I Was Hungry*

### Abstract

"Through his stories and experiences, Everett shares how he learned—sometimes the hard way—to listen well to those closest to the problem, to intentionally share power, and to be present in hard places in communities."

Posting about the book *I Was Hungry* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/common-ground-for-the-common-good-a-review-of-i-was-hungry/>

### Keywords

book review, *I Was Hungry*, common ground, America, crisis, Jeremy K. Everett

### Disciplines

Christianity

### Comments

*In All Things* is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service at Dordt University](#).

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# in things

March 12, 2020

## Common Ground for the Common Good: A Review of *I Was Hungry*

Abby Foreman

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

**Author:** Jeremy K. Everett

**Publisher:** Brazos Press

**Publishing Date:** August 20, 2019

**Pages:** 176 (Paperback)

**ISBN:** 978-1587434242

We can't do everything, but we can do this. We can probably do it fairly well... *and we all could do it together.*

This is a pretty basic summary of Jeremy Everett's simple but hopeful argument that we can come together to end the hunger crisis in the United States. According to Everett, "hunger is the broken streetlight of poverty issues" (22). He explains that in community work, the broken streetlight is the initial, easy win. Addressing the problem and fixing the streetlight accomplishes two key things: first, it begins to empower the community to believe that they can solve problems; second, the group begins to trust one another as they work together. You don't have to look around too hard to find evidence that we are suffering collectively from a problem of low self-esteem, low sense of efficacy and low trust—and we're pretty sure that the fault for it lies with the other guy. "Yes we can" is perhaps an over-simplified slogan, but the research bears it out: if you believe you can do something, you are much more likely to be able to do that thing. The

empowered self and community are powerful forces that can be used for what Everett characterizes as *common ground* for the *common good*.

Everett argues convincingly that hunger is low-hanging fruit in the overflowing fruit basket of modern social problems: “Hunger in our modern American context is not about famine or a lack of production but about a lack of concerted effort to ensure that people have access to food” (145). Helping to feed the hungry is an issue that resonates with most people, regardless of political ideology. For Christians, the biblical command to feed the hungry is clear, and there are multiple examples of how to do that—give food directly, invite someone to join your table, allow the poor to gather their own food (gleaning), etc. Lots of options!

In my previous experience as an organizer around hunger issues, I would agree that the issue of hunger has a long history of involvement by multiple Christian denominations and has also enjoyed bi-partisan support and action. The McGovern-Dole International Food for Education and Child Nutrition Program Act is an example of a possible bi-partisan relationship. Senators McGovern and Dole worked together and across party lines throughout their political careers to reduce hunger in the United States and around the world. Along with government programs, meeting the needs of the food insecure is also a space where church and community groups actively participate.

Everett’s book begins with a story about his experience in disaster relief after hurricanes. In Hurricane Katrina’s aftermath, people and organizations scrambled to house and care for thousands of displaced people:

The first responders—fire departments, police departments, and emergency medical technicians—all spoke different work languages and struggled to coordinate their efforts. No one knew who was in charge or how to give directions. Evacuations were directionless, shelters were overcrowded, medication was inadequate, and volunteers were disorganized. Everything was a mess, and what he desperately needed was a coordinated response (5).

By the time the next major hurricane hit the area, responders were prepared with an adequate, coordinated reaction to the event. Everett uses this experience to highlight the power of coordination and collaboration in meeting needs and solving problems.

Through his stories and experiences, Everett shares how he learned—sometimes the hard way—to listen well to those closest to the problem, to intentionally share power, and to be present in hard places in communities. He shares his experience leading the Texas Hunger Initiative which sought to organize the response to hunger in communities and statewide. Organization and coordination require that the various actors work

together and play nice. Collaborative work takes intentional effort to cultivate positive working relationships among organizations. The chapter entitled “Together at the Table” provides helpful guidance on how to engage in coalition work that would be useful to anyone considering implementing this model in their own community.

Be organized, work well with others, be kind and listen carefully—all simple lessons many of us have learned since childhood—and yet these lessons also have timeless relevance to our organizational and communal lives. Everett’s voice and gifts as a storyteller make this an easy book to read. He shares his own journey and what he has learned along the way as a person deeply committed to following God’s call in his life. I imagine that most people would get to the end of this book, as I did, and think, “He makes a lot of sense, I can see what he means about hunger being one of those things that we could actually tackle...and why haven’t we been better about coordinating our efforts in our communities?” This book will be valuable to anyone who is interested in learning about how to engage with others in community to come together to solve a collective problem.