

FOREWORD BY DAVID BECKMANN, BREAD FOR THE WORLD

**JEREMY K. EVERETT**

---

Cultivating Common Ground to End an American Crisis

---

**I WAS  
HUNGRY**

**MINI-MART**



“An urgent, biblically grounded summons to Christians to end the tragedy of contemporary poverty in America. Everett uses gripping personal stories to show both the wrenching agony of that poverty and also how it is quite possible to dramatically reduce it. Biblical. Factual. Practical. Engaging.”

—Ronald J. Sider, author of *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*

“I watched Everett emerge as a force for change for the poor and hungry in my own community. Everett understands the importance of systemic change, solidarity among disparate voices, and power from below that challenges superficial ideals from above for confronting one of America’s most heinous social issues. Now, years later, I have the joy of walking alongside this prophetic voice who is making a difference for the hungry of our neighborhood and nation.”

—Jimmy Dorrell, founder, Mission Waco/Mission World;  
pastor, Church Under the Bridge; president emeritus,  
Texas Christian Community Development Network

“We need this book! There are good books telling us why Christians should serve the poor, but they often leave one asking, ‘How?’ And there are good books that tell how a person or ministry has served the poor, but one wonders, ‘Would that really work in my community?’ In *I Was Hungry*, we learn how to actually serve the poor by seeing how serious Christians are doing just that in their own contexts.”

—Todd L. Lake, Belmont University

“There is a considerable difference between being aware of our neighbors’ needs and taking practical action to meet our neighbors’ needs. Everett has devoted himself to bridging the gap through his leadership with the Texas Hunger Initiative, his own personal acts of service, and now through his words in *I Was Hungry*. For those wanting to participate in the daily service of praying ‘on earth as it is in heaven,’ *I Was Hungry* is a good place to begin.”

—Andrew Greer, singer/songwriter and cohost  
of the Amazon Prime show *Dinner Conversations*  
with Mark Lowry and Andrew Greer

“Everett makes us see that ‘other America’ made up of needy people that is often invisible to those of us who live in our so-called affluent society. More important, he explains and demonstrates from his own experiences what we can do to minister to those who live there, whom Jesus called ‘the least of these.’ This book challenges us to act.”

—Tony Campolo, Eastern University

“Confronted with America’s hunger disaster—and its cultural, institutional, and spiritual causes—Everett asked, ‘How can I help?’ The Texas Hunger Initiative (THI) became his answer. *I Was Hungry* tells

this remarkable story as well as the story of the gospel remarkably working its way through the world. Readers of this terrific book will find themselves asking, ‘How can I help?’”

—Jonathan Tran, Baylor University

“In this book, which is full of practical wisdom and insight, Everett shares what it looks like not only to address hunger but also for Christians to partner together with their neighbors for the common good. Anyone who is interested in loving their neighbor, in feeding the hungry, and in being the church in and for the world should read this book. Everett is one of my heroes, and the stories and insights here capture much of why this is true.”

—Myles Werntz, Hardin-Simmons University

“By the end of this book, readers will understand that they have a mentor and colleague in Jeremy who will help guide their own efforts to make their communities hunger free, as well as a friend who will help them guide their own personal spiritual journeys for a more just world.”

—Ambassador Tony P. Hall

“*I Was Hungry* is a beautiful account of what our country needs more of: strong commitment to the common good, all through the lens of love. The pages are filled with enthralling stories that bring to life the realities of those struggling with food insecurity and poverty. It is God’s voice that I hear throughout this poignant book. Hunger and poverty are problems we can make a serious dent in, and Jeremy helps us see how our mental models, perspective on God’s rich abundance in our world, and a ‘with, not for’ plan of action can move us toward this goal as a nation.”

—Heather Reynolds, Wilson Sheehan Lab for Economic Opportunities (LEO), University of Notre Dame

“Everett is one of the most talented people I have ever worked with and one of the finest people I know. He is also one of the country’s leading experts on reducing food insecurity. This book is Everett at his best: drawing on his wealth of knowledge and experience, telling stories, and bringing people together to reduce hunger and poverty.”

—Victor J. Hinojosa, Honors Program, Baylor University

“Everett does more than preach about the spiritual values our country so desperately needs—he lives them. On every single page, the honesty and authenticity with which he shares his journey yields inspiration for living a life that matters.”

—Billy Shore, founder and executive chair of Share Our Strength

~~I WAS~~  
~~HUNGRY~~

# ~~I WAS~~ ~~HUNGRY~~

---

Cultivating Common Ground  
to End an American Crisis

**JEREMY K. EVERETT**

FOREWORD BY DAVID BECKMANN



**BrazosPress**

*a division of Baker Publishing Group*  
Grand Rapids, Michigan

© 2019 by Jeremy K. Everett

Published by Brazos Press  
a division of Baker Publishing Group  
PO Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287  
www.brazospress.com

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Everett, Jeremy K., 1975– author.

Title: I was hungry : cultivating common ground to end an American crisis /  
Jeremy K. Everett.

Description: Grand Rapids, MI : Brazos Press, a division of Baker Publishing  
Group, 2019. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2018054498 | ISBN 9781587434242 (pbk.)

Subjects: LCSH: Hunger—Religious aspects—Christianity. | Church and social  
problems—United States. | Church work with the poor—United States.

Classification: LCC BR115.H86 E94 2019 | DDC 261.8/3260973—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2018054498>

ISBN 978-1-58743-443-3 (casebound)

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright © 1989 National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations labeled NIV are from the Holy Bible, New International Version®. NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. [www.zondervan.com](http://www.zondervan.com). The “NIV” and “New International Version” are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.™

Published in association with Creative Trust Literary Group,  
210 Jamestown Park, Suite 200, Brentwood, TN 37027, [www.creativetrust.com](http://www.creativetrust.com).

19 20 21 22 23 24 25      7 6 5 4 3 2 1

In keeping with biblical principles of creation stewardship, Baker Publishing Group advocates the responsible use of our natural resources. As a member of the Green Press Initiative, our company uses recycled paper when possible. The text paper of this book is composed in part of post-consumer waste.



Jeremy Everett, *I Was Hungry*  
Brazos Press, a division of Baker Publishing Group, © 2019. Used by permission.

To Amy, Lucas, Sam, and Wyatt.  
The loves of my life.

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?" And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." Then he will say to those at his left hand, "You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me." Then they also will answer, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?" Then he will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me." And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.

Matthew 25:31–46

# CONTENTS

Foreword by David Beckmann xi

Acknowledgments xiii

1. Disaster: *What I Learned from a Hurricane about Tackling the Hunger Disaster in America* 1
2. Broken Streetlights: *Finding Our Commonality amid Crisis* 16
3. A Priest and a Prostitute: *It Really Does Take Nearly Losing Your Life to Find It* 25
4. The People: *Finding Citizenship in the Right Kingdom* 40
5. The Desert: *Moving from Mind-Sets of Scarcity to Abundance* 53
6. Organize: *How a Shared Response Can Create Scalable Solutions to Our Communities' Greatest Social Challenges* 67
7. The West Side: *Once You Engage a Community, Fear Cannot Hold Out against Love* 85
8. Politics: *Searching for Consensus amid a Landscape of Contention* 103

## Contents

9. Together at the Table: *The Texas Hunger Initiative's Story of Organizing a Systemic Response to Hunger* 118
  10. Justice: *Our Cultural Moment to Find Common Ground for the Common Good* 136
- Notes 147
- Index 155

# FOREWORD

Once I started the first chapter of this book, I had a hard time putting it down. Jeremy Everett is a great storyteller. And the overarching story of this book is God’s call to Jeremy—to all of us actually—to end hunger.

I love the following story from Jeremy’s student days. Late one night he watched an old movie about a young man named Francesco who felt called to give away all his possessions to people in need. Jeremy was captivated by Francesco’s story even before he realized that the movie was about Francis of Assisi. Young Jeremy packed up all his possessions—even his beloved camping gear—and distributed them to homeless people in the city park.

Jeremy’s radical gift didn’t transform the lives of the people he encountered that day, but it was the start of Jeremy’s pilgrimage from community organizing to his leadership in developing the Texas Hunger Initiative. This remarkable organization helps communities, government programs, and companies work together to reduce the scourge of hunger all across the great state of Texas. Their collaborative efforts have provided countless meals for Texans who struggle with hunger. This book

explains how caring people in any state or community can have the same impact.

Jeremy also introduces us to some of the individuals who cope with hunger. He and his family lived next door to Lupe. She and her husband struggled to provide for their children, and her premature death due to lack of adequate health care only intensified their predicament. Jeremy tells us about a student who let his grades slip so he would have access to food during summer school. Jeremy explains how elderly men and women in El Paso, who have worked hard at low-paying jobs all their lives, can't afford groceries now that they aren't able to work any longer.

Jeremy is now a leader in a spiritual and political movement to end hunger. He knows from experience that unlikely allies can come together to solve this problem. He believes this can and should happen nationwide. We can end hunger and, at the same time, help to heal the crippling divisions that now threaten the security and well-being of all of us.

David Beckmann  
President, Bread for the World  
and the Alliance to End Hunger



# DISASTER

---

What I Learned from a Hurricane about  
Tackling the Hunger Disaster in America

## **Katrina**

In the days and hours following the landfall of Hurricane Katrina in August 2005, while everybody was holding their breath hoping the levees would hold, waterways were already completely full, New Orleans was flooding, people were being displaced, and the death toll was beginning its gruesome climb.

As I watched the story unfold on television, I remembered hearing in the 1990s from an executive at the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), a close friend of my father's, about two possible emergencies for which the nation was drastically unprepared: a tsunami hitting California and wiping out urban centers along the coast and a category four or five hurricane hitting New Orleans. Because the city lay below sea level, its decades-old levees would be no match for such a powerful

storm. Once the levees broke, he predicted the resulting floods would be devastating.

We all saw the horrific pictures captured by news crews when the levees finally gave way: people scrambling to their rooftops hoping to be rescued; thousands clamoring to get into the Superdome, which was already in bad shape with its roof blown off; store owners armed with guns trying to ward off looters, people desperate to grab anything within reach.

One scene that remains particularly vivid in my memory is of people stranded on a bridge, where they had climbed because it was the only structure not under water. Because of the magnitude of the disaster, emergency responders were unable to reach them for five days. Helicopters dropped water and a little bit of food to help them maintain some level of survival.

Once some roads were able to be cleared, school buses, helicopters, planes, ambulances, and charter buses descended on the city to transport New Orleans residents to other cities, and the chaos continued. Because each vehicle had a limited number of seats, some families could not all board the same one, and since this happened before cell phones and social media were prolific, when people were split up, they had no idea where their family members and friends were being sent. When a bus left New Orleans, no one knew where it was going; it just left town. Evacuation vehicles were routed to Dallas, Fort Worth, Oklahoma City, Houston, San Antonio—any city that had room. Oftentimes bus drivers would be heading in one direction only to find out that they needed to change course because their destination city was full. So a mom and daughter could end up in San Antonio while the family's father and brother were in Oklahoma City, and neither side had the ability to figure out where the other was. There was no tracking system for individuals once they got onto a bus or as they checked into a shelter. People simply arrived hoping their loved ones were safe and they would be reunited soon.

As people were evacuated from New Orleans to other cities, massive shelters, such as the Houston Astrodome, became full.

Organizers quickly began to realize that not everyone could live in a general population shelter with thousands of other people. Infants and people who were mentally or physically disabled needed a more direct level of care than could be afforded them in a general population shelter. They needed to be moved out.

The organization where I worked, a Baptist social service agency, was called on. FEMA asked us to drop what we were doing and open up medical special needs shelters. These were smaller shelters for a particular part of the population that needed more intense care.

I was sent to manage a small shelter on the south side of San Antonio in a church gymnasium. It was an extremely old facility, and I had often joked that it was probably the first church gymnasium in Texas. The air-conditioning was shoddy, the kitchen was mediocre, and the bathroom facilities weren't great. We had room for about 150 people.

Before we were completely ready, buses full of people began to arrive, and the chaos from the storm continued. Because we were a special needs shelter, most of the people coming to us had no real ability to take care of themselves because of their physical limitations. They were hungry, and the many who were diabetic hadn't had their insulin. Their sugar levels had been thrown off balance to the point that many of them were hardly able to put together a coherent sentence. Most of them had soiled themselves en route because the buses didn't have bathrooms or they were physically unable to use them without assistance. By the time they arrived, they were hot and sweaty after waiting for days to be evacuated. The smell was horrible; it was the smell of people who had soiled themselves, been exposed to heat and humidity for days, and then cooped up on public transit for hours. Those who were still coherent were mortified. They had a blank stare in their eyes like that of a soldier returning from the horrors of battle.

Some of the arrivals had been among those stranded on the bridge, including a seventy-five-year-old woman who had broken her hip during the evacuation from her home. She should

have gone to a hospital, but by that point all the hospitals in San Antonio were full—both the hospital rooms and the hallways were overflowing with people. Our shelter was a sea of army cots, but we had one lone hospital bed that we were able to give to her. Because of her hip, she couldn't walk, so whenever she needed to use the restroom, three evacuees and I would each take a corner of her bedsheet, lift her up, and carry her to the bathroom. I can only imagine how painful that was for her. It was almost a week before we could get her seen by a doctor.

Another man who was wheelchair-bound felt humiliated each time he had to use the restroom because we had to physically take him to the facilities and help him with all the intimate details involved with relieving oneself. We did not know him, and he did not know us, and the shame and humiliation he was experiencing were evident in his facial expressions.

The work was exhausting—eighteen-hour days, six or seven days a week, for months until we could get people back home or find a more permanent place for them to stay. The emotional toll was more severe. I had been working and living among impoverished conditions for years, but I had never seen tragedy on this level in my life. Obviously, our peril as first responders paled in comparison to that of the evacuees.

Our agency was responsible for connecting volunteers with tasks that were actually helpful. People really wanted to help out. They donated clothes and all sorts of goods, but what we really needed was a coordinated food schedule. People were arriving at all times of day, and finding enough volunteers and resources just to provide meals for people was a challenge. The health department came in and said that the people staying at the shelter couldn't go in the kitchen; only volunteers could enter. Since volunteers were needed all over the city, trying to find enough hands to provide food was a major challenge.

Additionally, doctors were not available because of the scale of the need, so our small team without medical experience had

to learn how to administer medication. A whole host of the population needed diabetes medication, and figuring out how to get it for them was difficult.

Everything about the hurricane, including our response to it, was chaotic. 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 we desperately needed was a coordinated response.

### **The Power of a Shared Response**

When another devastating hurricane season hit three years after Katrina, I had a chance to see from the inside out what a difference proactive coordination can make.

By the time Hurricanes Gustav and Ike blew into Louisiana and Texas, the federal government, through FEMA and Homeland Security, already knew it would need to do a better job of coordinating across sectors. The agencies implemented a new training process to do this. A manual was written up for medical special needs shelters so that people knew how to manage them not only in San Antonio but also across the country. Many of my coworkers were able to use their expertise, developed during Hurricane Katrina, to contribute to the manual. Though we all were trained, we all also had to speak the same language. In typical government fashion, the federal agencies developed a new language for us to learn, mainly composed of acronyms. We began to understand everyone's unique role, who was responsible for what, and how to orchestrate a coordinated response. For example, we learned that an incident commander was in charge. It didn't matter who that incident commander was, what his or her title was when that person

wasn't the incident commander, or who showed up; even if the president of the United States arrived, the incident commander was still in charge. We were all given roles to execute precisely.

During Hurricanes Gustav and Ike, I managed several shelters in east Texas and a Veterans Affairs Hospital shelter on Kelly Air Force Base in San Antonio. When people arrived at the shelter, we could code them and identify where their loved ones were if they had been split up during the evacuation. We also had a plan to reconnect them with their families. The federal government developed contracts with helicopter, airplane, and bus companies. They rerouted interstates prior to the hurricanes so that both the eastbound and westbound lanes could be utilized to get people out of the disaster-prone area as quickly as possible. Shelters were no longer rough-and-tumble. Now we had not only a generator but also a backup generator in case the power failed. In one of the shelters I managed, we even had a makeshift intensive care unit where we literally had the ability to put people on life support. Teams of physicians and nurses worked around the clock in our shelters. I, with a degree in theology, was no longer responsible for giving insulin to diabetics. We had a full pharmacy in each shelter so we could give people medications as they needed them. We were able to offer meals four times a day so that even those who arrived in the middle of the night could receive some food. We had contracts with restaurants and food service companies to provide meals to ensure that everyone was taken care of. We no longer had to worry about whether or not we were going to have food for people the next day. We even had laundry services set up so people could clean their soiled clothes. It was a completely different experience.

Ultimately, what was important was that there was a grand plan to get people back home. We knew that people could not go back to their communities until grocery stores opened or else they wouldn't have food. We knew that communities needed to be cleaned up and that people needed to have access to their homes to see what had survived the storm.

The work was still exhausting and still required all hands on deck, but it was a coordinated response that made the difference.

### **Stranded by the Hunger Disaster**

For the past twenty years, I have traveled the country and other parts of the world observing, researching, and addressing hunger and poverty. Much of what I have learned about addressing hunger and poverty is similar to what I learned by working in disaster response. The problem is often overwhelming, and we need to find a way to work together in a coordinated response to address these issues that have been around for thousands of years. Years after Hurricanes Katrina, Gustav, and Ike, while living and working in San Antonio, I was offered the opportunity to put these ideas to the test when I was asked by Texas Baptists to start an organization focused specifically on coordinating a collective response to hunger, the Texas Hunger Initiative (THI).

The premise was that hunger and poverty are too large and too complex to address alone. We would all need to work together in a coordinated capacity if we wanted to make a dent in them, much less end them. We also knew that we had a cultural problem. Our nation tends toward blaming the hungry and poor for their plight rather than walking alongside them to find solutions. Blaming the poor for their poverty only adds insult to injury and is largely an inaccurate diagnosis. We also had a spiritual problem. Jesus spoke frequently about loving our neighbor in practical and tangible ways, such as providing food for the hungry, but hunger in Texas was more prevalent than in almost any other state in the nation or in any developed country around the world. We needed a stronger understanding of our collective call to love God and our neighbor, and we needed to move with a sense of urgency, as I would soon learn.

As I was transitioning into this new position, I was told I needed to meet Pastor Dan Trevino, because his congregation

was providing food for the hungry. Dan's congregation was on the South Side of San Antonio, a sister neighborhood to the West Side, where I was living. Dan spoke to me about his congregation's ministries in the community. They had a charter school that used the church's education building, a food pantry, a community garden, and literacy and employment classes. If you can think of an idea for ministry, Dan and his church were probably doing it.

As we talked and toured the church, Dan told me about a formative experience. He said that he and his sons had come to the church one Saturday morning before dawn to make breakfast tacos for the elders in the congregation. When they pulled into the church parking lot, the headlights of his van revealed children in the church's dumpster. He and his sons were startled, and so were the children in the dumpster. The kids tried to get out of the dumpster and run away, but Dan was able to get to them and calm their fears. He invited them into the church's kitchen and made them breakfast tacos before the elders arrived. Once they were full, he began to ask them why they were in the dumpster. Slowly, the boys began to open up and told him that they did not have any food in the house, so they had snuck out while it was still dark to rummage through the dumpster to see if they could find something to eat.

I was stunned. Dan's church wasn't far from the Riverwalk and all that we enjoy visiting in San Antonio. Yet there were children in his community so impoverished that they were rummaging through a dumpster to find food. This was a story I expected to hear about the developing world, but downtown San Antonio? My shock led to dismay. How could our nation passively let children experience such extreme circumstances? How could the church?

Gandhi called poverty the harshest form of violence. I believe hunger is the harshest form of poverty. Hunger is debilitating. It stimulates physical pain, anger, lethargy, and depression. It will keep you up at night and ironically cause drowsiness during the day. I can only imagine the shame and humiliation parents

experience when their children miss meals. One of our primary responsibilities is to provide a stable household for our families. We want to make sure they have food, a consistent place to sleep, and a loving environment. If we were unable to provide them with three meals a day and a place to sleep, we would probably feel inadequate and ashamed.

These dumpster-diving kids were no different than the hurricane survivors on the bridge: they had been stranded by tragedy. Travel to any urban or rural impoverished community and you will find similar stories everywhere. Today in the United States, over forty million Americans are food insecure (or at risk of hunger). According to the US Department of Agriculture (USDA), this means that at times during the year, these individuals live in households that are uncertain of having or are unable to acquire enough food to meet the needs of all their family members because they have insufficient money or other resources for food.<sup>1</sup> Nearly one out of six children in the US live in a food-insecure household. That number is one out of two in south Texas.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, economic inequality is the worst it has been in modern American history. A person working a full-time job and getting paid minimum wage earns less than the federal poverty line, and the poverty line is an inaccurate underrepresentation of true poverty.

## I Was Hungry

Most Christians are probably familiar with Jesus's teaching in Matthew 25: "For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me" (vv. 35–36).

This is the only apocalyptic (or end-of-the-world) scene in Matthew.<sup>3</sup> Jesus the King has returned, and he is sitting on the throne. This is the final judgment. All people are gathered, and

Jesus is separating them—the sheep and the goats, the righteous from the accused. To the astonishment of the people gathered, “the criterion for judgment is not confession of faith in Christ. Nothing is said of grace, justification, or the forgiveness of sins.” Instead, what matters is whether a person has acted with love and cared for the needy. These acts are not just extra credit but “constitute the decisive criterion for judgment.”<sup>4</sup> Essentially, “when the people respond or fail to respond to human need, they are in fact responding, or failing to respond, to Christ.”<sup>5</sup>

The calling of the faithful is clear: feed the hungry and you will live.

But we don’t rush to rescue these sufferers the way we did when Katrina wreaked its havoc. A hurricane we can understand. Poverty? Hunger? Many of us believe people just need to get a job and quit complaining. Unfortunately, this type of narrow thinking has only worsened our current situation. The truth is that the realities of hunger and poverty are complex. People experience hunger in our nation typically because they live in poverty. They are therefore forced to decide between purchasing food or medicine, paying for housing or making a car payment, and so on.

## West Texas

As we saw with the emergency responders and volunteers for Hurricane Katrina, a lack of effective communication between organizations makes it impossible to efficiently organize a response to disaster. Poverty is a disaster, and those responding to it are often speaking different languages and on different wavelengths. The faith-based sector doesn’t know what the public sector is doing; the public sector doesn’t know what the corporate sector is involved with; and many philanthropists don’t know what the federal poverty programs are funding.

This disaster is magnified when we have an unorganized response. Although there are numerous federal nutrition and

antipoverty programs, oftentimes these agencies lack strong communication and program integration with agencies working with the same populations on state or local levels. Not to mention that churches and nonprofits often do their own thing. Furthermore, nonprofits, who should be strategically aligned and working together seamlessly, often compete against one another because they are applying to the same potential funders, who have a limited amount of funding.

This does not mean there is a lack of compassionate people working tirelessly to address hunger and poverty. Quite the opposite. Amazing people and amazing organizations are doing great things, even if addressing hunger and poverty is not a national priority. Unfortunately, due to the high needs of communities across the country, these compassionate responders simply do not have the bandwidth to identify key organizations to partner with in ways they collectively desire. The result is an uncoordinated response, creating a massive gap in services across the nation despite the numerous efforts to fill this gap.

To try to combat this chaos, in the first year of the Texas Hunger Initiative, as part of our effort to build collaboration, my friends at the USDA, the food banks, Texas state agencies, and Texas congregations decided to identify pilot communities across the state where we could organize a collaborative response to address food insecurity. Our attempt would be modeled after what we had learned by addressing disasters together. Initially, we identified over four thousand organizations in Texas doing something about hunger, yet we still had five and a half million food-insecure people. Many of the organizations we visited told us of their desire to partner with other groups, but the need they were addressing every day was so great they simply did not have the time to step back to find ways to work with other organizations. This resulted in duplicated efforts and gaps of services that no one was aware of.

Our group traveled around Texas to hold town hall meetings to announce our vision for a hunger-free state and begin

galvanizing communities across sectors by asking the non-profits, churches, businesses, school districts, and local governments to work together to address hunger in their communities. These meetings were successful, and we were quickly able to identify several pilot communities in which to try out our collaborative model.

Then, about midway into that year, I received a phone call from Mary and Carol, two women from Southland Baptist Church in San Angelo, Texas. I knew of the church because my father-in-law had pastored there twenty-five years earlier, and I had met Mary and Carol when my wife and I had visited San Angelo.

On the phone that morning, they spoke with a sense of earnestness and urgency.

“Jeremy, three of San Angelo’s large manufacturing plants just closed. So many people lost their jobs, and we know many San Angelo children are going hungry because of it, especially when school is out.”

“Mary, I am sorry to hear that. How can I help?”

“We heard about THI and wanted to become one of your pilot communities.”

“Well, unfortunately, we have already chosen our pilot communities.”

“Well, can you add one more?” At the time, there were only a couple of us working at THI, and we did not have the ability to take on an additional community.

“We really can’t right now. We just don’t have enough staff. Check back with us next year. Hopefully, we will have more staff members by then so we can assist you.”

My answer did not work for them. Instead of hanging up the phone, they repeated their story as if I simply hadn’t heard it the first time. This time they spoke a little louder, with more urgency and even sprinkled with a bit of hostility. “Jeremy, three of our plants closed. People are out of work, which means their kids aren’t eating!” As if I did not fully understand what they communicated the first time.

They were clearly persistent, and I could see that I was not going to get off the phone unless I obliged—or came up with something for them to do. So I asked them to complete a community assessment. The assessment typically takes quite a while, at least several months. My assumption was that Mary and Carol either would be overwhelmed with the amount of work and simply go on their way or that they would take the next year to complete the assessment and call me back then.

“Thank you, Jeremy,” Mary said.

Carol chimed in, “We will call you back soon!”

Three weeks later, they called me back! Mary informed me that they had completed the assessment and asked plainly, “So can we be a pilot community now?”

I laughed with sheer amazement and said, “I think you already are.”

Mary and Carol disclosed that, although there were ten thousand children on the free and reduced-price lunch program in their county, the community provided only one thousand meals throughout the entire summer of 2009. They knew that children were going hungry in the summer, and they were ready to do something about it. Needless to say, we arranged for our group to go to San Angelo.

When we arrived, we were met by a group that included the school district superintendent and school board members, city council officials and the mayor, church leaders, nonprofit directors, people from the business community, a representative from a congressman’s office, and concerned citizens. These people from different political parties and religious affiliations were ready to get to work for the children of Tom Green County. After our town hall meeting, people met weekly over the next several months to plan for the upcoming summer. They knew that they each had something they could offer and developed a strategy. One group would cook the meals, another would deliver them to a site. Then another group would be a host site, while yet another would provide activities to encourage children and families to come. In the summer

of 2010, Tom Green County served nearly twenty thousand meals to children.

Mary and Carol are somewhat unusual in their tenacity. These two women have spent much of their lives in San Angelo, cultivating trust by advocating for those on the margins. So when they called community leaders to tell them of the food insecurity epidemic among their children, the leaders were willing to listen and respond with the same sense of urgency I had heard over the phone during that initial call. West Texans have a saying about reliability: You can hang your hat on that! Mary and Carol are as reliable as they come.

Mary and Carol were also wise enough to know that one church, one school, one business, or one nonprofit could not meet the needs of so many food-insecure children. They knew that strength would come only if the community worked together. They learned sustainable social change happens by cultivating trust, collaborating across denominational and political lines, and committing to the cause of the poor and hungry. They proved that working together was both possible and pragmatic. They also put flesh on Jesus's command to care for the poor.

### Triumph or Tragedy?

Our team at THI works at the federal, state, and local levels to bridge the gap between the resources that exist and the people who need them most. We didn't invent the model. In fact, shortly after those early town hall meetings, a new theory of social change called collective impact was popularized in the *Stanford Social Innovation Review*.<sup>6</sup> Collective impact—which espouses a “commitment of a group of important actors from different sectors to a common agenda for solving a specific social problem” using a structured form of collaboration<sup>7</sup>—coupled with our experiences addressing poverty and responding to disasters, gave us a framework to increase access to existing programs, maximize the efforts of charities and volunteers,

build collaboration to ensure community members are working together, and strengthen all of this work with university research. What we have been brewing in our Texas laboratory can be replicated and indeed is being replicated in other states and communities throughout our nation.

In this book, I will weave together stories of triumph and tragedy with research and practical solutions for addressing hunger and poverty in our communities. I hope you will walk away with a greater understanding of the plight of people in America who struggle with food insecurity and that your greater understanding will elicit a compassionate response. I also want you to be equipped with resources and solutions to address the hunger and poverty crisis in your community. Throughout the book I will illustrate these ideas with stories from my journey and how I came to some of the conclusions I draw in the book. We are a nation on a dangerous path. My hope is that by working together to build trust and collaborating to address hunger in our communities we will recognize our common humanity and put aside the hateful rhetoric that is pervasive in our nation.

How might the Spirit of God move if we came out of our silos and chose collaboration for the common good over contention in order to rescue our stranded neighbors abandoned by the storms of hunger and poverty? In a time when some of us have way too much food and others way too little, it is a tragedy to argue over policies and politics and even Bible verses while people on the bridge are waiting for an airlift.

So let's turn social awareness into social activation, build hunger-free communities, and end the systemic hunger disaster in America. I know we can do it, because I have been privileged to see progress happen both top down and ground up: a coalition of the willing, crossing ideological divides instead of widening them, coming together at the table of collaboration for the hungry. Triumph or tragedy? The choice is ours.