

The Picture of Poverty in Alabama

by James Evans

This past week the Alabama Poverty Project, a non profit organization committed to ending poverty in Alabama, released its long awaited study of poverty in Alabama. The report reveals a grim and frustrating picture of people in need. And while it is clear that poverty in Alabama is not as bad as it could be, it is nonetheless far from being acceptable.

The study was prepared by the Auburn University of Montgomery Center for Demographic and Cultural Research under the direction of Don Bogie. The study gleaned census data from the years 1990 and 2000, along with a plethora of other sources. The picture of poverty offered by the report makes it tragically obvious that poverty will be a significant part of Alabama's future.

Over all the number of Alabama residents in poverty was reduced during the economic growth of the 1990's. But even with these gains, many rural counties continue to have poverty rates over 30 percent.

Just for one example, the state's poorest county, Wilcox, faces nearly 40 percent of the county's residents living below the poverty level. This includes 47 percent of the children in the county. Compare that to Shelby County with the lowest poverty rate of 6.3 percent. Statewide the poverty rate was 16.1 percent.

The picture of poverty has many different angles. For instance, the poverty rate state wide among children 17 and under is nearly 22 percent. The number of families with a female head of household is nearly 45 percent. The number of persons eligible for Medicaid, is right at 16 percent.

Wayne Flynt, retired Auburn University history professor and president of the board of the Alabama Poverty Project notes that the greatest poverty in Alabama is among our children. "In a state where evangelical Christianity is by far the dominant religion," Flynt said in a press interview, "these numbers are hard to accept."

Dr. Flynt's reference, of course, is to Jesus' admonition that his followers show particular care for "the least of these in your midst." Children and the elderly are in fact singled out in the Scriptures for special attention-the so called "widows and orphans."

In the Foreword to the The Picture of Poverty, Dr. Flynt writes, "What does it say about the moral values of a society when its poorest, least powerful, most neglected people are its children and its senior citizens?"

A copy of the study was hand delivered to every state legislature and Governor Riley. In a statement on the steps of the Statehouse last Friday, Dr. Flynt said, "Never again will the leaders of our state be able to say 'I didn't know that!' concerning poverty because they did know that, because we're going to give them a copy of this."

Of course changing the picture of poverty in Alabama will require a concerted effort of all its citizens. It will require a substantial enactment of Jesus' admonition that we "love our neighbor as we love ourselves." And it will take some awareness of the scope of poverty, which means taking stock of just how many folks qualify as "the least of these in our midst."

To that end, the Alabama Poverty Project will make the Picture of Poverty available to anyone who would like a copy. There is a free PDF download of the study available at the Project's website, www.alabamapoverty.org. To obtain a hard copy of the study for \$20, visit www.atlasbooks.com/marktplc/01577.htm.

James L. Evans is pastor of Auburn First Baptist Church, Auburn, Alabama, and is on the board directors of the Alabama Poverty Project. He can be reached at faithmatters@mindspring.com.