

## Alabama Poverty Project Offers New Hope to the Old Problem of Poverty in Alabama

by Susan Pace Hamill

Amidst the Christmas festivities as 2004 came to a close, the facts revealed in the widely-circulated mid-December newspaper article, "More Alabamians live in poverty than in 2000," were nothing to celebrate and certainly do not honor the one whose birthday most of us were celebrating. Fifteen percent of our citizens, nearly 700,000, and twenty-two percent of our children, well over 200,000, live below the poverty line. When you add to that the many families struggling just above poverty who are one paycheck, layoff, divorce or health set back from sinking into poverty the picture becomes more tragic.

The tragedy of poverty hits both races with nearly equal numbers of blacks and whites affected, although blacks, making up roughly a quarter of our population, are disproportionately impacted. The tragedy of poverty affects most areas with ratios reaching and sometimes greatly exceeding, twenty percent in rural counties across the Hill Country, North Alabama, West Alabama, the Tennessee Valley Region, the Wiregrass and South Alabama Regions as well as the Black Belt.

Regardless of your political leanings, regardless whether or not you practice Christianity or some other religious faith, regardless whether you voted for or against Governor Riley's tax and accountability plan in September of 2003 these basic facts should disturb you greatly. Whether moved by compassion for Alabamians suffering in poverty or by a desire to see the state's economic development advance, all of us should be committed to doing our part to reduce and eventually eliminate poverty in Alabama. This requires much more than responding to the consequences of poverty through charitable giving but also must involve addressing and solving the causes of poverty.

The Alabama Poverty Project, a nonprofit organization led by Dr. Wayne Flynt, is committed to providing a holistic effort to identify and fight the causes behind tragedy of poverty in Alabama. The board of directors is highly diverse with representatives from small colleges and large universities, other nonprofit organizations already working on poverty issues, ministers and other leaders of our religious institutions, lawyers, and finally most importantly women dedicated to raising their children. We have adopted a three-prong strategy, focusing on "head, heart and hands."

Drawing on experts from all fields, the Alabama Poverty Project will explore the complex causes of poverty. Despite the risk of offending political interest groups on both sides of the spectrum, we will focus on both systemic justice issues such as living wage, transportation, fair taxes, education, healthcare and environmental as well as personal responsibility issues such as teenage pregnancy, family budget planning, school attendance and work ethic. Our goal is to foster a wide-spread understanding of these complex causes both formally, by bringing this information into the curricula of higher education and informally at the popular level by engaging in and coordinating speaking engagements in churches, civic clubs and other places where Alabamians gather.

Without a wide-spread understanding of the complex causes of poverty it is impossible to motivate large numbers of our people to care about poverty beyond engaging in individual acts of beneficence and contributing to charitable organizations. The Alabama Poverty Project will arm our religious leaders with information explaining the complex causes so that they can inspire Alabamians in all walks of life to join in the effort to eliminate poverty as a disease rather than just treating the symptoms. Jesus' warning, whatever we fail to do for "the least of these" we fail to do for him, requires us to do much more than treat the symptoms—Jesus requires us to empower "the least of these" to no longer need to be supported by charity.

Finally the Alabama Poverty Project will help build the network of front-line service providers who actively engage in a number of activities that reach the many Alabamians trapped in poverty. We also plan to partner with other agencies and work within the legal system to seek changes at highest levels of public policy that will mitigate the many systemic problems, for example our inadequate transportation infrastructure and weak legal protections for tenants, that currently make it much harder for those in poverty to pull themselves out.

As part of our efforts to educate our fellow citizens about the complex causes of poverty and what we are doing about it the Alabama Poverty Project will publish a series of editorials, one each month, during 2005. This editorial is the first of the series. We hope that our fellow Alabamians will appreciate the information we have to share and will join us in the effort to reduce and eventually eliminate poverty in Alabama.

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