



# Living It Out

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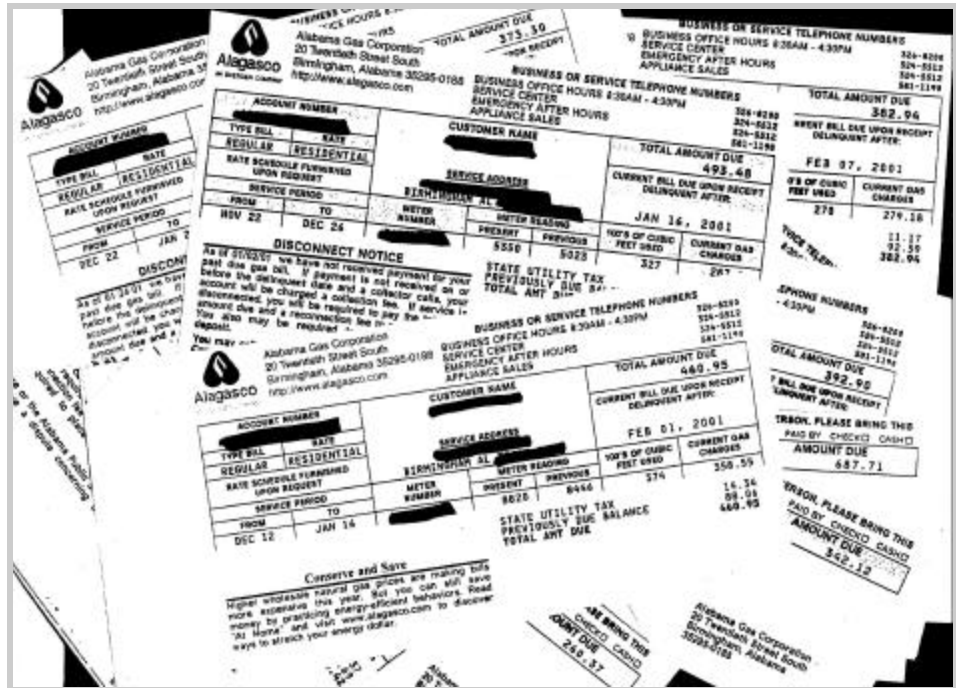
The Newsletter of Greater Birmingham Ministries

## Inside this Issue

- 1** Heating Bills Hit Hard
- 2** Holiday Generosity 2000
- 4** Landlord-Tenant Bill Faces Setback
- 4** Episcopal Diocese Joins Call for Tax Reform
- 4** Center for Affordable Housing Launched
- 5** Initiatives for Africa
- 6** News Around GBM
- 6** GBM Direct Services 2000 Report
- 7** Conference on Race
- 8** Tax Reform A Step Closer to Reality

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## Heating Bills Hit Hard

Few people in the Birmingham area need to be convinced that the cost of natural gas has jumped dramatically this winter, bringing very high heating bills to community residents.

“This jump in the cost of natural gas for home heating is a major challenge for all households, but for low-income families, for older people on fixed income and people unable to work, these bills are overwhelming, and their impact will be felt for a long time to come.” GBM Executive Director Scott Douglas points out. “Through no fault of their own, poor people’s usual winter-time dilemma of “heating or eating” has been raised to a whole new level. They’re close to not being able to do either one. Our Direct Services ministry is really struggling to keep people from being disconnected. Meanwhile, people must still be able to afford food and medicines and not fall too far behind in their rent at the same time.”

“It’s a major problem, and all the organizations that provide financial assistance for utilities are running out of money,” notes Ernestine Davis, who works in GBM’s Direct Services. “People are worried about how they are going to pay these bills even when the weather changes.”

“People in the community are wondering why their bills are so high,

(Continued on page 5)

# Holiday Generosity 2000

## Scores of Volunteers and Donors Make a Difference for Area Families

December at GBM means scores of individuals and groups from across the community bringing food and gifts in boxes and bags of every description. Many spend several hours at GBM as volunteers busily sorting cans and toys into rows of holiday packages for the 350 families who have asked GBM for help in providing their children's Christmas joy.

People from different parts of the community, of different races and different faiths come together to provide food to needy families food as a part of meeting their daily struggle—and to bring laughter to children who often go without many of the toys that most people associate with childhood.

GBM becomes a busy place days before the holiday distribution begins as staff and volunteers pick up and receive deliveries from area



congregations and individuals. Lines of grocery sacks and large plastic bags filled with toys overrun nearly every inch of available space, including of-

fices.

Each year, it takes faith to believe that the food and toys will come in—and arrive in time to be sorted into the packages before families begin to arrive for their schedule appointments. And each year, the community's generosity—sometimes coupled with last-minute shopping to fill in the gaps—has provided food and gifts for every family that GBM has committed to serve.

On behalf of GBM and the families assisted,  
**THANK YOU!**



350  
Families  
Served with  
Food



Gifts to over  
1,000 Children



## **Bad Version of Landlord-Tenant Bill Passes House Committee**

Since the early 1990's, Alabama Arise has been advocating the passage of a "Warranty of Habitability" law at the Alabama Legislature as a result of the widespread poor housing conditions in which so many low-income people live. Arise proposed a bill to spell out the rights and the responsibilities of both landlords and tenants.

The Realtor Association has constantly opposed this effort, after repeatedly delaying and detouring negotiations for the final form of the bill.

Rep. Laura Hall, after several meetings with the Realtors, introduced her own version of a warranty of Habitability bill with the goal of fairness for both landlords and tenants, but with real rights and responsibilities outlined.

In an effort to silence the growing embarrassment about the state of rental housing in the state and the fact that Alabama is one of only two states with no landlord-tenant laws in place, the Realtors proposed their own bill, with the apparent intent to be of allowing the state to say it has a Warranty of Habitability law, even though it is written to lopsidedly favor landlords at the heavy expense of tenants, who are already caught in a shortage of decent, affordable housing across the state.

Both bills came up in House Committee on March 14, and after debate, the Arise bill was defeated 8-7. Those House members voting against the bill were: Representatives Gaines, Carns, Hawkins, Dukes, Martin, Allen, Wren and Vance. Later in the day, the Realtors' bill passed

committee.

Now Arise supporters must gather energy to change or defeat the current version of the bill. Decent, affordable housing for low-income and fixed income people who do not own their own homes remains a crying need in Alabama.

## **Center for Affordable Housing Launched in Birmingham**

The Birmingham Center for Affordable Housing held its first board meeting recently to develop a fundraising plan and to recruit a director. The mission of the Center is "to act as a catalyst and resource for increasing the availability of affordable housing that creates viable, self-directed communities." The Center is the creation of the Housing Policy Committee of the City of Birmingham, volunteer housing advocates, nonprofit organizations, neighborhood organizations, and local financial institutions.

According to Carolyn Crawford, a board member of the Center, "the Center will help fill the gaps that currently exist in Birmingham's affordable housing infrastructure. We're losing affordable housing much faster than it's being replaced, and a one-stop-shop providing or leveraging needed technical assistance, financial support, and social services coordination will better serve the needs of our communities."

The concept of the Center emerged after advocates studied existing local housing policy, researched best practices across the country and conducted numerous conversations with neighborhood leaders, public officials, community development organizations, and local financial institutions.

## **Episcopalians Join the Call for Tax Reform in Alabama**

*The following resolution was passed on February 10, 2001 by the 170th Convention of the Episcopal Diocese of Alabama:*

WHEREAS, our concern for the poor, the elderly and children at risk is deeply rooted in Holy Scripture where we are instructed to show concern for the poor and to promote pro-active ministries to relieve both the effects of poverty and its causes; and

WHEREAS, effective tax reform can lead to the improvement of the quality of life; and

WHEREAS, sales tax on essentials such as food and over-the-counter medicines places an unjust burden on the poor, the elderly and children at risk; and

WHEREAS, Alabama is the only state imposing income tax on families making as little as \$4,600 a year; and

WHEREAS property tax rates in many parts of the state are unconscionably low, with the result that children enrolled in the public school systems in poor areas receive a substandard education; and

WHEREAS, those whom we furnish a substandard education as children have little opportunity as adults to succeed;

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that parishes in the Episcopal Diocese of Alabama be encouraged to participate with corporate, governmental and citizens' groups in the framing of principles governing tax reform in Alabama.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the work of the Episcopal

*(Continued on page 5)*

(Continued from page 4)

Diocese of Alabama be in solidarity with the United Methodist Church (North Alabama Conference) resolutions of June 2000 and the Alabama Baptist State Convention of November 2000 each supporting Tax Reform in the State of Alabama.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that this 170th Convention of the Episcopal Diocese of Alabama urges in the strongest terms immediate action by the Governor and the State Legislature to provide relief and hope especially for our most vulnerable citizens and our poorest counties and that they provide leadership during the 2001 Legislative Session by adopting legislation effecting meaningful tax reform.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that we call upon Alabama Arise to provide informational resources to parishes within the Diocese of Alabama on the issues of tax reform in the state of Alabama.

(Ed. Note: See the article regarding tax reform on page 8 of this issue)

## Living it Out

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Unitarian Church of Birmingham  
United Church of Christ  
United Methodist Church

*Living It Out* is produced by the Faith in Community Work Group, Dot Baker and Patricia Ross, Co-Chairs

## Justice and Peace Initiatives for Africa

The globalization of the economy urges on us the long overdue globalization of our ethics. Africa has long been the victim of active injustice and passive neglect on the part of the most powerful countries in the world. Many countries in Africa now face some of the worst crises anywhere on our planet.

Bread for the World's 2001 Offering of Letters, *Africa: Hunger to Harvest*, is urging Congress to commit to cut hunger in half in sub-Saharan Africa by seeking at least an additional \$1 billion in poverty-focused assistance, including debt relief.

With this additional aid, African countries could better carry out development programs that give communities the capacity to improve education, health, agriculture and economic opportunity. The cost to our government would amount to one penny a day per American. By making this commitment to Africa, the United States could leverage as much as another \$4 billion in development aid from other countries. (See more information at [www.bread.org](http://www.bread.org).)

The Washington Office on Africa is sponsoring two other initiatives: *A Millennial Campaign for Africa*, which focuses on overall US policy, and the *Stand with Africa* campaign, led by the U.S. Lutheran Community, which seeks to overcome HIV/AIDS, produce enough food to eat and sell, and build peace at the grassroots. (For more information, go to <http://www.woafrica.org>.) Dr. Leon Spencer, a past staff member of GBM and St. Luke's Episcopal Church in Birmingham, is the Executive Director of WOA.

## Gas Bills

(Continued from page 1)

and they have a right to know," commented Scott Douglas. "There are record profits being reported at the same time that low-income and fixed-income people are carrying a huge burden. We also know it is not just a local problem, but is something that is going on nationally. There is a need for a serious investigation into this, especially since there are widespread reports that there is no shortage and there has been no increase in the cost of production. Suspicions of price-gouging or intentional manipulation to increase the power of gas producers in access to public lands are widespread. These are serious charges."

GBM's Economic Justice Work Group is working on the issues and the questions involved.

"In the meantime, these bills are hitting poor people hard," said Sarah Price, Senior Staffperson for Direct Services. "At best, people are going to be paying on these bills long after the weather has warmed up. In the meantime, they are going to run out of money for other things their families need."

## Do You Have a Car You Can Donate?

Many people need transportation. If you have a car in good working condition which you can donate, please call GBM.

# News Around GBM

## Workshop on “Corporations and Democracy” Held at GBM

GBM board and staff recently invited Jim Price, the Southeast Director of the Sierra Club, to present a workshop on “Corporations and the Deterioration of Democracy.” The workshop has drawn strong interest and support from across the country.

The workshop utilizes a wide variety of resources and methods to explore the increasing power of transnational corporations in all aspects of our lives, both locally and globally, and its impact on human beings and community life. “A startling percentage of decisions that affect all of us are made daily by corporations, rather than by us as people” is the introductory theme of the workshop, which then goes on to document and demonstrate the range and the depth of that statement in our current economic arrangements of power. As Jim stated, “Democracy embodies the power of ‘we the people,’ a power which is increasingly overshadowed and often dominated by the growing power of enormous corporations and their influence in politics and society in general.” The workshop invites participants to reflect on the implications of globalization led by corporations and to explore options and strategies for renewed citizen ac-

<b>GBM Direct Services Report</b>	
<b>January –December, 2000</b>	
Total Number of Families Assisted	3,416
Total Number of People Assisted	9,612
Number of Children	4,585
Number of Food Bags Distributed	5,725
Value of Food Given	\$189,680
Value of Clothing And Toys Given	\$48,300
Qualified Financial Requests Received	\$248,365
Financial Assistance Given	\$134,150
Total Value of Physical Assistance Given	\$372,130

tivism to strengthen and expand the power of democracy world-wide.

The workshop is a highly valuable experience. To schedule a presentation, contact Jim at 933-9111.

## Dedicated Community Leader Rev. Felix Yarbro, to Retire In May

Rev. Felix Yarbro, a steady and devoted friend of the Birmingham community has announced his retirement this May from his ministry at Independent Presbyterian Church effective in May. He has directed Independent’s extensive outreach and community ministries as a part of his work.

“Felix has been an invaluable person to GBM and to the residents of this area, and while we send him our very best wishes on his retirement, we will also miss him very much,” GBM Executive Director Scott Douglas stated. “Independent Presbyterian Church was founded out of a strong social justice theology, and Felix has lived out and embodied that commitment through all the years of his ministry here.”

“Felix has been one of those people you could count on,” added Sarah Price. “You could count on him to care about people and do what he could to help them. This community is better because of Felix, and his work has helped many, many poor people. He has truly made a difference.”

“Felix has many close friends at GBM,” noted Robert Montgomery. “GBM has a special place in its heart for people who reach out of their own circle of contacts to serve others in need, and that’s when you hear Felix’s name the most. He has done his work well.”

## James Cone Leads Recent Seminar on Racism



Dr. James H. Cone, Charles A. Briggs Distinguished Professor of Systematic Theology, Union Theological Seminary, New York, recently led a conference in Birmingham on "Reframing the Dialog on Racism." The invitation to come to Birmingham came from a number of clergy from predominantly white congregations and denominations who wanted to learn from and consult with the theologian internationally recognized as the founder of Black Theology. He is the author of numerous articles and several books, including, *God of the Oppressed*, *Malcolm, Martin and America*, *Black Theology and Black Power*, *A Black Theology of Liberation* and *Risks of Faith*.

"The dialog on racism, even among churches, is widely perceived to have bogged down into a new *de facto* segregation cloaked with language that seeks to present the current situation as one of actual racial equality. There is a discouraged silence, on the one hand, among those who see the underlying ongoing reality. On the other hand, the silence is generally broken only by those who promote the idea that the only way to deal with race is to studiously avoid it or to adopt the current situation as one that already represents the pinnacle of racial justice," remarked Rev. Lawton Higgs, Sr., pastor of Church of the Reconciler and one of the conference organizers. "This conference was an effort to move beyond the silence and discouragement, as well as the often hollow rhetoric of "racial harmony" which simply avoids the hard reality of continuing racism."

Dr. Cone's message challenged white clergy to break the silence that perpetuates systems of injustice, discrimination, and oppression. Unmasking systems of institutional racism, Cone stated, requires a speaking out coupled with concrete actions that are actually liberating alternatives to a quiescent ratification of the status quo. Cone also challenged Black churches to intensify their leading role in breaking the remaining chains that still deny the full development of all peoples.

Fortunately for those who were unable to attend the conference, Dr. Cone's extensive writings are widely available from local bookstores.

### Open a Door

By making a contribution to Greater Birmingham Ministries, you open a door of opportunity and hope for people in need. Your contribution of money provides help with rent, utilities, and medicine for individuals throughout the Birmingham/Jefferson County area. Your contributions of food and clothing make it possible for others to conserve their meager financial resources to pay other bills. Your contribution of time and effort lets you work with and get to know people from all parts of the community.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Please make checks payable to Greater Birmingham Ministries. GBM is a nonprofit 501(c)3 organization as defined by Internal Revenue Service codes. Contributions are tax-deductible.

## Tax Reform A Step Closer to Reality

Representative John Knight has introduced HB 577 and HB 578, a plan to create fairness in state income taxes in Alabama, while also raising badly needed funds for education. The plan would lower income taxes for 61% of current taxpayers (1.38 million) and raise nearly \$300 million for education.

The plan would leave tax rates unchanged for an additional 17% of taxpayers and raise taxes for the wealthiest 21% or about 480,000 taxpayers. Those who see their state taxes go up under the plan, however, will receive nearly \$205 million in additional tax refunds from their federal taxes.

Currently, the poorest taxpayers are taxed are three times the tax rate of the wealthiest. Knight's bill would reduce the lowest tax rates to double that of the wealthiest 1%, but it would also drop many of the poorest families from the tax rolls altogether. Currently, Alabama begins taxing families when their income reaches \$4,600 per year, the lowest threshold in the country.

Under Knight's plan, a one-parent family of three with an annual income under \$20,700 or a two-parent family of four with an income under \$23,300 would

be exempt from state taxes. The plan would also raise personal deductions to \$2,800 per person (up from \$1,500 per taxpayer and \$300 per child).

The plan would raise the standard deduction and eliminate deductions for federal taxes. Only three states currently allow full deductions for federal taxes: Alabama, Iowa and Louisiana.

The Knight tax reform would raise \$290 million for education, but at a net cost of only \$85 million to Alabama taxpayers, after the \$205 million tax refunds. The additional funds for education exceed the 2001 budget shortfall.

The tax rates under the Knight plan are based on 2% of the first \$500 for single taxpayers (\$1,000 for joint returns); 4% of the next \$14,000 for single taxpayers (\$28,000 for joint returns); and 6.5% of all income over \$14,500 for singles and \$29,500 for couples filing jointly. Only taxpayers with incomes that fall in the highest bracket will experience a tax increase.

The plan also calls for a new state Earned Income Tax Credit for low-income workers at 10% of the federal rate.

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*When families can save money on groceries, they have more left to pay rent and utilities.*