



Living It Out

Fall, 2002

The Newsletter of Greater Birmingham Ministries

The Question Is Before us Again:

NARROW SELF-INTEREST OR FAITHFUL COMMUNITY?

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Constitutional Reform in Alabama, the "Super Sewer" Controversy, and the recently rediscovered limits of "the market." This issue of *Living it Out* begins a series of articles about these topics, and we begin by seeking to outline a faith perspective to serve as an interpretive lens of these and other current issues.

Each of these three issues is a complex debate, yet at the center is a single, basic question—will we choose to engage them based only on our own narrow self-interest or will we choose to enter them with a commitment to embrace the work of God of creating faithful community among human beings? It is a stark way of framing the issue, but a central and urgent one.

There is little doubt that we are living through difficult times and that important events are transpiring which will define much of our future, both here locally in Birmingham and also across the world. For many people, there is a feeling that we are living through an almost unending series of troubling, unsettling events in which it is difficult to gain a sense of perspective. We are tempted simply to react because we feel that our ability to reflect is a luxury we can no longer afford. From a faith perspective, however, reflection is an essential

response to everything that occurs in life. Prayer itself is simply personal reflection about our lives carried out in the presence of God.

In this case, we find ourselves confronting the question of what we will decide about how to view the world around us. What will we decide about the people around us, especially those we do not know? What

One of them asked, "Which commandment is the first of all?" He answered, "The first is this: 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." —Mark 12

will we do to move forward with life? Even more importantly, *how* will we go about deciding what we will do? The Biblical mandate remains the same in every age, namely, to remember that we are not alone. We travel with God and our fellow human beings as our companions. However, the dominant voice of our culture, especially our economic culture, is usually that of narrow self-interest, of living life on our own with our selves at the center. Even when there is no overt message of abandoning God or of turning our hearts away from our neighbors, there is always the message that everything hinges on ourselves, that we can trust no one and that we have no choice but to focus our real energies on looking out for ourselves. Viewed solely from this perspective, we create the very dog-

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eat-dog world we fear, because we view one another only as competitors, to the degree that we see each other at all.

There is a widespread feeling in the United States that we have lost something very fundamental

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in our most basic values. As a result, many have mistakenly identified the past as a golden age, as if turning back the clock is our only hope. This is a hopelessly fear-based perspective. Rather than try to run backward in time, we humans are called to live in the present and walk faithfully into the future. It is the same truth in every age. Whenever and wherever people begin to pursue their own narrow self-interest at the expense of their relationships with God and their fellow human beings, we always lose the most basic value of our society. On the other hand, when people choose to embrace a sense of community with God and with others, we rediscover the power of real life. We are always at risk of losing these values and we always travel with the possibility of deepening our experience of them. So, we are always facing the same question again and again. Will we choose only our narrow self-interest, or will we choose faithful community?

This is the defining question in human life, for us individually and as human beings together. From Enron and other corporate scandals, to the obvious problems of the stock market itself, to the crying need of reforming our consti-

tution and tax system in Alabama, we have repeated examples of narrow self-interest, or greed, at work at the expense of our relationship with God and others. In each, however, we also find the possibility for acting in ways that strengthen and embody our relationship with God and our fellow human beings. We must choose.

It is imperative to remember that these two relationships—God and our neighbors—can never be separated. It is simply not possible to claim a relationship with God while neglecting, forsaking or abusing other people. Stated positively, our own joy as people is always found in being faithful to being part of the community of life that God is always working to create among us. To be sure, no amount of human effort can replace the creative power of God to provide for the needs of our human community. That would be to try to leave God out of our community. But God does not leave us or our neighbors out, either. God is at work wherever people begin to work toward more than their own narrow self-interest and God supplies energy and power to those efforts, no matter how difficult the issues or the tasks.

Constitutional Reform

Constitutional reform in Alabama is an old issue in one sense, one that affects every person residing in this state. The emerging movement for reform is filled with potential and possibility—and also with danger.

So, on the one hand, we must all recognize that there is a dangerous possibility that the debate over a new constitution could quickly disintegrate into a struggle among the relatively powerful in this state to assert their own self-interest at the expense of everyone else, especially the least powerful and most vulnerable. If that becomes the case, we might soon have a different constitution, but it will be of no different moral weight than our current constitution, which enshrined the narrow self-interests of

the most powerful people in Alabama in 1901. If all we do is update the names of the most powerful in a new constitution, then we will have made no progress as human beings in relationship to God and one another.

But, on the other hand, at the same time, a genuinely hopeful possibility *does* indeed exist, namely, that we will decide to travel through this part of our history with a profound, divine awareness that how we treat our neighbors in our individual lives and in our public policy is part of God's work among us. Clearly, to act in light of this commitment will require reflection and patience as we take the time to learn from one another what is best for others as well as ourselves and then work together to do our best to enact a fair and just constitution. Since budgets are the chief instruments of policy, such a constitution must certainly reflect fair and honest taxation based on people's ability and resources, as well as the benefits and powers entrusted to them on behalf of

On the one hand, we must all recognize that there is a dangerous possibility that the debate over a new constitution could quickly disintegrate into a struggle among the relatively powerful in this state to assert their own self-interest at the expense of everyone else. But at the very same time, we must step forward knowing that a genuinely hopeful possibility does indeed exist...

the public good. It must also reflect the sharing of power and participation that respects every person's dignity equally. Why? Because from a faith perspective, we are all connected to one another through the God who created us all. The earth's goodness is a trust from God for the enjoyment of both ourselves and our

neighbors. God calls us to embrace and risk community, despite our fears, because our faith calls us to remember and trust that God is the guarantor of our mutual and individual well-being. It is not our greed that sustains us, but God's goodness.

The Super Sewer

If constitutional reform is an issue of hopeful possibility, despite the very real dangers of narrow self-interest, the controversial "Super Sewer," a project of Jefferson County government, is an issue in which narrow self-interest appears to be already dangerously entrenched.

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The "Super Sewer," which will cost at least \$141 million dollars and which is designed to carry sewage through largely undeveloped areas of eastern Jefferson County, is a project being promoted in the name of the common good, but without any actual input or authorization to this point from the community. If the worst allegations prove true, the project takes money from the whole community, both poor and non-poor people, and provides immediate, enormous benefits to a few, already resource-rich people. Those are serious charges, and if true, then the project must not be allowed to proceed. Certainly, since money will be taken from the poorest people in the county through dramatically increased water bills, there can be no justification for threatening the poorest households with the complete loss of water and sewer service in order to build services for those who face no such threat.

The Super Sewer is another instance where our community is encountering the choice of how to spend community money and who should receive it. The typical practice of too many communities is to "write off" poor communities and to steer resources to the more prosperous communities in hopes of increasing benefits for "as many people as possible." This is classic unrestrained market economics turned into public policy. For this reason, tax breaks often go to the wealthy and to powerful corporations in hopes that they will produce benefits for others.

There are deep problems with such an approach in general, all of which are at work in the Super Sewer project. First, both poor and nonpoor people have been left out of the decision-making process and even denied information about the plans of those who have seats at the decision-making table. As a result, the dignity and the equality of people is denied. Secondly, in this case, as in almost all instances of policy shaped by narrow self-interest, poor people receive almost no benefits but still pay—and pay at a higher percentage rate than anyone else, relative to their income and resources. Thirdly, life is not a commodity, regardless of how much our economics may try to make it one. Life, and the things needed for life, such as potable water and healthy living conditions, are part of God's intent in creation. They are intended for the benefit, not of a few, not even most, but all of God's living creatures.

In this case, average citizens had no opportunity to give input on the Super Sewer project. Indeed, until July of 2002, there was not a single public hearing or advertised meeting about the project, yet it is clear that it has been in the works for some time. And, indeed, because of the impact of increased sewer bills, the poor will pay a higher percentage of their monthly income and

run a higher risk of disconnection (even eviction) than anyone else. It is not just possible or likely, but inevitable that as it currently stands, some people will lose their water and sewer service because of the costs of paying for the Super Sewer. The costs of the Super Sewer would only add to other problems already being faced by people whose income is less than the cost of survival. The cost of the Super Sewer is already on top of the cost all rate-payers are paying for the repair of the existing sewer system.

The Super Sewer proposal has been wrongly lumped together with an altogether separate issue, namely, a court decision in which Jefferson County government was found liable and negligent in its responsibility to maintain the existing sewer system. The current system causes pervasive ground and water contamination, especially in some of the poorest areas of the metropolitan area. Finally forced to clean

In almost all instances, public policy shaped by narrow self-interest results in poor people receiving few, if any, benefits, but still paying—and paying at a higher percentage rate than anyone else.

up the mess, the County has raised sewer rates significantly to pay for the improvements. As noted above, the rate increase for needed repairs will already pose a challenge to those with the fewest resources to pay. Originally, a huge bond issue was proposed, along with further rate increases, to pay not just for the repairs to the current system, but also the Super Sewer project, which is entirely separate from the court decision and which has apparently

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been a project of a few people for some time.

Without meaningful participation by the community as a whole; without specific, separate authorization from the community as a whole; and without some genuine awareness and action regarding its inevitable, negative impact on the most marginal households, this project cannot meet the test of faithful community. The environmental concerns raised by the project only double its inability to meet that standard since it presents a risk to water resources, a risk that must be jointly shared by the community very intentionally, if the risk is to be undertaken at all. The Super Sewer, at least at this point, shows disturbing signs of narrow self-interest at work at the expense of faithful community.

The Rediscovered Limits of the Market

The slogan of the 1980s and 1990s was "Let the market decide." Now many people are looking for ways to protect themselves from the market. We have rediscovered the

The market has approached becoming a religion with many people, so that even language traditionally associated with God was transferred to the market.

limits of the market that our grandparents understood after 1929. Markets are not infallible, nor are they self-regulating. Markets still require moral guidance from people's ethical decisions.

How we will interpret the wave of corporate scandals in which greed and deception allowed a few to rack up enormous wealth, even after making decisions that wrecked the lives and the well-being of mil-

lions, is an open question. Once again, the possibility exists that we will each absorb whatever losses that "the market" has inflicted on us individually and hope that "the market" will recover and return to us what we lost. Perhaps this will hap-

There is no substitute for our own ethical decisions, both in private matters and in the public exercise of what power we have as citizens, employers, investors and consumers.

pen, but chances are, it will not. Because, part of what we lost was a blind confidence in self-interest as the bedrock of human life.

"Let the market decide" was too often a way of saying that moral and ethical decisions have no place in economic discussions. Some economists label moral decisions and economic justice as "externalities." They have no place in the discussion at all. The most ardent supporters of the market as an infallible mechanism assumed that profit of any kind is good and that people with wealth can always be trusted to be truthful and honest. Many assumed that companies to which we entrusted money (and tax breaks) would have the interests of at least their investors primarily at heart, if not the country in general. Recent events have severely dented that naïveté.

Prior to the most recent events that have jolted the very core of the market, there was a cultural assumption that the market would always function like a goose that laid golden eggs. There was no need for moral decisions regarding the behavior of corporations or their leaders, and there was also no need for anyone to raise the question about whether there were social values that should not

be entrusted to the workings of the market.

The privatization of virtually all public services and facilities, the adoption of the corporation as the model for government and faith communities, and the dismantlement of social support programs and turning any remaining resources over to market-based forces were all signs of the ascendancy of the market. The proposed privatization of the Social Security system into the market was the next step in turning even more of the community's resources and our commitment to each other over to the market.

The market approached becoming a religion with many people, so that even language traditionally associated with God was transferred to the market. The "invisible hand of the market" in some discussions rivaled the position of God in faith-based settings. Implicit was the message that the market and a conscience are not easy companions. Events at Enron, Qwest, Global Crossings, Tyco, WorldCom, Ar-

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thur Andersen and other places verified that conscience” was clearly trumped by other forces.

Greed creates its own rationalizations. It always has, and it always will, as all our faith traditions clearly assert. There is no substitute for our own ethical decisions, both in private matters and in the exercise of what power we have as voters, investors and consumers. God acts, not nearly so much through “the market” as through human hearts and minds which faithfully entrust themselves to God’s will and then act in ways that transform the normal workings of human systems. The market can indeed be a mechanism through which human beings express their commitment to God, but only to the degree that human beings recognize the dangers and the limits of narrow self-interest and embrace the primary goal of serving God and our neighbors above all.

The market is always in danger of being turned into an idol from which we hope somehow to derive marvelous benefits without ever having to make conscious decisions to uphold truth and compassion or to look after the good of others, not just oneself. Our commitment to faithful community with God and others must always remain above and within our dealings in the market.

Faithful community does not just automatically “happen” when enough people have plenty of money. Community appears when people allow God and all our fellow human beings to be our traveling companions, and we trust God to provide for all our needs while we focus on tangible ways of loving God and loving our neighbors as ourselves. One’s power in the market is determined by the amount of money one has. God has a far broader standard for how human beings are to relate to one another, one in which we make intentional decisions to assure that God and people remain primary and that every person has sure access to the things essential for life itself. ◀

Quick Facts on the Super Sewer

- The Super Sewer is not part of the court-ordered sewer repair.
- The Super Sewer is a \$141 million public subsidy for private development.
- Half of Jefferson County’s originally proposed \$1.4 billion bond issue is not for required sewer repairs.
- At least one-third of water rate increases are actually paying for sewer system expansions
- Most of Jefferson County will not be served by the Super Sewer and will receive no benefit.
- Seniors living on fixed incomes, low wage workers, and struggling young families--black, white and brown--are finding their sewer bills increasingly competing with other utility bills as a strain on their budgets.
- The County’s prioritization of work on the Super Sewer *is* delaying work on court-mandated sewer repairs. In continuing this practice, the County is guaranteeing higher construction costs later for the now deferred court-ordered repair work.
- Updated sewer infrastructure is vital to the health, safety and economic development of Jefferson County, as is safe, clean drinking water. Projects involving potentially irrevocable environmental and health consequences deserve the highest standard of public scrutiny. The County is unconvincing in their claim that boring under the Cahaba River more than a dozen times will not put the river at risk. Transparency and accountability are necessary components of good governance. There is a need for more public hearings and independent expert assessments of sewer expansion projects and county land use planning.

For more information:
www.cahabariversociety.org or (205) 322-5326

Quick Facts on the Current Alabama Constitution

Framers of our 1901 Constitution had 3 major goals:

- To strip blacks, poor whites and cities of political power
- To establish control and power in the legislature
- To maintain low taxes on property – a goal that benefited major land owners & corporations

The Aftermath

- In 1900 there were 181,315 registered African-American male voters in Alabama; in 1903 there were 2,980.
- In 1900 there were 232,821 white men registered; in 1903 there were 191,492.
- Thus, the 1901 Constitution dramatically limited democracy while it protected the interest of white elites.

Prevents Home Rule

- Our legislature spends at least 40% of its time on strictly local issues.
- About 70% of our over 700 Amendments apply to a single city or county.

Preserves a Defective and Unfair Tax Structure

- We have income and property taxes set low; thus local governments have come to rely on sales taxes which they can raise without a constitutional amendment. Sales taxes fluctuate with the economy and are a far less stable revenue source than property and income taxes.
- Because we rely so heavily on sales taxes, we have a regressive system that places the heaviest percentage burdens on low-income citizens, since they spend more of their income on food, clothing and other necessities.

For more information:
www.constitutionalreform.org or call ACCR at (334) 834-5495

News Around GBM

Merika Coleman Elected to Alabama House of Representatives



Merika Coleman, Economic Justice Staffperson at Greater Birmingham Ministries, was recently elected to the Alabama House of Representatives for District 57. She was the winner of the June 4 primary and faces no opposition in the November general election.

She based her campaign on commitments to set up a district-wide plan to revitalize neighborhoods and foster new businesses, promote educational reform, ensure adequate compensation and protect labor laws, improve and expand public transportation for people with transportation needs, work for tax fairness in the state of Alabama and advance Constitutional Reform by means of a Constitutional convention so as to give average citizens a voice in state government.

Merika will take office in November and take her seat in the 2003 legislative session which begins in March.

GBM Direct Services Report

	January-August 2002	January-December 2001
Total Number of Families Assisted	2,210	3,496
Total Number of People Assisted	5,329	9,195
Total Children	2,322	4,495
Number of Food Bags Distributed	3,703	5,334
Value of Food Given	\$118,496	\$196,580
Number of Families Receiving Clothing	606	1,292
Qualified Financial Requests Received	\$163,174	\$359,760
Financial Assistance Given	\$85,638	\$205,065
Total Funds and Value of Goods Given	\$213,224	\$430,710

The board and staff of GBM congratulate Merika and wish her the best as she continues her work on behalf of this community in a new role. ◀

Tari Williams Soon to Join GBM Staff

GBM Executive Director Scott Douglas has announced the selection of Tari Williams to fill a vacancy in the Economic Justice staff of Greater Birmingham Ministries. "The EJ Search Committee is extremely pleased to have offered her the position and to have received her acceptance. We are delighted," Douglas reported to GBM board and staff.

Tari earned her law degree from the University of Baltimore School of Law, where she achieved top national rank in a number of competitions. She was admitted to the Maryland Bar in 1998.

She is also a graduate of the University of Maryland and Vestavia Hills High School. Most recently, she has completed a two-year Education Rights Fellowship at the Alabama ACLU in Montgomery where she worked in all areas of civil rights litigation with a focus on educational reform issues. Prior to returning to Alabama, she worked in the office of the State's Attorney in Baltimore. She was also involved in a project to represent the homeless in the Baltimore area.

"Tari brings remarkable skills, talents and experiences to GBM, and we are glad to welcome her back to the Birmingham community. We are looking forward to an exciting period in GBM's history, and we think Tari is just the person to help us move on with the work of building justice and community in the Jefferson County area and across the state," Douglas noted. ◀

Be Encouraged: The Story of Mr. C

For the past four years a young man has been coming to GBM seeking food and financial assistance. This young man, Mr. C, was trying to do all the right things for his new family, working each day in a management position until he suffered a fall that caused injuries to his leg. To complicate the situation, Mr. C soon learned that he is a diabetic. Due to the many complications with the diabetes and the slow healing of his leg and foot, Mr. C ultimately lost his job.

Soon Mr. C found himself in the exact place that so many clients find themselves who come to GBM's doors: learning about the different agencies, the hours they are open and the services provided. For four years, Mr. C also continued to apply for disability and for four years, he received the same answer: **DENIED.**

This newlywed couple soon realized the devastation that this kind of personal trauma and stress can bring into a relationship: either you grow stronger or you grow apart. Despite their best efforts, Mr. and Mrs. C grew apart. Mr. C felt that it would be best that she return home to her parents than for her and their child to be in a house with no lights or no heat, and at times no food.

Returning to the office after lunch one day, the first person I saw was Mr. C. My heart dropped because the first thing I thought was, "Lord, we do not

have any money." Instead, Mr. C wanted me to meet his wife and to give Sarah and me a gift basket to say "thank you." Mr. and Mrs. C were out delivering gift baskets they had made for each agency, medical staff and all others who had assisted them during those four long years.

After four yours of holding to their faith, and with the assistance of several nonprofit agencies, such as GBM, Salvation Army and others, Mr. C finally received notice that his application for Disability had finally been approved, **after four years of waiting.**

There are times of doing the mission of GBM that we feel as if we are making tracks but going nowhere. And just as God put the rainbow in the sky to reassure us, somebody or someone like Mr. and Mrs. C stop by just to say "thank you."

The card attached to the gift basket says it all; "We wish to thank you for all your kindness and generosity toward our family in our time of need. These tulips on the front of this card represent our family, and these tulips might have withered up and died if it had not been for OUR ANGELS OF MERCIES. To each of you we pray that your deeds will not go unrewarded by our God."

So we the GBM Staff continue to do the works of Him who sent us and give thanks to all who share their gifts with GBM.

When is Enough, Enough? The Story of Ms. L

A call came into our office from a DHR Social Worker with a request for food for a grandmother and her three grandchildren ages 12, 11 and 14. Due to family issues, this grandmother has been given custody of her grandchildren.

After interviewing this very caring and warm-hearted person, I discovered that she was also facing eviction the same day. No food, about to be evicted and, oh yes, one of the children whom she loves and cares for had tried to kill her. But because of a grandmother's unconditional love she was willing to have her back in her home and, most of all, to love her unconditionally and provide these all her grandchildren shelter food and clothing.

I requested a check from GBM for the amount of rent on nothing but faith. There were no funds available, but I just could not see this grandmother and her grandchildren outdoors. We wrote the check, the eviction was halted and the granddaughter is receiving treatment for her anger. ◀

L'Shanah Tovah

Happy New Year!

to the entire
Birmingham
Jewish
Community

GBM Welcomes Two New AmeriCorps VISTA Volunteers

The next time you visit Greater Birmingham Ministries, you may see some faces you may not have seen before. These faces belong to Sybrynna Watts and Chris Davis. Each of them recently completed their Pre-Service Orientation in Orlando, Florida, and they have now begun their initial one-year tour of service with AmeriCorps at GBM. Mary Jones is the overall coordinator of their work at Greater Birmingham Ministries.

The AmeriCorps VISTA program strives to build and improve permanent infrastructure in non-profit agencies that struggle with poverty issues in their surrounding community. VISTA's essentially serve in a similar capacity within the United States as Peace Corps volunteers do abroad. To this end, the work of the three AmeriCorps VISTA volunteers at GBM will be focused on public transportation, public education, affordable housing and economic education.

During the week of October 21, our VISTA volunteers will attend meetings in Tuskegee, Ala-



AmeriCorps VISTA Volunteers Sybrynna Watts and Chris Davis

bama, which will evaluate their first three months of service. AmeriCorps VISTA volunteers from the Southeast will come together to share information and experiences. When they return, it will be time to move out of the planning stage into the implementation phase of their work.

GBM welcomes these talented people and the renewed sense of excitement and commitment they bring with them. We look forward to the benefits they will bring to the Birmingham community.

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“Narrow Self-Interest or Faithful Community?”

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Greater Birmingham Ministries is a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization. Contributions are tax-deductible and are deeply appreciated. Donations of funds, food and clothing are essential to GBM's work. Thank you for your continued support.