



Living It Out

Spring, 2004

The Newsletter of Greater Birmingham Ministries

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Greater Birmingham Ministries
2304 12th Avenue North
Birmingham, Alabama
35234-3111

Phone: (205) 326-6821
www.gbm.org

BUILDING A HIGHWAY OUT OF HOMELESSNESS

- by The Birmingham Coalition of the Homeless

For the past several months there has been a group of amazing people meeting regularly at the Church of the Reconciler in downtown Birmingham. The group, called the Birmingham Coalition of the Homeless, is composed of our brothers and sisters living on the streets. They meet to discuss and identify the systemic problems that have walled them into the all too hopeless world of homelessness. In the process they are helping the rest of Birmingham better understand the problems and walls they face daily and partner together in the fight for equality and justice for all of the citizens of this country, state and city. Following are several of the systemic issues they have identified:

Livable Wages – “We find it very difficult to get out of homelessness because we do not have access to living wage jobs. We are hard working people, yet we frequently have to work reduced-hour temporary jobs often in dangerous and dirty conditions that pay only \$5.15 to \$6.00 an hour. The low pay keeps us on the streets. If we are to move off of the streets, we must make enough to be able to save enough to move into and maintain even rental properties currently available. If the temporary labor agencies in Birmingham were required to pay a minimum wage of \$8.50 an hour, we would be helped greatly.”

Alabama Arise has done research to determine livable wage for cities in Alabama. For Birmingham the wage ranges from a little over \$8 per hour to over \$15 per hour depending on whether the worker has no children or up to two. Livable wage for larger family units is even greater.

Sanitary Conditions – “We share the need for bathhouses and laundry facilities with all who labor in environments that cause bodies and clothes to become dirty. We need access before and after work hours to shower, bathroom and laundry facilities. This would enable us to present ourselves in the eyes of the city center as the people who we are - partners and contributors to the economy of the city we all share.”

Transportation – “Without quality public transportation, we as homeless people are trapped in downtown Birmingham. We cannot work many jobs in the metropolitan area that pay living wages because our current public transportation system is less than adequate. We have to camp out downtown because public transportation does not allow us to leave surrounding neighbors early enough to make it back downtown to the temporary labor agencies by 5:00 in the morning to have a good chance of obtaining a job ticket for the day.”

Housing – “We find it very difficult to obtain market rate housing. Once out of the temporary shelters, we often have to pay \$700 per month to stay in the inexpensive motels in downtown Birmingham and use homeless services to survive because we cannot manage the large up-front deposits required for market rate housing. Rent and utility deposits, back utility bills, furniture and household supplies can amount to \$1,000.00 to \$3,500.00 up front cost.”

The Coalition proposes the establishment of a trust fund to be used to guarantee rent and utility deposits for those who qualify. Recipients of the guaranteed deposits would have to show strong progress in a healthy life style and sign a covenant to be drug and violence free. The recipients would pay a monthly fee until their deposits have been covered. This fund could be expanded through donations from financial institutions, corporations, and individuals.

Health Care – “We find it difficult to move out of homelessness because we do not have the resources to cover co-payment cost for doctor visits and prescription drugs needed for our health and strength. We can receive \$50.00 a week for selling our blood plasma twice a week. Therefore we sell our blood plasma often to obtain money for these and other basic needs. This is a self-defeating process. We know our blood plasma is an essential health care resource for the broader community, yet we suffer loss of health providing it. We don't even have access to healthcare for our families or ourselves. We would be helped if the blood shops were required to pay a fee for each unit of

(Continued on page 2)

Out of Homelessness

(Continued from page 1)

blood plasma they purchase, no reduction in the price paid for blood plasma., to create a fund to cover co-payment cost for health care for persons and their families who sell their blood plasma with in a twelve-month period.”

“In addition, we need more quality residential drug recovery programs in Birmingham. Currently there are not enough of them, and the waiting lists are too long! We need support and partners to enable us to develop a world-class 12-month residential drug recovery program. This is an essential component of the highway out of homelessness.”

Legal Support and Understanding – The Coalition of the Homeless has discovered that many people are kept homeless by the criminal justice system. Small traffic or quality of life offenses result in fines that are unable to be paid because of no employment or low wage employment. Missed court dates are an all too common occurrence for the homeless who typically do not own watches or carry calendars and thus live an unstructured life. Missed court dates result in new fines that are further out of financial reach of the homeless. Additional missed court dates result in arrest warrants. These warrants make it impossible to work except for “cash under the table.” This situation results in increased probability of being caught in a background check run by police. The resulting jail time disrupts completely any progress made in the journey into employment, housing and a meaningful life. Most come out of city jail with new probations and new court dates to be missed and a new cycle of events that lead to another round that becomes an endless cycle of hopelessness.

“We need a restorative justice processes that can interrupt this cycle of hopelessness and move homeless people out of the City Jail and courts and into a productive life.”

Shelter - The homeless community needs a variety of specialty shelters that can focus healing and hope for our community.

“We need a day shelter so that we can work the many night jobs in the city. The current shelter arrangements make it virtually impossible to manage night work. Night work with a place to rest in the day can enable many of us to move out of homelessness.”

“We need a surgical and hospital discharge shelter for the large number of us who are discharged from the hospital with no place to recuperate. Without this resource we suffer long recovery times and are at high risk for permanent disability.”

“We need a shelter for persons who are in severe dysfunction from mental illness or intoxication so that they can be held for seven days with out criminalization and given a proper mental health evaluation and referral for treatment or drug or alcohol recovery. We recognize that there may be a number of repeat offenders that may need jail but it should not be the first line of action. Too many homeless persons have been diagnosed with mental illness and with treatment have made it off of the streets. Such a shelter would increase the number of addicted people getting connected with drug or alcohol recovery programs and speed the process of recovery.”

The above are a few of the systemic problems being faced by the homeless in our City. The Birmingham Coalition of the Homeless offers insightful suggestions into ways of building a highway out of homeless. These suggestions are “not an attempt to make the homeless more comfortable in our homelessness.” Instead they reflect the need for structural justice rather than direct services. We all recognize changes require time and effort. The Birmingham Coalition of the Homeless commit themselves to working in cooperation to make them possible. What about the rest of us?

For additional information on the topic, please contact Rev. Lawton Higgs at

Church of the Reconciler
(205) 324-6402



**BIRMINGHAM
TRANSIT ADVOCACY
GROUP FIGHTS
FOR PUBLIC
TRANSPORTATION**

- summary of minutes from BRTAG

In 1998 Congress authorized \$87,500,000 toward public transportation in Greater Birmingham and between 1999 and 2003 \$16,279,223 of these funds were appropriated for use. The federal government will provide the remaining \$75,220,777 for public transportation only if a 20% source of local funds is made available. A bill was introduced last year to provide matching funds and reorganize and expand the Transit Authority Board. That legislation was passed by the Senate, but killed in the House. Similar legislation has been reintroduced this year but is again threatened.

The Greater Birmingham region will lose the already dedicated funds unless Senator Shelby reauthorizes funds in the new six year transit bill.

The Birmingham Transit Advocacy Group (BRTAG), a grass-roots organization of concerned transit riders and advocates for public transportation, has been meeting regularly under the leadership of Doris Powell, to address the issues surrounding the lack of adequate public transportation in the Greater Birmingham area. The group has partnered with various other organizations, like Alabama Arise and the Birmingham Chamber of Commerce, in the political struggles to improve public transportation in the region. Improved public transportation for the region would allow more equitable access to the services we claim are the right of every citizen. Reliable and extensive public transportation would also help improve air quality, provide access to jobs, and increase independence for the physically challenged and elderly who no longer drive.

For additional information on the topic, please contact Doris Powell at

dpowell18@bellsouth.net
or (205) 252-7606



**ALABAMA ARISE
WARNS OF
DEEPENING CRISIS**

- summary of articles by Alabama Arise

In its sixteenth year as an advocate for justice for the poor in our state. Alabama Arise devotes its energies to influence state policies by presenting well-researched issue analysis and by voicing the concerns of citizens throughout the state. Making systemic changes is a long-term process and the help of all concerned citizens is needed. This year Alabama Arise is concentrating on the following 6 issues: tax reform, adequate funding for children's issues, public transportation, landlord/ tenant legislations, a moratorium on executions, and legislation against unfair lending practices. Your help is especially critical this year as the Governor and Legislature address the crisis in funding for all State programs and agencies. Too often the ear-marking of funds protects the popular issues and programs while overruling the needs of those most vulnerable to the loss of services. For this reason new income sources for the General Fund must be found.

One of Arise's greatest concerns is that proposed solutions and budget cuts for 2005 will fall hardest on children and adults receiving Medicaid assistance. The state shortfall in 2004 is expected to be \$60M and the federal match \$160M (the match is \$7 for each \$3 in state funds). Many hospitals have been operating at a loss for several years and if they close now, they would most likely not reopen. Rural pharmacies are threatened and rural communities could lose doctors. Arise is part of the CARE Coalition which is pushing for some taxes it considers regressive and does not usually support but which would generate some federal matching funds to help save the services.

Inadequate public transportation denies thousands in urban and rural areas the basic needs of work, health care, education, and more. A number of studies indicate this is not only an economic and social justice issue; it is also a health and safety issue, and an economic development issue.

Arise makes available information on these and many more issues. They also provide guidelines for contacting legislators including extensive phone numbers and/or e-mail. For fact sheets on these and other issues, please contact:

Alabama Arise
P.O. Box 612
Montgomery, AL 36101
(800) 832-9060
www.alarise.org



**PARTICIPATIVE
BUDGETING**

Fed up with our Political System? Look to the South! South America, that is.

For too long we in the US have resigned ourselves to a political system which is wasteful, divisive, and unresponsive to our needs. The citizens of Brazil also suffered for years under a corrupt political system, but they have decided that enough is enough and are making major changes. About fifteen years ago the city of Porto Alegre decided to involve as many of its citizens as possible in developing the annual budget, so as to make the city government as responsive as possible to the concerns and wishes of the public. This participative budget process received such widespread support in Porto Alegre that the elected officials have been re-elected by a wide margin for three successive terms, and similar participative budget processes have now spread to 200 Brazilian municipalities including Sao Paulo, one of the largest cities on the planet.

A recent educational survey conducted by the Kettering Foundation has indicated that Alabama citizens in general have a deep distrust of state and local officeholders, and they are very concerned about government mismanagement and its negative impact on their families and communities. Furthermore many of the citizens of Alabama would welcome the opportunity to work through many of these problems if they had any confidence that anyone in government was listening seriously to them.



LOBBY DAY 2004

On March 4, Alabama Arise held its annual Lobby Day. Above, participants from Birmingham talk with legislators about the need for funding to provide adequate public transportation for the citizens of our City and Region.

Photo above by—John Meehan

One of the most impressive outcomes of the participative budget system in Brazil is the high level of civic enthusiasm and commitment of the citizens for their government. Ottawa, Canada is now moving towards a participative process. Maybe it is time to make some changes in the political systems of Alabama.

For additional information on the topic, please visit The Innovative Journal web site at

www.innovation.cc/case_std/doucet.htm



**Come join the
Economic Justice Work Group**

Meetings are every Thursday
at GBM from Noon to 1:30 PM.

Bring a lunch and
come when you can.

For more information

Please contact EJ Co-Chairs
Helen Holdefer at 879-6195 or
Betty Likis at 290-9459

Or call GBM 326-6821
and speak to

Tari Williams (ext 105)

VOLUNTEER BIRMINGHAM!

Imagine GBM without volunteers. Next to impossible, isn't it? Volunteers in a multitude of capacities make our mission possible, and with each new volunteer GBM's effectiveness increases. That is why we are excited and pleased to be one of 60 non-profit agencies invited to participate in the second annual Volunteer Birmingham!

Volunteer Birmingham is sponsored by The Junior League of Birmingham. Formed in 1922 to promote volunteerism, the Junior League has organized this community-wide volunteer fair. Brookwood Village Mall has generously offered to host the event. From 10:00am to 8:00 pm on Tuesday, April 13, their interior promenades will be filled with agency booths. GBM will staff a booth and share our mission, vision, and goals with interested members of the public. Our hope is that others will be inspired by our story and will join our volunteer team.

So come to Volunteer Birmingham! Bring your friends. Volunteers transform lives and communities every day. Take this chance to learn for yourself what great things you can do.

HUNGER, HOMELESSNESS INCREASE IN U.S.

Following is a summary of an article by Siobhan McDonough of the Associated Press

A recent survey by U.S. mayors finds an increased demand in many of our cities for emergency food and shelter. The Report by the U.S. Conference of Mayors, released in December, showed a 17% increase in demand in 2003 over 2002, with one city having an increase of 48%. Requests for food assistance rose 18% for families with children and 13% for the elderly. In addition, 59% of the people requesting emergency food were in families, and 39% of the adults were employed.

Requests for emergency shelter rose by 13%, and the number of homeless families requesting shelter rose by 15%. The report also showed an increase in the average length of homelessness.

Among the issues cited as contributing to the increased needs are low paying jobs, high housing costs, and high energy and utility costs.

Additional information can be obtained on line at: www.mayors.org/USCM/home.asp

WOMEN AS STRENGTH PROGRAM (WASP)

The Women as Strength Program (WASP) is an open group of women who gather to "talk to" or "be with" each other. They share their experiences of life, their accomplishments and their struggles of everyday living, of dealing with problems that are dumped on them by society and the system. As one of the women pointed out, the focus of the group is asking, "What can we do to help each other today?"

Participants pair up in an effort to get to know each other and to help each other in the tasks of survival, sharing childcare responsibilities and family needs. Together the participants recognize they are not alone, and together they overcome unbearable situations. Since its beginning 6 years ago, well over 200 women have benefited from the program.

Currently there are two WASP groups meeting in the Birmingham area. One meets at the World of Opportunity in Gate City, and the other moves around to better accommodate the participants.

For additional information, please contact Mary Jones at GBM - 205-326-6821 ext. 107



LOCAL JUNIOR HIGH GETS INVOLVED WITH HOLIDAY FOOD DRIVE



Christmas Pickup from Mountain Brook Junior High School. The school's Assistant Principal was inspired by the early December press story on how little had been collected for the families in need for the holidays. He got the students involved, and within 24 hours the school was able to collect over 2,000 cans of food for families in need.

NEW GBM VAN!!!

**THANKS TO THE
LASKER FOUNDATION!!!**



Thanks to a very generous donation by Dr. James Lasker, MD of the Lasker Foundation, Direct Services has a new van which is being put to good use picking up food and clothing donations many times a week. The New Van was a vision of Irwin "Chico" Bomchel, a beloved friend and very active member of Direct Services until his death last summer. His memory still influences GBM and the work we do.

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 the IRS. Contributions are tax-deductible.

OUTSTANDING WOMAN

Mary Jones, who has served on staff at GBM for 7 years, and has been a strong advocate for Direct Services and Women's Rights, was honored on March 11, 2004, at UAB as the "Outstanding Woman in the Community". Mary is active at Greater Birmingham Ministries, Church of the Reconciler, World Of Opportunity, Women As Strength Program, ONB's Community Affairs Committee, Southern Rural Black Women's Initiative, and many, many more. Congratulations!!!



**DIRECT SERVICES
2003 YEAR END REPORT**

Total Number of Families Assisted	3,306
Total Number of People Assisted	8,572
Total Number of Children Assisted	3,967
Number of Food Bags Distributed	7,699
Value of Food Distributed	\$323,182
Financial Assistance Requested	\$192,483
Financial Assistance Provided	\$107,891
Value of Total Assistance Provided (Food and Financial)	\$505,323

**Come join the
Direct Services Work Group.**

Meetings are the second Monday of every month at GBM from Noon to 1:00 PM.

Volunteers are needed throughout the week.

Please contact DS Chairperson Patty Warren at 879-0898

Or call GBM at 326-6821 and speak to Ernestine Davis (ext 101) or Sarah Price (ext 102)

**TRANSITIONS
FROM 2003 INTO 2004**

Being a part of a community means being a part of the transitions of human life, arrivals and departures, with their celebrations and griefs. The past 12 months have been marked by just such transitions for Greater Birmingham Ministries:

Deaths

Josie M. Lee, a quiet, joyful and loving staff member of GBM for many years, died on July 4, 2003. She was the voice of GBM for each on the long list of board meetings, committees and work groups. "Are you coming to the meeting tonight, my dear," was her trademark question, and it was all but impossible to miss when Josie asked you to come. We still miss her at GBM, but we know she's getting people together, all the same.

Irwin "Chico" Bomchel, a true Birmingham landmark and legend was also a member of the GBM board of directors. He died on July 31, 2003, having given and raised innumerable charitable gifts all across the community. He picked up the name "Chico" as a little boy in Argentina before his family moved to Birmingham. As a member of the Jewish community and representing Temple Beth-El on the GBM board, Chico never once forgot how difficult life could be for others and the simple joys that all children should enjoy. His voice still echoes throughout the work of GBM.

Rev. Ronald E. Nored, Sr., a one-time staff member of GBM and a board member at the time of this death on October 11, 2003, has been rightly celebrated as one of the most gifted ministers to have ever lived in this area. His work with Bethel AME Church and the partnership he forged with the Sandybottom neighborhood of Ensley breathed new life into six square blocks of Ensley, while taking great strides toward revitalization in the economic base of the surrounding area. Ron was a tireless advocate for

folk oppressed by poverty, just as he himself had been as a child. He caused all of us to rethink how neighborhoods are revived, community trust is rebuilt and houses and jobs are created as a result. He was a primary moving force behind the newly launched Birmingham Center for Affordable Housing, and he has committed GBM to neighborhood-driven housing work for as long as there is a GBM.

Staff Departures

Former GBM Staff Member, **Merika W. Coleman**, is now State Representative Merika Coleman, following her election to the Alabama House of Representatives. In order to bring her own time schedule into manageable reach, she resigned from GBM's staff effective December 31, 2003 and accepted the invitation to join GBM's board effective January 1, 2004. Merika is a very active legislator, and she understands very clearly the same issues in her district that bring people to GBM's doors: housing, health care, jobs, public transportation, education and jobs. We are sad to lose her from our staff, but we celebrate that she is in the Alabama legislature.

Staff Arrivals

Ada Wilkerson became GBM's official "Front Door Greeter" in 2003 working closely with GBM's receptionist Lila Genreux to deal calmly with the huge amount of activity that comes with serving as many people as possible who call or walk in. Mrs. Wilkerson is another of those extremely talented people who arrive at GBM with just the people skills and good "community sense" that are indispensable to our overall work.

George M. Thompson, a long-time and highly respected volunteer (already up to his Palm Pilot's eyeballs with involvement in the Birmingham area) has now fulfilled his wishes to work full-time doing what he loves while filling a raging gap in the GBM staff. We are glad that George is now

our Faith in Community staff person, and you will soon notice major improvements in all of GBM's publications and systems of communication. George arrived on staff December 1, 2003, and we're still celebrating.

**CONSTITUTIONAL
REFORM**

How do we define justice in our society? Is it based on the laws of the land, the practices of those in power, the trends of corporate America, or something deeper, more humane? For justice and equality to be truly integrated into society, the laws governing the land must uphold and support the democratic ideal of justice for all. For only through justice and equality for all citizens can there be any true hope for peace. GBM is in the process of forming work groups specifically focused on the issues of governance in this state by looking into grassroots efforts for Constitutional Reform. If you are interested in more information on the issue or on participating in the work groups, please feel free to contact Tari Williams or George Thompson at GBM.

**BIRMINGHAM
EXPERIENCES**

Rev. Lawton Higgs, pastor at Church of the Reconciler and active GBM Board member, was included in the PBS Series - *America Beyond the Color Lines* with Harvard Professor Henry Louis Gates, Jr. which aired February 2nd and 3rd. Professor Gates traveled across America investigating the experiences of Black America during the start of the 21st Century. His travels took him through Memphis, Atlanta and Birmingham. Here in Birmingham, the road lead to several places including Church of the Reconciler.



LOBBY DAY 2004

On March 4, Alabama Arise held its annual Lobby Day when Arise supporters and concerned citizens from around the state gather in Montgomery to speak with legislators on the issues unjustly affecting the poor and very poor within our communities. This year a record number of people—over 250— participated, including a number of social work students from universities throughout the state.

A special “Thanks” to all of you from the various faith communities who participated in the event.

Photo at left by—John Meehan

JUBILEE TRANSIT AMENDMENT

The following is a summary of an article by Alabama Arise

Alabama and the world will celebrate the Golden Jubilee of the Montgomery Bus Boycott in December 2005. To mark this historic occasion, Alabama Arise, the Montgomery Transportation Coalition, the Birmingham Transit Advocacy Group and Greater Birmingham Ministries have launched a statewide petition drive urging the Legislature to pass a Jubilee Transit Amendment. The amendment would permit the use of a portion of the \$400 million gasoline tax revenues to fund public transportation. Almost 50 years after the Bus Boycott, the Alabama Department of Transportation still provides no funding for public transit. A 1952 amendment to Alabama’s Constitution makes it illegal to use state gas tax and license fee revenues for any purpose other than building and maintaining roads and bridges. ALDOT administers the use of federal transit money in the state, matching local dollars on a 4-to-1 or 1-to-1 basis. The absence of transit service keeps thousands in Alabama from meeting basic needs. In addition, over-dependence on private vehicles creates air pollution, traffic congestion, and other health and safety hazards.

For more information on this effort, please visit Alabama Arise’s website: www.alarise.org/Jubilee_Launch.htm

MATTHEW FOX IN BIRMINGHAM

On Friday, April 30 and Saturday, May 1, Matthew Fox will be in Birmingham to lead discussions and present ideas on Creation Spirituality.

Friday, April 30

**With Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth
3:00 PM—Free and Open to Public
Birmingham Civil Rights Institute
“Trust and Transformation”**

Creation Spirituality and social justice, focusing on Birmingham’s human rights history and current local struggles connecting ecological devastation with issues of race and poverty.

Friday, April 30

**7:00 PM—Free and Open to Public
Birmingham Southern College
Munger Auditorium**

“A Spirituality for the 21st Century”
Discussion and book signing follow.

Saturday, May 1

**9:00 AM to 4:30 PM—\$60
Church of the Reconciler
“Spiritual Sustainability”**

A day focusing on practical experiences in cultivating a spirituality for meeting the challenges of the 21st Century.

For more information, please contact
Judy or Glenn Hand-Truitt at
jplants@bellsouth.net
(205) 833-2591

STORIES COMING UP IN THE NEXT ISSUE:

GBM TURNS 35

At 7:30 AM, on Tuesday, June 10, 1969, Reverend Joe Elmore convened a breakfast meeting of the initial board of Greater Birmingham Ministries in the cafeteria of Birmingham-Southern College, and GBM was officially launched. Many things have changed over the course of the last 35 years within GBM and in the world. The board still meets on Tuesday to this day, but not at 7:30 AM. Through countless committed people GBM is still charged with being a living prayer “for people in Jefferson County who can be significantly helped by these ministries.” You will soon be hearing more of the story of GBM’s past years and the call we still sense to carry out that continuing vision into future.

BIRMINGHAM CENTER FOR AFFORDABLE HOUSING

After decades of need, years of focusing on the concerns of the under served, and months of final prep, the Birmingham Center for Affordable Housing is on the road to reality. Look for an update in the next issue of **Living It Out**.

Come join the Faith in Community Work Group

Meetings are the second Thursday of every month at GBM from 6:00 to 7:00 PM.

Please contact

Hattie Belle Lester at 942-6825
Or call GBM at 326-6821
and speak to
George Thompson (ext 115) or
Robert Montgomery (ext 110)

Living it Out - Spring, 2004

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2304 12th Avenue North, Birmingham, AL 35234-3111 Telephone: (205) 326-6821 Fax: (205) 252-8458 Web: www.gbm.org

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Tom Forsee
Rev. Lawton Higgs, Sr.

At Large Members

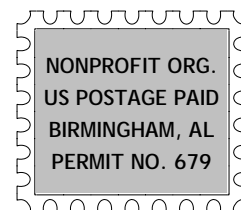
Whitlynn Battle
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Living It Out

GREATER BIRMINGHAM MINISTRIES
2304 12TH AVENUE NORTH
BIRMINGHAM, AL 35234-3111

www.gbm.org

ADDRESS CORRECTION REQUESTED



GBM Going High Tech - In hopes of better connecting to our friends and allies, GBM is trying to expand its e-mail lists for quick and urgent updates on local and state issues. If you have e-mail and are interested in receiving periodic news, please e-mail us your address. Simply say, "Add to List" and send to info@gbm.org. Thanks!!