

Yertle offers lessons to Alabama

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The Alabama Poverty Project is conducting a series of events to provide information and resources about poverty to local faith communities across the state. At the Huntsville forum I commented on the history and current state of poverty in Alabama and shared my thoughts on the important contributions that must be made by the faith community.

Almost seven years ago my article attacking on biblical grounds how our state and local taxes immorally oppress the poorest Alabamians forced me out of the comfortable ivory tower. The failure of the voters to approve Governor Riley's 2003 tax reform proposal sent me on a journey to understand our people. If I could not figure out why so many poor and lower middle class, mostly white, Alabamians voted against their own tax relief I might as well retreat back into my office.

After five years of studying the state's history, listening to countless Alabamians tell me about their family, friends and ancestors, and, engaging in intense spiritual reflection and prayer I finally understand our rut and have identified the key that only the faith community possesses.

This can be illustrated by the classic Dr. Seuss story, "Yertle the Turtle".

Yertle, the ruler of the turtles, decided that his throne was not high enough. So he ordered all the turtles to stand on each others' backs and soon had hundreds of turtles stacked in a straight line upward. While Yertle comfortably sat on the top of the stack viewing the world around him, all the turtles, except those close to the top, experienced various levels of crushing pressure on their backs and had either a limited or no view of the world.

This story represents the history of Alabama. Using illegally stuffed ballots, the wealthy landowners, representing the planters before the Civil War, and, metaphorically Yertle, fraudulently approved the 1901 Constitution. The 1901 Constitution denied all black Alabamians and most poor whites the right to vote. It also severely limited the power of the counties at a local level to sponsor economic improvements and enshrined the unfair tax system crippling the ability to adequately fund public education.

As a result of being denied political rights to improve their lot, blacks and poor whites suffered decades of sharecropping and low wage jobs, which substantially contributed to the legacy of persistent poverty that continues to plague us today. During the 1960s Alabama lost economic opportunities enjoyed by certain other Southern states, notably Georgia, because most whites strongly resisted the Civil Rights Movement. Most whites refused to move out of the straightjacket illustrated by Yertle's stack of turtles, even though, especially for poor and lower middle class whites, this meant preserving their own bondage.

And though all this white churches failed to proclaim the true meaning of the Word. Instead of challenging how far the world was straying from the teachings of Jesus, they accommodated the world.

The picture of Yertle sitting on top of a stack of turtles speaks the truth about Alabama today. African-American Alabamians, and the newly arrived Hispanics, are at the bottom. Poor and lower middle class whites, being just above them are not much better off. Although middle class whites are a bit further up, and are a very important component keeping the stack together, only the upper middle class, the wealthy and those benefiting from powerful special interest groups are free of the crushing back pressure experienced by most of the turtles and are able to fully see the world around them.

What is paralyzing most white Alabamians, especially those trapped closer to the bottom, from moving out of this straightjacket? The answer is fear. Fear that supporting changes even those that objectively will help them (such as Governor Riley's 2003 tax reform plan) just might cause them to fall closer to the bottom than they already are. Fear that supporting changes that might uplift those below will anger friends and family, and, show disrespect to ancestors. Followers of Jesus, who were often "cast out" from their communities had to face similar alienation.

The ending of "Yertle the Turtle" provides a clue as what the faith community must do. In the end all the turtles were freed when a fed up turtle at the bottom of pile "did a plain little thing. *He burped!* And his burp shook the throne of the king!" In Alabama today the burp in the story represents the rushing wind of the Holy Spirit that can only be inspired by the faith community.

The question is, given the glaring and repeated past failures of the faith community to inspire a moral compass strong enough to break this straightjacket do we dare hope and pray that we can provide a moral compass now? The answer is no matter how short we have fallen in the eyes of God we still have the ability to inspire numerous Alabamians to overcome their fears and do the right thing. When that happens there will be materially less poverty in Alabama.

All of us part of the Alabama Poverty Project are committed to partnering with local faith communities as we take this journey to overcome poverty together. We are planning more forums offering our resources and hope to cover areas all over the state. The cities of Anniston, Dothan, Florence and Tuscaloosa are currently at the top of our list to visit.

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