Faith in Action Alabama is grateful to all of our congregational partners, volunteer leaders, and funders who made this work possible.
"Our mission is to honor God by dismantling systemic racism to create pathways of opportunity for all Alabamians."

Faith in Action Alabama’s mission statement was crafted at our Founding Conference in 2016 and guided FIAAL’s work in anti-gun violence, voter rights restoration, & anti-mass incarceration in the first 5 years of the organization’s life.

GROWTH REQUIRES STRATEGY

The People’s Agenda project was conceived as a way to go to grassroots, to center on the people of Alabama whom FIAAL serves. These findings will guide our work in the coming years.

Our volunteer leaders began by holding listening sessions with 433 of their neighbors...

Then, guided by Dr. Alexandra Pineros-Shields, an expert in the Participatory Action qualitative research technique, our organizers and volunteer leaders analyzed the transcripts for patterns and themes.

This report is the summary of the findings, the voices of our neighbors in Alabama, predominantly from underrepresented communities.
How Can the People's Agenda Be Used to Create Pathways of Opportunity?

This report contains 6 Core Areas for improvement – ways we can make life in Alabama better for all her citizens.

The People's Agenda is a unique, evidence-based, state-wide community needs assessment focused on historically disenfranchised communities. Our structured listening sessions brought forth clear information on the gaps between the current & desired state of life in Alabama.

These 6 Core Areas will inform Faith in Action Alabama's work in Community Safety, Access to Liberty, and Inclusive Democracy.

Faith in Action Alabama's leaders & staff will use these findings to inform our programming in 2022-2025. Having developed this process, we intend to repeat our listening tour at intervals to update this strategic guide.

The 6 Core Findings from the People's Agenda can inform the work of any organization, law maker, or public servant.

If you want to serve all Alabamians or build a project or program that serves all people, you can find tangible, actionable ideas and recommendations here.
Core Area 1: Poverty & Economic Insecurity

ALABAMIANS SPEAK ABOUT THEIR EXPERIENCE OF POVERTY

“We are so consumed with survival mentality that we can’t think about education, the environment, economic development, community development, voting, restoration, and/or redistricting.”

KEY OBSERVATIONS:

- Wages in underrepresented communities are not a living wage
- Women & People of Color make less than white people for the same work
- Lack of generational wealth disadvantages the next generation
- Lack of job opportunities, especially jobs for formerly incarcerated individuals, leads to time & effort invested in the illegitimate economy (crime)
- Gentrification & skyrocketing housing prices drive low income families from their homes & divide communities
- Lack of financial literacy makes achieving personal gains difficult
- Healthcare costs lead to financial instability

CHANGE MIGHT LOOK LIKE:

- Public investment in housing programs
- Improved financial literacy programs in schools, prisons, & communities
- Increase the state & federal minimum wage
- Medicaid expansion to create jobs, decrease uninsured population, and alleviate the burden of medical expenses
- Universal access to free community college

There is a wage gap in Alabama. To do the same work as a white male, yearly compensation is decreased by:

$31,244 for a Black woman
$12,908 for a Black man
$27,176 for a Latinx woman
$13,984 for a Latinx man
$12,287 for a white woman
Core Area 2: Draining of Resources & Lack of Investment
ALABAMIANS SPEAK ABOUT COMMUNITY INVESTMENT & PLANNING

“I’m just gonna give honest opinion: when you look at African American predominate areas right here in the city of Montgomery where I live...in African American predominant neighborhoods, you don't see any business coming in those areas. Only business you see is going to see Title Max, Payday loans, predatory type of people move in to prey on folks who are already economically at a disadvantage.”

KEY OBSERVATIONS:

- Business that prey on the poor (e.g. payday lenders) proliferate in poor neighborhoods while essential services, nutritious food, & childcare flourish in wealthier neighborhoods
- Fast food restaurants are a-2 sided issue: the food is of low nutritional value, but the restaurants themselves provide jobs
- Fines, fees, sales tax & other regressive revenue sources worsen economic disadvantages
- Planning decisions are made by a powerful few lawmakers & stakeholders, with little representation from the community

CHANGE MIGHT LOOK LIKE:

- Restructuring of municipal & state taxes to favor more progressive methods & generalize funds for more equitable distribution
- Investment in minority entrepreneurs
- Investment in reliable transportation
- Urban planning should have community input & provide incentives for beneficial businesses
- State-wide regulation of the payday loan industry to limit terms & APR

FACTS ON PAYDAY LENDING IN AL

456% Maximum payday loan APR
$278,356/day Amount paid by Alabamians payday loan fees
>5,000/day New payday loans in Alabama

Food, Gas, Rent, Medical Bills
Biggest reasons people took out payday loans
“Oftentimes, those who are financially challenged, don't have the financial wherewithal to be able to afford the counsel that someone else can afford to get. Therefore, because they had counsel, they were able to get off charges, whereas someone who didn't have a bank account has to get a public defender or someone who was not as qualified to be attorney. They were, you know, they were at the mercy.”

**KEY OBSERVATIONS:**
- The criminal justice system is structurally biased against poor people & People of Color in our communities with regard to:
  - Which laws are written & passed
  - How law enforcement applies those laws
  - What options people are offered if they are arrested
  - What sentences & punishments are assigned
  - What options people have after exiting the criminal justice system

**CHANGE MIGHT LOOK LIKE:**
- State-wide commitment to establish & fund in every county or jurisdiction
  - Public Defenders' offices
  - Medical Examiner's offices
  - Pretrial Services programs
- Eliminate cash bail system
- Remove economic barriers to diversion programs & pretrial services
- Data tracking & reporting systems for improved equality in:
  - Citations & detentions
  - Cash bail practices

**INEQUALITY IN PRETRIAL DETENTION**

433% Increase in Pretrial Detention of Americans since 1971
Core Area 4: The Cycle of Stagnation & Disengagement
ALABAMIANS SPEAK ABOUT THEIR EXPERIENCE OF EFFECTING CHANGE

“We can get those from our community to run for positions like judge, and D.A. We should expect those who are running for those positions to be equitable, but when you have someone who is from the community, who knows the plight of the people there, they can have some guidance, some kind of plumb line, you know, to be able to administer justice.”

KEY OBSERVATIONS:
- With little change in the balance of power in the state government, people become uninspired to participate
- The efforts to exclude African Americans from civic life are working. These include:
  - Felony disenfranchisement
  - Legislation on voting that disproportionately affects People of Color & poor people
  - Redistricting
- People of faith do not engage as a group on issues that effect the community
- People are discouraged from talking about race in politics & civic life because it's uncomfortable

CHANGE MIGHT LOOK LIKE:
- Pipeline projects for minority candidates for state & local offices
- Increased efforts for voter rights restoration for eligible citizens
- Coalitions of organizations can support & energize each other to avoid disengagement & burnout
- People of faith have an opportunity to lean on shared values to create dialogue across race, political, & zip code lines

LACK OF DIVERSITY OF CHOICE OR PERSPECTIVE IN THE STATE HOUSE

In the 150-seat Alabama State Legislature

79 state legislative seats will be uncontested/have only one party as an option on the ballot in 2022

With only 3 exceptions, Alabama state legislators of one party are all People of Color & state legislators of the other party are all white
Core Area 5: Opportunity for Civic Education & Engagement

ALABAMIANs SPEAK ABOUT THEIR EXPERIENCE OF CIVIC LIFE

“Many of us may not be aware of the public participation that we can have at the [School] Board meeting. We are not aware of the voices, we do have as people.”

KEY OBSERVATIONS:

- In historically disenfranchised communities, there is a lack of:
  - Accurate information about laws, lawmaking, & rulemaking
  - Civic education for kids & youth
  - Access to higher education & knowledge of the root causes of inequality

CHANGE MIGHT LOOK LIKE:

- Funding for civic engagement & candidate pipeline projects
- Faith-based or neighborhood-based mobilization for civic participation at the municipal & state level
- Laws & rules requiring community input or needs assessment prior to municipal or development projects

"We need to start grooming our communities earlier...If we grab that young person in junior high, high school that has an interest in economics or our social and civic arena and groom them going through to keep their names clear and clean.

Now we are able to put them in position, so that when it's time to run for office, or to get on school boards or whatever those positions are, they're ready. They're prepared because we started getting them ready."
Core Area 6: Leaders Are Not Accountable to All Alabamians

Alabamians speak about their experience of poverty

“*They’re not voting in our best interest. A lot of time they’re voting in the best interest of whoever gave them the money. And most of the time, 99% of the time, that is not in the best interest of minorities.*”

**Key Observations:**
- Decisions that affect communities of Color are made by people from outside the community
- The Alabama State Legislature & Constitution often obstruct municipal & community autonomy at the city & county level
- Politicians are accountable mostly to their political donors. This disproportionately affects People of Color because:
  - They lack generational wealth & are less likely to be political donors
  - Gerrymandering of districts & neighborhoods dilutes representation at the national, state & local level
  - Corporations often represent interests outside the state or community
  - Formerly incarcerated people face many barriers to participating in public life

**Change Might Look Like:**
- Founding of political action entities specifically run by and focused on People of Color
- Off-cycle lobbying by organizations focused on communities of Color to hold elected officials accountable
- Address gerrymandering on federal level by strengthening the Voting Rights Act
- Campaign finance reform

**Representation in Political Donation**

- **9.3%** Percent of political donors who are People of Color
- **32%** Percent of Alabamians who are People of Color
Faith in Action Alabama wants to thank three visionary clergy leaders whose collaboration made the work of the listening tour and the launch of the People’s Agenda possible: Bishop George Crenshaw of the Alabama-Florida Episcopal District of the AME Zion Church, Bishop Teresa Jefferson-Snorton of the 5th Episcopal District of the CME Church, and Bishop Harry Seawright of the Ninth Episcopal District of the AME Church. We thank Dr. Alexandra Pineros-Shields and the staff of Faith in Action National organizing network for their amazing teaching & support from start to finish. Most of all, we want to thank each of the participants of the listening sessions, and especially the steadfast Faith in Action Alabama leaders who organized and hosted virtual listening sessions throughout the state during October 2021 - February 2022:

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**Equality of Representation in Political Donation**
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