

Ending the “Crayfish Syndrome”

by Ralph R. Reiland

What are the chances for upward mobility for a group of poor, black church people 96 percent on welfare—in rural Mississippi, the poorest state in the nation? What’s their prospect for economic success if they don’t get a dime from the Rockefellers or the Ford Foundation? What if they get no new anti-poverty programs, nothing from the Fortune 500, and nothing from the rich and famous African-American celebrities and athletes?

That’s the story of the Greater Christ Temple in Meridian, Mississippi, and they ended up owning 1,000 head of cattle, two motels, a gas station, three restaurants, two chicken farms, 4,000 acres of farmland, the Green Acres housing development, two supermarkets, a hog operation with 300 brood sows, a construction company, a 55-acre Holyland commune, a school, and two meat-processing plants.

“We stopped the Crayfish Syndrome—it’s when you put all the crayfish in a pail, and one starts out and all the others reach up and pull him down,” says Bishop Luke Edwards, the pastor of the church. “We started by selling peanuts in the church, and buying wholesale food with the welfare money and selling it in a small grocery store

in the church. Now there’s no welfare or food stamps. We’re saving the federal government \$300,000.”

Green Acres is the congregation’s new 54-acre subdivision in Utaw, Alabama, with 132 homes being built for sale to the public. Heritage Construction, another business owned and operated by the congregation’s members, supplies the heavy equipment—18 wheelers, backhoes, dump trucks. The church also acquired two motels this year in Alabama, the Westin Inns in Utaw and Livingston, and started chicken farms in Decatur, Mississippi, and Gainesville, Alabama.

“We haven’t allowed anything to diminish our thinking or our efforts,” says Edwards. “Black people can be just as successful as anyone else, but our leaders have allowed us to be entrapped by government handouts. I lived in those neighborhoods. Welfare broke up the families, put the father out of the home, and let another man lay up there all he wanted. Handouts robbed our people, robbed them of self-esteem and self-respect.”

Edwards doesn’t preach the traditional bad news about a shrinking pie in racist America. “Racism is an excuse, a song. No, the playing field isn’t even, but we make it even. We proved we can make it in Mississippi and it’s the poorest state in the nation, and Alabama isn’t far behind. Think what we can do in New York or Chicago. Look at

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the Cubans out in the ocean coming here. It is the land of opportunity."

The bottom line for Edwards is to focus more on opportunities than on obstacles, and it's producing more success than failure. If any one of us were raising a handicapped child—and being black in America is still a handicap—the worst thing we could do is subject that child to a daily harangue about the things he could never accomplish, about what's impossible for him, about how life is unequal and unfair, about the stream of misunderstandings, obstacles, and prejudice that lie ahead for him. Few of us have levels of confidence and ambition tough enough not to be undone by that.

Edwards delivers the opposite message, and it's reinforced with no-nonsense schooling and a philosophy that doesn't sneer at hard work. On top of math and spelling, students at the congregation's Accelerated Christian Education school, K through 12, learn how to run a hog farm and operate restaurants. These ACE students regularly outscore the state schools, and the courts have 26 students enrolled this term for a straight dose of rehab. The school rules aren't complex: no smoking, no drinking, no drugs, no weapons, no three or four hours of MTV a day, and no dating. And it's lights out at 8:30 p.m. No midnight basketball.

To those watching from the ground, a bird

that's out of formation is usually seen as misguided, a joke. We don't think that the whole rest of the flock might be off track. To the Ivy Leaguers now occupying the White House, a black bishop who doesn't look toward D.C. for salvation is out of step, some outdated combination of Ronald Reagan, Clarence Thomas, and David Koresh. The only African-Americans who currently qualify for White House dinner invitations are those who believe in bigger government, higher taxes, and more urban pork.

What's working in Meridian, Mississippi, and Utaw, Alabama is less dependence on government and more respect for business. It is a prescription to reverse the deadly pathologies across America's inner cities. "There's no poor black neighborhoods," Edwards says. "Why would dope dealers be selling there? You've seen the money they're making. Those neighborhoods aren't poor, they're just misled and mismanaged. They can put money into opening stores, into creating jobs. They can do it." What's needed is more of the entrepreneurship of Little Havana and less Aid for Dependent Children, more of the small business capitalism of Koreatown, Little Italy, and Chinatown and fewer social engineers from HUD and EEOC. It's time to get the D.C. pipedreamers off center stage and unleash some black independence and entrepreneurship. □

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The Educational Octopus

by Mark J. Perry

Every politically controlled educational system will inculcate the doctrine of state supremacy sooner or later. . . . Once that doctrine has been accepted, it becomes an almost superhuman task to break the stranglehold of the political power over the life of the citizen. It has had his body, property and mind in its clutches from infancy. An octopus would sooner release its prey.

A tax-supported, compulsory educational system is the complete model of the totalitarian state.

—ISABEL PATERSON, *The God of the Machine* (1943)

What would you conclude about the quality of product or service X under the following circumstances?

1. The employees of Airline X and their families are offered free airline tickets as an employee benefit. The employees refuse to travel with their families on Airline X and instead pay full fare on Airline Y when flying.

2. The employees of Automaker X are offered a company car at a substantial discount and they instead buy a car at full price from Automaker Y.

3. Employees at Health Clinic X and their families are offered medical care at no additional cost as a benefit and yet most employees of Clinic X pay out-of-pocket for medical services at Clinic Y.

In each case, the employees' willingness to pay full price for a competitor's product or service and forgo their employer's product or service at a reduced price (or no cost) makes a strong statement about the low quality of X. What makes the inferior quality of X even more obvious is that the employees at Firm X, since they work in the

industry, would have better information about product (service) X and product (service) Y than the average person.

What then should we conclude about the quality of public education in the United States given the following facts?

- Public school teachers send their own children to private schools at a rate more than twice the national average—22 percent of public educators' children are in private schools compared to the national average of 10 percent.

- In large cities across the United States, more than a quarter of public school teachers' children are attending private schools—50 percent in Milwaukee, 46 percent in Chicago, 44 percent in New Orleans, 36 percent in Memphis, and 30 percent in Baltimore and San Francisco.

- In New York City, as of 1988, no member of the Board of Education and no citywide elected official had children enrolled in a public school.

Public school teachers are giving public education a failing grade by their disproportionate patronization of private education when it comes to the education of their own children. The sharp decline in SAT scores over the last 30 years confirms that the

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