Demetrius Semien, Sociology Professor at Spring Hill College, is the newest Associate of JSRI. In this article he describes the work of ARISE, a citizens’ advocacy group in Alabama of which JSRI is a member, now represented by Dr. Semien.

I found myself eager with anticipation to fulfill my first official assignment for JSRI. I was to attend the ARISE statewide convention on September 10th. I found out that the Arise Citizens’ Policy Project (AACP), founded in 1994, is a statewide nonprofit, nonpartisan coalition of 150 congregations and community groups. ARISE engages in policy analysis, organizes in low-income communities to hear the voice of the people, and teaches citizens how to be active participants in advocating for better laws and policies to support low-income communities in Alabama. JSRI requested I attend their annual legislative meeting in Montgomery to gain an understanding of their agenda for 2017. I also represented and voted on behalf of JSRI in terms of offering our input in the direction of where ARISE should put its energies and focus for the upcoming year. Every year ARISE works on two permanent issues of tax reform and adequate state budgets. At the state convention, members choose five other policy issues to go along with them.

I carpooled with some other people coming from Mobile. We arrived at the Aldersgate United Methodist Church in Montgomery. It was located in a remote part of town. The building we were in was a large cafeteria-style auditorium with long tables and chairs for participants. There was a stage with a podium in the front of the room where people presented on the main issues we discussed and voted on as possible items for ARISE’s legislative agenda for the year. In the back was a kitchen where we received lunches later that day.

At the convention, approximately 250 people from Huntsville, Birmingham, Montgomery, Mobile, and other parts of Alabama were in attendance and proud to be working on issues that would improve the lives of poor people in the state. The energy and excitement could be felt as allies from different cities met each other for the first time or reconnected. Everyone had their own particular issues of concern and discussed them with each other. Speakers presented on each issue so people could be informed. It was a testament to the power of democracy and the process of consensus.
After all of the presentations, we stood in lines according to our last names where we received a specific number of votes, according to our standing in ARISE. I received seven votes as the representative of JSRI. On the far right wall were posters with all of the issues we were to vote on. I was told I could use all seven votes for one issue or for seven issues or in any other combination, as I wished. I cast my votes for the key issues I thought we should work on—all but one of the ones I thought we should focus on were chosen. I was disappointed that voter restoration issues, which had been on their previous agenda, was not one of the group’s selected items. However, I learned later on that many people figured that issue would be addressed by a number of people this year since it was an election year. This made sense to me and encouraged me that the other members of ARISE were also concerned about voting rights for people who had been incarcerated.

This year a new precedent was set. Instead of adding five items to the agenda as usual, the vote for the final slot on our agenda was a tie with six items being chosen. So, ARISE members decided to work on eight issues in 2017. The following are the 2017 priority issues selected:

- Tax reform, including un-taxing groceries and closing corporate income tax loopholes;
- Adequate funding for vital services like education, health care and child care, including Medicaid expansion and approval of new tax revenue for General Fund services;
- Creation of a state minimum wage to help families make ends meet;
- Interest rate caps for payday loans and auto title loans in Alabama;
- “Ban the box” legislation to remove the criminal history checkbox from job applications so employers can consider an applicant’s qualifications first before a background check;
- State funding for public transportation in rural, urban, and suburban areas;
- Reforms of Alabama’s death penalty system, including more transparency and ending the practice of allowing judges to impose capital punishment despite a jury recommendation against it; and
- Dedicated state revenue for the Alabama Housing Trust Fund to help expand housing opportunities for low-income Alabamians.

I have to admit I was impressed at the fact there were so many people willing to show up and focus on issues related to the poor in Alabama. Unfortunately, I also have to confess that as a new person in the state, a person who had once been active in the progressive political scene in the Oakland-Berkeley area of California, I had a few misconceptions of Alabama. For the past two years, I have lived in Mobile. I witnessed the fact that there is a clear race and class divide in the city. However, I also aligned myself with community members, law enforcement agencies, and religious leaders who are clearly involved in changing policies and practices to improve our Gulf Coast city. I have come to love my city! I call it, and Spring Hill College, my Place in the Sun. The place where I can help make a difference.

Apparently, I held some prejudices about what the rest of this “very red state” was like. Sure, I had visited Selma and the King memorials in Montgomery and saw where civil rights struggles had taken place. That was, in my mind, part of the past history of Alabama and not its present times. My day at the ARISE convention helped me see my stereotypes were wrong. It is a state filled with many progressives who are working hard to make much needed changes. Arise serves as an oasis of hope and optimism filled with visionaries working hard to transform the state and make it a better place to live for everyone, including low-income communities.