

Bernie Sanders visits prominent black church before Super Tuesday

by [Yonat Shimron](#) in the [March 25, 2020](#) issue



Sen. Bernie Sanders speaks at a Poor People's Campaign event in Washington, D.C., on June 17, 2019. He participated in a forum hosted by William Barber II at Greenleaf Christian Church, in Goldsboro, North Carolina, that spotlighted poverty, last month. (RNS/Jack Jenkins)

In a visit to one of North Carolina's most prominent African American churches, Sen. Bernie Sanders scored big points talking about poverty in the United States.

The front-runner for the Democratic presidential nomination spoke on February 26 with William J. Barber II at Greenleaf Christian Church, where Barber is senior pastor. The talk came ahead of Super Tuesday, when a significant segment of black voters cast their votes—including in North Carolina, where African Americans make up 22 percent of the state's residents.

Asked by Barber to introduce himself, Sanders spoke of his modest roots as the son of a poor Polish immigrant growing up in a rent-controlled apartment in Brooklyn.

He spoke of how important it is for poor people to speak up about their lack of health care or retirement savings.

He spoke of the stress that poor people experience as a result of not being able to provide for their families and how that stress can impact their health.

And he spoke about the need to raise the minimum wage, allow workers to unionize, and ensure that women are paid the same wages as men.

“What we have got to do is not apologize for the speed in which we want to transform this country,” Sanders said.

But on the critical issue of race, Sanders spoke more generally, without addressing historic inequities.

Asked by Barber how Sanders would address systemic racism, especially as it relates to voter suppression and racialized gerrymandering, Sanders didn’t offer solutions to target racial injustices.

“The bottom line is, if you are 18 years of age and a citizen of the United States of America, you have a right to vote,” Sanders said.

Barber went on to press Sanders. Barber talked about the 2013 Supreme Court ruling that gutted a key provision of the Voting Rights Act, as well as various North Carolina legislative efforts to require voter ID, limit early voting, and gerrymander legislative districts—all efforts that courts have found were intended to disempower African Americans and maximize Republicans’ advantage.

Sanders repeated a pledge to expand the vote. And he won applause for saying he would support making Election Day a federal holiday.

Sanders is the third presidential hopeful to speak at Barber’s church this election cycle as part of a series of events organized by the Poor People’s Campaign, a national movement to lift up issues affecting the poor, which Barber cochairs. Former South Bend mayor Pete Buttigieg and California activist billionaire Tom Steyer have previously visited the church. (Both have since dropped out of the race.)

The sanctuary and several overflow rooms were packed with activists from the Poor People's Campaign, Sanders supporters, and Democrats eager to get a glimpse of the front-runner ahead of the March 3 Super Tuesday vote. Not all were persuaded by Sanders.

"I'm not sure he has a full appreciation for systematic racism," said Anne Baird Wells, a retired NAACP volunteer who lives in Moore County near the town of Pinehurst. "You have to spend enough time with people who have experienced it to fully grasp it. I didn't get the sense he truly grasped it."

Many supporters with "Bernie" T-shirts and buttons attended the conversation at Barber's church and thought he spoke clearly and effectively.

Among them was Keith Cooper of Greenville, North Carolina, president of the Eastern North Carolina Regional Association of Black Social Workers.

"I believe in his very progressive agenda," said Cooper. "That progressive agenda is very reminiscent of the New Deal agenda of Franklin Roosevelt of the 1930s. Sanders reminds me a lot of that."

The next day, Sanders held a rally at Winston-Salem State University, a historically black university in the Piedmont region of North Carolina, before heading back down to South Carolina. —Religion News Service