Crossing Bridges: Reflection on the 50th Anniversary of the Selma to Montgomery March

Guide for Youth Groups

As the 50th anniversary of Bloody Sunday, March 7, approaches, we reflect on the historical aspects of that time and examine where we are today as a nation and global community. The recent release of the movie, “Selma,” has aided in jumpstarting these conversations; however, follow-up processing after viewing the movie is extremely important.

Before taking your youth to see “Selma,” take some time to talk with your group about what they already know about the movie and the historical events in Selma in 1965. After allowing them time to share, review the historical facts outlined below to help explain the significance of the march from Selma to Montgomery. Explain to your group that though the movie is based on historical facts, it is not intended to be a documentary of that time period.

Timeline:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tr>
<td>Feb. 3, 1870</td>
<td>15th Amendment of the Constitution ratified by Congress, granting black men the right to vote</td>
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<td>May 17, 1954</td>
<td>Brown versus the Board of Education</td>
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<td>April 9, 1947</td>
<td>Journey of Reconciliation</td>
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<td>May 4, 1961</td>
<td>“Freedom Riders” leave Washington, DC, en route to New Orleans</td>
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<td>Aug. 28, 1963</td>
<td>March on Washington; Dr. Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream,” speech</td>
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<td>July 2, 1964</td>
<td>Civil Rights Act</td>
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<td>March 1965</td>
<td>Selma to Montgomery March</td>
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<td>Aug. 6 1965</td>
<td>The Voting Rights Act</td>
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After viewing the movie, spend some time with your group discussing and processing the film. Below are some ideas to stimulate your thinking.

Give them a chance to ask any questions they might have.
Consider asking them some questions such as these:

- What are some of your feelings after viewing this movie? For example, what are your feelings about citizens of Selma in 1965? What are your feelings about Martin Luther King, Jr., and other African-American leaders? What are your feelings about the violence between these groups? What else brought out strong reactions from you while watching the movie?

- Why did Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and the thousands of others march across the Edmund Pettus Bridge? Why did the government of Alabama and so many citizens of Selma oppose this march?

- Ask the group if they can identify any acts of nonviolent resistance to racial oppression from their area. Here in North Carolina most people have heard about the Greensboro Sit-ins at the Woolworth’s. There are, however, numerous accounts of other significant civil rights events that occurred in North Carolina, such as Durham sit-ins at Royal Ice Cream and Howard Johnson, the sit-ins in Charlotte, the formation of SNCC, "Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee", in Raleigh, as well as marches in our own time against inequality in education, health care, voting rights, and perceived racial profiling of law enforcement.

Depending on the size and dynamics of your group, you may want to divide the youth into small groups to respond to questions such as these:

- Ask the group if they have ever had an experienced where they didn't have a vote or a voice on decisions that were important in their lives. If so, how did this feel? How did they deal with these situations?

- In the movie, after King marches on Selma’s courthouse and is arrested and jailed along with other marchers, King shares with a friend how tired he is. He wonders whether it’s all worth it for black people to truly gain their right to vote if so many of them remain impoverished and illiterate. His friend quotes to him Matthew 6:26-27:

  “Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?”
● What do you think this scripture means and why might his friend have quoted this to him at this time? What does this scripture say to you?

● Ask the youth to take a few minutes to think about a time when they feel they have been treated unfairly, a time when they felt powerless.

● Thousands of individuals risked their lives in participating in this march. They marched in silence but their message was heard. For what might you be willing to march today?

● Often with major historical movements we focus our attention on one heroic character. In this case it is Martin Luther King Jr. Can you think of other people/characters who were behind the scenes including women who were often under-recognized in this era of Civil Rights history? In what large and small ways did people support this act of civic bravery? Can you think of subtle or quiet ways that you can support positive changes in the world around you?

● Hand out index cards or paper and pens and ask each person to take a few minutes to ponder this question. Invite them to write a short prayer, one line or so, that will be used for the closing prayer time.

● Ask for three volunteers to read the prayers below; between each of these prayers, invite two to three youth to share the prayers they wrote.

Prayer for Peace
Eternal God, in whose perfect kingdom no sword is drawn but the sword of righteousness, no strength known but the strength of love: So mightily spread abroad your Spirit, that all peoples may be gathered under the banner of the Prince of Peace, as children of one Father; to whom be dominion and glory, now and for ever. Amen.

For our Enemies
O God, the Father of all, whose Son commanded us to love our enemies: Lead them and us from prejudice to truth: deliver them and us from hatred, cruelty, and revenge; and in your good time enable us all to stand reconciled before you, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

For Social Justice
Grant, O God, that your holy and life-giving Spirit may so move every human heart [and especially the hearts of the people of this land], that barriers which divide us may
crumble, suspicions disappear, and hatreds cease; that our divisions being healed, we may live in justice and peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Timeline Details and Resources

The 15th Amendment to the Constitution granted African American men the right to vote by declaring that the "right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude." Although ratified on February 3, 1870, the promise of the 15th Amendment would not be fully realized for almost a century. Through the use of poll taxes, literacy tests and other means, Southern states were able to effectively disenfranchise African Americans. It would take the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 before the majority of African Americans in the South were registered to vote.

Brown v. Board of Education (1954), now acknowledged as one of the greatest Supreme Court decisions of the 20th century, unanimously held that the racial segregation of children in public schools violated the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. Although the decision did not succeed in fully desegregating public education in the United States, it put the Constitution on the side of racial equality and galvanized the nascent civil rights movement into a full revolution.

The Journey of Reconciliation of 1947, was an organized effect of the Congress on Racial Equality to send eight white and eight black men into the Deep South to test the Supreme Court ruling that declared segregation in interstate travel unconstitutional. The Journey of Reconciliation was to be a two-week pilgrimage through Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee and Kentucky.

On May 4, 1961, a group of 13 African-American and white civil rights activists launched the Freedom Rides, a series of bus trips through the American South to protest segregation in interstate bus terminals.

PBS Special on the Freedom Riders (with resources for teachers)

Freedom Rides in Mississippi 50th Anniversary (with lesson plans for teachers)

The 1963 March on Washington was one of the largest political rallies for human rights in United States history\(^3\) and called for civil and economic rights for African Americans. It took place in Washington, D.C.. Thousands of Americans headed to
Washington on Tuesday August 27, 1963. On Wednesday, August 28, 1963. Martin Luther King, Jr., standing in front of the Lincoln Memorial, delivered his historic "I Have a Dream" speech in which he called for an end to racism.

Time Magazine’s “The March on Washington: Power to the People

CNN: March on Washington Fast Facts

The Civil Rights Act of 1964, enacted July 2, 1964, is a landmark piece of civil rights legislation in the United States that outlawed discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin. It ended unequal application of voter registration requirements and racial segregation in schools, at the workplace and by facilities that served the general public (known as "public accommodations").

History.com

The Selma to Montgomery March: The three Selma to Montgomery marches in 1965 were part of the Selma Voting Rights Movement and led to the passage that year of the Voting Rights Act, a landmark federal achievement of the 1960s American Civil Rights Movement. Activists publicized the three protest marches to walk the 54-mile highway from Selma to the Alabama state capital of Montgomery as showing the desire of black American citizens to exercise their constitutional right to vote, in defiance of segregationist repression.

History.com: Selma to Montgomery March

Teaching Tolerance: Bridge to the Ballot

National Geographic: Education The Selma-to-Montgomery Marches: How a 54-mile walk helped a journey for civil rights

National Park Service: Selma to Montgomery

'Selma' and the Long Arc of Justice

Selma Guide

The Selma Voting Rights Struggle: 15 Key Points from Bottom-Up History and Why It Matters Today
The Voting Rights Act of 1965 is a landmark piece of federal legislation in the United States that prohibits racial discrimination in voting. It was signed into law by President Lyndon B. Johnson during the height of the American Civil Rights Movement on August 6, 1965, and Congress later amended the Act five times to expand its protections. Designed to enforce the voting rights guaranteed by the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments to the United States Constitution, the Act allowed for a mass enfranchisement of racial minorities throughout the country, especially in the South. According to the U.S. Department of Justice, the Act is considered to be the most effective piece of civil rights legislation ever enacted in the country.

History.com Voting Rights Act

Why the Selma campaign was a success

Is Selma's fight for voting rights over?

5 Things You Should Know About Selma