

Exploring Justice on the Road An Intergenerational Civil Rights Bus Tour

“Let us all hope that the dark clouds of racial prejudice will soon pass away and the deep fog of misunderstanding will be lifted from our fear-drenched communities, and in some not too distant tomorrow the radiant stars of love and brotherhood will shine over our great nation with all their scintillating beauty.”

—Martin Luther King Jr., Letter from the Birmingham Jail

“There is a strength, a power even, in understanding brokenness, because embracing our brokenness creates a need and desire for mercy, and perhaps a corresponding need to show mercy. When you experience mercy, you learn things that are hard to learn otherwise. You see things you can’t otherwise see; you hear things you can’t otherwise hear. You begin to recognize the humanity that resides in each of us.”

—Bryan Stevenson, *Just Mercy*

The Seeds of Interest

It began with a book study during Lent. It turned into a transformational three-day, intergenerational trip.

Several weeks before Lent began, our spiritual formation committee choose Bryan Stevenson’s compelling novel, *Just Mercy*, as our Lenten Book Study. We invited high school youth and adults to participate in the reading and following discussions. As you might expect, during the spring of an academic year, no youth took us up on the offer to participate. But, during the second discussion session, full of adults of varying ages, an idea began to surface of ways to capture a better understanding of the roots of so much racial turmoil and injustice in our country. Stevenson’s book and work with the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI) called us to review key events during the civil rights movement and the number of changes in our country that *had* happened since that period in our nation’s history. It also highlighted the number of things that had fallen far short of change or justice. A young woman in the group shared the experience of taking students at the high school where she worked to several important sites from the Civil Rights era. By the end of our discussion, the group was contemplating how they might do a similar tour.

The following Sunday at youth group I mentioned the possibility of going on a civil rights bus tour with older members of the congregation. I explained that it would

mean reading the book *Just Mercy* and spending time in discussion with the adults who were interested in going. I was surprised at the excitement of the group. They wanted to do it. And they were excited to hear from these adults who they knew but didn't ever really talk to about their experiences during those years of turmoil that lead to the events of the civil rights movement and also share with them their own experiences of racial tension in their high schools.

The Planning

The time being ripe for this experience seemed to be confirmed by the announcement by the EJI that their Legacy Museum and National Memorial for Peace and Justice (sometimes called The Lynching Memorial) had just opened in Montgomery, Alabama. Those were going to be important locations to include on our trip, and I could build an itinerary with that starting point.

Step 1: I gathered a core group of youth and some of the key adults who had expressed interest, and we pinned down the dates that worked for them. This way I had a committed group of folks of varying ages to start the process.

Step 2: I decided where we would go based on distance/travel time, events that occurred there, logic of sequence. Montgomery wasn't too far away, so we could leave in the morning and arrive in time to visit both the Memorial and the Legacy Museum before they closed. These two sites also gave us good background for the rest of the trip.

Birmingham wasn't too far from Montgomery, so we could visit the EJI offices in Montgomery in the morning and then travel to Birmingham to tour 16th Street Baptist Church and the Civil Rights Institute before they closed.

When first planning, we wanted to visit Selma and Memphis. In reality, Memphis was just a little too far away for this trip. So, we decided to close our trip in Selma at the Voting Rights Museum and then walk across the Edmund Pettis Bridge.

Step 3: I decided on the key number of participants to go. I had my core group. I had to decide how many more folks would enable debriefing time to not become unwieldy. I decided that we could accommodate about twenty-five people and still all have one conversation as well as move about a city easily.

Step 4: I located a charter bus company and local hotels in Montgomery and Birmingham that were affordable and available. Since we were using a bus, I wanted both hotels to be downtown near restaurants and activities so that trip participants could walk to their own dinner plans in a price range with which they were comfortable. Bringing youth along meant that I wanted there to be some cheaper

options for dinners. Both the hotels that we used were very helpful when booking rooms to also offer options for affordable dining nearby.

Step 5: I advertised to the congregation! Knowing that youth and college students are slower about registering for trips or knowing their summer schedules, I held out five spots for late youth registrations. I used our weekly newsletter, email blasts, and minutes for missions on Sunday mornings to invite people on the trip. I also sent invitations to all those who I knew had read the book for the book study and to parents of youth and youth and college students who were away at school. I had the core group of youth also invite folks with whom they were interested in having conversations.

Step 6: I determined the cost. I knew I couldn't charge too much or youth and college students would be unable to go. I ended up charging people \$160.00, which included the charter bus, two nights of double or triple hotel lodging with breakfasts included at the hotel, and some of their museum entry fees. Participants were asked to bring a bag lunch for the first day, since it would be easier to eat on the bus than it would be to find a fast-food place in time for our appointed arrival time at the Memorial. (Note: you must choose entrance times when purchasing tickets for the Memorial and Legacy Museum.) Dinners and other lunches were not included in the trip fee. In the end, I asked our Outreach Fund Trustees for the funds to pay for the charter bus, the bus driver's lodging, and some entrance fees.

Step 7: I registered folks, sent packing list reminders (including pack a light jacket because it will be cold in museums and bring your lunch and drinks with screw-on tops for the bus), and let the congregation know who was going! I then finished getting the exact number of entrance tickets for museums.

The Trip

We looked a bit motley getting on the bus at 7:15 a.m. We were two middle school, five high school, and one college student (OK, I had wished for several more in the young category, but . . . the ones who went were wonderful!), five folks in their 80s, and the rest of us inbetween. We were groggy but excited.

There was nothing about the trip that I would have changed—except to have more people experience it!! Each place we went offered hospitality, information, and a deeper understanding into the struggle for justice that has been going on in our country for so long. Debriefing time in the evening offered insights from participants that turned into long, meaningful conversations. As we sat in a circle in a hotel side lobby area in Birmingham and prepared to head to Selma the next morning, one of our octogenarians recalled his time as a young student at Harvard in Massachusetts. He was friendly with another gentleman (also now a member of our congregation)

who was there serving a Congregational Church as a pastor. He told of how he got a call from him saying, “Dr. King has sent out a call for people of faith to come help. Pack. I think you and I should head to Selma.” And they did. They arrived the week after James Reeb, also from the Boston area, was killed by local segregationists. They stayed at Brown Chapel, ate meals there, went to services, slept, did walks in the neighborhood to organize folks, and basically helped in any way they could. He talked about his fear of what might happen. He talked about the camaraderie with others, from Selma and from around the country, who were also there working for voting rights and racial equality. He talked about how it was faith that brought them there and faith that kept them going. Everyone had questions, and then others shared stories of growing up in segregated communities and recalled injustices or ways that people tried to change the status quo. The youth talked about situations they saw in their schools and with their peers that seemed no better than some of the stories of segregation. The conversation changed to faith and how we are called by Christ to stand with and for those in our communities who are at the margins. What was Christ calling each of them to stand up for? Or who should they stand alongside?

The next day we arrived in Selma and walked across the Edmund Pettis Bridge as a group, united in faith, varied in age, and closer to understanding the roots of injustice that we continued to live with. What we struggled with as a group and as individuals was how each of us was called to create change in our community.

Debriefing

Our debriefing was scheduled to happen in the evenings, around 7:30 p.m. We met in a circle in some part of the hotel lobby. We prayed together and then shared our thoughts from the day. But sometimes debriefing happened on the bus too.

The kinds of questions we asked to process our experiences were:

- What is one word that would summarize the day for you?
- What is something you enjoyed today?
- What is something that challenged you? What is something that gave you hope?
- What was a meaningful message that you heard?
- What is something you want to share with someone not on this trip?
- Where did you see things in the museum as old news—hard to imagine it was ever so? Where were you surprised that things are still relevant today or haven’t changed much?
- What was a Scripture verse that came to mind as you went through your day?
- How did faith impact the struggles we learned about today? How did faith change the people we learned about today? How does your faith influence what you are seeing and experiencing today?
- What is something you think your faith calls you to fight for?
- How might God be calling you to serve in your community?

Final Itinerary

Day 1:

7 a.m.—Arrive at church to load the bus. Pack a lunch!

7:30—Pray and leave for Montgomery, Alabama

Noon-ish—arrive at Memorial

1:15 p.m.—head to the Legacy Museum (we have entrance tickets for 1:30 p.m. CT)

4:30-ish—Check in at Hotel—Hampton Inn by Hilton Downtown Montgomery
(100 Commerce St., Montgomery)

Dinner on your own

Day 2:

Eat Breakfast at the hotel

9:00 a.m.—Load the bus and then walk to Equal Justice Initiative Office

9:30 a.m.—Hear presentation at EJI offices

10:00—Head to Birmingham

Stop for lunch on way into town

1:00—Arrive and tour 16th Street Baptist Church (we have a tour scheduled)

2:00-ish—head to Civil Rights Institute

4:30-ish—Check in at Hotel—Home2Suites, Downtown Birmingham

Dinner on your own

Day 3:

Eat Breakfast at the hotel

9:00 a.m.—Load the bus and head to Selma

Stop for lunch on way into town.

Stop at Brown Chapel for photos and monuments

12:30-ish—Arrive at the Voting Rights Museum

Walk across the Edmund Pettus Bridge

Dinner on the road

Not Able to Actually “Get on the Bus” and Do a Tour?

There are plenty of ways you and your youth or an intergenerational group can experience a civil rights tour without leaving your hometown. Here are a few suggestions:

1. **Do a virtual tour:** plan to watch several different movies that take place during the civil rights era. Invite members of your congregation to come watch also. Have questions about the movie ready to discuss following the showing. Get folks into smaller groups if your group is large. Be sure that there is an adult in each group. Movies you might watch include: *42* (2013), *Selma* (2014), *The Butler* (2013), *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1961), *The Long Walk Home* (1990), or *The Help* (2011). You could also watch some of the videos available from the Equal Justice Initiative about Montgomery as well as the relationship between the lack of opportunities for African Americans in the 1940–1970 and the current pipeline to prison.
2. **Introduce this movie series with some background information about the era that would begin to put this time into perspective:** for youth who may not know anything about it. You might find information to share, such as when black people were given the right to vote, when schools were mandated to be integrated and when they actually were, when colleges were integrated, when stores were mandated to sell lunch to anyone who came in and could pay. . . . things that may not occur to youth who are used to living in a world where they don't necessarily see institutionalized racism (though they see and might experience prejudice).
3. **Organize a movie discussion series and invite some local people to come talk about their experiences growing up during a segregated time.** Or there may be some people in your community who marched or worked for justice in some way during that time who could come share their experiences with your group.
4. **Discuss your town's (or somewhere nearby) history during the 1950–1970s?** Are there places you might visit that were important to your town integrating schools and stores and neighborhoods? If so, you can get a local historian or longtime resident to drive with you and your youth on a tour of the area, talking about changes that were made to include people of all racial ethnic backgrounds. Or there may be some sites in your town that are more difficult to visit but are still important to include, such as where a lynching occurred, the side of town that was designated for black people to live in, the site of a cross burning, or other such events that often live in a community's collective memory but aren't always acknowledged. If you visit a neighborhood that may have been segregated at one point, have students think about the bus boycotts. You might try walking from where African Americans would possibly have worked to that neighborhood where they may have lived and see how long it would have taken.

5. **Discuss the topic in a book club or movie outing.** Have a group that is still interested in the relationship between things fought for in the civil rights era and the reality of injustices still happening today? Do a book group using the novel *Dear Martin*, by Nic Stone, or the novel *The Hate U Give*, by Angie Thomas. *The Hate U Give* is coming out as a movie soon. You might plan to read the book and discuss it before going to the movie together.