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Peace and Justice

## **Michelle Walker and Fletcher Lowe column: A pilgrimage not to be forgotten**

By Michelle Walker and Fletcher Lowe  
Mar 15, 2020



A statue depicting chained people was on display at the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, a memorial honoring thousands of people killed in lynchings, in Montgomery, Ala. The memorial aims to teach about America's past in hope of promoting understanding and healing.

The Associated Press

By Michelle Walker and Fletcher Lowe

“It could have been one of my grandfathers,” Valena Dixon emotionally reflected on her experience at the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Ala.

Dixon was one of the 33 African American and white members of St. Paul’s Episcopal Church in Richmond, who joined in a four-day pilgrimage to Montgomery and Selma, Ala., this past October.

The memorial is one of two in Montgomery conceived and implemented by Bryan Stevenson. He was scheduled to be the Richmond Forum speaker on March 21, but the event was postponed. Suspended from its expansive ceiling are more than 800 columns, each one representing a U.S. county, with the names and dates engraved of victims who were lynched there (for which there is documentation) — more than 4,000 names in total. To move through this six-acre elevated site — pausing to read the names of men, women and children in county after county who “were hanged and beaten, shot, drowned and burned, tortured, tormented and terrorized, abandoned by the rule of law” — confronted us with the horror of this dark period in our national life.

Through this memorial, Stevenson has not only brought focus to this atrocity, but has concretely memorialized the victims by placing their names in honor. For the several thousand victims whose names might never be known, there is a water wall for personal reflection. Needless to say, this experience of the memorial was difficult, challenging and confronting, calling for remembrance, repentance and reconciliation.

The other Stevenson initiative in Montgomery is the Legacy Museum. Where the memorial is silent, the legacy is noisy. As we pilgrims moved through it, we traced the African American experience from 1619 to the present through a lively, interactive and confrontative dynamic. With the voices of segregationists like George Wallace, of civil rights leaders like Martin Luther King Jr. and of wrongly incarcerated black men, this museum brought to us stark light to the darkness of slavery and its aftermath. Visual reminders also confronted us, including the presence of row after row of jars filled with dirt from known lynching sites and a floor-to-ceiling, 20-foot-wide panel with the signs of Jim Crow segregation. To mention four of more than a hundred: Whites only, maids in uniforms allowed; No Negroes or Apes Allowed in the Building; Waiting Room for Whites only; Negroes must sit from the rear of the bus. More calls for remembrance, repentance and reconciliation.

As pilgrims in Montgomery, we also spent reflective time at the Rosa Parks Museum that traced the 384-day bus boycott (December 1955 to December 1956) that began the civil rights movement, when Parks refused to move to the rear of the bus. Close by and just down the street from the state Capitol is the Dexter Avenue King Memorial Baptist Church, where an enthusiastic guide led us in story and song as she shared MLK's one and only pastorate and his beginnings as the leader of the civil rights movement.

Our pilgrimage ended in Selma on a rainy day as we retraced the courageous steps of those who felt the clubs and horses and police on "Bloody Sunday" (March 7, 1965) at the Edmund Pettus Bridge that set off the voting rights movement.

A couple of personal reflections:

**Michelle Walker:** The Pettus Bridge stands for me as a symbol of the courage of the generation just before mine. I was 10 years old during the summer of the marches, blithely unaware of what people only five or six years older than I were doing to change the world. I was unaware that they were throwing their young bodies at dogs and fire hoses and spit so the school I was attending would be less separate and more equal.

And they did those things on this bridge. Led by Hosea Williams, John Lewis, Amelia Boynton and Martin Luther King Jr., they threw themselves at the injustice of our lives. It took three tries to cross that bridge and make it to Montgomery, and people died in the attempt. So I wanted very much to stand on that bridge, to honor their bravery — bravery I am not sure I could ever emulate.

**Fletcher Lowe:** This life-changing pilgrimage brought into clear focus my life as a white Southern teenager in the late 1940s and early 1950s. I was confronted by the panel of segregationist signs in the Legacy Museum that were so visible especially in my life in Greenville, S.C. For the first four years of my life, I had an African American lady care for me. By the very way she nurtured me, Rachel sowed a seed of social justice in my heart and soul. Later on in my youth, I figured that if the colored fountain was good enough for Rachel, it was good enough for me, and if the back of the bus was good enough for Rachel, it was good enough for me. It was hard for me to understand why there was a separate toilet in our home for “the help” and why my parents had Marie, the maid, sit in the back of the car when they drove her home. The St. Paul’s pilgrimage brought all of that back to my consciousness with its attendant call for remembrance, repentance and reconciliation.

For those days of our pilgrimage, we give thanks to God for the sharing of emotions and experiences, for the challenges and the calling, which emerged as we are more deeply committed to remembrance, repentance and reconciliation within ourselves, our church community and our world. A pilgrimage not to be forgotten.

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