March 7, 2015 marked the 50th anniversary of the day 600 civil rights workers gathered at the Brown Chapel AME Church in Selma, Alabama to begin a 54-mile walk to the state capital in Montgomery. Inquiries into the suspicious officer-involved death of their friend and colleague in Marion, Deacon Jimmy Lee Jackson, led to stonewalling and dead ends. Black Americans were still disenfranchised and denied the right to vote through all manner of tactics from random and arbitrary testing to threats and intimidation. The people wanted answers.

As we reflect on the 50th anniversary of Bloody Sunday and the historic Voting Rights Act it prompted later that year, we know that there is still work to do. Today every 28 hours an unarmed black American is killed by law enforcement. And following the 2013 nullification of the 1965 Voting Rights Act many states and municipalities are seeking to re-draw districts and rescind voter protections to suppress votes by persons of color. The fight for freedom has yet to be won.

Thank you to our Conference Partners:

- 31 Lengths Agency
- The Brown Endowment
- Center for the Study of Race, Politics, & Culture at the University of Chicago
- Chicago ROAR
- Chicago Sunday Evening Club
- Columbia Links
- Community Renewal Society
- Greater Chicago Broadcast Ministries
- Illinois Humanities Council
- The Ink Factory
- Jasiri X
- Mikva Challenge
- Pozen Family Center for Human Rights at University of Chicago
- Office of Civic Engagement, University of Chicago
- Spiritual Life Office, Rockefeller Memorial Chapel, University of Chicago
- University Community Service Center, University of Chicago

The following students and alumni bravely stood up for justice in Selma 50 years ago. We salute them and are thankful for their example.

- Mr. David M. Ackerman (CTS 1965-68)
- Mrs. Satoko I. Ackerman (M.A. 1965)
- The Rev. John B. Bell III (B.D. 1966)
- The Rev. James W. Burford (B.D. 1968)
- Ms. Virginia R. Griffith (B.D. 1967)
- Dr. James W. Ingersoll (B.D. 1967)
- The Rev. Gary F. Massoni (MDiv. 1971)
- The Rev. Roswell C. Blount (B.D. 1967)
- Mr. James A Aull (B.D. 1965)
- Mr. Alfred R. Benton (B.D. 1970)
- The Rev. Dr. William M. Briggs (B.D. 1965)
- Mr. Bruce D. Christie (B.D. 1965)
- Mr. Jenoye R. Cole (B.D. 1965)
- The Rev. Dr. Robert G. Schwartz (B.D. 1965)
- Mr. Tommy L. Timm (B.D. 1969)
- Mr. David H. Wallace (CTS Student, 1963-66)
- Dr. Newton L. Wesley (DMin. 1982)
- The Rev. David E. Williams (B.D. 1967)
- Mr. Barry Morris (B.D. 1979)
- Mr. James W. Paton (B.D. 1967)
- Mr. Tommy L. Timm (M.Div. 1971; B.D. 1969)
- Mr. David M. Wallace (CTS Student, 1963-66)
- The Rev. Dr. William M. Briggs (B.D. 1965)
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- Mr. Jenoye R. Cole (B.D. 1965)
- The Rev. Dr. Robert G. Schwartz (B.D. 1965)
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- Dr. Newton L. Wesley (DMin. 1982)
- The Rev. David E. Williams (B.D. 1967)

In the build-up to the event, that would soon become known as Bloody Sunday, people around the country heeded the call of The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. to be “people of goodwill” and join protesters in Selma to fight for justice. Among those who were so moved included 27 CTS students.

This past March, CTS honored this legacy in the midst of eerily familiar events. CTS President the Rev. Alice Hunt, Ph.D., Rabbi Rachel Mikva, Ph.D., and alumnus the Rev. Jesse Jackson, Sr. among others traveled to Alabama to mark the 50th anniversary of the Selma marches just as names like Freddie Gray, Michael Brown, Jr., and more became rallying cries for justice in our time. To focus our spring conference on the Selma story seemed to resonate now more than ever. The impulse to march for justice was compelling then and remains urgent today.

As we reflect on the 50th anniversary of Bloody Sunday and the historic Voting Rights Act it prompted later that year, we know that there is still work to do. Today every 28 hours an unarmed black American is killed by law enforcement. And following the 2013 nullification of the 1965 Voting Rights Act many states and municipalities are seeking to re-draw districts and rescind voter protections to suppress votes by persons of color. The fight for freedom has yet to be won.

DON’T MISS THE ‘SELMA AT 50: STILL MARCHING’ DOCUMENTARY!

The Greater Chicago Broadcast Ministries program Sanctuary will air a 30-minute documentary on the CTS Spring Conference on Chicago’s ABC-TV Channel 7 on June 28th, 11:30 to noon. For those outside the viewing area, please visit the CTS Website for a link!
ACTIVISM TODAY

Selma at 50: Conference Overview

Lee Ann Norman, Staff

E ach year, Chicago Theological Seminary hosts a Spring Conference as a way of gathering together current students, faculty, alumnae, and the surrounding community to reflect on a relevant social theme, situating it at the place where public life, theology, and scholarship meet. This year, we focused on the 50th anniversary of the civil rights actions in Selma, Alabama, because of the seminary’s important connections to the event. “Selma at 50: Still Marching” was held on campus April 24th and 25th, and welcomed more than 360 attendees, more than 40% of whom had never attended a CTS event previously.

CTS was involved in a number of efforts to advance the cause of civil rights. In 1957, the seminary became the first in America to award The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. an honorary Doctor of Divinity degree for his activism in the movement, and, in 1965, our support of the cause deepened. CTS president Howard Schommer, along with faculty and students—including The Rev. Jesse Jackson, Sr. (M.Div. 2000 and D.Min., honorary causa 1969); and The Rev. Gary Masoni (M.Div. 1971)—marched alongside Dr. King in Selma. President Schommer, the students, Dr. King, and several other march leaders were less sent by alumnus Kokuah Abraham Akaka (B.D. 1943), who served as pastor of the historic Kawaiaha’o Church (United Church of Christ) in Honolulu from 1957 to 1984. The ties, symbols of peace and unity in Hawaiian culture, served as reminders to the march leaders and observers of the purpose of the event.

Using activism and movement organizing theory as a lens, “Selma at 50: Still Marching” broadened conversations around what it means to be an activist, a scholar, and a person of faith. Attendees gained knowledge and forged bonds that helped them make connections between the legacy of civil rights activism and emerging contemporary activist movements. The event also provided diverse perspectives on a range of social issues like systemic causes of oppression and violence, the prison industrial complex, racism, and income inequality and their relationship to each other. In their plenary address, alumnus The Rev. Jesse Jackson, Sr. and Professor Michelle Alexander challenged attendees to consider theological responses to social issues as well as to forge courage, knowing that each person can make a difference in his or her unique way.

Workshops emphasized a solution-oriented mindset and encouraged participants to turn theory into action. “Show Me the Money” occurred in two sections, one focusing on worker justice and the other on strategies for garnering financial support for activism work. Experts speaking in these workshops agreed that all faith traditions have similar beliefs regarding care, compassion, and support for the oppressed and those who fight for greater justice. The discussions also emphasized that, at the heart of the matter, people are and appealing to potential supporters and allies on a heart level is important.

“Hashtag Activism” and “Make it Mobile” explored the emerging and powerful use of social media in movement building. From Cairo to Ferguson, digital activism continues to play a central role in uniting young people in action and continues to do so despite misapprehensions that youth are apathetic and unengaged in activist movements. Workshop speakers discussed critical moments in their activism when they discovered the power of communities built online. They also spoke about how they harnessed that energy to get people away from their screens and devices and into the street. “Stop the Lockup” examined root causes and possible solutions to the growing incarceration epidemic in the United States. Panelists spoke eloquently to help audience members understand the interconnectedness of systems that create a false narrative of pathology about the poor and oppressed who disproportionately represent people who are incarcerated. Conversations also dispelled prevailing myths about “black on black crime” and explored the causes of antagonistic relationships between communities and the officers who police them.

Crossroads/Chicago ROAR provided an interactive workshop for all participants on organizing, helping people gain insight into how to mobilize community resources and work with community organizations and institutions toward social change. Performances from Chicago humanitarian rapper and activist Jessica Disu (aka FM Supreme) and Chicago-born and Pittsburgh-based emcee and community activist Jasit X energized the crowd, as did the time attendees took to talk, think, and reflect on what had been presented during the event.

The conference hashtag #CTSselma trended in the top ten nationally on Twitter on April 25th, affirming what we already knew: This work is meaningful and relevant. We are grateful to the Henry Luce Foundation, the Illinois Humanities Council, and The Brown Endowment for their support of this momentous event, and look forward to another engaging and inspiring spring gathering next year: April 15-16, 2016.
It is easy for some to disparage today’s Millennials as disconnected, passionless, and apathetic given that they are the first generation to grow up in a fully digital and socially networked world. The youth leadership track during the “Selma at 50: Still Marching” conference, however, revealed thoughtful, passionate, and engaged young people, eager to help shape the world into a better place. The Rev. Waltrina Middleton (M.Div. 2009) participated in the event as a speaker on the panel “Justice, Justice Shall you Pursue: The Community, the Police, the Courts,” the workshop “Get on the Bus,” and as a leader of the Youth Power Lunch. In all of those roles, Middleton demonstrated gifts and provided insights for empowering and affirming the voices of young people in creating a more just and peaceful world.

Middleton currently serves as National Minister for Youth Advocacy and Leadership for Formation with the United Church of Christ in Cleveland, Ohio. When I asked Rev. Middleton how she inspires young leaders, she quickly reframed my assumption by saying, “At the end of the day, they inspire me. My role is to be present, listen, and help them channel creativity that transforms the world toward justice,” she said. Her ultimate desire is to help young people respond to social injustice with faith. She often encourages youth to contextualize injustice by asking the question: “What does God have to say about this?” She hopes that young people will take the answer to the streets.

Assuming there is a formula or a curriculum that is going to speak to youth is a false notion, according to Middleton. Part of her job, she explained, is to recognize the uniqueness of each young person.  “Inspiration comes in different forms,” she said. “When young people are missing from the pews, congregants assume that they are disconnected from God or rejecting the church, but I hope the pews are empty,” she said. “For me, this means that young people are being called where they are needed, whether it is in the streets, in their apartment complexes, schools, or wherever God is calling them.” They are being disciples, she explained.

For Middleton, young people connecting outside the doors of the church are creating a bigger sanctuary.

The Rev. Gary Massoni’s (M.Div. 1971) journey to social activism wasn’t always a linear one. A chance meeting in the parking lot of McGiffert Hall with The Rev. Jesse Jackson, Sr. (M.Div. 2000; D.Min. honorary causa 1969) more than 50 years ago sparked a friendship and revealed a shared vision for a better world that has shaped the ministry of Massoni ever since.

Before that pivotal trip to Selma, Massoni never really thought of himself as an activist, describing his advocacy work only as personal. He briefly considered joining the U.S. Marine Corps, but soon realized that staying in the United States and attending seminary would allow him to be a more effective fighter for truth and justice. Massoni remembers that just a few nights before he was scheduled to leave for basic training, he talked to his wife about the decision, knowing in his heart he couldn’t leave. Seeing images of beaten civil rights protestors and hearing Dr. King’s call for “people of goodwill” to come to Selma in solidarity, moved him deeply. Massoni felt compelled to act.

While he knew joining the protesters in Selma was the right thing to do, Massoni admitted that he still struggled with the decision. He did not agree to go until Jackson convinced him by using a tactic that Massoni called (in jest) “divine manipulation.” Once Massoni decided to go to Selma, Jackson approached their friends, persuading each to go with them. Filled with excitement, enthusiasm, and faith Massoni, Jackson, and the other students headed to Selma in a VW bus and a Chevy Corvair.

As the students journeyed south, Massoni remembered how rattled and frightened they were. A carload of young people of different races traveling through the south was certainly a sight. So much so, that they were followed for several miles by a pick-up truck with a sizeable gun rack. The anxiety the students felt was quickly was relieved by the friendship and delightful welcome they received when they arrived at Brown Chapel.

The trip to Selma was transformational for Massoni, inspiring him to continue his work in social activism. His efforts, focused on education equality, parenting and infant care, fair housing, and community development, only deepened as he went on to collaborate with Dr. King and The Rev. Jackson on various projects, including Operation Breadbasket, the National Rainbow Coalition, and Operation PUSH (People United to Serve Humanity). Massoni served as a campus minister, a community minister, and as Field Secretary and Director of Programs for the Pacific Northwest Region of the American Friends Service Committee. He also served as National Director of Scheduling for Jackson’s 1984 presidential campaign.

Massoni credits CTS for not only building his biblical framework, but also for creating a culture that reinforced his beliefs around advocacy and service. He briefly considered joining the U.S. Marine Corps, but soon realized that staying in the United States and attending seminary would allow him to be a more effective fighter for truth and justice. Massoni remembers that just a few nights before he was scheduled to leave for basic training, he talked to his wife about the decision, knowing in his heart he couldn’t leave. Seeing images of beaten civil rights protestors and hearing Dr. King’s call for “people of goodwill” to come to Selma in solidarity, moved him deeply. Massoni felt compelled to act.

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Oppressions don’t exist in isolation, and the “Selma at 50” panel discussion “Effecting Change in Our Communities” helped audience members consider the ways in which methods of persecution overlap. Panelists spoke about challenges they encounter in their work to foster vibrant community living. They also explored strategies on different ways people who experience multiple forms of oppression—whether racial, economic, gender-, or language-based—can work together to create a better world.

Intersectionality, a sociological theory that examines the ways that multiple forms of oppression overlap to create systems of domination, became popularized as a term in 1989 when scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw sought to deepen her understanding of how gender bias is complicated by racial discrimination. Crenshaw’s work in this area would later earn her a place on the legal team that represented Anita Hill during her sexual harassment case against then-Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas, and inspire future generations of academics to explore how oppressive systems converge.

Throughout the conference, attendees expressed enthusiasm about change and enacting strategies to bring it about. Many panelists admitted to feeling overwhelmed, though, about how to approach large social problems like economic inequality, racism, immigration, and violence. Judy Levey, Executive Director of the Jewish Council on Urban Affairs, explained that a challenge for the Council is to convince people who attend synagogue and other supporters that service and activism don’t have to look one particular way. She spoke about helping people expand their definition of activism beyond giving money or donating goods and services to become active collaborators and advocates. Levey went on to say that she struggled to address some issues that related to police violence and racism with members of her community, feeling that such conversations might alienate some people. Fellow panelists responded by encouraging her and others to increase their capacity for empathy, and noted that changes in attitude occur through small acts that accumulate into big endeavors.

The Rev. Otis Moss III, Ph.D. (D.Min. 2012) emphasized that a critical step in creating a sense of unity among marginalized peoples involves understanding that capitalism, as a system, is not inherently moral. Dr. Rami Nashashibi, CTS Visiting Assistant Professor in Sociology of Religion and Muslim Studies, underscored this idea when he said that people of faith must be courageous enough to stand for justice even if it means standing in opposition to your brothers and sisters.