FOURTH PRESbyterian CHURCH
CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT TRIP REPORT
October 26 - November 2, 2019

Under the sponsorship of the Racial Equity Council 24 members and friends of Fourth Presbyterian visited the principal sights of civil rights activism in the southern United States. The cities visited were: Birmingham, Alabama; Montgomery, Alabama; Selma, Alabama; and Jackson, Mississippi. The co-leaders of this trip were Vicky Curtis (Associate Pastor for Mission), Robert Crouch (Director of Volunteer Ministry) and Derrick Dawson (Chicago Regional Organizing for Antiracism CROAR).

The group spent each day learning about the major events of the United States civil rights movement by visiting churches, museums, memorials and locations of significant activism. Over fifteen such sites were visited during the trip. Every evening, the group met to share reflections from the day’s experiences.

A BRIEF SUMMARY OF THE STRUGGLE OF BLACKS IN THE UNITED STATES

In the 17th and 18th Century, 12 million African people were kidnapped, chained and brought to the Americas after a tortuous journey across the ocean. The labor of the enslaved black people fueled economic growth in the
United States
where an ideology of white supremacy and racial difference was created to justify slavery and make it morally acceptable. After the Civil War, the 13th Amendment was passed prohibiting involuntary servitude and forced labor. This did not at all end white supremacy and racial discrimination.

Instead, when the recently freed blacks began asserting their freedom and basic human rights, including running for elections and winning state and national offices, the whites violently fought back to reclaim their power and restore white supremacy. This began the Jim Crow era. In the 1950s the blacks all over the south began to fight and demand their civil rights with organized resistance led by many leaders, including Rev Dr Martin Luther King, Jr.

The struggle continues to this day. The membership in white supremacist groups and racist attacks are on the rise. Mass incarceration of blacks is growing. Following the 2013 decision of the Supreme Court to allow the Voting Rights Act to expire, voting rights of blacks in the southern states are again being affected by new state laws creating voting registration barriers.

HIGHLIGHTS OF SOME OF THE SITES VISITED

16th Street Baptist Church - Birmingham, Alabama
Our trip began with the group worshipping on Sunday in the 16th Avenue Baptist Church of Birmingham, which is now a national monument. We participated in the two hour service which included a passionate sermon and many wonderful hymns sung with high energy by the choir and the congregants.

This church served as headquarters for the civil rights mass meetings and rallies in the early 1960s. Members and friends of this church conducted many marches and demonstrations resulting in brutal police retaliation in Kelly Ingram Park across the street from the church. The police used high pressure fire hoses and police dogs viewed by millions on nationwide television. The pastor of the church, Rev Fred Shuttlesworth, and Rev Dr Martin Luther King, Jr. provided leadership to the marchers. The church also hosted several meetings to oppose public school segregation. In retaliation to church’s role in these civil rights activities, in September 1963
four young girls during Sunday School at the 16th Avenue Baptist Church were murdered by an explosion of sticks of dynamite placed by Klansmen under a window of the church.

After the service we were shown a very sobering video of the events of the bombing which filled our hearts with deep sadness and anger.
National Memorial for Peace and Justice - Montgomery Alabama

The National Memorial for Peace and Justice was opened in April 2018. It is based upon years of research conducted by the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI), a nonprofit human rights law office in Montgomery headed by Bryan Stevenson.

EJI’s main goal for this Memorial was to document every lynching that took place in the U.S. between the end of Reconstruction in 1877 and the 1950s, and then design this Memorial is such a way to be a tribute to the victims of this horrific time period in our history. Along with research and design, this memorial also uses sculpture, art, literature, and poetry to present the full story of lynching as racial terror.

In the center of this six acre site is a huge gallery lined with over 800 six-foot tall steel columns hanging from the ceiling. There is one column for each U.S. county where a known racial terror lynching took place and it is inscribed with the names of
the lynching victims. More than 4400 lynchings are documented in this memorial, but there are thousands of unknown victims of lynchings whose deaths cannot be documented. These names will never be known but this memorial honors them all.

Many heartbreaking stories of why the lynching occurred are provided throughout the museum. Here are a few of these narratives:

“David Walker, his wife and their 4 children were lynched in Hickman, Kentucky, in 1908 after Mr. Walker was accused of using inappropriate language with a white woman.”

“William Donegan was lynched in Springfield, Illinois, in 1908 for having a white wife.”

“Dozens of men, women and children were lynched in a massacre in East St. Louis, Illinois in 1917.”

“Mary Turner was lynched, with her unborn child, at Folsom Bridge at the Brooks-Lowndes County line in Georgia in 1918 for complaining about the recent lynching of her husband, Hayes Turner.”

“Grant Cole was lynched in Montgomery, Alabama, in 1925 after he refused to run an errand for a white woman.”

“Henry Patterson was lynched in Labelle, Florida, in 1926 for asking a white woman for a drink of water.”

“Elizabeth Lawrence was lynched in Birmingham, Alabama in 1933 for reprimanding white children who threw rocks at her.”
“Reverend T.A. Allen was lynched in Hernando, Mississippi in 1935 for organizing local sharecroppers.”

“Jesse Thornton was lynched in Luverne, Alabama in 1940 for addressing a white police officer without the title ‘mister’.”

The monument park just outside the structure holds a field of identical steel columns waiting to be claimed by and installed in the U.S. counties they represent. Over time, this portion of the memorial will show which parts of the country have confronted the truth of their history and which have not. This memorial is an opportunity for everyone to confront the past with courage and begin a future in which truth leads to repair, restoration and reconciliation.

The Legacy Museum, From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration - Montgomery, Alabama

Opened in 2018, the Legacy Museum was also sponsored by the nonprofit Equal Justice Initiative and emphasizes that we have not yet undertaken the work necessary to understand and acknowledge the full
impact of more than two centuries of slavery, racial terror and lynching, and Jim Crow. Our nation did make inspiring achievements in the Civil Rights Movement. But we are not done. Today, people of color must navigate many challenges and obstacles because of our nation’s history of racial inequality. Until we can face the past honestly and be willing to tell our devastating story of abusing human rights as truthfully as we can, we cannot move forward to become a healthy antiracist society.

This Museum is designed to make us intellectually and emotionally aware of our history of racial inequality by employing technology to dramatize the various stories of our past. As the group went from display to display, we weren’t simply seeing the displays but also deeply feeling the emotions related to these displays, making them shatteringly real.

At the site where the Legacy Museum now stands, enslaved people were imprisoned alongside horses, pigs, cattle, and bales of cotton. When visitors enter the museum, they first encounter imagery including holograms, narrative and song. This first exhibit gives voice to the memories of those who suffered and survived slavery in America. There are first person accounts from enslaved people saying what it is like to be confined in a pen while waiting to meet an unknown fate that most likely results in separation from their family.

This museum also shows more on racial terror lynchings and the segregation associated with the Jim
Crow era. This era fostered the racialization of criminality where whites claimed that lynching was necessary to protect them from black “criminals.” This presumption of guilt and dangerousness has burdened blacks in this country for generations.

The museum’s ending displays focuses on mass incarceration in the United States. At the close of the civil rights era, politicians seized on “law and order” as a winning campaign platform and used thinly-veiled racial appeals to win elections. Since the start of the “war on drugs” in 1971, the prison population has increased from 300,000 to more than 2.3 million, most all of them being people of color and many children of all ages.

Rosa Parks Museum - Montgomery Alabama

All of our group knew the story of Rosa Parks being arrested for refusing to give up her seat on the bus to a white person. Her arrest led to a massive boycott of the Montgomery Bus Company by blacks. What many of us did not know before
visiting this museum was that the bus boycott started out only demanding better treatment for the blacks on the buses, but quickly evolved into a demand for racial integration on the buses. We also were amazed how quickly and successfully the boycott was organized by thousands of local blacks, local black churches and many other activist leaders, including a young Martin Luther King, Jr. Rosa Parks was arrested early evening December 1, 1955 and only four days later on December 5th the boycott began in earnest. In that short preparation time, thousands of committed activists arranged all the many details for a successful boycott, including locating 19 station wagons to help transport the blacks to their jobs, many of them maids employed in white homes. In fact, some of white employers even helped with the transportation of the workers.

During the 381 day boycott, the bus company lost between 30,000 and 40,000 riders a day. Many members of the community, including some whites, wanted the boycott to terminate
and so helped push along the legal process to that end. On November 15, 1956, the Supreme Court ruled that segregation on public buses was unconstitutional.

Despite the ruling, the southern states increased their violent opposition to racial equality. Rosa Parks’ act of defiance brought international attention to the fight against segregation and was the inspiration for the many civil rights events to follow.

**Freedom Riders Museum - Montgomery Alabama**

In May 1961, a group of Freedom Riders led by John Lewis began a bus trip from Washington, D.C. to New Orleans. These activists were white and black, male and female and none older than 22. Their goal was to compel the U.S. government to enforce Supreme Court decisions outlawing segregated transportation seating and facilities. The group were all unarmed and trained in nonviolent resistance.

This group that had already met with violence in Birmingham were determined to continue their journey to New Orleans where their next stop was Montgomery. Upon arriving at the Greyhound Bus station in Montgomery, their police escort disappeared and suddenly angry white men, women and children carrying baseball bats and lead pipes began pouring out of cars and burst from behind nearby buildings and began attacking the Freedom Riders.
John Lewis shouted out: “Stand together, don’t run, just stand together.” Many of the Freedom Riders were beaten unconscious.

Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy and President John F. Kennedy were so enraged that they sent in 450 U.S. Marshals and became active in the civil rights movement.

This Museum once was the Greyhound Bus Station in Montgomery where this horrendous event happened. A docent told us and showed us how this bus station, just like other bus stations in the south, was designed for segregation. In this bus station, there were no restrooms or restaurant for colored passengers. The waiting room for the colored passengers was very small making many of the colored travelers wait outside.

The Freedom Rides in the south continued for seven months throughout the summer and fall. The Freedom Riders grew to 436 participants and they all continued to encounter tremendous violence from white protestors. In the fall of 1961 the Interstate Commerce Commission issued regulations prohibiting segregation in bus and train stations nationwide.

**Selma, Alabama**

On "Bloody Sunday," March 7, 1965, some 600 voting rights marchers headed east out of Selma on U.S. Route 80 with state capitol
They got only as far as the Edmund Pettus Bridge six blocks away, where state and local lawmen attacked them with billy clubs and tear gas and drove them back into town. This attack was nationally televised arousing broad outrage. After gaining federal protection from President Lyndon Johnson, the marchers were able to leave Selma again on March 21. By the time they reached Montgomery several days later, the number of marchers had grown to 25,000. Later that summer the Voting Rights Act of 1965 was passed and signed into law by President Johnson.

The group visited the nearby Voting Rights museum in Selma which has detailed information on this march. Many of our group were fortunate to have the opportunity to walk across the infamous Edmund Pettus Bridge in a driving rainstorm. It was very long bridge especially with the wind blowing the rain into their faces. These folks will never forget this experience.

**Mississippi Civil Rights Museum - Jackson, Mississippi**

This museum opened in December 2017 and is the first civil rights museum built using taxpayer dollars. This museum was totally funded by the Mississippi Republican state administration.
We witnessed the civil rights struggle in eight interactive galleries that show the systemic oppression of black Mississippians over centuries and their fight for equality that transformed the state and the nation. Seven of the galleries encircle a central space called “This Little Light of Mine.” This central gallery is the heart of the museum, a soaring space filled with natural light from large windows. Civil rights activists are honored with words and images, and the music of the Movement emanates from a dramatic light sculpture.

This museum covers every detail of this sad centuries-long history of oppression of blacks in Mississippi. Many in our group felt we could have spent at least two days learning and feeling the emotions generated by the displays in this
museum.

We were privileged to have Mississippi’s youngest Freedom Rider, Hezekiah Watkins, present in the museum. He told us his story. At the age of 13, Mr Watkins was arrested along with other Freedom Riders and placed on Death Row in Parchman Penitentiary. Fortunately after five days he was released. From that point on, he continued his involvement with the Freedom Riders resulting with him being arrested over 100 times. Mr Watkins has dedicated his life to pursuing justice and continues to teach the importance of learning from this history and to share his story with all who visit.

Medgar Evers Home - Jackson, Mississippi

Medgar Evers was a WWII veteran who fought in Europe and returned to his native Mississippi where he again faced harsh segregation. As the first field secretary of the Mississippi NAACP, he tirelessly led voter registration drives, marches, prayer vigils, and boycotts and persistently appealed to blacks and whites to work together for a peaceful solution. In the early 1960s, he also orchestrated a major boycott of white merchants which made him a target of the Ku Klux Klan.
He also led efforts to help James Meredith successfully integrate the University of Mississippi in 1962.

On June 2, 1963 Evers pulled into his driveway after returning from an integration meeting. Emerging from his car and carrying NAACP t-shirts that stated “Jim Crow Must Go”, Evers was shot in the back with a bullet that ricocheted into his home, landing in the kitchen, while his terrified wife and 3 children huddled inside the home. As Evers lay bleeding on the driveway neither the police nor an ambulance would answer the call to take him to a hospital. Finally a neighbor took him to the hospital where he died.

This modest ranch-style home stood vacant for years after the family moved away until the Evers family donated the home and is now designated a national historic monument by the National Park Service. While visiting inside the home, we were led by a docent who told us Evers had the house built without a front door and windows placed higher for security reasons. His house also had a flat gravel and stone roof so it would not catch fire if someone tossed a lit torch. His children slept on mattresses placed
directly on the floor to make them less visible targets. In 1994, thirty years after two previous trials with an all white jury which failed to reach a verdict, the white supremacist, Bryon De La Beckwith was again brought to trial and convicted by a jury with both white and black members and spent the rest of his life in prison.

**GOING FORWARD**

Our group was deeply moved by what we witnessed and learned on this trip, and to this day we are still processing our experiences, especially facing the horror of man’s inhumanity to man that has lasted hundreds of years and still exists today in different ways.

**Some personal reflections from our group:**

“If we are to get beyond this, we first have to tell the truth and we aren’t doing that. We aren’t teaching our kids this history.”

“It is not just in the past. It is continuing today in different ways.”

“This is the United State’s holocaust.”

“The breadth of this Peace and Justice Memorial overwhelms me.”

“Remembering is not enough.”
“This history is still continuing today. What do we do?”

“Our emotions are meaningless unless we do something now!”

“Darkness is creeping into my body today.”

“The depth of human depravity. How is it that white people kill black people?”

“It is necessary that everyone knows about our civil rights history.”

“I just wept constantly when walking around and reading all the names of those lynched”

“It’s not black history. It’s American history.”

“I am going to follow what Arthur Ashe, a black activist and famous tennis player said: ‘Start where you are; Use what you have; and Do what you can.’”

Impressions and Actions Resulting from this Trip

*We must continue to confront our long history of racism against black people. We need to tell this story as fully and truthfully as we can. We as a nation take steps forward to reduce racism here and there, but do not do what we must do to face the institutional racism that still exists today. We need to take a broader and more effective look at the problem. We are working hard at Fourth Church with our Racial Equity Commission (REC). We all must help REC in any way we can as we move forward at Fourth Church to become a fully anti-racist church.

* We must strive to ensure that every school in the United States teaches this history to our children. The youth who are our future leaders must be told all these stories of the civil rights struggle beginning with slavery. Our group concluded that Fourth Presbyterian should organize a similar trip for our church youth.
We need to communicate to as many people as possible the value of visiting some of the civil rights museums and sites in the south. Those who are able to travel must put visiting civil rights museums and memorials in the South and in D.C. on their bucket list. As we saw on this trip, many of the states in the south are beginning to confront their past with honesty and are establishing wonderful memorials and museums to explain our shameful history.

Our group often feels discouraged and hopeless as the problem seems insurmountable. We are living in troublesome times and seeming to take steps backwards. But we must be willing to move forward. We saw many examples on our trip when the resistance of one ordinary citizen resulted in major changes. Also, we want to keep in mind that little steps forward are good, such as:
- Getting out the vote on election day.
- Learning more and working together to fight mass incarceration.
- Telling our civil rights history story to young people in our lives.

PRAYER

This prayer was part of our reflection packet of prayers and poems that accompanied us on this trip.

Against Silence

O Holy Ghost, giver of life,
whose breath fills our lungs at this very moment,
you are above all powerful and true.

Be alive in us today against the awful silence in this land,
that we might be filled with your words:
words that heal, liberate and offer hope in our day.

Let us speak, and let our lives in tandem with our words
be a way of witness in the world for you
and the liberation of your black people, God.

Amen

Respectfully submitted by Karen and Jerry Johnson, November, 2019