

# Selma: Sustaining the Civil Rights Momentum

“Selma: Sustaining the Momentum” was the title of a Dean Peerman and Martin E. Marty article in “The Christian Century” 48 years to the month after colleague Peerman and I joined several thousand protesters and prayers at the Edmund Pettis Bridge in Selma, Ala.

That was two days after “Bloody Sunday” when, in that case, mainly clergy responded to Martin Luther King Jr.’s call (in my case transmitted through fellow Lutherans at Valparaiso University).

I was back this year, along with Joseph Ellwanger, a Lutheran pastor in Alabama in the worst-old days and a sustainer of momentum on civil-rights fronts to this day.

Also on the scene was Congressman John Lewis, who 48 years before had stood, bloodied but not bowed, before us in Brown’s Chapel.

He still leads and inspires, for example when voting rights is an issue, as it is now in the United States Supreme Court.

This time, I was there at the invitation of a new friend with old school ties, college President Tilahun Menedo. He hosted and invited me to keynote a civil rights symposium at under-resourced but ambitious Concordia College in Selma.

Valparaiso University and Concordia College students interacted creatively at the weekend events, and through their actions showed their readiness to involve their schools in “sustaining the momentum” for civil rights in their corners of the religious world.

Our post-Bloody Sunday march, described in 48-year-old headlines as “thwarted,” had led us to “glares and prayers.”

The glares and stares appeared during the stand-off between the blue-clad officers in a phalanx on the bridge, and the prayers were offered by leaders among the religious witnesses who knelt where we could not march.

Mustered on a few hours' notice to fly from Chicago, in our case, to the scene, we headed back late in the day, just before one among us, Pastor James Reeb, was murdered.

We were all changed by the experience and carried impetus back, again, in our case, to Chicago. There, King later met opposition and was frustrated in a town two miles from where I lived, Cicero, Ill., the "Selma of the North."

During our non-bloody Sunday in Selma this year, we gathered again in Brown's Chapel, where we had been charged and whence we were propelled by John Lewis and others. We heard a range of civil rights leaders, all of whom stressed the religious theme in the movement.

In what is called "secular" America, it is sometimes hard to recall how distinctively religious the movement, then led by the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, had been.

Old newsreels and clippings remind us that most of the black leaders had "the Reverend" attached before their names, and priestly, nunly and pastoral garb was ubiquitous.

Do we still need to sustain momentum?

Many speakers and conversation partners, especially Alabamans, made frequent references to the United States Supreme Court, which is currently deciding whether Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 still has its place and mission.

No one doubted that it does.

Yes, there have been great gains since we visited Selma in 1965, but as columnist Clarence Page noted in the *Chicago Tribune*, "it's a good time for everybody to

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reconsider the importance of preserving minority voting rights, whomever the minority might happen to be.”

We celebrated the achievement of the leaders in 1965 but still had reason to focus on the future as the gatherings sang “We shall overcome.”

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