

Small Group Ministry Focus:

Call and Commitment: Honoring the Families of the Martyrs

Background

“Without Marion, there would have been no Selma to Montgomery March.” That’s something the Civil Rights Movement veterans of Marion are quite clear about. Yet, few people have ever heard of Marion, Alabama, a town not even a quarter the size of Selma. Even so, Marion’s place in history is well established. General Sam Houston, while President of the Republic of Texas, was married there. The Southern Baptist Convention has its roots there. The Confederacy’s “Stars and Bars” were designed there. Coretta Scott King, wife of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was born and grew up there. And in 1964, Jimmie Lee Jackson was shot and killed there.

Jimmie Lee Jackson was a twenty-six year old, African American civil rights activist who was beaten and shot by an Alabama State Trooper during a civil rights march organized by the Southern Christian Leadership Council. His death, on February 26, 1965, inspired the Selma to Montgomery march.

On March 7, 1965, a little over a week after Jimmie Lee Jackson died, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference organized a march from Selma to Montgomery, but marchers were beaten by Alabama State Troopers and local law enforcement and chased back across the Edmund Pettus Bridge. After this event, which became known as Bloody Sunday, Dr. King issued a call for ministers and others from all around the country to come to Selma to stand with the people there. One who responded was Reverend James Reeb, a Unitarian minister from Boston.

Two days after Bloody Sunday, Dr. King led a second march across the Edmund Pettus Bridge. Rather than violate a federal injunction against the march, Dr. King led the marchers back to Brown Chapel where the march had begun. That night, James Reeb and two other white Unitarian ministers, Clark Olson and Orloff Miller, left a restaurant to return to the chapel. Minutes later they were attacked and beaten by three white men who opposed their presence in Selma. On March 11, 1965, James Reeb died, leaving a wife and four children.

Another Unitarian who answered Dr. King’s call to come to Selma was Viola Liuzzo, a white, Detroit-based activist and mother of five. She helped with logistics for the successful Selma to Montgomery march that concluded in Montgomery on March 25, 1965. On her way back to Selma after shuttling some people to the airport in Montgomery, she was shot and killed by members of the Ku Klux Klan.

Even though Jimmie Lee Jackson’s murder set events in motion, it never received the public outcry that James Reeb’s murder received. Dr. King eulogized James Reeb and

President Lyndon Johnson credited that murder with his decision to move forward on the Voting Rights Act. Neither did Liuzzo's murder raise attention. Because one of the people in the car with other members of the Ku Klux Klan was an FBI informant, the FBI responded by attacking Liuzzo's reputation, saying she only went to Selma to solicit black men. As a result, her family, instead of being honored for their loss, was shrouded in shame.

The Unitarian Universalist Association established and maintained contact with the families of each of these three martyrs. Although the relationships ebbed and flowed over the years, the spouses, siblings, and grown children of Jackson, Reeb, and Liuzzo have a genuine connection with Unitarian Universalists. It was only natural that they were invited to be honored at the fifty years commemoration of the Selma Voting Rights Campaign.

How to Use This Material

This guide and the related video clips (posted online) provide the focus of a small group ministry session. Add any traditional opening, chalice lighting, check-in, check-out, and closing to complete the sessions.

The video, [Honoring the Families of the Martyrs](#), runs 23 minutes and 42 seconds. A second video, [Fifty Years of Love](#), is a four-and-a-half-minute, condensed version of the full video. There are two options for discussion in small group ministry:

- Option 1: Watch *Honoring the Families of the Martyrs*. Then, answer the discussion questions.
- Option 2: Watch *Fifty Years of Love* and answer the discussion questions.

Discussion Questions

1. In this video, Gordon Gibson says that all three of these individuals, Jimmie Lee Jackson, James Reeb, and Viola Liuzzo would rather be alive today, and yet it is through their deaths that the Voting Rights Act of 1964 was passed. Gibson says that their losses were "inflicted on these families."

How would you feel if one of your family members told you they were going into a high risk situation because of their beliefs? How was the risk for Jackson, who was an African American living in the South, different than it was for Reeb and Liuzzo, white people who lived outside the South and were there only a short time before they were killed?

2. Jimmie Lee Jackson's sister, Emma Jean Jackson, recalls a time when the Unitarian Universalist Association sent a check to her mother every month.

Why do you think the UUA did that, even though Jackson was not a Unitarian?

3. James Reeb's daughter, Ann, says it is a great honor to be present with the Jackson family and the Liuzzo family.

Why do you think the link between these families is so strong? Has there ever been a time when your family was linked to another through a circumstance outside of either family's control? How did that shape the relationship between the families?

4. Viola Liuzzo's youngest daughter, Sally, says that for so many years her mother's name wasn't known and yet, the UUs remembered, even "when nobody loved her."
Why is the fact that the UUs never forgot so important to her children?

5. The four Reeb children and the five Liuzzo children grew up without a parent because theirs were killed standing up for justice.

How might you feel if you lost a parent in that way? What are some emotions you might feel toward your parent? The people they stood with? The people who killed them? The government that lied about their mother (as in the case of the Liuzzo children)? If you have children, what would be important enough for you to leave your children at home while you stood up for something you believed in?

6. Penny Liuzzo talks about how the work isn't done. She says she's not going to let it slip back to the way it was as long as she is mindful of the legacy for her children and grandchildren.

What legacy do you want to create for the generations to come? In what ways do the families of the martyrs inspire you to carry on the work of justice?

Resources

Home of the Brave, a video about Viola Liuzzo in which her children tell her story
<http://www.homeofthebravemovie.com>

The Informant: The FBI, the Ku Klux Klan, and the Murder of Viola Liuzzo by Gary May

From Selma to Sorrow: The Life and Death of Viola Liuzzo by Mary Stanton

Murder on the Highway: The Viola Liuzzo Story by Beatrice Sigel

Jimmie Lee and James: Two Lives, Two Deaths, and the Movement that Changed America by Steve Fiffer and Ardar Cohen

Selma, the 2014 Hollywood movie <http://www.selmamovie.com>

Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Movement 1954-1985, a multi-episode, comprehensive history, produced and partly directed by African American Henry Hampton, who at one time served on the UUA staff
<http://www.pbs.org/wqbh/amex/eyesontheprize/>