

## Clerks' Tip Connectionalism in Montgomery, Alabama



One of the distinctions of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is that it is connectional. As said at the beginning of the Form of Government: “The congregation is the basic form of the church, but it is not of itself a sufficient form of the church...” G-1.0101. Congregations are “bound in communion with one another, united in relationships of accountability and responsibility, contributing their strengths to the benefit of the whole.” G-1.0101.

I recently benefited from this connectionalism when I was able to go on a Synod of the Mid-Atlantic-sponsored pilgrimage to the Legacy Museum and the National Memorial for Peace & Justice in Montgomery, Alabama, a project of Bryan Stephenson’s [\*Equal Justice Initiative\*](#). On this trip were people from New Castle Presbytery, Presbytery of the James, Eastern Virginia Presbytery, Coastal Carolina Presbytery, and more. As we shared this moving experience with each other, we learned and risked with people different from ourselves, people who worship and live in different contexts, but who share love of Christ and the church and are interested in dismantling systemic racism.

The theme of the museum is that slavery did not end, it evolved. The museum, through heart-wrenching display after display, tells the story of the kidnapping, enslavement, and trade of millions of African people. Once the Thirteenth Amendment, abolishing slavery and involuntary servitude “except as a punishment of crime,” passed, slavery morphed into a system of racial terror, African American rights were violated, and all-white legislatures authorized convict leasing. Racial violence established white supremacy throughout the former confederate states—and the era of Jim Crow was supreme. Then, after the success of the Civil Rights Movement, the new slavery became the racialization of criminality in which blacks have been and continue to be disproportionately arrested, tried, convicted, and jailed.

After visiting the museum, we went to the National Memorial for Peace & Justice. The website for the memorial explains its genesis: “Work on the memorial began in 2010 when EJI staff began investigating thousands of racial terror lynching’s in the American South, many of which had never been documented. EJI was interested not only in lynching incidents, but in understanding the terror and trauma this sanctioned violence against the black community created. Six million black people fled the South as refugees and exiles as a result of these “racial terror lynchings.” Forty-four hundred lynchings are memorialized there, county by county. I had seen pictures of the memorial, but it was much vaster than any TV screen or picture can capture.

I know there will be other opportunities—by yourself, as a family, or as a member of a congregation, a presbytery, or a synod—for people to go on this pilgrimage. If you can, go.

Please let me know if you have questions or topics, you’d like me to address in Clerks’ Tips.

Peace, Sara

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