

**Many footprints show Lyla the way to Selma, Alabama**  
**By Jeff Mahoney**  
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Lyla Miklos is going to Selma on Friday, and she's bringing her ears.

To listen.

She's going as a Hamiltonian and a Unitarian, to take up the torch that Hamilton Unitarians have thrown to her over the distance of 50 years.

Mostly, she's going to Alabama as a human being, hungering after moral progress along a hard path. She's going to walk in solidarity with others and with the past, literally over a bridge, in a jubilee reprise of the original crossing.

What will Lyla hear when she listens? Perhaps the lingering vibrations of a question sounded through the land 50 years ago.

Martin Luther King brandished those words on the steps of the state capitol building at the end of that long arduous march, from Selma to Montgomery Ala., in that voice of his, a voice that could move stone, a voice that shook the pillars of a conscience that his country didn't even know it had or needed.

How long? Fifty years and counting. Every day, says Lyla, victims of racism slog along that march, walk that gauntlet figuratively, enduring ignorance, intolerance and the often unconscious presumptions of white privilege.

"What they marched for (in 1965) is disintegrating," says Lyla. "Ferguson, Trayvon Martin, the list goes on."

Lyla is a member of the First Unitarian Church of Hamilton (which I have attended) and last fall she learned the Unitarian Universalist Association is staging a conference (Marching in the Arc of Justice) this weekend in Selma, commemorating the 50th anniversary. It culminates in a march across the Edmund Pettus Bridge.

"Oh, I'd love to go to that," she thought at the time.

"MLK has been a hero of mine for, well, for forever. But it was too expensive. Then I saw the movie. I thought, 'I'd really love to go to that conference.'"

Her minister, Rev. Victoria Ingram, told her about scholarships being offered to help people attend. She applied.

"I got a letter saying 'congratulations!'"

Lyla was overjoyed.

Unitarians have a deep connection to Selma. When Martin Luther King called on church leaders of all faiths to help in Selma, they answered unstintingly.

The penetration of Unitarian commitment is reflected starkly and tellingly in that there were two white deaths during the Selma voting rights movement, both Unitarians. Pastor James Reeb was beaten to death outside an integrated restaurant by white segregationists. Chicago Unitarian Viola Liuzzo was shot in the head by Ku Klux Klan members while driving to the Montgomery airport.

Locally, Rev. Robert Hemstreet, minister at First Unitarian of Hamilton from 1964 to 1968, travelled to Selma on March 11 with Rev. Arnold Thaw, a Mississauga Unitarian.

"He didn't actually march — by then the marchers' numbers were being restricted" as the influx to Selma overwhelmed the possibility of everyone participating, says Bill Johnston, a First Unitarian Hamilton board member who's writing a history of the church.

But Rev. Robert helped on the ground and, on return to Hamilton, led fundraising.

Other Hamilton clergy also went, says Bill: Rabbi Eugene Weiner of Beth Jacob; Frederick Etherden of St. Elizabeth's Anglican in Burlington; Gerald Elliot, United Church; Alan Matthews of Eastwood Baptist Church; Francis Legge of Stewart Memorial; Edwin Heaven, a McMaster Anglican chaplain.

Lyla, both excited and humbled, says she's not sure what to expect.

"I suppose I have a sense of the ghosts of those people carrying me," she says. "I have to hear the reality of people's stories and not put them through my filter."

"I am not black and will never fully understand what it's like to live with systemic racism 24-7. I'm going to try my best to be an ally, to shut up and listen.

Lyla, a Hamilton activist and school board employee, worries about Selma's legacy.

"Achievements aren't static. They can be so easily taken away, and when the economy's crap people go to a place of fear. Democracy takes hard work. It's complicated and messy."

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Historic letter

Bill Johnston, in the exhaustive research he's been doing on the history of the First Unitarian Church of Hamilton, unearthed this fascinating letter, written in 1965 by Rev. Robert Hemstreet to his

congregation, explaining the need for him to travel to Selma, Alabama. He died last month at age 84, just shy of the 50th anniversary.

Saturday, March 13, 1965

Dear Friends,

When you receive this newsletter, I will probably be in Selma, Alabama. The Rev. Arnold Thaw and I decided to go Friday night, after satisfying ourselves that our presence was needed in Alabama and would make a difference there.

For me, it was not an easy decision to make. I am not given to symbolic gestures, and I deliberately court neither danger nor publicity.

I think constantly of all that needs to be done here in Hamilton and throughout Canada to improve human relations. And all of us concerned with the management of this church as an institution were looking forward to this week as the beginning of an intensive every-member canvass.

But events of the past week have made it impossible for me not to go. The tear-gassing and clubbing of peaceful marchers last Sunday shocked all of us. The Board unanimously approved sending a strongly worded telegram of protest to President Johnson. (Text elsewhere in the newsletter) Then the Rev. James Reeb and two other Unitarian ministers were brutally attacked.

The reaction to these events has made the Selma situation a continental and international issue, rather than just an American one. And the tragic fate of James Reeb has made it especially imperative for Unitarians, no matter where they may live, to take all necessary steps to make sure that this death will have a constructive outcome. Four Unitarian ministers, including myself, protested at the U.S. Consulate on Thursday. But telegrams, protest marches in Toronto, and resolutions are not enough now. Our physical presence is needed, for whatever we may be able to contribute and accomplish.

Mr. Thaw and I will be joining more than 50 Unitarian ministers already in Selma, and hundreds of clergy from other denominations. We hope that the witness of so many spiritual leaders will overcome the stubborn forces in Selma and throughout the American South whose blind fear and hatred is holding back the achievement of full human and democratic rights by Negroes. We shall overcome.

In conclusion, I would like to thank Mrs. Maureen Orton and all the members of our Board for their magnificent support. They know full well that Unitarianism must act now if it is to be a vital religious force for the building of true community among men.

Yours sincerely,  
Robert Hemstreet