

Her Voice Still Echoes

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By Karen Kegelman

With additional reporting and reflection by Cynde A. Bimbi, pilgrim on the 2024 Ecumenical Civil Rights pilgrimage

In September 2024, pilgrims from across the Episcopal Church in Delaware and the New Castle Presbytery traveled to Selma and Montgomery, Alabama, as part of an Ecumenical Civil Rights pilgrimage. We walked sacred ground. We crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge. We prayed. We sang. We listened.

And we listened closely to a woman whose life embodied the very history we had come to remember — **Ms. Jo Ann Bland**.

We had the sacred privilege of talking with Jo Ann and listening to her testimony. One of our pilgrims, Karen Kegelman, wrote the following reflection for Women’s History Month in remembrance of her life and witness.

During our pilgrimage we toured sites central to the early Civil Rights Movement with Ms. Jo Ann Bland who died on February 19, 2026.

A native of Selma, Ms. Bland was a child when she joined friends and neighbors marching for voting rights. By age eleven, Ms. Bland had been arrested at least thirteen times for her participation in nonviolent demonstrations.

On March 7, 1965, young Jo Ann joined siblings, friends, and neighbors for a voting rights march from Selma to Montgomery. The march ended abruptly on the Edmund Pettus Bridge when Alabama State Troopers on horseback charged the 600 peaceful marchers, attacking with tear gas and beating them with clubs which resulted in serious injuries. Several marchers suffered broken bones and cracked skulls — the event is known as “Bloody Sunday.” The brutal violence that day, and the subsequent murder of Rev. James Reeb, a white Protestant minister who participated in the march, prompted Congress to finally pass the Voting Rights Act in August 1965.

While memories of discrimination, marches, arrests, violence, and fear were seared in Ms. Bland’s heart, so too were memories of Gospel hymns, love, family, friends, and her church community. She dedicated her life to educating the public about the Civil Rights Movement, and shared compelling first-hand accounts of events that do not appear in history books.

When I was considering whether or not to attend the first No Kings March in Philadelphia in June 2025, I feared the prospect of arrest. Then I remembered Jo Ann and her siblings, arrested multiple times as children, and the wall of mug shots I stood before at the Holt Street Baptist Church Museum — more than 90 photos of Black men and women of all ages who faced fear and protested anyway. Who was I to be afraid?

Jo Ann lived a remarkable life of integrity and courage. I am grateful we had the privilege to hear her testimony in person. The Bland family wrote, “She was humble, direct, and unwavering in her convictions. She would give the shirt off her back to anyone in need, yet she stood firmly for justice and truth. Her life embodied courage, faith, resilience, and love.”

In Jo Ann Bland we encountered the enduring power of moral courage rooted in faith, a child of God who bore witness to the Gospel through steadfast love of neighbor at great risk to her personal safety. May we continue to carry forward the responsibility to walk together toward justice with love, humility, and hope.

For those of us who made that pilgrimage, Jo Ann was not simply a historical figure. She was a living bridge between past and present — between “Bloody Sunday” and our own uncertain moment.

Born on July 29, 1953, in Selma, Alabama, Jo Ann Blackmon Bland began her activism at just eight years old. She attended meetings of the Dallas County Voters League with her grandmother, Sylvia Johnson, under the leadership of Amelia Boynton. She joined the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), becoming one of the many young foot soldiers whose courage reshaped the nation.

Remembering her walk across the Edmund Pettus Bridge on “Bloody Sunday”, she later recalled seeing a woman fall beneath a charging horse and hearing the sound of her head hitting the pavement. She fainted. When she regained consciousness, her sister’s blood was dripping onto her face. Her sister required 26 stitches.

For Jo Ann, the Civil Rights Movement was never an abstraction. It was childhood.

Yet her life was not defined by trauma. It was defined by purpose.

After attending the College of Staten Island and serving in the United States Army, she returned home to Selma. In 1989 she co-founded the National Voting Rights Museum and Institute. Later she founded Journeys for the Soul, guiding visitors from around the world through the living history of Selma.

Ms. Bland was, in the words of the 2024 Ecumenical Civil Rights Pilgrimage coordinator and a member of the Episcopal Church in Delaware, Sheridan Quarless Kingsberry, “a Christian, an advocate for social and racial justice, a mentor, a community organizer, a true womanist, a friend and so much more.”

She believed deeply that what happened in Selma was not simply Black history — it was American history.

In 2021, alongside Kimberly Smitherman, Jo Ann began purchasing parcels of land near the site where the Bloody Sunday march began. That land became Foot Soldiers Park — her vision to memorialize not only famous leaders, but the ordinary people, including children, who made history through their courage.

In her own words:

“My dream is that Selma will become a place of pilgrimage for all those who seek to right the wrongs of our society... My vision for preserving the hallowed ground where the Bloody Sunday march began and creating Foot Soldiers Park is to show every visitor, and especially every child, that they have the power to make great change in their community.”

When our Delaware pilgrims gathered at Foot Soldiers Park in September 2024, we stood on that sacred cement.

She often said that movements for social change are like jigsaw puzzles. Everyone is a unique and necessary piece. If your piece is missing, the picture is not complete — because you are the most important piece.

For Women’s History Month, we remember Jo Ann Bland not only as a child of the movement, but as a woman who shaped its memory, guarded its truth, and entrusted its future to the next generation.

She died peacefully in Selma on February 19, 2026, at the age of 72 — in the same city where she was born, marched, and built a legacy.

But her voice remains.

It echoes on the bridge.

It rises in the hymns she sang as a child.

It lives in the courage of pilgrims who return home changed.

And it asks us still:

What is your piece of the puzzle?

May we answer as she did — with faith, humility, and unwavering love of neighbor.

To learn more about Foot Soldiers Park and the life of Jo Ann Bland, visit footsoldierspark.org. To learn more about the 2024 Ecumenical Civil Rights pilgrimage, [click here](#). Portions of this additional reflection draw from Jo Ann Bland’s public writings and

obituary.