

Discovering Hidden History

Digging into the past can help shape a more just future

History plays an important role in understanding our current situation and the issues we face today. This, in turn, can lead us on paths to new life. We must ask, “How and why have we come to this point?” “What events in history led us here?” Yet, discovering our history is also complicated. There are many stories that simply are not broadly shared. They are often hidden because we failed to protect everyone, because they might portray our hero’s in a bad light, or because they don’t give credit to the real people behind the success.

A great example is the movie “Hidden Figures”

https://www.amazon.com/gp/video/detail/B01MS4V81A/ref=atv_dp_share_cu_r

Until this film came out, many people in the U.S. never knew that African American women were working at NASA as mathematicians and were the brains behind sending our astronauts to the moon and back – safely.

History often impacts justice issues. Here are some ways for youth to discover those hidden stories in their own locations and empower all of us to go another way in the present and future. Use these ideas with young people as you help them to uncover issues that they are passionate about and that they would like to further explore.

Hidden History in Our Churches

Churches are part of the community and often members reflect the shared history of the church and the community. Talk with members that have been around for a long time and learn how the community and the church has changed. For example, there are folks who can speak to the experience of segregation and Jim Crow laws firsthand. They can share about neighborhoods we live in, especially how and why they came to be.

Speak with the pastor or minister in a local congregation. Find out if there is anyone in their congregation that could share some stories from the past pertaining to the topic of interest and see if they can help connect you. Have some questions ready to go and then spend time listening to and recording their stories. See if they have any other connections (people, places, books) that could assist you in your learning and discovery.

Seek out ministers and clergy from different denominations and faiths in addition to your own. Your journey of discovery will be better for it. For example, if you want to learn more about the history of Muslims in your community, reach out to your local Mosque and extend an invitation for someone to share about their faith.

A church historian or church that has a cemetery may be a resource as well. For example, if you want information about certain historical people in your area - they may have attended a church and the church historian might offer some additional information that is not in the shared history.

Many communities have non-profits that were started by a church. Ask churches about the ministries they support and partner with. There is often a story of local ministers who began nonprofits or ministries that still exist today and typically began because of an event or need.

Nonprofits are a Great Source of Hidden History

People working at non-profits have a wealth of information on the folks that they serve, the issues they are facing, and how they are moving in a direction that brings dignity and life. For example, a nonprofit that supplies disposable diapers to people can share that not only are disposable diapers expensive, but you cannot wash diapers in public laundry facilities and daycares will not accept cloth diapers. A nonprofit pantry can explain the how’s and whys of food deserts in your area as you learn about everyone having access to healthy food. Contact

them and ask for a tour. Most love sharing their history and what they are currently doing to meet the needs of others.

Museums and Justice Centers—uncovering the stories of the past and creating better futures.

Museums can offer information about your local history, the people who lived there, the issues that they faced, and how they moved through those difficulties with inventions and attitudes of perseverance. For example, learning more about the holocaust and the people that survived. Learning about events of the Civil War and how they shaped the state and movement forward. Check your local museum for special exhibits that you are interested in.

Justice Centers can share what they are doing on the front lines. They know and understand the history of an area and are already in the process of using it to move us forward. They are thinking outside the box in realistic ways that keep our history from repeating itself. For example, they can share the history of the average cost of rent in your area, compare that with the current minimum wage, and provide the reasoning and statistics as to why we need a living wage for everyone that adjusts over time. They can share which companies and organizations are providing a living wage and which ones are not.

Justice Centers can also be helpful in pointing towards current legislation and ways in which we can get involved. (An example for North Carolina is the NC Justice Center <https://www.ncjustice.org/>)

Local History Professors

Local colleges and universities have history professors that might be willing to meet with you (perhaps through a phone call, zoom, or email) to provide some additional resources as well. These professors will be able to point you to reliable books and articles that contain information that you are seeking. They may also be able to point you to historical sites in the area that can provide some concrete, hands-on learning.

For example, there may be a local site nearby where you can take your youth group for a time of reflection... a park that was created because of the Jim Crow laws. You could spend time reflecting on what it would be like to not be able to enjoy a park because of the color of your skin.

In addition, a local professor might be able to fill in some gaps that you are unable to discover on your own. For example, street names that seemingly change for no reason - might be due to some incident/argument that occurred in the past and the remedy was to change the street name. There are lots of strange stories out there!

Documentaries

There are many documentaries that share about the issues that we currently face and provide ways to uncover a hidden history.

- [“13th”](#) – Titled after the 13th Amendment, it explores the intersection of race, justice, and mass incarceration in the United States.
- [“Wilmington on Fire”](#) – Chronicles the Wilmington Massacre of 1898, a bloody attack on the African American community. This event was the springboard for the White Supremacy movement and Jim Crow segregation throughout the state of North Carolina and the American South but has been omitted from most history books.
- [The Tulsa Lynching of 1921: A Hidden Story](#) - Also called the Tulsa Race Massacre – a violent attack that killed many and destroyed more than 35 square blocks in the Greenwood district of Tulsa, OK.

Taking time to uncover hidden histories helps us provide a more truthful and just present and future for everyone.

Writer: Linda Harding, Youth Mission Co

Office of Christian Formation: <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/formation/>

Presbyterian Youth Workers Association: <https://www.pywa.org>



Office of Christian
Formation

