human rights day

21 MARCH

On 21 March 1960, the community of Sharpeville and Langa townships, like their fellow compatriots across the country, embarked on a march to protest against pass laws. The pass laws required all indigenous Africans over the age of 16 to carry a passbook everywhere they went. This long-standing practice served to severely restrict and control travel, dictating when, where and for how long black South Africans could stay within white areas. Every black male over the age of 16 had to carry his ‘dompas’ on his person day and night and produce it on demand by the police. Failure to produce it, forgetting it at home, or not having the right stamp in it, meant jail. Legally, no black person could leave a rural area for an urban one without a permit from the local authorities. On arrival in an urban area, the person had to obtain a permit within 72 hours to seek work. The Reference Book, or Pass, included a photograph, details of place of origin, employment record, tax payments, and encounters with the police.

The demonstration began with a festive atmosphere, as thousands of unarmed South Africans gathered in peaceful protest. As the crowd grew ever-larger, however, long-simmering tensions rose to a boil. An initial police presence of fewer than 20 officers soon rose to nearly 150 as reinforcements were rushed in, joined by four armored personnel carriers, armed with various rifles and submachine guns. Scuffles broke out as the crowd, armed only with rocks, surged toward the police station. The police opened fire on the crowd, killing 69 people and injuring 180 more. In 1986, the Pass laws were ultimately repealed as part of an effort to roll back some of apartheid’s most oppressive laws.
Why do we remember this day?

Human Rights Day is a national day that is commemorated annually on 21 March to remind South Africans about the sacrifices that accompanied the struggle for the attainment of democracy in South Africa.

The new constitution in South Africa now includes the following rights:

• Equality – everyone is equal before the law and has the right to equal protection and benefit of the law.
• Human dignity – everyone has inherent dignity and has the right for their dignity to be respected and protected.
• Freedom of movement and residence – everyone has a right to freedom of movement and to reside anywhere in the country.
• Language and culture – everyone has the right to use the language and to participate in the cultural life of their choice.
• Life - everyone has the right to life.

As Christ-followers, what can we do on this day?

• Under apartheid law it was illegal for you to love your neighbour. The pass laws ensured that black and white were separated. On this day, get together with a family of another culture for a meal or an outing and be thankful that we are free to live, love and serve alongside our friends – no matter their race or religion. Remember that the gospel affords people an even greater dignity than the law. We honour each other not because our constitution says it is illegal not to, but because every person bears the image of God.
• Think about the new constitution and our current South Africa. What ‘human right’ still needs action and recognition. Share around the table where you’d like to see change and in what specific situations you want justice.
• Pray for our own hearts – that we would be a people who would stand up for justice. Let us not be silent in the face of injustice. Instead, let us be active in praying for and seeking the shalom of the city in which we live.