At Acumen we aim to be leaders with moral imagination— with the humility to see the world as it is and the audacity to imagine the world as it could be. We aspire to values-based leadership, holding ourselves to a moral compass grounded in the ideas of our Manifesto. https://acumen.org/manifesto/

This reading is from a specific time and place in American history but contains lessons that are universally applicable today. We use this reading to teach us how to have conversations in and across communities, starting with deep listening, empathy and the courage to speak truth in service of a more just world.

Indeed, few readings capture the essence of moral imagination like “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” written by Dr. King when he was 34 years old in 1963. He was imprisoned for coordinating marches and sit-ins in Birmingham, Alabama, a means of non-violent resistance as a call for civil rights.

While Dr. King sat in his jail cell an ally smuggled in a newspaper, which contained a public statement by eight white clergymen condemning Dr. King’s work and his activist fight against racism. Dr. King began his famous letter in the margins of the paper, with a borrowed pencil, and continued writing on other scraps of paper until he had completed the letter. From a place of weakness and physical imprisonment, Dr. King authored one of the most widely read, elegiac and powerful calls for understanding and justice.

“Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.”

– Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Dr. King’s reflections in his Letter are as relevant today as they were more than 50 years ago. As the internet and mobile technologies connect us in ways unimaginable in 1963, we are also seeing individuals pulling back into familiar tribes and easy ideologies.

If there is any testament to change, it is the work of Dr. King and so many others who fought and too often died so that others might live with dignity. They walked with strong shoulders on which all who want to effect change can stand. Our hope is for you to draw inspiration, wisdom, empathy and courage from the deep-rooted strength and imagination of Dr. King. We thank you for your willingness to experiment and explore the ideas in this reading, and wish you the richness we ourselves find each time we re-examine this document.
As the moderator of this discussion, you must fully immerse yourself in the reading, and understand the context in which the letter was written.

Understand the Context

Before going through the reading, familiarize yourself with Martin Luther King Jr. and the time during which the “Letter from Birmingham Jail” was written.

Martin Luther King, Jr. was an instrumental leader of the African American Civil Rights Movement in the US in the 1950s and 1960s. As a Baptist minister, he drew from aspects of Christian thought and was also heavily influenced by the Satyagraha teachings of Mahatma Gandhi.

“Letter from Birmingham Jail” was written in 1963 from a solitary confinement jail cell in Birmingham, Alabama. The letter was written on scraps of paper and in the margins of a newspaper and gradually smuggled out by Dr. King’s lawyer.

Birmingham was one of the most segregated cities in the South, winning it the nickname, Bombingham, due to a string of unsolved bombings of African American churches during the summer of 1963. Dr. King was arrested on April 12, 1963 for leading a peaceful protest against racism and racial segregation on the grounds that he did not have a parade permit.

On that same day The Birmingham News published “A Call for Unity,” an open letter written by eight white clergymen in Birmingham, criticizing Dr. King and his supporters for being “outside agitators” (he is from Atlanta, Georgia), calling the protests “untimely,” and urging legal means to end discrimination. Dr. King wrote this missive in response to the clergymen.

Additional Research

Take 20 minutes to do your own brief internet research about what was happening in your local area during the early 1960s. What other significant events were happening at this time in your country? In the U.S.? In the world?

Read & Reflect

Read the “Letter from Birmingham Jail” and note things that are of interest to you; things you don’t agree with or things that you don’t understand. Look up any references that Dr. King makes that are unfamiliar to you.

Reflect on the following questions BEFORE you head into the discussion:

- What are some current topics that you care about that relate to this letter?
- Which part of the letter is particularly enlightening to you? Why?
- Why do you think it’s important for you and your peers to discuss this reading today?
Here’s the agenda we suggest you use:

| Welcome & Introductions (10 mins) | Welcome | Welcome your group to your session and briefly share why we read this text. We read this text for two reasons:
1. To understand what we can learn from Martin Luther King, Jr.’s leadership
2. Discuss the ideas around social justice he shares and how they relate to our world today
Also inform your group that you’ll be following a fairly structured format to discuss the reading.
Introductions | Start by creating a “container”: quick introduction from the group including names and one word about what they’re feeling/bringing to the discussion. Then go over ground rules: confidentiality, practicing active listening, respect, stay fully engaged, be willing to challenge each other’s ideas, etc. |
| Group Norms (10 mins) | You know how to set norms! Spend a few minutes to determine what the norms will be. For example, listen actively, speak from your experience instead of generalizing, respectfully challenge each other, the goal is not to agree but rather to gain a deeper understanding. |
| Discussion (60 mins) | You will cover three sections during the discussion. The discussion questions and instructions are provided on the following page. The three sections you will cover are:
1. Context
2. The Alabama Clergymen
3. Dr. King’s Opening |
| Wrap up (10 mins) | Individually, take 1–2 minutes to reflect on your groups’ discussion overall and write it down. If you’re struggling to come up with an aha, here are a few questions to help:
1. What was your favorite quote?
2. If you were to tell your friend about this experience tomorrow, what would you tell them?
(Optional) Take a photo of your group and share it on your cohort’s WhatsApp group! And, you’re done! |
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

We believe that a powerful way to experience the remarkable range of Dr. King’s rhetoric is to slow down and explore the different ways in which he argues and builds his case—layer by layer. Therefore, the questions are designed to allow you and your group to discuss the letter point-by-point.

This discussion follows the same format we use when discussing this reading in seminars and with the Acumen team. However, don’t feel tied to it when the discussion starts flowing. This guide is meant to be comprehensive but no exhaustive. This is one model of discussing this letter but there are and could be many others.

### Section 1: Context

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Facilitator Talking Points &amp; Questions</th>
<th>Facilitator Notes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Before diving into the letter, let’s first discuss the context in which it was written.</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Questions:</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>• How much did you know about Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., American history in the early 1960’s, what was going on in Birmingham, Alabama then prior to now?</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Why was this happening?</td>
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<tr>
<td>• What else was going on in the world at this time?</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Was there anything new that you learned while preparing for this discussion, that you would like to share with the group to provide context?</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Dr. King was an instrumental leader of the African-American Civil Rights Movement in the US in the 1950s and 1960s.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• A Baptist minister, he drew from aspects of Christian thought, and was also heavily influenced by the Satyagraha teachings of Mahatma Gandhi.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• This letter was written in response to a letter from eight Alabama clergymen. He wrote it in 1963 from a city jail, where he was imprisoned for leading a non-violent protest against racial discrimination.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Birmingham was one of the most segregated cities in the South, and there were unsolved bombings of black churches.</td>
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<td>• Also during this time: Vietnam War, U.S. President Kennedy assassinated, the FARC in Colombia were established, Nigeria was on the brink of civil war, Kenya gained independence from Britain, Gen. Ayub imposed martial law in Pakistan, and the Indian army ejected the Portuguese from Goa.</td>
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### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

**Section 2: The Alabama Clergymen**

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relevant text: The first 1.5 pages of the reading (pg. 257-258)</td>
<td>In their letter, the eight clergymen argue that:</td>
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**Questions:**
- Why do you think the clergymen made this letter public?
- What does the statement say?
- What effect does calling someone an outsider have?
- Do you see any connection between what you read here with things that you care about in your community? If so, what are those connections?

- Dr. King’s protests are badly timed and unwise. The protestors should wait. They [the clergy] are working on the issue. Be patient. This isn’t the time for your extreme measures.
- Dr. King is an “outsider” – i.e. Who are you to tell us what to do? You don’t understand our situation, we have it under control.
- Their language is very alienating, creating an us vs. them mentality.
### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

#### Section 3: Dr. King’s Opening

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<tr>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Relevant Text:</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• pg. 258 first paragraph from “My dear Fellow Clergymen...” till “patient and reasonable terms.”</td>
<td>Dr. King opens his letter masterfully:</td>
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<td>• pg. 258 line 30: “I have the honor....” until line 39 “we were invited here.”</td>
<td>• He addresses them as “My dear Fellow Clergymen” to highlight their sameness rather than differences. He’s saying we are all men of the cloth from the same Judeo-Christian background.</td>
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<td>• pg. 258 line 41: “I am in Birmingham” until p. 259 line 5 “beyond my particular home”</td>
<td>• He uses language from their letter (e.g. unwise and untimely) to start from their perspective, not his.</td>
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<td>• pg. 259 line 9: “Injustice anywhere...” until line 14 “never be considered an outsider anywhere in this country”</td>
<td>Then Dr. King gives three reasons why he is not an “outsider”.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Questions:</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>• What leadership technique does Dr. King use in his opening?</td>
<td>• He was invited as president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, which is a national organization.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Do you agree that there’s no such thing as an outsider?</td>
<td>• He uses a reference from the Bible and appeals to their higher purpose as clergymen by comparing himself to the apostle Paul, who was called to carry the gospel of freedom beyond his own place of birth.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• How does Dr. King’s campaign approach compare with approaches you’ve participated in or seen in the news recently?</td>
<td>• And he makes a moral argument: “I am in Birmingham because injustice is here...Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere...”</td>
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TIPS FOR EFFECTIVE FACILITATION

Your role as a facilitator is not to be an expert, but to enable the conversation among your group and move it along.

- Give yourself permission as the facilitator to pull people out or shut them down if the conversation is becoming unproductive or breaking any of those ground rules – your job is to keep people going in a productive discussion.

- Bridging: watch out for people getting into a rut or back and forth argument. You can break the pattern and take the opportunity to ask someone else in the group to say how they feel about the argument, and see if someone might be brave enough to take it on.

- Don’t be afraid of letting people disagree. It can be tempting to instigate conflict to make the discussion interesting, but the real art is to find the heat that’s already in the room and understand where it’s coming from.

- If you are asked, “What do you think the author means?” say, “I’m not going to answer that but would someone else like to?”

- Encourage participation from those who haven’t spoken yet. It’s important to strike a balance in your group of who’s sharing: there are those who will talk more and those who are more reluctant to share, and it’s up to the facilitator to help manage that balance.

- An important technique is to have participants read important passages in the text. Pick the passage you want people to read before-hand (with flexibility to shift as the discussion moves forward). This serves two purposes: 1. It is an easy and lower-risk way to bring more voices into the conversation; 2. Some people process better when hearing than when reading – so this is a way to make the text come alive. Whenever the facilitator guide says “Read” this means that the reading should be done by a participant, not by the facilitator.

- Be unafraid to hold the silence – let the questions sit there until someone has the courage to respond, and if they don’t, ask someone who you know has the confidence to do so in front of the group (not someone who doesn’t).

- Encourage vulnerability in the group by showing humility and vulnerability as a facilitator, particularly in moments when you can share. There’s a way of listening to people that makes them feel safe as well. A killer for the conversation as a facilitator is being the smartest person in the room. Instead, you are best being the quiet listener. If you feel no one is being vulnerable, figure out if there is someone in the group who will do that for you, and take that opportunity to share something from yourself in order to open up the conversation – leave that to your good judgment as a possible option.
TIPS FOR EFFECTIVE FACILITATION

• Your thoughts in the discussion are a currency, and you want to use them as little and efficiently as possible.

• Don’t let your group get away with trying to find the “answer” to the readings – throw the answer-seeking questions right back: “what do you think” or “talk to me about what it means to you.” The point is for them to struggle with it and make meaning for themselves rather than for you to guide them towards an answer. You could bring in Rilke’s quote (see below) on “living the questions” to remind that there is no concrete yes or no to these questions.

“Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves, like locked rooms and like books that are now written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.”

— Rainer Maria Rilke

• Don’t let them go into politics – this is another way that people escape the real conversation. Pull it back to the goal that this is about them discovering their principles and their deepest touchstones. If you let it devolve into intellectual banter, they will let themselves down in doing so.

• You may not get through all the questions in the facilitation guide, and that’s okay. Ask yourself as a facilitator, “What does this conversation want to be, given who’s in the room?” with the knowledge that our goal is to encourage participants to be open and connect with how they think and feel about the overarching themes and questions.

• Before closing, you might ask the group: have we missed anything or is there something you have a burning desire to add here?

• If you run out of time, end with each person going around and saying one word.

• The more you can link and reinforce the themes in the readings, the more people will walk away and remember – and that is the ultimate goal. Especially for those for whom English is not easy, it’s key to summarize the 3-4 key points that came up at the end, as this could be really helpful to those for whom this will be more of a challenge.

• Encourage participants to use “I” messages and dive into their own experience. Don’t let people depersonalize. Each group’s discussion will be different based on the participants' experiences, and the group will gain from the richness and diversity of the discussion.