

***Why We Can't Wait* by Martin Luther King Jr.**

Soapstone's *Dismantling Racism Discussion Group* talked about Martin Luther King's powerful book, *Why We Can't Wait* Jan 22, just days after the National MLK Holiday. The Southern Christian Leadership Conference chapter in Birmingham called for King's assistance in battling racism in their city. Nine days into the civil rights marches and boycott that began April 3, 1963 in Birmingham, King was arrested. Sparked by a published letter from church leaders arguing against the civil rights action, King wrote his Letter from a Birmingham Jail on the margins of that newspaper.

He said: "Racial injustice engulfs this community. Birmingham is probably the most thoroughly segregated city in the U.S. Its ugly record of brutality is widely known. Negroes have experienced grossly unjust treatment in the courts. There have been more unsolved bombings of Negro homes and churches in Birmingham than in any other city in the nation. These are the hard brutal facts of the case."

In the letter, King goes on to explain the planning and non-violent strategy to seek rights and takes issue with the church leaders' demand that civil rights actions stop while they wait for (stalled) negotiations. King wanted action first, to jump-start the negotiations.

He wrote: "When you are harried by day and haunted by night by the fact that you are a Negro, living constantly at tiptoe stance, never quite knowing what to expect next and are plagued with inner fears and outer resentments; when you are forever fighting a degenerating sense of "nobodiness"-then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait."

The brutality endured by protestors threatened by dogs and battered by water continued into early May. Young students took part in a Children's Campaign marching into town where they were met with snarling dogs and powerful water hoses. The night of May 11, white supremacists bombed homes in black neighborhoods, leading President Kennedy to call out the National Guard to bring peace to the city.

The attention brought by King's letter from jail and the brutality of the six weeks of protests in the city led to requests for King to write a book. He wrote ***Why We Can't Wait*** with his jail letter as a central chapter publishing the book in July 1964, one year after the Letter was printed in newspapers.

Jim Galloway, who facilitated discussions, noted that King's letter said the biggest threat facing protestors came from silent moderate supporters who failed to speak out against racism and brutality; not people like the Birmingham police chief Bull Connor, who unwittingly created new nationwide throngs of volunteers. In our discussions, we agreed it's just as important to speak out to fight the forms of racism that exist today.

We agreed that King's book did an excellent job of bringing to life what happened in Birmingham in the spring of 1963.

Galloway said one of the themes of King's book was the way the people shaped the leaders. Protestors took actions the civil right leaders then supported. As newspapers across the nation described what happened in Birmingham, the nation's reaction pushed both local businessmen and the federal government to act. The civil rights leaders were also pastors who taught the importance of non-violent protests, using God's love to change hearts and minds.

Pastor Mitzi Johnson said that Rev. King was the son and grandson of preachers. He grew up in a faith shaped by preaching and scripture. The group agreed that King's faith led him to believe that black Americans were entitled to freedom and justice and would earn it with God's help.

In discussing the book, we expressed concerns about present action in congress that failed to strengthen federal voting rights law. Local pushes across the country seek to limit teaching historical events, and to ban books in school and community libraries. The efforts in many states to curb voter participation and restructure vote counting procedures were condemned. We said both privileged people and leaders take such actions to maintain their hold on political and financial power.

The group consensus was that we want both to conserve historic rights and foster change to establish greater justice. To do this we must work together. We must learn how to be allies that can help move things forward.