



## STUDY GROUP LEADER

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# LETTER FROM BIRMINGHAM JAIL

## Resources: Suggestions and Evaluation

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Published 7/17/18



## Contents

STUDY GROUP LEADER GUIDE .....	3
<i>“Letter from a Birmingham Jail”</i> .....	3
Introduction.....	3
Session 1:.....	4
Suggested Discussion Points .....	5
Final Session:.....	7
Ground Rules for Groups .....	8
5 Key Suggestions for MLK LFBJ Group Process.....	9
EVALUATION Form .....	10

# STUDY GROUP LEADER GUIDE

## *“Letter from a Birmingham Jail”*

### Introduction:

This is a “guide” for the study of Martin Luther King's *“Letter from a Birmingham Jail”*. The length of each session and the number of meetings can vary, but it is suggested that a group meet for about 1½ hours each time and there should be at least five sessions.

Because King's “Letter” can bring out a variety of reactions, feelings and ideas, it is important to ensure that participants feel safe. To that end, develop guidelines for confidentiality, pledge to honor each person's response as a contribution; assure that no one person dominates the conversation. See below for suggestions

Some strategies for group process might be to invite participants to keep a journal each week and write down and reflect on instances of racism they experience/observe/read about. At the end of each session, the group could be invited to take a few moments of silence, with the invitation to share one word about “where they are now”, “what they experienced”, “how they feel,” etc.

Evaluation of the process will take place continually as the leader assesses the group's situation and adjustment made for how material is presented and discussed. At the end of the last session, however, we ask that the leader fill out the Evaluation Form.

Please feel free to adapt as you see fit, for your group, number of sessions, and length of time per session.

The next pages have page breaks in case you want to print out questions for your group discussions.

## Session 1:

### Quick Get-to-know-you:

Let each participant introduce self briefly and state why they are attending this group

### Establish group norms (see below for suggestions)

### What was going on in April 1963?

View short context: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XIpfCVt2eb4>

Read Aloud Historical Context (Participant's Package)

Ask for Group Sharing

### What was the immediate catalyst for Dr. King writing the letter?

Read Aloud: Letter from 8 Alabama Clergymen (Participant's Package)

Brief discussion:

Any ways you identify with their concerns?

Do they raise issues current today?

Why was MLK in jail?

Listen to the letter. Here are 3 excellent options

1. Dr. King reading his Letter. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=3&v=ATPSht6318o](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=3&v=ATPSht6318o)
2. View a film: A reading of the Letter by various community leaders with powerful pictures from the times <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cT397uOak>
3. Have one or more participants in your group read one or two paragraphs, either in its entirety, or with breaks for group discussion

Process participants' responses: feelings? physical reaction? ways in which Pastors and King see the situation differently?

### Homework:

- Journal: please find a quiet place to write any thoughts that have come to you in your notebook/journal about the experience of session one, and during the week notice any incident that bears on the topics MLK addressed
- Read King's Letter perhaps paying attention to words/phrases/images he use?

## Suggested Discussion Points

How is reading the letter different from the group experience of watching/listening to many people read the letter?

What catches your attention or unsettles you in reading the letter? What new thoughts/ideas/ reactions occurred to you?

What is the crux of the conflict between Dr. King and the faith community bishops and other leaders? Where/ Why did King and Pastors agree/disagree?

How do you view the context of his reply and our current state of race relations? Compare/contrast our current state of conflict in the USA with the Civil Rights Era conflict.

The letter speaks of economic exploitation of people of color by the white power structure for centuries. How about today? Do we white people continue to 'benefit' from economic exploitation of poor people today?

Have you ever experienced the kind of violent persecution and abuse experienced by black people and other minorities and marginalized communities and individuals? Or had a friend or family member who did so?

What inner spiritual resources sustained and empowered the civil rights protesters, especially the young people? Today?

What are your own feelings and behavior towards the "other"?

How relevant to your own experience is King's discussion of Black History; what words do you use to talk about race?

Share from participants' journal/ reflection on their experience of race that week.

What did you think of " Uncomfortable" by Jodi Heights

Discuss the concerns/issues King is attempting to communicate. Perhaps divide the letter into several sections: eg.

What was MLK's response to "patience"?

Why did he not want to "wait" any longer?

Do you think all laws are just?

When is it justified to break the law and how did King "break the law"?

What is MLK's view of race and does it differ from today?

Why was MLK willing to go to jail/put his life on the line?

Would you follow his leadership?

What was the role of the church in that situation?

Is it different today?

Why was he considered an "outsider"?

How did he see the role of the Birmingham police. How is that role the same/different today?

If MLK came to Cape Cod today, how would he be received? How welcoming is your church/community to persons of color? Are the people with whom you work and play similar in color, economic condition, educational and ethnic background?

Define the "other".

Define Racism.

Define White Privilege.

**Final Session:**

During this session, focus on personal/corporate action.

Reflect on MLK's 4 steps:

Collection of facts

Negotiation

Self-purification

Direct action.

Ask:

What will you do now in the presence of racist act or word?

Where do you discern injustice in your community?

Who is working on it and what might you be willing to do?

Complete the Final Evaluation form: How many in the group? Meeting place? Highs/Lows in group discussion and process? What aspects of King's letter did the group struggle with the most? How/Were disagreements settled? Did people admit to changing their thinking about race and the need for and ways to address racism today? Decisions about actions?

**Evaluation Form: please give the MLK Action Team feedback. (see document below)**

## Ground Rules for Groups

- **Everyone's story is heard and respected.**
- **Things shared in confidence are held in confidence.**
- **People take responsibility for their own learning and growth.**
- **It's okay to disagree.**
- **It's not okay to shame, blame, or attack.**
- **Hurtful or offensive remarks and behaviors do not go unaddressed.**
- **People can practice speaking the truth in love.**
- **People can practice trying on new ideas.**

### Oops and Ouch Rule:

- Say "OOPS" to acknowledge when you may unintentionally say something and wish you had not.
- Say "OUCH" when someone's words or actions offend you. Ouch should not be used simply when someone disagrees with what's been said, but only when they are offended or personally attacked.

If your group uses this rule, explain that this will suspend conversation for a moment, during which you'll ask the participant about the "ouch" and then encourage participants

involved to further discuss the issue at a break. It is important the facilitator does not ask the participant who made the offensive comment to explain or justify their statements,

which sets the dialogue up to become a debate.

### Guidelines you might list:

- Listen carefully before responding and when you do respond, begin by paraphrasing what you heard the other person say to ensure you correctly understand them.
- Speak from your own experience.
- As you share insights gained from the group, respect confidentiality.
- Honor your own discomfort at things that are being said or done by members of the group, so that expressions of racism (and other "isms") do not go unaddressed.
- Pay attention to times when you are responding (verbally or nonverbally) with defensiveness and denial, and be open to exploring what lies beneath those responses.
- Share the time and space with others.
- Allow each other and ourselves to change.

## 5 Key Suggestions for MLK LFBJ Group Process

- If possible, have 2 facilitators for each study group – different genders, races, or sexual orientation is ideal. How you connect to each other can help make participants feel comfortable.
- Open the group with essential information, eg: this is the group studying the Letter from the Birmingham Jail; the bathrooms are downstairs to your right; we are meeting for 1.5 hours today and for five weekly sessions. We hope you can join us for the entire series. Facilitators are timekeepers. Respecting people's time commitment means they're more likely to return.
- People listen best when they trust they'll be listened to. Good to start each group and especially the first group with people getting their voices in the room.

Providing a prompt makes this easy. Would you tell us your name, where you are from, and what you remember from 1963 or what you remember learning about 1963? Or, more simply, why did you come? (Choose one prompt only). Then facilitators start the checking in by modeling it in a personable and brief way. This can discourage people telling their life stories, unless it's a small group and that feels okay to you.

- Participants who participate often have better experiences – it can help to notice and politely inquire of anyone who has not spoken who might have something to add to the conversation.
- Our roles as facilitators also involves listening. People may have difficult things that come up around racial experiences. If someone has a troubling story, let them take the time they need, we can listen in a kind way, and then when it feels right steer the conversation back to the Letter.

These may become comfortable conversations as people get to know each other. We don't need to cling to the agenda if people are engaged from the reading and want to bring up current issues, personal experiences, etc.

These are reflections and suggestions only. Everyone will do best as they practice their own facilitating style..

## EVALUATION Form

The MLK Action Committee would like to hear from you about your group after completing the Study Guide for MLK's Letter From Birmingham Jail.

Please return the completed questionnaire to Becky Alden, [raalden@capecod.net](mailto:raalden@capecod.net). Or mail it to Becky Alden, MLK Action Committee, 333 Route 28, Apt. 10, Harwichport, MA 02646

1. Was your group a preexisting group, or a new group created just for this study?
  
2. Please describe the group, the organization you are affiliated with, your groups' focus and perhaps even a short description of the interests and backgrounds of your leaders and participants so we can tailor our material for future groups  
  
How many were in your group? (if religious, how many participants/leaders were clergy?)
  
3. Please give us feedback about our Participant, Leader and Resource Material? Did it help? How could it have been improved?
  
4. Can you tell us some of the actions your group, or members of your group plan on doing as a result of this study?
  
5. Any other comments would be gratefully appreciated.

Thank you for completing this questionnaire!