

To Simeon Booker

20 Oct  
1959

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[Montgomery, Ala.]

*After reading an unfavorable article on SCLC in Jet, King called the magazine's Washington bureau chief to rebut the charges.<sup>1</sup> Following up in this letter, King asserts that SCLC's "aim is neither to grab headlines nor have a multiplicity of mass meetings" and notes that some members have "taken time out of extremely busy schedules to actually knock on doors" to encourage voter registration. King admits, however, that he is "all too conscious and even ashamed of our occasional apathy, complacency, irresponsibility." He concludes with an affirmation of his respect for Johnson Publishing Company and observes that "unity is still that magical something that will be necessary to finally crush the walls of segregation."*

Mr. Simeon Booker  
Washington Bureau Chief  
Jet Magazine  
Johnson Publishing Company  
Washington, D.C.

Dear Mr. Booker:

As a follow-up of our telephone conversation a few hours ago I would like to submit the following facts concerning the Southern Christian Leadership Conference:

1. Far from halting its efforts and program, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference is actually expanding. In the recent meeting of the Conference at Columbia, South Carolina, we voted to add two persons to our staff in Atlanta and expand our general program throughout the South.
2. While it is true that there have been changes in personnel, these changes were made to strengthen the organization instead of diminishing its effectiveness. As far as Rev. Tilley is concerned, my only comment is that he is a very fine man with a dedicated spirit, and one whom I have warm affections for.
3. It is true that we have not raised \$250,000.00 as we had initially contemplated, but we have raised much more than \$25,000.00. Our secretary-treasurer is out of the city now and I do not have the figures before me, but I would ven-

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1. A subsequent news item in *Jet* reflected King's refutation and included information on SCLC's financial condition and expansion plans ("Ticker Tape U.S.A.," *Jet*, 12 November 1959, pp. 10-11). Simeon S. Booker (1918- ), born in Baltimore, received a B.A. (1942) from Virginia Union University. In 1950 he was awarded Harvard's Nieman Fellowship in journalism and worked as the first full-time black reporter at the *Washington Post* from 1952 until 1954. Booker became the Washington bureau chief for Johnson Publishing Co. in 1955 and traveled to Ghana's independence celebrations in March 1957 as part of Vice President Nixon's delegation. Booker covered the Selma to Montgomery march for *Ebony* and in 1967 was part of a panel that interviewed King on "Meet the Press."

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ture to say that we have raised approximately \$50,000.00. Actually, our organization is in better financial shape at the present time than it has ever been, and we are getting support from many new sources.

4. Our aim is neither to grab headlines nor have a multiplicity of mass meetings on the question of registration and voting; we are concerned about getting the job done. We have been so concerned about this that we have tried to employ people to head the administrative staff of our organization with technical know how and competence. I may say further that some of us have been so concerned about this pressing problem of getting our people registered that we have taken time out of extremely busy schedules to actually knock on doors. More than fifteen of the leading ministers of Montgomery, Alabama took a day off and went into numerous homes to determine how many people were registered and encourage those who were eligible to do so.<sup>2</sup>

A further illustration of our concern with technical know how and concrete results is the fact that one of the most important sessions of our Columbia meeting was given to a practical discussion of political action on the part of the Negro in Memphis, Tennessee. We had Attorney Sugarmon and Attorney Hooks to lead the discussion, both of whom ran for public offices in Memphis in the recent municipal election.<sup>3</sup>

As I said to you on the telephone, I do not want to give the impression that we have done any herculean job in the area of registration and voting. We are quite conscious of the fact we have not scratched the surface in the South in this all-important area of voting. Moreover, we do not feel that our organization is above criticism, nor any individual connected with it, for it is often through constructive criticism that we grow, correct our errors, and improve our shortcomings. I for one am not the minister with a holy art thou attitude, feeling that we are above reproach. I am all too conscious and even ashamed of our occasional apathy, complacency, irresponsibility. But in spite of all of this, I am sure that destructive criticism will do the cause of freedom no good. Neither will it help for any individual or publication to sow seeds of dissention. The job ahead is difficult, and our opponents are willing to use any technique to prevent our advances. In order to meet this massive resistance we will need the massive assistance of every segment of Negro society. This is a time for big things and big action. Individuals and organizations must submerge their petty jealousies, envies, and quests for recognition in the glowing commitment to the overall cause. The fact remains that no organization has done an adequate job in the area of registration and voting. The job is too big for any single organization. What we must do now is come together on all levels and coordinate our efforts. Unity is still that magical something that will be necessary to finally crush the walls of segregation.

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2. King and other MIA ministers walked door to door in Montgomery's Victor Tulane housing project to encourage voter registration ("Montgomery Launches New Voter Registration Drive," *Birmingham World*, 26 September 1959).

3. Attorney Russell B. Sugarmon ran for Memphis city commissioner during the summer of 1959. Benjamin L. Hooks, an attorney and ordained minister who went on to become the executive director of the national NAACP, ran for juvenile court judge in the same year.

The Martin Luther King, Jr. Papers Project

Again, I must say that I am sorry that this situation developed, and above all, I am sorry that we were misrepresented in the article. I am sure that it will cause my associates and me some embarrassment and lay upon us the burden of some unnecessary explaining; and I am sure it will make it much more difficult for us to raise funds for our humble and struggling efforts. But in spite of that we will continue to move on. And let me assure you that this in no way lessens my regards for you and Johnson Publication, for I have been so inspired by the good that has come to the Negro and the nation as a result of the creative contribution made by Johnson Publication—nothing less than a tour de force—that I would be an ingrate to fail to appreciate it.

27 Oct  
1959

Very sincerely yours,  
Martin Luther King, Jr., President  
The Southern Christian Leadership  
Conference, Inc.

MLK:mlb

TLc. MLKP-MBU: Box 20.