

Clergy answer King's 1963 Letter from Birmingham Jail

by [Kevin Eckstrom](#)

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(RNS) A coalition of Christian churches answered the Rev. Martin Luther King's 1963 "Letter from Birmingham Jail," conceding that Americans have often have chosen to be comfortable rather than "prophetic" on racism.

Leaders of Christian Churches Together in the USA, meeting in Birmingham, Ala., said they were "chastened by the unfinished nature" of overcoming racism after visiting Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, where a bomb killed four young black girls in 1963.

"Too often, our follow-through has been far less than our spoken commitments," the group said in a letter released Friday (Jan. 14). "Too often we have elected to be comfortable rather than prophetic. Too often we have chosen not to see the evidence of a racism that is less overt but still permeates our national life in corrosive ways."

King's 1963 letter was a response to local clergy who urged black protesters to drop their "unwise and untimely" civil rights protests and engage in "negotiations" with white authorities.

King responded that "there comes a time when the cup of endurance runs over, and men are no longer willing to be plunged into the abyss of

despair. I hope, sirs, you can understand our legitimate and unavoidable impatience."

CCT officials said "so far as we know, no one has ever issued a clergy response to Dr. King's letter." They acknowledge that "some of us have not progressed far enough beyond the initial message from the Birmingham clergy."

Christian Churches Together, which was officially formed in 2007, is the nation's largest ecumenical Christian group, bringing together evangelical, Catholic, Orthodox, mainline Protestant and historic black churches, as well as independent groups like Habitat for Humanity and the American Bible Society.