

To John Lee Tilley

3 April 1959
[Montgomery, Ala.]

With SCLC's Crusade for Citizenship stalled and its treasury overextended, King asks its first executive director to resign.¹ Tilley complied on 13 April.²

1. Tilley sent a letter to SCLC board members on 17 March in which he noted that "the success of our organization is being threatened by a rapidly dwindling bank account. . . . we are hard pressed, and will be greatly embarrassed, if further funds are not available from some source, immediately." SCLC treasurer Ralph Abernathy sent out a mass appeal for funds on the same day (Abernathy to Friend of freedom, 17 March 1959).

2. See pp. 182-184 in this volume. SCLC's associate director Ella Baker served as interim executive director until Wyatt Tee Walker of the Petersburg Improvement Association was hired to replace Tilley in mid-1960 (see King to Walker, 5 March 1960, pp.384-385.in this volume).

3 Apr
1959
Dr. John L. Tilley
2101 Whittier Street
Baltimore, Maryland

Dear Dr. Tilley:

In a meeting of the Administrative Committee of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference which was held on Thursday, April 2, in Montgomery, Alabama, several important matters were discussed which the Committee asked me to bring to your attention immediately.

First, the financial crisis confronting the organization was seriously analyzed. As you well know, our treasury is almost empty and we are now operating in the red.³ In the last few months our disbursements have far exceeded our income. In order to assure the continued existence of the organization, we concluded that our budget must be cut immediately. This automatically means cutting the staff. I am sure that you can understand both the necessity and the wisdom of this.

Secondly, it was the feeling of the committee that the organization has not had a dynamic program commensurate with the amount of money that it is spending. It was also felt that the Executive Director had not been able to achieve the public response expected. We had hoped that our program would be well developed by now, and that the aims and purposes of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference would have been well established in the minds and hearts of the people all over the nation by this time. Of course, we were not unmindful of the factors that were probably responsible for this failure in implementation. We were cognizant of the fact that your responsibilities as a pastor had to continue along with your work with us, and it was probably too much to expect the full implementation of our program from a person who could only give part-time to it.⁴

In the light of the factors here enumerated, the Administrative Committee has instructed me to request your resignation to become effective April 15. We are certainly grateful to you for the work that you have given to our youthful organization. The fact that you were willing to take a partial leave from your church and come to us at a time when we were in desperate need of assistance is something that we will never forget. We hope that this move, which has been precipitated by our present crisis, will not in any way cause you to sever your interest and affection from our conference.⁵

In the next four or five days I will mail you a check for all that the organization owes you up through the fifteenth of April. If you feel that it is necessary, I will be very happy to discuss this matter with you.

3. SCLC's funds had dwindled to \$163.75 and it owed over sixteen hundred dollars to Tilley and Baker (Abernathy, Financial report, 2 April 1959).

4. After becoming executive director of SCLC in 1958, Tilley continued to serve as part-time pastor of New Metropolitan Baptist Church in Baltimore.

5. King later suspected that Tilley may have contributed to an unfavorable article on SCLC that appeared in the October issue of *Jet* (see King to Theodore E. Brown, 19 October 1959, pp. 310-312 in this volume).

The Martin Luther King, Jr. Papers Project

Yours very truly,
Martin L. King, Jr.

MLK:mlb

TLc. MLKP-MBU: Box 72.

7 Apr
1959