**Analysis activity 12.9: ‘Letter from Birmingham Jail’**

While King was in jail from 12 April, a letter in a local newspaper, written by eight white ministers from Alabama, criticised King as an outsider and condemned his protests in Birmingham for ‘spreading hatred between the races’. King’s lawyers smuggled a pen into the jail, and King wrote a long reply on toilet paper and in the margins of newspapers. His response to these white church leaders was also published, and became one of the most famous documents in the history of the civil rights movement. Here is a short extract.

**King’s attitude to non-violence protests**

*In any nonviolent campaign there are four basic steps: collection of the facts to determine whether injustices exist; negotiation; self-purification; and direct action. We have gone through all these steps in Birmingham … Birmingham is probably the most thoroughly segregated city in the United States …*

*We had no alternative except to prepare for direct action, whereby we would present our very bodies as a means of laying our case before the conscience of the local and the national community … We began a series of workshops on nonviolence, and we repeatedly asked ourselves: ‘Are you able to accept blows without retaliating?’ ‘Are you able to endure the ordeal of jail?’ We decided to schedule our direct action program for the Easter season, realizing that except for Christmas, this is the main shopping period of the year …*

*You may well ask: ‘Why direct action? Why sit ins, marches and so forth? Isn’t negotiation a better path?’ You are quite right in calling for negotiation. Indeed, this is the very purpose of direct action. Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. It seeks so to dramatize the issue that it can no longer be ignored …*

*The purpose of our direct action program is to create a situation so crisis packed that it will inevitably open the door to negotiation. I therefore concur with you in your call for negotiation. Too long has our beloved Southland been bogged down in a tragic effort to live in monologue rather than dialogue.*