

My life with Martin

For three years, since 1956, Martin had been virtually commuting between Montgomery and SCLC headquarters in Atlanta. Toward the end of 1959, my husband had come to the point in his life when he felt that he had to give still more time to the civil-rights struggle, and that in order to do this, he could no longer perform his duties as full-time pastor of Dexter. The times seemed to dictate the need for a concentrated assault on the system of segregation in the South. Martin felt that if SCLC was to expand and really become the catalyst that would move the South and the nation forward, then he must devote full time to the organization and its development.

The Dexter congregation did not in any way resent Martin's activities. In fact, it is hard to describe the patience and understanding they showed us. Rather than requiring that Martin preach every Sunday, when civil-rights activities required this presence elsewhere, they would hire other ministers to fill in for him. Martin himself would be assailed with guilt as to whether he was giving the church sufficient attention; yet, at that same moment, the board of deacons and church members of Dexter would say, "We know all the demands upon you, but don't even consider leaving us. Dr. King, we want you to stay at Dexter forever."

It was a very hard problem, but finally the pressure of traveling back and forth to Atlanta, trying to pastor at Dexter, speaking and traveling all over the country, as well as in other parts of the world; the increased demands of the civil rights Movement; and all the other demands placed on him as a leading public figure, led Martin to the painful decision that he must leave Montgomery.

Atlanta provided the greatest opportunity for his personal development as well as offering the most favorable climate in which SCLC could grow.

He discussed the situation with Daddy King, who pointed out that having Martin with him at Ebenezer would be of enormous help to him, since he was finding it increasingly difficult to manage alone. The matter was taken up with the board of deacons, and they most generously offered Martin the position of co-pastor of the Ebenezer Baptist Church of Atlanta.

Martin was moved and excited by the prospect, but, even so, leaving Dexter was a great wrench for us as well as for the congregation. There was something very special to us about Montgomery; it was our first church, and our experience of sharing and suffering with the people brought us so close together. We loved the congregation and they loved us. They wanted Martin to

stay, and though we knew we must move on, we shared their feeling. The members of the congregation, as well as others in the Montgomery community, would say to him, "Oh, Dr. King, we feel so comfortable when you're in town. We just know that if anything happens, you'll know how to handle the situation."

On Sunday, November 29, I was in church when Martin offered his resignation. He asked the Reverend T.E. Brooks to preach the regular sermon, and then he went to the pulpit. As he stood there, so filled with emotion, you could feel the love and sorrow of the people reaching toward him.

Martin said, "What I am about to say I know you are already aware of

... For almost four years now, I have been trying to do as one man, what five or six people ought to be doing...

He talked of the responsibilities that had been thrust upon him and "the strain of being known" and the fact that he had been unable to serve them as completely as a pastor should. Then he said, "I want you to know that after long and prayerful meditation, I have come to the conclusion that I can't stop now. History has thrust upon me a responsibility from which I cannot turn away. I have no choice but to free you now."

Then supporting himself on the lectern, his heart reaching out to the brothers and sister, Martin said, "I would like to submit my resignation as pastor of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, to become effective on the fourth Sunday in January, 1960."

As the congregation of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church rose for the Benediction, they sang, "Blest Be The Tie That Binds," and my husband wept.

Two days later, on December 1,

1959, Martin served notice on the nation of a great new thrust toward black freedom. He said, "The time has come for a broad, bold advance of the southern campaign for equality. After prayerful consideration I am convinced that the psychological moment has come when a concentrated drive against injustice can bring great tangible gains.... Not only will it include a stepped-up campaign for voter registration, but a full-scale assault will be made upon discrimination and segregation in all forms. We must train our youth and adult leaders in the techniques of social change through nonviolent resistance. We must employ the new methods of struggle involving the masses of the people."

The unfolding of this intricate offensive was made possible by our moving to Atlanta where Martin's direction of the Movement could be more effective.

On the last Sunday in January, there was a big ceremony in Martin's honor at Dexter. His life in Montgomery was reviewed and, to Martin's complete surprise, Mamma King, A.D., Christine, and my parents all suddenly appeared. Yoki and Marty, then only four and two, were also present. It was a beautiful and moving occasion that was culminated when the congregation presented us with a lovely silver tea service engraved with the inscription: "To Dr. and Ms. Martin Luther King, Jr., in grateful appreciation. Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, Montgomery, Alabama 1954-1960."

At a testimonial given by the Montgomery Improvement Association, Martin again spoke with deep emotion. All of us had lived through so much together that our hearts were very close.

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Martin Luther King,
a hero for peace.**

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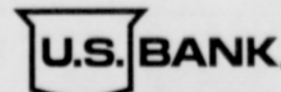
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