

Cap Grad's Memoir Recalls Civil Rights Fight and Life in the Black Community

In the summer of 1955, Capital graduate the Rev. Robert Graetz '50, S'55 and his wife, Jean Ellis Graetz '53, were sent by Lutheran Church officials to Montgomery, Ala., to pastor an all-black congregation.

Six months later, he and his family would become players in the American civil rights movement.

Such is the focus of Graetz's new memoir, "A White Preacher's Message on Race and Reconciliation," which follows Graetz through the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the civil rights movement, to the 21st century fight for equality.

When Graetz and his wife and their two children moved to the Deep South, they took the then-controversial step of living in Montgomery's black community. Among the friends they soon made were Raymond and Rosa Parks, whose arrest, of course, triggered the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Bob and Jeannie were among the few whites who supported the first broad-based civil rights protest of the 20th century.

"I became aware of race relations seven years earlier, in 1948," Graetz said. "I had a sociology course with Professor Karl Hertz at Capital and founded the Race Relations Club that year. I also joined the NAACP. But we didn't know how awful racial discrimination was until we got there. That was a major shock to us. There had been violence that surrounded the Brown v. Board of Education decision in 1954 and the killing of Emmett Till in 1955, but we weren't prepared for it when we got there."

The Graetzes were neighbors of the Parks. "Rosa was an adviser for the NAACP Youth Council that met at our church," he said. "The bus strike was organized by a group of women. The area ministers came aboard and supported the women. We announced to our congregations to stay off the buses, then I offered my car to help transport people. By then I was a member of the movement."

He was the only white member of the board of trustees of the Montgomery Improvement Association, which directed the boycott.

"Then the threats and anonymous phone calls came. They slashed our tires; put sugar in gas tanks and bombed our house – twice," he said. A third bomb was



Robert Graetz and Martin Luther King Jr. together at a Lutheran youth gathering at Miami Beach in 1961; the Rev. Graetz is on the other side of the man standing.

discovered, but it did not go off. Officials determined that the amount of dynamite it contained could have blown up half of the block.

"After our successful bus boycott, we also became involved in other activities, including school desegregation and opening parks and recreation facilities to all races. We launched a full frontal assault on discrimination and racial segregation," Graetz said.

In spite of the violence and danger, Graetz and his family were determined to stay in Alabama; but God had other ideas, and in 1958, Graetz accepted a call to St. Philip Lutheran Church in Columbus, where he served until 1967.

"Members of our congregation came to visit," Graetz said. "They had mixed feelings. They did not want us to leave Montgomery, but they realized that the Klan would have eventually got us." By this time the Graetzes had five children: Margee, Robert Jr., Dianne, David and Kathryn. Two more, Jonathan and Carolyn, were born in Columbus.

Once back in Columbus, the Graetzes' civil rights activities continued. He became active in the Columbus chapter of the NAACP, and his speaking calendar became filled with requests to speak to the Urban League, Near East Side Area Council, Columbus Council on Human Relations, Greater Columbus Committee for Fair Housing, Citizens Advisory Committee and the Columbus Leadership Conference, all of which worked to improve race relations

in Central Ohio.

Throughout these years, Jeannie served by his side and describes herself as "Bob's keeper."

"I was there to support him," Jeannie said. "We got to meet and entertain people from all over the world, and we made a lot of friends from everywhere. When I look back at those times, it really was not so horrifying as it sounds. I felt that the Lord had put a circle of love around us and hate could not penetrate that."

Over the years, Bob Graetz's distinguished record of community service and devotion to human relations has earned numerous awards and accolades.

He received the Russwurm Award in 1957 from the National Negro

Newspaper Publishers Association; the Selma Humanitarian Award in 1976; Distinguished Alumnus Award from Trinity Lutheran Seminary in 1986; Ohio Humanitarian Award in 1993; and the Governor's Humanitarian Award in 1997. In 1990, he received an honorary doctor of humanities degree from Capital. He has been involved with Washington, D.C.-based lobbying groups; has written numerous papers and articles on human and race relations; and has served on numerous boards and committees.

For the past 12 years, the Graetzes have led civil rights pilgrimages, leading church, school and community groups on tours of



A recent photograph of the Rev. Bob Graetz and his wife Jeannie.

important civil rights sites. They have spoken to groups all across the country on race relations, civil rights and other related topics.

Currently, the couple is living in Montgomery, where they are guests of the National Center for the Study of Civil Rights and African-American Culture at Alabama State University, one of this country's historic black colleges. Montgomery is celebrating the 50th anniversary of the bus boycott, and the Graetzes are serving a two-year appointment as ambassadors-at-large. They speak to classes at ASU, to groups that visit the center and to many other groups throughout Alabama on behalf of the center. They also have been interviewed and have conducted interviews for the center's oral history project.

There are usually two points they try to make in their talks. "We always write

the word RACE on the chalkboard or screen," said Jeannie. "We then write that RACE means Respect All Cultures Equally, and all people should strive for mutual respect."

"The second thing we stress," Bob continued, "is that there are little things that people can do every day. We don't have to wait for a big event to happen to become involved."

The couple's lifetime collection of papers and artifacts has been donated to the National Center, where it now is available to historians and students. The center is also in the process of establishing the Graetz Symposium on Civil Rights and



Bob and Jeannie with attorney Fred Gray (second from left). Gray was Rosa Parks' attorney, and has been a civil rights attorney on numerous historical civil rights cases. They are with Thomas Gray, Fred's brother, and his wife, Juanita.

Reconciliation, an annual conference that will be held on the ASU campus.

A White Preacher's Message ...

"A White Preacher's Message on Race and Reconciliation" describes the Graetzes' adventures during the 50 years of the modern civil rights movement. Their experiences in Montgomery shaped a long ministerial career that always emphasized equality and justice issues. The book includes provocative chapters on white privilege, black forgiveness, and the present-day challenges for human and civil rights, including those for gays and lesbians. Here is an excerpt:

The modern civil rights movement began in the church. It was conducted by people of faith attempting to live out their understanding of God's call to them, to live lives centered in righteousness, justice and love. When the movement was at its zenith, it achieved its goals because of the involvement of large numbers of people of many faiths.

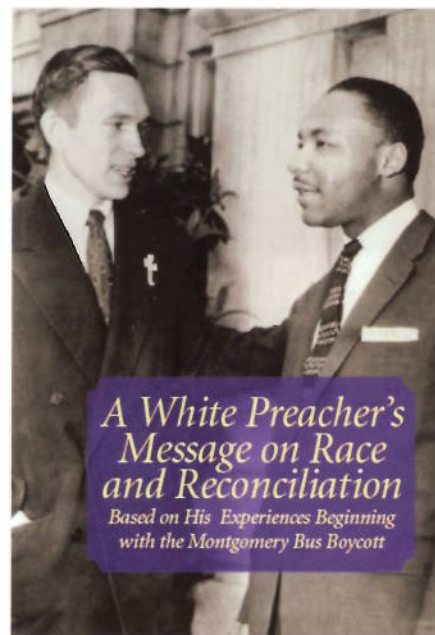
Our human history would seem to be a betrayal of that call from God, as we survey the wars and conflicts around the world that have grown out of conflicts between and among people of differing faiths. Our faith commitments, which at one point in time were drawing us closer together, now seem to be creating unbridgeable chasms between us. There was a time when church bodies were falling all over each other to identify

those tenets which we shared, and could celebrate. Now there are extremist groups within virtually every faith who seem hellbent on identifying every possible difference that divides us.

We must focus our attention once more on Dr. King's dream of the Beloved Community. We must look beyond our differences and think of those factors that we share: our common humanity, our need to partake equitably of the resources God has given to us all, our vulnerability to the destruction that flows out of hatred and animosity, our increasing interdependence as we move into a totally global society and economy. It is God who created us. It is God who calls us to be one people. It is God to whom we are responsible for what we do with our lives and our world.

There is a verse of scripture that was quoted often by Dr. King and which now is engraved in the black marble backdrop to the Civil Rights Memorial in Montgomery, which is dedicated to the memory of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and forty other martyrs who gave their lives for the cause of human rights: "But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream." (Amos 5:24, NRSV)

May that be our dream as we move toward the Beloved Community!



**A White Preacher's
Message on Race
and Reconciliation**
Based on His Experiences Beginning
with the Montgomery Bus Boycott

ROBERT S. GRAETZ, JR.
Foreword by JOHN LEWIS

"A White Preacher's Message on Race and Reconciliation" is available through local bookstores, chain/online retailers, or from NewSouth Books, toll free (866) 639-7688, or at <http://www.newsouthbooks.com/graetz>.