

**Practicing What You Preach:
The Untold Story of Rev. Robert S. Graetz Jr. in the Montgomery Bus Boycott**

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Abstract

The Reverend Robert S. Graetz Jr. has a relatively unknown story about his involvement in the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Few remember his name, even though he was the white minister to the all African American congregation of Trinity Lutheran Church. Instead of taking a back seat to the fight for Civil Rights, Rev. Graetz dove head first; driving boycotters to their jobs, attending the mass meetings, and joining the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) among many other groups. Rev. Graetz helped lead the Montgomery Bus Boycott with his faith in God and strong convictions of helping those in need to carry him forward.

Language Disclaimer:

In keeping with how Rev. Graetz wrote his memoir, and how people spoke in the 1950's, language about the African American community has been quoted exactly in terms some contemporary readers may find disturbing. Reader discretion is advised.

Vignette

The sounds of children playing in the front yard should bring images of joy and blissful happiness. Their innocence in the world is beautiful, their noises bring smiles to those that see them, and children rarely have a care in the world. Yet in 1956 this was not the always the case, especially for Robert Graetz, his wife Jeannie, and their four small children. Due to their involvement in the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the Graetz family faced constant danger, "...not only were our lives threatened but there were people threatening our children's lives on a regular basis. People would call us up and say 'I see your children out in the yard there, are you sure they're okay out there?'"¹ Every day that the Graetz family was involved in the Boycott was another day that the entire family was at risk of bodily harm from those that disagreed with the fight to the end segregation in the South. Their children could not play outside like others did so freely. Every action of theirs was watched, and the Graetz family had to be hypervigilant for the safety of their children. More than phone calls, the Graetz family received death threats in the newspaper, through the mail, and in person.

While the Graetz family were not the only people who fought for Civil Rights in Montgomery, Alabama, they were one of the only white, northern families that had an active voice for the African American population. This made the family targets of hate from angry southerners and groups like the Ku Klux Klan. More than just being an active family, Robert Graetz was the pastor to an all-black Lutheran church in Montgomery- this only fanned the flame of hatred from outside groups. Nevertheless, the Graetz family remained active in Montgomery from the summer of 1955 to the fall of 1958.

¹ Robert S. Graetz, interview by PBS, *PBS*, April 14, 2011, accessed October 10, 2018, <https://www.pbs.org/video/religion-ethics-newsweekly-rev-robert-graetz-extended-interview/3:14-3:32>.

Introduction

Once again, if we forget, we risk losing not only our sense of history but also our awareness of who we are and why we are here. –Rev. Robert Graetz, *A White Preacher's Memoir*.

History is far more than reciting facts, figures, and important events. History, as Rev. Graetz puts it above, is about remembering one's heritage, one's past, and to see how far humanity has progressed. Forgetting the past can lead to the repeating of events and atrocities, which is why telling the stories of how far society has advanced is crucial to the education of future generations. The topic of this story is the involvement in one of the most pivotal moments in modern American history, and the role a relatively unheard-of pastor had to play in it. The Rev. Robert S. Graetz was a Lutheran pastor in Montgomery, Alabama just before and during the now-famous Bus Boycott which many people consider the birth of the Civil Rights Movement.

There were thousands upon thousands of individuals involved in the Montgomery Bus Boycott, with dozens of leaders. The most active of these leaders went on to direct the Civil Rights Movement as a whole. As a result such people are somewhat universally known today like the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Mrs. Rosa Parks, and the Rev. Ralph Abernathy just to name a few. Yet the other leaders of the Movement are lesser known, and even more seldom mentioned in history books. The Bus Boycott of 1955-1956 was a place where many of the future national movement leaders got their start, and many others faded into the shadows. However, the lesser known leaders' stories are still vital to tell and have known. Often, they are the underdog or unexpected citizens rising to the occasion of fighting back against centuries worth of racism, segregation, and hatred. Rev. Graetz, while not well known to the general public, played an incredible role in furthering the Boycott's mission, leading the African

American community, and showing how religious leaders played a key role in the success of the Montgomery Bus Boycott.

Rev. Graetz's name can be found in newspaper articles of the time and was found on the lips of people like Dr. King, and Mrs. Parks, both of whom had a close relationship with him.² Active members in the Montgomery community certainly knew of Graetz, his family, and the congregation he was serving. National sources knew of him as well, even being interviewed by the *Minneapolis Tribune* and *Time* magazine in January of 1956.³ Graetz's involvement as a leader in the Montgomery Bus Boycott was known, but something happened as the years passed. Eventually, his name and the story of his involvement disappeared- the focus of stories turned to towering leaders like Dr. King. Historian Taylor Branch mentions Graetz just over a dozen times in his well-respected work, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years 1954-63*. Yet within those few mentions, Branch speaks poorly of Graetz, including, "The skinny, jug-eared white pastor..."⁴ and, "... even those who tried their hardest to welcome them [Graetz family] were saddled constantly with awkwardness, as nothing came naturally to the Graetz."⁵ At the very least, parts of Graetz's story were told by Branch, yet the addition of comments on his physical stature and personality seem to be unnecessary to the larger picture. While Branch offers one take on Rev. Graetz and his family, there is a need for a revised and correct depiction of the real involvement of the Graetz family.

² Robert S. Graetz, *A White Preacher's Memoir: The Montgomery Bus Boycott* (Montgomery, Alabama: Black Belt Press, 1998), 50, 58.

³ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁴ Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years 1954-63* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperback, 1988), 194.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 126.

Historiography

Graetz's involvement in Montgomery has been a story seldom told. Devoted readers of the Civil Rights Movement might recognize his name, but there has been little beyond Graetz's own works. As briefly mentioned above, Taylor Branch wrote about Graetz a handful of times in his book. Branch's words on Graetz are short, and less than flattering for a man that dedicated his time in Montgomery to the fight for civil rights. A handful of articles after the Civil Rights Movement include Graetz's name as an oddity in Montgomery, but none are in-depth biographies of every action and word spoken. Of course, Graetz was well written about in the *Montgomery Advertiser*, and other newspapers between 1955 and 1958 due to his active role. His name reappears in newspapers only within the past decade as the 50th anniversary of the Civil Rights Movement has come and gone.

Because of Graetz's relatively unknown status in the mainstream of Civil Rights history, there are only a few resources available to be used in this research. Thankfully, Graetz published a memoir in 1998, within which he used newspaper sources to back up claims he made, and in 2006 he published another book detailing his moral/religious message surrounding the Bus Boycott and Civil Rights Movement.

The Road to Montgomery: Graetz's History

The story of Robert Graetz and his involvement in the Montgomery Bus Boycott began with his own awakening to the treatment of the African American community in the United States. Graetz was born May 16, 1928 in Clarksburg, West Virginia, but spent his early years in Charleston, a place he described as, "... a largely segregated society..." where he attended all-

white public schools.⁶ Graetz admits that he was a child of the times he lived and tells a story of racist jokes made by his friends in high school. It was in college at Capital University, however, that Graetz found his passion for advocating against discrimination. Graetz, according to his memoir, took a class on discrimination against Jews in higher education, and then felt so impassioned by the subject he switched his field of studies to sociology and joined the NAACP.⁷ In personal correspondence with the Graetz's, Jeannie mentioned that he discovered this topic through being assigned, "a paper on any topic of their choosing," which led to, "an awakening from the Lord that he was to work for justice with Negroes."⁸ At this point he became close with the African American community in Columbus, Ohio where Capital University is located. He advocated strongly for the African American community and attempted to immerse himself in black culture. A friend of his, however, told him that he would never be able to fully experience the true life of the African American community that, "You [Graetz] always have the option of walking out. We don't."⁹ That message never left Graetz and he carried it with him throughout his life in ministry.

After college, Graetz attended the Evangelical Lutheran Theological Seminary, now known as Trinity Lutheran Seminary, also in Columbus, Ohio.¹⁰ Continuing his streak of involvement with the African American community, Graetz and his then fiancé Jeannie, became very active at St. Phillip's Lutheran Church, on the East side of Columbus- St. Phillip's was an

⁶ Graetz, *Memoir*, 16-17.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁸ Jeannie and Robert Graetz, interview by author via email, October 8, 2018.

⁹ Graetz, *Memoir*, 17. Graetz quoting "a wise black friend".

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 40.

all African American congregation.¹¹ There, Graetz further learned about the issues many African Americans faced in 1950, and created bonds with that community. The most major event during his theological formation was the internship year. It is common in Lutheran theological education for seminarians to complete two years of course work, a year of internship at a church, then a final year of course work. Graetz accepted an unusual internship site in California at Community Lutheran Church. Instead of serving under an advising clergy mentor, Graetz became the solo pastor of this congregation, which was also all African American.¹² During his internship experience, Graetz helped his congregation deal with an incredible amount of racial prejudice and violence. Originally, their neighborhood in Los Angeles was meant for white families, but when the Graetz's arrived, the community was mostly African American.¹³ Graetz stated that, "living in a largely Negro area, we learned to look beyond race or color of a person's skin."¹⁴ While Graetz did not mention much about his experience at Community Lutheran, the experience firmed his feelings for advocacy and fighting for social justice. Undoubtedly this was a new experience for the white soon-to-be-pastor, and a skill that would serve him and his family well in the next place in their journey.

Once his internship experience was over, Graetz and family moved back to Columbus for Graetz's last year of seminary education. According to Taylor Branch, in Robert Graetz's graduating class, only two men were listed as those who were going into the foreign missionary

¹¹ Graetz, *Memoir*, 40.

¹² *Ibid.*, 42.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 43.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

field- Graetz was one of them.¹⁵ Graetz and the other members of his graduating class were assigned to districts where their first call would be- Graetz was put in the Ohio district.¹⁶

Graetz's first call was to Trinity Lutheran Church in Montgomery, Alabama. That congregation's previous pastor, Rev. Nelson Trout, had accepted a position where Graetz had done his internship- Community Lutheran in California.¹⁷ However, Graetz was not sent directly off to begin his ministry. Knowing that Graetz had a history of being incredibly active in the African American community and dealing with race issues- like in California- his district and national officials summoned him. Graetz in his memoir had this to say about the interaction:

They stressed that my primary tasks were to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ and to serve my people. "The South is not receptive to intruders from the North," they explained. "You will bring harm to yourself and your family, not to mention the congregation and the church at large, if you go to Montgomery crusading for racial justice." "I am going to Montgomery to be a pastor," "I [Graetz] assured them. "I won't start any trouble, I promise."¹⁸

With that, Graetz received endorsement, and ordination from the American Lutheran Church. He became Trinity Lutheran Church's pastor in 1955, just a few months before the Boycott started in December of that same year.

The church Rev. Graetz went to serve is an interesting case by itself and understanding a little of its background will help set the stage for Rev. Graetz's time spent there. The American Lutheran Church, or any Lutheran denomination for that matter, did not have a strong presence in the South. In fact, serving a congregation in the South was considered missionary work

¹⁵ Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 126.

¹⁶ Clarification- other names for districts are; synods, dioceses. The difference comes from each denomination, but all refer to generally the same thing.

¹⁷ Gregory Freeland, "Lutherans and the Southern Civil Rights Movement," *Journal of Lutheran Ethics* 6, no. 11 (2006), <https://www.elca.org/JLE/Articles/557>.

¹⁸ Graetz, *Memoir*, 45.

because of how different congregations functioned and the atmosphere in which they existed. In the North, especially in the Midwest, one could find multiple churches of the same denomination close together, yet in the South, Trinity was the only ALC (American Lutheran Church) in Montgomery. The Lutheran church became known for its private schools and the education that it offered members of the African American community. For this reason, Lutheran churches were attractive- they offered good education when the publicly funded schools of the South were lackluster. Trinity Lutheran was started in 1916 as a day school. Eventually it evolved into a church which supported the school and had numerous pastors over the years.¹⁹ Just before Rev. Graetz arrived, Trinity's pastor was Nelson Trout, also a graduate from the now Trinity Seminary. During his time there, Rev. Trout noted that both the congregation, and pastor of Trinity were never taken seriously by its Methodist and Baptist counterparts in Montgomery.²⁰ Yet, because of the congregation's focus on education, many members were educators themselves and passionate about racial justice.

Rev. Graetz, along with his wife and kids, moved in during a hot Southern day in 1955. Upon their arrival, their white faces were immediately noticed by their neighbors and parishioners. They were kindly greeted, and due to a mix-up on payment of the moving company, accepted borrowed mattresses and other housing necessities for their first night from the neighbors. In addition to Trinity, Rev. Graetz was also in charge of two preaching stations located many miles away from Montgomery- where he would preach at each once a month while leaving them in charge of lay members the rest of the time.²¹ This was a common occurrence in

¹⁹ United Evangelical Lutheran Church, "History of Trinity Lutheran Church," accessed September 29, 2018, <https://www.ueluth.org/trinitylutheran.cfm>.

²⁰ Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 125.

²¹ Graetz, *Memoir*, 46-48.

rural areas as these other congregations could not support a full-time pastor. Rev. Graetz quickly became involved with Montgomery and all that was going on at the time- he maintains that he kept his promise to his superiors that he did not look for trouble, but rather trouble found him.²²

The blatant racism which occurred in Montgomery and the South was well known to the average person at the time. Graetz wrote extensively about some of the atrocities in his memoir, including stories of African American men and women being forced to move from their seats on the bus, being forced to pay the bus fare twice, and he included a particularly graphic story, “One day a particularly abusive driver called out, ‘if it wasn’t for these whites sitting up here, I’d wreck this bus and kill every one of you God damn black sons of bitches!’”²³ Stories such as these were countless, and drove Graetz to become even more passionate in his ministry to his African American congregation.

Like any good pastor who was new to a city, Graetz became involved in local organizations like the Montgomery Council on Human Relations (MCHR).²⁴ The MCHR was a community organized group which was dedicated to the advancement of racial justice through legal means. It existed as a direct opposition to such groups like the White Citizen’s Council- which was made up of urban middle class white men who wanted to combat the Civil Rights Movement also through legal means.²⁵ Through the MCHR Graetz met a young African American Baptist pastor who arrived only a few months before he did- his name, the Rev. Dr.

²² Graetz, *Memoir*, 59.

²³ *Ibid.*, 57.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 49-50.

²⁵ Seneca Vaught, “The White Citizen’s Council of Montgomery, 1955-1958: The Politics of Countermovement, Moral Culture and Civic Bigotry” (diss., Bowling Green State University, 2003), 12, <http://www.memphis.edu/benhooks/pdfs/vaught.pdf>.

Martin Luther King Jr.²⁶ Early on, Graetz made connections with the African American community, which got his name to be well-known. Rev. Graetz also joined the White Ministerial Association, a group of liberal leaning white pastors in Montgomery. This opportunity afforded him the ability to meet fellow pastors of denominations ranging from Presbyterians to Lutherans who supported African Americans taking action.²⁷ These groups also allowed Graetz to be on the radio to hold devotionals, during which he was able to meet many individuals who expressed their support for Graetz's active role in the Boycott without outing themselves as supporters.

Rev. Graetz did not only join white pastoral groups, he was also invited to join the Interdenominational Ministerial Alliance, which was all African American and filled with Baptists and Methodists.²⁸ This of course rarely, if ever, happened. Because of Graetz's strong support for the African American community and serving an all-Black congregation in Montgomery, he naturally fit in. As a result of his bizarre dual-membership in the white clergy groups and African American clergy groups, Graetz often took it upon himself to attempt to close the gaps between the two. He once attempted to organize a joint worship service between the groups. This led to less than favorable feedback from the white group, yet when the day came, Graetz said, it was the more conservative clergy leaders that showed up to the service.²⁹

The less than six months Graetz and his family were in Montgomery before December flew by, and on December 1st, 1955, their world changed. That was the day Mrs. Rosa Parks was arrested for not yielding her seat to a white rider on the Montgomery bus line. The *Montgomery*

²⁶ Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 127.

²⁷ Graetz, *Memoir*, 51-52.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 53.

²⁹ Graetz, *Memoir*, 54.

Advertiser posted the story the following day under the headline, “Negro Jailed Here For ‘Overlooking’ Bus Segregation.”³⁰ A seemingly small arrest turned into a world altering event. For the African American community, however, this was not just another arrest. Rather, she had been the fourth woman that year who was arrested for not giving up her seat on the bus line. The Women’s Political Council (WPC) had previously wanted to attempt a boycott, but decided against it for a variety of reasons, however, this was their opportunity.³¹ Within a short matter of time, the WPC produced pamphlets to inform the African American community to boycott the bus lines the following Monday- December 5th. This was quickly discovered and carried by the *Advertiser* on the front page of their Sunday edition.³²

Rev. Graetz learned of the arrest in a rather comedic way. A congregation member called to inform him that an African American woman was arrested on the bus. Graetz, wanting to learn more, called his friend who was the adult adviser to the Montgomery NAACP Youth Council- Mrs. Rosa Parks! Graetz recalled the conversation in his memoir:

“I just heard that someone was arrested on one of the buses Thursday”

“That’s right, Pastor Graetz.”

“Do you know anything about it?”

“Yes, Pastor Graetz.”

“Do you know who was arrested?”

“Yes, Pastor Graetz.”

“Well, who was it?”

³⁰ “Negro Jailed Here For ‘Overlooking’ Bus Segregation,” *Montgomery Advertiser*, December 2, 1955, <https://montgomeryadvertiser.newspapers.com/image/256832379>.

³¹ Robert Graetz, interview by PBS, April 14, 2011.

³² Joe Azbell, “Negro Groups Ready Boycott of City Lines,” *Montgomery Advertiser*, December 4, 1955, <https://montgomeryadvertiser.newspapers.com/image/256834227>.

In a quiet, timid voice she replied, “It was me, Pastor Graetz.”³³ The conversation continued, Mrs. Parks explained what had happened in detail, Graetz listened intently. After the call ended, he knew he had a choice to make- to get involved or sit back. After long conversations with his wife, Jeannie, and lots of prayer, the Graetzs knew they had to take action.

On Sunday December 4th, the 210 members of Trinity Lutheran Church filed into their pews, all likely aware of what took place that previous Thursday and what was being called for the next day. Rev. Graetz, “clad in the vestments of the Lutheran Church,” as the *Advertiser* puts it, said from the pulpit, “Let’s make this boycott as effective as possible because it won’t be any boycott if half of us ride the buses and half don’t ride. So if we’re going to do it, let’s make a good job of it.”³⁴ Graetz took his commitment one step further, pledging that he would drive members to and from work, and that if they needed a ride, that Jeannie would be staffing the phone.³⁵ To the outside viewer, Graetz’s actions seem reckless and unheard of. Yet, for Graetz, being active for the African American community was nothing new. His time at Community Lutheran in California and at St. Phillip’s in Ohio prepared him for this. While on a scale he had never participated in before, Graetz knew that his church, and more importantly his family, stood behind him in his ministry.

This was the point in Rev. Graetz’s ministry that he changed from a pastor to be a leader in the Montgomery Bus Boycott. No one would have faulted the Graetzs if they called it quits from this point. The higher-ups in the American Lutheran Church would have found him a call

³³ Graetz, *Memoir*, 58.

³⁴ Tom Johnson, “The Mechanics of the Bus Boycott,” *Montgomery Advertiser*, January 10, 1956, <https://montgomeryadvertiser.newspapers.com/image/256535142>.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

elsewhere, but his faith, belief in the Gospel, and life experiences drove him to become fully involved. Maybe the congregation was shocked at Graetz's choice to speak so publically in support of the Boycott. To Graetz, however, there was no choice, as he says, "... plenty of people around us, Negro and white, reinforced our conviction that the fabric not only needed to be changed but to be torn apart. And they were willing to stand with us as we allowed God to use us in that process. Even in the worst of times we knew we were never alone. God was always present, not only in his Spirit but also his people."³⁶ Faith, was inexplicitly linked not only to Graetz's ministry, but also to the Boycott as a whole. The Graetzs knew they had support, but also knew that their actions spoke volumes about two previously separated groups coming together.

Another point that Rev. Graetz makes, was the involvement of the church in the Civil Rights Movement as a whole. Not only were many of the leaders of the Movement also clergy, but the churches they served acted as important meeting places. The first mass meeting of the Boycott took place at Holt Street Baptist Church, which drew an attendance of over 5,000 people, with only a handful of white faces present for it.³⁷ Furthermore, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, pastor at Dexter Ave. Baptist Church, was the head of the entire Movement. On that first mass meeting, King preached a message to inspire the African American community of Montgomery to take action, "If you will protest courageously, and yet with dignity and Christian love, when the history books are written in future generations, the historians will have to pause and say, 'There lived a great people—a black people—who injected new meaning and dignity

³⁶ Graetz, *Memoir*, 37-38.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 65.

into the veins of civilization.’ This is our challenge and our overwhelming responsibility.”³⁸ The overtones of Christianity are unmistakable, King and so many other leaders were overt with their message on purpose as their faith was a driving factor in their decision to seek equality. The Civil Rights Movement would have been unsuccessful had it not been for the involvement of people from nearly every Christian denomination and many religious faiths. Their practice of non-violent protest would not have worked had it not been for the participating member’s religious beliefs. Rev. Graetz’s involvement as a white, Lutheran pastor helped to cement that point- regardless of race or denomination, the fight for equality and civil rights was one the universal church stood behind.³⁹

The Boycott Begins

The first day of the Bus Boycott was a resounding success- there was nearly 100 percent participation by the African American community, something the boycott leaders were not expecting.⁴⁰ The emotions on that first day, for all people involved, were undoubtedly tense. For the African American community, they knew their commute to and from work was not likely to be the safest if they could not secure a ride with others. And the white community only knew what to expect because of the *Advertiser* which released information the day prior. That first day of the Boycott was also Mrs. Park’s trial for breaking the law. Rev. Graetz stopped transporting people to attend the trial, he recalled her silence, and Fred Gray- Mrs. Park’s attorney- stating his

³⁸ Graetz, *Memoir*, 66.

³⁹ Further reading about Rev. Graetz’s religious ideas in Montgomery can be found in his second publication: Robert Graetz, *A White Preacher’s Message on Race and Reconciliation* (Montgomery, AL: NewSouth Books, 2006), 23-100.

⁴⁰ Graetz, *Memoir*, 63.

intention to appeal Judge John Scott's decision. At the end of that trial, Mrs. Parks was fined \$14 for her choice not to budge from her seat.⁴¹

Mentioned earlier was the first mass meeting of the Boycott which occurred at Holt Street Baptist Church. Rev. Graetz attended and was one of only a few white faces- the rest being reporters. In this meeting, the African American community of Montgomery decided in a resounding cry to continue the Boycott until the bus company met their three demands; one, a guarantee of courteous treatment to be given to all passengers, two, passengers be seated on a first-come, first-serve basis, with African Americans starting in the rear to front, and white passengers starting from the front, with neither party standing for the other, three, African American drivers would be hired for routes that went in mostly African American neighborhoods.⁴² While these points would later become contentious in the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA), one will note that they were not originally calling for the total desegregation of the bus line- simply fair seating and hiring practices.

For the next several weeks of the Boycott, Rev. Graetz drove people to work from 6am to 9am, he notes that those in charge of assigning volunteers were hesitant to ask him to do more.⁴³ Outside of this time commitment, Rev. Graetz helped with organization, communication, and continued outreach in Montgomery, all the while maintaining Trinity Lutheran Church and his preaching stations.

⁴¹ Graetz, *Memoir*, 65.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 67.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 68.

Consequences of Rev. Graetz's Involvement

The high spirit of the birth of the Boycott was quickly hit with the reality of the racism in the South- something Graetz experienced personally. On the morning of December 19th, after waiting to pick up passengers, Rev. Graetz was pulled over and arrested for “picking up passengers in a taxi zone,” which he denied. Graetz was ordered to follow the Sheriff to the county jail, where he was placed in a room. After being alone for a little while a man came in and said, “we like things the way they are here. We don’t want anybody trying to change them.”⁴⁴ Graetz was shortly released without charge, but not before also having been lectured by Sheriff Butler where he said, “I don’t see how you can claim to be a Christian and a minister and believe the things you believe.”⁴⁵ Rev. Graetz likely had the same question in his mind for Christians of the South.

Tom Johnson, a reporter for the *Montgomery Advertiser* and whose January 10th article is quoted above makes other interesting remarks about Graetz in the same writing. While Graetz was becoming well known in Montgomery at this time, the January 10th article got his name out for the rest of the population, which proved to be dangerous. Johnson wrote that, “though not the only white person active in the boycott, Graetz is the only one who makes no secret about his activities,” and, “it is unlikely that his great-grandfather would have approved his namesake’s activities.”⁴⁶ Johnson wrote a fairly full biography of Graetz, and attempted to point out as often as possible that Graetz was somewhat alone in this ministry. Graetz’s mother worried about him and the family member he was named after likely would not have approved of what Graetz

⁴⁴ Johnson, “Mechanics of the Bus Boycott,” January 10, 1956.

⁴⁵ Graetz, *Memoir*, 74.

⁴⁶ Johnson, “Mechanics of the Bus Boycott,” January 10, 1956.

would say, is acting on his faith. Five days later, Graetz received a death threat printed in the editorial section of the *Advertiser*, though they had been coming before then.⁴⁷

Following the publication of the first article, Graetz recorded in his memoir that his home phone started to receive threatening calls. Much like the King family and other leaders of the Boycott, these calls and threats became a regular part of life. The first threatening call that Graetz and family received was in the evening, it said, “Pastor, if I was you, I wouldn’t call myself a pastor. You’re a no-good, nigger-lovin’ son-of-a-bitch.”⁴⁸ Early on the calls were violent, explicit, and racist. Graetz immediately reported such phone calls to Federal Bureau of Investigation agent Woodrow E. Draut and Captain E. P. Brown of the Montgomery Police Department.⁴⁹ While no one was ever arrested for the phone calls, Graetz felt it important to report to the authorities each time his family got the calls. Tom Johnson wrote a follow-up to the January 10th story just two days later publishing some of the contents of the phone calls, but with the addition of a few positive calls from, “twelve whites and nine Negros.”⁵⁰ Graetz, keeping to his pastoral training and faith, would occasionally engage the anonymous callers in an attempt to reason with them, he notes, however, that their responses were then, “but you are a communist, aren’t you?”⁵¹ The Red Scare of the Cold War was often an easy scapegoat, and the callers often had little interest in reasoning with Graetz.

⁴⁷ James H. Greene, “Another John Brown,” *Montgomery Advertiser*, January 15, 1956, <https://montgomeryadvertiser.newspapers.com/image/256539347>.

⁴⁸ Graetz, *Memoir*, 75.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 75.

⁵⁰ Tom Johnson, “Pastor Graetz is Threatened,” *Montgomery Advertiser*, January 12, 1956, <https://montgomeryadvertiser.newspapers.com/image/256536177>.

⁵¹ Graetz, *Memoir*, 76-77.

The early days of the Boycott were not only met with negativity and death threats. Graetz reported that his family received some of the nicest letters from people around the world, received gifts from seminary classmates, and even a resolution from the Board of American Missions in the American Lutheran Church that commended his faithful work.⁵² As one of the few white people involved with the Boycott, the hate which the Graetz family was inundated with was not unexpected, but the outpouring of positive messages from far and wide reinforced their call to ministry in the South.

Outside of receiving threats, Graetz helped the Boycott by going on public speaking tours around the United States to raise money for their efforts, just as the other leaders of the movement did. In one case, Graetz went to Columbus, Ohio where he spoke at Union Grove Baptist Church to a crowd of twelve-hundred people. In his speech, which was to an all African American crowd, Graetz said, “we are going to have to find a way to make it ourselves,” never once hesitating to include himself with those around him.⁵³ Robert and Jeannie Graetz always felt a part of the African American community and were welcomed as members despite their skin. This distinction, or lack of, for Graetz about race is a fine example of the uniqueness of what he was doing in the South. Instead of drawing sharp lines between himself and those he was serving, Rev. Graetz made clear to those that listened, that he and the African American community were fighting for the same goals. Graetz did not view himself as a white liberator and did not accept a call to Montgomery to act as such.

⁵² Graetz, *Memoir*, 77-78.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 86.

The FBI, KKK, and Communists

Due to the level of involvement Rev. Graetz had in the Boycott and how frequently he and his family were the target of crimes, the FBI took an interest in his life. As mentioned before, Rev. Graetz reported especially heinous phone calls to the FBI, but he also had a connection with that same agent which lasted most of the Boycott. It was not uncommon for the FBI to investigate active leaders of the Civil Rights Movement, and they famously surveyed Dr. King and his family in great detail, keeping track of day-to-day movements.⁵⁴ Perhaps they viewed Dr. King as a threat to the United States, but more likely it was to keep tabs on a man that had huge sway over the African American population. This level of intense scrutiny was not employed for Graetz and his family, however. Instead, Graetz, his wife, and both their families had extensive background checks done.⁵⁵ His relationship was with Special Agent Woodrow E. Draut, which Graetz said evolved into a good friendship- occasionally Graetz and Jeannie would eat with Special Agent Draut and his wife.⁵⁶

Rev. Graetz used this connection with the FBI to the biggest advantage he could for the Boycott. Special Agent Draut would occasionally pass along information to him, however, there was no mention as to what this information usually contained.⁵⁷ But the FBI had good reason for keeping tabs on the leaders of the Boycott. In addition to it being a political and racial upheaval in the South, the FBI was concerned with Communists infiltrating the organization. Because the

⁵⁴ Federal Bureau of Investigation, Stanford University, The Martin Luther King Jr. Research and Education Institute, accessed October 10, 2018, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/federal-bureau-investigation-fbi>.

⁵⁵ Graetz, *Memoir*, 118.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

Cold War was reaching boiling points around the world, the United States Government had to keep close notes on domestic movements to ensure the safety of the Nation. Rev. Graetz writes that there were a few times that individuals either associated with the Communist party or Socialist party reached out to give support, but thanks to information from Special Agent Draut, any potential mishaps were avoided. A legitimate accusation of the MIA being Communist leaning would have torpedoed all their efforts.

In opposition to the support Rev. Graetz and the MIA received from the FBI, the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) and other white supremacist groups adamantly worked against their progress. While their violent efforts have already been noted throughout the detailing of Rev. Graetz's ministry in the South, their efforts to stop and kill active members did not stop. In one particular case, Rev. Graetz was told by a neighbor that the KKK was lining up down his street, planning on intimidating him and his family. In a moment of courage, Rev. Graetz and Jeannie decided, "if they came to see us, we ought to let them see us," and they walked out of their front door and watched the KKK members, who eventually drove away seeing their intimidation tactic failed.⁵⁸ To say Graetz and his family were unafraid of the threats they received would not be telling the whole truth. Rev. Graetz admitted throughout his memoir that they were often terrified of the reality in which they lived. Their support of the African American community and their fight for equal rights was enough to vilify them in the eyes of Southern people. Add to that, the Graetz's were white northerners, and their actions were abhorrent in the eyes of those who opposed them.

⁵⁸ Graetz, *Memoir*, 114.

The Boycott Comes to an End

The Montgomery Bus Boycott lasted a famous 381 days, and the ramifications of it were felt long after that. The African American community had scored a big victory in their first stretch in the long road that was the Civil Rights Movement. They withstood the aggression and legal tactics of Southerners who were in direct opposition. The United States Supreme Court ruled in November that the bus segregation was illegal but did not take effect until December 20th, 1956. In the ruling, the Supreme Court said Mrs. Rosa Park's arrest, which was over a year earlier, was unconstitutional and segregation, at least for the Montgomery bus line, was illegal.⁵⁹ The original news of the Supreme Court's decision was met with great pleasure from the boycotters. Dr. King in *Stride toward Freedom* said upon hearing the news, "at this moment my heart began to throb with an inexpressible joy. The darkest hour of our struggle has indeed proved to be the first hour of victory."⁶⁰ In the same evening of the Supreme Court ruling, there were two mass meetings and an estimated eight thousand African American attendees unanimously voted to officially end the boycott of the buses as soon as the ruling went into effect.⁶¹ Rev. Graetz read scripture at one of the meetings, and found that the congregation was so energized that he struggled to finish the reading having to speak over the cheers. The elation which the African American community felt was indescribable, but there was still a small way to go before the ruling was enforced.

⁵⁹ "Bus Integration Ordered Here," *Alabama Journal*, December 20, 1956, <https://montgomeryadvertiser.newspapers.com/image/457515168>.

⁶⁰ Martin Luther King Jr., *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story*, (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1958), 160.

⁶¹ Graetz, *Memoir*, 125.

The City of Montgomery attempted to appeal the court order, which then caused a delay in its implementation. During this lapse of time, the African American community trained people to end the Boycott and to begin use of the buses again. The MIA feared that when African Americans did start to use the bus lines again, they might be met with violence- those fears were not unfounded, and the passive training was well used in later weeks. During the one year anniversary of the Boycott there was a week-long celebration and schedule of events on the theme of, “Gandhi in America,” and the idea of non-violent protest.⁶² Just a few days later, the Supreme Court refused to further debate its decision. On December 17th, the *Montgomery Advertiser* ran the headline, “City Bows to Court Decision, Pledges Fight For Segregation,” with a dangerous subtitle of, “Negroes Given Warning for Avoiding Bloodshed.”⁶³ The *Alabama Journal* ran a full page story on the issue on December 20th, the day the court decision reached Montgomery, and stated that the boycott would officially end the next day.

While Rev. Graetz missed the two mass meetings the night of the 20th, he attended a MCHR meeting, where they produced and distributed flyers which urged bus riders not to engage anyone who was attempting to provoke them.⁶⁴ The continued nonviolent and passive response to any violence by those in opposition would only help the African American struggle. The Boycott’s official lifting did not end the conflict, however. There was a second flyer, not created by the MIA or MCHR, which advocated for African Americans to give up the boycott and return to the buses- which argued that segregation would never change. Graetz reported that

⁶² “Anniversary Celebration of Boycott Starts Today,” *Montgomery Advertiser*, December 3, 1956, <https://montgomeryadvertiser.newspapers.com/image/257241459>.

⁶³ Al McConagha, “City Bows to Court Decision, Pledges Fight for Segregation,” *Montgomery Advertiser*, December 18, 1956, <https://montgomeryadvertiser.newspapers.com/image/257145699>.

⁶⁴ Graetz, *Memoir*, 131.

members got a good laugh out of it, and ignored the flyer.⁶⁵ The stage was set for the Boycott to end the following day, but before that happened, Dr. King reminded riders that they did not ride alone, but rather with the weight of 50,000 African Americans, and that if they could not take the pressure they should continue walking.⁶⁶ There was a great deal riding on the peaceful and legal integration of the bus lines.

On Friday, December 21st, 1956 the African American people who had boycotted the bus line for over a year reboarded the buses. Reporters from all over, especially from the *Advertiser* and *Alabama Journal* reported on all that happened the entire day. Charles Sullivan of the *Journal* reported that, "... many Negroes continue to sit in the rear of the buses. Too, those Negroes taking seats near the front of the bus—those formally reserved by custom for whites—appear in the main to be those riding 'to prove their point' or to serve as examples to others of their race."⁶⁷ In addition to average citizens who rode the buses, clergy and leadership from the MIA made sure to be present during the early morning hours and peak ride times to show solidarity.⁶⁸ Not only were people now able to get to work the way they had before, they were also celebrating a victory in the fight against institutionalized racism and segregation. Rev. Graetz recalled the elation he had while he rode on the buses that day, remembering that he did not personally see any hostility, but felt some apprehension.⁶⁹ More than that, however, Graetz

⁶⁵ Graetz, *Memoir*, 132.

⁶⁶ Edward Pilley, "Bus Desegregation Order Served Here; Negroes Vote to Call Off Boycott Today," *Montgomery Advertiser*, December 21, 1956, <https://montgomeryadvertiser.newspapers.com/image/257146920>.

⁶⁷ Charles Sullivan, "Absence of Conflict Marks Bus Situation," *Alabama Journal*, December 21, 1956, <https://montgomeryadvertiser.newspapers.com/image/457517771>.

⁶⁸ Graetz, *Memoir*, 133.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 135.

recounted that, "... we were celebrating a victory. There was no doubt about that. It was a victory we had earned during the past year of struggles and trials. But we knew it was not just a victory for the Negroes of Montgomery. It was a victory for all of us."⁷⁰ The first battle of the Civil Rights Movement had been won, but not everything about bus integration was met with such positivity.

As it turns out, the nonviolence training the MIA had the bus riders complete was well needed. There were signs of trouble even before the actual integration started. Back in November when the original Supreme Court announcement had been made, the KKK responded by driving 40 carloads of Klan members through the African American residential area of Montgomery in an attempt to intimidate those who were celebrating a great victory.⁷¹ Furthermore, the night before the buses were integrated there were several acid attacks on Boycott leaders' cars, luckily, no one was hurt.⁷² However, the day of, there were several cases of violence towards African American riders. In a few cases Rev. Graetz wrote, "... Negro women sitting near the front of the bus would be followed off the bus by a white man, who would beat them with his fists, then jump into a car that had been following the bus."⁷³ These acts of violence were premeditated and a clear reaction to African American people sitting wherever they wanted- which was now completely legal. In the days that followed, violent acts increased, and in one particularly horrific case, buses became targets for gunshots: a pregnant African American woman was hit in both of

⁷⁰ Graetz, *Memoir*, 135.

⁷¹ "City Questions Car Pool Plea: U.S. Court Order Asked by Negroes Against Injunction." *Alabama Journal*, November 14, 1956, <https://montgomeryadvertiser.newspapers.com/image/457245117>.

⁷² Graetz, *Memoir*, 137.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

her legs, while other passengers were narrowly missed.⁷⁴ The Montgomery Police Department investigated such acts zealously, and did their best to protect riders and bus drivers.

Another Bomb: January 10, 1957

In a display of their aggressive feelings towards the African American community winning the legal battle for bus integration, members of the KKK bombed six different locations in a single night. Four African American churches were bombed, as well as the Rev. Abernathy's parsonage, and the parsonage of Rev. Graetz- this was the second time their house had been bombed.⁷⁵ The bombings occurred early in the morning of January 10th, Graetz recalled that around 2:00AM Jeannie awoke to the sound and yelled, "My word! Another bomb!" and after checking to make sure the family was safe, they went outside to investigate the damage.⁷⁶ Graetz remembered the windows were shattered, their front door hung at a crazy angle, and glass was everywhere.⁷⁷ The bomb that exploded, however, was not the original intended bomb. Instead, the attackers had thrown a much larger bomb with eleven sticks of dynamite wrapped around a container of TNT- this one failed to go off and lay in the Graetz's front yard.⁷⁸ Had it exploded, the police theorized that it would have leveled the entire block and killed dozens. This was the only attack that night meant to be deadly.⁷⁹ The *Alabama Journal* carried the story that same

⁷⁴ Graetz, *Memoir*, 138.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 139.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 13-14.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 139.

night, including information that Governor of Alabama, James Folsom offered a \$2,000 reward for information on the perpetrators.⁸⁰

For a second time, the Graetz home was a mess with the debris of the bomb explosion. Again, the Graetz family experienced an outpouring of love and support from their friends, and in that same night Mrs. Rosa Parks came over to their home and helped clean up, as did several members of Trinity Lutheran.⁸¹ The second bomb was removed carefully by the police, and the other sites were investigated. The massive damage at both Bell St. and Mt. Olive Baptist Churches caused the buildings to be condemned.⁸² The Rev. Abernathy and his family were safe from that evening's attacks despite being the main targets. But the nightmare was not over for the Graetz family. Due to their involvement in the Boycott and being white Northerners, they were still targets. Special Agent Draut passed along to Rev. Graetz that, "... [Your] enemies were still intent on killing [you]. [You] should not stay in [your] house overnight."⁸³ With their lives constantly in danger the Graetz family moved from friend's house to friend's house for a few days, until Jeannie declared that she had enough of running and the family returned to their home.

The following Sunday, January 13th, just three days after the attacks, Rev. Graetz and almost every African American pastor in Montgomery preached from Matthew 18:21-35, and had a sermon of forgiveness of one's enemies.⁸⁴ Despite all that had happened, Rev. Graetz and

⁸⁰ Hy Brown and Gene Kovarik, "Halt in Bus Service Extended as Six Bombings Investigated," *Alabama Journal*, January 10, 1957, <https://montgomeryadvertiser.newspapers.com/image/457348449>.

⁸¹ Graetz, *Memoir*, 141.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 139.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 142.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 143.

the African American community stuck to their morals of non-violence and Christian faith, forgiving the attacks. But the fallout over the bus integration was not quite over. Two weeks later there were more attacks. Dr. King's home was the target this time, however the bomb- made of twelve sticks of dynamite- could not be set off as the attackers were interrupted by a watchman who stumbled upon their plans.⁸⁵ The police investigated the attacks seriously, regardless of their thoughts on the Boycott- the safety of their city depended on it.

Weeks later, the police chased down a lead and found credible evidence about the men who committed all of the bombings- they discovered Henry Alexander who confessed and implicated several other men. Rev. Graetz was called to the police station to sign warrants against Eugene Hall and Charley Bodiford. In total, seven men were arrested for the conspiracy and attacks- eventually an ad was placed in the newspaper calling for contributions to their legal fund- the KKK was intent on freeing their people.⁸⁶ The trial began on Monday, May 27th, 1957, and ended just a few days later on Thursday, May 30th with a verdict of not guilty for all involved. Because of the level of their crimes, the seven men became outcasts and newspapers ran stories with their actions as well as included their pictures. Also due to the publicity, many lost their jobs, and one defendant's father tragically killed himself due to guilt over his son's actions.⁸⁷

In a show of solidarity at a mass meeting after the trial, Mrs. Harris- an active community member, said to Jeannie Graetz when presenting her with new dishes that, "when they bombed

⁸⁵ Graetz, *Memoir*, 145.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 146.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 147-148.

the Graetzes, they bombed us.”⁸⁸ Through all they had suffered, Rev. Graetz and his family were accepted by the African American community. While their skin color was different than those around them, their convictions and fight were one in the same- for justice.

The Graetzs Leave Montgomery

Rev. Graetz and Jeannie wanted nothing more than to continue to fight for the Civil Rights Movement in the South. By 1958 Graetz was the chairman of the Montgomery Council on Human Relations, president of the Alabama Lutheran Pastoral Conference of the ALC, and secretary for the Montgomery Improvement Association.⁸⁹ Despite this involvement and passion for Civil Rights, God seemed to have had different ideas for him. In January of 1958, Graetz received a call letter from St. Phillip’s Church- the same where he was involved during college and seminary. After a few days of discussion, thought, and prayer with Jeannie, Graetz decided to return the letter, opting to stay in Montgomery.

Yet there was a new development at Trinity Lutheran. The congregation, and other Lutheran churches in Alabama, were considering transferring denominations to the Lutheran Church- Missouri Synod (LCMS)- a more theologically conservative Lutheran denomination than the American Lutheran Church. Graetz said that, “even the thought of it was traumatic,” as he would have to defend his own theology against a board of LCMS pastors.⁹⁰ His history of activism and messages of radical love would have prevented the LCMS from allowing his transfer into their clergy roster. The other issue the Graetz family faced, if they chose to stay in

⁸⁸Graetz, *Memoir*, 148.

⁸⁹ “Rev. Graetz, MIA Officer, Leaving Here,” *Montgomery Advertiser*, August 6, 1958, <https://montgomeryadvertiser.newspapers.com/image/256159467>.

⁹⁰ Graetz, *Memoir*, 151-152.

Montgomery, was the education of their children. While the Graetz family broke many segregation laws during their years, school segregation was not one they were quite willing to face yet. While they found a public school down the road, students in passing buses would yell, “nigger-lover,” at their daughter as she walked to and from school.⁹¹ With few options left, the Graetzs sought a place at the day school at Holt St. Baptist Church- this too did not work, as the Graetzs learned by purposely integrating the day school, the educational institution would have lost funding from the Government.⁹²

On May 28th, Rev. Graetz was visited by Ohio District president, Ken Priebe, and others to discuss Trinity’s possible transfer to the LCMS. Before their conversations on that subject, however, Rev. Priebe handed Graetz another call letter- again from St. Phillip’s. Graetz was surprised, and in the conversation which followed between the two men, Rev. Priebe reprimanded and reminded Graetz that, “You let the Lord decide what you’re supposed to do about that call!”⁹³ Graetz was originally quick to dismiss the letter again, but promised to reconsider. After further consideration and conversation with Jeannie, Rev. Graetz announced on June 15th to Trinity Lutheran that he accepted the call to St. Phillip’s, and the congregation voted to release him.⁹⁴ While their departure was delayed due to the birth of their fifth child, the Graetz family eventually left the place they called home for three years.

Both the *Alabama Journal* and *Montgomery Advertiser* ran front page stories on Rev. Graetz’s departure from Montgomery. Each article told of the accomplishments of the Boycott,

⁹¹ Graetz, *Memoir*, 152.

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 153.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

Graetz's involvement, and where he was moving to next. The *Journal* focused more on bombs and threats the family received than anything else, and it was also shorter than the *Advertiser*.⁹⁵ The *Advertiser* on the other hand, showcased the many ways Graetz was interconnected with the Montgomery community.⁹⁶ Each spoke generously about Graetz, although there was likely celebration by members of the KKK and other organizations that hated his presence in the South.

As mentioned before, Rev. Graetz and Jeannie were honored by the many groups in which they held membership. The Montgomery Improvement Association held a special luncheon in Graetz's honor, among many other activities. The Montgomery Council on Human Relations presented the Graetz family with an inscribed formica serving tray, but most valuable of all, Graetz said in his memoir, was the silver serving tray presented to them by Martin and Coretta King after the Kings visited their home.⁹⁷ Martin also signed a copy of his book, *Stride toward Freedom*, to the Graetz's saying, "In appreciation for your genuine goodwill, your unswerving devotion to the principle of freedom and justice, and your willingness to suffer and sacrifice in order to make Montgomery's stride toward freedom a lasting inspiration."⁹⁸ These are all objects and memories the Graetz family undoubtedly cherished for years afterwards as reminders of their commitment to ministry in the South.

Rev. Graetz preached his farewell sermon at Trinity Lutheran Church on Sunday, August 24, 1958, a little over three full years since the family's arrival in Montgomery. Not only did Rev. Graetz help lead the Boycott, but he also grew Trinity as a church. During his three years,

⁹⁵ "Bus Boycott Minister To Depart From Area," *Alabama Journal*, August 5, 1958, <https://montgomeryadvertiser.newspapers.com/image/457167640>.

⁹⁶ "Rev. Graetz, MIA Officer, Leaving Here," *Montgomery Advertiser*, August 6, 1958.

⁹⁷ Graetz, *Memoir*, 154.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

Rev. Graetz reported that baptized membership increased by one-third, and confirmed membership increased by fifteen percent.⁹⁹ Despite his activity serving the larger population, he never neglected his call to be the pastor to Trinity. Months after the Graetz family left, members of Trinity visited him in Columbus and told him, “none of us wanted you to leave, but we knew that if you stayed, sooner or later you would be killed. So, all of us accepted the fact you had to leave.”¹⁰⁰ The members were right, Graetz admitted. The violence in the South never stopped or let up after the Boycott had ended and only increased as the Civil Rights Movement advanced further. Eventually, either Graetz, his wife, or one of their children could have been seriously injured, or worse. Their move to St. Phillip’s, while painful, was the best choice they could have made.

Conclusion

The three years which Rev. Graetz and his family spent in Montgomery, Alabama and at Trinity Lutheran Church were so filled with events, happenings, and interesting cases that it is surprising so little has been written on their involvement. While Rev. Graetz did not plan or mastermind the Bus Boycott as some may have believed, his involvement is undeniable. Rev. Graetz openly spoke about supporting the African American community, advocated for their advancement, and more than that, supported the Movement with his own body. He drove people during the Boycott, was active in the MIA and MCHR, and attempted to create real change in the South. Rev. Graetz suffered devastating defeats and violence, and celebrated the great victories right alongside the African American communities of the South. He and his family drew no distinction between others because of race, and truly believed that despite their white skin, the

⁹⁹ Graetz, *Memoir*, 55.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 155.

battles against segregation and racism was their fight too. Rev. Graetz led by example and held fast to his faith in God to help guide him.

While there were dozens of leaders of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, Rev. Graetz is one truly worthy of note. He fought against racial divides, embracing the Bible's teachings of inclusivity. He supported the Boycott in word, as well as action. He showed not just Montgomery, but the entire United States that the African American community was not alone in their fight for a better life and fair treatment. Rev. Graetz, along with his family, dealt with the harassment of reporters, they answered phone calls which on the other end had people threatening death, they suffered verbal abuse in the streets, and their own home was targeted and bombed not once, but twice by individuals that would rather see men, women, and children dead than the integration of a bus line.

When he was an undergraduate in college, a wise black friend told him that he always had the option of walking away from the fight, but the African American people could never leave. Rev. Graetz, through all he and his family suffered in those three years never walked away. No one would have blamed them for packing up after the first bombing, after the first phone calls, or after the first letters. Yet, instead of running, Rev. Graetz stood up for what he believed in, and what he was called to do as an ordained minister of the American Lutheran Church- all of God's children are worthy of love.

Rev. Graetz's story is particular to that time and place in United States history, and the level of involvement was peculiar, which could be why his story has remained relatively unknown for decades. Those alive at the time in Montgomery knew his name and all that the Graetz family did, but as the years passed and the number of individuals who continued in the Civil Rights Movement grew, Graetz faded into the shadows. His story remains important,

however, as one to be told for the future generations: showcasing the racial lines that were crossed to advance the Civil Rights Movement, improving the lives of African Americans, and being a religious leader of an undeniably spiritual movement.

Rev. Robert S. Graetz, and many like him, have stories that deserve to be told, to remind us today of the sacrifices people of all backgrounds made to begin the steps towards equality. He noted in 2017 how the violence of today reminds him of Montgomery 60 years ago, and gives him pause for worry.¹⁰¹ To see strides made forward for decades, and then the resurgence of hatred and racism in modern times would make the Civil Rights leaders who lost their lives for this fight roll over in their graves. But Graetz does not leave the tone somber and without hope. In his most recent, and perhaps last interview, Rev. Graetz, alongside his wife Jeannie, answered questions for New York Times reporter Alan Blinder. Rev. Graetz, 90 and in hospice care at the time of the August 2018 interview had this short answer to Blinder's question of: "Do you see any reason for optimism?" Graetz answered, "Any time I see two people getting together and smiling."¹⁰²

¹⁰¹ Kym Klass, "Violence today 'frightening,' says civil rights leader Robert Graetz," *Montgomery Advertiser*, August 18, 2017, <https://www.montgomeryadvertiser.com/story/news/2017/08/18/violence-today-frightening-says-civil-rights-veteran-robert-graetz/576719001>.

¹⁰² Alan Blinder, "Bombed by the K.K.K A Friend of Rosa Parks. At 90, This White Pastor is Still Fighting," *New York Times*, August 17, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/17/us/rosa-parks-kkk-montgomery.html>.

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