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On Religion

Transcending Race and Religion to Rebuild the Ruins of Baltimore

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One weekday morning in 1981, when he was new to Baltimore, Arnold Graf descended into the basement of the Enon Baptist Church. The steps took him into the midst of 60 skeptics. They were the black ministers whom Mr. Graf, a white Jew, was trying to persuade to join him in community organizing.

Even among a loquacious crowd of preachers, conversation stilled at Mr. Graf's arrival. "I don't know if we should be talking about this stuff with an outsider here," one minister said, as Mr. Graf recently recalled the meeting.

Then the Rev. Vernon N. Dobson, one of Baltimore's legendary civil rights leaders, replied. Alone among the dozens of ministers, he was already a member of Mr. Graf's group, Baltimoreans United in Leadership Development. Alone among them, Mr. Dobson had already gotten to know Mr. Graf during the organizer's brief months in the city.

"He's with me," Mr. Dobson said. "And who's blacker than me here? The man is my brother."

Nearly 30 years later, Mr. Dobson's judgment on Mr. Graf has been ratified and redeemed. Mr. Graf, 64, has built a striking track record of crossing the borders of race and religion to organize among black Christians. His current effort has brought together millions of dollars from black churches and Jewish philanthropies to build or repair up to 1,200 homes in the ruins of East Baltimore.

In his work — both for Build, as the Baltimore group is known, and for its parent organization, the Industrial Areas Foundation — Mr. Graf has breathed new life into the black-Jewish alliance that flourished in the first decade of the civil rights movement before bitterly rupturing over black nationalism and affirmative action.

"I never wanted to come off as a special guy who really understood the black church," Mr. Graf said this week in an interview. "I don't want to be a cliché. But I believe in this work, and I do it with whoever I'm in relationship with."

In the case of Bishop Douglas I. Miles, the senior pastor of Koinonia Baptist Church in Baltimore, Mr. Graf persisted even as the minister made and canceled eight appointments for an introductory meeting. Finally, Mr. Graf hid in the church restroom until he could ambush Bishop Miles as he entered the church office. That was in the early 1980s; these days, Bishop Miles is the co-chairman of Build.

“Arnie wasn’t just a white organizer working for black people,” the pastor said in an interview. “He was working with black people. He was willing to immerse himself in our culture. He had an extra layer of compassion.”

The affinity for black culture comes from some deeply personal sources. In 1973, less than a decade after state laws against interracial marriage were struck down by the [United States Supreme Court](#), Mr. Graf wed a black woman, Martha Rodgers. One of their four children, Alicia Graf, went on to become a featured dancer with the [Alvin Ailey](#) troupe.

Martha Rodgers had grown up in the A.M.E. Zion denomination, and she provided some of Mr. Graf’s first exposure to black Christianity. Unwittingly, their churchgoing as a couple helped prepare Mr. Graf for his involvement with black congregations in Baltimore. Until then, his work for the Industrial Areas Foundation had mostly involved Roman Catholic parishes in Milwaukee and San Antonio.

“There is something special about the black church,” Mr. Graf said. “Vernon Dobson, more than anyone, got me back to God. Not to organized religion, but to a Creator. He had an intellect and a spirit that seemed integrated in a way I’d never seen. The way he understood that his religion called for him to ‘be for the least of these’ — it struck a chord with me.”

At points, Mr. Graf even considered converting and joining a black church. What kept him from taking that step, however, was that “internally, I felt so profoundly Jewish.” In theological terms, Jewish identity made it impossible for him to view Jesus as the Son of God. In personal terms, Jewish identity meant family, blood and life’s first lessons in social justice.

Mr. Graf spent the earliest years of his childhood on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, the son of a secretary and a salesman. Even as his nuclear family moved to Queens and then Long Island, he returned to the old neighborhood every week for Shabbat dinner given by his garment-worker grandmother, Pauline Horowitz.

Mrs. Horowitz lived in a two-room walk-up on Pitt Street and sometimes sewed her piecework by candlelight to save on the electric bill. Yet every Shabbat she fed 20 or 30 relatives, solicited donations for a cousin who survived the Holocaust and packaged leftovers to give to even poorer neighbors.

“She didn’t cast it in religious terms,” Mr. Graf recalled. “She just said, ‘You’re supposed to help.’”

Perhaps no endeavor more than the current building campaign in East Baltimore has reconciled Mr. Graf's Jewish roots and his black Christian soul. Reaching in one direction, Mr. Graf helped Build's member churches raise \$1.2 million for construction. Reaching in the other, he helped cull the comparable amount from two Jewish philanthropists in Baltimore and the Jewish Funds for Justice, a national group based in New York.

Mr. Graf has also been formally mentoring the justice fund's founding director, Simon Greer, as well as Rabbi Jonah Pesner, a leader of social-justice activity in Reform Jewry.

During a board meeting of the justice fund a few years ago, Mr. Greer asked Mr. Graf a question so obvious that the organizer had never even thought of it: What about your work is Jewish?

The answer was the memory of Shabbat at grandmother Pauline's. But the answer was in more than words alone.

"The look on his face, the trembling in his voice," Mr. Greer recalled. "I had a sense this was a story he hadn't told before. It felt to me that he had unearthed a treasure in his own upbringing that he'd forgotten he had access to. You could just see something coming off him."

<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/06/us/06religion.html?ref=us&pagewanted=print>