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## "The Difficult Way Breaketh Not Their Courage": The Evolution of Unitarianism and its Role as a Liberal Bastion in Bellicose Birmingham

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# “The Difficult Way Breaketh Not Their Courage”: The Evolution of Unitarianism and its Role as a Liberal Bastion in Bellicose Birmingham

by Lance Ledbetter



Unitarian minister Reverend James Reeb was beaten to death for his civil rights activism, courtesy of WYO History.

“TO BE a Unitarian in Boston is almost fashionable but to be a Unitarian in the Deep South requires courage.”<sup>1</sup> This irrefutable statement concluded the field report on the progression of the Unitarian Church in Birmingham, Alabama to the American Unitarian Association in 1954. Unitarianism as a religion preached tolerance, the universal brother-

hood of man, an elastic, secular view of the bible, and most importantly personal service to the community. The church in Birmingham practiced a similar dogma. Birmingham’s Unitarian Church acted as a focal point for citizens with liberal views and a desire to bring about social improvement in the community.

The most important issue of improvement in Birmingham socially and economically during this era was undoubtedly the assurance of civil rights for the city’s black citizens. As Joseph Volker stated in one of his lay sermons he delivered at the church, “No one will deny that the present crisis exceeds any others that mankind has faced.” adding, “The leadership of those precipitating the crisis is well known. It is strongly entrenched and has demonstrated its capabilities nefarious as they may be.”<sup>2</sup> In the pugnacious environment of conservatism in Birmingham led by the “nefarious” Bull Connor, Volker’s outlook could lead to unemployment and threats of violence. However, the church did not disband. In the face of such pressures, it grew. As Volker said in another sermon, “We are not alone in our thoughts and hopes...we are the outpost of a wonderful group of people.”<sup>3</sup> People ostracized and marginalized by the oppressive environment joined and found like minds promoting open discussion of issues and a sense of individual responsibility for social change as well as a refuge from their hostile en-

1 Joseph Volker, “Report from the Field on the Unitarian Fellowship of Birmingham, Alabama,” UAB Archive (Joseph Volker Papers 12.75).

2 “The Need for Leadership,” UAB Archive (Volker’s Papers 6.51).

3 “Town Hall Religion,” UAB Archive (Volker’s Papers 6.48).

vironment. The individual efforts of Dr. Joseph Volker in his creation of UAB and Charles Zukoski’s Button Gwinnett columns highlight the unique individual nature of activism within the church, as do the recollections of members of the church during the time. The church evolved to take a collective role in the fight for civil rights when faced with major tragedies such as the 16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist Church bombing and the murder of Unitarian activist Rev. James Reeb during Martin Luther King Jr.’s Selma march.

“ VOLKER WORKED BEHIND THE SCENES TO PLAN A TOTAL RACIAL INTEGRATION OF THE CAMPUS AS SOON AS THE “CONGRESSIONAL COVER” CAME.

The history of Unitarianism in Birmingham did not begin with the church founded in 1952. In 1916, Rev. Thomas Byrnes attempted to establish a church at 725 North 19<sup>th</sup> Street. His church much like the one that would eventually gain a permanent foothold later would work to help improve social maladies. They fought for such issues like women’s suffrage, the end of the convict lease system, and education and care for the city’s indignant population by creating women’s leagues, distributing liberal pamphlets, creating schools, and funding charity drives.<sup>4</sup>

They faced massive resistance in their time as well. Industrialists, seeking to maintain the inequitable racial and economic environment they had created to exploit Birmingham’s natural resources, dominated the

local government. Eventually Rev. Byrnes left Birmingham and without his leadership, the congregation collapsed. This small bright spot did help to start some change. Eventually women’s leagues they helped to pioneer would abolish the convict lease system, but overall Birmingham only became more ignorant, diseased, and violent as the city government refused to put any significant amount of money into public assistance. The Great Depression exacerbated this situation. Wealthy civic leaders tried to assist the general population as much as they could personally but eventually the coffers ran dry. President Roosevelt eventually declared Birmingham as the hardest hit city during the Depression.<sup>5</sup>

Eventually, with public funding from New Deal policies, Birmingham would begin to pull itself out of the mire of industry that was rapidly fading as resources began to run dry. Out of the ashes or the blast furnaces emerged the “New South” service economy of Birmingham. The University of Alabama Medical Center (now known as the University of Alabama-Birmingham) became the driving force behind the new, burgeoning Birmingham. The driving force behind the new burgeoning Birmingham was The University of Alabama Medical Center (now known as the University of Alabama-Birmingham) it sought to bring new ideas and minds to the area and helped to break down and replace the old industrial order that created and perpetrated the hostile environment in Birmingham. In the place of the former society that only benefitted the top industrialists and kept people from advancing socially and economically a community of meritocracy evolved. The keys to social mobility became the access to formal higher education.<sup>6</sup>

4 Gordon D. Gibson, *Southern Witness: Unitarians and Universalists in the Civil Rights Era* (Boston: Skinner House Books and the Unitarian Universalist History and Heritage Society, 2015), 149.

5 Catherine A. Connor, “Building Moderate Progress: Citizenship, Race, and Power in Downtown Birmingham, 1940–1992” (The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2012), 29-30.

6 Ibid., 10-18.

Understanding the relationship between this new economy, UAB, and the Unitarian Church is key to understanding the importance of the Unitarian Church's role in Birmingham. The report mentioned earlier directly makes the connection between the growth of the church and the growth of the "New South" economy in Birmingham that the university fueled. The professionals from the university made up almost a quarter of the congregation of the church and students from the college contributed even more to their growing number.<sup>7</sup> Dr. Joseph Volker, who founded the Unitarian Church in Birmingham and guided the transition of UAB from a simple medical extension of the University of Alabama to a semi-autonomous, highly prestigious, civic research university, acted as a common thread between these two institutions. His individual actions greatly contributed to the advancement of African Americans in Birmingham.

Dr. Joseph Volker, known affectionately as "Big Joe" or "Papa Joe," was born Joseph Francis Hennessey Aloysius Volker in Elizabeth, New Jersey, on March 9, 1913, the middle son of three boys born to second-generation German and Irish immigrants Frank and Rose Volker. He was raised Catholic in a middle-class household in a multi-cultural neighborhood filled with immigrant families as well as white and black natives. This experience would help shape his views of tolerance and racial cooperation later in life. After high school, Volker enrolled at Rutgers University initially but transferred to the dental school at Indiana University. There he earned his dental degree and moved back to the east coast to complete an internship at the Mountainside Hospital in Montclair, New Jersey. While there, he would meet and marry his wife Juanita "Neet" Volker, a nurse, against the hospital's wishes of fraternization between doctors and



"Papa Joe", the affectionate nickname for Joseph Volker, courtesy of Encyclopedia of Alabama.

nurses. Volker would continually vilipend rules like these throughout his life especially when they conflicted with his vision of a better world. Volker continued his academic studies at the University of Rochester in upstate New York. While there, he became a Senior Carnegie Fellow and earned a master's degree and a doctoral degree in biochemistry. Through his research there, Volker showed that applications of fluoride prevented tooth decay. In 1942, Volker accepted the position of Professor of Clini-

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<sup>7</sup> Volker, "Report from the Field on the Unitarian Fellowship of Birmingham, Alabama."

cal Dentistry and director of the dental clinics at the Tufts College Dental School in Boston, Massachusetts While at Tufts; he would have an apartment practically inside the Unitarian Church of Boston, the historical epicenter of American Unitarianism. Here he converted from Catholicism to Unitarianism. After five years, the 34-year-old Volker became the youngest dean of the Tufts dental school.<sup>8</sup>

After multiple applicants turned down the position of director of dental studies at the Medical Center, Volker accepted the offer in 1948, saying he “Wanted the intellectual challenge of building something from scratch.”<sup>9</sup> His long-term vision included the creation of a public, civic university that would interact with its community. In Birmingham, he realized that as in other universities in the past the changing political climate would fuel and push the university forward and simultaneously, the university would push the city to change as well. In his rise from dental school dean to president of UAB, he accomplished just that. In the words of a colleague, “Big science and big medicine truly were not big enough for Joe.”<sup>10</sup>

This vision is not a new concept to Unitarianism. In England the “red brick” universities that rose out of industrial cities, like Birmingham’s sister city in the United Kingdom, rode a similar wave of social change in England. The Industrial Revolution’s breakdown of parochial structures of social and economic class and its determinants educational access led to the advancement of formerly static agrarian society and subsequently the rise of a new middle class and worker class. Volker himself commented on the social change and upheaval

that helped create the classical universities during the Renaissance and understood the social factors that led to the creation of southern colleges in New Orleans, Charlotte, Richmond, and Atlanta.<sup>11</sup> Thus although he never left anything in his large archive indicating that he understood the connection between the “red brick” universities and his own, Volker undoubtedly understood the significance of his actions as a continuation of those of the heroes of the Unitarian Church. In his own words the two communities of the university and the city of Birmingham, “could come to be more than if they were operating without the help of each other.”<sup>12</sup> He also understood that a simple medical center would not be enough. For true democratically backed social change, he had to alter the fabric of the community.

To do that he needed to create a full university. As he said, “Physicians only seek to keep people alive and well, and well people can be dumb voters unable to choose good leaders for changing times, as we know from the history of Alabama.”<sup>13</sup> He knew that the majority of the community did not have the opportunity to leave Birmingham for education and operating on the Jeffersonian and Unitarian logic of the imperative of an educated body politic that could choose the best candidates. He sought long-term political change, and therefore racial change, in the community from the inside by offering education and opportunities to the electorate.<sup>14</sup> He sought to create a community with free minds. He addresses this concept of free minds in one of his Unitarian sermons. Within he states that to think freely, “We must free ourselves from the bondage of other’s thinking.” He then uses words from another Unitarian, William Channing, to define the

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8 Tennant S. McWilliams, *New Lights in the Valley: The Emergence of UAB* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2007), 75.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid., 117.

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11 Ibid., 116-118.

12 Ibid., 117.

13 Ibid., 118.

14 Ibid., 118.



free mind saying,

I call a mind free...which recognizes in all human beings the image of God and rights of his children... and offers up a willing victim to the cause of mankind... which protects itself against the usurpations of society, which does not cower to human opinion... which respects itself too much to be the slave or tool to the many or the few...which does not live on old virtues...which forgets what is behind, listens for new and higher monitors of conscience.

Volker concludes that, “A free mind is the product of its environment.”<sup>15</sup> Taken in the long-term context of the Civil Rights Movement and the advancement of African-Americans in America this action of creating an environment conducive to free thought is one of the greatest accomplishments by any individual person.

More directly, under Volker’s continued guidance and influence of UAB, he would create avenues for African-American residents of Birmingham to rise out of the racially motivated institutional poverty. Even before the university officially desegregated, it created opportunities of gainful employment for black residents in professional support roles and spaces of personal interaction between races. This understated interaction, in what some called the most segregated place in America, challenged Birmingham’s status quo.<sup>16</sup> A sermon by Volker labeled “Unitarian Views on the Bible” touches on this lack of inquiry. He admonishes that in Birmingham, “There seems to be a taboo against asking questions-even fair ones seeking honest info rather than dogmatic replies.”<sup>17</sup>This new relationship takes away the institutional security of

racism and the continued interaction humanizes the previously abstract concepts prompting questions of why exactly these people deserve to live as second-class citizens the forces that kept them down, especially when those forces turned to outright violence and terrorism. These jobs would also allow black residents to become part of a new lower-middle class that could have a greater income. Many of them used this income to help send their children to UAB when it desegregated, allowing black residents to join the new professional service economy that UAB fueled.<sup>18</sup> In addition, Volker would offer help with continuing education efforts at Tuskegee Institute, allow an illegal integrated meeting of the American Psychiatric Association in the medical center, and begin to offer continuing education classes to black dentists by way of the creation of the university funded Jefferson County Dental Study Club in 1954.<sup>19</sup> These types of actions showed his commitment to ideals he espoused in his sermons to help your fellow man saying to his congregation that the, “Only consideration is that he is in need and we are privileged to help him.” and stressing that, “Freedom alone is not enough that every man must have the opportunity with dignity.”

Volker had also wanted a black doctor at the university hospital for black residents but officials continually rebuffed him, citing the law mandating all practicing medical professionals had to be members of the all-white Jefferson County Medical Society. The board required unanimous approval to become a member, something they refused to do for black doctors. Volker and Charles Zukoski Jr., along with other liberal, Unitarian professionals like Roger Hansen and Frederick Kraus whom Volker had enticed to join him at UAB would redouble their efforts to petition the society to admit a black mem-

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15 Joseph Volker, “A Free Mind,” UAB Archive (Volker’s Papers 6.44).

16 Connor, 26.

17 Joseph Volker, “Unitarian Views of the Bible,” UAB Archive (Volker’s Papers 6.52).

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18 Connor, 27.

19 McWilliams, 118-119.

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ber after the image of Birmingham continued to fall due to the attack on civil rights demonstrators by Bull Connor’s police force. James T. Montgomery, a highly qualified cardiologist who also treated those injured in the demonstrations, applied to become UAB’s first black doctor. If successful, he could operate his own floor at the hospital, allowing first class medical care for the city’s black residents. After a long battle of phone calls, letters, and personal meetings, the society desegregated. Montgomery became the first black faculty member of UAB in 1963.<sup>20</sup> That same year Volker would privately order the “white” and “colored” signs removed from the medical college after receiving two memorandums from faculty and staff urging him to do so.<sup>21</sup> Also that year UAB officially, though tokenly, desegregated by admitting, more than five months after the token desegregation of its parent campus in Tuscaloosa, Ullman High School English teacher Luther Lawler into the graduate study program for education.<sup>22</sup> At this point, Volker froze all actions on civil rights; UAB became one of the last schools in the state to fully desegregate.<sup>23</sup>

This seems counter to Volker’s liberal ideology of racial progress in Birmingham. Volker had to build his vision of a school that could make lasting change in Birmingham a reality from nothing in one of the most socially conservative and violent places in the United States under the supervision of a board of trustees that were extremely conservative in their social views and re-

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 151-152

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 150-151. Ken Pruitt, “A Memory,” (Author’s possession 1989).

<sup>22</sup> McWilliams, 150.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 158.



Courtesy UAB Archives

UAB Hospital in 1960, courtesy of UAB archives.

garded the extension of their university in Birmingham as secondary the University of Alabama.

To secure UAB’s future primarily the university had to be self-sufficient. The board made it clear that any advance in the UAB would have to come from their own budget and not from the funds designated for UA.<sup>24</sup> To accomplish this Volker funded UAB with a combination of federal and state funds. This presented a problem especially as the Civil Rights Movement gained momentum. Volker saw an example of what could happen to his beloved college in his friend Henry King Stanford, president of Birmingham Southern College. After openly calling for desegregation the state and boosters cut funding,

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 153-154.

eventually ousting Stanford from office. In turn, UAB, seen as too liberal, experienced a decrease in enrollment and endowment. Volker realized that this could easily be his fate if he failed in his balancing act and in turn, his progressive Unitarian mission would fail. He needed the courage to face the hostile environment. Courage as he said in one sermon “Must have eyes as well as strength. Courage is only a virtue when directed by prudent caution.” Concluding finally, “Most problems cannot be solved today without men of courage.”<sup>25</sup> This prudent caution to preserve his vision for the university and Birmingham was essential in this trying time

While he bravely accomplished much in the way of racial progress in Birmingham, Volker also had the courage to commit acts that were against his core beliefs as a Unitarian to be patient and liberal as he urged in his preaching. For example, when black citizens injured in demonstrations arrived at the emergency room for treatment he called Bull Connor and told him if he did not do something about it, he would go to the press.<sup>26</sup> Two other Unitarians, Roger Hanson and Frederick Kraus, sought to organize a defense for a Methodist minister injured in defense of civil rights and called for Chuck Morgan, the white civil rights attorney, to give a “time for change” speech to the faculty and staff. All of this occurred on public property and Volker berated Hanson fiercely until Hanson produced a letter from the American Association of University Professors promising to protect Hanson’s right to free speech.<sup>27</sup> As Ken Pruitt summed up speaking of Volker in 1989, “‘Papa Joe’ protected his university from political vengeance” and, “He protected his faculty from the consequences of outspokenness on unpopular

themes.”<sup>28</sup>

The board’s conservatism threatened Volker’s ambitions, but its tendency to overlook Birmingham and focus on Tuscaloosa played into Volker’s hands. During this time, Wallace’s “stand in the schoolhouse door” brought so much attention to UA that the business of what they saw as a small extension of the campus sixty miles away rarely came up.<sup>29</sup> However, Volker decided to freeze all desegregation efforts on campus after the cooling of the Tuscaloosa crisis and the imminent passage of the Civil Rights Act to avoid seeming too liberal. Zukoski disagreed mightily and pleaded with Volker to take action. Volker was unmoved.<sup>30</sup> The wave of social change that fueled the university had to make the final push to achieve the most visible victory in Volker’s vision. Meanwhile, Volker worked behind the scenes to plan a total racial integration of the campus as soon as the “congressional cover” came. When it finally did, he immediately enrolled forty-four black students, most who lived within three miles of campus.<sup>31</sup> The battle over desegregating the hospital persisted, but after consulting with his interracial “Kitchen Cabinet” and receiving the advice to desegregate immediately, Volker promised complete desegregation in four days. Two days later, dressed in a seersucker suit and with his bowtie drooping slightly to the left, Volker announced that the hospital would be completely desegregated. The desegregation went pleasantly with many angry white patients eventually bonding with black patients over their shared conditions.<sup>32</sup> With the desegregation of UAB Volker won one of the major battles needed to accomplish his long-term individual vi-

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28 Pruitt.

29 McWilliams, 153-154.

30 Ibid., 158.

31 Ibid., 158.

32 Ibid., 160-162.

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25 Joseph Volker, “Courageous Living,” UAB Archive (Volker’s Papers 6.77).

26 McWilliams, 152.

27 McWilliams, 152.



sion. Finally, “The faces in the university of his dreams were black and white.”<sup>33</sup>

This type of individual action Volker has historical precedent in Unitarianism in a sermon titled “Salvation through Service” he begins by saying that Unitarians do not have saints but they have heroes like Dorothy Dix, Theodore Parker, and Horace Mann that accomplished great progressive victories. Highlighting that, “The remarkable thing about these accomplishments is that they were almost individual effort.” He ends the sermon by reminding the congregation, “We should not lose sight those possibilities-or should I say obligations...that have challenged us in the past-let’s not fail to respond in this day and age.”<sup>34</sup>

In “Brotherhood Revisited”, Volker lays out the basic tenants of the response calling for his congregation to practice “Universal Brotherhood undivided by nation, race, or creed” adding that, “To be tolerant we must reject hypocrisy. To be understanding we must be tolerant and there can be no true love without understanding and the brotherhood of man cannot be attained without love of thy neighbor.”<sup>35</sup> “Reverence for the Living” touches on the high cost of this action. “Provided we can accept our responsibility, provided we are prepared to sacrifice of our time, our monies, and our energies,” says Volker.<sup>36</sup> The congregation can do as he said in “Courageous Living” and “Throw yourself into the task of fighting for the underdog-helping the underprivileged, lifting the down trodden-bringing comfort to the suffering and promoting happiness of others. Develop the courage to be a servant

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33 Pruitt.

34 Joseph Volker, “Salvation through Service,” UAB Archive (Volker’s Papers 6.54).

35 “Brotherhood Revisited,” UAB Archive (UAB Volker’s Papers 6.70).

36 “Reverence for the Living,” UAB Archive (Volker’s Papers 6.46).

of mankind.”<sup>37</sup>

Ed Harris, who grew up in a working-class family in the heart of Birmingham, would eventually become minister in the Unitarian Church. He describes the church as a place that kept Alabama from becoming a closed society by fostering free and open discussion between the races.<sup>38</sup> Discussion occurred in interracial councils like the Greater Birmingham Council of Human Relations, a group with a large proportion of Unitarians.<sup>39</sup> A fiery activist, Harris remembers the church as “a leading force in positive constructive action in the civil rights field” and that “it was the issue that dominated our lives, our church, and later our communities.” He goes on to say that as a layman of the church he remembers picketing merchants, writing letters, answering on talk shows, leafletting, and demonstrating long before widespread black activism, saying that the influence of white liberals mostly stopped after 1963 when the SCLC took over activities.<sup>40</sup>

Virginia Volker remembered the time differently. She recalls the congregation taking place in civil rights activities but stressed individual action. The church “was a refuge from battle a place to regain strength among friends before returning to the fray.” Therefore, members of the Unitarian Church experienced it in different ways.<sup>41</sup>

Carolyn Fuller remembers the church much like Virginia Volker. Raised by her Unitarian parents and present at many sit-ins and demonstrations and when the first black student enrolled in her high school, she made it a point to talk to them, leading to her being ostracized. The church brought her and her friends closer

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37 “Courageous Living.”

38 Harris, 10.

39 Gordon D. Gibson, “Unitarian Universalists and the Civil Rights Movement: What Did We Do What Can We Learn from What We Did,” (Author’s possession 1983). 14-15.

40 Ibid., 15.

41 Ibid.

together. Her youth group would organize and invite young black and white children during the summer of 1963 to help them adjust to integration. Two of these children were the victims of the bomb planted at the 16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist Church.<sup>42</sup>

Another member Alice Syltie had this to say of the church's congregation "There is a special strength and a profound connection between these people...the deeply rooted understanding of what it means to work for justice under physically demanding and emotionally challenging conditions continues to touch the lives of the congregation," said Alice Syltie.<sup>43</sup> Other individual efforts headed by members of the church included an interracial dance troupe that would practice and perform at the church, the starting of various petitions, protests and public stands as well as President John F. Kennedy's appointment of former congregation president Paul Johnston to serve on the President's Committee for Civil Rights under Law.<sup>44</sup>

In Volker's sermon "Silence is not Golden" he asks, "Why do people stay silent?" when they see injustice done to their fellow man. People, "Don't want to start unpleasantness" so they stay silent when it comes to sensitive issues.<sup>45</sup> Charles Zukoski, Jr. did not subscribe to this theory. The immigrant from St. Louis came to Birmingham during the 1920s, a former Catholic like

“ MORE DIRECTLY, UNDER VOLKER'S CONTINUED GUIDANCE AND INFLUENCE OF UAB, HE WOULD CREATE AVENUES FOR AFRICAN-AMERICAN RESIDENTS OF BIRMINGHAM TO RISE OUT OF THE RACIALLY MOTIVATED INSTITUTIONAL POVERTY.

Volker. Birmingham residents always knew him as a man committed to social change. Quietly fired from his position as bank manager after he publicly advocated for race reform and mandatory birth control, he used his free time in constructive ways.<sup>46</sup> He would individually

achieve many victories in the Civil Rights Movement, including pushing for the removal of Bull Connor from office as a member of the Young Man's Business Club.<sup>47</sup>

Zukoski authored newspaper columns under the pen name Button Gwinnett. He chose the pseudonym out of necessity to keep himself and those around him safe. He began writing under the name of the obscure signer of the Declaration of Independence from Georgia in the 1940s and continued until the 1960s when he wrote a formal letter to the Birmingham News after the bombing of the 16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist Church. Taken as a whole these represent the emphasis of individual activism present within the church. Much like Volker, Zukoski used his vision and privileged position to try to make positive change in the world and help people see another viewpoint.

In these columns, Zukoski promoted liberal ideals and in doing so acted as a counter to the steady stream of racial hatred from Birmingham. He advocated at first for a much more gradual change, but events led him to see that moderation would not lead to change.

In his columns about desegregation in the 1940s, he particularly focused on issues surrounding the attempt to codify into formal law the de facto racially separated

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42 *Southern Witness: Unitarians and Universalists in the Civil Rights Era*, 153-154, 158-159.

43 *Ibid.*, 159-160.

44 Harris 12.

45 Joseph Volker, "Silence Is Not Golden," UAB Archive (Volker's Papers 6.55).

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46 McWilliams, 150.

47 Connor, 37, 103.

neighborhoods around Birmingham. He argued against mandatory segregation. Zukoski used constitutional arguments for his stance against segregation, but simultaneously praised the south for the subtle advancement of African-Americans. His solution to Birmingham’s racial problems included the creation of a biracial committee to mediate disputes between the city’s black and white communities.<sup>48</sup>

“WE STAND NOW WITH BROKEN HEARTS [OVER] THE GRAVES OF SIX CHILDREN...SIX CHILDREN WHOSE DEATH NONE OF US CAN COUNT AS GUILTLESS. FOR WE WERE SILENT WHEN WE SHOULD HAVE SPOKEN, SUBMISSIVE WHEN WE SHOULD HAVE REBELLED, FEARFUL WHEN WE SHOULD HAVE BEEN COURAGEOUS.”

Zukoski’s columns became progressively more liberal after the Supreme Court’s ruling on *Brown v Board of Education* in 1955. He applauded the courts in giving the states time to act independently and “with all deliberate speed” but urged Birmingham’s residents not to put off. If they do not, he warned, “we will have to face up in due time, to the final necessities of the situation.”<sup>49</sup> Birmingham and the state of Alabama would not heed these words, instead trying to uphold segregation at all costs. A disgusted Zukoski explained the imminence of integration. Fighting only widens the racial divide, allowing the

48 Charles Zukoski Jr., *Voice in the Storm: The Button Gwinnett Columns Written During the Civil Rights Struggles and Other Writings* (Birmingham, Alabama: Birmingham Public Library Press, 1990), 9-13.

49 *Ibid.*, 27.

rule of law to be undermined. He went on to demand that extremists, such as bombers, be punished to the full extent of the law.<sup>50</sup> To help ease tensions he also advocated for Bull Connor’s police force to hire black officers as other places in Alabama had done.<sup>51</sup>

One event led Zukoski to drop the pseudonym and write an open letter to the *Birmingham News*: the bombing of the 16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist Church. He brought the letter to many liberal, white business leaders, but the only person to cosign the letter was James A. Head. In the letter, he laid out basic truths that every citizen must realize. First, that black people are citizens of the United States and are thus entitled to equal rights and treatment as guaranteed by the constitution and that segregation, therefore, cannot be constitutional. Regarding *Brown v Board of Education*, Zukoski said that citizens of Alabama must obey the rulings of federal courts for the sake of civility. The Unitarian Church would only act officially as a congregation in the face of great tragedies. A growing number of people decided not to sit idly and let social activism become the foray of the minister or a select few.<sup>52</sup> The aforementioned bombing of the 16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist Church and the murder of Rev. James Reeb in Selma, Alabama during Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s marches led the church to act collectively. The second forced the Church to declare their stance on the Civil Rights Movement and open themselves up to collective action.

In response to the bombing of the church, which most the congregation learned of as they arrived for Sunday worship, there was a feeling of shock, despair, and fear. They feared they might be next to be bombed. Their pastor, Alfred Hobart, had been extremely active in the

50 *Ibid.*, 34-35, 43-48.

51 *Ibid.*, 43-44.

52 Harris, 11.

Civil Rights movement all around the United States and even espoused “The Beloved Community” concept years before King popularized the phrase.<sup>53</sup> Frequently referred to as “that nigger-loving preacher” for promoting radical race change ideals in his sermons and serving on various interracial councils, the fear of an attack was very real.<sup>54</sup> In spite of this, members took action. That very day many members left church to donate blood, while Betty Crutcher, nurse and mother of six children, volunteered to help the victims. Ed Harris and Peggy Fuller went to the houses of the victims to offer their condolences.<sup>55</sup> Six to eight members of the church went to Carol Robertson’s funeral and represented more than half of the white people in attendance.<sup>56</sup> For Alfred Hobart’s next sermon he remembers not only the four little girls but the two young men killed in the racial violence that followed the bombing as well. He concluded the sermon by rebuking the city of Birmingham, saying, “We stand now with broken hearts the graves of six children...six children whose death none of us can count as guiltless. For we were silent when we should have spoken, submissive when we should have rebelled, fearful when we should have been courageous.”<sup>57</sup>

The death of Rev. James Reeb, a Unitarian minister, sparked an even greater response by the church. Just a few days before Reeb’s death, seventy-two white citizens travelled to Selma to read a statement condemning the brutality and suppression they witnessed. Among those thirty-eight were from Birmingham, almost all of

them Unitarians.<sup>58</sup> These men made it home safely. Reed did not. Three men brutally attacked Reeb as he exited a black owned diner with two other ministers. An ambulance rushed him to university hospital where Dr. Volker ordered that all available resources be devoted to Rev. Reeb.<sup>59</sup> Black and white preachers and laymen from all around the city filled a black church to hold a vigil for Reeb the next night. During the service, Rev. Reeb passed away. Rev. Lawrence McGinty, the new minister at the Unitarian Church in Birmingham, left from the vigil to call an emergency meeting. To his surprise the council drafted a statement condemning the attack, saying, “As citizens of Alabama, and as Unitarians, we share the same moral sentiments which have stimulated these outbursts of protests.” The members adopted the statement immediately with the only dissenting vote coming from Ed Harris: Harris didn’t find the statement strong enough.<sup>60</sup> Soon Unitarians from around the country converged on the small church in Birmingham.<sup>61</sup>

That Sunday in Birmingham, a group of interracial ministers illegally held another memorial at a white church. More than four hundred mourners attended. The ministers left for Selma the next day and then departed the state. McGinty breathed a sigh of relief, but could not rest yet. A federal judge had granted an injunction to protect marchers on their planned march to Montgomery. The Unitarian Board in Boston called and informed McGinty that they would be coming once more, but in much greater numbers. The board of directors voted to use the

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53 James A. Hobart, “For We Have Promises to Keep,” (Author’s possession 2013).

54 Harris, 11.

55 Gibson, *Southern Witness: Unitarians and Universalists in the Civil Rights Era*. 154.

56 Hobart.

57 Gibson, *Southern Witness: Unitarians and Universalists in the Civil Rights Era*, 154.

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58 Joseph Elwanger, “Interpretation of March 6, 1965 Demonstration by 72 Alabama Whites in Selma,” in *Author’s Possession*.

59 Lawrence McGinty, “Sixteen Days of Crisis for a Group of Insiders,” (Author’s possession 1965).

60 W. Edward Harris, *Miracle in Birmingham: A Civil Rights Memoir* (Indianapolis, Indiana: Stonework Press, 2004), 162.

61 McGinty.

*“The Difficult Way Breaketh Not Their Courage”*

Birmingham church as a base for the protest.<sup>62</sup> So over the course of the next seven days, the church provided accommodations, logistical support and transport for more than five hundred people. When they left for Selma to march, the church members were too exhausted to go. In any case, they had a church to clean.<sup>63</sup> Overwhelmingly, the church was successful in finally taking a public stand together as a group toward racial reform. The church received significant support, but its members had taken a great risk by supporting an anti-segregation protest.<sup>64</sup>

The church began to take a much bolder stance on civil rights and improvement of race relations. With the help of many professionals from UAB, the Unitarian Church created a program that helped underprivileged children, both black and white, improve academically.<sup>65</sup> This fostered interracial dialog among the city’s poorest black and white families. Frequently, the city’s poorest whites had performed acts of terrorism against African-Americans. The program helped foster a more amicable relationship between poor white and black citizens.

Volker stated in his field report to the Unitarians that “Two years ago the local populace might have confused a Unitarian with a Martian; today it is a trademark of a liberal religion in Alabama.”<sup>66</sup> The church grew despite threats of violence against its members due to the congregation’s courageous desire to fight social injustice. Similar to the proverbial mustard seed, the Unitar-

ian Church sprouted from humble beginnings and grew into a mighty force, one that devoted itself to the fight for justice.



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62 Harris, “Our Church in Birmingham: It Has Not Kept Silent,” 10.

63 McGinty.

64 Ibid.

65 Ethel Gorman, “Participation of the Birmingham Unitarian Church in the First Head Start Program in Alabama - Recollections of Ethel M. Gordon,” (Author’s possession 1994).

66 Volker, “Report from the Field on the Unitarian Fellowship of Birmingham, Alabama.”