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# Foreword

History is made by the actions of extraordinary individuals who influence the world in their own time to such a degree that those of us living after them still benefit from their inspiration and commitment. The late Rev. Edwin T. Dahlberg was clearly such an extraordinary individual, and we are fortunate to have this excellent biography by his son, Keith. Reading this book is like being offered a front-row seat on a historical journey. It is a journey that traverses the classic American immigrant search for religious freedom, from the hard work of a family in a new land, to a call to ministry, and into the most important religious debates and political movements of the mid-twentieth century.

Edwin Dahlberg was senior pastor of some of America's preeminent Baptist churches. He played a leadership role in the Northern Baptist Convention, the Fellowship of Reconciliation, the Baptist Peace Fellowship, and the World Council of Churches, and he served as president of the National Council of Churches of Christ (1957–60).

Like a first rate journalist, Keith Dahlberg has recorded his father's involvement in these often contentious and controversial organizations, and this memoir features frequent "aha" moments when a piece of a puzzle that had been missing is snapped into place. As an American Baptist myself, I have never before read such a concise and compelling description of the Liberal-Conservative debates that swirled within my own denomination in the mid 1940s, and which continue to play out in the twenty-first century.

Rev. Dahlberg was a radical. At an early age he made the decision to become a conscientious objector—in World War I! It was an unflinching commitment to peace that he maintained all of his life. He recognized the sin of racism from the beginning of his ministry, and while other preachers were writing to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. with the patronizing advice to go slow, Rev. Dahlberg was one of the few who wrote a much-needed letter of support while Dr. King was in the notorious Birmingham jail. It was an act of solidarity for which King was always thankful.

Rev. Dahlberg insisted that it was not a contradiction for a Christian to have deep religious convictions and a thriving spiritual life while also holding liberal views about scriptural inerrancy and an inclusive approach to other religious traditions. His religious convictions sometimes brought hardship and attack, but Dahlberg had the gospel on his side, which carried him through the storms.

In the most public way possible, Rev. Dahlberg lived out his faith, and by leading with such lauded integrity, he inspired others to follow. Vignettes in this book, such as those describing when Rev. Dahlberg brought a deeply divided church back together or tamed a virulent opponent to the NCC by having lunch with him, offer the reader a practical “how to” manual for maintaining one’s own convictions while still valuing reconciliation and allowing the other side to feel heard and respected. It is no surprise that Rev. Dahlberg was continually asked to stay on for a second term as leader of important organizations, and whenever he moved on to a new pastorate, his leaving was always mourned by his previous congregation.

Yet what makes this book so captivating is not the public life of Pastor Dahlberg, but the day-to-day manner in which he went about his life as a Christian. We learn about the true nature of Dahlberg when we read of his gentle encouragement of a young Keith to find not merely a pretty wife but someone who was also a true soul mate. We perceive the deep love Edwin shared with his first wife until her death, and then the joy he felt when finding a second woman with whom he could live out the rest of his days. We recognize his matter-of-fact pastoral impulse when he got out of a car to steady a drunken man.

While it is certainly true that Rev. Dahlberg is a historical figure whose memory we should honor, we should also make sure that we each listen closely to Dahlberg’s response to the desperate cry of a boy in a psychiatric ward who repeatedly cried out, “Am I done for?” To the sick boy, Pastor Dahlberg spoke with assurance: “No, you are not done for. God loves you.” In those simple, pastoral, Christian words, we find the true meaning of the life of Rev. Edwin T. Dahlberg.

Rev. Dahlberg studied under my great-grandfather while in seminary, and this biography gets Walter Rauschenbusch just right. Keith Dahlberg is careful to show that Rauschenbusch cared deeply for the well being of each person as well as for the society in which the individual resides—it was never a choice between one concern or the other. Dahlberg was ordained the year of Rauschenbusch’s death, and he continued to carry the torch that Rauschenbusch passed, a fire that still burns, although alas, the light is fainter than it

was. Reading this memoir one can't help but wince at our own tepidness in contrast with the passion and radical commitment of Rauschenbusch and Dahlberg. How many Christians, and specifically Baptists, have decided that it is better to be safe than courageous, to be pious rather than righteous?

My prayer is that this book might reignite that passion for establishing justice and creating a world that reflects God's abiding love for each individual. May *Edwin T. Dahlberg—Pastor, Peacemaker, and Prophet* continue to impart inspiration and faith to our generation and generations to come.

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