

Karl Heinz Walter

PEOPLE AND ENCOUNTERS

that impressed and shaped me

1933 - 2008

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To our grand-daughters
MARA and JOANA,
dedicated with thanks for their interest

PREFACE

"A Man For All Seasons"

Karl Heinz Walter became General Secretary of the European Baptist Federation at the right time. He was the right person in the right place. The fall of the Berlin Wall and the breakdown of the Soviet Union presented many opportunities and challenges for Christians and especially Baptists in Eastern Europe. There was a lack of leadership and confidence among the people in many Baptist unions of Eastern Europe. On the other hand, there was weak leadership and a lack of vision in Western Europe. Karl Heinz Walter with his experience of leadership of the European Baptist Youth and Baptist World Youth knew the leaders and knew the demands of the church in a changing society. His leadership helped many struggling Baptist Unions find direction in a changing world and at the same time gave assurance of the promises of God to take care of His people.

Indeed Karl Heinz was "a man for all seasons." His leadership was very evident in four important aspects of Church life:

1. Pastor and counsellor: Having served for many years as a pastor, KHW had a pastor's heart and therefore was able to serve as a pastor to the new leadership that was coming into the churches of Eastern and Western Europe. As a German, coming from a country which had been divided into two camps, he understood the new problems facing young leaders very well.

Every Christian leader needs a pastor and counsellor. And that is what KHW was for many of the new young leaders of Eastern Europe. They needed wise counsel and pastoral encouragement and hope. Whether counselling with young leaders in Russia or the Ukraine, Poland or Hungary, KHW was able to give an encouraging word and point them to a future of hope. He was in the New Testament sense a real bishop!

2. Administrator: With the fall of communism Baptists and relief organizations from around the world were eager to assist the conventions and unions in the new era of freedom. It was important that funds be administered properly and honestly. It was also important that everyone got their fair share. KHW brought his great administrative skills to the front, enabling donor organizations and churches to feel confident that their contributions were being honestly and fairly spent.

But administration is more than handling funds. Good administration fosters confidence in church members that promises made will be promises kept. The setting of dates and meeting places for future meetings was no small undertaking. One needs vision to ensure that all of God's people have a fair in-put into the proper decisions that will influence generations to come. In that respect, I would say that KHW was a "prophetic administrator" in that he set policies and structures in place that were enabling and not crippling. Confidence, orderliness, and honesty are requirements of a good administrator. In this respect KHW was a model.

3. Theologian and Spiritual Leader: As Christians we expect our leaders to be people of integrity, but more than that we expect them to be men and women who have met Christ and carry on their work as a spiritual calling. KHW was a Bible study leader par excellence! Members of the EBF council as well as conventions and unions were awaiting a word from the Lord. A leader was needed who could interpret the signs of the times in light of God's word. When Karl Heinz preached and led Bible studies our people felt that Scripture had something significant to say to today's problems and concerns. With his long experience as a pastor and church leader KHW was able to study scripture in depth and allow the Lord to speak a word of encouragement and challenge. Confronted with a secular agenda that very often resisted a Biblical word, KHW was able to make the Bible come alive to a whole spectrum of audiences, including other denominations and even the pope. Karl Barth would have applauded KHW as a man who really did have the newspaper in one hand and the Bible in the other!

4. A Prophetic Vision: Scripture reminds us that "where there is no vision the people perish." Part of the responsibility of leadership is to be a prophet, that is, one who "speaks for" the Lord and helps us understand what God is doing in history. Too often people think of prophecy as "foretelling" the future and miss the importance of spiritual leaders "speaking for" God. Of course Christian leaders do not operate in a vacuum but are responsible to their national leaders, as well as international leaders. As General Secretary of the Baptist World Alliance during Karl Heinz Walter's tenure of office, I had first-hand experience of this prophetic vision which he had not only for Europe but for the world. KHW always brought world leaders to a serious discussion and encouraged them to dig deep into the Word of God to discover where we were going and what we were doing. It was a joy for me to work with KHW during the days of his leadership.

These written memoirs provide more than a historical record of past events. They are a spiritual diary of God leading one man to respond to that heavenly vision. Karl Heinz Walter did not deny that vision but responded with seriousness, enthusiasm, and joy to the cross of Christ that was set before him. And in his responding to that vision of Christ for a united fellowship of Baptists in Europe, the leaders and members of the European Baptist Federation also responded affirmatively and with great enthusiasm. Congratulations Karl Heinz Walter. Well done, good, and faithful servant!

*Denton Lotz,
General Secretary Emeritus
Baptist World Alliance*

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

If at the beginning of my journey with Jesus someone had said what possibilities would present themselves in my life, onto which paths God would guide me, which tasks would wait for me and what kinds of people I would encounter in all regions of this world, I would have never believed it.

I was 14 years old when I made my decision for Jesus Christ and was baptized. Only one year later, as I was reading the journals of one of the first Cameroon missionaries, it became clear to me that God had called me to become a pastor-preacher.

Following my theological studies in Hamburg, I became youth pastor in Westphalia, then church pastor in Minden, leader of the church youth ministries of the Baptist Churches in Germany, church pastor in Bremerhaven and, eventually, Secretary-General of the European Baptist Federation (EBF) and representative of the Baptist World Alliance (BWA) to Europe and the Middle East.

In this way, I met people who impressed and moved me. I met personalities who carried great responsibilities in this world, and others whose names I was not told or which I no longer remember. All these people left their mark on my life. I had repeatedly and on various occasions told of my encounters and was asked to write down my experiences so that they might not be lost. I have done this now in the hope that the reports of my experiences might leave behind lasting impressions.

Some of these encounters and experiences I was able to enjoy together with my wife, Traute. It goes without saying that our journey through life together was a decisive factor for me and, without Traute, none of these would have been possible.

Hamburg, October 2011
Karl Heinz Walter DD