

# Introduction

THE AMERICAN THEOLOGIAN WILLIAM A. BROWN, himself an ecumenist, hailed the Swiss theologian Adolf Keller as one of the eight most important pioneers of ecumenism in the decades prior to the founding of the World Council of Churches in 1948.<sup>1</sup> Keller (1872–1963) served as a pastor for the Protestant community in Cairo, for a church in his native canton of Schaffhausen and then in Geneva, and finally at St Peter's parish church in Zurich. Already from the outset of his career, he sought to promote social justice and world peace. After the end of World War I, the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America entrusted the well-educated, multilingual, and open-minded Keller with cultivating relations between churches in America and Europe. He retired from parish work at the end of 1923 to play a key role within the ecumenical Universal Christian Conference on Life and Work (hereinafter abbreviated as Life and Work), which was steadily evolving at the time. At its inaugural world conference, held in Stockholm in 1925, Keller was elected second associate general secretary, in which capacity he later became director of the International Christian Social Institute in Geneva. From 1930 on, his work focused on spreading ecumenism in the churches throughout the world.

In 1922, Keller founded the ecumenical relief agency Inter-Church Aid, which he headed until 1945. It became the cornerstone of his life's work. The agency supported churches in France and Germany that had suffered the effects of World War I. Keller placed particular emphasis on coming to the aid of Protestant minorities in Eastern Europe. In particular, he supported their efforts to recruit and train young ministers. Furthermore, he lent assistance to the hard-pressed Protestant and Orthodox Christians in the Soviet Union. Financial support for these ventures came chiefly from the United States and from the Swiss Protestant community.

1. Brown, *Toward a United Church*, see Index.

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Like his friend Karl Barth, Keller adopted a clear stance toward National Socialism. He became actively involved in enlightening the English-speaking world about the Nazi regime, and was among the first theologians to tend to the needs of German refugees.

Among Keller's fellow ecumenists were Nathan Söderblom, Charles Macfarland, Henry S. Leiper, Eugène Choisy, Wilfred Monod, Marc Boegner, Adolf Deissmann, and George Bell. Together they aspired to the same overarching objective and shared the ideals encapsulated in Keller's book *Von Geist und Liebe: Ein Bilderbuch aus dem Leben* (1934).<sup>2</sup>

Keller wrote more than twenty books, dozens of brochures, and hundreds of articles. His copious, unpublished estate is housed in numerous archives, among other places, in Geneva, Bern, Basel, Zurich, Berlin, London, and Philadelphia. The present English version of the biography of Adolf Keller dispenses with an exhaustive appendix. It is an abbreviated version of the comprehensively researched German original, *Adolf Keller (1872–1963): Pionier der ökumenischen Bewegung* (2008).

2. Hereafter abbreviated as *Von Geist und Liebe*.