Niemoller, Martin

(1892--1984), German Protestant pastor who headed the anti-Nazi Confessing Church during the Nazi regime. During World War I Niemoller distinguished himself in the German navy. He was ordained as a minister in 1924; in 1931 he became the pastor of an important parish in Berlin, where his fame as a naval hero and his preaching drew large crowds.

Niemoller was not a supporter of the Weimar government, and in fact, originally welcomed the Nazis. However, he soon saw how dangerous they were. In 1934 he established the Pastors' Emergency League, and in 1937 he became the head of the Confessing Church. At that point, he was arrested for "malicious attacks on the state," assigned a symbolic sentence, and made to pay a small fine. However, after he was released, he was re-arrested based on direct orders from Hitler. For the next seven years, Niemoller was detained in the concentration camps of Sachenhausen and Dachau, where he was often kept in solitary confinement. Despite this, at the beginning of World War II, the patriotic Niemoller volunteered to help the German navy---but he was refused. In 1945 he was released by the Allies, and became an avowed pacifist who supported a neutral, disarmed, and unified Germany.