

Deaths

News in the [December 30, 2008](#) issue

William C. Placher, an influential and widely admired theological scholar, died November 30 at age 60 of natural causes, according to a spokesperson at Wabash College in Crawfordsville, Indiana, where he had taught for 34 years. Placher died in Minnesota where he was serving as a writer-in-residence at the Collegeville Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research at St. John's University. Author of 13 books, including *A History of Christian Theology*, *Narratives of a Vulnerable God* and *The Triune God*, Placher was an editor at large for the Century and renowned for his lectures and guest sermons. A lay leader in Crawfordsville's Wabash Avenue Presbyterian Church, Placher was the LaFollette Distinguished Professor in the Humanities at Wabash, his alma mater. He earned his master's and doctoral degrees at Yale in the mid-1970s. In 2002, the American Academy of Religion gave him its coveted Excellence in Teaching Award. (See also the [Century's tribute to Placher](#).)

Scottish-born Presbyterian **George M. Docherty**, a minister credited with pushing Congress to insert the phrase "under God" into the Pledge of Allegiance, died on Thanksgiving at his home in Alexandria, Pennsylvania. He was 97. Docherty, who succeeded Peter Marshall as pastor of the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church in Washington, D.C., delivered a sermon in 1952 saying that the pledge to the flag should acknowledge God. Docherty gave the sermon again February 7, 1954, upon learning that President Eisenhower would be at the church. The next day, Representative Charles G. Oakman (R., Mich.) introduced a bill to add the phrase to the pledge. Eisenhower signed the bill into law on Flag Day that year. Docherty, who served the congregation for 26 years, was active in the civil rights movement and opposed the war in Vietnam.

Odetta, the folk singer whose deep and powerful voice became a soundtrack for the civil rights movement of the 1960s, died December 1 in New York after a decade-long fight with heart disease. She was 77. Born Odetta Holmes in Birmingham, Alabama, she was one of the best-known folk and blues singers of the 1950s and 1960s. She helped to shape the careers of rising folk singers such as Joan Baez, Bob Dylan and Judy Collins. But it was at the 1963 March on Washington, where Martin

Luther King Jr. gave his “I Have a Dream” speech and Odetta sang the slave-era “O Freedom,” with its lines “before I’d be a slave, I’d be buried in my grave, / And go home to my Lord and be free,” that forever linked her voice with the aspirations and tragedies of the movement.

Frank Pollard, 74, president of the Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary from 1983 to 1986 and a widely known Southern Baptist preacher, died November 30 at his home in San Francisco. Pollard, who suffered from Parkinson’s disease, twice served as pastor of First Baptist Church in Jackson, Mississippi, for a total of 22 years. *Time* magazine once named Pollard one of seven “outstanding Protestant preachers in America.”