

From the Foreword

Even in the midst of the worst pain and suffering and loss in our lives, there is always hope. In the fire of faith, out of the ashes of grief and despair, comes the gospel promise of presence and transformation. The words of the prophet Isaiah remind us,

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you (Isaiah 43:1-2).

Notice the passage stresses when you pass through the waters and when you walk through the fire, not if! When the inevitable suffering and tragedies of life seem overwhelming, God promises: "I will not forget you. See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands" (Isaiah 49:15-16).

From a meaningless act of random violence in the torching of Trinity Lutheran Church in Lynnwood, Washington, a pastor and an arsonist, his family and an entire congregation began to experience redemption in the unconditional love and forgiveness of Jesus Christ. Literally experiencing the total destruction of their beloved church by fire and water, the faithful people of God at Trinity, led by their visionary pastor, began not only to rebuild, but they also reached out in love, reconciliation, and friendship to the arsonist and his family. What resulted was the transformation of all of their lives.

Fire of Grace: The Healing Power of Forgiveness is the powerful and true story of tragedy and transformation — turning from unawareness, disintegration, and premature death to understanding, forgiveness, and integration — which is a necessary condition in each person's journey toward wholeness. To be transformed individually and collectively is to undergo metamorphosis; fundamentally, it requires a change of life direction, a change of heart and being.

With openness and clarity, longtime friend, pastor, and author Rick Rouse relates not only the Trinity story, but also his personal story of renewal in pastoral ministry. The Trinity church fire becomes the metaphor of his own burnout and, at the same time, a symbol of God's cleansing and healing for himself and the entire congregation. Renewal is gained at a price—the price is the necessary pruning of the false self, the ego, so that true meaning and purpose can blossom.

Pastor Rouse tells this inspirational story of healing and renewal with passion — love and forgiveness lie at the very heart of transformation and the Christian life. *Fire of Grace* is an unforgettable true story of faith, a compelling book that you will want to read in a single sitting. At the end, God's promise rings bold and true: "When you walk through the fire, the flame shall not consume you." Indeed, it shall be so!

— The Rev. Dr. Kenneth L. Bakken, Physician, pastor, and author of *The Journey into God: Healing and Christian Faith* (Augsburg Fortress) **From the**

Preface

"My hope is that this book will encourage holy conversation about what it means to be a follower of Jesus in unsettling times. I hope it will be read by individuals who then will gather with other believers in new member classes, adult study, church councils, and other settings for lifelong learning in the church. May the Spirit bless our search for wisdom and our witness to the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

— Mark S. Hanson, Presiding Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America