



# Profiles

of Mennonite Faith

## Marie Wiebe (1912 -1985) – *That Impulsive Marie*

“Marie!” the people said, “you are too impulsive—think before you leap!” But she was unstoppable, always ready for the next adventure, stepping out in faith and courage.

Born in 1912 in Steinbach, Manitoba, she was the tenth of 15 children born to Peter and Elizabeth Toews. Her mother died when Marie was 12, leaving her crushed and lonely. At age 15 she left home and the Mennonite Church she’d grown up in. She found a job and joined a wild crowd. But at age 18 she turned back to God, returned home and finished high school.

Though she “couldn’t afford even a three-cent stamp,” she managed to study at the Saskatchewan Bible College. She married Joe Wiebe and together they dreamt of reaching out to others beyond their faith community. So in 1943, with two small children, they were sent to start a mission from scratch in the town of Stuartburn in southern Manitoba.

A tarpaper shack was all they could find to rent. It had no electricity,

the roof leaked and the yard was a cow pasture. Marie struggled to leave behind her modern appliances. “For two days and nights I cried while God loosed me from my house and things,” she said. She clung to Psalm 126:6 which became amazingly fulfilled in her lifetime, “Those who go forth with weeping, bearing precious seed, shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing their sheaves with them.”

Marie and Joe threw themselves into the work. They studied the Ukrainian language to connect with the immigrant community. For years, each Sunday morning they moved their furniture out into the front yard to make room for church services.

In another town they rented the local pool hall for a meeting place. Marie’s thought patterns were definitely outside the box for a Mennonite woman of the 1940s. She was not shy to mix with those of other faiths or of no faith.

In order to tell children about Jesus, she and Joe visited 45



Marie and Joe Wiebe

rural schools throughout southeastern Manitoba. She packed their five children into the car along with music books and flannel graphs and off they went—at times spending a week or ten days on the road, sleeping in halls, schools or homes.

“God naturally burdened us with what we would call underprivileged children. Oh, what a responsibility we felt for them,” Marie exclaimed. During summer they took many of these rural children to a Bible camp. Over the years many of the young believers she helped became Christian workers, missionaries and ministers.

Then she and Joe were sent to a challenging assignment in a northern centre, Ashern, surrounded by First Nations communities. On Saturday nights the whole family set up on a corner in town to hold street meetings, the young children joining in the singing. Marie instilled in them a team spirit. The entire family carried on these street meetings for eleven years!

Marie enjoyed new challenges. When Joe suffered from debilitating headaches she happily filled in as preacher. She once drove the tractor that hauled a used church building to its new location.

To stretch their meager salary she kept a large garden and canned hundreds of sealers each year—often with no electricity. There were frequent dinner guests; and Marie once confessed, “Hospitality is a test of Christian

character.”

She seemed to never need a break. But by age 45 she and Joe had started new churches in three different towns and she was worn out. She took a rest from ministry for two years. This was a Marie her family hardly knew.

Later on, she and Joe accepted an assignment from the Mennonite Brethren Conference to move to Mexico to minister to Low German-speaking Mennonites. It was a tough assignment. They had to learn new ways to share the Gospel message. A great story-teller, Marie would don the typical dress of the colony, gather the women and tell stories. When she caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror with a kerchief over her head she would “almost die laughing;” but when she spoke, the women leaned forward to catch every word of the Bible stories.

At age 70, at a picnic in Canada, Marie couldn’t resist a new adventure of trying to walk on stilts. She fell and sheepishly accepted the news that she had cracked her ribs. The next year she suffered a heart attack followed by two years of poor health. Yet the unpredictable Marie, on the day before she died, raised an arm high announcing, “If I perish, I perish!”

Some 900 people from many regions attended her funeral. In their homes and communities the impulsive Marie, armed with humor and courage, had met them with love.



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