



Profiles

of Mennonite Faith

Henry G. Classen – *City Missionary in Vancouver*

In the summer of 1950 Henry G. Classen stood near the corner of Main and Powell, conducting street ministry in downtown Vancouver together with his family and a band of volunteers from local Mennonite Brethren (MB) churches. He would soon become known as “city missionary Classen,” the founding leader of Pacific Grace Mission.

Henry Classen was born in 1907 on the Island of Chortitza in southern Russia (Ukraine) to Gerhard and Aganetha (nee Hildebrandt) Klassen. Henry was the eighth of nine children who would soon lose their parents and suffer through the ravages of the revolution. At the age of 15 Henry gave his life to Christ at a revival meeting in Kronstal. Less than a year later he fled to Canada with all but one of his surviving siblings.

A few years later Henry renewed his faith and was baptized in the MB Church in Herbert, Saskatchewan. He married Sara Nielsen in 1929 and began farming in Aberdeen, where he was active as a youth leader and sensed a growing call to ministry. After completing two years of study at Coaldale Bible School in 1946, Henry and

Sara, along with their five children, moved to Aldergrove, BC while seeking the Lord’s leading for future ministry.

In 1949 the MB Conference approached Henry with the call to start a ministry in the down town area of Vancouver. Initially he declined, fearing the impact of the city on his children and not feeling equipped to carry out inner-city ministry. After a day of fasting and prayer, he felt confirmed in this calling after reading Exodus 14:14 “The Lord will fight for you, you need only be still.”

Henry and Sara began their ministry with street outreach and hosting a Sunday school program and evening services at a nearby rescue mission in collaboration with Union Gospel Mission (UGM). Within two years, they turned the ministry over to UGM and began another Sunday school ministry near the corner of Hastings and Clark. With the help of co-workers Herb Brandt and Wes Classen it grew to over 70 children by 1955 when they were forced to relocate due to construction, so they moved to the Hastings Auditorium as they looked for a long-term solution.



Henry and Sara Classen

Early in 1956 they purchased an empty lot on the corner of Woodlawn and Francis and by July of that year the “Chapel” of Pacific Grace Mission was constructed. After extensive canvassing in the neighbourhood, they welcomed over 100 people on their first Sunday. With the help of co-worker Sue Neufeld the Sunday school and DVBS programs grew steadily along with clubs for boys, girls, youth and mothers, along with practical assistance of clothing and food hampers for those in need. Thanks to the dedicated efforts of a core group of volunteers and co-workers, the Sunday school grew to over 300 children from a diversity of cultures, and in 1963 the Chapel was formally registered as a church.

While the Sunday school ministry flourished, Henry established a growing rescue mission in the downtown core of Vancouver for men who struggled with addiction. This included an evening service with a sermon followed by a hot meal, counselling, friendship and sharing faith. For a time they offered shelter for up to 40 men. By 1963, when Henry handed the leadership of the rescue mission over to John Esau, over 12,300 men had been served.

In addition to the Chapel and rescue mission, Henry conducted active hospital visitation and prison outreach. He also preached regularly on a CJOR radio program called “Light House of Hope” and at evangelistic meetings in various MB churches. Sometimes he preached as many as five times on a Sunday.

By the late 1960s the majority of the children in Sunday school were of Chinese origin, reflecting the changing composition of the surrounding neighbourhood. In

efforts to reach the parents of the Chinese children attending Sunday school, Sara Classen and co-worker Sue Neufeld started taking lessons in Cantonese, and a short term Chinese worker was hired to assist with home visitations.

The response was positive, and in 1972 Henry asked Paul Li to join the team. Paul’s ministry grew to include 45 people attending the Chinese speaking congregation, but his ministry was cut short due to cancer and his sudden death 1975. Eddie Chu assumed leadership for the Chinese congregation, which grew despite some early adversity.

By 1977 it was time for Henry and Sara to retire. It also seemed to be the right time for Chinese workers to assume full leadership for Pacific Grace as the congregation was now almost 80% Chinese. Pacific Grace Mission Chapel was dissolved and Pacific Grace Chinese MB Church emerged as the first Chinese MB church.

Henry and Sara retired to Culloden MB Church where Henry continued visitation, teaching Sunday school and occasional preaching. Henry passed away on April 26, 1988 in the loving care of Sara and many friends who supported them during his illness with Parkinson’s.

In their retirement Henry and Sara would say that “the years at Pacific Grace Mission Chapel were the most precious and meaningful years of our live.” During his life and ministry Henry led many to faith in Christ, and countless people experienced his compassion and grace. Since his passing, the legacy of Pacific Grace continues in the work of the original Pacific Grace Chinese MB church as well as the numerous Chinese churches that have sprung from it, many of whom carry the name Pacific Grace.



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