



Profiles

of Mennonite Faith

Orlando Harms – Editor, Publisher, Minister

An editor who can write consistently well over many years in two languages is a rare gift. Orlando Harms was such a man – a gifted editor who not only edited periodicals in German and English, he also managed a publishing and printing company that printed and distributed many books and curriculum materials in both languages.

In 1954 the Mennonite Brethren Publishing House was in great need of a change. Nearly bankrupt, it needed a new general manager. The board turned to a former assistant manager and Mennonite Brethren pastor, Orlando Harms, to transform this publishing ministry. Within a few short years, Harms had won good support for the *Christian Leader* and the *Zionsbote*, which he personally edited. With his careful, yet aggressive, leadership the publishing house was transformed into an influential, and economically successful, enterprise. Harms developed a widespread ministry that extended to Mennonite Brethren internationally.

In addition to his editorial work, other responsibilities included helping to edit and write the *Adult Quarterly* and *Lektionsheft* -- the conference adult curriculum materials. He edited and published the conference

yearbooks, a hymnbook, and was an editor of the devotional publication *Rejoice*. He oversaw the operations of a bookstore, all in addition to the constant schedule of putting out two periodicals in different languages.

Orlando Harms was born on June 28, 1913 near Hillsboro, Kansas, the son of Peter P. and Justina Seibel Harms. He committed himself to Christ at a young age and was baptized in 1935. On October 3, 1941, he married Erna Anna Wiebe, and they would have three children, James (married to Elaine Roupp), Robert (married to Sandra Wiens), and Marilyn (married to Richard Jeppesen), and granddaughters Lisa and Laura Jeppesen. Erna spent many years as a primary school teacher and later specialized in the education of mentally handicapped children. She also started a Sunday School class for the mentally handicapped. She was a volunteer at the "Et Cetera Shop" for many years, and was active in community

organizations. Each year she looked forward to singing Handel's *Messiah* as an alto in the choir of the *Messiah Festival* in Lindsborg, Kansas.

Orlando was educated in English and Journalism at Tabor College, at Friends University, and the University



Orlando and Erna Harms

of Colorado. He taught at Tabor College, and later became the pastor of the First Mennonite Brethren Church in Wichita, Kansas, where he was ordained. Yet it was in his writing and editing that he made his most important contribution to the Anabaptist vision and mission of Mennonite Brethren.

The initial professional work and training for Orlando was editing and writing for a weekly newspaper, the *Hillsboro Journal*. He worked for the *Journal* from 1941 until 1947. This initial start into journalism had a profound affect on his work throughout his life. He would later change the periodicals he edited to reflect a more socially and politically astute journalistic approach. After six years in journalism, Harms made a career change to become a pastor within the Mennonite Brethren Church. However, this career change would only be temporary.

In 1954, when Harms accepted the challenge of general manager and editor of the *Christian Leader* and *Zionsbote*, the publications began to reflect the personality and world awareness of the new editor. He had a driven personality that even manifested itself in the way he walked. Co-workers had a difficult time maintaining the pace set by the busy man. While continuing to publish reports on spiritual issues and conference news, Harms also added reports and columns on the role of the Christian in the world, and developed a forum for readers to respond to issues covered in the magazine. With this increased content, Harms also focused the *Leader* to a U.S. constituency, and it became the official periodical of the U.S. conference in 1963.

Through these changes at the *Leader* and *Zionsbote*, Harms sought to tell the Mennonite

Brethren story within the larger context of social history. He wrote about the issues of the day such as the Vietnam War, civil rights, and dissatisfaction with the “American Way.” This political focus led to Harms being criticized for not giving enough priority to articles relative to Mennonite Brethren spirituality. Other church leaders took the opposite route, and criticized the *Leader* for focusing too little on controversial issues. Harms recognized that he could never please all of his readers at the same time, and chose to focus on the Anabaptist-Mennonite vision. He became a critic of leaders or churches who were inclined to leave the Anabaptist vision for easy theology and church growth. He was not radical or forceful in his views on the Mennonite Brethren place within the world, but consistently pushed people gently toward a social consciousness.

Even after his retirement in 1978, Orlando with his wife Erna continued to reflect what it means to be Mennonite Brethren within the larger society. They traveled together, visiting the Mennonites in the USSR, and Orlando taught a course on Mennonite History at a Bible college in Europe. His final years were spent writing books, including a devotional book on Psalm 23, the history of the Hillsboro M.B. Church, a history of the M.B. Southern District Conference, and he had almost finished his memoirs when he passed away in his home in Hillsboro, Kansas, on September 5, 1993. In his last editorial in the *Leader* Harms reflected on his career. “As I look back, I have no regrets about the editorial positions I have expressed over the years. I believe God has specially used some of them for the good of the brotherhood and the glory of His name. This humbles me and is reward enough.”



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