



Profiles

of Mennonite Faith

C. N. Hiebert (1881-1975) – *Servant Of The People*

Who was C. N. Hiebert? A colporteur? An evangelist? A pastor? A city missionary? A foreign missionary? A crisis manager? A counselor? A storyteller? He was all of these and more.

Cornelius Hiebert—or CN, as he came to be known—was born in poverty in Minnesota, handicapped as a youth by a farm accident, frail, without the advantage of education, but totally dedicated to whatever ministry the Lord might give him. He wrote no books and was not remembered as serving on boards or committees; but he cared for people enough to give all he had in their service. He believed that helping people in need was the duty of every Christian.

CN's ministry began at age 20 when he approached his father with a request for a horse and buggy in order to do colportage work during the winter months. (Colporteurs sold Bibles and religious books.) Would his father also be willing to buy some Bibles to help him get started? Father Nikolai Hiebert said, "Yes."

From small beginnings as a colporteur in his own community, CN's radius of operations expanded beyond Minnesota to South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma and Colorado. All his travels were by horse and buggy, by train or on foot. Throughout his life he never owned a car. Lodging was with godly people who offered hospitality. Wherever he went, CN spoke to people about their salvation. Sometimes he preached in churches. What people remembered best about his sermons was his gift as a spellbinding storyteller.

CN's first Canadian stint lasted six years beginning in 1909, one year after his marriage to Tina Harms, a nurse. He was invited by Saskatchewan's Rosthern district to do colportage work among newly arrived Mennonite immigrants. The salary proffered was \$250 per year, the wildly optimistic expectation being that he could earn enough from the sale of books to make up for whatever the salary did not cover. Considering that the Hiebert household



Helen and Cornelius Hiebert

eventually included four daughters and three sons, the responsibility of CN to provide for his family could have appeared insurmountable.

In Canada as well as in the United States, move followed move—a major one being to Winnipeg in 1925 to take up “City Mission” work there. CN was the right man for the job. Between 1923 and 1930 more than 20,000 Mennonite refugees arrived from Russia, many of them making their home in Winnipeg or the surrounding area. CN welcomed them all, served them food and drink, collected clothing for them, helped them find accommodations and jobs, and, not least, listened to their heart-wrenching stories of deprivation, pillage, rape and murder. Sometimes CN could not find any available accommodations or food. In 1929 Tina Hiebert wrote to one of her children, “I can hardly manage alone. We had a lot of company again—eighteen for night and twenty-five for dinner.”

In 1930, in addition to everything else, CN became busily involved in fundraising and in the construction of a building for the North End Mennonite Brethren Church. During his thirteen years in Winnipeg CN officiated at 57 weddings and baptized 253 persons.

In 1941 Hillsboro, Kansas became the Hieberts’ home. The next year Tina died; and their daughter Esther, married to Ben Horch, suffered the loss of an arm because of an automobile accident en route to her mother’s funeral. In due time the Lord graciously led CN to marry Tina’s sister Helen.

In 1948 CN was called upon to minister to the many Mennonite refugees who had fled from Russia to Paraguay. He was 67. In the Chaco, known as “The Green Hell,” the Hieberts poured themselves into the work. In Hiebert’s words “[we] walked or drove with oxen from village to village and from house to house preaching, comforting and helping along financially with the help we received from friends in the U.S. and Canada. We visited every village in the colonies of Fernheim, Neuland, Friesland, Volendam and Menno Colony. We also visited the refugee settlements in Brazil, Uruguay and Argentina.”

There was one more humanitarian assignment for CN before he could say his work was done. In 1952 thousands of refugees who had fled from Russia to West Germany and Austria were in great need of spiritual and material aid. The Hieberts visited, comforted, preached and organized—“walking, walking, walking until our shoes gave out.” He wrote that in Austria he observed “31 camps of barracks, housing thousands of homeless, helpless, hopeless, breadless, Christless refugees.”

The death of C. N. Hiebert at the age of nearly 94 was followed by tributes from far and wide. Many people had known him as the kindly shepherd who had brought them into the fold of God. Perhaps the best tribute came from a former refugee who said, “As a little girl I felt this man was more like Jesus than anyone else I knew.”



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