

PROFILES

OF MENNONITE FAITH

Peter C. Hiebert

Combining Word and Deed

Peter C. Hiebert was born 5 April 1878 into a robust immigrant family. A scarce two years earlier his parents, Kornelius and Katharine, had arrived in Kansas along the historic Peabody Trail, at a time when buffalo and antelope still roamed the grass-rich prairies.

Young Peter was nurtured in a loving family in which the Bible was the textbook. The Ebenfeld congregation, which had recently been established as the first organized Mennonite Brethren church in North America, became his spiritual home. It was in this church that he was elected to the ministry in 1906.

Hiebert cultivated a life-long love for the church. After his marriage to Katherine Nikkel on 1 January 1907

he began a fruitful ministry as pastor, evangelist, preacher and teacher. His ability to communicate eloquently in both German and English made him an invaluable asset during the time when his denomination was in

linguistic transition. Because of his love for church music, he was elected chair of the hymnal committee that produced the 1953 Mennonite Brethren hymnal. For over twenty years he served with the Southern District's Board of Home Missions. It was his commitment to combine word and deed, however, that particularly motivated Hiebert to fulfill a long tenure

with the Mennonite Brethren Relief Committee, later called the Board of General Welfare and Public Relations. At a time when social activism was



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deemed by some to be a hindrance to evangelism, Hiebert worked diligently to sensitize the social conscience of Mennonite Brethren.

At heart Hiebert was a teacher. His studies at McPherson College in Kansas convinced him that a liberal arts education was important. With fellow student Henry Lohrenz, the two aspiring leaders pledged to establish a post-secondary training institution for Mennonite Brethren young people. When Tabor College opened on 30 September 1908, Lohrenz was appointed president and Hiebert his assistant. Hiebert's long contribution to Tabor is perhaps best illustrated in his willingness to accept the presidency during some of the difficult formative years when financial pressures threatened the very existence of the school.

For many, Peter C. Hiebert was synonymous with the Mennonite Central Committee. When MCC was organized on 20 September 1920, Hiebert was elected as the chairman, a responsibility that he discharged with consummate skill and integrity for the next thirty-three years. His inner vision for service in the name of Christ was most acutely crystallized on a fact-finding mission to Ukraine 1922, where the sheer magnitude of the disaster deeply moved him. In response MCC set up kitchens that fed forty thousand people daily.

With the approach of World War II, Hiebert joined a delegation that appealed personally to President Franklin D. Roosevelt on behalf of conscientious objectors. As a result the Civilian Public Service was established,

allowing twelve thousand Americans an alternative to military service. After World War II, MCC mounted a major relief effort in war-ravaged Europe, culminating in the shipment of 58,000 tons of food to Germany alone. One out of every three German citizens received some form of food assistance during this time. By the summer of 1947 there were 317 MCC volunteers serving in twenty-one countries. Never before had Mennonites shared their Christian compassion over such a wide area of the globe.

When Peter Hiebert retired from active ministry in 1953, his dedicated service was widely recognized within the global Mennonite community and beyond. On 30 June 1953 a consular representative of the West German government visited the Hiebert home in Hillsboro to bestow on him an iron cross. The citation, signed by President Heuss and Prime Minister Konrad Adenauer, reads: "In recognition of the activities of Mennonites and as symbol of the gratitude of the German government, the President of the Republic has bestowed upon you, dear Dr. Hiebert, the Grand Cross of the Order of Merit."

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