



Profiles

of Mennonite Faith

Esther (Hiebert) Horch – *A Gifted and Generous Woman*

Esther Horch was a unique gift to the church at a time when few women were involved in public forms of ministry in the Mennonite Brethren (MB) Church in North America. She left a rich legacy of involvement in teaching, counseling, writing, radio ministry, and many other areas. Esther and her husband, Ben, made a profound impact on generations of Mennonites in North America.

Esther was born in 1909 in Mountain Lake, Minnesota. Her father was the well-known preacher and colporteur, C.N. Hiebert, and her uncle was the missionary, N.N. Hiebert. In 1925 C.N. Hiebert was invited by the Canadian MB Conference to become the city missionary in Winnipeg. A small Mennonite Brethren church had evolved in Winnipeg's North End, but in the 1920s the influx of Mennonite refugees from Russia began. This drastically changed the community and made Winnipeg the Mennonite center for all of Canada.

Esther took a one-year course in teacher education (Normal School) after completing high

school and then taught for three years, first in the country and then in the city. She was the first woman to teach public schools in Manitoba. In 1932 she married Ben Horch. This ended her teaching career because married women were not allowed to teach. She therefore began a kindergarten in the North End Church in order to earn a living during the difficult depression years.

Esther's husband, Ben, was a singer and conductor who eked out a meager living giving private music lessons at the Winnipeg Bible Institute (now Providence College). In 1939, however, the Horchs decided to attend the Bible Institute of Los Angeles (BIOLA), where Ben studied music for four years. It was during this time (1942) that Esther was injured in an automobile accident while traveling to her mother's funeral. The car, which Esther was driving, overturned and her left arm was crushed. Several weeks later the arm had to be amputated near the shoulder. But Esther always managed to rise above her handicap.

On returning to Canada,



Esther and Ben Horch

Ben first taught at Winkler Bible Institute, but in 1944 he was invited to head the music department at the newly established Mennonite Brethren Bible College.

Esther, although not given full status as faculty, taught English at MBBC for seven years. She also soon established a solid reputation in music, teaching hymnology and singing soprano solos as well as joining the A Cappella choir. In addition, she served as Dean of Women for several years.

Esther and Ben both became involved in the production of the *Gesangbuch* which was published in 1952. Esther was researcher and consultant. Later she assisted in the production of the English version, called *The Hymn Book* (1960).

But Esther's gifts were also utilized in other areas. She became involved in social work at Logan Neighbourhood House and at Marymound in Winnipeg while taking several social work courses at the University of Manitoba. In the 1950s both Ben and Esther became involved in radio work with CFAM in Altona. Esther became a story-teller and was affectionately known as "Tante Esther." She was in charge of a ladies program and developed a six-year series of programs entitled, "The Story of our Hymns." In the meantime she also contributed many articles for Mennonite periodicals on hymnody. In later years she served as a deaconess in the First Mennonite Church.

Esther's literary gifts came to expres-

sion in another remarkable form with the publication of the biography of her father, entitled, *C.N. Hiebert was my Father* (1979). In it she states that like her father, "I am a systematic collector of dates, anecdotes and photographs. I find it difficult to discard a letter, especially when it comes from a member of our close-knit family."

Esther and Ben had their own close-knit family, with an only daughter, Viola, born in 1935. Viola also was a gifted musician and frequently sang solos for the Oratorio choir which her father conducted. In 1968 she was tragically killed in an automobile accident near Goshen, Indiana, where her husband, David Falk, was teaching. The loss of their only daughter dealt an almost unimaginable blow to Ben and Esther, but they tapped the deep resources of their faith and carried on with an effective ministry and showed profound love and care for the surviving grandchildren.

Esther's husband, Ben, predeceased her in 1992. Then, two years later, Esther also passed away after a rich life of service, not only to her own community, but to many others.

For Esther serving God meant serving people. Her obituary ended with her own reflection on her career, "I was probably conditioned as a people-helper because of my father's unbiased concern for people in need....helping people in need was the duty of every Christian."



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