



Profiles

of Mennonite Faith

Abraham E. Janzen – *Educator and Missions Promoter*

Abraham Ewell Janzen (“AE”) was one of those rare pioneer leaders in the Mennonite Brethren Conference whose imprint spanned most of the 20th century. Janzen was born on 22 November 1892 in the Ukraine and died on 2 December 1995 in Hillsboro, Kansas at the age of 103.

The Janzen family migrated to the United States in 1904, settling near Hillsboro, Kansas. In 1906 he experienced a traumatic conversion at an evangelistic meeting conducted by Peter A. Wiebe. Shortly thereafter he was baptized and received into membership of the Springfield Krimmer Mennonite Brethren congregation.

Janzen was blessed with a keen mind. Shortly after the establishment of Tabor College in 1908, Dr. H. W. Lorenz personally encouraged Janzen to consider further studies. A year later he enrolled at Tabor, beginning a long, productive association not only with the school but also with President Lorenz. In time Janzen continued his studies and eventually completed

his residency for a doctorate at Berkeley University. Owing to the call to the ministry, he never completed his Ph.D.

While a student at Salt City Business College, Janzen met Zola Lentz. Marrying a non-Mennonite Brethren, particularly someone who spoke no German, was unusual at the time. Janzen also faced some doubts about his career and marriage because of an accident while splitting wood. A splinter lodged in his right eye and left him with no alternative but to have the eye removed. The result was a disfigured face. Nevertheless, Zola’s unreserved love led to marriage on December 1917.

By 1931 the family, including their adopted son Philip, had comfortably settled in

Wichita where AE joined the faculty of Friends University, a Quaker school. In the midst of a satisfying teaching career, Janzen was invited to take on the Tabor presidency. Owing to financial woes, his beloved Tabor College was struggling for its very survival. The task would be daunting. However, Janzen felt that Tabor rep-



Abraham and Zola Janzen

resented “a mandate from God” to train young people for church ministries and thus must be preserved. With characteristic energy, he threw himself into this task. Every effort to save a few dollars was made, including keeping the temperature in his secretary’s room at a barely comfortable level. As president he also saw himself as a moral guardian, insisting that modesty drapes be installed around library study tables and that skirt-lengths of female students be measured. Janzen’s legacy to Tabor College included 34 years of teaching, 8 years as president, and in the opinion of many, rescuing the college from extinction during the Depression. He also found time to write, including several definitive entries in the *Mennonite Encyclopedia*.

During the early 1940s Janzen was given a leave of absence from Tabor College to resolve a contentious issue threatening Paraguayan Mennonites. Owing to a 300% devaluation of the Peso, these settlers found it impossible to repay the Mennonite Central Committee loan given earlier for the purchase of land. After thorough investigation, including numerous personal interviews, Janzen recommended an across-the-board reduction of the original loan by 50%, with further considerations for hardship cases. It was a mutually satisfying outcome. While in Paraguay, Janzen also began conducting evangelistic services, resulting in a spiritual awakening of many in the colonies.

The funeral of H. W. Lorenz in 1945 was

another turning point for Janzen. With the passing of Lorenz, a huge leadership vacuum was created within Mennonite Brethren missions. In his memoirs Janzen recounts that during the funeral ceremony he heard the voice of God saying, “You will be asked to fill that vacancy.” The invitation was issued the very next day. For the next 15 years Janzen served the cause of Mennonite Brethren missions as secretary and treasurer, traveling to 34 countries. During his tenure the Mennonite Brethren missionary force grew to 279 career missionaries, on average opening one new field every two years. It was also marked by sharp struggles during a time when the missionary enterprise gave way to indigenous control, often with strong resistance from missionaries on the field.

Following his retirement from formal ministries, Janzen worked diligently in developing the Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies in Hillsboro and earned a reputation as an authority on local history. He was also recognized nationally for his work with the Marion County Counsel on Aging.

Most notable was AE’s love for the Mennonite Brethren Church and particularly for his own Hillsboro congregation where he served unstintingly in numerous roles for over four decades. With his writing, preaching and teaching he reflected and articulated the core Mennonite Brethren values of his day.



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