

PROFILES

OF MENNONITE FAITH

Adolf Reimer

Proclaiming the Good News to the Destitute

The Bolshevik Revolution, civil war, anarchy and famine in Russia and the Soviet Union in the early decades of the twentieth century brought untold suffering to thousands, including many Mennonites who had settled there in the nineteenth century. In the midst of such suffering and turmoil there was also a remarkable renewal of faith among many. There were those who, like the Anabaptists of the sixteenth century, caught a vision of their responsibility to share the good news with others and to demonstrate their love to those in need.

Adolf Reimer was one of those whose life was cut short because of his devotion to Christ and courage in the face of danger. He grew up in a family that had been active in evangelism among the Russians for generations. His grandfather, Martin Kalweit, was shot by the Reds in 1918 because of his evangelistic activity. Adolf's father,

Abraham Reimer, was a colporteur who distributed Bibles and other Christian literature among the Russians.

Although Adolf became a teacher after completing his education, by 1906 he resigned his position to devote himself totally to mission work among the Russians.

At first he was financially supported by a society, but opposition by government authorities resulted in a withdrawal of most of that support. In 1910 he became one of three teachers for the St. Petersburg Bible School, which ministered to many Russians and Mennonites before it was finally closed by the government in



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1929.

During World War I Adolf registered for alternative service because of his firm conviction that Christians should love their fellow human beings and not kill them, whatever the cause. He witnessed to the wounded soldiers

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and often conducted evangelistic services in the villages where he was stationed, even when his superiors objected.

During the period of anarchy following the Revolution, Reimer continued his efforts to win people to Christ no matter which side of the conflict they were on. When one of the Mennonite churches struggled with how to react to the Reds who were inflicting such suffering, Reimer stood up and asserted, "Brothers, the Reds also have a soul which longs for salvation and we must preach the gospel to them." Such an open proclamation of the gospel was done at great risk.

One evening Reimer and his associates decided to conduct a service while a commander of an anarchist unit was present in the community. They also invited the officer (referred to as "the executioner") and his men. The officer came and warned that a bloodbath was about to occur. But despite the imminent danger a choir came forward and sang gospel songs to soften the hearts of their enemies. Then Reimer got up and stated, "Today we are not conducting a business meeting or a political meeting; today we are gathered in the name of Jesus, about whom the choir has just sung. He is now in our midst. The executioner is also here. Now it will depend on you [the executioner] whether we will have a peaceful service or whether someone will dare to disrupt us! We can depend on you, isn't that right?" The officer sprang up immediately and stated, "Whoever makes the slightest noise will have to deal with me!" And so Reimer was able to conduct the service without incident!

During these years a group of twelve young men and twelve young women organized a tent mission that traveled from village to village, proclaiming the gospel. In 1919 some of these were in the village of Eichenfeld when a great massacre occurred, in which about eighty villagers were murdered. Five of the victims were with the tent mission. Adolf Reimer then took on the task of regrouping and leading the distraught remnant. For a time they functioned as a small Bible school.

An intense famine struck in 1922. Reimer nevertheless decided to venture forth and visit scattered Russian congregations around Kiev. For four months he labored. But typhoid fever was spreading and taking its toll among the weakened population, and eventually Reimer also became ill. He managed with difficulty to find his way back home. After four days he succumbed to this brutal disease at the age of thirty-seven.

Adolf Reimer was not the only hero of faith in these trying times. But he was one who clearly demonstrated the cost of discipleship in a tumultuous world.

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