



# Profiles

of Mennonite Faith

## Anna J. Thiessen – *City Missionary*

At the beginning of the Radical Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup>. century, Mennonites left behind the religious tradition of single men and women set apart for service to the church. Yet, at the same time, there were single women and men who devoted their lives to the church—most frequently as missionaries.

Among Mennonite Brethren one outstanding example was Anna Thiessen (26 January 1892-1 April 1977). She was one of the first Mennonite Brethren city missionaries in Canada. She spent her entire working life in Winnipeg—which for a number of years was the only city mission in Canada.

Anna was the oldest of 13 children born to Jacob W. and Helena Siemens Thiessen at Wassieljewka, Russia. She immigrated with her parents to Manitoba in 1903. In 1906 the family moved to Herbert, Saskatchewan where Anna attended the Herbert Bible School for two years. In 1915 she accepted a call to move to Winnipeg where she began working with the Northern District Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Church as a city missionary in what still is known as the “North End.”

Anna worked with William and Helena

Bestvater from Mountain Lake, Minnesota. They had been appointed by the Northern District Conference as Winnipeg City missionaries in 1913. Upon coming to Winnipeg Anna immediately became involved with the Bestvaters and the new church they were serving. She accompanied them on home and hospital visits. She taught Sunday school and began a program for young women within the community, teaching them sewing. She began a young people’s association that soon was bursting with many youth from this poor section of the city.

One of her major tasks was to work with the many immigrants and the poor that were streaming into this frontier city, looking for new homes and jobs. She organized relief work that assisted them with food and clothing.

This relief work expanded significantly in 1923 when Mennonites from Ukraine began immigrating to Manitoba. Anna assisted with visitations to the immigration hall adjacent to the Canadian Pacific Railway station, which served both as an arrival location as well as a way station for immigrants traveling to other destinations in western Canada.



Anna J. Thiessen

As a result of these Mennonite immigrants, the small chapel that had been adequate for this new city church was soon filled and overflowing. New space had to be found. This resulted in the construction of the much larger North End Mennonite Brethren Church at 621 College Avenue.

About this same time Anna felt the need for more Biblical training. She left Winnipeg to study at the Bible Institute of Los Angeles from 1923 to 1925. Here, among other things, she volunteered to work with the inner-city missions of BIOLA and became involved with a mission for young women named the Mary-Martha Mission.

Anna is best known for her work as the matron of the Mary-Martha Home in Winnipeg. This home for working girls in the city was established in 1927. Many young Mennonite women—recent immigrants from Russia—came to the city to work as domestic servants. For families to send a young woman to work in the city and live with strangers was risky. But the money these young women could earn was critical for immigrant families to pay their travel debt from Russia to Canada and also for the family's living expenses in the new land.

Anna's primary role in this new venture was to provide a home-away-from-home at the Mary-Martha Home, where gatherings were held on Sundays and Thursday afternoons and evenings. Anna was a surrogate mother, nurse, friend and sister who provided the counsel and spiritual nurture these young women needed. For most girls this was their very first job and also the first time they lived away from their families. The Mary-Martha Home served as a city location where young

women could come and stay when they were ill, out of work, or during a physical or emotional breakdown. In 1932 the Mary-Martha Home was permanently housed in a 16-room house at 427 Mountain Ave.

In days when few labour laws protected domestic servants, Anna served as an employment agency for the hundreds of young women looking for jobs as well as for wealthy homeowners looking for domestic servants. On occasion she intervened to curb exploitation by employers. She was the rock that provided security for the young women and assurance for their families. She spent much time in job-placement and working with employers to make sure they would treat the young women correctly.

One of the notable efforts of Anna was that she successfully lobbied the Winnipeg City Council for a universal statute that gave domestic servants every Thursday afternoon and evening off. These became the days when the young women took the streetcar to the Mary-Martha home to fellowship with other young women, attend Bible studies and receive counsel from Anna. Also present for many years was a local minister who would lead worship and Bible studies and provide further spiritual care.

From working as a missionary within the roughest section of Winnipeg to assisting domestic servants, Anna was one of the pioneers of Mennonite Brethren home missions in Canada. At the same time she was a tireless worker within the emerging city church. The city mission in Winnipeg grew and today there are 19 Mennonite Brethren congregations in Winnipeg, a living testimony to the hard work and dedication of many dedicated servants of God such as Anna Thiessen.



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