



Profiles

of Mennonite Faith

John B. Toews (1906—1998) - *Church Statesman*

John B. Toews (24 September 1906—9 May 1998) was one of the most influential Mennonite Brethren church leaders of the 20th century. His influence spanned some 60 years of ministry as pastor, teacher, college and seminary administrator, missions executive, theologian and historian for Mennonite Brethren around the world.

Perhaps what people remember most about “JB,” as he was popularly known, is that he was an inspiring, motivational speaker on topics of missions, theology and history. Fluent in Dutch, German, Russian and English he ministered in all of these languages. Articulate, well read on the latest trends in missions and historical theology, he influenced thousands of people to dedicate their lives to following Jesus in church and missions.

JB was born to Johann A. and Margaretha (Janz) Toews in Ukraine. Educated in Ukraine, he graduated from the University of Ukraine in 1926. He continued his studies in the Netherlands and then immigrated to Canada (Coaldale, Alberta) in 1928. He studied at Tabor College in Hillsboro, Kansas, at Western Baptist

Theological Seminary and Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. In 1933 he married Nettie Unruh. They had three sons, two of whom followed their father in church related ministry.

Toews taught New Testament theology and doctrine at Bethany Bible School in Hepburn, Saskatchewan, and later served as president of the school (1932-38). He was director of the Bible department at Freeman College, Freeman, South Dakota (1940-42), president of the Mennonite Brethren Bible College in Winnipeg (1945-48), and president of the Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary in Fresno, California (1964-1972), followed by several years as adjunct professor of missions, practical theology and history at the seminary. On three occasions he left the institutions

where he was serving to enter the pastorate—his first love and calling. He pastored at Mennonite Brethren Churches in Hepburn, Saskatchewan (1937-38), Buhler, Kansas (1942-45) and Reedley, California (1948-53).

JB rose to international prominence as a leader and inspiring missions and



Nettie and John B. Toews

theology speaker during his 10-year term of service as General Secretary of the Mennonite Brethren Board of Foreign Missions (1953-63). His travels on behalf of the board established him as a missionary statesman among all Mennonites. At the same time he maintained his involvement in Mennonite Brethren church life by serving on various boards and committees.

Toews is one of the people who helped to shape the Mennonite Brethren Church and its agencies into what they are today. Often he was at the cutting edge within the very institutions where he was serving. He brought the seminary into a new understanding of the Anabaptist vision and its own Mennonite Brethren self-understanding within that vision. He helped move the seminary to an Anabaptist approach in its interpretation of scripture. He was instrumental in bringing on board new faculty to teach and re-invigorate the leadership of the Mennonite Brethren Church. As always the costs were high as faculty and conference leadership were not always ready to make such significant changes both within their own leadership and within their theological worldview.

JB moved Mennonite Brethren missions from a paternalistic worldview into a new era of international indigenization. This was a move that cost him dearly as missionaries and long-time missions supporters were slow to understand the changed thinking, growth, vigor and restlessness of new Mennonite Brethren adherents in other countries. It was hard for both the church in North America

and for its missionaries to understand that the very people they had brought to faith were now ready to take over the leadership of their national churches.

Having taught history and theology until his retirement in 1980, Toews remained active within the Mennonite Brethren Church, its agencies and institutions by inspiring, encouraging and building a renewed sense of history and vision for all Mennonite Brethren. It was his vision that kept calling the conference to remember its theological and historical roots within the broader Anabaptist vision. He gave impetus to and served as the first director of the Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies in Fresno, California and he pushed hard to establish similar centers in Hillsboro, Kansas and Winnipeg, Manitoba. It was his historical vision that gave rise to the present Mennonite Brethren Historical Commission of which he became the first Executive Secretary.

The inspiration and dedication to the church that JB exemplified can be still be seen today. In 1988 the Mennonite Brethren Historical Commission developed a three-part film series (video and DVD) featuring JB as speaker. Entitled "The Mennonite Brethren Church: A Missionary Movement" it tells the story of the growth and missionary vision of the Mennonite Brethren Church. Available from any of the Centers for Mennonite Brethren Studies it presents the timeless inspiration of God working through the Mennonite Brethren Church told as only JB could tell it.



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