



Profiles

of Mennonite Faith

Henry and Maria Wiebe – Social Health Ministry

A problem had arisen in one of the original buildings at the Bethesda home. A stairway was desperately needed for a new third story in the building, but no funds were available and time was running out! The Wiebe family, and several patients, were seated around the kitchen table one day discussing the issue. Henry Wiebe led in prayer asking for the Lord's help. After prayer he read Philippians 4:19, "My God will supply all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus." Amazingly, that noon hour there was a cheque in the mail, a cheque from Saskatchewan large enough to cover all the needed expenses.

These were the early years of Bethesda, the first Mennonite mental health institution in Canada. It grew from the vision of Henry and Maria Wiebe. The vision had begun years before in south Russia, where both Henry and Maria had trained to work in a field they would pursue for years to come.

Henry was born in the village of Blumenhof, one of the Borozenko colony villages in the vicinity of Chortitza. He was the son of Peter and Anna (Warkentin) Wiebe. In October of 1920

he married Maria Unrau and their family was blessed with two sons, Edward (married to Gertrude Wiebe), and Henry (married to Helen Koop). Edward became a teacher and Henry a teacher-pastor-church planter.

Henry obtained his education in the *Zentral* and *Kommerzschulen* in Halbstadt. He later received training and employment as a social worker at Bethania, a Mennonite mental health hospital that had been established in 1910 in Alt-Kronsweide. It was the first and only Mennonite mental health hospital established in Europe. Here he began his ministry to the emotionally and mentally challenged.

At the same time Maria was also preparing for work in mental health, training as a registered nurse in the College of Medicine in Marya. For some of her practical training she worked in the Bethania Mental Health Hospital and it was here that she met Henry. The two were united in marriage in 1926 and together they dedicated themselves to serving in this ministry.

Henry was baptized into the Mennonite Brethren Church in Tieve in 1923. Several years later he was ordained after becoming active in preaching and church



Maria and Henry Wiebe

leadership. In 1927 the family immigrated to Canada, settling first in Kitchener, then Stratford, and finally Camden, near Vineland, Ontario.

In 1934, while living in Stratford, Henry and Maria opened their home to a fledgling mental health ministry where they applied their training and personal resources. When they moved to Vineland in 1937, they bought a hundred-acre farm with a view to a future ministry of psychiatric help right out of their home. Soon rooms were added, then more buildings and land, and in the early 1940s the ministry had expanded to the point where the Wiebes needed more than the hard work and dedication of their own family to cope with the growing ministry.

At the same time Henry worked as a pastor leading the Vineland Mennonite Brethren Church from 1938-40 and again from 1948-57. During these years of additional responsibilities his major focus of ministry still lay in providing help for the mentally ill.

New options for the ministry became available and following several years of debate and consultation, Bethesda was accepted as the responsibility of the Ontario Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches in 1945. The Wiebes stayed on as house parents. But at the same time the Ontario Conference was overburdened with responsibilities for a camping ministry, a seniors' ministry and significant church extension programs. In 1947 this rapidly growing ministry was shifted once again, this time to the Canadian Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches.

As the mental health work expanded Henry became more and more immersed in administrative detail and had less time for ex-

erting his spiritual leadership in the programs. That portion of his ministry was taken over by a full-time chaplain from the Mennonite Brethren Church, who was given responsibility for spiritual leadership at Bethesda. Throughout those early years, and continuing to the present day, a very strong emphasis at Bethesda has always been the spiritual lives of staff and clients.

By the late 1970s and early 1980s, Bethesda grew to the point that the Ministry of Community and Social Services of the Provincial Government of Ontario took over the administrative responsibilities. Today the Ontario Mennonite Brethren Conference mainly oversees the chaplaincy ministry of the hospital.

It was from these humble, pioneering roots, begun as a private enterprise by Henry and Maria, that an impressive ministry for emotionally, mentally, and developmentally challenged children and adults has grown. Today the staff numbers over 400 with 1200 clients spread out over the Niagara region in buildings, houses and clinics. The hospital operates with a budget of almost \$20,000,000.

Serving the mentally ill in Canada began with the Wiebe family and a small number of mentally challenged people in a large brick house in 1937. Today the memory and legacy of Henry and Maria Wiebe stands as a tribute to every aspect of this impressive and extensive ministry. Henry and Maria retired to Tabor Manor in the late 1970s. Henry passed away on June 18, 1980, and Maria on February 14, 2002. Their motto for the work at Bethesda from the very beginning was from Galatians 6:9, "And let us not be weary in well-doing; for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not."



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