



# MENNONITE BRETHREN HISTORICAL SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

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## C.A. DEFEHR: A CHARACTER MODEL

by Dr. J.B. Toews

I consider it a privilege to share with you this evening, and to reflect on the life of Mr. C.A. DeFehr, a life that has been very meaningful for a very large circle of people.

E.M. Bounds, who is known for his extensive writing on the spiritual life, coined the statement, "Men search for better methods, but God is looking for better men." In our age of technology we have placed great emphasis on methods. We search for ways in order to gain the most and to gain it at the least cost. Church work and Christian service have also been influenced by this concept. We live in a day where we have seminars, a dime a dozen, which emphasize "how to do it," how to become a better soul winner, how to make the church grow, how to raise finances. Many of our pastors, caught in the trap of these seminars, forget that the method is only as good as the man that uses it.

The Bible places central emphasis not on methods, but on men. We find that ordinary people, when they relate to God, become extra-ordinary people who are used in his Service. Man's worth is not represented by what he has or what he does, but by who he is. The quality of worthy models is recognized in lives that reflect a deep commitment, a strong will, a settled purpose, an invincible determination, deeply rooted in a faith that is willing to try and to accomplish the impossible.

In reflecting upon the life of C.A. DeFehr, it would be insufficient to enumerate all the things that he did. Those things we would list, he

did because of who he was. A very suitable biblical injunction is where Christ says, "He that is faithful in the least will be faithful also in much. He who is not faithful in the least also that will be taken from him what he has." In this sound biblical principle we find that growth, in stature and worth, has its roots in faithfulness in the ordinary assignments of life. This then leads to trust and to assignments in the area of the extra-ordinary.

The model of Father C.A. DeFehr depicts a building consisting of many bricks, but bricks that have certain qualities. I wish to outline six dimensions, that in my judgement, express the character which made his life useful and productive.

### I. C.A. DeFehr, a Man with an Integrated World View.

He did not compartmentalize the spiritual, secular or social. Life for him was a unit. His world view included all areas, not one separate from the other. He had a commitment to a world view which was deeply rooted in a sense of divine providence. Last week I re-read his life's story and was amazed how many times he referred to divine providence. In relating, for instance, the time he borrowed \$20,000 he says, "God gave to the banker that confidence, because it was unheard of to borrow \$20,000, and God blessed and helped me to pay it back." There is this deep sense of divine providence and a consciousness of ultimate destiny throughout his story. Business in Millerowo, a risk of an unusual character, was chanced because he had confidence in divine leading and providence. If you read the story of his life in the Kuban you will find that, scarcely recovered from a serious illness, recently spared from death, he became the defender of the conscientious objectors at the risk of his own security. He was willing to defend the conscientious objectors because this was a cause for which someone had to take a stand. In his story of the Refugee resettlement in the Kuban you will read constant references to "Der Herr gab Gnade," and again this divine providence seemed to be the tone which carried him through this experience. This dependency on divine providence made him, already as a young man, a pillar in the church.

Recently I had conversation with someone who knew him at that time in the Kuban. He reflected on C.A. DeFehr's participation and insistence of certain changes in the Mennonite Brethren Church. He noted that his commitment was reflected in his business, and in his love for his church. He had a deep peoplehood consciousness. His total integration was expressed by a commitment of equal interest to various areas of life. When he came to Canada, even in the midst of the struggle for survival, where they travelled for weeks and the diet was only a bag of roasted Zwiebach, he refers to divine providence. In the story that Anna Thiessen writes, she says, "Und der Herr gab uns einen Vater und eine Mutter." Already early in the thirties, while he was struggling for economic survival, his involvement with the Mary Martha Home in Winnipeg was such that he was called the father of a home for the girls that worked in the city.

My earliest recollection of him was when he came to Coaldale to sell farm plows. He stayed in B.B. Janz's small farm house. Due to a lack of bedroom space, he slept on a little cot in the entrance of the house. I happened to come there early in the morning and found this man sleeping in the entrance. They introduced him to me as, "This is Mr. C.A. DeFehr who sells plows." At that time he was also a member of the Winnipeg city mission. I saw in him a marvellous characteristic. He had an integrated world view that was not compartmentalized. Everything seemed to flow into one great objective, one serving the other.

## II. C.A. DeFehr, a Man with an Integrated Value Concept.

This value concept expressed itself in his business, in his involvement with the Board of Colonization, Concordia Hospital, as deacon of the church, treasurer for the Board of Missions, in his vision for the college, and also for a high school. I will never forget the occasion when he came into my office here at the Mennonite Brethren Bible College and said, "Brother Toews, it isn't fair that all these rooms here are empty. We have the rooms, so why don't we begin a high school?" His integrated world view and integrated value concept gave him a vision which was usually a little ahead of his contemporaries. His suggestions were always given without any demands that his vision ought to be accepted.

I remember the debate about the location of the College. He had already bought a building for \$10,000, but a number of brethren thought the College should be located in North Kildonan where there was a large building beside Henderson Highway, past the end of the street car line at that time. As the brethren debated the issue he said, "Let them talk about it, let's not get excited. If they want it there, it's all right, as long as we get a college." His objective, not necessarily the fulfillment of his exact plans, was to see his vision come to a fulfillment. This integration of values was important to him.

## III. C.A. DeFehr, a Man with an Understanding of Human Nature.

In viewing C.A. DeFehr as a model, involvement equaled interest and participation. Let me give you an example. At the Canadian Conference he brought up the idea of the Conference levy. The brethren said to him, "That won't work. Maybe it worked in Russia, but it won't work in Canada. After a period of quietness he said, "How will we then unify our conference if we don't have all the people invest something in the conference?" And so the idea of participation was for him a vision of involving all the people. His understanding of human nature worked effectively and it repeated itself in other principles and responsibilities.

I wish you could have been here in the Summer of 1945 when we renovated the old college building. In Plaut Deutsch we have the expression, "Auntje und Mauntje." Everybody was involved. If a film could have been made of that time it would show Mother and Father DeFehr, together with bucket and mop, working and cleaning. He became the inspiration for the group, creating a group concept by identifying himself with them. Through his equality, participation and understanding of human nature, he

was always able to create a center through which he inspired the people around him.

Many times I have visited the villages of the widows in South America. These widows have told me, "You know, this wouldn't have worked if Brother DeFehr wouldn't have also taken the axe and shown us how to cut down trees and how to pull the saw." When they saw that the grandfather became involved they said, "Then we all can do that." He had a marvellous way of involving people, building the center and then using that center to influence others and thereby gain their participation. That was the secret of his influence in common activity.

#### IV. C.A. DeFehr, a Man with a Tremendous Capacity for Identification.

He was a person who had little academic training. In Schiller's drama it says, "What you learned and have acquired by paying much money, that, I inherited from my mother." Even without much formal education he had learned to identify himself with all classes of people. He was comfortable in the academic community. He was also comfortable among the clergy. Whether it was Jacob Reimer, Erik Sauer or A.H. Unruh, he was able to relate to them and had a tremendous capacity of identification. In the business world he was one of the businessmen. When among the refugees he identified himself with them.

In Paraguay, the story is told, how the refugees lived in tents in Argentina before they were permitted to come to Paraguay. Grandfather and Grandmother DeFehr, unlike the other MCC representatives, lived in tents like all the other refugees. And so there was immediate identification.

When the refugees moved to Paraguay the other MCC representatives lived in Fernheim where there were already houses. He moved with the refugees and lived in the little shacks that they built up in the colony—he had a tremendous gift of identification. No matter where he travelled, he identified with the widows, the learned people, the businessmen, the ministers—he fit in everywhere.

On our trip around the world three of us travelled together: a Mr. Kliewer from Oklahoma, Father DeFehr and I. He was already advanced in age at that time. In India we shared in the dedication of a new church building. The celebration included a meal. We watched as the Indians butchered some goats in order to make curry and rice. As we watched, we discovered that more went into the pot than we were accustomed to. Mr. Kliewer, who also watched what was happening, suddenly turned around and said, "Those macaroni (the intestines which were not washed) I will never eat." And he didn't. Father DeFehr's reply was, "We will eat, they do not die from it and we will not either."

On my last visit to India a few years ago, the people asked, "What has happened to that old grandfather that was here?" The impact, made through the capacity of identification, was lasting. This capacity which I have observed throughout his life is a quality essential in the undertaking of such a broad ministry.

V. C.A. DeFehr, a Man with an Integrated Loyalty.

As a loyal Mennonite Brethren he reacted strongly when in the '40s there were attacks on certain practices in the Mennonite Brethren Church. In defence of his brethren, at his own expense, he reprinted the pamphlet by P.M. Friesen, "Gemeinde oder Sekte."

He had an equal loyalty to the larger "Mennonite Brotherhood" and always recognized other Mennonites as equals. He was involved in a broad spectrum of Mennonite interests. He had barely arrived in Canada, still travelling to earn his livelihood, and he was already on the administration of the Gretna school—another Mennonite undertaking. Very early in his career, while still struggling for economic survival, he served on the Board of Directors of the Concordia Hospital that was established here in Winnipeg. As a member of many inter-Mennonite organizations, including MCC and the Board of Colonization, he had equal loyalties to all organizations. He was able to combine a loyalty to the various organizations without being critical. With this capacity of an integrated loyalty, a marvel in his personality, he fit well into all these activities.

VI. C.A. DeFehr, a Man with a very Gracious Response to Opposition and Criticism.

He never claimed to be faultless. I have shared with him the opposition that he experienced in some of his many undertakings where he always was a little ahead of the other people.

At the time that he purchased the facilities for the M.B. Bible College the Canadian Conference had not yet decided to establish a college. He, however, had the vision. In 1945 I came to Winnipeg and we discussed how we should begin. We had no place for the dining hall. We knelt down together and prayed, asking God to show us a way to house students for that year. I was discouraged. The next day he came and said, "I bought a building." He had bought the one that we later called the "White House". He said, "I have looked at it. It's big enough for the cafeteria and kitchen, and upstairs there are rooms for students to live." After a few days he came back and said, "I have a house rented on Glenwood Crescent. A four-storey house. We can house students there." After this we had a Board meeting. The Board members were enraged. They said, "He always jumps ahead." And there was serious criticism. A man of few words, he listened, and finally said, "If that isn't good why don't you go and get something better. You don't need to keep this." The result being that those who criticized him couldn't get anything better. A man of few words, Father DeFehr quietly accepted criticism. His gracious response to opposition and criticism in the conference or in church, never led him to an attitude of reaction or defense. He did not find it necessary to defend himself.

It was these capacities which made him a person with such varied interests. I do not know of a man that has been used of God so widely and in so many areas as C.A. DeFehr. Because of the quality of the man that he was, the scope included: business, church conference, social services,

publication and many years in MCC. He never had a boastful attitude. He received few words of thanks, but he did not need to feed on recognition. For him to spend his time and utilize his resources on projects which were necessary, was the satisfaction of his life. It was the quality of his life that made possible the large scope of his ministry. No departmentalization. No partisanship. All people were for him brothers. That commitment was the secret of his broad ministry. We thank God for his life and for his example.

As a personal testimony I must say he has meant very much to me. He always looked ahead. In our first meeting in Winnipeg at the Conference in 1936, he invited me into his house. In our conversation he suddenly asked, "Should you not come to Winkler?" Later when I came to Winnipeg he said to me, "I already thought earlier that you should come." Eight years before I came to Winnipeg, he had recognized gifts in me and he had the capacity of identifying these gifts. It was his quality of life which made possible such a broad spectrum of services.

I hope that the M.B. Historical Society will proceed further and produce a little pamphlet of C.A. DeFehr, a character sketch which will serve as a challenge to the generation that follows.

#### QUEBEC CONGREGATION WRITES ITS HISTORY

The St.-Eustache Mennonite Brethren Church has led the way for many of our younger congregations across Canada by writing its story and making it available to interested readers. This young congregation, founded in 1977, has grown from an initial 12 members to some 110 members at the beginning of 1982. The story of this growth, and the background to it, is told in some 19 pages by the author, Normand Rochon. Entitled L'HISTOIRE DE L'EGLISE CHRETIENNE EVANGELIQUE DE ST.-EUSTACHE (Freres Mennonites), the story is written in French for primary circulation among the Quebec conference congregations. Copies are available by writing the congregation.

#### DIE WIEDERTAUFER IN MUENSTER: A Museum Exhibit

Peter Rempel, an MCC worker in Europe, recently viewed an exhibit at the new city museum in Muenster. By letter he gives his impressions of this interesting and informative exhibit.

"The exhibit visually portrays the religious and political setting in which the Anabaptist kingdom of Muenster emerged. The first section, "Apocalyptic Age" (57 items) includes the series of wood cuts of scenes of the apocalypse by Albrecht Duerer as well as portraits of reformation figures and samples of their and other writings which reveal the anxieties and predictions of the imminent apocalyptic age. The second section (16 items) depicts Muenster and its political situation before the time of the Anabaptists with portraits and religious art pieces as well as a map and a chart.

"The main section (107 items) has four subsections: the seizure of power, the New Jerusalem, the kingdom and the conquest and punishment. Displayed are the writings and portraits of the Anabaptist leaders, manifestations of their book burning and iconoclasm (eg. damaged statues), the change in the city's coins and seals in the new kingdom, armor and weapons sketches of the city and its sieging forces and finally the records of their punishment by their victors. Many of the publications of that era relating to the Anabaptists are also exhibited.

"The final section (24 items) displays the rehabilitation of the city and contemporary reports on the happenings in Muenster and then various artistic renditions to the present day of the events."

The Center is grateful to Peter Rempel for alerting us to this exhibit. Unfortunately the exhibit has closed and will not be open during the tourist season this summer. Peter graciously purchased a catalog of the exhibit and we have purchased a copy from him. In the catalog the items displayed are pictured together with very well written descriptions of the items and the events of the exhibit. Visitors to the Center may wish to take a look at this catalog.

#### EARLY RUSSIAN PERIODICALS DISCOVERED

Recent acquisitions include two Russian periodicals which have not before been readily available in the west. The first periodical is the Unterhaltungsblatt (1846-1862) which was a monthly agricultural paper for German-speaking settlers in the Ukraine. It contains reports of the many German colonies, also Mennonite colonies, focusing especially on their agricultural output. The first several years contain a number of reports by the well-known Mennonite agriculturalist, Johann Cornies.

The second periodical, which was the successor to the Unterhaltungsblatt, is the Odessaer Zeitung. Previously only copies from 1890-1914 were available. This new accession contains the first five years of the periodical (1862-1867).

Both papers are available for viewing and research at the Center in Winnipeg.

#### NEW MUSICAL RESOURCE DISCOVERED

A Protokollbuch der Dirigenten-Kursen in Manitoba was recently discovered in the First Mennonite Church Library in Winnipeg. This minute-book of early M.B. musical activities dates back with its first minute to February 23-25, 1912 and continues with the last minute dated June 14, 1936.

Containing some 101 pages of minutes it gives valuable information on the early musical activities of M.B. congregations in Manitoba. Written

in gothic script a transcription has been made by Erica Voth to enable those unfamiliar with the script to gain access to its contents.

A special thanks to the First Mennonite Church for alerting us to its discovery and for depositing the book in our Center.

#### HOW TO WRITE MINUTES

A new brochure, written by Archivist Ken Reddig, and published by the Historical Commission and the Board of Christian Literature, is enclosed with this Newsletter. The intent of the brochure is to provide a rationale for the writing of minutes and to provide some practical guidelines on the recording and preparation of minutes. Should congregations or organizations require additional copies please write to the Center and we will supply them.

#### ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Symposium sponsored by the Center for M.B. Studies on "Inter-Mennonite Relations: MB's and GC's in Canada" will be held November 4-5, 1983 at the Mennonite Brethren Bible College in Winnipeg. The public is invited to participate in this Symposium.

A request has been received to locate the minutes of Camp Arnes (the Lake Winnipeg Mission Camp Society) for the years 1953-1957. Anyone having information or copies of minutes for this time period should contact Ken Reddig at the Center or the Camp Arnes office in Winnipeg.

A request has been received for copies of Botschafter an Christi Statt by Dr. G.D. Huebert. Copies received will be sent to the Umsiedler congregations in Germany. If you have any copies you would like to donate to these congregations please send them to Ken Reddig at the Center in Winnipeg.

The M.B. Archives in Asuncion, Paraguay has ordered a microfilm copy of the Mennonitische Rundschau. This copy is now in our Center. We would appreciate your help in getting the Rundschau to Asuncion. If you are planning a trip to Paraguay and could take some reels of the Rundschau with you, please contact Ken Reddig at the Center to make these arrangements.

#### OUR NEXT ISSUE

Our next issue of the Newsletter will feature an article on the Herbert Bible School by Anna Redekopp. Also included will be reviews of several new books. If you have any special requests or announcements please send them to the editor and request that they be included in the next issue.

This Newsletter of the Mennonite Brethren Historical Society of Canada is published four times a year, by the Executive of the Society, at the Center for Mennonite Studies in Canada, Winnipeg. All correspondence regarding the Society or the Newsletter should be addressed to:

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If you know of someone who would be interested in becoming a member of the Society and receiving the Newsletter please have them fill out the following form:

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

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Send form together with the yearly membership fee of \$5.00 to the Society Secretary in care of the above stated address.

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