

Menno Wiebe (1932–2021)



Menno Wiebe died peacefully on January 5, 2021, at his Simkin Centre residence in Winnipeg at the age of 88. He was born the fifth of ten children in Bannerman, Manitoba, in 1932. His German-speaking Mennonite parents, David and Margaret (Ens) Wiebe had recently immigrated from the Soviet Union. The Wiebe family moved several times in rural southern Manitoba during the Depression of the 1930s. In 1945, they settled in Mount Lehman in British Columbia's Fraser Valley. During his twenties, Menno did some volunteer stints in tornado-torn Oklahoma and at a horticultural experimental station in Paraguay, which satisfied an impulse to serve and showed a healthy streak for adventure. Menno met his future wife Lydia Boese while studying at CMBC in Winnipeg. They were married in 1959 and had two children, Rhonda and Tom. Menno went on to study at Bethel College and the Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary.

On January 3, 1974, a group of Swift Current Bible School students gathered at the YOU (Youth Opportunities Unlimited) in Winnipeg for an orientation to their internship in Manitoba's Indigenous communities. I was part of this group that was introduced to Menno Wiebe that day. It was an experience that I will never forget but it was also the beginning of a lifelong friendship with Menno.

When I met him, Menno had recently completed a ten-year term as the executive secretary of the Canadian Board of Missions of the Conference of Mennonites in Canada, which included the Mennonite Pioneer Mission (MPM). There were a few small but active congregations in First Nations and Métis communities already formed at this time as a result of MPM's ministry, and Menno offered encouragement and direction to them and their leadership. In his role he

also challenged the mission workers and churches to re-examine their views of Indigenous peoples. He emphasized that Indigenous peoples have a parallel, not an inferior or lower culture to that of white society. For too long he felt that mission organizations had tended to look at Indigenous peoples as innocent children of the forest, like blank pages to be written on without understanding or appreciating their culture or deep spirituality.

Menno also emphasized the importance of local decision making, that people of the community should have the opportunity to state their expectations of the church and mission personnel and that they should have a say in the selection and assessment of the people who were assigned to work with them. He encouraged the board of directors and workers to be willing to relinquish their control to local groups and to open themselves up for assessment by the people whom they were serving. This was a radical step for any mission board to take because for too long the church dominated over Indigenous peoples and communities with no thought of releasing their clutch on them.

Already at the early stages of his involvement with mission work, Menno was a vigorous proponent of inter-church cooperation. In 1966, he helped organize an inter-church organization that sat together for the first time and whose members spoke to one another about their common task. This became a stepping stone toward churches speaking cooperatively to issues affecting Indigenous peoples. This had a dramatic effect, for groups now recognized the power of a united voice.

There was one program operated by MPM that was very close to the heart of Menno. It was the YOU Drop-in Centre, which offered pastoral ministries, youth sports activities, counselling, and referral services, and operated in the heart of Winnipeg. Sports were a vital part of the program. YOU produced some teams that excelled in basketball, baseball, and hockey. Menno really encouraged sports (he played hockey as well) and felt that it was a vital element through which Indigenous peoples could begin to achieve a sense of peoplehood. It also served as an excellent community-building process, not only for the MPM workers but for the Indigenous peoples who came from many scattered places to find friendship and companionship in the centre of the city.

In the fall of 1974, Menno resigned from his position with MPM and began a career with the newly formed Native Concerns (now Indigenous Neighbours) program under Mennonite Central Committee Canada. The new assignment continued to build on the friendships he had built in both Mennonite and Indigenous communities. By this time Menno had become one of the church

representatives most often consulted by Indigenous and government agencies in Manitoba, and was highly respected. He was also known as one of the most knowledgeable Mennonites on Canada's Indigenous peoples. This knowledge shaped his life, his thinking, and his Christian vocation.

In work with MCC spanning twenty-three years, Menno was often chosen to provide leadership on various ecumenical boards and commissions. He was articulate and passionate about social justice in his presentations, which made a profound impact on his listeners. He saw his voice as amplifying the voices of Indigenous peoples and not speaking for them. In his role he testified before the Lubicon Settlement Commission, the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, the Northern Flood Agreement, the Aboriginal Justice Inquiry, the Leon Mitchell Inquiry regarding Treaty Land Entitlements, the Royal Commission on Northern Environment, and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. He used his voice to encourage and challenge the church and society to a more just relationship with Indigenous peoples. He knew that these structures needed to be changed along with the systemic racism they represented. He was convinced that the gospel had something to say to the sacredness of the treaties and the reckless way that development projects in the north had impacted Indigenous peoples without their consultation.

He was truly a national figure who was often caught in the media spotlight, standing on runways with the Innu in Labrador or locking arms with the Lubicon in Alberta. Just as significant, though, were the face-to-face encounters with Indigenous peoples in their communities. He was often called a prophet, poet, and statesman.

Menno's passion for intercultural understandings extended to the academic world. He earned a MA degree in anthropology from the University of Manitoba in 1973 and taught anthropology at the University of Manitoba, Canadian Mennonite Bible College, Providence College, the University of Zurich, and Canadian Mennonite University. As a student in Menno's anthropology class at CMBC, I recognized it as one of the most unusual and fascinating classes I had ever taken. Classes did not always start or end on time and the text was often set aside for some guest lecturer to take part or for Menno to spend a good chunk of time telling us about his work. We had a healthy mix of hands on-and academic learning and were introduced to many of Menno's friends, who helped us to see culture, language, music, art, faith, and development issues through another lens. Menno instilled in his students a curiosity for learning, an appreciation of the beauty in other cultures, a desire to build relationships, and a passion to work for justice.

His experience with Indigenous peoples was well rounded, for in the north he tramped around with people to their traplines, ate their moose meat and bannock, listened to their legends, took part in powwows and ceremonies, and preached the word of God. In the cities he scouted the streets where Indigenous peoples struggled with poverty, unemployment, and addiction. He also sat in their homes, trying to help them make the painful transition to city life. As an ordained pastor, Menno was often called to officiate at weddings and funerals for both Mennonite and Indigenous peoples. This brought him into situations where he had to cry with people who were grieving and laugh with those who were happy. Soul searching was also part of Menno's life as he tried to make a difference in the lives of those whom God had placed in his path.

Many times through Menno's years of service to God through MCC he challenged the Mennonite constituency to hear the message he brought from the Indigenous communities. He reminded us about our role in society and that we as Mennonites were not placed in this country for our economic well-being. He wrote, "If we can accept the history of our migration to Canada as God willed, then our coming also presents the challenge to treat our neighbors with justice." On another occasion Menno wrote about why he was involved with land issues: "For us it is a matter of biblical justice. The biblical reminder not to oppress the poor is very strong in the Old and New Testaments. Mennonite people, who themselves know all about land displacement, about being aliens in countries they have come to know as their own and about ethnic marginalization; they should be the first to understand the plight of original people who find themselves struggling for survival in their own homelands." His prophetic voice and message were not always appreciated by his own people. Over his lifetime he has had many dreams, "but my one dream" said Menno on one occasion, "would be that it could be said of Mennonites, is that they seriously try to understand the Indian people."

Menno approached his work with a vision, which combined his love for his own people and his love for Indigenous people. This is possibly best seen in his love for gardening. He himself loved to garden and this passion for planting and nurturing garden seeds has been transplanted in many Indigenous communities in Canada through the Native Gardening Program that he initiated. Mennonite volunteers worked alongside Indigenous peoples, where local people grew food of their own. A good bridge-building opportunity, seeds of friendship were also sown through this project which would last a lifetime.

Menno was a very gifted orator and storyteller. The people who interacted with Menno also had rich stories of their interaction with him. One of the most unforgettable experiences for me took place in the spring of 1976. Menno had heard that Mennonite dairy farmers could not sell their bull calves and were considering slaughtering them rather than feeding them through the winter. He encouraged farmers to take care of them until the spring and at the same time he arranged for the communities of Bloodvein and Berens River to take and raise them. The calves were brought from Osler, Saskatchewan, and Winkler, Manitoba, to the end of the road and loaded onto boats. I was there when they were unloaded from the trailers, wrestled to the ground and feet tied crossways, a pole stuck between their legs, and loaded onto boats and then taken by boat across Lake Winnipeg. The communities invited Mennonite farmers to join them for a butchering bee in fall. Menno had a dream that both communities, Mennonite and Native, would benefit from this experience. Each trusted Menno's leading; he provided a bridge for them to come together to build relationships, to learn from one another, and to have fun doing it!

A mutual friend, Elder Clarence Nepinak, of Pine Creek First Nation, has reflected on his friendship with Menno. He recalls how over the years Menno was consistently ready to serve Indigenous people at many levels. He was thankful that Menno was willing to take risks with Indigenous people by doing things with and for them, hoping that his own people would understand. Clarence praised Menno for his gentle manner, leading by example, and his willingness to walk with people through dark valleys. He thought that maybe Menno's love of music and poetry helped him cope in those tough times.

I am grateful to Menno for the faith, courage, and commitment that he brought to his life's work. He was an ambassador of peace, goodwill, and reconciliation, on whose work we continue to build. We stand on the shoulders of giants like Menno and that spirit still walks with and guides us today and into the future.

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