



Profiles

of Mennonite Faith

Henry J. Schmidt: Fun-loving Evangelist and Educator

If you never rode white-knuckled with Henry Schmidt in one of his huge Ford cars, followed him as he handled his Honda 1100 Gold Wing around a California curve, sat as one of his students in a Seminary class, were witness to his wild gesticulating and impish grin or his weeping while he preached, or sat at a meal with him while he affectionately teased his Elvera (calling her Agnes, as she called him Jake), you never really knew the man.

Henry lived in fast motion: coat tails flapping behind him, the wind in his white hair as if he thought he needed to catch up with his future. How did this La Glace, Alberta, farm boy come to cut such a wide swath through our Mennonite Brethren world from 1940 to 2011?

He did it by pastoring the Emmanuel MB Church in Onida, South Dakota, from 1964 through 1969, and then the Neighbourhood and Rosedale Bible Churches in Visalia and Bakersfield, California, while he was also a student at MBBS. He did it by being both the Executive Director of Evangelism of the USMB Conference and the Conference Evangelist from 1972 through 1977. Many remember that, while

working on a PhD, Henry also taught at the Seminary. After completing his doctorate, he became the director of the Center for Training in Mission/Evangelism at MBBS. The man could multi-task. In 1993, Henry became the President of the Seminary and remained so until 2003.

Henry Schmidt came from rural, immigrant stock. He was the youngest of eight born to Margaretha (Unger) and Peter Schmidt of Grande Prairie, Alberta. Henry married Elvera Langemann of Coaldale in 1960. Two daughters, Debra and Laura, and five grandchildren gave Henry indescribable joy. He was his most un-professorial when playing street hockey and/or any boisterous game that his grandchildren could think of to play with Grandpa on roller blades. He passed away in Reedley, California, on February 8, 2011, at the age of 70.



Henry J. Schmidt (1940–2011)

It would be no exaggeration to say that Henry poured himself out for the sake of his parishioners, his students, his colleagues, the pastors in his orb, the Seminary, his family, his friends, and his God. Even on the run between tasks galore, lectures and cities and countries, Henry could listen to people in pain and point out possible solutions

without his hearers ever knowing the ideas they came up with had been gently suggested to them in the exchange. He was a man of loyalty, passion, energy, vision, sincerity, and a wild sense of humor. His outbursts of self-deprecation contrasted his huge respect for others. Practical and down to earth, Henry would say to broken pastors, “You got shot in the back? You were going the wrong way! Always move toward your critics. There are two things we need to learn from them: they might well be capable of changing their minds about some of these things, even you, and they might have a good idea you can use.”

Notable Mennonite Brethren leaders have always been marked by their selfless service and work ethic, but none, it could be said, seemed to serve while having as much fun as Henry. He was an integrator; he could move mountains and yet not miss a tiny grain of sand that needed noticing in his relational ministry world.

The President’s Creed displayed on Henry’s office wall describing his call to be a “Shepherd, a Servant, a Steward, a Seer” made sense. That’s what he was—plus a friend to so many. Those who worked with Henry would testify that he reflected King David of Psalm 78 who “shepherded (his people) with integrity of heart, with skillful hands he led them.”

Effervescent and infectious, yet serious, a joker and a pray-er, a biblicist and a hockey player (if such is possible), altruistic but competitive, he ran too hard; he tried to do too much. The rapid downturn in his

health in his last years, suffering from Alzheimer’s and Pulmonary Fibrosis, he ran too fast. A counsellor told him once that it seemed like he was indicated he might have stretched himself too thin, that too often trying to do the work of two Henrys. A close friend chided him on another occasion saying, “With your deep commitment and your high energy, Henry, I don’t always know where you end and the Seminary begins.”

After long days of Seminary board meetings, Henry would verbally switch back and forth between six hockey games on his TV, the pro forma budget up for discussion the next day, and talk about fiduciary responsibilities seamlessly. His candle burned brightly at both ends.

Henry Schmidt was irresistible and ir-repressible. With the loyal and enthusiastic help of carefully chosen people who were clearly unlike him in organizational ways, he could produce pages and pages of annual reports, strategic plans, and intelligent speculations far into the future, and yet he had seen to it that unimaginable budgets had been met. For board meetings, he made sure the board members had bowls of fruit, nuts, candy, pop, and water at their working tables, and he personally arranged the serving of exotic dinners when the meetings ended as celebratory rewards for their hard work.

Henry Schmidt has “left the room” but his presence, for so many of us, still runs through the warm memory of our Mennonite Brethren people.



Profiles of Mennonite Faith: No. 61, Spring 2017.

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