



Profiles

of Mennonite Faith

Dan Friesen (1911–1998): The People’s Pastor

“Now that’s where the rubber meets the road!” Using this familiar closing to his sermons, Dan E. Friesen was known for practical, hard-hitting messages from the pulpit. Passionate about applying the truths of the Word of God to everyday life, Friesen was intentional in the content and delivery of his sermons, in his writing, and in his pastoral ministry.

Daniel Erstis Friesen did not intend to become a pastor. Born in Hooker, Oklahoma, on February 5, 1911, he was one of ten children born to John F. and Aganetha (Ediger) Friesen. His initial childhood years were spent in Moundridge, Kansas, and later his family moved to Corn, Oklahoma. He claimed this rural Mennonite community of Corn as home for over thirty years. He trained to teach school, receiving his education at Southwestern State College in Weatherford, Oklahoma. In love with words, he was blessed with a creative mind. With these gifts, he became an English teacher in the public high school at Corn. During this time, he attended the Corn Mennonite Brethren Church, and met a local girl, Eva Reimer, whom he married on October 1, 1933.

God changed the course of his life. While teaching school in Corn and calling auction sales on the side, he began preaching in area churches. The desire to preach well caused him to leave home and attend Tabor College in Hillsboro, Kansas, for one year 1938–1939, majoring in theology. On his return to Corn, he accepted a preaching assignment at the Okeene Mennonite Brethren Church, some 25 miles from Corn. Dan and his wife drove back and forth on the weekends for two years until May 1941. At this time his home church, the Corn Mennonite Brethren Church, recognized Friesen’s spiritual gifts and affirmed God’s call on his life for ministry. The church ordained

him on November 23, 1941, with local ministers Rev. H.H. Flaming and Rev. J.J. Wiebe officiating with the laying on of hands.

A pastor for the people, Dan E. Friesen served at least nine Mennonite Brethren congregations in Kansas, Oklahoma, Colorado, and California before retiring in 1991. Brevity, punctuality, and humor were the earmarks of his ministry. He “cut to the chase” and did not mince words. People felt



Dan Friesen

stirred, encouraged, convicted, disturbed, and challenged by his preaching and by his writing. His poetry and newspaper columns were much appreciated, especially his booklet, *End of the Struggle* (Hillsboro: MB Publishing House, 1966).

At Sunday services, attenders were confident that if Dan Friesen was preaching, church would be over by twelve noon. According to Dan, “If you can’t say what you need to say in 20 minutes, it didn’t need to be said.” Besides, “No one listens after 20 minutes anyway.”

“Twenty-minute Dan Friesen” had no use for lateness. Punctuality for him was a virtue. He felt church services should be started on time, and it did not matter if the church attenders were still outside visiting. He took his hymnal in hand and began the singing of a favorite hymn, such as No. 99 “At Calvary,” even though only 3 or 4 people were seated in the sanctuary.

To him all the parts of a worship service deserved attention and respect—the singing, the offering, and the sermon. If three people were sleeping during his sermon, he “made *Schluss*” (an ending) and closed the service. The next Sunday the parishioners would be caught up on their sleep! Occasionally, Friesen was known to switch the benediction and the offering, so that late-comers did not miss the opportunity to participate in giving their tithe and offerings!

Friesen had the distinction of serving as chairman or moderator of three regional MB districts in the US, the Southern District, the Pacific District, and the Central District, as

well as the larger United States MB Conference and the bi-national General MB Conference. His leadership skills enabled him to clarify issues in the midst of confusion and intensity. On one occasion at a conference, there was endless debate on a certain issue, and the discussion was lost in amendment after amendment; no one knew how to proceed. Friesen said, “You all remember what we said when this started. So do I. I’m gonna rule that the last 5 minutes never happened!” The proceedings started over and all went well.

Friesen and his wife Eva were a team in the ministry, but Friesen made sure that each congregation he served understood that his wife’s job was not to play piano, teach Sunday School, or lead the women’s circle, but to cook for him and keep his shirts ironed; she was to serve the Lord by “serving the Lord’s servant,” her husband! At their 50th wedding anniversary, Friesen was honored for his loyalty to Christ and the Mennonite Brethren church, and his wife was praised as the “cohesive element” that kept marriage and ministry together. Eva died in 1996 and Dan died two years later on April 15, 1998, at the age of eighty-seven.

A memorable figure among Mennonite Brethren, Friesen was not bound by others’ expectations nor confined to a specific mold. Passionate, energetic, sometimes impatient, some said that he walked to a different drummer. He was driven to communicate God’s truth as he saw it, without pretense or falsehood. He committed himself to wholeheartedly serving the Lord Jesus and His church.



Profiles of Mennonite Faith: No. 53, Spring 2013. Written by: Peggy Goertzen

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