Profiles

of Mennonite Faith

Abe and Irene Neufeld: Innovative missionaries, pastors, and singers

Irene Loewen (b. 1926, Fairbury, Nebraska), town girl from Steinbach, Manitoba, and Abe (Abram) Neufeld (b. 1920, Sergeyevka, USSR), farm boy from nearby Niverville, married in the Steinbach Mennonite Brethren Church in 1946. They could not have imagined how world-expanding their life together would be.

After graduating from Mennonite Brethren Bible College in Winnipeg, they embarked on a long life of shared ministry. In the early years, Irene had her hands full at home with three little boys, Thomas (b. 1947), Charles (b. 1949), and Gareth (b. 1951), while Abe taught Bible School in Yarrow, British Columbia. Both sensed a shared calling to mission work. So, after a brief pastorate in a small Ukrainian MB church in Kief, North Dakota, the family arrived in Linz, Austria, at the very beginning of 1955.

While women's roles were severely constrained, especially in ministry, the mission field afforded much more opportunity for fully shared work. Abe did the preaching and evangelizing, while Irene worked alongside, tirelessly engaged with teaching women, visitation, and endless hours on the phone. Pastoral visits and counseling were typically a joint venture. I recall no time that my parents did not make decisions together, big or small. They were each other's most trusted consultants, honest critics, and unfailing encouragers. Most knew them simply as "Abe und Irene." While they might at one time have held to a "biblical" gender hierarchy, what they consistently modeled was a thoroughly egalitarian relationship marked by mutuality and collaboration. Two of their daughters-in-law have been pastors and experienced nothing but enthusiastic support from their parents-in-law. Both trained soloists, they forged that gift into a ministry suited to the humble contexts of church planting. Abe revived his early skills at guitar and often accompanied them in their duets. They even roped their three sons into singing with them.

Irene (Loewen) and Abe Neufeld

The early years in Linz were challenging in the extreme for these two young prairie folk, with the effects of World War II and the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 palpable. They began with Bible studies and prayer meetings in our home (Abe would remove the furniture from the small living room and put in planks to sit on), attended by refugees living in barracks Hitler's army had left behind. As a community formed, they held services in large barracks, or in a drinking establishment that required early Sunday morning cleanup after Saturday night

carousing. Abe then designed and oversaw the building of a congregational home that serves the congregation in Linz to this day.

What was to be a well-deserved furlough in 1959 became a crisis year. Gareth, their youngest, was diagnosed with advanced thyroid cancer, requiring multiple surgeries. Abe and Irene and the countless people who prayed for "Gary" experienced his surviving this ordeal as nothing but a miracle. Able to return to Europe in 1960, this time, given Gareth's medical needs, to Switzerland and then Germany, Abe undertook a largely itinerant ministry, as well as the radio program "Quelle des Lebens," where he was speaker and they both participated in the music. While he worked tirelessly with constant travel, speaking and teaching, Irene carried the burden of care for the growing teens. It is difficult to say on whom this mode of work was harder. They both understood it to be the cost of shared ministry.

The return to North America in 1964 was marked by study and several years of itinerancy in deputation for the Mennonite Brethren Mission Board. Winnipeg became home, with Irene taking up the teaching career she had interrupted with marriage, family, and mission work. Soon, however, with passion for mission running deep in both Abe and Irene, and confident that their sons were launched into adulthood, they headed back to Austria in 1969, this time to Vienna. This would open one of the richest chapters of their life.

With no specific plan in place, Abe and Irene began once again with Bible studies in their home, a one-bedroom apartment. A lively circle of mostly university students rapidly grew into a congregation, with up to a hundred people squeezing into their small apartment for both Bible studies and Sunday services. When that became too small, the congregation leased an old bakery in downtown Vienna, at 8., Tulpengasse (also the title of Margaret Epp's 1978 book on Abe and Irene's ministry). The congregation came to be known simply as the "Tuga."

Something missiologically very imaginative took shape. With Abe and Irene's focus being leadership training and congregational empowerment, what started as one Bible study became many Bible studies, with members of the "Tuga" offering their homes in various parts of Vienna. These matured into a network of numerous congregations with strong Austrian leadership, and with a vibrant sense of their Anabaptist identity, rooted in a movement once strong in Austria. Openness, flexibility, and courageous trust were important ingredients of Abe and Irene's novel approach. Even more important were love for people, deep empathy with their struggles, and enormous patience.

Returning to Winnipeg in 1983, Abe became senior pastor at Portage Ave MB Church. Following his "retirement," Abe and Irene were asked to lead the German language ministry at the Elmwood MB Church, which quickly grew beyond expectation. These were unexpected and rich years of ministry that would serve as a fitting capstone to their many decades of service.

Having faced many health crises throughout their life together, including Irene's triple bypass heart surgery in 1991, Abe and Irene would both succumb to cancer late in life, Irene at 90 in 2016, and Abe at 99 in 2019, meeting their final days with characteristic grace and courage. They died with profound gratitude for the privilege of having been able to offer their lives in service to their Lord.

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