



Profiles

of Mennonite Faith

Ricardo and Carmen Peña: Bi-vocational Church Planters

Ricardo R. Peña was born in a village along the Rio Grande River called Los Ebanos, Texas, on September 7, 1924. Ricardo was the third of four children raised by his parents, Federico & Maria Luisa F. Peña. He graduated from La Joya High School and Tabor College in Hillsboro, Kansas. At the age of 16, Ricardo committed his life to the Lord Jesus Christ through the ministry of Harry & Sarah Neufeld from California in Los Ebanos, Texas. He was baptized a year later in the Rio Grande River, one of the first converts in the Los Ebanos Mennonite Brethren (MB) Church.

After graduating from high school in 1943, Ricardo felt called to study at a Christian college and prepare for the gospel ministry with a Bible and business administration degree at Tabor College. In October 1947, he was appointed missionary by the Board of Home Missions of the Southern District Conference of MB churches. Ricardo joined three other missionary couples who were already serving in

Texas: Harry & Sarah Neufeld, Ruben & Eva Wedel, and Harry & Ruth Thomas. His mission work involved preaching the gospel at open-air meetings, in front lawns, on flat bed trailers, porches, and along canals to labor camp workers. Ricardo planted churches in Premont and Garciasville, Texas, and taught in the Rio Grande Bible Institute in Edinburg, Texas, and the El Faro School in Sullivan City, Texas. In 1953, at age 28, he married Carmen Villarreal from the La Grulla MB Church, whom he had met at the Youth For Christ rallies that the MB church plants were co-sponsoring.

Carmen Villarreal was the younger of two sisters, born on July 20, 1931, to Eduardo & Inez Villarreal in the village of La Grulla, Texas, along the Rio Grande River, a few villages west of Los Ebanos. At the tender age of three, Carmen's

mother passed away, leaving her to live through many hardships with her father and sister. Carmen was only able to obtain an eighth-grade education in the Texas public schools.



Ricardo R. (1924–2017) & Carmen V. (1931–2010) Peña

Carmen committed her life to the Lord at the age of 17 through the ministry of Ruben & Eva Wedel from Oklahoma, becoming the first convert in the La Grulla MB Church. She was baptized at the age of 18, together with her sister, Yolanda. Later she attended the Rio Grande Bible Institute in Edinburg, which also prepared her for a life of ministry. At the age of 21, Carmen married Ricardo.

Their desire and passion as a couple was to start new churches and bring the gospel to the Rio Grande Valley, where they were born and raised. Ricardo was ordained by the MB Church in 1953 and continued to serve as a missionary church planter. Ricardo & Carmen founded the MB Church in La Joya, Texas, and also served in the Chihuahua MB Church. In 1961, they moved to Mission, Texas, and served in the Mission MB Church for 17 years. After six children and 30 years of ministry, Carmen & Ricardo retired in 1977. However, they soon found themselves serving the Reynosa MB Church in Colonia Juarez, Mexico, and the McAllen MB Church in Texas, while also planting two more churches in Mexico (Magueyes and Pinosuarez) during an eight-year ministry.

Throughout their ministry, Ricardo also worked full-time in different jobs to support their family. He retired after 30 years of employment with the US Postal Service office in Mission. An avid fisherman and pool player, he loved to play the board game, *WaHoo*, with anyone who challenged him. His parting words on December 25, 2017, were: “I

have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, and I have kept the faith” (II Timothy 4:7).

Carmen was also employed during their ministry years in support of their family, working 35 years at the Suderman Clinic in Pharr, Texas. She used her many talents in the ministry, writing songs, dramas, poems, and acrostics, making flower arrangements, and witnessing to the patients that came to the clinic about the Lord Jesus Christ. She later used her poetry to share God’s love to those around her.

When Carmen was diagnosed with breast cancer, she was inspired to create a poem titled *The Love of My Master*. Carmen presented the poem to her cancer doctor, who was so moved that she submitted the poem to an international poetry contest. Carmen’s poem was selected as a semifinalist in the contest. And now the poem and Carmen’s biography are published and cataloged in the US Library of Congress, along with two of her other award-winning poems.

Carmen’s testimony of lifetime achievements is even more remarkable because she saw them as an opportunity to express her devotion to God. Carmen readily confessed that she did not regret a day or a moment of her life—she was preparing her soul as a “vessel for salvation,” something she intended to continue using in eternity. Her favorite Scripture chapter was Psalm 23, which was recited to her by her family prior to her going home to glory on March 28, 2010.



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