



Profiles

of Mennonite Faith

P. Karuna Shree Joel: Messenger of Hope

Karuna Shree was born on February 8, 1964, on the MB Mission compound in Wanaparthy, a small city in the state of Andhra Pradesh, India. Both her father, S.S. Krupiah, and her mother, B.D. Kanthamma, were teachers in Mennonite Brethren high schools that had been established as ministries of the mission work Mennonite Brethren had started in 1912 in that area.

After high school, Karuna Shree enrolled at the MB Bible School in Shamshabad to follow her interest in learning more about the Word of God. However, during her pre-theology studies, she had the vivid experience of God speaking to her — “Even though you never thought that you would continue in biblical training, it is Me who is calling you to full-time ministry.” This experience led her to commit herself into God’s hands and dedicate her life to him. By 1984, Karuna Shree had completed a Bachelor of Theology from South India Biblical Seminary in Bangalore.

In 1985, at the age of 21, Karuna Shree married P. Menno Joel, who had been her teacher in Shamshabad.

This arranged marriage, which is the common practice in India, was made by her parents without her awareness. While she was initially cautious, her father told her he had been praying for one year about this man as a possible marriage partner and miraculously it was his

parents who had proposed the marriage! Karuna Shree immediately said “yes!” She soon realized that God had indeed chosen Menno Joel as her life partner, since he encouraged and actively supported her pursuing theological studies. They had three children, a son and two daughters.

Karuna Shree recognized how the discrimination toward women within Indian culture was also experienced within the church where women’s gifts and their participation in ministry were rarely encouraged. Convinced of the unused potential, she felt motivated to pursue theological training because there were few women who were able to equip young men and women to study the Scriptures.

Following her marriage, Karuna Shree completed a Bachelor of Divinity from Andhra Christian Theological College in Hyderabad in 1990, and, in 1994, she became the first MB woman to earn a Master of Theological Studies, which she completed at the United Theological College in Bangalore.



P. Karuna Shree Joel (1964–1996) with Sneha

In her own studies, Karuna Shree sought an “answer” to the burning question regarding the role of women from the Scriptures and discovered that Jesus did not regard women as inferior.

Her specialization was homiletics, which was challenging given

that preaching by women was not accepted in MB churches. Her thesis focused on examining lay involvement in preaching within Mennonite Brethren congregations.

Karuna Shree “promoted the ministry of women with gentle urgency, knowing full well the obstacles within her society and church.” Her desire was to help women develop a clear understanding of the biblical teaching about women and encourage them to explore their own gifts. She said, “I would like to tell them that ‘you are okay to be a woman and you are precious in the sight of God.’”

Karuna Shree and Menno Joel attended the 1990 Mennonite World Conference in Winnipeg, where she had the opportunity to share her testimony with delegates. Following the Conference, they visited churches in both Canada and the United States. She was also the first Mennonite Brethren woman to represent India at the ecumenical Christian Conference of Asia.

Karuna Shree’s own involvement within the India MB Conference shattered traditional barriers that had limited women’s involvement. She served as a member of the Conference’s Governing Council, as editor of the monthly magazine, *Suvarthamani*, and as an instructor in homiletics and pastoral ministries at MB Centenary Bible College (MBCBC) in Shamshabad. Karuna Shree also served as the Executive Secretary of the Mennonite Brethren Women’s Conference.

More significant than the roles she had was “the impact of her personality and spirit. Stories of her generosity abound.” Karuna Shree and Menno Joel traveled extensively on behalf of the Conference,

leading retreats and seminars in churches, always coming with a message of hope and encouragement. Her love and acceptance toward all endeared her to the hearts of both local villagers and conference leaders.

During this time, two rival groups were in conflict over the leadership of the MB Conference. This split also affected women’s ministries. At a gathering of women from both factions, Karuna Shree advocated for a single unified leadership body. When the women voted overwhelmingly to unite, she voluntarily stepped down as Secretary to make space for the election of new leaders. Her humility prompted someone from to rival group to declare that Karuna had given good leadership already and should continue in her role.

In one of her last sermons, Karuna Shree challenged her listeners, “When I think of Christian preaching today, I am often disturbed because our preaching is done within the four walls of the church. Now my dear brothers and sisters, are you not ready to decide to become the disciples of Christ? How long can you sit back, remain aloof and uninvolved in Christ’s mission?”

On July 7, 1996, at 32 years of age, Karuna Shree was tragically killed in a vehicle accident along with her eight-month-old daughter, Sneha. They were thrown from their scooter into an irrigation reservoir. With less than a day’s notice, over 2,000 people attended her funeral, attesting to how she had impacted so many lives.

Shortly before her death, Karuna Shree reflected on her ministry, “Above all, God’s continuous grace sustains me to bear everything and anything. I am a small vessel in his mighty hands.”



Profiles of Mennonite Faith: No. 70, Fall 2021.

Written by Doug Heidebrecht. His sources include Delores Friesen, ed., [Karuna Shree] “Testimony,” *All are Witnesses: A Collection of Sermons by Mennonite Brethren Women* (Winnipeg: Kindred Productions, 1996), 173–175; Gary Hardaway, “India Women’s Leader, 31, Dies in Vehicle Accident,” *Mennonite Weekly Review*, August 1, 1996, 3; Don Ratzlaff, “A Short But Significant Ministry,” *Mennonite Weekly Review*, March 20, 1997, 1–2; D.N. Purushotham, ed., “Life History of Karunasree Joel (1964–1996),” in *Mennonite Brethren Theological Graduates with their Life History and Literary Contributions*, 303–307; and Kathy Heinrichs Wiest, “Elsie Ann Kroeker in Shamshabad, India,” *California Mennonite Historical Society Bulletin* 57 (Spring 2013): 3.

E-mail: jon.isaak@mbchurches.ca • www.mbhistory.org