



Profiles

of Mennonite Faith

Fred Stoesz: Hard-driving, deep-loving inner-city missionary

Urban missionary and church planter Fred Stoesz had a passion for reaching out to people living the hardscrabble inner-city life—and he knew how to ask hard questions of church folk living in the suburbs. In a May 2007 article, he wrote: “Why do many Christians continue to struggle to respond to God’s call? Why do we hesitate to engage broken people in our own communities, specifically communities of urban poor people?”

In that same article he probed further: “We may know the urban mission field is nearby, but we keep it at arm’s length. We choose to drive around the city, never through it. We may drive through it, but we don’t really see it. Do statistics, demographics, and sociological facts no longer impress us? Do we hear the stories of broken people, yet feel nothing?”

“Are desperate urban communities viewed as the ‘black hole’ of mission? Do we feel that we’ve sent workers, tried new strategies, and given money, yet nothing has changed? Have we decided the city is too big a mess for us, and maybe even for God?”

However, Fred did not limit himself to posing provocative questions. He was also known to follow up his challenging queries with encouraging words, action plans, and

deep prayers for God’s Spirit to once again move in transformative ways. And for him, God’s ways were best mobilized through small clusters of Jesus followers engaging their city neighborhoods.

Missional community organizer Rachel Twigg Boyce said: “Fred had a unique ability to dive right into my world and ask questions that showed he truly understood what I was going through and give the words of encouragement I needed to carry on.”

Fred was born on May 26, 1952, to John and Ellen Stoesz. Fred grew up as a preacher’s kid in southern Manitoba. After attending Columbia Bible College, he served for some 28 years as an urban missionary with World Impact in Los Angeles and Wichita, Kansas. He also regularly resourced Mennonite Brethren mission trips, working with many Youth Mission International (now MB Mission) groups in those cities. In 1977, Fred

married Jolene Klaassen from Hillsboro, Kansas. Together they raised four children.

In 2003, Fred and Jolene moved to Winnipeg, Manitoba. Supported through World Impact, he served the Mennonite Brethren in Canada, first through the Canadian conference’s Evangelism Canada, and then with the Manitoba conference’s Mission and



Fred Stoesz (1952–2013)

Church Extension. His vision was to inspire churches to develop ministries in the urban core. Above all, he was passionate about Jesus—and his deepest desire was for others to be filled with the peace of Christ also.

A key part of Fred's strategy was educational formation, specifically tailored to the contextual realities of urban life. He helped develop the School of Urban Leadership (SOUL), launched in 2006, and then EdenB (*Escuela de Entrenamiento Bíblico*), launched in 2009. Both schools were designed to be “affordable, accessible, and culturally relevant,” in order to meet the growing need for local leadership training for those serving in the inner city of Winnipeg.

In 2004, Fred began a battle with kidney cancer. Doctors were amazed, as Fred outlived the one year they'd projected, then subsequent occurrences of cancer. The prayers for healing were many. Fred never gave up on his life-long calling to serve his Lord Jesus in the urban core. At Gathering 2012, the Canadian Mennonite Brethren summer convention, Fred cheerfully hosted a bus group of delegates, guiding them through the inner city on Experience Winnipeg. Many had hoped for healing and the shock was great when God finally took him. Fred Stoesz died on March 22, 2013.

Fred's wife Jolene said: “He wasn't perfect, but he did a lot of things right. And his kids will tell you that he was an amazing father. He lived fast and furious and hard. He was driven, but I wouldn't say restless. At his core, he was really at peace with Jesus. He knew how to love people

quickly, and deeply, and unconditionally. That's why he was so easy to be around.”

Co-worker George Klassen added: “Fred was a great example of a Godly man. He had incredible energy—even when he was sick—and was always ready to meet new people, wherever he went. He made friends easily, everywhere. The inner-city context was key for him, that was exactly where the church needed to be active. He was not a fan of big meetings. Small settings, one-to-one, praying in people's living rooms, that's where he thrived. Fred was always challenging me to keep the focus on people. That's where his heart was.”

In a 2009 *MB Herald* “letter to the editor,” he set out another challenge to other soon-to-be-seniors. He wrote: “Recently, I walked through doors opened to me in a [government subsidized] housing complex for seniors in the Elmwood area of Winnipeg. In this location alone, there is visible abuse and desperation, and senior suicide. Many of those I met were so lonely. Yes, we may understand our responsibility to our own aging parents, to ‘honor your father and mother.’ But what happens to those in a seniors’ complex like the one in Elmwood, when there is no one left to ‘honor’ them?”

Right to the end of his too-short life, Fred was asking challenging questions and creating opportunities for Mennonite Brethren to serve as the hands and feet of Jesus in the urban core. The life of this hard-driving, deep-loving inner-city missionary remains a vibrant inspiration for engaged community involvement.



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Written by Jordan Duerrstein. During the summer of 2017, Jordan worked as an archival intern at each of the four Mennonite Brethren archives in North America. His sources for this Profile come from interviews with family and friends of Fred Stoesz and from articles in the *MB Herald* (May 2007; June 2009; March 26, 2013).

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