

Working the Fields

ONE FAMILY'S TESTIMONY

by Jeff & Susan Chapman
Pikeville, TN

Webster's 1828 Dictionary defines *providence* as "the care and superintendence which God exercises over His creatures". This is just what we felt when we met Brother David Janzen in Manitoba, back in the summer of 2004. Somehow, we felt that this meeting held an integral part of our future.

David shared with us about a revival beginning in a group of believers in Northern Alberta, Canada. The people were coming from a religious system into the freedom of Jesus Christ. "Your family could be a real blessing in the work up there," he stated. Wow! Could our family be a blessing to new believers? "Tell us more, Brother." This was our heart's desire—to be used of God as a family.

As a result of this meeting, our family did, indeed, travel to Cleardale, Alberta, in the summer of 2005. There, we met many people who would become very dear friends. We also got to experience, first hand, a bit of the revival that was taking place there. It was also there that we learned of a real need for a work to be started in a Northern Canadian hamlet, called LaCrete.

Throughout the remainder of 2005, and into the spring of 2006, we took LaCrete into our hearts and prayers. Could this possibly be a place where



From Russia to Chile, from the Falkland Islands to the wild street parties of the American inner cities, we had attempted to share the everlasting Gospel of our Lord Jesus. But none of that prepared us for what we were about to face in the neat and orderly Mennonite town of LaCrete.

God could use us? Then we got a call from Brother David Janzen, asking us to pray and consider an extended summer trip to LaCrete. "There's a group of believers meeting together that could really use some encouragement," he shared. We knew what it was like to be part of a small group, so we longed to go up and encourage these saints. But what would the Lord say? We began praying

for specific direction regarding this decision and God answered with an abounding “Yes—you are to go!”

We were so excited as we packed up our big family and headed north. We had such high aspirations for evangelism, in this town of approximately 3,000 people—95% of them from the Old Colony Mennonite background. We had always enjoyed evangelizing as a family. We had been on a few foreign missions trips, and done street ministry together for many, many years. From Russia to Chile, from the Falkland Islands to the wild street parties of the American inner cities, we had attempted to share the everlasting Gospel of our Lord Jesus. But none of that prepared us for what we were about to face in the neat and orderly Mennonite town of LaCrete.

Our first meeting with the believers there felt like a reunion with old friends. We felt our hearts blending so beautifully with each brother and sister. We eagerly listened as they shared with us bits and pieces of the beliefs, practices and traditions of the Russian Mennonite heritage. We were shocked to hear that baptism is mostly a prerequisite for marriage, and most of the time the candidate is not even born again. Then, if there is ever a conversion and a real believer’s baptism later on, the person is accused of blasphemy of the Holy Ghost, and told they can NEVER be forgiven. It is this act—this believer’s baptism, as taught by our own Lord in the Gospels, practiced by the early church in Acts, preached by the apostles in the letters to the churches, and still carried on by believers all over the world—this act—would cost you everything in LaCrete. Family disowns you, employers can fire you, and friends forsake you for obeying this simple teaching of Mark 16:16. It is also a common teaching that you cannot have assurance of your salvation—“Doubt is faith in disguise,” they are taught.



How our burden grew as we learned these things and more. “You dare not carry a Bible to church or engage in spiritual conversation away from the church house,” we were told. This is thought to be an act of pride or arrogance. How many, many times would we hear the words, “THIS IS NOT A CHURCH!” as we attempted to share the Gospel throughout the summer.

The men wanted to start evangelizing right away, so our first weekend in LaCrete they headed for the nearest liquor store, where we had heard that many Mennonite young people buy strong drink. The night was uneventful as they handed out tracts and engaged in a few meaningful conversations. However, after arriving home that night, our magnetic Gospel signs were stolen off of our van. The signs are large (6’ x 2’) and simply read, “Jesus came into the world to save sinners” and “Whosoever was not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire.” How grieved we were to think of the boldness of this thief, to steal a Gospel message (it was still daylight outside and we lived right on a very busy corner) and later to hear that our signs were taken to a party where they were burned by the rowdy crowd. “They absolutely hate the Gospel,” we marveled.

And it was true! As the summer unfolded, we saw more and more, the hatred this religious group had for the Word of God. We were forbidden to witness at public gatherings, prohibited from handing out Gospel tracts at public events, and put under house arrest for preaching in the public square. “We know all of this,” they shouted, “Go back to Tennessee!” “We go to church!” “We’re Gods’ people!” “God is German!” “Don’t read to us from that no-good English Bible!” “LaCrete is a Christian community—go to Africa!”

How longsuffering our God must be. He has patiently continued to strive with these people since they left Germany due to persecution in the 1780’s. They fled to Russia in an agreement with Katherine the Great—an ungodly deal that traded rich farmland and freedom from army enlistment for the Mennonite’s commitment not to evangelize! And we see where this act of Gospel treason has landed them—right in the midst of dead religion some two hundred plus years later. Their churches are only shells of their former glory, places where the sermons are preached in a language (High German) that a majority of the people don’t even speak or understand clearly. Places where the people fear the preachers and don’t fear God.

These churches turn out young people whose wild partying and fornication is overlooked and excused as “sowing wild oats.” Yet, in their pride and rebellion, they will not allow them to seek after God (Psalm 10:4). So, it was to these lost young people that we decided to focus our message.

The brothers showed up at their parties to witness to those who would hear, and went to their weekend hang-outs to share with those who questioned them. Out of these efforts came brothers with bruises, scratches, scrapes, and cuts. One brother even required stitches to sew up a head wound from a beer bottle. These angry and violent young people were acting out the hatred of their parents! Our house was vandalized, our property stolen, and our Gospel tracts returned to our yard as litter, with profane messages and curses scrawled all over them. “Read Ephesians 4:5,” they wrote amidst many vulgar phrases. This was the response we encountered again and again, as we attempted to evangelize.” We know who you are—you RE-BAPTIZERS!” “Don’t step foot on our property!” we were warned as we tried door-to-door evangelism.

But as always—God is faithful to preserve for Himself a people. And out of this angry crowd came some serious seekers, young people with real questions, seeking real answers—others coming by to apologize for the behavior of their relatives and friends. A couple of vile drunks at a Sunday night party became our supper guests (and henceforth our friends) on Monday evening! They just *had* to hear what in the world we were doing there. Didn’t we know they were Mennonites?

Other young people saw the lines being clearly drawn and decided they wanted to be on the Lord’s side. We were privileged to witness a sincere young man’s baptism, and see others take a stand with the Gospel, when a crowd nearly turned into a riotous mob during a night of street preaching.

It was through these experiences—some persecutions and some joyful victories—that we learned some very valuable lessons. In Philippians 3:10 the apostle cries out, “That I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being made conformable unto His death.” This verse seems to be an acknowledgement by Paul, that there is a level of intimacy attained in a relationship through shared suffering, which is not achieved any other way. Companionship in sorrow establishes the most intimate and lasting of ties, as afflicted



Our desire is that hearing a bit of our experiences in LaCrete will encourage you to allow God to use you and your family in the field of His choice.

There are needs all around us.

hearts cling to each other. We experienced this beautiful truth firsthand. There was such a bonding of hearts among the brothers and sisters there in LaCrete, as each one bore the sufferings of the other.

As fathers disowned their sons because of their stand for Jesus, and rumors ran rampant in attempts to destroy one’s integrity and reputation, the others in the fellowship would rally around the hurting member with prayers and encouragement. What a living example of I Corinthians 12:26! Seeing this beautiful truth in “shoe leather” made our entire trip worthwhile. We had to remind ourselves that God wanted us there in Canada for our own growth among other reasons. He wanted to put His finger on issues in our own life and mold us into His image more and more.

So, although our stay in LaCrete was shadowed by daily harassment and confrontation, it also yielded fruit in our lives that is priceless. God can use us. And He will use you, too, if you make yourself available. There is nothing special about our family. We are just a big (sometimes noisy and even rowdy) family with a desire to see souls saved. We have struggles and we have needs, but we also have a God who is looking for more than ability—He’s looking for availability! Our desire is that hearing a bit of our experiences in LaCrete will encourage you to allow God to use you and your family in the field of His choice. There are needs all around us, if we will only...*lift up our eyes, and look on the fields; for they are white already to harvest.* (John 4:35) God bless you as you work in His fields! □