

“Orlo Kaufman Memorial Service November 9, 2005 Eden Mennonite Service”

Editorial Comment: The following statement was made by Rev. Harold R. Regier at the Memorial Service for Orlo Kaufman on November, 2005 at the Eden Mennonite Church, Moundridge, KS. Rev. Regier and his wife, Rosella, served with Orlo and Edna Kaufman for more than 10 years at the Camp Landon Mennonite Mission in Gulfport, Mississippi.

Meditation: “Mistakes Orlo Made” (Scripture: Luke 4:18-19)

Rosella and I were privileged to be co-workers with Orlo and Edna Kaufman for more than 10 years. They were exciting, turbulent, challenging, GOOD years! It was the ‘60s. The setting was the Black community of North Gulfport. It was a pocket of poverty. Racial tensions were high. Segregation was the law. Discrimination was on every hand. Northerners were not welcome! But Orlo and Edna came (from the North – or Midwest) They came from right here: Eden Mennonite Church! They went to Mississippi. AND THEY STAYED! We learned much from both Orlo and Edna. It was a joy to be in ministry with them.

When I think of Orlo and Edna, I think of Jesus’ mission statement taken from Luke 4. “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free. To proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

I never HEARD Orlo say this was his mission statement, but I SAW it! He saw the poor, and “good news” to them. He saw the oppressed, and was “good news” to them. And later in Moundridge, he saw those in prison, and was “good news” to them.

Today we celebrate Orlo’s life and ministry. His ministry was so inter-related with Edna’s partnership in ministry that I can hardly think of one without the other. We celebrate the “good news” they were to the communities and worlds in which they were so deeply immersed: MCC. Camp Landon Mennonite Mission in Gulfport. Pine Lake Camp in Meridian, MS. Pastorates in Paso Robles and Eden Mennonite Church. M-2 Prison Visitation. AND we celebrate Orlo as a star rook and dominoes player, but a “terrible” scrabble player! It was Edna who excelled in scrabble!

I’ve titled this meditation “Mistakes Orlo Made.” Lew Henderson, the white owner of a local surplus store, on occasions introduced Orlo and those in the Camp Landon Mission to one of his friends. Not a religious person himself, he would say, “These people are Mennonites. They make the mistake of practicing what they believe.” That was Orlo.

Lew saw Orlo's ministry in a poverty stricken Black community as something not compatible with a racially segregated social structure. He saw Orlo practicing a different religious and social ethic that challenged discrimination and sought justice for an oppressed people. Orlo related to Black friends as equals in an environment that relegated them to second class citizens. He was an advocate for oppressed people, a people whose segregated schools were inferior, whose jobs were largely limited to menial, lower paying work, whose access to the beach, restaurants, and even churches was denied. He quietly, confidently, and compassionately challenged oppressive structures and ministered to needs of oppressed people. That was a "mistake" if he expected acceptance and respect from the dominant white community in that era of intense civil rights struggles.

There were risks and dangers in the mission Jesus lived and taught. There were risks for Orlo, Edna, and their family. A cross was burned near Camp Landon. A local Ku Klux Klan member requested that the state Klan bomb Camp Landon. A rock and pipe-throwing mob broke up an NAACP Banquet recognizing ministers. A rock landing on the trunk of Orlo's car made it all the way back to Camp Landon.

And so our friend, Lew, knew what he was saying when he said Orlo made the costly mistake of practicing what he believed.

We learned much from the spirit and strategy in which Orlo carried out Jesus' mission: "Bring good news to the poor, the blind, the captives, the oppressed!"

1. Orlo had vision – long range vision. He believed that conversion and change can take time. He and Edna were from the North, yes. But they did not leave the Eden Mennonite Church community only to return if the going got tough. Be it the spiritual or physical needs of those served in the Black community, or the hope that there would be a change in racist attitudes and practices, Orlo took the long view. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who worked tirelessly for women's suffrage in the 19th century, said, "I never forget we are SOWING WINTER WHEAT which the coming spring will see sprout, and other hands than ours will reap and enjoy." Born in 1815, she worked relentlessly for the right of women to vote. She died in 1902, 18 years before Congress adopted the 19th amendment granting women nationwide the right to vote. The LONG view. Orlo had this long view, too. He sowed WINTER wheat. Some of us were more impatient. We wanted to plant SPRING wheat. We wanted more immediate results. Orlo believed in the harvest. But the timing he did not know.
2. Orlo had a generous spirit. Many needs in North Gulfport came to his attention. Often he loaned or gave either financial assistance or provided a helping hand. His generosity did not depend on whether or not someone seemed deserving. A teen-ager at the Community Center once slashed some Camp Landon vehicle tires. Orlo confronted him, but ended up taking him to town to buy him a needed jacket. He "returned good for evil."
3. Orlo's style was collaboration with humility. He worked WITH, rather than FOR. His goal was not to start a Mennonite church in the Black community, but to work with and through the existing churches, strengthening their ministries, filling in gaps, working ourselves out of a job. And so the strategy was to work with churches. Teaching summer Bible Schools and Winter Bible Classes. Developing summer camping programs.

Establishing a community center for children's recreation programs. Creating a local structure that became the GOOD DEEDS ASSOCIATION to carry on local programs such as a community library, and yes, the KREHBIEL MEMORIAL SWIMMING POOL. Here again is a connection with your church. Ethel Krehbiel from this church community, a volunteer worker at Gulfport who died in an auto accident, was the catalyst for funds to begin that project. Recently, there is a commitment to repair and re-open this pool. Many of these services met significant needs at a time when segregation and discrimination deprived the North Gulfport community of these services. Orlo did not build an empire. Rather, he made every effort to empower the local community to take leadership and responsibility.

4. Orlo demonstrated faithfulness in the face of realism. He had an uncanny balance between optimism and realism. I remember his observation regarding the potential for Mennonite church growth in the South in those racially tense years. "Three strikes and you're out," he said: "1) Strike one, the Mennonite witness about race relations, 2) Strike two, the Mennonite position on war, and 3) Strike three, the incompatibility of the Baptist Bible belt with Anabaptist theology and practice." Given these three strikes Orlo knew it was more important to be faithful in our Mennonite witness than to strategize to plant a viable church structure.
5. Orlo helped sensitize the larger Mennonite Church about our witness for Christian race relations. Camp Landon's history, *THE QUIET DEMONSTRATION*, lists the names of 455 CPS and voluntary service workers, most of whom served while Orlo and Edna were at Camp Landon! There were others who spent short periods of time: 1,000 MDS volunteers after 1969's Hurricane Camille. Kansas families who hosted Fresh Air children from North Gulfport. Orlo gave volunteers a "crash course" on race relations in the context of "the Southern Way of Life." Imagine the impact this exposure had on the many who came and then went back to their home communities and congregations to share their experiences!
6. Orlo was a Unit Leader! Orlo and Edna understood the importance of good VS Unit life. They nurtured the spiritual side of unit life, making sure our work was grounded in our Christian faith and commitment. For instance, we named a long pier on the beach, "Prayer Meeting Pier," because of unit prayer meetings there. Orlo also knew the importance of fun. A summer trip to New Orleans. An excursion to Ship Island. Deep Sea fishing. Picnics on the beach. But we discovered Orlo didn't like sand in his food, so while the rest of us sat on blankets, Orlo always stood, avoiding the blowing sand peppering his food! Large VS Units with workers from everywhere made a vital witness in the community. Many treasure good memories of ministering together under Orlo's leadership.
7. Orlo was a Bridge Builder. It would have been so easy to alienate oneself from those with whom we might disagree. But Orlo found ways to relate to both the White and Black communities. He belonged to both the "White" Ministerial Alliance and the "Black" Ministerial Alliance, of course, preferring that they be ONE Ministerial Alliance. At his urging a few joint meetings were held. Orlo and Edna kept their feet in both worlds: the Gulfhaven and Crossroads Mennonite Churches as well as the Black church community. Bonnie, Frances, Gene, and Robert, you grew up well aware of racial conflicts. Your parents wanted you to be comfortable participants in the existing Mennonite churches. But you were not spared the tensions Orlo and Edna lived with in ministering in "both

worlds.” I recall, I believe it was you, Robert, coming home from school the day of the assassination of Martin Luther King. You reported that when the children heard the news, some cheered. I can only imagine the tensions as you grew up in “two worlds.” I believe you are the richer in character and Christian commitment for having grown up with your parents as role models! Orlo wanted always to keep lines of communication open between people. Interracial work in the church was very difficult in the 1960s. It grieved him that the church was such a segregated institution.

8. Orlo was a practical man! He could work with things as well as with people. This fit well with his frugal life style. He fixed things in the shop. The barracks that we all lived in, originally purchased from the military base for \$100 per 50 foot section, were repaired and repaired and repaired! Orlo did not discard. Orlo fixed! You children who grew up with Orlo and Edna are fortunate to have absorbed much of their practical as well as religious values!

Orlo’s and Edna’s legacy in North Gulfport continues. The Christian Community Center which was a Night Club Camp Landon converted into a children’s recreation center has been replaced by a new building. This Center is now administered by the North Gulfport Good Deeds Association which grew out of Orlo’s vision for community ownership and leadership.

And so today we celebrate the life of Orlo Kaufman. He was a gift to his family. A gift to those of us who worked with him and shared his passion for ministry. A gift to the Gulfport community. A gift to the larger Mennonite Church. We who are here today and have known and been blessed by Orlo’s life celebrate and thank God for that life. It is a special privilege to have several people who have come all the way from Gulfport to share in this celebration and farewell. Gaynette Flowers Pugh represents the North Gulfport community. Sue and Linda Williams represent the Gulfhaven Mennonite Church in Gulfport. And Elsie Miller who began her relationship to Gulfport as a Vser in the late 40s, living there until retiring in Hesston, is also a representative of the Gulfhaven Church.

To the family of Orlo and Edna, your parents have been a blessing and a light to many. You who are grandchildren and great-grandchildren, know that your grandparents were special people whose lives are wonderful examples of Christian faithfulness. We, with you, express our gratitude for them, and wish you God’s grace and blessing as you and we remember their lives of service. May the good news they shared continue as we carry on the mantle of Christ’s mission in our world. And may we also make some of the “mistakes” Orlo made.

Harold Regier
11/08/05