Dear Family and Friends,

We have gathered here as family, relatives and friends
to mark the end of a life well-lived,
to grieve the loss of Menno Epp, who has been a part of each of our lives,
and to support the family in this time of grief.

In this service we affirm that, even in the face of loss and of death,
God’s Spirit of love and compassion is present
and will continue to be with us in the future.

We begin by thinking about death.
But we will not stop there,
for this is really a celebration of life and its memories,
a celebration of our faith and hope,
rooted in the resurrection of Jesus.

Important events of our lives, such as a memorial service,
are communal and somewhat ritualized.

What I mean is that no matter where we come from,
we sort of know what to expect at a memorial service –
viewing, sitting in silence, entry of pall bearers,
closing of the casket, family processional,
Scripture, hymns and reflections.

As the gathered Body of Christ we look to the story
that has nurtured our faith, and Menno’s faith, for decades.
In this ancient story-line we find light, comfort and hope.

We are reminded that the God whom we worship,
the one we have come to know in and through Jesus,
is with us – as God has always been with God’s people.
In this grand story-line of faith,  
   we find encouragement and hope for the rough patches of life  
   particularly on "the downhill side of life."

Losing a loved one is a rough patch indeed –  
   that is where you as a family find yourselves today.

We have already heard verses from Psalm 90 –  
   did you notice how realistic the Psalmist is,  
   how realistic about life and death, and yet, how hopeful?

Faces of death

So, let’s begin by thinking about death, a topic the Bible does not avoid.  
Death is a persistent reminder that life is a paradox and a puzzle.  
We are born, dependent on the love and care of mother and father;  
   we mature and accomplish life’s tasks as best we can;  
   we believe and we doubt,  
   we struggle and we conquer,  
   and, eventually,  
   we grow older, become more and more dependent,  
   we become ill and we die.  
That is our reality – expressed so well in Psalm 90.

We know we are but creatures of dust and captives of time,  
   susceptible to suffering, sickness, frailty  
   and eventually death.  
There are no exceptions.

But death, even though it comes to all, is not always the same.  
It comes with different faces.

When the grim reaper comes and takes away a younger person,  
   or stops someone in mid-life,  
   death wears the dark face of the enemy,  
   an unwanted and unwelcome intruder.

On such occasions grief is bitter, even angry –  
   some of us have experienced that kind of death –  
   not only is it sad, it is tragic;  
   it is very hard to accept the death of someone in their youth or prime.

But, when death comes at the end of a long life,  
   a life of dedicated service  
   she wears a quite different face.  
May I even suggest, the face of a friend?

I have spoken with people who had lived long, and lived well  
   and in the end they were waiting for death to come,  
   they were not denying its approach,  
   they were not railing against it,  
   no they were waiting for their earthly pilgrimage to come to an end.

But whatever the age, when it comes to dealing with one’s own death, we realize what Maggie Callanan says in her book, Final Journeys, “dying is hard work.” Dying is hard work because it is consciously taking leave of all loved ones and friends. Not everyone gets to do this hard work well.
At a funeral in our church a daughter of the mother we were burying told the story of her mother, who was then in palliative care, having asked her doctor, “So, doc, what are you going to write on my death certificate?” “I don’t know, you haven’t died yet” he replied. She responded, “Why don’t you write, ‘She died of curiosity?” She knew her time was up, her earthly course had been run, and she was ready to wrap things up.

In such cases death has more of a friendly face. 
Death is God’s gentle way of bringing life on earth to a fitting conclusion.

On such occasions grief and sorrow are still real, very real, for life-long bonds of love and companionship are severed.

Even so, grief need not be bitter, and anger need not raise its head.

Such a death, even as Menno’s, is sad, but it is not tragic, is it?

Our sorrow and grief are tempered with gratitude and many memories of shared experiences – gratitude that the struggle is over, and memories that we will cherish long after today.

Some years ago an acquaintance of mine wrote about the funeral of an 83 year old friend of his, "It was sad, but it was not a tragedy. It was a good death and we could celebrate and give thanks for his life."

And then he added, "When my body gets to be more of a burden than an asset, I hope to "go gentle into that good night," my hand firmly in the hand of God who will lead me through my second birth." (Rumors Newsletter, Ralph Milton, October 12, 2003)

Elsie, and the rest of your family, from this time forward your lives will never be the way they were – your husband, father, grandfather, brother, uncle will no longer be there with you.

While we believe with Paul that nothing, not even death, can separate us from the love of God, (Romans 8), that does not erase the fact that death does separate us from the ones we love. That is the painful part of having loved and shared the journey.

Part of healthy grieving is remembering how it was – and over time the pain of this loss will decrease.

Remembering

Each of us has come with a basketful of memories and feelings today. Our lives have intersected with Menno’s in many different ways – in the immediate family, in the circle of friend. Some of this has been mentioned in the tributes.

What a wealth of memories and experiences, some delightful, others painful, some humorous, others sad. Memories are a gift to be cherished, and to be intentionally explored.

Working with our memories is an important aspect of grieving and it may take a long time.

Conversations will travel back and forth across the decades that he was with you and you will hear and say comments like:

“Do you remember when …? 
“| remember how he did this or that…
“What I like best about grandpa was this, or …”

And some of you may find the repetition of memories tedious…

But let us not shut down the talking.
Let us not say,
   “You already mentioned that yesterday and the day before too.”
Healthy grieving includes going over shared experiences again and again and again.

Another thing we need to keep in mind is this:
grieving is personal and everyone has his/her own schedule.
Some grieving has happened in recent months, in anticipation of his dying.
Some will be finished much earlier than others.
Let’s allow each one their own space, and their own rate of remembering.

In the providence of God,
   grace and healing then become part of the journey,
   and a profound sense of acceptance settles in our hearts,
   knowing that all is in God’s gracious hands.

When it comes to shared memories at memorial services,
   I have been struck by how good we want to make the person look,
       emphasizing all the good traits
   to the exclusion of any mention of negatives,
       only light, no shadow.
I have been struck by the lack of a wholesome balance.

After attending a particular viewing service I mentioned to (my wife) Anne that this person was so perfect, so
   saintly in the way they were depicted, they didn’t even need the grace of God!
I find it refreshing and realistic
   when the earthiness of the loved one comes to the surface
   alongside their strong points.

When we remember,
   we think of the very ordinary side of a person too, don’t we?
We even remember things that could have been different.
I have had thoughts like that about my own parents.
And that is the way it should be –
   as well as naming the wonder that was this extraordinary ordinary person –
   we can also remember and even name some of the less commendable traits.

Most couples and families are ready to admit that each one in their immediate circle,
   including the one whose life has ended,
   was actually "more gifted than they had imagined,
   but also "more flawed than they had feared."
In other words, he or she was a real Mensch!

Paul expressed something of this sentiment when he said that we have this treasure of God’s grace "in earthen vessels."

In addition to the legacy of good memories he leaves for you as a family,
   Menno was also a public person
   and he has left a legacy to the wider community as well.

I want to talk about that for a few moments.

In his public work as teacher, pastor, counselor, committee member,
   he was not only who he was, he was himself larger than life.
Early on he had accepted the call of his Lord and of his people to be "a set apart leader" – so that the body of Christ, would be built up and equipped for service.
Menno took that calling very seriously and served faithfully as Bible school teacher, as pastor— as an active participant in the work of the wider church. And he did so in decades of change and transition for Mennonites in Canada— the language transition from German to English, the transition from being more isolated as the “Stillen im Lande” to being more involved and acculturated, the transition from being quite sure of what the gospel meant to being quite sure that we were not sure anymore (in other words, we were dealing with new and complex situations).

Like creative leaders in every generation, he sought to interpret afresh how the old biblical message was relevant to life experiences in the present.

He was a son of foreign-born parents who became a living link between what had been and what was emerging in a new land, one of the trusted agents of change in a new culture and a new time.

He was a passionate and committed leader, but was able to lead with patience, even though change and progress came slowly.

Menno and I were colleagues already when we went to Bible college to study, then while we taught at Bethel Bible Institute in Abbotsford, as guest speakers, together, at Rosthern Junior College’s deeper life services, as experimenters in dialogue sermons when touring with Bethel Bible Institute groups in British Columbia. Together we dealt openly with the topics of dating, love and sexuality with youth in our churches and schools.

While we served as pastors separately we kept in touch with each other, sharing some of the things that pastors need to share with another who is outside of the congregation.

He was a mentor to pastoral interns, coaching them and sharing experiences with them about leadership; he was a patient pastor, offering counsel to countless individuals and couples after having listened to the way they experienced life with its hurdles and obstacles.

After the death of his wife, Irma, he became a steward of that most difficult experience and was able to help others deal with their losses and bereavements and regain hope.

At such times he drew on the depth of who he was and by whose Spirit he was being guided.

Did he always respond in the best possible ways to the many crises and interruptions he encountered? I doubt it. Few pastors can claim that.

There were always ‘second thoughts’. We shared these from time to time. Some situations and predicaments were clearly beyond our levels of understanding and well beyond our grasp.

There are no pastoral manuals covering every imaginable life situation, spelling out how one ought to respond in every possible situation.

But who he was at the core came through again and again: compassionate and patient, gentle and caring; always seeking to express the two top commandments that Jesus had given his followers: love God with all your heart and soul and mind and your neighbor as yourself!
That was his life’s bias. That is what shaped his discipleship and his leadership. That was the default setting he relied on again and again. Spirit-guided creativity helped him figure out what new circumstances called for.

Going on from here

When we think of all of these things associated with Menno’s life, his faith, his commitment, his devotion to family and church, his concern for those in pain and distress – then we have much to be thankful for.

Being thankful for his life intersecting with yours in so many ways, and with all of our lives who knew and appreciated him – is a wonderful source of encouragement as you face the future without him.

In addition to the encouragement we find in recalling this legacy of faith and service, the story-line of our faith reminds us that the God whom we worship is with us whether life is short or long, when the sea is calm and when there are storms. God is with us in the very “rough patches of life,” even when there is loss and grief, loneliness and sorrow.

The encouragement of our faith is most sharply focused in the person of Jesus – whose victory over sin, violence and death we celebrate repeatedly.

In Jesus, the faith and hope of the psalmist— that God is from everlasting to everlasting that the almighty is the refuge of all believers, that God is utterly dependable— all of these affirmations are incarnate in Jesus; they take on specific shape in Jesus life and ministry. For Menno and for us, Jesus was God fully in focus.

Like the Psalmists before him, Jesus was also realistic – teaching and modeling that following him would not provide immunity from the storms that batter human life, nor excuse us from dealing with loss and sorrow.

So, let not your hearts be troubled, do not be afraid – be encouraged as you go on, accepting the reality and the pain of this loss, cherishing the memories you have, sharing your grief with others, supporting one another in prayer, accepting the challenge of his legacy, living in faith and commitment as he did, and, like many before us, place your trust afresh in Him who tasted death and claimed victory over the grave, even Jesus, our Risen Lord.

Amen.

“This sermon, by John H. Neufeld, was preached at the August 6, 2011 memorial service for Menno H. Epp. Menno died at age 79 having lived a rich, exemplary life as a pastor, teacher, counsellor, mentor, church leader... in Mennonite Church Canada.”