

# Heather Johnston

## 1930 - 2014

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Heather Erika Johnston was a devout ecumenist Christian, a justice-seeker and the founder of Oikocredit's Canadian branch.

Johnston was born in Coelbe, Germany, in 1930. When her father was forced to choose between his faith and his nation, he chose the former and became "one of the founding members of the 'Bekennende Kirche' – the underground Church in Nazi Germany". When the war ended, Heather Johnston became a translator for the Refugee Department of the World Council of Churches and later for the Lutheran World Federation.

She moved to Canada after marrying a Canadian Presbyterian minister, with whom she had three children. There, she continued to be heavily invested in the Church, and in 1975, she became the first Canadian woman elected to the World Council of Churches' (WCC) Central Committee. There, she helped to make the organization more inclusive with a program to combat racism, which ran from 1979 to 1983. From 1979 to 1982, she concomitantly served as president of the Canadian Council of Churches (CCC).

In 1987, she founded the Canadian branch of the Ecumenical Development Co-operative Society (EDCS). This financial organization was established as a means to raise money in Europe to help promote small businesses in developing countries. Johnston adapted this concept to her vision, where instead of handing out money, the recipients would have to loan it with a small interest fee, which would then be reinvested to help more small businesses. She hired advisors on the ground to help these businesses thrive. The EDCS also supports fair trade, cooperatives and other means of ethical investing. A few years ago, the Ecumenical Development Cooperative Society (EDCS) changed its name to Oikocredit so that it could be the same in any language. Today, Oikocredit has invested more than 7 million dollars



and counts a total membership of over 900 businesses. Thanks to Johnston, it is also an affiliate member of the CCC.

In 1995, she was the recipient Order of Ontario and Hamilton's Woman of the Year. In 2012, she was given the Queen Elizabeth Diamond Jubilee Award. She was also "first woman and lay person to be conferred with the Honorary Doctor of Divinity by Knox College in Toronto". She died in 2014 at the age of 84.