

Humbly walking the road with God



Katherine Arnoldi

Ernesto Unruh: Enlhet leader, pastor, counselor, world traveler, writer and scholar



John Mosesso | nbii.gov

by Katherine Arnoldi

If you are looking for Ernesto Unruh, you just may find him on his hands and knees with other members of the congregation, painting the floor of the church in Yalve Sanga, the Chaco, Paraguay. If you have the honor of speaking with him, which you can do at Mennonite World Conference 2009, you will find he will humbly speak of working together with others, of cooperation and harmony.

Yet Ernesto Unruh is an Enlhet indigenous leader, a man of great stature, dignity, poise, grace and diplomacy. A pastor at one of the largest churches in Yalve Sanga, he served for 13 years as president of the Conference of Enlhet Brethren Mennonites, an organization of seven churches with 2,700 members. A graduate of the Bible Institute of Yalve Sanga, he continued his studies for six years after graduation. He has co-written many books, including *Ya'alva Pangcalhva II*, a collection of stories from Enlhet elders, the 903-page *Enlhet Dictionary* and *Lo Que Cuentan los Enlhet, Stories of the Enlhet*, a book published in both Enlhet and Spanish. He has traveled to Europe and Africa as a representative of his church, his people and his country.

Ernesto's father, Francisco, an Enlhet, was given the name of his boss, Mr. Unruh, the owner of a large farm. "My father attended a fiesta and there met my mother, a Nivaclé. I am the third of their 12 children," Ernesto says. "As a boy, I sang in the local choir and at 18 came to the Bible Institute back when the classes were held in a barn." During his years of study he helped build a new building for the institute and began his work with the local church, where, after 10 years, he became a pastor.

It was in 1984 that he, along with two other Enlhet and two Nivaclé, was invited to the Mennonite World Conference in Strasbourg, France. "I saw a different world on that trip," Ernesto says, "I saw many new ideas and activities. I saw people living in big buildings, which is not our custom. We like to live out in the open air, free. I saw people hang gliding, flying in the air great distances." But, most importantly, he met Mennonites from all over the world. "I saw my Mennonite broth-

ers from many different places. I saw people of many different colors who are part of the Mennonite family. I learned about all the diverse Mennonite churches that are equal. I met many people, and we discussed many themes, studied much and thought much together about Christ."

In 2003, he attended the Mennonite World Conference in Zimbabwe. "I saw the African people walking together, singing on the way to church, and we at the conference also walked and sang together the song, 'Walking in the Light of God.'" Ernesto learned about the devastation of AIDS in Africa and saw many people suffering from this disease. Also he was moved by the diversity of the Mennonite congregations. "I met and talked with Africans from many countries."

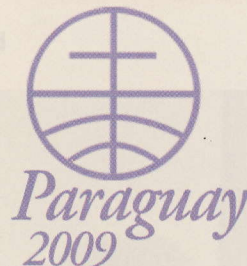
The community must face these issues together.—Ernesto Unruh

Back home, Ernesto, now 55, continues his work as pastor, traveling long distances to speak with people, offer solace, advice and marriage counseling. He does this work, as he has always done it, without pay. "When we walk on the road with God, we must do it with or without pay."

Elsa, Ernesto's wife, works with women's groups at the church and sings in the 80-member women's choir. She organizes activities, including preparations for Christmas celebrations. They have four children: one daughter and three sons.

While Ernesto sees that the problems now for the Enlhet in Yalve Sanga are basic—food security and water—he sees that in the future, as the population grows, they will need more land to sustain their needs. Unfortunately, all the land around Yalve Sanga is owned by others. "The Cooperative of the Enlhet must work together to buy land," Ernesto says, "The community must face these issues together."

Katherine Arnoldi is a member of Manhattan (N.Y.) Mennonite Fellowship and a Fulbright Fellow to Paraguay 08-09. Melvin Warkentin assisted with this article.



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