

The story of Mennonites in Paraguay is a marvelous example of God's leading and human ingenuity and perseverance.

JESUS, GO

How Mennonites in Paraguay gathered, prospered and gave back.

by Edgar Stoesz

Since the first exploration in 1921, Paraguay has become a kind of city of refuge for Mennonites. In 2008, the entire multiethnic Mennonite population, including the indigenous and Paraguayan Latinos, was around 60,000. This ranks it in the top 10 countries in Mennonite World Conference and exceeds the Mennonite population of either Holland or Switzerland, usually regarded as the cradle of the Mennonite movement.

The story of Mennonites in Paraguay is a marvelous example of God's leading and human ingenuity and perseverance. This moving story is told in more detail in *Like a Mustard Seed: Mennonites in Paraguay* (Herald Press, 2008) from which this abbreviated version is drawn.

How they gathered: Old Colony Mennonites from Canada were the first of four separate movements. They arrived in the Paraguayan Chaco in 1927, taking the name Menno Colony. Another group followed in 1948, establishing Bergthal and Sommerfeld colonies in East Paraguay. They had emigrated from Russia to Manitoba and Saskatchewan in the 1870s. After 50 years, they felt threatened by the encroaching world and Canadian laws that forbade them to conduct their schools in the German language.

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Paraguay
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Mennonite
World
Conference

Assembly Gathered

A second grouping of Russian Mennonites immigrated to Paraguay in 1930, establishing Fernheim Colony. These Mennonites had suffered through the Russian Revolution. Later the way opened for them to leave. After a brief stay in

small groupings of Swiss Mennonites immigrated to East Paraguay. This included an Old Order Amish and a Beachy Amish group, both from Ohio, and a conservative group that split from Lancaster (Pa.) Mennonite Conference.

before us

Germany, approximately one-third of them got their wish to go to Canada, some occupying farms left behind by those immigrating to Paraguay. Another third pioneered a settlement in Santa Katarina, Brazil, but most later resettled in Curitiba, Brazil. Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) helped the remaining third settle in Paraguay, neighbor to Menno Colony.

The largest group (5,616 Mennonite refugees) came to Paraguay in 1947. Their dramatic story is told in *Up from the Rubble* by Peter J. and Elfrieda Dyck. Half went to the Chaco, where they formed Neuland Colony. The other half went to East Paraguay, where they formed Volendam Colony. They were assisted by Friesland Colony, which had broken off from Fernheim Colony 10 years earlier.

Beginning in 1967, the first of three unrelated

The fourth and last mass migration of German-speaking Old Colony Mennonites immigrated to East Paraguay (and Bolivia) from Mexico in four groups, beginning in 1969.

While the Old Colony families that came from Canada and Mexico—along with the Swiss Mennonites—came voluntarily and managed on their own, those who came directly from Russia came as refugees, with substantial assistance from MCC.

The indigenous (First Nation people) also found themselves in a Chaco they had never known, without having left it. The 1932-35 Chaco War and the coming of Mennonites created a whole new reality for them. There was still room in the vast Chaco for them to relocate, but they elected to stay. And many were attracted to join this unplanned, bicultural experiment with few equals anywhere.

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A burden to witness: Elenita, Liliana and Doreen, former students at Instituto Biblico Asunción, a Bible school in Asunción.



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How they prospered: When Fernheim Colony celebrated its silver anniversary in 1955, it did so not knowing if it would survive. One of its leaders said, "We knew we would be poor; we did not know we would be poor so long." This was also true of the other colonies. Many who could have left for better prospects, mostly to Canada and Germany. As a new generation took the reins, a series of innovations began to have a positive effect.

- Colony cooperatives made quantity purchasing of essentials and the marketing of surplus products in Asunción possible.

- MCC and the U.S. Government helped build a 300-mile road connecting the Chaco to Asunción, reducing isolation and the cost of transport.

- Robert Unruh, an MCC agronomist, discovered buffelgrass, which gave rise to the burgeoning of ranching.

- Twice Paraguayan Mennonite leaders came to get loans from brothers and sisters in the United States and Canada. Then came a \$1 million development loan from the U.S. government, followed by substantial loans from Germany. With this credit, Mennonites bought equipment to process raw milk into cheese and later yogurt and ice cream, logs into lumber, peanuts into cooking oil.

The second generation learned how to farm in tropical Paraguay. They also learned how to navigate the Latino culture in the Spanish language. Today the third generation of German-speaking Mennonites have, with diligence and God's blessings, plus some help from the outside, progressed beyond the subsistence level that plagued them so long. Some have ventured into business, with

annual revenues in the millions of dollars and hundreds of employees. A few have ventured into politics, occupying positions of influence in the recently ended administration of President Niconor Duarte Frutos. Paraguayan Mennonite names will soon appear on the list of Paraguay's 100 wealthiest families.

How they gave back: Mennonites did not come to Paraguay to do mission. They came seeking a place to live in accordance with their religious convictions. But a missionary spirit lay dormant in their souls. In the words of Gerhard Hein, a life-long missionary to the indigenous, "When we saw the Indians, we said, 'Is this what God had in mind when he directed us to Paraguay?'"



Called to mission: The ordination service of four pairs of deacons in a church in Filadelfia, June 8, 2006.

At their first harvest festival in the Chaco, Fernheim churches called for workers to initiate a mission to their unexpected neighbors. The Chaco War between Paraguay and Bolivia intervened, but on the last day of the war, 97 Mennonite families began *Licht den Indianern* (Light for the Indians).

After 10 years they did not have one convert, but in 1946, Sepe Llama, an Enlhet, requested baptism. That developed into a network of 39 indigenous congregations with 9,100 members served by more than 300 indigenous pastors.

In the 1950s, the indigenous families demanded land to create their own chacras (farms). Over the years, more than 12,000 indigenous people have been assisted, with help from MCC and European organizations, to occupy 300,000 acres (460 square miles). They have more than 13,000 head of cattle.

Education was one of four original mission objectives. There were no schools, and the indigenous population was illiterate. Slowly the indigenous languages were alphabetized, basic primers written and printed. After some years, indigenous teachers replaced German Mennonite teachers. By 1985, 95 percent of the children living in communities served by the Mennonite mission had access to at least three years of classroom learning. In 2006, just under 4,000 indigenous children were enrolled in a network of schools with more than 190 indigenous teachers, while 150 were enrolled in a high school in Yalve Sanga.

Improved health was a second mission objective. Mennonite hospitals served indigenous patients, but to serve them better, Mennonites constructed a hospital in Yalve Sanga in 1953. In 1968, Dr. Hans Epp was appointed the first full-time physician serving the indigenous population in Yalve Sanga and in 16 scattered village clinics. Dr. Epp also introduced a public health program to



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address tuberculosis, worms and childhood diseases. As a result, infant mortality has decreased dramatically and life expectancy has increased, but tuberculosis remains a public health problem.

Mission-minded German Mennonites also had a burden to witness to their Spanish and Guarani neighbors. Among the early pioneers were Hans and Susana Wiens and Albert and Anna Enns. After some years of Bible training in Argentina, they began evangelistic activities in Paraguay. Others joined them, and North American mission organizations offered support. By 2008 there were 126 churches in eight of Paraguay's 17 departments (provinces), with a combined membership of 5,300. A 24-hour radio ministry also serves Asunción and surrounding areas with Christian programming, now expanded to include television.

To thank Paraguay for receiving them, as they were, no questions asked, Paraguayan Mennonites in 1953 initiated a mission to serve people suffering from leprosy. Clara and John Schmidt pioneered this work, which continues under Paraguayan direction, with limited outside financing. Known by the road marker at its entrance, Km 81, more than 15,000 names appear on the leprosy register of this world-renowned oasis.

A voluntary service program, Christlicher Dienst (Christian Service) also began in 1953 to staff the new leprosy mission. The focus broadened to address a variety of needs. This included a major role in the rehabilitation of the national psychiatric hospital in Asunción. Now in the third generation, more than 6,000 youth have served in a variety of ministries, including child care, prisons and help to the aged destitute.

Following the expulsion of President Alfredo Stroessner (1954-1989) were reports of as many as 30,000 children on the streets of Asunción. Paraguayan Mennonites did not walk by on the other side. A large-scale program began and continues to serve this need. At the same time, the Mennonite Brethren, with financing from Europe and Canada, built two large schools in Asunción with a combined enrollment of almost 2,000.

As Mennonites became more proficient in Spanish, they were increasingly attracted to business opportunities. In 2008, there were more than 30 German Mennonite-owned businesses in Asunción. Six of the largest firms had sales in excess of \$140 million and 2,300 employees. To meet their moral responsibility to their employees, these business owners initiated a service previously unknown in Paraguay. Starting with one part-time chaplain, Capellania Empresarial now has 13 full-time and seven part-time chaplains serving the spiritual and social needs of 3,200

employees and families.

The story of Mennonites in Paraguay is replete with partnerships. First it was MCC and the North American and European mission and service agencies. More recently, 110 business and professional people organized a chapter of Mennonite Economic Development Associates. To assist poor rural families, they established a plant to process casava. In 2006, they returned \$3.5 million to 1,800 member families. The program was so successful that another plant is under construction.

In 1994, Mennonites helped begin an affiliate of Habitat for Humanity. By 2008, 568 deserving families had been helped to own and occupy decent houses.

Paraguayan Mennonites are on a journey with an outcome known only to God.

Nevertheless, Paraguayan Mennonites face some steep challenges as they prepare to host the Mennonite World Conference Assembly in July. Economically they are positioned to become increasingly wealthy, in contrast to their neighbors, many of whom live in abject poverty. This increased wealth brings increased secularization. Some decry that the saying "the common good ahead of personal gain" is being inverted. Personal gain is winning at the expense of the common good. The remarkable partnership with their indigenous neighbors is far from over. Finding Christian solidarity with the emerging Paraguayan Latino church is a constant challenge. Relationships with the Catholic Church are potentially fragile as Mennonites come out of their colony enclaves and compete with them for members. Political stability is not assured.

Paraguayan Mennonites are on a journey with an outcome known only to God. Their Russian experience is a reminder of threats beyond human control. Were it possible to gather this multiethnic community, speaking 10 languages, brought together by God's leading, under one tent, their prayer would doubtless be, "Jesus nos guia, Jesu geh voran" (Jesus, go before us).

Edgar Stoesz is author of Like a Mustard Seed: Mennonites in Paraguay (Herald Press, 2008). This article is adapted from his article "Mennonites in Paraguay: A Brief History" in the Mennonite Central Committee Peace Office Newsletter, January-March 2009.