

# Latin America





# 13 Mennonite Brethren Missions in Latin America

Victor Wall and Victor Wiens

The first Mennonite Brethren (MB) stepped onto Latin American soil in 1930, the year in which the MB Church was founded in Brazil as in Paraguay.

Their actions emerged out of the spiritual awakening that came to form the MB Church in Russia and out of the missionary vision that characterized the Anabaptists in the sixteenth century. Renowned missiologist David Bosch considers the Anabaptists as pioneers of mission in the context of the church. “They were the first to require of all believers obedience to the Great Commission. This was a direct result of their ecclesiology ... Ignoring all obstacles, they crossed all frontiers of geography, economics, race, culture, and language.”<sup>1</sup> Every church in the sixteenth century was an evangelistic center and every believer was directly related to the same.

The story of the mission of the MBs in Latin America allows us to recognize the beginnings of the mission, achievements and successes, as well as the weaknesses of the missionary efforts.



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## Historical Overview

The first Mennonite missionary enterprise in Latin American soil began in 1917 in Argentina. In the 1940s missionary work began in seven Latin American countries; in the fifties eight more countries were added and in the sixties four more countries were added.<sup>2</sup> Long-term MB missionary work began in nine countries, and short-term missions were conducted in numerous others. What follows is a brief summary of beginnings and developments in each country.

### Brazil

As mentioned in the chapter introduction, the MBs first came to Brazil as immigrants fleeing the oppressive communist regime of the Soviet Union. In 1930, on the ship en route from Germany to Brazil, a group of settlers was led by elders Jacob Hübert and Heinrich Ekk to plan and organize the MB church in Brazil. The first church, named Waldheim after the village they had left in the Ukraine region, began in the Witmarsum settlement of Santa Catarina state in southern Brazil.

Having experienced a certain abundance of spiritual, social and economic life in Russia, the Mennonite refugees struggled in this new reality which was so foreign to them. Although thankful for this new chapter of freedom and opportunity, they experienced isolation and discouragement. The MBs sought and found fellowship and mutual encouragement with other MBs from Paraguay and North America. This mutuality helped them survive, but also renewed their mission vision.

In the early 1940s Jacob and Anna Unruh, initially independent MB missionaries, worked with an orphanage near Curitiba sponsored by the Salvation Army. In 1946 they returned from the USA as North American MB conference-sponsored missionaries with the assignment of beginning an orphanage with cooperation from the MB churches in the Curitiba area. This orphanage, begun in 1947, was the first formal mission project begun by MBs in Brazil. In addition to reaching hundreds of homeless children with the gospel, and inspiring missional vision among the immigrant churches, at least four MB churches were begun as a direct result of this holistic ministry. This South-North cooperation in mission work has continued since then until the present.

As one surveys over eighty years of MB presence in Brazil, a number of periods emerge that describe their development and expansion. First, the initial period from 1930-1946 was one of survival and settlement. Mission outreach was directed to children and youth, as well as to unconverted immigrant Mennonite settlers. Second, a period of organized missional efforts began in 1947. A revival in 1947 in the original Witmarsum church, ignited by a deadly lightning storm, led to a concern for Bible study, conversion, and outreach. This was also the year that the orphanage was

opened in Curitiba, an endeavor that was to stimulate considerable mission interest, opportunity, and practice. This period of beginnings lasted through the decade of the fifties as both MB Mission and local German-speaking churches began churches and schools. Third, the sixties and seventies were decades of prolific expansion. Thirty-five churches were begun, new fields were entered and new methods tested (e.g. saturation evangelism). Mission expansion in these decades could be said to occupy the core of the MB Church. Finally, during the eighties until the present, the focus appears to have shifted to consolidation of younger churches, conferences and supportive ministries.

With the exception of the initial period of settlement and survival, different kinds of mission outreach have been central to the life of MBs in Brazil. Both the German-speaking Association of MB Churches (b. 1960) and the Portuguese-speaking Convention of MB Churches (b. 1966) included mission cooperation in their statements of purpose. With language and cultural differences less pronounced by 1995, the Association and Convention merged to form the Brazilian Convention of Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Churches, or COBIM. It has as its objectives: 1) mutual fellowship; 2) doctrinal unity; 3) evangelistic mission work; and 4) cooperation in social work and education.

The MB Church, in its multicultural Brazilian expressions and in partnership with the North American mission agency (now MB Mission), has sought to take seriously both the Great Commission of Jesus as well as the Great Commandment. As early as the thirties, holistic missional ministries began in embryonic form. Over the last eighty years, these have taken numerous directions, including the following:

- Church planting in six southern and western states. Today COBIM is composed of forty-eight established churches, seventeen emerging churches and 7,317 members.<sup>3</sup>
- Children's and youth ministries such as orphanages, camps and preschools.
- Educational ministries including a number of Christian schools at elementary and secondary levels.
- Health services such as hospitals, clinics, a crisis counseling ministry, a seniors' home, and a mental health outreach.
- Training for ministry and mission: MBs have invested heavily in this area beginning with local Bible schools, then mobile training centers, Bible institutes, and since 2003 an accredited Christian college (named Fidelis).
- Global mission: missionaries have served or are serving in Canada, Portugal, Angola, Senegal, Ecuador, and East Timor, in addition to cross-cultural fields within Brazil.

## **Paraguay**

The story of the Mennonites in Paraguay is one of the most fascinating and well-documented stories of migration and mission in the twentieth century. The early twenty-first century result is what is rightly called a “mosaic of Mennonites.”<sup>4</sup> In no other Latin American country has there developed such an ethnic diversity of faith communities among those who would identify themselves as Mennonite Christians.

The MB communities, from the very beginning and in cooperation with other Mennonites, have played a significant role in the development of this mosaic. The following summary unfolds the story of a people on a mission in a country that at once has welcomed with open arms needy refugees, yet itself is in dire need of the transforming grace of the gospel of Christ.

As with the immigrants that were able to flee an oppressive Soviet Union in 1929 and find a refuge in Brazil, so approximately 2000 Mennonite refugees also found a new homeland in the Chaco region of western Paraguay. They too arrived early in 1930. They came with three already-established Mennonite identities: the Mennonite Church, the Evangelical Mennonite Brotherhood, and the MB Church.

### ***Mission among Germanic Immigrant Communities***

Although there were many characteristics of their identity that united them (a common German language, history, social and civic structures, educational values, etc.), beyond doubt their faith commitment to God as passed down from their Anabaptist forebears was at the center of their identity and existence. As such, it was not long before the MBs gathered to form their first church on Paraguayan soil. This happened on June 9, 1930 in the village of Gnadenheim near Filadelfia.

Alfred Neufeld captures well those convictions shared by MBs and other Mennonites in establishing immigrant churches early on:

These groups brought at least three common convictions to Paraguay. First, there was a sense of gratitude to God for having given them a new homeland. Second, there was a sincere desire to cooperate fraternally without eliminating each group's own identity. Finally, there was a strong common conviction of a calling to an integral mission which prioritizes evangelization and Christian social service.<sup>5</sup>

In order to continually worship God, to grow with other like-minded believers in discipleship and fellowship, and to keep the faith alive and to give it away to future generations as well as new neighbors, strong congregations would need to be organized. These indeed were organized according to location and the emergence of new immigrant colonies or settlements of MB families. Thus, at present seven

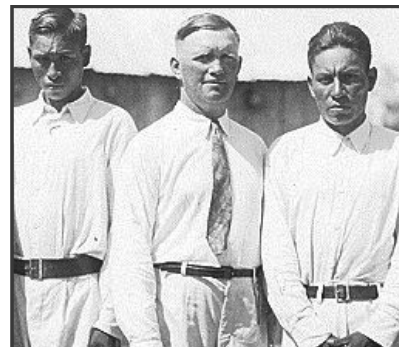
German-language churches have been established in both western Paraguay (Chaco region) and eastern Paraguay. In the west are Filadelfia Church (established in 1930), the East Filadelfia Church (1990), the Blumenthal Church (1960), and the Neuland Church (1948). In the east are Friesland (1937), Volendam (1947), and Concordia in Asuncion (1963). In 1961, five of these came together to form the first MB Conference in Paraguay. While few Germanic churches have been multiplied over the decades, together and individually these “mother churches” have planted numerous churches among both indigenous and Latin populations. The influence of this conference (called *Vereinigung*) is far beyond its numerical membership (currently ca. 1900), in that it provides extensive leadership and support to ministries and partners among the indigenous and Latins (see below).

### ***Mission among Indigenous Communities***

An outstanding feature of the Paraguay story is how the missionary spirit that came with the refugees from Russia was almost immediately expressed in their new homeland.

On 29 March 1931, the Fernheim colony celebrated the first Thanksgiving festival with a moving missionary message by Pastor Gerhard Isaak. The offering yielded five dollars, two of which were dedicated to missionary work in India, two for Java, and one was left in the box to consider mission work among the indigenous people in the Chaco. Shortly before the outbreak of the Chaco War (1932-1935), a missions commission was formed to promote that purpose.<sup>6</sup>

Indeed, in the same year the war ended, the missionary intention became an expression as the Light to the Indigenous agency was formed. Permission was secured from the Paraguayan government to establish a holistic outreach among the Enlhet (Lengua) people group. Volunteers came forward to carry out the church's and their own missionary vocation. Among these were Abram Unger, Anna and Abram Ratzlaff, and Gerhard and Katarina Giesbrecht. Missionaries from Canada soon joined them in this new endeavor. It took eleven years of sacrificial and persevering service to bring an initial group to conversion and baptism (1946).



**Enlhet baptism / missionary  
Gerhard Giesbrecht**

Also in 1946, Jacob and Helen Franz from Canada began a new outreach among the Nivaclé (Chulupi) people group. Later, other indigenous people groups in the Chaco were engaged with expressions of Christian love and the truth of the saving gospel of Christ. Among these were the Ayoreo (Moros, 1958), the Guaraní (sixties), and the Toba (simultaneously with the Enlhet).<sup>7</sup>

The challenges were numerous, among them, the selection of locations for mission stations, radical cultural differences (including the practice of infanticide and a nomadic lifestyle), language learning, and of course the financial need to sustain both workers and a multifaceted outreach. For this reason, it became clear to the well-intentioned leaders of this agency that help was needed. An appeal was made to the mission board of the North American MB Conference (MB Mission) to both assist and indeed oversee this ministry. The request was received and embraced and thus from 1946-1961 the Light to the Indigenous agency partnered with the MB Board of Foreign Missions of North America. In 1961 the supervision was returned to Light to the Indigenous and the three Mennonite church sponsors that initially began the ministry.

The multifaceted nature of this kind of mission also required partnerships with other agencies. Foremost among these was Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) which in fact for many years assisted in numerous ways the settlement and development of the immigrants. Among the indigenous, MCC assisted with their land settlement in nearby Yalve Sanga, with agricultural development, with medical clinics and with schools. Other financial sponsors were the governments of Netherlands and Germany. Currently the Indigenous Mennonite Cooperation Association (ASCIM), the Indigenous Federation of Farming Development (FIDA) and the Light to the Indigenous work together to further social, economic and spiritual development.<sup>8</sup>

The fruit of this sowing and cultivating has been nothing short of miraculous. Lives, families, communities and cultures have been transformed by the gospel. Nomadic and self-destructing people groups have discovered a way of life to survive and to thrive. In 2015 there were a total of 9,320 baptized members in established churches among the Enlhet, Nivaclé, Guaraní, Ayoreo, Toba and Zanapaná peoples. The Yalve Sanga Indigenous Bible Institute serves the different people groups to train church workers for the now self-sustaining churches. The Nivaclé churches formed their own conference in 1971 and the Enlhet in 1978. Since then a second Enlhet conference has formed as well as a Guaraní church conference.<sup>9</sup> True, there were and are numerous shortcomings on the part of both immigrants and indigenous, yet there is a clear consensus that the eighty-year relationship has been mutually beneficial.



### ***Mission among Latin Communities***

The missionary spirit that the MB immigrants were blessed to bring to Paraguay also found expression among their new Latin neighbors. Already in 1951, Mennonite associations with support from MCC and the American Leprosy Mission began a ministry of physical relief and spiritual hope to victims of leprosy, at that time a common disease in Paraguay. What is now known as the Mennonite Health Center was established at Kilometer 81 on the road from Asuncion to Brazil. In 2014 an MB church from Asuncion sponsored the beginning of a rehabilitation center for drug addicts at an adjacent location.

MBs have also participated extensively in the Christian Service program, begun by MCC in 1951. Here, young adult volunteers give of their time and talent to serve social and spiritual needs of all Paraguayans. Examples include volunteering at the leprosy hospital, at government psychiatric hospitals, in seniors' homes, and in childcare. Volunteers have also served outside of Paraguay in disaster relief.

A far-reaching missionary advance began in 1955 when the Filadelfia Church commissioned three couples to begin a church planting ministry in Asuncion and eastern Paraguay. These were Albert and Anna Enns, Rudolph and Hilda Plett, and John and Susanne Wiens. Later Hans and Irene Pankratz and other mission workers joined them. MB Mission gave full cooperation to this effort. Over the next twenty years four mother churches were established: Bernardino Caballero, Santa Lucia, Dr. Francia, and San Isidro. The immigrant churches, MB Mission, and the new Latin churches cooperated in numerous kinds of outreach to establish dozens of churches in the decades from 1960-2000. Notable among these was the Messengers of Christ team of "saturation evangelism" which would focus on a town or section of a city with prayer, literature, films, outdoor preaching, visitation, Bible studies, etc.—all toward the planting of a new church. Numerous churches began this way.

These Spanish-language churches came together in 1971 to form their own conference. The first leader was Carlos Chavez. This conference (*Convención*) has been instrumental in the beginning and development of the Spanish-language Asuncion Bible Institute (1964), the Albert Schweitzer School, and the national radio/TV ministry (Obedira). It has sent missionaries to Morocco, Argentina and India. In 2012 this conference included some sixty-five congregations and 3500 members.<sup>10</sup>

Also noteworthy are the approximately twenty-five Latin (Spanish-, Guaraní-, and Portuguese-speaking) daughter churches that associate with the *Vereinigung*. These have been established either by the collective or individual church planting efforts of the immigrant churches. An initiative mostly unique to Paraguay has been

for the *Vereinigung* to establish schools in cooperation with the *Kinderwerk Lima* foundation (Germany). These are expressly Christian schools for lower income families. Through Christian education, on-campus chaplains, and off-campus evangelism and discipleship, many students and families have come to faith in Christ. Three new churches have developed out of this holistic approach.

### **Colombia**

The initial impulse of missionary work in Colombia came from a group of students at Bethany Bible Institute, Saskatchewan, Canada, where through courses in missiology became aware of the spiritual need in other countries. They felt a special burden for indigenous groups and people in the Chocó region, these being of African descent. By sharing their concern with MB Mission, this body recognized the call of God in this. The first missionaries who were sent and came to Colombia in 1945 were former students of the Bible Institute.<sup>11</sup> These were Daniel and Elsie Wirsche. The Chocó region, where they were, was extremely poor. In that sector was established in 1946 the first MB Church of Colombia in the city of Istmina. In 1947 a clinic was launched. The interest and concern of MB Mission and the missionaries in the early years were focused mainly in this region known as the Chocó.

Pioneering work among native peoples called Wounaan, who were illiterate, was also initiated. Since their language was not yet written, the missionaries worked in the production of a grammar, a dictionary and translation of the Bible stories.

By 1966, most of the mission team was serving in the city of Cali. The focus of the ministry in Cali was evangelism and church planting, but also included nursing, and primary and secondary education. In 1968 a new work began in the city of Medellín. In the capital city Bogotá missionary work began in 1974. By 2004, Bogotá had six MB churches. An important factor in the success of the churches in Bogotá was the presence of a strong missionary team as well as the vision of multiplying leaders.<sup>12</sup>

The MB church in Colombia has become a sending base for missionary teams in Peru, Panama, Mexico and Turkey.

### **Mexico**

The possibility of sending missionaries into Mexico was not envisioned until the early part of the fifties. Isaac Goertz, who had relatives in the German Mennonite colonies who had immigrated to Mexico from Canada between 1922 and 1927, requested missionary work among these conservative Mennonites who had established their colonies in the states of Chihuahua and Durango. The first missionaries sent in 1950 were David and Elereca Toews and Edna Thiessen.

From the outset, the mission work in Mexico was at a disadvantage due to legal restrictions. Since the revolution of 1914 the Mexican government had rules that restricted the entry of foreigners, including missionaries. Therefore, the national church needed to be incorporated as soon as possible so it could legally hold land titles acquired by the Mission.<sup>13</sup>

Missionaries soon discovered that the Mexicans were more willing to hear the gospel message than the people of the traditional colonies. In 1960, the decision was made to focus work in Mexico in planting churches among Mexicans in larger cities. Work began in Durango (1961) and Monterrey (1965), but with few lasting results. In 1968, two missionary couples settled in Guadalajara, namely Richard/Delores Wiens and Willie/Betty Heinrichs. With the addition of Leslie/Erlene Mark, who had worked in Mexico for a long time, the work in Guadalajara was encouraged and strengthened. A small cluster of churches has emerged which has formed a national conference.

In 1992 an MB couple, Robert/Anne Thiessen, was sent by their church in Ontario, Canada, to work among the unreached Mixtec people group in Guerrero state. They have been instrumental in planting churches and training indigenous leaders, as well as Mexican and North American missionary apprentices. The network of Mixtec churches will likely remain non-denominational.

In the early twenty-first century a new vision was forged when representatives from the International Community of Mennonite Brethren (ICOMB) and MB Mission conducted a joint review of the work of MBs in Mexico. The vision of a stronger conference of MB Churches in Mexico resulted in sending a multi-cultural team (Colombians, North American Hispanics, and Canadians) of missionaries to Guadalajara in 2003. Their priorities were focused on middle-class church planting and training for the church and missions.<sup>14</sup>

## **Panama**

The MB Church in Panama began as a result of the early missionary work among the native peoples of the Chocó in Colombia. Between 1955 and 1957, while in Colombia, Jacob Loewen and David Wirsche began linguistic work with the Wounaan. The territory of that ethnicity was not limited to Colombia. They also lived in Panama to which many had migrated. In 1959 in the Darien region, the missionaries conducted a writing workshop with a group of individuals of the Wounaan and Emberá tribes in their respective languages. This experience gave them a sense of dignity, because they could now read in their own language. In 1961 the first congregation was established among the Wounaan. Soon a focus on preparing

leaders helped strengthen the work begun. There was also a concern for reaching Latinos and black Panamanians.

“The agenda for Panama in the decade from about 1970 consisted of a holistic approach to evangelization, continuing the ministry of adult education, teacher training, translation, and Bible teaching, as well as developing the socio-economic base.”<sup>15</sup>

Zorrilla and Ens highlight two things that stand out with respect to the Wounaan and Emberá culture:

First, the relationship of the missionaries with the national leaders was one of prudence and service ... They made themselves available while promoting human development and Christian integrity among the people from the Darien. Secondly, while the teacher-training program was being carried out and solidified, the translations into the two languages of the region were being used in addition to Spanish. As a result, the community discovered a lost identity and a design in the gospel that made them feel proud of their culture.<sup>16</sup>

The MB conference, called the United Evangelical Church of Panama, for quite some time had no resident missionaries in Panama. Finally in 2004, Einer and Girleza Zuluaga of Colombia, were sent by the Colombian conference in collaboration with MB Mission. They are working in a ministry of discipleship and leadership training with the Wounaan and Emberá groups.

## **Peru**

Since the late 1940s MB missionaries had conducted a ministry among the Campa indigenous people in northeastern Peru. Initially these missionaries came from the Krimmer Mennonite Brethren, a conference which in 1960 joined the MB Conference of North America. This work among indigenous groups lasted from the 1940s to the eighties. It was for a time in collaboration with Wycliffe Bible Translators and later with the Swiss Indian Mission. The contribution of MB missionaries has been very significant, but the Campa churches have chosen to form a non-denominational indigenous conference and so no MB church has emerged.<sup>17</sup>

Another chapter of mission work is taking place in the coastal region of Peru. On July 22, 1983, Jorge Pablo Fernandini, Ambassador of Peru in Canada, presented to MB Mission a request for humanitarian assistance for flood victims in northern Peru as a result of the rains caused by the climatic phenomenon called “El Niño.” This was the beginning of the current missionary work of the MBs, initially concentrated in

the region of Piura and city of Sullana, located on the northwest coast of Peru, over a thousand miles away from Lima. The first MB missionaries, John/Agnes Penner, arrived in this region with diplomatic visas. The first baptism was performed on a historic day for MBs: January 6, 1985.<sup>18</sup>

In 1996 the Conference of Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Churches of Peru was incorporated. As with most new conferences there have been challenges of growth, consolidation, lack of resources, lack of experience and lack of national leadership. These challenges have hindered the support and guidance needed to advance the work. Meanwhile new churches were planted in other large coastal cities such as Trujillo and Lima, the capital of Peru. At present, the Peruvian Conference of Mennonite Brethren is composed of twelve churches.

### **Uruguay**

The vast majority of Uruguay's population is of European descent. More than half of the population lives in Montevideo, the capital. In 1948 the first Mennonite immigrants reached Uruguay, most of whom were refugees from Danzig (modern Poland) who fled their homeland during World War II to avoid the advancing Soviet forces.<sup>19</sup> The beginning of the MB Church among immigrants in Uruguay was marked by struggles for survival. Among the reasons for these struggles it is important to mention the smallness of the MB group (a total of 34 members at the beginning), lack of spiritual leadership, not having an ordained minister in the group, their own settlement difficulties, and the distances between the various small groups. Only in 1950 was Tobias Foth ordained to the ministry.

In 1963 they decided to reorganize into three local churches that together had 78 members. They were heavily dependent on aid from North America as well as visits of preachers from Paraguay. For several years in the sixties MB Mission was undecided about engaging Uruguay as a mission field. In the late sixties they finally decided to establish evangelistic works for reaching the Uruguayan population.<sup>20</sup> With this new emphasis in 1968, Daniel and Elsie Wirsche, missionaries with experience in Colombia, arrived in Montevideo to implement this new vision. Other missionaries followed. By 1986, churches had begun in two areas of Montevideo and also were giving classes in a Bible Institute to train pastors and church workers. Although there was still a church in the Gartental colony, the focus of the conference was the work in Montevideo.<sup>21</sup>

Attempts were made by some missionaries to plant a church among the professional class in Montevideo. Many disciples were made, however a church was not established. The MB Conference of Uruguay today has seven churches with a membership of around 200.<sup>22</sup>

Unlike Paraguay and Brazil, where the MB immigrant church gave support and stability to missionary work, offered human resources, accompanying the work with prayer, offerings and spiritual fellowship, in Uruguay the immigrant background increasingly waned since its members immigrated to Europe or Canada. Today there is no MB Church of immigrant background. Other factors in the slow progress of the work in Uruguay relate to the shortage of domestic workers and a highly secularized culture that resembles Europe, with broad indifference to the gospel. The MB Church is not alone in its struggle to develop healthy and growing congregations in Uruguay. Even so, this small conference presses on with faithfulness and hope.

### **Other Countries**

In Ecuador, the HCJB (Heralding Christ Jesus' Blessings) radio ministry was begun in 1931 by the World Radio Missionary Fellowship. Upon an invitation to the MB Board of Missions to supply missionaries for the German language broadcasts, David and Anne Nightingale in 1953 joined this cooperative effort to spread the gospel and build up the church in Latin America. Many other MB workers from North America and later Brazil have served in this ministry until 1989.<sup>23</sup> The German broadcasts reached an audience especially present in Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay. In addition to follow-up by the written page, occasional visits were made to regions of high interest. In consultation with the Brazilian German MB Conference, the Nightingales were sent to plant a church among the highly receptive region of Joinville, Santa Catarina state in southern Brazil.<sup>24</sup>

In Venezuela, almost simultaneous church planting initiatives by the (Chinese) Pacific Grace MB Church of Vancouver (Canada) and the (Hispanic) Parlier MB Church in California (USA) occurred around 1990. In 1991 the North American MB mission agency (then MB Missions/Services) discerned the need to send workers to assist these local initiatives. Miller and Isabella Zhuang were sent to assist the emerging Chinese group in Caracas and eventually planted another church in Puerto La Cruz. The Spanish-language church in Maracaibo eventually joined another denomination. The two small Chinese churches continue to this day as MB churches.<sup>25</sup>

Finally, a variety of cooperative outreaches with other ministries, both short- and long-term, have taken place in Argentina, Belize, Bolivia, Chile, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua.<sup>26</sup>

### **The Beginnings and their Significance**

What causes a church to become missionary? Is there a secret or a special recipe regarding the proactive involvement of a church or conference in mission?

The book of Acts, the first missions text, is instructive as to how a mission work starts. Also in terms of the places to which the missionaries or evangelists went. By studying the early MB missions in Latin America we will discover some parallels with the stories in Acts.

First, migration from the beginnings in Acts (8) until today is presented as an effective missionary strategy. Migration includes forced migration for reasons of persecution or social, political and economic oppression, as well as voluntary migration for purposes such as business, improvements in quality of life, study, etc.

Regarding the MB Church in Latin America, migration itself has been central to the mission work. Specifically it is evident in the beginnings in Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay. In these countries the immigration of large Mennonite groups from the Soviet Union and Poland has been the key to the start and sustainability, in terms of human and financial resources, and in terms of presence and stability for the beginning and progress of missionary work. The clearest case is Paraguay where they could reach the indigenous groups in the Central Chaco with the gospel effectively and continuously. It is understood that the effectiveness of missionary work does not imply the absence of errors and in many cases lack of cross-cultural sensitivity.

The other side of the coin of migration also has to be mentioned. Migration has often had the opposite effect as described above. That is, thanks to emigration in many cases, churches have been emptied, a small group has struggled to survive having to face all kinds of internal conflicts. This is noted in the case of Uruguay, where MB immigrants have entirely left the country, leaving the young and fragile church in the hands of leaders not very well prepared and depending on one or two missionaries. Also, sectors of the immigrant populations in Brazil and Paraguay have suffered the debilitating effect of emigration.

A completely different facet has been and is the situation in Colombia, where due to terrorism and drug trafficking, internal migrations in the country have presented a great challenge for all Christian churches. This challenge naturally includes in a special way the question of the position of the church regarding these violent struggles. How does a pacifist church respond to violence? How do you respond to social injustice? How do you respond to the displaced?

Second, considering the beginnings of missionary work, it is imperative to mention the central role of institutions of theological and missionary education. Students of Bethany Bible Institute of Canada, studying missions, felt a special burden for Colombia. The result was mission trips to Colombia and later the sending of the first missionaries, former students of these missions courses.

So also it is worth noting that the vision of starting missionary work among the Paraguayan Latino population by MB immigrants was conceived in the Biblical

Seminary of Buenos Aires where young Paraguayan students could be found studying the Word of God and envisioning a different future in Paraguay. Upon their return, Albert Enns, Hans Wiens and others had a well-formed vision and mission strategy. The central role of theological educational institutions in missionary work is by no means limited to the beginnings. The progress and growth of the new mission works have been directly related to the biblical-theological training in virtually all countries. Also the lack of theological education has always meant a reduction for advancing missions.

Third, sending missionaries as church planters, both by MB Mission and national conferences, was another strategy of great importance. This strategy has been more efficient where it was accompanied by other strategies or approaches. In the last decade the traditional model of sending missionaries from North America to Latin America has changed. Where it was possible to achieve a close collaboration with some national conference, this has tremendously enriched the strategy of sending missionaries. For example, the Conference of Colombia has provided missionaries to Peru, Mexico, Panama and Turkey who have been able to make very significant contributions. So also, Uruguayan and Paraguayan missionaries are part of teams in France and India with a mission to reach Muslims for Christ. Considering the history of missions in the countries of Latin America where there are MB churches, one can confirm that church planting was the main strategy in most if not all the countries.

The fourth dimension relative to the start of the missionary work has been the social services. The clearest case is the beginning of the work in northern Peru, where MB Mission responded to the needs of a society who suffered the effects of the “El Niño” floods. This response of mercy and love was manifested as incarnational evangelism. And the result has been that many people wanted to know the God of mercy and love. So many were reached for Christ and the MB Church emerged in Peru.

Clearly, the social-spiritual witness is part of the DNA of the missionary theology of the MB Church. And that’s why it has always accompanied the missionary work as an important ingredient in the preaching of God’s love. The late MB missiologist Hans Kasdorf states convincingly that social ministry is part of holistic mission, with evangelism being the heart or center of it. The MB Church with some exceptions has generally accepted the biblical balance between evangelism and social-spiritual ministry. A strong illustrative example is the missionary work among the native peoples of the Central Chaco of Paraguay. What God has accomplished in the last 80 years is a very good synergy between evangelism and social work. Anyone who is familiar with this context knows that it is unthinkable to have conducted evangelization without also hard work in the area of social development. On the other



hand, the social-economic development of these communities without indigenous churches would have been a disastrous failure.

A comparison with the stories of Acts shows that the early missionary work in Latin America have their counterparts, and parallels in the mission of the early church: Migration, spiritual and theological formation, sending church planting missionaries, and social-spiritual ministries were foundation stones in the beginning and progress of missionary work.

### **Ethno-Theology and the Latin American Context**

According to Charles Kraft, ethno-theology is an approach that takes seriously both theology and anthropology. Theology offers the absolute and eternal truths concerning God and his saving act while anthropology offers cultural and relative truths concerning humanity and its cultural environment.<sup>27</sup>

The purpose of “ethno-theology” has four pillars: a) to better understand humanity as God’s creation and the *imago dei*; b) to better understand the cultural environment of humanity and its complexities due to its remoteness and alienation from its creator; c) to achieve a more balanced understanding of the way of life of human beings as well as their attitudes and relationships formed by culture and sin; and d) to discover more effective ways to communicate the gospel of Christ.

The ethno-theological approach helps us take a critical look at MB missionary work in Latin America. At times the missionary initiatives for various reasons were not framed within clear anthropological concepts with respect to cultural, religious and political developments of that region or country context. Catholicism, which for 500 years has dominated the Latin American continent, has suffered strong and steady syncretistic influences. These came both from the pagan religions of indigenous peoples as well as the values of the Spanish conquistadors in their effort to take advantage of the wealth and privileges available in the new world. Missionary work was carried out in this context, from the start suffering heavy pressure on the Catholic side, who until recently considered the MB Church a cult. The dominant Catholic culture in Latin America made progress in mission very slow. Upon presenting the gospel of salvation, inviting people to find forgiveness of their sins in Christ, and proclaiming eternal life without purgatory was naturally very attractive to Catholics. But people are usually afraid of the so-called “sects.” On the other hand, the “Catholic culture” presented a tremendous challenge in terms of lifestyle, ecclesiology, the relationship with the spiritual leaders, the management of finances, Christian ethics and family life. Thus, biblical pacifism has been taught very timidly in the context of partnerships with military-dictatorial culture.

## **Ecclesiology—Blessing and Challenge**

Missiology (mission understanding and practice) must be consistent with the theological vision of the church that sends the missionary, affirms Mennonite missiologist Wilbert Shenk. This implies that there should not be a separation between mission and ecclesiology. The Anabaptists practiced this unity in the sixteenth century. The divine mandate to mission and their obedient response caused the church to show its nature through missions and missionary work led to the church. In other words: the nature of the church is mission, and the essence of mission is the church. The church evangelizes, thus fulfilling the mandate of the mission, and through the mission churches are formed. This two-way dynamic has much relevance since the mission field constantly motivates the church to discern the times in the light of God's Word, and to review her understanding of it if necessary.

Upon evaluating the missionary work of the MBs in Latin America one finds that this principle was not always practiced. Two reasons for this were the ethnic-influenced confessions of immigrant groups on one side and the theological formation of missionaries on the other, since they came from diverse theological backgrounds as regards their training. In Colombia, for example, theology in the new church evidenced strong North American fundamentalist tendencies. In Brazil, pacifism was uprooted by the immigrant church since it had not secured release from military service and had adapted to the general position of the evangelical church according to the demands of society and government. It should also be mentioned that, especially in the earlier decades, the overall ecclesiology of the MBs had been influenced by the Baptists as well as the dispensational eschatological view.

A concrete expression of ecclesiology is the governance of the church. In Latin America churches were planted with a congregational approach, which is a Baptist model that is often confused with the concept of democracy. But democracy is a political, not a theological concept. This made many churches fall as easy prey to internal conflicts. At the same time the concept of a low pastoral profile was forged. This combined with relatively little theological preparation of members, and led to a relatively weak leadership in many churches. In reaction to this situation some opted for a model of church government that is pastor-centric that is copied from other churches, especially larger ones with widely influential pastors. As MBs, we need to address this situation obtaining a model that is faithful to our ecclesiology with a strong pastoral leadership based on the principle of giftedness (Eph. 4).

The spiritual formation of the new believer has always been and remains one of the biggest challenges of the church, since on this depends the growth, maturity and stability of the church itself. The strategy of the adult Sunday school has possibly been the most successful. Today this strategy has been largely abandoned which

has resulted in a concept of growth that is more quantitative and experiential than Bible-centered. While celebrating the new emphasis on spiritual and community experiences, we should not neglect the task of basing our experience of salvation radically in the Word and encourage spiritual growth by teaching the Word.

Related to the spiritual formation of the new believer and discipleship is the provision of necessary teaching materials. The lack of written material whose content is guided by the very theology of the MB Church, of high quality print, and covering all areas of Christian life has caused great suffering in the missionary work and church in Latin America. One theme for today that has not received due consideration is the teaching of peace and non-violence. Considering the violent context of Latin American societies the church must seriously ask whether it is willing and determined to follow radically the Prince of Peace and to form communities that are carriers and creators of peaceful relations offering models of conflict resolution.

## Conclusion

The MB Church is called to resist the temptation to seek to be merely an attractive community. Rather it is called to be a missional church, relevant to society with an incarnational missionary approach following that style of her Master. This requires the centrality of an evangelizing discipleship which involves the whole church. That is, an ecclesiocentric missiology and a missional ecclesiology. Embracing the world with the love and mercy of God, and forming ecclesial communities with a strong messianic culture based on the values of the Kingdom of God. This is the Trinitarian approach:

- a) The *missio Dei*, sending, the Great Commission.
- b) The *missio Christi*, the incarnation as model and strategy.
- c) The *missio Spiritus sancti*, the powerful practice, the expansion of the Kingdom of God.

MB missionary work in Latin America, rather than characterized by great numerical achievements, presents a faithful witness both of the churches of origin, as well as the missionaries and the many people reached.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> David J. Bosch, *Witness to the World: The Christian Mission in Theological Perspective* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1980), 127.

<sup>2</sup> Wilbert Shenk, *By Faith They Went Out: Mennonite Missions 1850 – 1999* (Elkart: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 2000), 87ff.

- <sup>3</sup> COBIM website statistics, accessed March 23, 2014, <http://www.cobim.com.br/#!/historia/c161y>.
- <sup>4</sup> Gerhard Ratzlaff, "The Mosaic of Mennonites in Paraguay," in *Courier* 4 (2008): 10-12, accessed January 23, 2015, [https://www.mwc-cmm.org/joomla/images/files/courier/Courier2008\\_4.pdf](https://www.mwc-cmm.org/joomla/images/files/courier/Courier2008_4.pdf).
- <sup>5</sup> Alfred Neufeld, "Mennonite Brethren Church in Paraguay," in *The Mennonite Brethren Church Around the World: Celebrating 150 Years*, ed. Abe J. Dueck (Kitchener and Winnipeg: Pandora Press and Kindred Productions, 2010), 265.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 268.
- <sup>7</sup> J.J. Toews, *The Mennonite Brethren Mission in Latin America* (Hillsboro: Mennonite Brethren Board of Christian Literature, 1975), 116-125.
- <sup>8</sup> Toews, *Mennonite Brethren Mission*, 120-121; Neufeld, "Mennonite Brethren Church," 269.
- <sup>9</sup> Mennonite World Conference World Directory (2012): 25, accessed January 23, 2015, [https://www.mwc-cmm.org/sites/default/files/website\\_files/mwc\\_world\\_directory\\_w\\_links\\_minus\\_cover.pdf](https://www.mwc-cmm.org/sites/default/files/website_files/mwc_world_directory_w_links_minus_cover.pdf).
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>11</sup> Toews, *Mennonite Brethren Mission*, 86ff.
- <sup>12</sup> Harold Ens, *Mennonite Brethren in Global Mission: Observations and Reflections, 1966 – 2006* (Winnipeg: Kindred Productions, 2010), 142.
- <sup>13</sup> Toews, *Mennonite Brethren Mission*, 141.
- <sup>14</sup> Hugo Zorilla and Harold Ens, "The Mennonite Brethren Church in Mexico," in *The Mennonite Brethren Church Around the World: Celebrating 150 Years*, ed. Abe J. Dueck (Kitchener and Winnipeg: Pandora Press and Kindred Productions, 2010), 78-79.
- <sup>15</sup> Hugo Zorilla and Harold Ens, "The Mennonite Brethren Church in Panama," in *The Mennonite Brethren Church Around the World: Celebrating 150 Years*, ed. Abe J. Dueck (Kitchener and Winnipeg: Pandora Press and Kindred Productions, 2010), 84.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 85-86.
- <sup>17</sup> Toews, *Mennonite Brethren Mission*, 154-162.
- <sup>18</sup> Rolando Neyra, "The Mennonite Brethren Church in Peru," in *The Mennonite Brethren Church Around the World: Celebrating 150 Years*, ed. Abe J. Dueck (Kitchener and Winnipeg: Pandora Press and Kindred Productions, 2010), 335ff.
- <sup>19</sup> Gerhard Ratzlaff, and Ernst and Ursula Janzen, "The Mennonite Brethren Church in Uruguay," in *The Mennonite Brethren Church Around the World: Celebrating*

*150 Years*, ed. Abe J. Dueck (Kitchener and Winnipeg: Pandora Press and Kindred Productions, 2010), 325.

<sup>20</sup>Toews, *Mennonite Brethren Mission*, 54.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 163.

<sup>22</sup>Ens, *Mennonite Brethren in Global Mission*, 161.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 163.

<sup>24</sup>Toews, *Mennonite Brethren Mission*, 136.

<sup>25</sup>Ens, *Mennonite Brethren in Global Mission*, 164-165.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., 161-165.

<sup>27</sup>Hans Kasdorf, *Christian Conversion in Context* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1980), 32.

### Recommended Reading

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### Study questions

1. Reflect further on the role of migration in mission, especially in regard to internal migrations from the rural to the urban in Latin America. How does one avoid neglecting the rural regions in the midst of obvious population shifts to the city? Are there contexts where MBs should give a greater attention to urban mission?
2. Sometimes Mennonites are seen as isolationist. Has this been our story in Latin American missions? Reflect on partnerships and relationships between foreign missionaries and the national church, between immigrants and nationals, and between MBs and other Christians.
3. Review the mission initiatives in the various countries as described in the first half of the chapter (p.239-250) in light of principles identified in the second half (250-255). Where has MB work adhered to biblical and ethno-theological "best-practice" and where are the gaps?