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## Mission and Service through Education: A Paraguayan Case Study

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Whether Christian primary and secondary schools should be included in an outreach strategy or not is debated. The old Enlightenment ideal that education should be carried out independent of religious observance, speaks against it. The conviction that there is not such a thing as value-neutral education, and that the holistic witness of the church of Jesus including thought and culture, speak for it. Add to that the fact that faith foundations and belief are laid during childhood and adolescence period.

In this essay I want to use the example of Johannes Gutenberg Schools, which the Association of the Mennonite Brethren (MB) churches of Paraguay have implemented in partnership with other organizations, to describe how you can through Christian schools begin and develop *diakonia*, evangelism and church planting. After the descriptive part of this essay, the school *diakonia* missionary strategy should be evaluated from a theological perspective.



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The term “*diakonia*” I understand to include social services which are Christian-motivated and conducted in the context of the Christian community, expressed in many different ways. It is primarily concerned to witness to the love, mercy and justice of God, by showing solidarity especially with suffering, disadvantaged, weak, poor and marginalized people.<sup>1</sup>

### **Historical Background for School *Diakonia* of the Mennonite Brethren Church in Paraguay**

The first MB church in Paraguay was founded in 1930 by Russian Mennonites immigrants. They had lived for more than 130 years in closed communities (colonies). The self-governing school played a crucial role as a mediator of the traditional Mennonite Christian values and culture of the Mennonite colony system, as well as preparation for economic and social tasks. The immigrant Mennonites in Paraguay, even before their emigration, had insisted with the Paraguayan government on the right to establish and manage their own schools, in which their own beliefs and the German language should be taught.<sup>2</sup>

It is also noteworthy that the missionary work initiated among the indigenous communities by the immigrant Mennonites in 1935 was to include Christian education. The constitution establishing the mission organization *Licht den Indianern* (Light to the Indians) has four specific objectives, namely evangelism and church planting, education, health promotion and economic development. The purpose of the mission schools was defined as follows: “raise the intellectual level of the Indians through their children’s education and instruction about a morally pure, Christian family life.”<sup>3</sup>

In 1955, upon the suggestion of the mission board of the MB Churches of North America, a church planting ministry was begun in the Paraguayan capital Asunción. Meanwhile, due to immigration and church planting, there were already five MB churches in Paraguay. Due to the need to manage and to continue the newly established mission work, the Association of Mennonite Brethren churches was formed in 1961, today known as the *Vereinigung der Mennoniten Brüdergemeinden von Paraguay*. Mission and service were formative elements from the start of this church association.

In this context, in 1966 a Christian mission school started, which is known today under the name “*Colegio Alberto Schweitzer*.” The primary motivation for establishing this school was the challenge to offer the children of the families who were among the newly established Spanish-speaking MB churches, a holistic Christian education. In addition, from the beginning of the school, there was the intent to be

active in evangelism and service. Above all, children from poor families were the main focus. Priorities and characteristics of the school were and are: a good academic level, Christian beliefs, intentional personal support of students and parents through psychological counseling, and annual evangelistic school trips. On the premises of the school a Spanish-speaking MB church was born. The first members of this church, named *Roca de la Paz* (Rock of Peace) were students, parents and neighbors of the *Colegio Alberto Schweitzer*.<sup>4</sup>

Since 1983, the *Colegio Alberto Schweitzer* is under the full responsibility of the Association of Mennonite Brethren Churches of Paraguay, currently seven churches with a total of 2,031 members (as of December 31, 2013).

The experience gained in leading Christian primary and secondary schools was the essential condition for establishing the Gutenberg Schools in Paraguay. This originated out of a partnership with

*Kinderwerk Lima* (Children's Work Lima), founded in 1968 by pietistic Christians of the Lutheran Church from Germany, in order to do *diakonia* work.

In 1970, *Kinderwerk Lima* founded a day care center and kindergarten in the slums of the Peruvian capital. Out of this a church started in 1973 and so began the first Gutenberg School in the district El Augustino. In 1991, a second school in the district *Comas* was opened in Lima, connected to a large-scale project of the daily feeding of children from poor backgrounds. Through this project, 11,500 children daily received a nutritious breakfast (year 2000). The diaconal work was always accompanied by evangelistic events and concrete projects of church planting.<sup>5</sup>

Through personal networks senior representatives of *Kinderwerk Lima* and the Association of MB Churches of Paraguay learned to know each other and their existing projects of school *diakonia*. So began the vision to build together a Christian school and missionary project in Paraguay. In 1989 the first Johannes Gutenberg School opened its doors in the Lambaré district of Asunción. The good results of the first Gutenberg School in Paraguay led to the extension of this model of school *diakonia*. Thus, the second Johannes Gutenberg School was founded in 2010 in the city Santaní (about 150 km. northeast of Asunción) and in 2013 the third Gutenberg School, called Campo 9, was inaugurated in Eulogio Estigarribia (213 kilometers east of Asunción).



**First Gutenberg School  
Asunción, Paraguay<sup>5</sup>**

With regard to the school name, the reference is to the inventor of the printing press, Johannes Gutenberg (1394 - 1468), who provided his knowledge and abilities in the service of spreading the Bible. By selecting this name, the Gutenberg Schools have as their purpose the same dual task, namely, to combine biblical values with the scientific, technical and social development.<sup>7</sup>

In the first years of the Gutenberg School Asunción, efforts were made by the school's Division of Christian education to teach the students and families who came to faith through the evangelistic work, and to integrate them into existing churches. In 2010 the Association of MB Churches of Paraguay agreed after a lengthy decision-making process to form their own churches in or through the Gutenberg Schools and offer students and parents a spiritual home. The background to this decision was the positive experience of the *Kinderwerk Lima* church planting projects, and also the observation that through the evangelistic work of the Gutenberg School, students and parents came to believe, but often were not easily integrated into existing churches. In addition, it was felt that many parents, students, and former students had a strong identification with the school, and that this would likely continue even after the completion of their formal education. The churches to be founded would be called *Iglesia La Mies Hermanos Menonitas* (Church of the Harvest, Mennonite Brethren), and would be supported and guided by the Association of MB Churches of Paraguay as daughter churches.

In 2011, the first of these churches was founded in the Johannes Gutenberg School Asunción. In the two new schools (Santaní and Campo 9), the start of the churches was carried out together with the inauguration of the schools. In Santaní the official church planting took place in 2013 and in Campo 9, it was planned for October 2014.

### **The Institutional Profile of the Gutenberg Schools**

Since the Gutenberg School in Asunción is the model for the other two Gutenberg Schools, I shall use this as an example in the description of the institutional profile, even if some of the pedagogical strategies have not yet been fully implemented in the two Gutenberg Schools of Santaní and Campo 9, since they are still in the development phase. The major institutional differences between the three schools are concerning the ownership and financing. These are described in more detail in the relevant sections.

#### **The Basics: A Christian School Philosophy**

In 1993, the school philosophy in the context of the Association of Mennonite Brethren Church statements can be summarized as follows:<sup>8</sup>

- The theological framework is the Confession of Faith of the MB Churches of Paraguay.
- The Christian worldview assumes that all of creation is from God and therefore there can be no essential contradiction between God's revelation and the scientific study of God's creation.
- Christian education has the whole student in its field of view, that is, specifically a healthy physical, emotional, ethical and intellectual development, as well as social integration and spiritual growth. The dignity of the individual student must remain protected. Respect for the unique personality and life experience of the student, as well as being fitted with a will of his/her own excludes any form of indoctrination. Christian education should rather teach toward independent thinking, decision making and action in the face of biblical values.
- The teacher is not only imparting knowledge, but is also an educator, role model, encouraging companion, coach and dialogue partner for the students.

### **Educational and Missionary Strategies**

In a brochure for the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Gutenberg School, published in April 2013 in Asunción,<sup>9</sup> the strategic guidelines of this educational institution were expressed as follows:

- The educational program of the Gutenberg School is characterized by a strong academic quality, a Christian orientation and a holistic approach. Children and young people from all social classes are accepted to this school, giving priorities to families with economically poor conditions. Through education they will be enabled to have a way to get out of poverty and marginalization.
- The love of God is to be seen and experienced by word and deed in the school family.
- The formation of Christian character and the promotion of healthy and stable families are essential objectives.

### ***General Education and Vocational Training***

The Gutenberg School offers all levels of education from kindergarten until high school. In principle, it is envisaged that the majority of students will remain throughout their initial education at the school.

After completion of the ninth grade six options are available for the middle school students: general high school education in natural science or social sciences, or a technical high school education in one of the following four areas: electrical technician, clothing confection, mechanical technician or bookkeeping.

All courses of the Gutenberg School are officially recognized by the Paraguayan Ministry of Education. The program of technical high school education, which was developed in 1992-1993, at the time was an innovation in the Paraguayan education system.

Teachers should be good professionals in their field, but in addition active members of an evangelical church, have maturity of character and have a willingness for teamwork. The systematic and professional training of teachers in university courses and degree programs is very much encouraged and positively affects the development of the school.

In the meantime it has become a school tradition to have project exhibitions, organized every year by the students and accompanied by their teachers, in order to make the public aware of the integral professional preparation of the students at the Gutenberg School. To promote vocational training, systematic visits to companies and factories at home and abroad are organized, as well as internships.

### ***Social Work and Family Counseling***

At the founding of the Gutenberg School the principle was established that at least 65% of students would come from poor or very poor families. This was associated with the need to provide scholarships for these children. To find out what support individual children needed, a Social Department was set up in the school. The staff at this branch visit the families from which the students come and evaluate their conditions of life, and recommend an amount and form of financial assistance. The children from very poor homes are given full tuition and financial aid for food, school clothing, and medical and dental treatment. For all children needing financial assistance, foster parents are assigned. In the strategic planning of financial aid for students, the principle of self-sustainability is applied. Each year the amount of support is redefined in order to not promote dependency, but rather further the responsibility of parents.

### ***Adult Education***

The holistic approach of the Gutenberg School in the fight against poverty and social inequality is also evident in the program started in 2007 with the name *Padres a la Obra* (Parents to Work). Through regular contacts of the Social Department with the students' parents it became clear how many adults in the school environment are unemployed. Through targeted and practical short courses such persons should be able to improve their financial income. Technical courses are offered in mechanics, electricity, computer science, garment confection, cooking, baking and crafts.

### ***Spiritual Guidance and Church Planting***

At the Gutenberg School there is a Department of Christian Education, which is headed by a responsible school chaplain. He and his team are responsible for the organization and design of the school chapels, the biblical instruction in classes, spiritual counseling of students and teachers, and for the organization of parent and school trips. In 2013 the Gutenberg School Asunción conducted seven student and two parent camps. The Department of Christian Education is also working closely with the school management in the implementation of the parents' meetings and other public events where beyond general, educational and organizational meetings, there is always the offer of spiritual instruction.

The combination of the spiritual work of the school and the *La Mies* Church is strengthened through weekly meetings in which the employees of the Department of Christian Education, the pastor of *La Mies* Church, and the Church Planting Coordinator of the Association for projects in the Gutenberg Schools participate.

The Church Planting Coordinator of the Association of MB Churches works closely together with the pastors and leadership teams of the respective *La Mies* Churches through regular weekly visits. Under his leadership, the pastors of the three church planting projects meet periodically to interact, to evaluate and to jointly develop visions for the future. For the Executive Board of the Association of MB Churches of Paraguay, it is important that the churches develop a biblical-Anabaptist identity and integrate into the national and worldwide MB churches. A special feature of these churches is, in addition to the Sunday worship service, a systematic instruction with courses for church members, and the promotion of evangelism, discipleship and small groups. The vision of Ephesians 4:11-12, the equipping of the saints for service, is leading the way in these church planting projects.

### **Administrative Management**

The management of the Gutenberg School Asunción has been carried out in partnership between the *Kinderwerk Lima* and Association of MB Churches of Paraguay since its inception. In principle, the *Kinderwerk Lima* is responsible for the finances and the Association of MB Churches of Paraguay for the administration of the school and their legal representation before the Paraguayan government. The Board of the school consists of four representatives of the Association of MB Churches of Paraguay and two representatives of the *Kinderwerk Lima*.

In the case of the Gutenberg School Santaní the partnership between the Association of MB Church in Paraguay and the *Kinderwerk Lima* has been extended to two other partners, namely PROCODIA, a relief organization founded by a local

Mennonite entrepreneur, and the Mennonite company Agro Eco SA. These partners share the operating costs that are not covered by the income performance of the school. Representatives of all the partners form the School Board. Part of the scholarships for students are received from the supporting churches of the Association, both in the Gutenberg School Asunción and in the Gutenberg School Santaní.

The Gutenberg School Campo 9 was begun with the cooperation of the following organizations: Association of MB Churches of Paraguay, *Kinderwerk Lima*, the Evangelical Mennonite Churches Sommerfeld and CEDEC, a Mennonite foundation of entrepreneurs. The finances for the construction and maintenance of this school have been completely taken over by the CEDEC foundation. This foundation also provides the legal covering for the school. Representatives of the four partners form the School Board.

### Results in the Implementations of the Desired Objectives

Institutionally, one can see the current status of the three Johannes Gutenberg Schools summarized as follows (as of August 2014):

	<b>Students, 2014</b>	<b>Teachers, 2014</b>	<b>Staff, 2014</b>
<b>Gutenberg Asunción</b>	1508	107	59
<b>Gutenberg Santaní</b>	436	29	13
<b>Gutenberg Campo 9</b>	327	24	15
<b>Total</b>	<b>2271</b>	<b>160</b>	<b>87</b>

In the brochure for the twenty-fifth anniversary of Gutenberg School Asunción it was noted that in the first twenty-five years, a total of 2,142 students have successfully completed their high school in one of the six possible courses.<sup>10</sup>

The former head of the Gutenberg School in Asunción, Theodor Loewen, summarized in a 2007 historical review of eighteen years of schooling, the results in the educational and academic sectors as follows:

- The Gutenberg School was known to the public for its above-average academic performance, the Christian character, discipline and order in the school life, good facilities and organization, as well as the honesty and reliability of employed persons.
- Although in Paraguay unemployment continued to climb, an average of 60-70% of the outgoing students found a professional job. Many companies are very interested in employing graduates of the Gutenberg School.<sup>11</sup>



In the same anniversary brochure of the Gutenberg School Asunción it was stated that one can observe a considerable social and economic development around the school, which was mainly due to the holistic programs of social counseling, vocational training, and health promotion. The Director of the Gutenberg School Asunción, Delbert Unruh, however, states an observation in a report from the year 2010, that not all teachers easily identify with the mission of the school, particularly in regards to the poor and disadvantaged. This may have to do with the fact that the teachers earnestly strive for the higher academic level of the school, and in so doing the social perspective can easily move into the background.

The aforementioned brochure also states that the pastoral counseling at the school has been instrumental in promoting and stabilizing families, and as a result, many members of the school community are integrated into an evangelical church. Also, it is instructive to observe that many former students send their own children to the Gutenberg School because they are convinced of the educational offer by their own experience. Of the 162 employees of the Gutenberg School some 20% were former students. In relation to the offers of short courses in the adult education program in the Gutenberg School Asunción about 1,300 parents, from 2007-2012, were trained for better work opportunities.<sup>12</sup>

The current results of the three church planting projects in the Gutenberg Schools can be summarized as follows (as of August 2014):

Name of City/town	Official church beginning	Worshippers	Baptized members
La Mies – Asunción	2011	110	86
La Mies – Santaní	2013	45	26
La Mies - Campo 9	October 2014	35	
<b>Total</b>		190	112

### **A Practical-Theological Evaluation of the School *Diakonia* of the Mennonite Brethren Church in Paraguay**

The Gutenberg Schools in Paraguay are an example of missional, cross-cultural, diaconal and developmental *diakonia*. It is developmental, as it is expressed through institutions that promote the development of society, especially vulnerable groups, through education and training. It is diaconal, an expression of *diakonia*, in that it is Christian education, and the unselfish and self-sacrificing service to humanity of

Christ is an essential source of inspiration. Culturally, this is a *diakonia* where conscious cultural limits are crossed, for example, those of the German colony Mennonites to Spanish-speaking Paraguayans. Missional as a developing *diakonia* where churches are the carriers of education, and strategic initiators of other churches in the vicinities of the Gutenberg Schools.<sup>13</sup>

From a theological perspective one can conclude through the example of the Gutenberg Schools that Creation and Redemption, integrated together under the general theological category of the Kingdom, form the fundamental theological categories of Mennonite school *diakonia*. The incarnation of Christ into his fallen creation is the key model and motivation for the witness of the church, and for peacemaking and liberating this fallen creation and society. In the specific case of the Gutenberg Schools, this manifests itself primarily in an initiative toward overcoming poverty through holistic Christian education. However, there is more at stake than just improving economic and social circumstances. The theological center of Christian education in the Gutenberg Schools is the gospel of Jesus Christ, which leads not only to improve one's external circumstances, but to a fundamental change of heart among the people involved, with the restoration of a personal relationship with God.<sup>14</sup>

Specifically, one can summarize this dynamic between a theology of creation, social responsibility, and Christ-centered proclamation with the following three guiding principles:<sup>15</sup>

- The social activities of the school *diakonia* are a result of the preaching of the gospel, since these efforts have come out of Christian communities that emerged through the preaching of the gospel. School *diakonia*, is living faith expressing itself through love (Galatians 5:6).
- The social activities of the school *diakonia* are a bridge to the preaching of the gospel, since people who live in economic and social hardship, become acquainted with the biblical message in the vicinity of the Gutenberg Schools. Through a Christian school, mistrust and prejudice can be reduced, closed doors suddenly opened to the message of God, and the gospel heard.
- The social activities of the school *diakonia* are a partner of proclamation. The proclamation of the gospel is a public explanation of why Christians care, through holistic educational opportunities for socially disadvantaged, because they have experienced the grace of God. The social behavior in the school, such as the academic quality, honesty and love in dealing with each other, responsibility, empathy and dedication towards marginalized people are all practical illustrations of what the gospel can bring to people's lives.

At the Consultation on the Relationship between Evangelism and Social Responsibility, held in 1982 in Grand Rapids (USA), reflections on this threefold relationship were debated. It was also mentioned that the integration of proclamation and *diakonia* is a risk, and that social action may evolve into a kind of bribery and thus can become a manipulation.<sup>16</sup> The example of the Gutenberg Schools can easily fall into such a problem. Children and families from disadvantaged social groups are funded through generous donations, and thus tend to be more open and trusting as they socialize into the new environment of a Christian school with all the associated services. Even the decision to follow Christ and to join the school church can be guided by this motivation and is perhaps more a socialization than a conscious decision.

Concerning this reality, the leaders of the Gutenberg Schools need to be very aware. It will be a constant challenge, on the one hand selflessly and unconditionally in the name of Christ to care for people in need, while also respecting their dignity as independent and self-reliant people. Theologically speaking, holistic school *diakonia* should therefore respect the dignity of humans created in God's image on the one hand, and on the other give the unconditional love of God, because God's grace is also an undeserved gift.

In conclusion it can be said that the model of the Gutenberg Schools in Paraguay, which now is becoming a social-diaconal movement, is a convincing example of how Jesus' disciples are the salt of the earth and the light of the world as explained in the Sermon on the Mount, and in this way follow the example of Jesus toward the saving transformation of people.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Heinz Dieter Giesbrecht, *Mennonitische Diakonie am Beispiel Paraguays: Eine diakonietheologische Untersuchung*. Veröffentlichungen des Diakoniewissenschaftlichen Instituts 45 (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2011), 17.
- <sup>2</sup> Peter P. Klassen, *Die Mennoniten in Paraguay, Bd. 1: Reich Gottes und Reich dieser Welt*, 2. Aufl. (Bolanden – Weiherhof: Mennonitischer Geschichtsverein, 2001), 330.
- <sup>3</sup> Hans J. Wiens, "...Daß die Heiden Miterben seien": *Die Geschichte der Indianermission im paraguayischen Chaco* (Filadelfia: Konferenz der Mennoniten Brüdergemeinden, 1989), 41.
- <sup>4</sup> Giesbrecht, *Mennonitische Diakonie*, 199-206; Gerhard Ratzlaff, *Ein Leib – viele Glieder: Die mennonitischen Gemeinden in Paraguay* (Asunción: Gemeindegemeindekomitee, 2001), 130-132.

- <sup>5</sup> Source: [https://www.facebook.com/pages/Colegio-Polit%C3%A9cnico-Johannes-Gutenberg/262435017109351?sk=photos\\_stream](https://www.facebook.com/pages/Colegio-Polit%C3%A9cnico-Johannes-Gutenberg/262435017109351?sk=photos_stream).
- <sup>6</sup> Colegio Politécnico Johannes Gutenberg, ed., *Asociación Kinderwerk Lima: Su Historia. La obra de Dios en niños y familias en América del Sur* (Asunción: 2003).
- <sup>7</sup> Veronica Villalba de Amarilla, “Manual de Organización y Funciones del Colegio Politécnico Johannes Gutenberg” (unpublished thesis, Asunción, 2003), 3.
- <sup>8</sup> Giesbrecht, *Mennonitische Diakonie*, 198.
- <sup>9</sup> Equipo Directivo Colegio Johannes Gutenberg, “Colegio Politécnico Johannes Gutenberg: 25 años: Construyendo juntos: Somos parte de esto”, brochure, April 2013, 6.
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid., 5.
- <sup>11</sup> Theodor Loewen, “Geschichte der Schule” (unpublished document, 2007), 2-3.
- <sup>12</sup> “Colegio Politécnico Johannes Gutenberg: 25 años,” 29ff.
- <sup>13</sup> Giesbrecht, *Mennonitische Diakonie*, 218.
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid., 219-220.
- <sup>15</sup> Klaus Bockmühl, ed., *Verkündigung und soziale Verantwortung: Eine evangelische Verpflichtung. Gemeinsame Veröffentlichung des Lausanner Komitees für Weltevangelisation und der Evangelischen Welt-Allianz* (Giessen: Brunnen Verlag, 1983), 23-27.
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid., 24.

## Study Questions

1. Of the many factors that have been a part of this successful story of mission and service, name the three you consider to have contributed most to the establishment of the Gutenberg schools, and the many lives touched through them.
2. While there may be some similarities between the *Kinderwerk Lima* Schools in Peru, and the Gutenberg Schools of Paraguay, there are also many differences. Even though one cannot transplant or “copy” a successful model into another context, what are three transferable principles that can be gathered from this story that could be applied in your situation?
3. What are the advantages and disadvantages of attempting to begin churches that are associated with Christian schools?