

Almost 6,000 Mennonites gather in Paraguay for Mennonite World Conference Assembly 15.

Are you a Mennonite?” a policeman asked as Ditrich Pana approached the huge white church where 5,800 Anabaptists from around the world had gathered.

In Paraguay, Mennonites are known as fair-skinned, German-speaking farmers and ranchers who live in isolated colonies and produce much of the country’s cheese.

Pana doesn’t fit that profile. He is Enlhet, an indigenous group that—as much as it might surprise most Paraguayans—includes 6,000 Mennonites.

The Enlhet churches—and those of another indigenous group, the Nivacle—grew from mission work by Mennonite immigrants of Germanic and Canadian background who began arriving in Paraguay in the 1920s.

Together

by Paul Schrag

Pana, a radio evangelist, told how he answered his uniformed questioner: “Through the Holy Spirit I said, ‘Yes, I am a Mennonite.’”

His story of claiming the Mennonite name as a label of faith rather than of ethnicity captured a leading theme of the 15th Mennonite World Conference assembly July 14-19 in Asunción,

Through the Holy Spirit I said, Yes, I am a Mennonite.—Ditrich Pana

Paraguay.

In a sermon to the global Anabaptist gathering—which drew Mennonites and Brethren in Christ from 60 countries—Pana praised Christ’s power to bridge the world’s divisions.

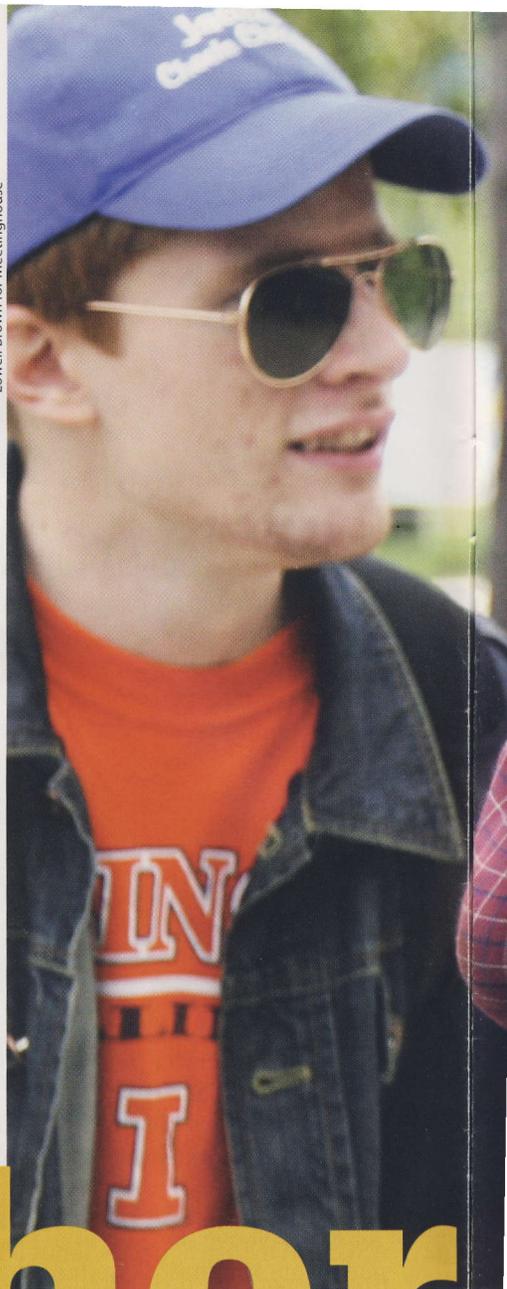
“This gathering unites us with glad hearts,” he said. “We belong to each other and to him [God] this week as brothers and sisters and friends.”

In that spirit of unity, Paraguay’s 32,000 Mennonites hosted a weeklong reunion of the 1.6-million-member global Anabaptist body.

MWC assemblies usually are held every six years but may be less frequent in the future (see box on page 11).

Of the 5,838 people who registered for the Asunción conference, 3,109 came from Paraguay, 766 from the United States and 730 from Canada. They gathered twice a day in the Centro Familiar de Adoración, a church with a three-level, 10,000-seat sanctuary in the final stages of construction by a Protestant congregation.

Lowell Brown for Meetinghouse





in faith

Family reunion: Mennonites from around the globe gather in Paraguay and greet old friends.

For worship services, the “platform language” was Spanish, so English speakers and others listened to translators through headsets.

They heard sermons and Bible study messages—under the theme “Come Together in the Way of Jesus Christ”—that emphasized living in unity and working for equality and justice, especially within the Anabaptist fellowship.

“Our conduct must reflect a change of thinking and attitude evidenced in how we relate to one another,” said Danisa Ndlovu, bishop of the Brethren in Christ Church in Zimbabwe and the new MWC president, on Saturday night (July 18).

“This is a clarion call for mutual respect, acceptance and, above all, unity in the household of faith.”

Songs in the dark

While sermons needed translation, music crossed language barriers—and turned a sudden difficulty into a joyful moment.

During Thursday morning’s service (July 16), the sanctuary went dark while Clair Brenneman of Palmer Lake, Colo., was telling about the building of Paraguay’s Trans-Chaco Road by Mennonite Central Committee Pax workers in the 1950s and early ’60s.

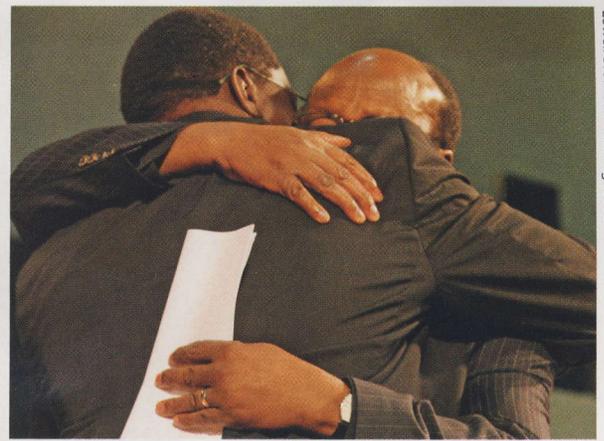
Songleader Paul Dueck of Canada and his team of musicians bounded to the stage and led the congregation in “Allabare,” “Grosser Gott, wir loben dich,” “We are walking in the light of God” and other songs until power was restored.

On Wednesday morning (July 15), a poignant

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Forgiving a murderer: Ayoreo chief Jonoine holds the spear his father used to kill missionary Kornelius Isaak in 1958.



Healing church wounds: Mennonite World Conference president Danisa Ndlovu (left) embraces Ishmael Noko of the Lutheran World Federation.

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moment with historic overtones occurred when leaders of two global church bodies affirmed the healing of centuries-old wounds.

MWC President Ndlovu embraced Ishmael Noko, general secretary of the Lutheran World Federation, after Noko spoke of Lutherans' plans to renounce condemnations of Anabaptism in their 16th-century Augsburg Confession.

Lutherans' persecution and execution of Anabaptists "is a wound we carry with us," Noko said. "When you meet for your next assembly, we hope to be with you a new relationship."

Worshippers gave Noko a standing ovation.

Remarkably, Noko and Ndlovu are both from Zimbabwe.

"Divine providence has brought these [two leaders] together," said Larry Miller, MWC executive secretary.

Forgiving the murderer

Another gesture of reconciliation took place Sunday morning (July 19), when Helmut Isaak of Paraguay read a statement of forgiveness to the son of the man who killed his brother.

"More than 50 years ago, your clan and tribe were resisting us, but now we aren't enemies anymore but brothers in Christ," Isaak said to Jonoine, a chief of the Ayoreo tribe.

Jonoine came to the stage in native dress, carrying the spear his father used to kill missionary Kornelius Isaak in 1958.

About 8,500 people attended the Sunday service. Local Mennonite churches were closed and encouraged their members to participate.

In addition to the worship services, two workshop sessions were held each afternoon on topics such as violence against women and children in Congo and the shared convictions of global Anabaptists.

Special-interest groups, such as women theologians from Africa and Latin America, held meetings.

Many conference goers spent their free time at

'If I don't get paid, I can't say no'



Ruthild Foth

Ruthild Foth, 75, from Ludwigshafen, Germany, attended her 11th Mennonite World Conference (MWC) Assembly in a row. For most of those she worked as volunteer interpreter.

Her first MWC meeting was in Karlsruhe, Germany, in 1952. The next one, in 1957 in Basel, Switzerland, was her first as a volunteer. In an interview on July 14, she said, "If I don't get paid, I can't say no." If MWC offered to pay her, she said, "I could say no because I don't need the money."

Next came Kitchener, Ont., in 1962, then

Amsterdam, Netherlands, in 1967. Her plane was not

allowed to land in Curitiba, Brazil, in 1972, so she went to Paraguay first. Next was Wichita, Kan., in 1978, then Strasbourg, France, where organizers put Foth in charge of coordinating the translations of information sheets each day.

In 1990 in Winnipeg, Man., Foth planned to attend as a tourist, but she was asked to interpret. Calcutta, India, in 1997 was her first since 1952 that she did not work as a volunteer. Then came Bulawayo, Zimbabwe, in 2003, then Asunción, her 11th MWC meeting.

Foth's father was a Mennonite, her mother a Baptist, and Foth grew up going to a Methodist Sunday school. But for most of her life she has been a member of the Mennonite congregation in Ludwigshafen, which began in 1702.—Gordon Houser for Meetinghouse

The future of Mennonite World Conference

Outgoing president of Mennonite World Conference Nancy Heisey of the United States and Danisa Ndlovu of Zimbabwe, the new MWC president, led a workshop July 15 on the future of MWC.

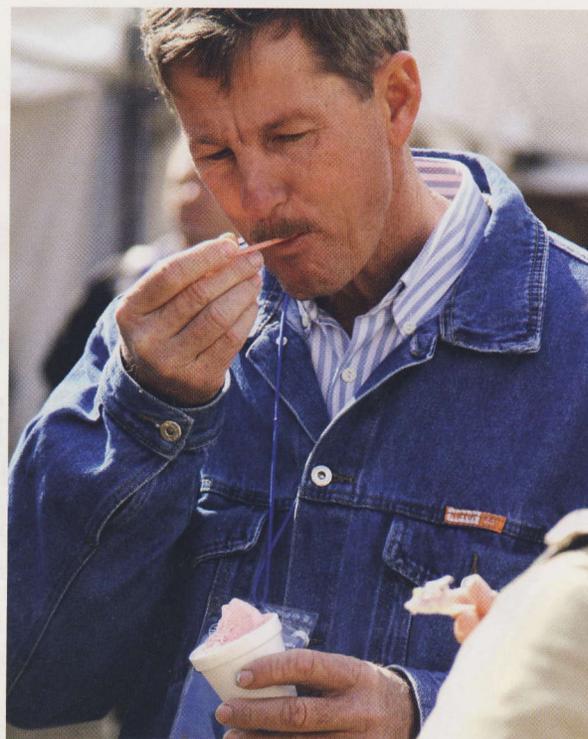
They listed some benefits and costs of these assemblies. Ndlovu said, "Nothing replaces personal contacts."

Among the costs are the literal one of finances, said Heisey. After the 1990 assembly in Winnipeg, Manitoba, MWC had such a large deficit it took years to dig out. She added that it's complicated to get people together from around the world. About 200 MWC delegates to this assembly had their passports held by the Paraguayan ministry, she said. Sometimes diseases are a problem, and few from the global South can afford to come.

Heisey noted, however, that many in North America think assemblies is all that MWC does. She pointed out that MWC's executive committee meets annually, the General Council meets every three years, a koinonia delegation each year visits a member church somewhere around the globe, as well as organizing the Global Youth Summit, the MWC history project, ecumenical work and World Fellowship Sunday.

She reported that the General Council meets next in 2012 in Switzerland. At that time they plan to make decisions about the next assembly, which will likely be in 2017 or 18. They hope to hold an assembly in 2025, perhaps in Switzerland, to celebrate the 100th anniversary of MWC and the 500th anniversary of the beginning of the Anabaptist movement.

"The key," Heisey said, "is how to make this living, breathing entity better."—Gordon Houser for Meetinghouse



Lowell Brown for Meetinghouse

the Global Village, an outdoor area featuring displays organized by continents. Global Village visitors stood in long lines to buy ice cream from Lactolanda, a Mennonite-owned dairy, and ate it with tiny spoons while listening to music at the outdoor stage.

Meals were served in the church's underground parking garage.

Due to health concerns, especially the need to guard against the H1N1 (swine flu) virus, some conference goers wore cloth coverings over their mouths, and volunteers sprayed disinfectant on people's hands before meals.

Activities for youth, including music and sports, took place in the "Teen Zone," a fenced field across the street from the church.

Before the assembly, a Global Youth Summit July 10-12 drew more than 700 participants, including 48 delegates from 32 countries.

MWC's governing body, the General Council, met and accepted four new national churches as

MWC members: the Vietnam Mennonite Church, the Brethren in Christ Church in Mozambique, the Gilgal Mission Trust (Mennonite Church) in India and the Bible Missionary Church in Myanmar. (See story on page 19.)

Council members elected Janet Plenert of Canada as vice president for a six-year term. Nancy Heisey of the United States ended her term as president.

The words of a young Nivacle woman may have summed up the assembly for many.

"I learned that God has different gifts for each of us," said Mirta Perez of Paraguay, reporting on the Global Youth Summit during a worship service.

"My dream is that the Mennonite family can remain in unity, because before God we are all the same, we are all valuable."

Paul Schrag is editor of Mennonite Weekly Review and wrote this for Meetinghouse, a group of Mennonite editors.

Global Village treats: Mennonites stood in long lines to buy ice cream from Lactolanda, a Mennonite-owned dairy.

Paraguayan Mennonite facts

- Mennonite churches have 32,000 members.
- Total Mennonite population is 60,000, or 1 percent of the nation's people.
- Eight Mennonite conferences officially hosted the MWC assembly—three German-speaking, two Spanish-speaking and three composed of the indigenous Enlhet and Nivacle groups.
- Other Anabaptist groups include Old Colony "horse-and-buggy" Mennonites, Old Order Amish, Beachy Amish and colonies independent of the conferences.
- Mennonite immigrants came first from Canada in 1927, then from the Soviet Union in 1930, again from Russia in 1947 as displaced survivors of World War II, again from Canada in 1948, and then from Mexico beginning in the 1960s.
- Mennonites are said to produce 80 percent of the country's dairy products.
- Former Paraguayan President Nicanor Duarte Frutos and his wife, Gloria, attend Raices Mennonite Brethren Church in Asunción.

Sources: Mennonite World Conference, *Like a Mustard Seed: Mennonites in Paraguay* by Edgar Stoesz (Herald Press)



Lowell Brown for Meetinghouse

Swine flu: Some MWC attendees wore cloth masks as a precaution against the H1N1 (swine flu) virus.