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# Paraguay Mennonites: Immigrants, Citizens, Hosts

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## Introduction

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by Daryl Yoder-Bontrager

In July of this year, people who are part of the Anabaptist tradition will gather in Asunción, Paraguay from all over the world to celebrate the 15th global assembly of Mennonite World Conference. The assembly will be hosted jointly by the 8 Paraguayan MWC member churches. In anticipation of that event, this issue of *Peace Office Newsletter* offers some beginning glimpses into the people and issues of Paraguay.

Almost anywhere in Paraguay at nearly any time of day one can find Paraguayans clustered in little groups drinking *tereré*, a cold tea, sipped from a metal straw stuck into a gourd that has been filled to the top with dried leaves of the *yerba mate* plant. The host pours water into the gourd, and passes it to the nearest person who sips all the water from the container and hands it back. The host then refills the gourd and gives it to the next person, and so on around the group in a ritual repeated several times daily. *Yerba mate* contains a stimulant much like coffee. But passing the tea from person to person—gourd, straw and all—changes the morning coffee concept that those of us in the Northern Hemisphere are more familiar with. Rather than a silent, solitary morning cup, it becomes a kind of several-times-daily communion with one's family and friends.

With such a custom common in the country, it can seem only natural that German-speaking Mennonites with their strong emphasis on sharing life together as a community chose to emigrate from Canada to Paraguay in the 1920s. It was yet another move in their centuries-long quest to live out their own interpretation of the Bible, free from the imposed laws of worldly kingdoms.

Paraguay was appropriate for Mennonites in other ways as well. A somewhat isolated, land-locked country in the middle of the Southern Cone, the southern triangle of South America, Paraguay contained vast tracts of sparsely populated lands in its northwest Chaco area. The Chaco region, shared with Bolivia and Argentina, is famous for its climatic extremes. The country had long since merged Spanish-speaking and Guarani-speaking cultures. Today Spanish and Guarani, the language of the dominant indigenous group, are both official languages. Moving to Paraguay seemed a win/win situation. Paraguay got people it believed it could count on to settle and farm land it considered empty and unused, and the Mennonites got a place to live far away from the influences of the world.

In this issue Edgar Stoez recounts a brief history of various groups of German-speaking Mennonites who migrated into Paraguay. Their success at turning the Paraguayan hinterlands into an economic powerhouse is indeed a story worth telling. By organizing themselves into colonies and economic cooperatives they were able to use the strength of their collective work to survive and then to sell their goods in the markets around them.

Meanwhile the rest of Paraguay struggled through the 20th century. Geography does play a significant role in determining a country's economic prospects. A land-locked country like Paraguay starts with the major disadvantage of not having its own access to the sea. While Alfredo Stroessner managed to modernize the country somewhat during his 35-year dictatorial hold on power, he also



**The highway was undoubtedly a factor in moving many German-speaking Mennonites toward more integration into Paraguayan society.**

**The word *mennonite* in Paraguay denotes an ethnic label more than it does a Christian denomination.**

was a flagrant abuser of human rights and led a country with the dubious notoriety of ranking high on the list of most corrupt nations.

One piece of that modernization was the road that connects Asunción to the Chaco, a lonely sliver of asphalt that runs through some 200 miles of mostly flat cattle ranches with houses few and far between. The road itself plays a big role in the history of German-speaking Mennonites and of Mennonite Central Committee's (MCC's) role in the country. Until MCC's large relief effort after the 2004 tsunami smashed into Asia, the highway that connects the Chaco with the southern part of Paraguay was MCC's largest single project (dollar amounts adjusted for inflation). It is notable that the road was financed in part with funds from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), while MCC today maintains a steadfast refusal to accept USAID funding.

The increased ease of access to the rest of the country made possible by the highway was undoubtedly a factor in moving many German-speaking Mennonites toward more integration into Paraguayan society. Their schools began to offer higher quality education. Their churches began mission work among indigenous and Spanish-speaking people. And the businesses of the co-ops grew.

Economic success came gradually after many years of hard work and sacrifice perhaps due in good part to the fact that German-speaking Mennonites could achieve something of an economy of scale as they banded their communities together. In all likelihood, it would have been much harder for the Mennonites to achieve their current level of success had they approached their life without the glue of community and their cooperatives.

The prominence of Mennonites in Paraguay became obvious when Nicanor Duarte, whose wife was a member of a Mennonite church in Asunción, was elected president in 2003. He invited Mennonites to join him in facing the country's difficulties and endemic corruption, and named four of them to his cabinet. Ernst Bergen, one of those cabinet members, reflects on his time in government in a just-released book, reviewed below by Alain Epp Weaver. In May 2008 Fernando Lugo, a former Catholic priest, was elected to succeed Duarte. Lugo is probably more left-leaning than many Mennonites in Paraguay are comfortable with, but for now the jury to pass judgment on his administration is still out. Alfred Neufeld offers some reflections on those May 2008 elections.

When German-speaking Mennonites built their first houses in the Chaco, the area was inhabited by at least five groups of indigenous people. The Mennonites' response to the indigenous people living around them was to establish mission churches and to work at community development among them, initially with MCC collaboration. The intent was to help set up community and economic infrastructure like roads, water systems, schools and health care systems, and cooperatives of their own.

After years of work, missions efforts with indigenous groups began to see fruit. In spite of the missions' success, however, these new Mennonite believers did not become part of the German-speaking Mennonite colonies, nor of their co-ops. Rather, they were encouraged to form their own organizations. While the indigenous people do have immensely improved lives as a result, it requires only a cursory tour of the Chaco and its peoples to observe the old U.S. civil rights movement truism that separate is not equal.

As Carmen Epp notes, when we consider the history, it is easy to understand why the word *mennonite* in Paraguay denotes an ethnic label more than it does a Christian denomination. Noting the record of the Mennonites in Paraguay provides those of us who did not live through the hardships of settling the Chaco a chance to examine one of the inherent contradictions of the Anabaptist tradition.

We in the Anabaptist churches take seriously Christ's call to go into the world and invite all to come join us. Doing that effectively requires a church with porous boundaries. People will pass into and back out of the church body, and it may be difficult at times to determine where some individuals are in their relation to the church. On the other hand we also take seriously the call to be community, to support one another, to get involved in the nitty-gritty of each others' lives.

While it is easy to argue that these two should not exclude one another, that has not been my experience. The communities where I have experienced strongest support—financial, emotional, spiritual and others—have tended to have boundaries that are quite closed, clearly defining who is in and who is out. The communities where I have experienced open and genuine invitations to all have had a wide mix of people and varying levels of commitment and have tended not to provide the support that I have enjoyed in the more closed communities focused on member support.

Probably for historic reasons that are centuries old, it seems to me that Mennonites with European cultural background have been apt to emphasize a community that supports its members and stays to itself. Others with other cultural roots seem to me to be better at being a church with an open door, inviting all to come in.

Obviously both emphases are necessary in a successful global church. Putting them together under one church roof, however, will likely be a challenge for some time to come.

In July 2009 the world-wide Anabaptist church will gather for the 15th time. Maybe some will appreciate the grassy flavor of *terré* as it is passed from hand to hand. Surely we can all learn from each other how to make the church be more the entity that God wants it to be. We hope this *Newsletter* issue can contribute to that.

*Daryl Yoder-Bontrager is Mennonite Central Committee Director for Latin America and the Caribbean.*

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## Mennonites in Paraguay: A Brief History

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by Edgar Stoesz

Landlocked Paraguay is sometimes referred to as an island surrounded by land, deep in the South American continent. For many, Anglican missionary Barbroke Grubb's book title, *An Unknown People in an Unknown Land*, rings as true in the early 21st century as in 1889 when Grubb first arrived there or as when Juan de Solis sailed up the River Plate four centuries earlier.

Paraguay has had a troubled history, including two costly wars with neighboring nations. Its past is rife with corruption and an abysmal human rights record. The 35-year rein of Alfredo Stroessner ended in a bloody coup in 1989. There followed a move toward democratization including a new constitution and other reforms. In 2008 a left-leaning former Catholic priest, Francisco Lugo, defeated the long-ruling Colorado Party.

So what brought Mennonites to this land and what made Paraguay so extraordinarily receptive to Mennonite appeals? Since the first exploration in 1921, Paraguay became a kind of City of Refuge for Mennonites. In 2008 the entire multi-ethnic Mennonite population, including the indigenous and Paraguayan Latinos, is approximately 60,000. It ranks in the top ten countries in Mennonite World Conference and exceeds the Mennonite population of either Holland or Switzerland. The story of Mennonites in Paraguay is a marvelous example of God's leading and human ingenuity and perseverance.

### How they gathered

Old Colony Mennonites from Canada were the first of four separate movements of German-speaking Mennonites to Paraguay. They

arrived in northwest Paraguay—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.

A second grouping of Mennonites immigrated to Paraguay in 1930 and established Fernheim colony. They had suffered through the Russian Revolution and then the way opened miraculously for them to leave. After a brief stay in Germany approximately one-third of them were helped by Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) to settle in the northwest Paraguay Chaco region, as neighbors to Menno Colony. (Another one-third moved to Canada, while the remaining one-third pioneered a settlement in Santa Katarina, Brazil, but most later resettled to Curitiba, Brazil).

The largest group of 5,616 Mennonite refugees then came to Paraguay in 1947 following World War II. 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 (some 100 kms north and east of Asunción). They were assisted by nearby Friesland colony, which had broken off from Fernheim colony ten years earlier.

Beginning in 1967 the first of three unrelated small groupings of "Swiss-origin" Mennonites immigrated to East Paraguay from Ohio and Pennsylvania. This included

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**The first of four separate movements of German-speaking Mennonites to Paraguay arrived in 1927.**

## ASCIM

ASCIM, the Association for Indigenous-Mennonite Cooperative Services, intends to promote interethnic harmony between autonomous indigenous communities in Paraguay through efforts to encourage growth of a solid economic base and to make health, education, and technical agricultural assistance more available.

As the largest Paraguayan partner of Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), ASCIM was started through efforts of the Low German Mennonite community and MCC to extend support to indigenous people in the central Chaco. It became an officially-incorporated non-profit organization (NGO) in 1978 and its base is in the city of Filadelfia in the Paraguayan Chaco. It currently works with seven indigenous groups, and coordinates with national and local governments to avoid duplication of efforts.

In its work with approximately 13,000 people in 13 communities, ASCIM intends to accompany indigenous communities in their socio-economic development. The organization helps them gain agricultural land, gives agricultural support, provides training opportunities, and promotes good health through preventive and curative health services.

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## The second generation of immigrants learned how to navigate in the Latino culture.

an Old Order Amish and a Beachy Amish group from Ohio, and a conservative group that split from the Lancaster Mennonite Conference in Pennsylvania.

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.

The indigenous Paraguayan people found themselves in a Chaco they had never known, without having left it. The 1932–1935 Chaco War and the coming of Mennonites created a whole new reality for them. There was room in the vast Chaco for them to relocate, but they elected to stay and more were attracted to join this unplanned, bicultural experiment. They are very much a part of this story.

### How they prospered

When Fernheim colony celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary in 1955 it did so under a cloud of uncertainty whether the colony 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 true also of the other colonies, and many departed 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.
- A 300-mile road was built with the assistance of MCC and the United States government to connect the Chaco to Asunción, which reduced the isolation and cost of transport.
- Robert Unruh, an MCC agronomist, discovered buffel grass that gave rise to the burgeoning ranching enterprise.
- Twice Paraguay Mennonite leaders came to request loans from brothers and sisters in the United States and Canada. Then it was a million-dollar development loan from the U.S. government, followed by substantial loans from Germany. With this credit, Mennonites were able to buy the equipment needed to process raw milk into cheese (and later yogurt and ice cream), logs into lumber, and peanuts into cooking oil.

The second generation of immigrants learned how to farm in tropical Paraguay. They also learned how to navigate in the Latino culture with command of the Spanish language. Today the third generation of German-speaking Mennonites have, with

diligence and God’s blessing and some help from the outside, progressed beyond the subsistence level of production. Some have ventured into business, with annual revenues into the millions of dollars and hundreds of employees. A few have ventured into politics, even occupying positions of influence in the recently-ended administration of President Nicanor Duarte Frutos. Paraguayan Mennonite names will soon, if not already, appear on the list of Paraguay’s one hundred wealthiest families.

### How they gave back to the country

Mennonites did not come to Paraguay to do Christian missions outreach. They came seeking a place to live in accordance with their religious convictions. Land and freedom were their prerequisites. But a missionary spirit lay dormant in their souls. In the words of Gerhard Hein, a lifelong missionary to the indigenous population, “When we saw the Indians we said, “Is this what God had in mind when he directed us to Paraguay?”

At the first harvest festival in the Chaco, during the first year after their arrival, the Fernheim churches lifted an offering and gave the call for workers to initiate a mission to their unexpected neighbors. The Chaco War between Paraguay and Bolivia intervened, but 97 Mennonite families initiated Licht den Indianern (Light for the Indians) on the very last day of that War in 1935.

After 10 years they did not have even one convert to show for their effort. Then in 1946 Sepe Llama, an Enlhet, came forward to request baptism. That was the beginning of 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* (farmettes). Over the years more than 12,000 indigenous people have been assisted, with help from MCC and European organizations, to occupy an expanse of 121,400 hectares (300,000 acres or 460 square miles). They have collectively 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. Bit by bit the indigenous languages were alphabetized. Basic primers were written and printed. After some years, indigenous teachers were able to replace German Mennonite teachers. By 1985, 95 percent of the children living in communities served by the Mennonite mission had access to at least the first 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. One hundred and fifty were enrolled in a high school located in Yalve Sanga (situated between Menno, Fernheim and Neuland colonies).

Improved health was a second mission objective. Indigenous patients were treated in Mennonite hospitals, but to serve them better a hospital was constructed in Yalve Sanga (adjacent to the Chaco Mennonite colonies) in 1953. In 1968 Dr. Hans Epp was appointed as the first full-time physician serving the indigenous population in Yalve Sanga and also some 16 scattered village clinics. Dr. Epp also introduced an active public health program to address the problem of tuberculosis, worms and childhood diseases. As a result, infant mortality has decreased dramatically, life expectancy has increased, but tuberculosis continues to be a public health problem.

Simultaneously, mission-minded German-speaking Mennonites also had a burden to witness to their Latino Paraguayan neighbors, both Spanish- and Guaraní-speaking. Among the early pioneers were Hans and Susana Wiens and Albert and Anna Enns. After some years of Bible training in Argentina they returned to Paraguay where they began evangelistic activities. They were joined by others and the support of North American mission organizations. By 2008 there were 126 churches in eight of Paraguay's 17 departments (provinces) with a combined membership of 5,300, and still growing. A 24-hour radio ministry serves Asunción and surroundings with Christian programming, now expanded to also include television.

Paraguayan Mennonites in 1953 initiated a mission to serve persons suffering from leprosy in part to thank Paraguay for having received them, no questions asked. This work was pioneered by Clara and John Schmidt and continues under Paraguayan direction with limited outside financing. Known by the road marker at its entrance, Km 81—81 kilometers due east of Asunción—more than 15,000 names appear on the leprosy register of this world-renowned oasis.

A voluntary service program, Christlicher Dienst (Christian Service) was also initiated in 1953 to staff the new leprosy mission. The idea of service appealed to young people who were growing up in isolated Mennonite colonies. The focus was broadened beyond Km 81 leprosy work to address a variety of

human welfare 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 a variety of ministries including child care, prisons, and help to the aged destitute.

Following the 1989 overthrow of President Alfredo Stroessner's regime (1954–1989) there were reports of as many as thirty thousand children on the streets of Asunción. Paraguay Mennonites initiated a large-scale program which 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 two thousand.

As Mennonites became more proficient in Spanish they were increasingly attracted to business opportunities. In 2008 there were more than 30 German-speaking Mennonite-owned businesses in Asunción. Six of the largest firms had combined sales in excess of US\$140 million and had collectively 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 thirteen full-time and seven part-time chaplains serving the spiritual and social welfare needs of 3,200 employees and families.

The story of Mennonites in Paraguay is replete with partnerships. First it was with Mennonite Central Committee and the North American and European mission and service agencies. More recently 110 business and professional persons organized an active chapter of Mennonite Economic Development Associates (MEDA). To assist poor rural families, they established a plant to process cassava. In 2006 they were able to return US\$3.5 million dollars to 1,800 member families. The program was so successful that another plant is under construction.

In 1994 Mennonites were the driving force in forming an affiliate of Habitat for Humanity. By 2008, 568 families had been helped to own and occupy a decent house.

### The future

Impressive as this all sounds, Paraguayan Mennonites face some steep challenges as they prepare to host the Mennonite World Conference in July 2009. Economically they are positioned to become increasingly wealthy, in contrast to their neighbors, many of whom live in severe poverty. This

## ASCIM (continued)

Farmers in the indigenous communities cultivated 1,600 hectares (3,955 acres) of land last year and had some 2,000 hectares (4,940 acres) of land for raising cattle. The crops included sesame, cotton, peanuts and *tartago* (castor bean, source of castor oil).

The education and training opportunities for indigenous children and youth includes preschools in 48 villages. ASCIM has responsibility under the government's Department of Education to supervise 57 schools in the region where some 5,000 students study, and to manage one high school of 130 students. An ASCIM agricultural center offers agricultural training to indigenous young people.

The health program runs a small hospital in the Yalve Sanga community and has trained more than 20 health promoters who work as nurses, radiologists and dentists. In 2007 they served over 12,500 patients.

—Eduard Klassen

*Eduard Klassen is Director of ASCIM. In 2009 he becomes Mennonite Central Committee Associate Director for Latin America and the Caribbean.*

**Thirteen full-time and seven part-time chaplains serve the spiritual and social welfare needs of 3,200 employees and families.**

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## Further Resources

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(continued on page 7)

increased wealth brings with it, as wealth always does, increased secularization. Some decry that the long-standing mantra—"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 complete. Finding Christian solidarity and complementarity with the emerging Paraguayan Latino church is a constant challenge. Relationships with the large and imposing Catholic Church are fragile. The political stability of the country is not assured.

Paraguay Mennonites—a multi-ethnic community that speaks ten languages—are on a journey with an outcome known only to God. Their prayer would doubtless be—*Jesu, geh voran, Jesús va adelante, Kirito tenonde ho'ó*, Jesus go before us.

*Edgar Stoesz began his association with Paraguay in 1966 as Latin American Secretary for Mennonite Central Committee in Akron, Pennsylvania. His MCC career included service as Associate Executive Secretary 1977–1984. He is author of several books, and this article is drawn from Like a Mustard Seed: Mennonites in Paraguay (Herald Press, 2008).*

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## A Letter from Paraguay

by Alfred Neufeld

### Asunción, May 2008

Some of you have inquired how it was in Paraguay to live through the recent weeks leading up to and including the elections of April 20, 2008, and the first days of a new political era. Here are some reflections and observations.

#### 1. The candidates in the campaign

Indeed, we had a long and tiring election campaign. Both traditional parties, the Liberal and the Colorado, had very "bloody" internal elections and the wounds had not healed. There was much at stake, especially the risk to the ruling Colorado party that it could lose power for the first time. In the Colorado Party, former Vice-president Castiglioni had the strong support of the Opus Dei, the big business leaders in Asunción, the soy bean lobby, the U.S. embassy and even some from the Moon sect. But he was strongly opposed by Chavez of Venezuela and Lula of Brazil. Castiglioni lost the internal elections by a razor-thin margin which split the Colorado Party, and about 35 percent of that party vote went to the opposition, mainly to Fernando Lugo.

President Nicanor Duarte Frutos, ineligible for re-election, had launched his female Minister of Education Blanca Ovelar as the presidential candidate for the Colorado party. She was known for being hard-working, very social minded, honest and quite capable. Her campaign was good, but was strongly resisted and betrayed by a large and considerably corrupt segment within the governing party who saw her as a threat to their interests.

Fernando Lugo jumped into politics officially just eight months ago. His family had belonged to the Colorado Party, but from a very early stage went into opposition during Stroessner's dictatorship. His uncle, Epifanio Méndez Fleitas, in the beginning a very close ally to Stroessner, fell into disgrace and became an opposition emblem in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Fernando was a school teacher in his first profession, and then studied theology. He became a priest in the spirit of the "ligas agrarias" (agrarian reformers) of the 1960s and the emerging Liberation Theology of Gustavo Gutierrez. He is a close personal friend to Leonardo Boff and seems to have a lot of financial friends in Germany. During part of the Stroessner regime he studied Sociology in Rome and later became bishop of the San Pedro department for about 10 years. In that area there are also Mennonite immigrant settlements, all kinds of small and big marijuana plantations, and a large segment of small and impoverished peasants. He became the 2008 Alliance presidential candidate.

The well known, always conspiring ex-General Lino Oviedo had regained his freedom partly because his legal process didn't proceed. He had been close to Lugo and the opposition, as long as he was in prison. But as soon as he recovered his freedom, he launched himself independently.

#### 2. Things to be thankful for

- Election Day went very well. It was a good experience, with nice weather, so many nice people working diligently at the election tables, and some rich and so many poor peo-

ple casting their vote in a climate of absolute freedom, privacy, and joy.

- The election results for the presidency were clear. There was a 10 percent difference between Lugo of the Alliance and Blanca of the Colorado Party. Paraguay does not have a second-round run-off election in order to build a clear majority. But a result with a 10 percent difference—40 percent versus 30 percent—is very helpful to keep the peace.
- The election machinery worked very well. On a big screen official results of the fast count were transmitted immediately. After four hours the official counts and parallel counts were finished and published at 9 pm with almost exact agreement on the results.
- Many international observers, OEA and IFES, led by ex-president Pastrana from Colombia, were present and played a very positive role.
- Both the winning and the losing candidates behaved in a very helpful way: the winners with humbleness, the losers giving their congratulations and admitting their defeat prior to 9 pm.
- Our president Nicanor Duarte Frutos pledged on that same election evening a peaceful, orderly and transparent transfer of power to the opposition government-elect. It has never happened before in the almost 200 years of Paraguayan political history that one party was willing to turn over power democratically to another party.
- Ten days after the election President-elect Lugo visited President Nicanor at the governmental palace. They had a chat for almost two hours and both came out with big smiles. A joint transition committee was formed in order to make important decisions together and avoid “strange things” prior to August 15, 2008, the date for the government-elect to assume office.

### 3. Basic arguments made during the campaign

#### a. Blanca Ovelar

Blanca characterized herself as the candidate representing economic improvement and continuity, and she built on a large list of economic and social achievements of the Nicanor era. These last six years of economic growth that averaged 6.8 percent were the best economic growth rate of the last 25 years. The achievements of the Nicanor government include stability, predictability, cheap credits, and fiscal budgets in surplus. Most analysts would agree that

the good economic figures were due to the job done by Dionisio Borda, Ernst Bergen, and Carlos Walde.

Blanca also made a strong point that she would be the first woman president in government. She came from an honest and humble home in Concepción, had worked hard as a school teacher and school administrator, with a record of transparent administration and no personal enrichment during her years of public service.

Against her was the fact that the very aggressive political discourse of Nicanor and the center-left position she shared with him was not received well by many businessmen and party bosses. That she had had almost no prior political party life encouraged some to think that she would be merely the extended arm of Nicanor. Those that had lost privileges during Nicanor’s time feared they would lose even more. She was, in fact, strongly resisted within her own party, partly because of her gender. So a major factor in her loss was that most of the “Castiglionistas”—the internal opposition within the Colorado Party—voted against her.

#### b. Fernando Lugo

Lugo was able to put together a large coalition of parties and movements from ultra-left to liberal free-market right ideologies. That gave him the possibility to promote the idea of change and opened up a real chance to displace the Colorado Party from power after 61 years. The present good macro economic structure made access to power very desirable from different segments of society. He made the following main arguments.

- Renegotiation of the hydro power agreement at Itaipú y Yacyretá with neighboring Brazil and Argentina to increase Paraguay’s revenue even more. Some Brazilian analysts have suggested that Lugo wants to wield political influence with hydro electricity in the way that Venezuela’s Chavez is with petro dollars. However, Lugo has expressed publicly that his model is Tabaré Vazquez and the Frente Amplia experience of Uruguay.
- Lugo sensed rightly that the Paraguayan population was tired of confrontation. He basically did not respond any of the attacks about his associates, to Vatican hints, nor as to whether his presidential candidacy was legitimate.
- Lugo was able to convince the voters that he would identify primarily with the poor and marginalized who make up the big majority. He refuses to wear ties and suits,

## Further Resources (continued)

### IN GERMAN

Peter P. Klassen. *Die Mennoniten in Paraguay: Reich Gottes und Reich dieser Welt*. Mennonitischer Geschichtsverein e.V., Bolanden—Weiherhof, 2001.

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**A joint transition committee was formed in order to make important decisions together.**

## Some Impressions from the Chaco

On May 23, 2008, we arrived in the Chaco to work with ASCIM (Association for Indigenous-Mennonite Cooperative Services), an organization formed by Paraguayan Mennonites in response to initiatives made by the indigenous peoples for economic and social growth.

We live in Yalve Sanga, a unique community of Mennonites of German origin, indigenous people, and Latino Paraguayans that is administered by ASCIM. Yalve Sanga contains a hospital, primary school, high school, Bible school, an agricultural program, bakery, and produces and broadcasts radio programming in the indigenous languages. It is a remarkable place where three cultures converge and blend in a tapestry of faith-based efforts to help the indigenous peoples of the Chaco.

We work in the high school as substitute teachers and provide violin lessons to students from the 6th–9th grades under a country-wide program founded by the conductor of Paraguay's National Symphony Orchestra to help poor children and their families.

Set in the driest part of Paraguay, where seven- to nine-month periods without rain are common and hot searing winds and dust storms torment the land, Yalve Sanga has positively affected the lives of many since its founding in 1936. We meet people in many parts of Paraguay who have lived and worked here who say that those years were the best in their lives. We feel privileged to work with our neighbors of all three cultures.

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### No one knows the future for sure.

mostly preferring “fishermen sandals”, making a curious figure in Paraguayan high society which loves glamour.

- Lugo was able to capitalize on popular frustrations, but also to secure big money and support from media tsars and large agro-businesses. As professional politicians these two segments will try to buy or pressure him. The old historic Liberal Party, whose candidates were unable to win in the last 60 years, has given him its unconditional support. The Liberals also made a very good showing in this year's 2008 parliamentary elections.

Time will show if Lugo has the political talent to keep his freedom and do what he thinks should be done. His momentary allies could become his worst enemies tomorrow. On the other hand, the Colorado Party, which in theory is center socialist, might well become his strongest support.

#### 4. What does the future hold?

No one knows the future for sure. Several scenarios are thinkable.

**Optimistic scenario:** Lugo is a mysterious and lovable—almost timid—guy. Coming from almost atheist parents he decided to study theology after being a school teacher and doing theater in order to overcome his shyness. But he knows a lot about Realpolitik from his uncle Epifanio, who, while still being Stroessner's friend, introduced torture in the mid-fifties. Some strange mixture of piety, love for the poor, Che Guevara, Dom Helder Camara and Leonardo Boff, feeling hands-on identification with the peasant movements, and sophisticated theological and sociological talk with intellectuals gives him the potential to lead Paraguayan politics into a completely new era. After this clear positive election, almost all political segments have promised support to his government—the Catholic Church in general, Opus Dei, and the Catholic Christian Democracy who opposed his candidacy. Good signals are coming from Brazil and Argentina and the United States. Both Lugo and the U.S. embassy affirmed that they want to strengthen the “umbra program,” to improve administrative efficiency and the transparency of state and government. So we could have a very good five-year period if Parliament is cooperative and the main political players are willing to produce positive synergy. It is an implied blessing from the Red Party to cede power in such an “elegant” way after a democratic and transparent election.

**Pessimistic scenario:** Once the honeymoon is over, there is real potential for political instability and a power crisis. The Liberal Party, Lugo's main political support, might get disenchanted about their candidate. With some smaller alliances it would be very easy for them to displace him from power. Lugo knows that and tries to strengthen his political support directly through his contact with the population.

**Extremely pessimistic scenario:** Lugo does not have good experience in public administration, and many claim that he is a very poor administrator. Several of his cabinet candidates (health, education, and finance) are good, but too radicalized, and are unable to get along well with others. Some Liberal Party insiders are very open to say that they chose Lugo as a puppet populist candidate and that they are prepared to get rid of him as soon as he “doesn't behave” or “gets crazy”. The far left has very ambitious reform programs and might become impatient once they see that he has to negotiate with moderate and capitalist forces. The soybean lobby and the meat lobby will not happily take cutbacks or heavier tax loads. The Pope and the Paraguayan bishops conference might get into serious conflicts, and there is a tense situation between the Opus Dei on the one hand and the Jesuits and liberationists on the other. The press is not independent and it's thinkable that they might soon become his worst enemies if he is not willing to play along with the interests of the strong owners. So a *coup d'état*, a severe crisis and leadership change within the next one or two years is a possibility.

Shalom,  
Alfred

#### Postscript. Asunción, November 24, 2008

Tomorrow we celebrate the first 100 days of Lugo in government. The general mood in the papers and with political analysts is not very optimistic. The conflicts in the countryside have been strong. The President and Vice-President are in permanent disagreement. The Liberal Party and the dissident Red Party (Castiglioni), who gave Lugo the victory, as well as the Catholic Bishop's Conference, have started signaling considerable distance to the present government. The question of the future will be “governabilidad”—governability.

As churches and religious associations we met three days ago, after being called together by the Minister of Education, Dr. Galeano Perrone. I was a little shocked by

what he said: "If we continue this way, we all will lose." Since this government was elected cleanly and democratically with a clear plurality and with a parliamentary majority, as churches we intend to do our best to help them to be successful. The big owners of the media have started attacking the government in an almost unfair way. These days we learn that Paraguayan marijuana is the best in the world, that we are the second-largest marijuana producer on the globe and that the drug traffic alone in this herb might produce almost as much revenue for the black market as our entire official exports. There seem to be indications that the marijuana production is financing a large part of the peasant and "campesinos sin tierra" (landless) conflict.

There is an increasingly heated ongoing "cold war" between Brazil and Venezuela, challenging us in Paraguay to take sides with Brazil's Lula or Venezuela's Chavez. As a small nation we are almost as defenseless as 30 years ago when we had to choose loyalty between Moscow and Washington.

A newspaper headline today reads: "The population after 100 days of government is frustrated, but has not yet lost hope that things can change for good."

*Alfred Neufeld is Dean of the School of Theology of the Protestant University of Paraguay in Asunción, Paraguay, and is chairperson for the Summer 2009 MWC Assembly 15 in Asunción.*

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## Hopes and Plans for the 2009 Mennonite World Conference Assembly 15

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by Carmen Epp

The Mennonite World Conference (MWC) Assembly 15 is going to be held in Asunción, Paraguay in July 2009. Many people are already involved in the preparations: conference leaders, pastors, leaders of Mennonite organizations and institutions, church members, students, business people, housewives, etc. Many sub-committees are planning arrangements for food, lodging, transportation, facilities, children and youth programs, service opportunities, Global Church Village, etc. One of the criteria for appointing members to the various committees is to involve all eight of the host member conferences in the planning and hosting of the assembly.

The Paraguayan hosts will be the eight Mennonite conferences that are official members of the Mennonite World Conference. All eight of these conferences are the result of Mennonite immigration into Paraguay in the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s. Three of these are formed by congregations of German-speaking Mennonite immigrants or their descendants.

- **The Vereinigung der Mennonitengemeinden von Paraguay** (Conference of Mennonite Churches, or General Conference) has 20 congregations with a total of about 7,300 baptized members. The congregations were founded by immigrants from Canada in the 1920s and Russia in the 1930s and 40s. In Menno colony, founded by immigrants from Canada, there are 15 congregations. There is

one in each of the colonies Fernheim, Friesland, Neuland and Volendam which were founded by refugees from Russia, and there is one congregation in Asunción.

- **The Vereinigung der Mennoniten Brüder Gemeinden Paraguays** (Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches) is made up of seven congregations with just over 1,800 baptized members. These congregations are located in the "Russian-Mennonite" colonies of Fernheim (3 congregations), Friesland, Neuland, Volendam, and one in Asunción.

- **The Evangelische Mennonitische Bruderschaft** (Evangelical Mennonite Brotherhood) consists of one German-speaking mother church in Fernheim colony with five Spanish-speaking annexes in greater Asunción. They have a total of about 900 members.

The close contact between indigenous groups and immigrant settlers in the Chaco in northwest Paraguay, and direct mission work to indigenous groups has resulted in the establishment of three conferences.

- **The Convención de las Iglesias Evangélicas Unidas—Enlhet Paraguay** (Conference of United Enlhet Churches) consists of 14 churches and three annexes in the Chaco with slightly more than 4,000 baptized members from different ethnic groups (Lengua Norte, Lengua Sur, Toba-Maskoy and Sanapaná).

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### Some Impressions from the Chaco (continued)

Despite the long dry season and the hot winds and dust storms, one cannot speak of the Chaco without mentioning the miracles of nature that abound here. Almost every sunset is spectacular. The stars are brilliant and the full moon so bright that you can almost read a newspaper by it.

The animal and plant life that flourish despite the drought is astounding. A wide variety of birds thrive in this parched land. Trees suddenly burst forth in brilliant leaf or flower after many months of drought and the Chaco becomes a symphony of colors in the midst of conditions so hot and dry you would expect the land to be consumed by forest fires.

However, the contrast between rich and poor in the Chaco is stark. There are wealthy land owners living on large tracts of land who made their fortunes through agricultural enterprises or businesses, using the land that once belonged to indigenous peoples. But many indigenous people still struggle to survive and live in simple houses or shacks or sometimes under plastic sheets, with the source of their next meal often very uncertain. But when we meet them we are almost always greeted with a broad smile and warm handshake. We find it amazing that these outwardly poor people seem generally happier than we of the so-called First World, who have so many material possessions. Perhaps this is why Yalve Sanga feels like a haven of peace and security.

—Mark and Krista Clement

*Mark and Krista Clement attend Church Communities International and are sponsored by MCC to work with ASCIM in the Chaco region of Paraguay.*

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**The Paraguayan hosts will be eight Mennonite conferences.**

**The diversity of languages and cultures in our global family of faith is part of our Paraguayan reality.**

- **The Convención Evangélica Hermanos Menonitas Enlhet** (Conference of Enlhet Mennonite Brethren Churches) has seven congregations in the Chaco with approximately 2,000 baptized members who speak Enlhet Norte.

- **The Convención Iglesias Evangélicas Hermanos Menonitas Nivacle** (Conference of Nivacle Mennonite Brethren Churches) consists of nine congregations in the Chaco and about 2,300 baptized members. Their language is Nivacle.

Church-planting efforts of the German-speaking Mennonites and Mennonite Brethren, mainly in the eastern part of Paraguay, resulted in two Spanish-speaking conferences:

- **The Convención Evangélica Menonita Paraguaya** (Conference of Paraguayan Mennonite Churches) has 25 churches and 22 annexes (developing churches) with approximately 1,350 baptized members.

- **The Convención Evangélica de Iglesias Paraguayas Hermanos Menonitas** (Conference of Paraguayan Mennonite Brethren Churches) is made up of 48 congregations and an estimated 2,500 members.

As can be seen from the outline above, we as Paraguayan hosts do not need to wait for Assembly 15 itself to experience the diversity of languages and cultures in our global family of faith. It is part of our Paraguayan reality.

We feel honored to be hosts to the Mennonite world that is coming to visit us, though at times we feel nearly overwhelmed by all the expectations. Then we tell ourselves that everything is possible with God's help, just as in previous MWC Assemblies.

#### **Hopes of the Paraguayan Mennonite church for the assembly**

It is hoped that one result of the MWC Assembly 15 will be a better understanding, or perhaps even redefinition, of what it means to be Mennonite in Paraguay. The label "Mennonite" is commonly applied to a cultural group instead of a denomination, both among Mennonites themselves and among the general Paraguayan population. When someone says "He or she is a Mennonite," the usual implication is that the person belongs to the cultural group of German-speaking immigrants from Canada, Russia and Mexico or their descendants, whether or not he/she is a member of a Mennonite church. So "Mennonite" is used to identify

a cultural group, just as "Paraguayan" in the common usage is used to refer to the majority population of Guarani/Spanish language and culture. Similarly, "Enlhet" or "Nivacle," etc. refer to the indigenous people groups, and "Ukrainian, Korean, Japanese and German" refer to those various immigrant cultures. When it comes to Christian faith and membership in a Mennonite congregation, members of Spanish-speaking or indigenous congregations would more commonly identify themselves as "evangélicos" than "menonitas." However, it is hard for the general population (and indigenous and Spanish-speaking brothers and sisters) to distinguish between "cultural Mennonites" and "faith Mennonites."

Another hope is that this event will strengthen our Mennonite churches in Paraguay, increase our testimony and outreach, and be a testimony of unity.

We hope that Assembly 15 might be a catalyst to help us create better networks and links within Paraguay as well as globally.

We also hope to share the hospitality that is typical of our different cultural groups, to offer a friendly atmosphere for all the participants, and to get to know our guests from all over the world.

To make Paraguay and its Mennonites better known, we hope to share our experiences and strengths with the rest of the world—what we produce and what we have achieved in different fields.

We hope to use Assembly 15 to show our gratitude to God and to those Mennonite groups who helped the Mennonites settle in Paraguay.

Our Paraguayan youth are looking forward to getting to know their peers from other cultures and to share the experiences and challenges they are confronted with in their countries. Young Mennonites also hope to show the Paraguayan non-Mennonite population that we are a people who are peaceful, multicultural and dedicated to service.

As we join in this celebration and time of renewal we hope to share with each other, to get to know each other better, and to strengthen each other. Together we will be better equipped to fulfill God's purpose for his church and his world.

*Carmen Epp is a Mennonite World Conference staff person based in Asunción, Paraguay.*

**Young Mennonites also hope to show that we are a people who are peaceful, multicultural and dedicated to service.**

## Jumping into Empty Space: A Reluctant Mennonite Businessman Serves in Paraguay's Presidential Cabinet

reviewed by Alain Epp Weaver

In 2003 the Paraguayan president selected Ernst Bergen, a successful Mennonite businessman who had grown up in Filadelfia in the Fernheim Colony, to be Minister of Industry and Commerce, and then in 2005 as Minister of Finance, a post from which he resigned in the summer of 2007. Bergen's story, narrated in concise, conversational, and accessible fashion with the assistance of Phyllis Pellman Good, provides an intriguing insider view of a Mennonite who ascended to one of his country's most prominent and challenging political positions. It provides material for reflection on the nature of Christian participation in state politics, while also offering one window onto Paraguayan Mennonite realities.

Bergen grew up within the colonies of German-Russian Mennonites who settled in Paraguay in search of religious freedom and freedom from persecution. The early chapters paint a warm picture of Bergen's upbringing in Fernheim, describing the solid religious upbringing he received from his parents, who both worked as nurses (his father served with Mennonite Voluntary Service in a psychiatric hospital) and who stand for Bergen as examples of piety and service and who sought out relationships with Paraguay's indigenous peoples.

When Bergen turned 16, he left the "closed community" of the colony to study at an agro-mechanic school many hours away from Fernheim. The move away "forced" Bergen "to identify and appreciate the Paraguayan culture," while also leading him to a deeper "faith and relationship with God." Bergen began to excel in his studies and the Mennonite colonies began to vie with each other to hire him as a teacher. Bergen, however, began university studies. Marrying Lucy Giesebrecht, another Paraguayan Mennonite, he started work with Record Electric, a major electrical contractor in Paraguay's capital. He also established his own business of buying and selling spare parts for cars. He quickly moved up in the business world, and became a successful entrepreneur who broke with much Paraguayan business practice by operating in full compliance with the law. Bergen also set himself up as an unusual

businessperson in hiring ex-convicts in his businesses. Bergen's life embodies Mennonite movement outward from the colonies towards an integration into and deep identification with all of Paraguay's people. Mennonites have been called to faithful witness in Paraguay, a witness which has led to the ongoing transformation of Paraguayan Mennonites from a German cultural group to a multiethnic church.

The bulk of Bergen's narrative concerns the challenges he faced as government minister. Appointed by President Nicanor Duarte Frutos—whose wife Gloria Penayo de Duarte was herself an active member of a Mennonite congregation—Bergen strove to advance multiple agendas. They included: to balance the country's budget; to combat corruption; to eliminate piracy of copyrighted material; to increase public revenues; to improve Paraguay's standing with the International Monetary Fund (even as he ironically notes the double standards whereby the IMF expects countries like Paraguay to work towards balanced budgets, while countries like the United States operate with massive deficits); to achieve more equitable arrangements with Brazil over revenues from a hydroelectric dam; to increase job opportunities for Paraguayans; and to address the starkly inequitable distribution of wealth in Paraguay. A very tall order.

Especially as Finance Minister, Bergen became a lightning rod at the center of numerous controversies, and some of the book's most captivating moments recount how Bergen attempted to negotiate these controversies in a win-win fashion. The book begins dramatically as Bergen must defuse a tense situation in which a victim of the Alfredo Stroessner military regime threatens to jump from a radio tower in Asunción unless the Finance Ministry provides compensation for his suffering under the dictatorship. Bergen convinced the man to come down, but then had to determine how to treat him fairly without exposing the government to a flood of budget-busting demands from other Stroessner regime victims, all while operating under the scrutiny of the media. In another striking incident,

Ernst Bergen, as told to Phyllis Pellman Good, *Jumping into Empty Space: A Reluctant Mennonite Businessman Serves in Paraguay's Presidential Cabinet*. Good Books, 2008.

**He broke with much Paraguayan business practice by operating in full compliance with the law**

**Bergen attempted to negotiate these controversies in a win-win fashion.**



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an opposition political figure threatened to conduct a strip-tease in front of the ministry if Bergen did not meet with her to discuss her concerns.

Bergen emerges in this account as reflective and self-aware. He is critical of his sometimes unsuccessful struggle to control his temper and to exercise patience. Running themes throughout the book are Bergen's awareness of the human tendency to abuse and misuse God's good gifts and his stress that ultimately the result of human actions depends on divine, not human, action. Reflecting on the temptations which come with business success and the responsibility such success brings for service, Bergen indicates that the faithful Christian enters politics not for glory or wealth but in order to serve and to help rebuild a ruined polity. The success of that work, however, finally depends upon God.

This volume also contains several appendices, including helpful and concise overviews of Paraguayan history and the story of the Paraguayan Menonite community written by Paraguay Menonite theologian Alfred Neufeld. The book will appeal to anyone

interested in how Christians generally and Menonites particularly have understood participation in governmental politics. Bergen's brief account leaves the reader at points wanting to know more. How does Bergen understand his Menonite faith? What elements of that faith pushed him into political work? What tensions, if any, did he discern between his Menonite faith and his political responsibilities? How does he understand the relationship of Menonites to other Christian churches in Paraguay? How is Menonite identity in Paraguay changing as it becomes increasingly multi-ethnic? This reviewer would have appreciated more sustained discussion of questions such as these. This quibble aside, Bergen's engaging account of his participation in the upper echelons of Paraguayan politics will appeal to a wide readership, from those interested in the Paraguayan Menonite church to those who reflect on the role of Christians in politics.

*Alain Epp Weaver served as MCC co-representative for Palestine, Jordan and Iraq. In early 2009 he becomes Director of the Program Development Department of Menonite Central Committee's International Program Department.*