

Mexican Mennonites and Mission—Report

Report on Mexican Mennonite Reconciliation—Fruit of Mission?

Abe Rempel

In March, 1922, the first of approximately 7000 conservative Old Colony and Sommerfelder Mennonites arrived at Cuauhtemoc, Chihuahua in northern Mexico. In 1948, 100 families of the Kleine Gemeinde arrived. Less well known are the 120 or more Russian Mennonite families, that arrived c.1923 and settled farther south in Irapuato.

The Russian Mennonite group consisted mostly of former Old Colony members by 1990, since most of the original members had migrated to Canada. The Old Colony, Sommerfelder and Kleine Gemeinde numbered about 60,000, excluding the thousands who had also migrated to Canada.

Very significant changes have happened in the 1990s. Drought, high inflation and the devaluation of the Peso, led to economic hardship, especially for the poorest of the colony Mennonites. Thousands migrated to Canada and the United States, some returning after the drought, but large numbers settling outside of Mexico. The most conservative tended to migrate to other areas in Mexico, such as Casas Grandes, Sacatecas, Campeche, or to Bolivia.

The migration and return to and from Canada and the United States brought improvements in education and new ideas to the colony. The drought of the early 90s, motivated many farmers to consider new crops as well as small business ventures. Apples, cotton, chiles and other market garden crops were planted, and the manufacture of farm equipment and wood products became significant. Some of the new businessmen began to meet monthly for breakfast meetings to listen to speakers giving new ideas for farming and business ventures, and to worship and be challenged to be

Art Rempel retired in 1998 after teaching among Mennonites in Mexico, continuing part-time oversight of relations to colony Mennonites for Commission on Overseas Mission, General Conference Mennonite Church.

Ed Zacharias is a missionary teacher under two Mennonite agencies (EMMC and COM), seconded to the United Bible Societies to complete a Low German translation of the Bible.

ethical in their new ventures. Men from the various religious groups attended, and the more conservative soon realized that the level of education in the colony was very low. Often Mexican secretaries needed to be hired in order to use computers and be able to communicate with officials.

The Old Colony and Sommerfelder Youth of the '90s could mostly read words, but not understand what they were reading. Ignorance, alcoholism and drug use were common. The colony bishops discouraged sports and other youth activities, adding to their frustration and unrest. The church language was German, the language of communication, Low German, so the youth rarely understood the message of the Bible. Their faith was determined by the requirements at baptism and the issues for which they were called to "Donnadach," the Thursday disciplinary meetings.

Very significant changes occurred in 1997. The Old Colony Brotherhood of the Cuauhtemoc area, met for the first time in many years. The motivation was the need for a new bishop, a man who wanted the brotherhood approval to use a motor vehicle for travel. This was common by 1997, but the brotherhood had earlier made the decision that no one was to use vehicles on rubber tires. This decision had never been rescinded, since the bishops had been hesitant to call a brotherhood meeting. Some forty people had been excommunicated for using rubber tired vehicles in the process of attending schools and Bible studies begun by the Russian Mennonites. After much discussion, the brotherhood removed the rubber tire regulation, so that the "disobedient brothers" would now be in good standing. Then the brotherhood made the decision to initiate a reconciliation with the excommunicated people. Bishop Banman was asked to carry out the reconciliation. He was not well at the time and wanted to carry out his task before his death. The reconciliation was done in a very sensitive way, so that the excommunicated persons were deeply moved. A new level of acceptance and good will was felt in the colony.

The 75th Anniversary of the coming of the first colony people was held in August of 1997. All groups in the colony participated, although the bishops were less than enthusiastic about the large, modern celebrations that were planned. People participated mostly with great enthusiasm and the celebrations were a huge success, with four to five thousand per day participating, for three days.

Song leaders and teachers in the colony have invited the youth to gather to sing Old Colony songs. Beginning with girls, then with boys participating, the youth meet in the villages and then in larger gatherings, with as many as 800 and more gathering to sing. The youth desire to meet, to sing, for fellowship, with no alcoholism nor disorderly conduct!

The Old Colony has begun to plan for teacher training to improve the education in the colony. Many of the teachers feel threatened by the plans for teacher training, and the most conservative of the bishops discourages the plans, but there is progress. There is a strong desire for change, and I am confident that it will happen!

The small group of Russian Mennonites, that grew after 1950 only by the influx of Old Colony people, has had an influence beyond its numbers, upon the larger colony. The General Conference Mennonite Church of North America has supplied teachers,

ministers, agricultural workers and medical teams to assist the group. After the reconciliation, it became clear how great the influence had been over the years. The schools, the evangelistic services often planned with the EMMC and EMC mission congregations, and the leadership given to the Credit Union and a variety of business ventures on behalf of the colony, the development of team sports, as well as the leadership given to the Christian businessmen, have had a significant influence on the colony.

A discussion of the economic welfare of the colony needs to include the work of the Mennonite Central Committee, whose assistance in crop and herd improvement, educational development and mutual aid is immeasurable. The reconciliation and renewal of the last years are very promising for the future of the colony.

Report on Low German (*Plautdietsch*) Old Testament Project in Mexico

Ed Zacharias

When my wife Susan and I were invited to become ministers of the church in Reinland, Manitoba, in 1979, it was for us a return to the village life we had known in our adolescent years. We were confronted with a community where half a dozen Mennonite denominations were serving a diverse community that had made major steps toward becoming a more integrated industrialized community, in contrast to the farm based economy which we had known it to be in the years when we were growing up. It was a fact of life, that some of the churches reflected the newer society, and others reflected the methods of instruction and organization that had become ingrained in the agricultural life style of the earlier part of the century. Another recognizable difference between the churches, was that the “older” churches were very community/*Gemeinde* oriented, with, in some cases, a deliberate shying away from having members claim personal salvation in the evangelical sense. These differences were significant enough that cooperation between the churches was at times strained, or even distant.

But during the 1980s, M B Communications for many years, had a 15 minute radio program in the Low German language of the more conservative Mennonite population. Rev J. J. Neufeld, the speaker, made a mark not only in the consistency and length for which the program ran, but also in speaking the Low German, or now we prefer to say the *Plautdietsch*, of the people among which he had grown up. He also brought an innovation in Scripture reading, as he made an effort to translate the Bible texts that he used into *Plautdietsch*. It was our experience with regard to intra-Mennonite cooperation, that many walls between the more conservative/less conservative churches were laid to rest during the period of that *Plautdietsch* ministry.

Rev Neufeld in fact translated the whole New Testament, and saw it come to print. Then partly due to my personal interest in languages and cultures, and of course my passion for Scriptural teachings, I developed an interest in extending the work that Rev Neufeld had begun. Knowing of resources like Wycliffe Bible Translators, I in-

quired of them whether they could give me some expert assistance. Over the years, that relationship actually materialized and grew.

More recently, the United Bible Societies, were also approached about helping the work proceed, and in May 1998, they accepted the translation and printing of the Plautdietsch Scripture as their project. Their involvement will also mean a rereading/revision of the New Testament translation. We had moved to Mexico in the interim, to work with the church in the Mennonite colonies in the Cuauhtemoc, Chihuahua area, and have now been accepted as full time translators for the Plautdietsch Old Testament project, as supervised by UBS.

Although schools and their attendance are assumed in the Mennonite colonies in Latin America, their limited success in teaching fluency in German, the language of instruction, has resulted in a population that to the greatest extent can not understand what they read or hear in German. Unfortunately, this is also true to some extent, for the elected ministers serving in the colonies. The people do have a respect and regard for Scripture, but the teaching of the same in an understandable vernacular is severely limited.

Most of the people, in the church where we worked, were not used to having Scripture read in Plautdietsch. But after some early hesitance, they came to stand in awe of Scripture that spoke their own dialect in their own idiom. But few people are being offered that at this time. The next question then is, are people able and willing to read Plautdietsch, whether Scripture or other material, on their own. The colonies have local papers, but their editors are persons who have learned written language proficiency in German, and find it an unusual discipline to write in Plautdietsch. Added to that is the feeling on the part of many educated persons in the colonies, that if people want to become literate and readers, then let them become fluent in a language that can offer them an abundance of helpful written material, which is lacking in Plautdietsch.

But then, that latter argument was also thrown at Coverdale and Wycliffe and in fact that has been the standard objection to most translators, even in our century, who have aimed at providing the writings of the Bible in a language that has not had it to date. The reality is that a very significant portion of “Old Colony” Mennonites in Mexico, Bolivia, Belize, Argentina, and some parts of Paraguay, as well as other Latin American countries, who may have a rudimentary introduction to reading High German, but they do not understand the words they are taught to read, until they are shown words written in their own Plautdietsch—often their only language.

A first draft of Old Testament material is currently at the half way mark and some review processes are already underway, while others are being developed. The UBS commitment to the project suggests a print date in five years.