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The Mennonite Experience in Paraguay

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The Congregational and Theological Experience

Introduction: Uniqueness of the Experience

Although Mennonites and heirs of the Anabaptist movement have always been spread over the globe by migration and by mission, the Mennonite experience in Paraguay is unique in a number of ways:

1. The Mennonites basically came as refugees – cultural refugees from Canada, political refugees from Russia.

2. They came to the Chaco, Paraguay's extensive wilderness region west of the Paraguay river, in an area characterized by a complete absence of the state.

3. They settled in a territory disputed by the nations of Bolivia and Paraguay, owned legally by a Spanish Argentinean corporation (Casado) but historically the habitat of the Enlhit native people, who weren't aware that several other institutions claimed ownership of their territory.

4. They started immigrating in 1927 under a unique law (Law 514) specially passed by the Paraguayan Parliament in 1921 for Mennonite immigration. This was the first law in Latin America dealing with people who refused to join the army and the military draft.

5. From Russia they brought the colony system and from the Soviets the *Raiffeisen-Genossenschaft* (co-operative) system, and introduced them into Paraguayan society.

6. Mennonites in Paraguay were the main concern and object of help in the first decades of MCC's and MEDA's existence.

7. They came with a rather confused mosaic of citizenships. The first

group arrived with Canadian national identity and passports; the second group with no citizenship at all; and the third group with German citizenship and experience with the *Wehrmacht*, though they were born in Russia.

8. Over the decades they developed from extreme poverty to become one of the wealthiest social groups in Paraguay; per capita income in their immigrant communities was at least ten times higher than the national average.

9. The Mennonite experience in Paraguay might be one of the most significant epochs in Mennonite history with respect to what John Howard Yoder called "mission by migration."

10. With strong first generation Anabaptist-Mennonite churches within five native ethnic groups in the central Chaco, and about 100 local churches in the Spanish-Paraguayan cities and countryside, the Mennonite experience in Paraguay is multi-ethnic. The past meets the future. The ethnic immigrant stream will sooner or later be a "Mennonite minority." MWC General Secretary Larry Miller observes that Paraguay is a microcosm of the new reality of the global Mennonite family.

A. The Congregations

Congregations Coming from Canada

Paraguay was "discovered" after World War I by conservative Canadian Mennonites who had come to Manitoba and Saskatchewan in the 1870s, leaving Russia because they were unwilling to adapt to Mennonite "modernism" in the Ukraine. Now they were willing to move again, because the government was restricting their freedom regarding private schools. Mennonite schools in Manitoba and Saskatchewan at that time depended very much on the German language, which was also used for church order (*Gemeindeordnung*) and catechetical instruction. There was also a suspicion that Canadian nationalism (expressed, for instance, by the presence of flags in school) and militarism could increase.[1]

Delegates sent by the churches, together with real estate agents Samuel McRoberts and Fred Engen, found "the promised land," the Paraguayan Chaco, in 1920-21. The Paraguayan government with Manuel Gondra as President and Eusebio Ayala as Minister, as well as José Casado, a Spanish/Argentinean landowner of more than six million hectares in the Chaco, had

a strong political and economic interest in "the Mennonite project." They were able to obtain from Parliament a special law, Law 514, which provided for six basic rights: free exercise of religion, private schools with religious orientation in the German language, exemption from military service in times of peace and war, simple affirmation of yes and no instead of swearing an oath, administration of their own matters of heritage, and freedom from taxation for the first ten years.[2]

In 1927, 266 families, a total of 1,753 people, left Canada and headed for Paraguay. One hundred seventy-seven families belonged to the Chortitzer Gemeinde, 53 to the Sommerfelder Gemeinde, and 36 to the Bergthaler Gemeinde. While 168 people died on the trip and 335 returned to Canada, 1,250 people did arrive in the central Chaco and founded the Menno colony.[3]

In the beginning, church leadership and settlement leadership were the same. The three different church directions soon merged into one church (Chortitzer), which in the 1970s would join the Conference of Mennonite Churches in Paraguay and South America. Church life has gone through a very dramatic change and renewal, so that today many representatives of this colony wonder if there had really been a good reason for their forebears to leave Canada because of faith issues.

Congregations Coming from Russia

A completely different odyssey was experienced by the second group, who came as refugees from Russia in 1930. Originally they all wanted to go to Canada after a dramatic flight to Moscow at the end of 1929 and a special "salvation day" on November 25, which allowed about 5,000 people to leave Russia, thanks to the intervention of the German government and the *Brüder in Not* (Brothers in Need) action directed by Benjamin H. Unruh. But Canada had changed its immigration policies in the late '20s, and the young MCC under the vigorous leadership of Harold S. Bender and Orie Miller stepped in to find a way to bring the Russian Mennonites to Paraguay. Most of these people had lost everything, even their citizenship, but they had lived through the Mennonite renaissance of the previous decades, leading to material wealth and an openness toward higher education and toward Russian and modern European culture. They had also been part of a strong

church renewal movement, as expressed in the emergence of the Mennonite Brethren after 1860 and in reform movements within the Mennonite *Kirchgemeinde* as well as the *Evangelisch Mennonitische Bruderschaft–Allianzgemeinde.*

The "Russians" experienced much help and solidarity from the "Mennoleute," who had already been there for three years, when they arrived in the central Chaco and founded the Fernheim colony. Since then, a fruitful inter-relationship has developed between these two groups, leading to considerable mutual assimilation in economics, education, church, and social life.

The Russian group had been much more exposed to European culture and non-Mennonite church life within the framework of the Evangelical Alliance, the pietistic and Moravian movements, and the theological seminaries in Hamburg, Berlin, and Basel. And they had spent half a year in refugee camps in Germany, feeling grateful to the German government that had "saved" them and was willing to confront "the Bolshevistic demons." Different from the Menno colony, where the three church branches merged into one "colony church," Fernheim from the beginning in 1930 resolved to continue with the three groups brought from Russia: *Kirchgemeinde* (Mennonite Church), the Mennonite Brethren Church, and *Evangelisch Mennonitische Bruderschaft–Allianzgemeinde*. Although B.H. Unruh and MCC had encouraged a merger into one church organization, they have retained the dynamics of these three historic branches but cooperate in a unique, mostly harmonious way within the so-called K.f.K (*Komitee für Kirchenangelegenheiten*) and *Gemeindekomitee*.

A different scenario marked the immigration of the Neuland-Volendam people, who came as Russian refugees after World War II. All of them had lived for at least twenty years under a communistic and atheistic regime, and they had witnessed the disintegration of Mennonite church life in the 1930s under Stalin. They had been part of the Mennonite exodus from Ukraine in 1943 toward the West under the custodianship of the *Wehrmacht*. But the men had mostly joined the German armed forces. Many had been killed. The survivors' status as refugees was not secure; certainly Canada was not willing to take many of them. Again MCC, under the vigorous leadership of C.F. Klassen and Peter Dyck, stepped in and brought them to Paraguay.

These refugees had been exposed for five years to German culture and Nazi ideology, but they had also seen the breakdown of the whole Third Reich. Arriving in Paraguay in 1947 with horrible memories of the war, they founded the Neuland colony in the Chaco and the Volendam colony in East Paraguay. Women, children, and widows were the main protagonists of these settlements. For many of these settlers, church life and personal faith had gone through a severe crisis, but in both colonies they soon organized a major Mennonite congregation and a somewhat smaller Mennonite Brethren church. The Allianzgemeinde existed only in Fernheim.

Transformation and Integration of Immigrant Congregational Life through Eight Decades

I suggest that at least five integrating forces have transformed the Mennonite immigrant groups into a quite homogenous unit.

1. The co-operative movement Strangely enough, the co-operative system, borrowed from the Soviets, has strengthened and almost replaced church life and church solidarity. As will be seen in my second lecture on the social and diaconal dimensions, Mennonite colonies today are unthinkable without the strong co-operatives, which provided the legal and economic framework for their existence and subsistence. As a mixed blessing the co-ops embodied forces that would strengthen a social phenomenon which was not too remote from notions of a "Mennonite socialist republic." The power of the co-ops would even overwhelm and overshadow the presence and leadership of the churches. To some extent it is fair to say that the colony citizens would look to the co-operatives to provide their basic security system and to meet their needs. On the one hand, this system has enormously strengthened economic growth and solidarity; on the other hand, it was a legal tool to keep out of the system non-ethnic Mennonites and people interested in buying land in the colony area.

2. The K.f.K. movement Founded in Russia at the end of the Tsar system as an all-Mennonite dialogue partner to the Russian government, the *Komitee für Kirchenangelegenheiten* (Committee for Church Affairs) in Paraguay became a kind of inter-Mennonite alliance movement. It was geared toward bringing General Conference and Mennonite Brethren congregations into a functional relationship, and enhancing spiritual life

and ethics within a settlement and a local village. Thanks to the K.f.K., most Sunday church services on the local level were held jointly (until some years ago). Recently congregational life and congregational church services have been strengthened. The K.f.K. legacy is that of a vital unifying force, bringing preachers (*Prediger*) and congregations to a considerable level of theological affinity. A result of the K.f.K. movement and the MCC influence has been the *Gemeindekomitee*, a network of 31 German-speaking congregations in the above-mentioned colonies plus Asunción, Sommerfeld, and Tres Palmas. They jointly sponsor the Christian Service agency, the Leprosy Hospital, and several other congregational and theological projects such as the Peace Committee.

3. The educational movement Higher education has been very important for Fernheim and has become important in the other colonies, fostering reform movements in the Menno colony in the 1960s and 1970s. From the beginning, the German government, partly through the lobbying of Dr. Walter Quiring and Dr. Fritz Kliewer, played a crucial part in the immigrant Mennonite school movement. They provided textbooks and, later, teachers for high schools and teacher-training seminars. This cultural connection to Germany fostered an open-mindedness on educational matters.

However, the churches sometimes felt the strong German and partly secular influence was a mixed blessing. The first serious trouble emerged in the late 1930s and early 1940s, when a large amount of Nazi ideology and propaganda was flowing through this channel to central Chaco. Ever since, there has been a kind of hidden competition between church and school as to which is exercising the main authority. This competition was often effectively bridged by preachers who were also schoolteachers. There have been times when the school system claimed more autonomy from church life, and times when church leaders looked for more authority over the school system. Beginning in the 1970s, the Mennonite school system and its bilingual education policy were completely integrated into the national school system, which brought new dynamics into the issue.

4. The theological schools The Russian Mennonite branch, familiar with the Bible school movement in Russia, Germany, and Switzerland, started several small Bible schools from the 1930s through the 1970s. A

major achievement was the founding of the Mennonite Bible Seminary in Montevideo in 1956. It closed down in 1973, but reopened as Centro Evangélico Mennonita de Teologia (CEMTA) in Asunción in 1978. Notably, this seminary introduced Paraguayan immigrant Mennonites to the wider Latin American context and the Spanish language, produced a number of key second generation leaders, and bolstered unity and missions.

The same was true for the Instituto Bíblico Asunción (IBA), founded in 1964 and owned by both the Spanish and German Mennonite Brethren Churches of Paraguay. The IBA and CEMTA had a hard time competing with the educational offerings of theological seminaries in Europe and North America, where a great number of immigrant Mennonites have received their training. Yet the co-operation of these schools, now two campuses of the School of Theology of the Protestant University of Paraguay, has done much to bring church leaders, mission leaders, pastors, and faculty members into close fellowship. Also, a significant part of the theological and Anabaptist consensus has been achieved through this movement.

Recently the Yalve Sanga Bible Institute, training leaders for four different native ethnic groups and Mennonite congregations, has become an important dialogue partner in this process.

5. The mission and service movement Since mission and service are always a two-way street, engagement in these activities has transformed the immigrant Mennonite churches considerably. Today, liturgy and spirituality are marked by Latin American trends. Local churches within a non-Mennonite environment – this is the case with most Spanish Mennonite congregations – have enhanced the church life of the immigrant groups and challenged their identity. Firsthand conversion experiences, and first generation Anabaptists coming out of either animistic backgrounds within native cultures or Catholic folk religion within the East Paraguayan context, have partly renewed people's understanding of the Anabaptist movement of the 16th century. However, the "common sense evangelicalism" characteristic of mission movements is also having an impact on the immigrant congregations. This last dynamic is also enhanced by evangelical literature coming from Germany, and by theological seminaries oriented to the European evangelical tradition.

B. Missions

Mission by Migration

My grandfather Kornelius Neufeld had been a very wealthy *chutor* (estate) owner and co-operative leader at Ekatarinowka-Kornjeowka in the Omsk region of Russia. After imprisonment in Moscow and the events of the miraculous November 25th, he arrived in the Chaco with his big family. When the Mennoleute with their oxcarts delivered him to the wilderness, at a place that would become Rosenort Nr.10, he reportedly said, "*Mama, nü sand wi tüs*" ("Mama, this now is our home").[4]

For the Fernheim people, the traumatic Russian experience had taught them a memorable lesson. They would be very hesitant about becoming wealthy employers again; employees might start a revolution if they felt discriminated against and saw themselves as victims of social injustice. At least that has been the attitude among the family I grew up in. Whenever we remembered Russia, we felt that good fortune should reach everyone.

The relatively friendly welcome that the Enlhit tribe offered to the newcomers (even showing a willingness to learn Low German), the openness of many immigrant Mennonites to learning the Enlhit language, the exchange of experiences, and the help that the Enlhit gave the immigrants gave birth to a unique relationship of mutual friendship and appreciation. This relationship was intensified during the Chaco war with Bolivia (1932-1935), when the Enlhit were considered spies and hunted like animals by both fronts, the Paraguayan and the Bolivian. Occasionally they were hidden and protected by the newly arrived Mennonite immigrants.[5]

Since the Enlhit practiced a peculiar method of family planning (killing the newborn before they had a soul and prior to their first cry), the newcomers' first spontaneous act of cultural interference was to open up a home for "orphans." Making the gospel understandable took time, but culminated in an amazing mass movement toward Christianity and a quite Mennonite style of congregational and communitarian life. Of course, there were pioneer missionaries, but there was also the simple co-existence of two ethnic groups, resulting in a tremendous transfer of ideas, techniques, values, and faith beliefs from the immigrant Mennonite community to an emerging Enlhit Mennonite church. Today the economic gap between the two groups is considerable, and many Enlhit and Nivaclé church leaders

ask for a return to that old friendly relationship, where all the central Chaco population was poor and depended on God and on each other.

From Refugee Consciousness to Apostolic Consciousness

The driving force of the Mennonite migration to Paraguay was to find a place of refuge, to "hide away from the world" and again become the "*Stillen im Lande*." Law 514 and the green desert in the Chaco without any roads or connections to the rest of Paraguay provided ideal conditions. When the Eberhard Arnold-Bruderhof people arrived in Filadelfia during World War II, expelled by Germany and Great Britain, they soon realized that in order to live their mission they would have to move toward populated areas. But for a long time Mennonites migrating to the central Chaco saw the reduced Chaco population as their only challenge for service and missions. That changed a bit with the coming of the Neuland-Volendam group: some of its members had promised the Lord while in military service that they would serve in missions if they survived, as in the case of the later missionaries Dietrich Lepp and Albert Enns. And so they did, pioneering mission extension among the Toba and in East Paraguay.

Dictator Alfredo Stroessner's long period in office (1954-1989) allowed a sense of isolation, self-sufficiency, and autonomy to grow within the colonies – and a sense of being a kind of Mennonite Republic in the central Chaco. For the government this was good business, because it didn't need to fulfill its duty to provide infrastructure and services. And the immigrant community enjoyed being left alone with its special identity. However, the end of the military government required and fostered an intense process of integrating political and social structures. This in turn provoked new considerations about integration and the reason for Mennonites being in Paraguay. Suddenly there was a call from the national community to make the Mennonite model of development accessible and understandable. Various political parties, especially new emerging ones, lobbied intensely to get Mennonite representatives into Parliament and politics. Now it became common to hear *"Wir haben einen Auftrag in diesem Land, und wir haben etwas zu bieten"* ("We have a mission – a duty – in this country, and we have something to offer").

I call this process a change of consciousness among Mennonites, from

being refugees who feel threatened by any outsider to becoming apostles who consider themselves sent to deliver a message and to live an alternative. This very profound change within the immigrant group during the last twenty years has been risky – and marked by achievements and failures.

Chaco Natives Becoming Mennonites

Today there are three relatively large Mennonite conferences among the Enlhit, Nivaclé, and Toba, with 39 local congregations and close to 10,000 baptized members. As well, the ethnic groups of the Guarayos and the Ayoreos are in the process of structuring as conferences and asking for membership in Mennonite World Conference. They find it strange to realize they are "Mennonites," because they always thought being a Mennonite meant belonging to an ethnic immigrant group of Prussian-Russian-Canadian origin. They even like to call themselves "Mennonite Brethren," not in the classic denominational sense as MBs but as "Brethren of the Mennonites." Even more, immigrant Mennonites have difficulty accepting that their native partners are authentic and probably even better Mennonites than they are themselves, if being Mennonite means relating to the experience of Menno Simons and the Anabaptists.

Now there is a vital process underway for Enlhit and Nivaclé to embrace Mennonite theological and congregational identity. The visit to Yalve Sanga of Mennonite World Conference President-elect Danisa Ndlovu from Zimbabwe in 2007 had a profound impact, in that Enlhit and Nivaclé church leaders felt united with other younger Mennonites in Africa, India, and elsewhere in the southern hemisphere. Generally they are most willing to embrace Anabaptist principles of theology and biblical interpretation, especially community-based hermeneutics, the peace witness, and the sharing of possessions. Until recently their knowledge of 16th-century Anabaptism was weak, but they would probably identify with the movement's early leaders turning away from nominal Catholic folk religion, as they themselves have been largely turning away from ancestral tribal folk religions.

Nevertheless, these groups feel they still have a lot of homework to do, dealing with their traditional beliefs and religion in the light of their experience of embracing Christ and the Bible in the Mennonite tradition.

What Paul Hiebert has called "no contextualization" as well as "uncritical contextualization" has occurred during this process. Now they are starting to undertake more "critical contextualization."[6]

East Paraguayans Becoming Mennonites

In 1950 John Schmidt, a medical doctor with MCC and the Mennonite churches in Paraguay, started to work in the area of Itacurubí de la Cordillera (Hospital Menonita Km 81), building a Mennonite leprosy hospital. From the beginning it was agreed that evangelism and church planting should go hand-in-hand with the service effort. In 1955 Albert Enns, after studying in Buenos Aires with the Old Mennonites, the Baptists, and the Christian and Missionary Alliance, began an evangelistic and church planting ministry in Asunción. Now, after more than 50 years, two healthy and autonomous Paraguayan Mennonite conferences (GC and MB), with over 100 local congregations and almost 5,000 baptized members, are part of Mennonite World Conference. Most of them are first generation "Anabaptists" and had to suffer much hostility, especially years ago, when embracing the gospel that Mennonite missionaries shared with them and turning their backs on family religious traditions.

Since Paraguay was nominally Catholic (encompassing at least 98 percent of the population) and Catholicism was the state religion until 1992, non-Catholic congregations were considered sects and were usually labeled as *evangélicos* (Protestants). In the founding decades of the Spanish Mennonite congregations, this identification was stronger than identification as *menonitas*. Yet there was a vital historical interest in the experience of 16th-century Anabaptists, and the *Martyrs Mirror* and movies like "The Radicals" had a profound impact.

At least two difficulties have arisen for these Paraguayan Mennonites with Mennonite identity:

1. The public and the press perceive Mennonite identity as basically ethno-religious and prefer to link it to the strong co-operatives, the dairy products, and the image of Old Colony Mexican Mennonites in overalls and straw hats selling cheese in the streets of Asunción.

2. The congregational concept of church leadership with democratic and parliamentarian rules is foreign to Paraguayan culture and Catholic

religious tradition. So the congregational model of church organization tends either to fail or to cause a power struggle and leadership deficits. Some churches are now asking if they shouldn't move more toward an Episcopalian or Presbyterian model, one that is more compatible with Paraguayan leadership culture. And since Menno Simons was a bishop, they wonder if the Congregationalist model is really Anabaptist.

The Call to the City

Until recently Paraguay had just one real city, the capital Asunción, the focus of most of the country's cultural, economic, and educational life. MCC headquarters was centered in Asunción, as well as the business and export departments of the colony co-operatives. Since 1950 there have been German Mennonite churches there, comprising business people, university students, domestic workers, and missionaries. Asunción has indeed become a nerve center for the Mennonite presence in Paraguay. Its more than 30 flourishing Mennonite businesses rank among the strongest at the national level. There are also two Bible colleges, four schools (Concordia, Albert Schweitzer, Johannes Gutenberg, ProEd), and a robust Mennonite presence in the Protestant University, leading the schools of Music, Economics, Education, Social Work, and Theology.

As well, there is a TV station and a radio network searching for a "Mennonite way" to be present in the media. And there are dynamic church planting efforts like Raíces and La Roca, and more than twenty Mennonite congregations in the Asunción area with a total of more than 2,000 church members.

Entering the media has probably been the most daring step in "going public" with the Mennonite identity. The idea was to present an overall alternative to the existing TV channels, by covering sports, cooking, music, politics, news, art, and of course Bible counseling and pastoral work, from a Christian and Mennonite perspective. The radio and TV initiatives are commercial in that they sell advertisements compatible with their values and principles. It is a new experience for Paraguayan Mennonites to compete in the media, but so far it has been a healthy one, because it forces us to go public with our beliefs, convictions, and perspectives on everyday national life.

Business among immigrant Mennonites is booming in Asunción. Younger and older Mennonite business people are getting involved too, thanks to the influence of MEDA, the German *Christlicher Kongress für Führungskräfte in Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* (Christian Conference of Executives in Business and Society, a yearly study conference at the Asunción Sheraton hotel), and intense co-operation between the pastoral leadership and the business community. There is a sincere search for biblical and Mennonite perspectives on business, social justice, and social responsibility. One early outcome of this effort is a business chaplaincy: around 3,000 employees belonging to more then 30 Mennonite businesses are part of pastoral care and evangelistic outreach. This effort also provides fellowship, brainstorming, interaction, and challenges to the business owners.

Mission and service through the schools is an idea borrowed partly from mission agencies and is seen as compatible with the priority that education has had within the immigrant Mennonite community. Missionary Hans Wiens and others laid the foundation by establishing missionary schools in Yalve Sanga, Cambyretá, and Villa Hayes, as well as the Albert Schweitzer School in Asunción in 1966. Today there is a vital Mennonite school movement in Asunción, and in the immigrant and native settlements, that can effectively impact the national school scene. But proponents face some questions: What makes a school Christian? What makes a school Mennonite? What is the mission of a Mennonite school?

C. Theology

Theological Approaches to Ethnicity

Mennonites coming to Paraguay often had an implicit rather than an explicit theology. Of course there was a catechism very important to the "Kanadier," but it was written in old Prussian German, far from the everyday language and issues of the central Chaco. The "Russe" had opened up to all kind of theologies, especially the dispensational paradigm, promoted by Bibelschule Wiedenest and Hans Legiehn's textbook *Unser Glaube ist der Sieg* (Our Faith is the Victory). The Russian-Mennonite revival movement had marked church music (Walter Rauschenbusch, Bernhard Harder), conversion experience, and missionary zeal. The Baptist influence had strengthened

the Sunday school movement (*Singvöglein*), and Jakob Kroeker (*Licht im Osten*) was the model of Bible teaching.

But never has there seemed to be serious theological reflection about ethnicity. Granted, there was an opportunistic, almost naïve debate in Russia before and after World War I about nationalistic identity, affirming either Dutch origins (B.B. Janz – "Holländerei") or German origins for Mennonites in Russia (B.H. Unruh, Walter Quiring, Hajo Schroeder). Coming to the Chaco bush, the immigrants met different native ethnic groups. On the one hand, they consciously sought ways that these *liebe braune Brüder* (dear brown brothers) would become part of the people of God and the family of faith. The key Bible verse leading to the establishment of the *Licht den Indianern* agency in 1935 was Ephesians 3:6, where Paul sums up the mystery of Christ, stating that the Gentiles are "heirs together with Israel" (NIV). On the other hand, the legacy of ethnic and colony segregation in Russia, a feeling of Germanic superiority, and possibly the severe cultural and educational gap between immigrant Mennonites and their surroundings made them vulnerable to racist attitudes, ideologies, and theologies, especially in the form of ideas coming from the Third Reich, as John Thiesen documents in his book *Mennonite and Nazi?*.[7] But this very error ultimately helped correct some ethnocentric attitudes and theologies, thanks not only to the mission movement but to a clear attitude on MCC's part.

A Theology for a Mennonite Republic?

At the second Mennonite World Conference in Danzig (August 1930) Benjamin H. Unruh and Harold S. Bender reportedly shared their vision of "establishing something like a Mennonite Republic in Paraguay." That sounds very unusual for Bender and his recovery of the "Anabaptist Vision." But given the circumstances in the central Chaco, the years 1930 to 1970, marked by almost no interference by the Paraguayan state and government, did produce a high level of regional self-administration by the immigrant community. Calvin Redekop calls this situation "a state within the church" – definitely an exaggeration, yet not so far from reality.[8]

In a way, the Schleitheim idea of the separation of church and state had taken a most peculiar form through the almost complete absence of the foreign state. At the same time, Menno Simons's concept of Christian

authorities and "the sword without blood" came very close to what was practiced during these four decades in the Mennonite colonies. In any case, this microcosm of a colony took the opportunity to develop an amazing number of community-oriented policies and good public government, social justice, and equality.

A Theology for Public Order and Politics

Starting in the 1970s, when their whole school and co-operative system was integrated into the national context, and much more since 1989 with the beginning of democracy, internal and external dynamics have forced immigrant Mennonites to go public. There was an insistent call by various national party leaders to learn from the Mennonite model of social and economic development. In addition, colony and church leaders realized that rapid change of their traditional structures would be necessary if their communities were to survive: provincial governments, city mayors, new tax systems, social security laws, and public police security would have to be implemented in the colonies as elsewhere.

But how to sustain these transformations theologically? At least two clear and robust alternatives have emerged. One important segment of the community views political openness as an extraordinary opportunity for Christians and Mennonites to step up and assume responsibility. According to this view, Christians – and why not Mennonite Christians? – would be the best qualified people to assume public and political responsibility and to fight for the well-being of all. The second group opts for just the opposite: To be faithful Anabaptists it is necessary to abstain from any public responsibility and political endeavors. The sheep have nothing in common with the wolves; the church has nothing in common with the world.

Through the work of the Mennonite Peace Committee, documents of Faith and Life Councils, many public and private debates, and experiments that have variously succeeded or failed, the topic is maturing theologically. At this moment political responsibility is seen by many as a twofold opportunity for Christians and Mennonites: as a "macro-diakonia," to make a solid contribution to the nation's well-being by strengthening health, education, economy, and justice; and as a chance for witness, to bring a Christ-centered and service perspective into public issues.

However, as the experience of the last twenty years shows, the public realm is not an easy habitat for pacifist Anabaptists.

Conclusion

Evaluating eighty years of the Mennonite experience in Paraguay, I suggest that immigrant Mennonites have been facing these dialectics:

1. They wanted to form voluntary believers' churches, but to a large extent their congregations became folk and colony churches.

2. In their desire to distance themselves from politics, they developed a very sophisticated internal political system.

3. Although they fled Communism, a good functioning colony closely resembles a *Colchos* (a Soviet agricultural collective mega-farm owned and run by the community).

4. Mission efforts resulted in the emergence of young Mennonite churches that found it difficult to be identified as "Mennonites," since that label was used for the immigrant ethno-religious group.

5. Internal and external forces put Mennonites in the public eye, but "going public" will transform their congregational and social life considerably.

6. Very soon the descendants of Mennonite immigrants will be in a minority. New forms of both Mennonite and inter-ethnic community have to emerge and must be based more on theology than on history.