

2008 BECHTEL LECTURES

The Mennonite Experience in Paraguay

Alfred Neufeld

II

The Diaconal and Social Experience

Introduction

As in the apostolic church in Jerusalem, missions and service transform Christian congregations, including the Mennonite churches in Paraguay. Gerhard Ratzlaff talks about a Mennonite “metamorphosis” that had once taken place in Russia, and he wonders if it is taking place again in Paraguay, if it is desirable, and if it should be part of a plan and a steering effort.⁹

A. Development of a Diaconal Theology

Community and Service: Part of Anabaptist Identity

Service and communal solidarity were undoubtedly at the core of 16th-century Anabaptist renewal. It is reported that congregations arranged for just two offices: “*Diener am Wort*” (Servants of the Word), who would be the itinerant preachers, and “*Diener der Notdurft*” (Servants of the Needy), who would be deacons looking after physical needs. Peace theology and peace witness were basically geared toward “the world,” those outside the believers’ congregation, as was an evangelistic presence. A good ethical reputation, accredited by those not belonging to the believers’ church community, was crucial for Anabaptist identity. However, the Hutterite experience, Amish solidarity, and different mutual aid set-ups within the Mennonite tradition suggest that the diaconal presence and service of the church was equally crucial to the Anabaptist heritage and presence in the world.

Community and Service: Part of Mennonite Immigration to Paraguay

Refugees may be said to benefit from sharing a common experience – that

of having lost everything, being equal, starting with zero, and needing each other. This was partly true of those coming from Canada and definitely true of those coming from Russia. Village and colony life in the case of Fernheim were already organized at the refugee camp back in Mölln, Germany: every settler would get the same amount of land; agricultural equipment would be shared among neighbors; and roads, schools, wells, and hospitals would be built together through an institution called *Scharwerk* – shared obligatory community work where everyone contributed as they were able.

The colony had a high level of democratic communal procedures and government. Every village would elect a mayor (*Schulze*) and two delegates (*Zehntmänner*) to the colony assembly – one responsible for spiritual and church life (*Ortsleitender*), the other responsible for school life (*Schulrat*). All decisions in the village would be taken by a *Schultebott*, an assembly of all the farmers. There was an office for widows and orphans (*Waisenamt*). And the co-operative system centralized all imports and took all products to the market. Although most of these diaconal institutions were not directly linked to church congregational life, they nevertheless clearly reflected Mennonite social spirituality.

While Mennonite settlements have traditionally tended to take the form of villages and colonies, in Paraguay this heritage has been conspicuously marked and transformed by the co-operatives. Currently the five main colonies – Friesland, Volendam, Neuland, Fernheim, and Menno – are legally registered as both civil associations (*asociaciones civiles*) and multi-purpose cooperatives (*cooperatives multiactivas*). This situation is comparable to that of a community organized on the one hand as a county and on the other hand as a corporative production and commercial unit. Fernheim registered Paraguay's first cooperative in 1937. Since then the co-operative movement has become very strong across the country, and today it is a serious competitor to the banking system. Shareholders in the cooperative and in the *Asociación Civil* enjoy key social security benefits, such as health insurance and retirement pensions, as well as access to a credit system, subventions for private schooling, good country roads, better prices for products, discounts in self-owned supermarkets, and so on.

The colony system as well as the co-operative system are going through, and will continue to go through, drastic changes. But in my opinion

they contain elements that are crucial for what can be called a “Mennonite Anabaptist diaconal theology.”

Praxis: First Act of a Diaconal Theology

Although there has been a most impressive diaconal praxis, almost no theological and missiological reflection has taken place that would make it fruitful to the mission and service endeavors outside the immigrant community. Even worse, most of the evangelistic efforts have not found ways to integrate historic Mennonite spirituality into diaconal service. The two young Spanish Mennonite conferences in Paraguay have more than 100 local congregations. With usually strong pastoral leadership but virtually no elected deacons, they have had a very weak way of integrating pastoral and deaconal work.

However, the praxis of the immigrant communities has led to ambitious and important service and development efforts and agencies, reaching out first to the neighboring population within and around the colonies, and later to needy areas in Asunción and East Paraguay.

The ASCIM – *Asociación de Servicios de Cooperación Indígena Menonita* (Mennonite Indigenous Development Agency) – has done very thorough work in establishing a theoretical base for sustainable partnership and development among immigrant and First Nation Mennonites in the Central Chaco. The Mennonite Christian service agency (*Christlicher Dienst*), working with leprosy victims, psychiatric patients, street children, and with many volunteers from Paraguay and abroad, tries to strengthen some kind of theology of service. The slogan of the Protestant University, thanks to Mennonite influence, reads “*Educar para Servir*” – education for service. As well, the ambitious neighborhood development programs that the cooperatives of Friesland, Volendam, Menno, Neuland, and Fernheim have developed in their regions are more than just enlightened self-interest: we can only get sustainable well-being if our neighbors are doing well too.

But going beyond this praxis to get to the second act – that of developing a diaconal theology – is just beginning. Martin Eitzen has conducted doctoral work on a theology and praxis of partnership, analyzing the relationship of the immigrant and the national MB conference as well as their co-operation with the North American mission agency; Dieter

Giesbrecht is about to defend a doctoral thesis on the diaconal theology and practice of Mennonite churches in Paraguay.

B. Service and Evangelism

Native Neighbors: “Unsere lieben braunen Brüder”

In the Paraguayan Mennonite experience, service and evangelism went hand-in-hand but were independent partners. What is usually considered the church’s double mandate, the Great Commandment (Matt. 22:39) to love your neighbor and the Great Commission (Matt. 28:19) to make disciples, has been practiced somewhat spontaneously without extensive theological and missiological reflection. Service was not carried out in order to be more successful in evangelism, and evangelism was not always linked to service projects.

What today we call “holistic mission” can be best practiced within the model of “mission by migration.”¹⁰ So the first missionaries to the Enlhit in 1936, Abram and Annchen Ratzlaff, observed a mandate to live with the tribal community, look after the sick, establish a little farm, teach people how to improve nutrition, and learn the language themselves and tell the stories of Jesus and God’s history with humankind. School, orphanage, hospital, library, Bible institute, and agricultural development programs came later.

The organic integration and independence of evangelism and social service reached a critical point in the early 1970s. The pastoral and congregational dimensions and the spiritual and theological issues needed more specialized attention; and even more so health, educational, and developmental issues, as well as specific questions of cultural anthropology as tribal communities underwent drastic changes. So there was a split in structure and approach, leading to ecclesial agencies (*Licht den Indianern*, Menno Missions Committee) and to the developmental agency ASCIM. This split, not so far from the idea of separation of church and state, was not very healthy in the long run, since both agencies dealt with the same communities, the same leaders, and the same people – and largely with the same cultural, theological, and spiritual issues.

In retrospect, the Chaco experience of service and evangelism between immigrant Mennonite groups and native Indian communities becoming Mennonites provides a challenging case study of the dialectics of separation

and integration of evangelism and service. One of the most difficult aspects of this model today is a weak interest in existential and relational partnership on a one-to-one basis. Evangelism is organized with some professionals and service is organized with some professionals. But older indigenous leaders as well as the established German Mennonite churches feel that there is a need to create space for friendship, fellowship, and relationship in spite of cultural and social differences. Theoretically, service and mission agencies build their work on partnership. But it is fair – and sad – to say that in everyday practice the temptation to “Apartheid” seems strong among many German-speaking Mennonites. The experience of authentic fraternity was definitely better in the beginning decades, when everyone was poor and needy.

Christian Service and the MCC Legacy

MCC has impacted Mennonite immigrants to Paraguay from the very beginning. American volunteers and American help had first come to the starving communities in Russia during the 1920s. MCC guaranteed a large debt that made the trip from Europe to Paraguay possible, provided basic equipment for a start in the wilderness, and supplied the necessary funds for buying land in the central Chaco. MCC sent the first medical doctors; assisted with schooling; later on, through the PAX participants, made an important contribution to constructing the Trans-Chaco road; fostered the birth of the leprosy hospital; engineered the emergence of ASCIM and Indian settlement programs; tried to create critical awareness of the Stroessner regime; and even intended to found an all-Mennonite church in Asunción through the mandate given to the young pastor Ernst Harder.¹¹ According to Edgar Stoesz’s calculations, MCC has invested over \$10,000,000 related to the Mennonite experience in this country.¹²

However, the attitude of the immigrants toward MCC was not always favorable. Discussions arose around at least five topics:

1. MCC tried to recover part of its funds in the 1930s and 1940s through debt payments that every family, at least in Fernheim, was expected to make. This was a heavy burden for both sides in a time of extreme suffering and poverty.

2. During World War II and Germanic euphoria in the colonies, the

North American-based MCC was perceived by the colonists as being aligned with the Allies. That caused a struggle of loyalty and identity for most immigrants, who were thankful to German President Paul Hindenburg and his government for delivering them from the Soviet Union. The immigrants may have been naïve, opportunistic, or incoherent toward Hitler's regime and Nazi ideology, but they were still very much committed to global and common Mennonite roots, Anabaptist theological tradition, and the help they received from MCC.

3. The groups of Neuland and Volendam brought by MCC and Peter Dyck in 1947 were thankful for their miraculous deliverance from World War II, but they had difficulty finding Paraguay to be "the promised land." A sizable group of "black sheep" (about 130 people) protested Dyck's leadership and stayed in Buenos Aires.

4. Immigrant Mennonites had a far more positive attitude and relationship to Paraguayan military governments (those of José Felix Estigarribia, Higinio Morínigo, and Alfredo Stroessner) than the MCC legacy would allow. Democratic political ideas, so prominent in Canada and the United States, were embraced with far less enthusiasm by an immigrant community frustrated with the Weimar Republic and nostalgic toward the Tsar and the Kaiser.

5. Beginning in the late 1960s, the MCC Peace Commission and efforts in favor of human rights, mediation in the Cold War, and disapproval of racial discrimination and Apartheid did not meet with much understanding or approval by most Paraguayan Mennonites of immigrant background.

Nevertheless, in my view MCC's presence has had a crucial, profound, and positive impact on the Mennonite experience in Paraguay. Most of the service initiatives and an important number of social and political reflections have been stimulated directly or indirectly by the MCC legacy.

Neighborhood Service and the MEDA legacy

The immigrant Mennonite community is rapidly changing from agricultural settlements to urban business enterprises and businesses like cattle ranching, dairy production, and corporate export-import activities within the paradigm of multi-active co-operatives. To a much lesser extent this is also true of segments of the Spanish Mennonite congregations and in some cases within

the native Indian congregations.

Most immigrant German Mennonites dream of being independent, self-employed entrepreneurs and, if possible, big business owners. Service-oriented professions like teaching, preaching, social work, and nursing, and labor relations characterized by dependency are not so attractive, especially for the men. Within the Spanish Paraguayan Mennonite congregations, however, things are quite different. The tradition of economic and labor independence or interdependence has been almost completely absent there. Historically, Paraguay has had a small aristocratic minority of *patrones* providing labor for the vast majority of the population. Most people seem to prefer a safe job and are willing to live in a relation of dependence with a *buen patron*, rather than be self-employed or take the risk of independent entrepreneurship. An important exception to this rule is a larger group of small *campesinos* (peasants), which is now in a severe social crisis and depends mainly on *acopiadores* (dealers), who give them credit and buy their crops.

Within the native tribal communities, family and community values as well as friendship are extremely important, even in economics and labor relations. So those cultivating their own fields in a semi-communitarian arrangement assisted by ASCIM and organized in the FIDA (the Indigenous Federation of Agricultural Development) have secured – at least compared to the tribal communities in the rest of Paraguay – quite sustainable ways of making a living, if the lack of rain doesn't ruin their crops. A very different story is true of the large number of indigenous employees working for German Mennonite bosses and the co-operative industries: socially and culturally they are less integrated, and much more vulnerable to exploitation and revolution.

Business ethics and both the social responsibility and the evangelistic responsibility of Mennonite businesses have lately become a prominent issue. MEDA International and the pastoral leadership of local churches have both played a key role in placing these topics on the agenda. There are three main outcomes of this effort:

1. Colonies and co-operatives have invested heavily in sponsoring neighborhood development initiatives. These efforts seem very fruitful, helping the population surrounding the colonies to get access to credit,

organize themselves socially for production, assure markets for their products, and so on.

2. MEDA Paraguay has started ambitious initiatives by establishing production units for Mandioca industrialization in East Paraguay (CODIPSA), charcoal production in the central Chaco, especially for the Ayoreos (DIRSSA), and in the future ethanol production for small sugar cane farmers in the poorest province of San Pedro. Marijuana plantations, the presence of the Colombian FARC, the invasion of private property by the so-called landless, and a strong revolutionary potential by *campesino* organizations characterize this area. MEDA breakfasts and membership meetings are used to discuss business ethics, social responsibility, sustainable development, macro-finances, and other subjects.

3. As noted in Lecture One, an Anabaptist business chaplaincy was founded by the MB-GC Concordia churches in Asunción. It now gathers together more than 30 Mennonite businesses and looks after more than 3,000 employees, with a staff of up to 15 chaplains. The goals are to strengthen the Anabaptist, diaconal, and evangelistic attitudes of the business owners, and to provide integrated assistance (*Diener am Wort, Diener der Notdurft*) to the employees.

C. Political Engagement as Macro-diakonia

Political Influence Through Presence

If asked for core Anabaptist beliefs about the church and its relationship to the world, I would claim that Anabaptists have accepted both an evangelistic and a diaconal mandate. By an evangelistic mandate, our Anabaptist forebears, like contemporary Catholic theologians, understood much more than saving souls for heaven. Coherent biblical theology must include an evangelistic presence of the church in at least five dimensions: a personal and existential encounter with Christ, his gospel, and the community of believers as the incarnated body of Christ in time and place; transformation of individual and communal lifestyle according to the gospel of the kingdom; evangelization of culture; the prophetic presence of the church in the world, calling it to repentance and the better righteousness of the kingdom of God; and church planting, in the sense of establishing living and pastoral communities of faith as holistic alternatives to surrounding society.

I suggest that the diaconal presence of the church in a biblical and Anabaptist perspective would thus imply, at a minimum, the following requirements:

1. Making it possible that the service of the word and “the service of intercessional prayer” can be adequately realized, as was the original intention at the first election of deacons (Acts 6:1-4);
2. Acting in favor of justice and equality, with special efforts to look after the rights and needs of the poor and marginalized;
3. Taking actions in defense of human rights and human dignity, in light of our creation in the image of God as well as God’s justice and mercy;
4. Practicing social solidarity and mutuality within the believers’ church outreach to the surrounding society; and
5. In the light of Christ’s return and his final judgment, working toward transformation and the prevailing of values of the kingdom of God within humanity as a whole.

No doubt both the church’s evangelistic and diaconal presence must be considered in their overall effect as a political influence on a national society. This is what Mennonites in Paraguay are starting to realize. Political influence, of course, must be seen as much wider than just nominations, elections, and the exercise of public power or dependence on governmental and state structures. It is probably fair to say that the believers’ church, claiming that its “citizenship is in heaven” and that it already belongs to the culture of the new Jerusalem, has for far too long underestimated theologically its potential for political influence. Paraguayan Mennonites seem to have had rather confused ideas about this reality, being highly political within their colonies and claiming a completely apolitical stance towards the structures of the state, yet being very effective in lobbying the powerful on behalf of the immigrant community and the indigenous peoples in the central Chaco.

Nevertheless, presence as an evangelistic and diaconal unit has had, and will have, a lasting political influence. This is true not only for the immigrant colony model but for the nearly 200 Mennonite local congregations of the present multicultural Mennonite family in Paraguay.

Political Engagement Through Elections

Anyone who wants to be elected and runs for public office always tells voters that his goal is to serve the public good. But when Kornelius Sawatzky (Governor, Boquerón state) and Heinz Ratzlaff (Deputy, central Chaco) started campaigning and got elected in 1993, they really meant it. Sawatzky had been *Oberschulze* in the Menno colony and a strong candidate to lead the ASCIM. Ratzlaff had been a pastoral counselor and director of the German Mennonite mental health center in Filadelfia. They became candidates of a newly-formed idealistic party called “National Encounter,” which wanted to leave behind the totalitarian and conflictive Paraguayan political tradition and present a fresh alternative.

What began small and spontaneously inaugurated fifteen years of quite zealous electoral activities in Mennonite territory, basically in the central Chaco. As a next step, Loma Plata and Filadelfia were declared *municipios* (mayorships), therefore needing publicly elected mayors and city councils from the whole regional population. By now the Filadelfia city site population would comprise about 30 percent German Mennonites, with the rest belonging to various ethnic groups like the Nivaclé, Enlhit, Guaraní, Ayoreos, Portuguese-Brazilian immigrants, and the Paraguay-Guaraní mestizo population – all attracted to the region because of its dynamic labor market.

An evaluation of the electoral experience of the last fifteen years is not easy. Was there any other option? As far as possible, there were efforts to keep party politics at a low level, but party rivalries did become accentuated. And the democratic state system is based on party life, competition, and rivalries – all foreign to the Anabaptist-Mennonite community tradition. Paraguayan voting has always been plagued by corruption, and sadly the Mennonite territory was no exception. “Vote early, vote often” is a well-known slogan in Paraguay. And the tribal indigenous community, applying its well-developed hunting and recollecting instinct to political matters, all too eagerly sold its vote, if possible to two parties, yet was subject to the most calamitous electoral manipulations. Is there a way to mature, and to learn democratic processes without such mistakes and painful learning experiences?

The elected governors, Parliament members, and mayors of German

Mennonite background have tried to do their best, but unfortunately some of them have gone through severe spiritual and marital crises. Most do not find it easy to be part of, and to follow the instructions of, a national party with many members not sharing their Christian and Mennonite values. As well, public bureaucratic systems in Paraguay are very slow to act and are marked by a high level of suspicion, so that effective social transformation and leadership is limited.

On the positive side, developments in the last fifteen years have been healthy for the immigrant Mennonite population. Questions of law, equality, integration of different ethnic groups, and knowledge of the national reality have received much higher priority. The immigrant communities have gone public and are in an intense process to transform their traditional community life, so it will be less discriminatory against outsiders, who still today often feel marginalized in a Germanic Mennonite colony. When Fernheim celebrated its 75th anniversary in 2005, the main theme and a huge monument at the entrance of Filadelfia focused on interethnic integration, solidarity, and co-operation.

Public Service Through Nominations

Meanwhile, churches and church leaders have worked hard on something like a Paraguayan Anabaptist political theology. John Howard Yoder's little booklet *Nachfolge Christi als Gestalt politischer Verantwortung*, in which he tries to bring together radical discipleship, the ethics of Jesus, and the public responsibility of the church, has been very helpful for me personally.¹³ The *Ältestenrat* (elders council) of the MB conference and the Mennonite Peace Committee both launched basic documents for orientation on this matter, and a sizable number of symposia, public debates, and lectures have focused on it. Heinz Ratzlaff, a former pastor and church leader, was in the very eye of the storm at the beginning because the national constitution prohibits members of the clergy from running for Parliament. So he needed a conference certification that he was not clergy, which triggered an intricate though painful discussion as to whether Anabaptist churches do indeed have clergy.

Meanwhile, in Asunción the Mennonite business community as well as the Mennonite presence in the media, higher education, and public church

life have captured more and more attention. There was a strong Mennonite initiative in the reformulation of the national constitution in 1992, together with the *Coordinadora de Iglesias*, a coalition of seventeen Protestant denominations plus the Catholic church. The result was that all four points they asked for were approved: stronger guarantees of religious liberty, separation of church and state, protection of human life from conception to natural death, and conscientious objection to military service.

The aim of the Asunción Concordia churches to open up evangelistic and pastoral space toward their neighbors, business partners, and university acquaintances culminated in the founding of Spanish Mennonite daughter churches, Raíces and La Roca. This more spiritual engagement led to many contacts in high society, something quite unusual up to then for the country's Protestant churches. So congregations like Raices suddenly found themselves associating with people from the political realm engaged in home Bible studies and strongly attracted to Anabaptist perspectives on spiritual and congregational life and on Bible reading and interpretation.

It was in this context that a completely new and unexpected form of political engagement started to take shape, based mostly on friendships and a common search for what could and should be done in the public areas of health, economics, education, development, and social action.

When Nicanor Duarte Frutos, longtime Minister of Education and friend of the Raices community through the conversion, baptism, church membership, and fervent evangelistic engagement of his wife Gloria, was elected national President in 2003, he surprised his party by nominating some high-ranking officers from a Mennonite non-party background. He put forward Carlos Walde as private economic assessor to the Presidency; Ernst F. Bergen as Minister of Industry and Commerce and later as the powerful Minister of Finances; Andreas Neufeld as Vice-Minister of Tax Collection; and Carlos Wiens as medical director of Social Security. In addition he named María José Argaña as Minister of Women's Affairs and Judith Adrasko as Minister of Social Action (both are Spanish Mennonite church members), and Derlis Céspedes as Minister of Justice (she is from a young independent Baptist church).

This experience of being called into public service, without party militancy and election campaigning but with a relationship to Christian

character values, is too new to be systematically evaluated. But some dimensions are already evident:

- On the macro-economic level Bergen, Walde, and Neufeld were able to achieve considerable success, certified by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, and recognized by the Paraguayan political opposition.

- Concerning public social security and medical services, important improvements have been possible through the work of Wiens and his team partner Pedro Ferreira, a committed Catholic Christian.

- Much improvement in public policy can be achieved without party membership and party militancy, though there are limitations to this approach.

- Alleviating the lot of the poor through politics, without falling into cheap “assistentialism,” is a long and complicated road.

- Jesus’ ethics and his model of servant leadership are to a great extent politically very attractive. Yet even Mennonite politicians are constantly tempted to adopt something like a Lutheran two-kingdom stance, finding it hard to reconcile political ethics with the way of Jesus and the Sermon on the Mount.

- The four above-mentioned people with German names all belonged to one local congregation. They repeatedly expressed how important support and correction by their congregation was for them, and they submitted quite willingly to a close relationship with the congregation’s pastoral leadership.

Conclusion

1. Evaluating the Mennonite experience in Paraguay, I contend that there has been an existential drive toward a strong diaconal practice right from the beginning.

2. This “existential deaconship” has kept the missionary movement close to what today is called “holistic” or “integral” mission.

3. Nevertheless, diaconal praxis and ethnic solidarity have always been tempted by an ethnocentric and even racist approach.

4. The ghosts of Apartheid, in both the ethnic and the classist sense, are alive and well all over Latin America. Paraguay is among the world’s

countries with the most drastic social class differences. This reality poses a serious challenge to immigrant background Mennonites (belonging mostly to the elite class) over against the rest of the Mennonite family in the other ethnic groups (belonging to the middle class and the poor).

5. Diaconal praxis, service leadership, and the priority of the family of faith over social and ethnic class systems need to be rooted again in the everyday theology and pastoral praxis of Mennonite congregational life.

Notes to Lectures I and II

For complete publication details, please refer to the Sources List which follows.

¹ Gerhard Ratzlaff, *Ein Leib, viele Glieder*, 55.

² Gerhard Ratzlaff, *Historia, fe y prácticas Menonitas*, 156-58.

³ Gerhard Ratzlaff, *Ein Leib, viele Glieder*, 55-56.

⁴ According to oral family tradition.

⁵ Frieda Siemens Kaethler, Alfred Neufeld, *Nikolai Siemens, der Chacooptimist*, 82.

⁶ Paul Hiebert, *Critical Contextualization*.

⁷ John Thiesen, *Mennonite and Nazi? Attitudes Among Mennonite Colonists in Latin America, 1933-1945*.

⁸ Calvin Redekop, *Strangers Become Neighbors: Mennonite and Indigenous Relations in the Paraguayan Chaco*.

⁹ Gerhard Ratzlaff, *Ein Leib, viele Glieder*, 50.

¹⁰ John Howard Yoder, *As You Go: The Old Mission in a New Day*, Focal Pamphlet no. 5.

¹¹ David Boschmann, *Die Mennoniten in Asunción*, 1986.

¹² Edgar Stoesz, private conversation, September 2007.

¹³ John Howard Yoder, *Nachfolge Christi als Gestalt politischer Verantwortung*.

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THE BECHTEL LECTURES

The Bechtel Lectures in Anabaptist-Mennonite Studies were established at Conrad Grebel University College in 2000, through the generosity of Lester Bechtel, a devoted churchman actively interested in Mennonite history. Lester Bechtel's dream was to make the academic world of research and study accessible to a border constituency, and to build bridges of understanding between the school and the church. The lectures, held annually and open to the public, offer noted scholars and church leaders the opportunity to explore and discuss topics representing the breadth and depth of Mennonite history and identity. Previous lectures in this distinguished series were Terry Martin, Stanley Hauerwas, Rudy Wiebe, Nancy Heisey, Fernando Enns, James Urry, and Sandra Birdsell.