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Mennonites and Politics In Paraguay

(Part 2 — Continued from Fall 2004)

by Victor Wall

Mennonite Social and Economic Life in Paraguay Today

Mennonites in Paraguay have developed and continued to run their own system of schools from kindergarten through professional training at the university level. Education has always been important. The Paraguayan government pays only the teacher salaries.

Any youth who finishes high school in the Mennonite schools is well-prepared to continue higher education anywhere.

However, a few of the more conservative colonies (accounting for approximately one-third of the Mennonite population) restrict education, teaching only the basics of mathematics and reading, largely for the purposes of learning the catechism.

Mennonite cooperatives, centered on agriculture and related industries, are the basis of economic life. These cooperatives export dairy and beef products around the world. Although the colonies and the cooperatives are separate legal entities,



Over the years, Mennonites in Paraguay have interacted with the government in a variety of ways. Minister Ewald Reimer of Filadelfia delivers a sermon at the fiftieth anniversary of the Fernheim colony, July 4, 1980. President Stroessner (center, left of man in light suit) listens. (Photo courtesy Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies)

the leader of a colony is also president of the local cooperative. Most Paraguayans identify cooperativism with Mennonitism.

Mennonites run their own system of social services including the following: hospitals, social security, elderly services and facilities, alcohol rehabilitation, mental health counseling, community development organizations, and legal services regarding divorce and inheritance, etc.

The development of the Chaco was made possible by the building

of the Trans-Chaco Highway, a project of Paraguayan Mennonites and the Mennonite Central Committee (with national and international support) in the 1950s. They viewed this highway as an expression of practical theology, with symbolic implications in transcultural relations, a road in the wilderness.

Outreach and Evangelism

Missionary and evangelistic concerns were not part of the

original vision of Mennonites in Paraguay. However, as they moved into the Chaco, Mennonites soon came to believe that they had a duty to their new neighbors, the indigenous people of the region. At the time, epidemics posed a threat to the indigenous population. In 1951, they numbered around 3,000. Currently, the population has risen to 27,000 and accounts for

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approximately 52% of the entire population of the Chaco.

In 1932, the colonies formed a missionary committee to evangelize their indigenous neighbors. Today, indigenous Christians have the Bible in their own languages, their own churches and pastors, radio programs, Bible institutes, conferences, etc. There are 4,600 baptized indigenous Mennonites with 100 pastors among them.

The indigenous people have organized themselves into self-governing communities, according to Paraguayan legislation, with their own by-laws. Their organization is called ASCIM (Indigenous Mennonite Association of Cooperative Services). ASCIM runs a health care system and has secured land for indigenous colonies.

The Servicio Voluntario Menonita (Mennonite Voluntary Service) of Paraguay runs programs for street children,

mental health facilities, day care centers, a leprosy hospital, prison ministries, mass media outlets, a MEDA (Mennonite Economic Development Association) chapter, conflict resolution services, and more.

Paraguay Politics Since 1989

After WW II, the countries of the Southern Cone were governed mainly by dictators with support of the United States government in its effort to resist communism. The Carter administration, with its emphasis on human rights, put pressure on these governments with little success. The 1970s and 1980s saw moderate change, most of which was in appearance only.

In those times, direct political participation was not possible except on an institutional basis. In Paraguay, Mennonites felt it was necessary to be in good standing with each government. Since the Stroessner regime was in power for about 35 years, there developed a relationship of mutual respect and appreciation, particularly with Mennonite contributions to economic growth.

Mennonites related to the government through an official representative of the colonies, rather than directly through the churches. When there was an anniversary celebration, the dedication of a new building, or the inauguration of a new project, they invited President Stroessner. He loved visiting the Mennonite communities.

In February 1989, the Stroessner regime was overthrown by a military coup. Paraguayan society, tired of the inefficiency of the Stroessner administration, responded with enthusiasm. General Rodriguez assumed the presidency, announced a new democracy, and quickly called

for an election. He was elected president, thereby improving his own image at home and internationally.

In 1991, during the Rodriguez administration, Paraguayans elected the Convención Nacional Constituyente, the National Assembly that had the mandate to write a new Constitution for the country.

In immigrant Mennonite circles, a process of discernment commenced in an effort to determine their obligations to the new social organization and the emerging nation. Mennonites feared what might happen to Bill 514, which had granted certain privileges to the Mennonite colonies. They also debated whether they should work with other denominations regarding these considerations, or whether they should work alone.

This resulted in a radically new step. Mennonites invited all Christian churches of

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Paraguay to dialogue about a mission in relationship to the new government and emerging constitution. To their amazement, all major ecclesiastical groups came together in order to influence the new constitution. There were representatives of the Mennonite Church, Pentecostals, Baptists, Lutherans, Anglicans,

and the Catholic Church. The inter-denominational cooperation strengthened and legitimized the task force.

The task force agreed on a four-point proposal to present to the Asamblea Nacional Constituyente. The group published the proposal, supporting it with biblical references, Vatican documents, United Nations treaties, and Amnesty International statements. The proposal included the following:

- 1) *A non-confessional state.* Catholicism had been Paraguay's official religion. The Catholic Church agreed to the idea of a non-confessional state.

“Life in a democracy, with the invitation to participate actively in shaping public life, has both benefits and dangers.”

- 2) *Protection of the family and human life.* This was directed towards dignifying the human person, making legislation on abortion as difficult as possible and respecting marriage and the family.
- 3) *Freedom of religion, worship and conscience.* This was not new except that conscience was being related directly to the question of religion.
- 4) *Conscientious objection on the issue of military service.* This was the Mennonite contribution and it was supported by all other denominations. All four proposals were



President Stroessner cuts the first piece of cake at the celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of Fernheim, July 4th, 1980. Frequently, Stroessner participated in Mennonite celebrations. (Photo courtesy Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies)

introduced into the new Constitution. The participating churches agreed that future legislation on these issues should be accompanied by an efficient lobby, which has been part of my task in the past.

The Armed Forces challenged the proposal of conscientious objection to military service in different ways. Today, we believe that the battle has probably been won. According to the 1992 Constitution, the president of the country no longer must be a Catholic.

Looking back on twelve years of democracy, we must admit that our democracy is shaky. Many Paraguayans are not convinced yet that this is the best system for our country. The reason is simple: corruption and inefficiency have become the *modus vivendi* of this young democracy. Paraguay has become a poor country, with about one-third of its population living in extreme poverty.

Mennonites and a New Relationship to Government

Life in a democracy, with the invitation to participate actively in shaping public life, has both benefits and dangers. Despite the difficulties, Mennonites in Paraguay have chosen to participate in the *res publica*. As a respected force in Paraguay's economic structure, its educational system, and its social life, Mennonites believe they have an important voice in politics.

Our experiment in regard to the constitution was new for us in numerous ways. Previously, we had not participated in lobbying efforts through elected representatives; ecumenical cooperation in influencing the new constitution was something new; and we had never voted. All this helped prepare the way for a bigger step into the political arena. We had to get busy hammering

*“...seek the welfare
(shalom) of the city
where I have sent
you into exile, and
pray to the Lord on
its behalf...”*

out the church’s stance on political participation.

We now have our third governor who comes out of a Mennonite church. In each period, we elected a Mennonite as deputy to represent the province in the Chaco where most Mennonites live.

After the initial period, people became enthused about having evangelicals in politics. The question arose: why not found a Christian (evangelical) political party? Traditionally, Christian political parties have long existed, both in Europe and Latin America. In Paraguay, this created a new scenario, one that was conflict-prone and complicated. The movement presented candidates, but was unsuccessful.

Ever since the first Mennonites got into politics, Mennonite churches have debated the question of political participation from a biblical and Anabaptist perspective, taking culture and history into consideration. At times, such participation was prohibited, in other circumstances it was discouraged. At a 2003 conference, the delegates of the Mennonite Brethren Churches of Paraguay accepted a statement on political participation that serves as a guideline.

Previously, Mennonites in Paraguay have not been involved in politics. They shaped efficient economic and social models

within society, but left political activity to others. In addition, the corruption of the political system served as a barrier for Mennonites. Paraguayan Mennonites were entering a new era.

A New Chapter

In August 2003, a new chapter began in the story of Paraguayan Mennonites and politics. The husband of a member of the Asunción Mennonite Church was elected president. In order to understand this new period, it is necessary to understand two ministries of the German-speaking Asunción Mennonite Brethren Church.

About 20 years ago, it started a ministry in the national prison in Asunción. One of the prisoners was Felix Duarte Dupont. During the investigation and interrogation, Dupont had an encounter with Christ. Throughout his incarceration, he grew as a Christian and developed leadership skills. Upon his release, we asked him to become our prison missionary. Dupont responded to the call and served as missionary to prisoners, evangelizing, discipling and reintegrating them into society.

The other ministry began about eight years ago. The leadership of the church in Asunción was looking into how to involve the whole church in evangelism. As a German-speaking church in a Spanish language context, there were complications in this endeavor. It became clear that the new church plant would take place among our Spanish-speaking neighbors and colleagues of the middle and upper classes. The emerging congregation called itself Iglesia Raices Hermanos Menonitas.

The second group to be baptized included a woman

named Gloria Duarte. She had been discipled by the prison missionary who was part of Raices. Gloria was married to the Minister of Education, a man who left his job because of a difference with the president. Gloria became one of the church’s best evangelists and a member of the church council. Since she knew many politicians, she evangelized women politicians who brought their husbands to special events.

When a new president was elected, Gloria’s husband, Nicanor, was invited to become Minister of Education once again. His wife’s faith was convincing to him, although he was not ready to become a Christian. He became the president of the political party, and went on to become the Paraguayan president.

When elected in April, he had several months to prepare for the presidency. By this time, he had made a commitment to Christ and identified himself with Raices. As president-elect, he asked for advice from and developed a close relationship with some MB entrepreneurs. Even though he came to power through the official political party, he daringly appointed a few ministers and vice-ministers who were not of that party. Among them were three Mennonites who accepted the positions, and three who declined. In addition, there is a Mennonite governor, deputy and senator.

Although these Mennonites in government represented a stand against the corruption of the previous Paraguayan government, their presence was troublesome for many. In a party with a history of corruption, this was the only trustworthy element. However, most of Paraguayan society did not understand the Christian faith and how it could change a person to that degree.

There were numerous reasons the country was concerned. The Paraguayan population is 90% Catholic, which raised a question of whether the president could be an evangelical. People also questioned the nature of Raices. Was it an evangelical Mennonite church or a sect?

At times politicians have turned to Christ, but in this case, a Christian actively pursued political office. There was also the idea that when a president asks Christians (Mennonites) to become government ministers, it is different from when a Mennonite seeks to become involved. These things complicated the situation and raised serious issues for many.

Reflections on Emerging Models

This new situation has left us with many questions. Rather than a conclusion, this is another step in the ongoing discussion of Mennonites and political involvement. We need new models and serious reflection on the following questions and others too:

- Can/should a country be governed on the basis of Christian principles?
- How does Christian faith interact with democracy?
- Does our Anabaptist legacy provide a theological basis for politicians to make decisions they will be required to make?
- Should the president choose a different church (as happened in Guatemala)?
- Are there other politicians to whom we can turn for examples? (Jimmy Carter or Johannes Rau of Germany).
- What are the dangers of modern Constantinianism?
- What have previous theological and political thinkers said about Christian culture and Christian

politics? (For example: Richard Niebuhr or Max Weber).

- From where does wisdom arise? Who has the word of wisdom?

In conclusion, I leave you with three historical quotes:

Jer. 29:4-7 *Thus says the Lord of hosts, to the exiles in Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters ... multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare (shalom) of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.*

The Epistle of Diognetus V:1-16 (second century) *For Christians are not distinguished from the rest of humankind by country, or by speech, or by dress. For they do not dwell in cities of their own, or use a different language, or practice a peculiar life. . . . But while they dwell in Greek or barbarian cities according as each person's lot has been cast, and follow the customs of the land in . . . matters of daily life, yet the condition of citizenship which they exhibit is wonderful, and admittedly strange. They live in countries of their own, but simply as sojourners; they share the life of citizens, they endure the lot*

of foreigners; every foreign land is to them a homeland, and every homeland a foreign land . . . They spend their existence upon earth, but their citizenship is in heaven.

July 22, 1921, the Daily News Paper: *They will build a city within the Chaco, not a state within a state and we will go and greet them there. All those who hunger and thirst for righteousness will go to see this Mennonite city where the motto of our flag, "Peace and Justice", glows in the hearts of its citizens, who praise the name of God and do not want to spill the blood of their neighbor or enemy and who do not better themselves at the expense of their neighbor.*

About the Author

Victor Wall (Asunción, Paraguay) is a graduate of Fresno Pacific University and Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary. He was the founding pastor of Raices MB Church (Spanish) in Asunción and is currently a member of its pastoral team. Victor and his wife, Margita (also an FPU graduate) have three children: Sebastian, Marcelo, and Debora.

• The California Mennonite Historical Society •

ANNUAL SPRING MEETING

April 30, 2005

College Community (MB) Church
2529 Willow Avenue
Clovis, CA

Speakers: Corinna Ruth and Alan Peters

Topic: *Mennonite Origins in Reedley*

3:30 p.m. Genealogy workshop

6:00 p.m. Dinner

7:30 p.m. Meeting and speaker

Dinner Cost \$10 (members)
\$15 (non-members)

Reservations required. Call (559) 453-2225

