The Mennonites in Latin America

(www.mwc-cmm.org)
## Global Mennonite Population (MWC 2012 statistics)

Total Mennonites, in 83 countries: 1,774,720

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Total (2009)</th>
<th>Countries</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>North America</strong></td>
<td>29.8%</td>
<td>529,108</td>
<td>USA 391,900; Canada 137,208</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Latin America</strong></td>
<td>10.5%</td>
<td>186,339</td>
<td>Par. 33,251; Mex. 32,036; Bol. 24,988</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Africa</strong></td>
<td>38.3%</td>
<td>679,053</td>
<td>Congo 235,202; Ethiopia 224,407</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Asia</strong></td>
<td>17.8%</td>
<td>315,645</td>
<td>India 149,849; Indonesia 108,528</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Europe</strong></td>
<td>3.6%</td>
<td>64,575</td>
<td>Ger. 46,757; NL 8,030; Switz. 2,500</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Some statistics:

- Baptized members in Latin America: 186,339 (169,864 in 2009)
- Total of 110 conference bodies in 26 countries
- Of these, 54.2% are members of MWC
- Latin American Mennonites make up 10.5% of MWC

Focus here: Mexico and Paraguay
- Mennonites in Mexico: 32,036
- Mennonites in Paraguay: 33,251
One part of the story begins with missions . . .

- American missionaries started a church in Argentina ca. 1919 (mysterious earlier report of Mennonite villages in Argentina in 1877, but no further information--Dyck, Intro., 321)
- In 1942 missionary work started in Buenos Aires
- R.C. opposition until Vatican II (1960s), then more tolerance
- “A veritable explosion of Mennonite missionary activity began in Latin America about 1950” (Dyck, Intro., 338)
- Global Menn. Hist. divides L.A. into Southern Cone, Andean Region, Caribbean, and Mesoamerica
Another part of the story begins in Canada . . .

- About 8,000 Mennonites came to Canada from Russia during 1874-1880, settling in the East and West Reserves, Manitoba.

- They had received incentives and some special rights, including freedom of religion and education.

- They were later called "Kanadier"—to distinguish them from a subsequent wave of immigrants, the "Russländer," who came in the 1920s.

- All were “Russian” Mennonites, i.e., from Russia, even though they were ethnically Dutch/German.
Canadian and Manitoba governments had own agendas:

- To populate the prairies with “good settlers”
- To develop loyal and patriotic Canadian (British) citizens
  - Schools’ flag-raising recital: “One king, one flag, one fleet, one Empire” (*All-Briton’s Day Catechism*, 1907)
- The “**Manitoba Schools Question**” became a major issue
  - Only one (English) public school system for all
  - Hotly disputed between English and French
  - Other ethnic groups also affected (Icelanders, Ukrainians)
  - Mennonites felt betrayed, reacted very negatively

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Other encroachments followed:

- Municipal government, pressure to accept English
- Until WW I, the Mennonites were still largely isolated
- **World War I** had major impact:
  - Anti-German sentiments (government, society)
  - Pacifist convictions, feared losing religious freedom
  - Continuing educational and other restrictions
  - Shortage of blocks of land also becoming a problem

- Some Mennonites were willing to compromise, others not
- The stage was set for a major conflict
Some conservative Mennonites decided to emigrate

- **Major emigrations to Mexico, 1922-1925**
  - Old Colony Mennonites from Manitoba West Reserve moved to Mexico (established the **Manitoba Colony**)
  - Saskatchewan Mennonites settled in **Swift Current Colony**
  - 7,000 Mennonites emigrated to Mexico in 1920s, settling in the state of Chihuahua (south of El Paso, Texas)

- 13 “daughter colonies” founded in Mexico, 1922-1983
  - Land shortages, once again
  - Also religious and social disagreements

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Mennonite Colonies in Mexico (Menn. Hist. Atlas, 68)
Many subsequent moves within Mexico
  - 20 different groups (80% are Old Colony, Kleine Gemeinde, and Sommerfelder)
  - 15 colonies scattered through all of Mexico
  - each colony may have 2 or 3 to 60 villages (Swift Current)

Numbers of Mennonites in Mexico are hard to establish:
  - about 30,000 (Concise Encycl., 2010)
  - 32,167 in 2012 (MWC)—German and Spanish Mennonites
Meanwhile, there were other migrations: Paraguay

- **1926-27** conservative Kanadier moved from Canada to the Gran Chaco
  - Similar concerns to those of the Mexican emigrants
  - Established **Menno Colony** with 1,300 people
  - *Samuel McRoberts*
  - Very difficult beginning
  - Waiting time, suffering, illness, death in Porto Casado
  - Lack of preparation in the Chaco
  - **1932-35**—Chaco War between PY and Bolivia (“frontier”!)

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Another immigration to Paraguay from Europe:

- **1930** about 1,700 Mennonites from Russia migrated to the Chaco (Fernheim Colony, adjacent to Menno Colony)
  - Different background from Menno Colony, also hard start

- **1937** about 750 moved to East Paraguay (Friesland Colony)
And more migrations to Paraguay!

- **1947** ca. 2,500 refugees from Europe (Neuland Colony, next to Fernheim and Menno, and Volendam Colony, east of Paraguay River, near Friesland)

- **1948** conservative Mennonites from Canada moved to East Paraguay, 200 k east of Asuncion (Bergthal and Sommerfeld Colonies)

- **1970s** about 2,500 conservative emigrants from Mexico came to Paraguay, est. Rio Verde Colony

- Other conservative colonies: Tres Palmas, Santa Clara, etc.

- **1990**—ca. 23,000 Mennonites, 19 colonies + many in Asuncion (Menn. Hist. Atlas, 115)

- **2012**—ca. 34,000 Mennonites in Paraguay (MWC stats)
Mennonite colonies, Paraguay

(Menn. Hist. Atlas, 75; also see Dyck, Intro., 326)
Continual migrations/reverse migrations

- Migrations have continued throughout Latin America
- Reverse migrations by the conservative Mennonites between Latin America and Canada, 1960s- present
- Issues: Limited land, unemployment, dry climate, political and social instability, economic hardships, rigid colony controls
- Also: Canadian citizenships and benefits
- Settlements in Ontario and prairies
- Numbers very hard to estimate
- Many difficult and tragic experiences behind the statistics
Travel and migrations have also continued among the progressive Mennonites

- 1950s many from Neuland and Volendam went to Canada
- Many young people from Fernheim, Neuland, and Volendam study in Asuncion, Canada, Germany, Switzerland
- Numerous family relations between Canada and Paraguay

Gradually, increasing numbers of Mennonites live in Asuncion

- Many involved in business, education, professions, politics
- In 2009, MWC was held in Asuncion
- Many changes occurring among all Mennonites (distinctions between “conservatives” and “progressives” less clear)
Questions facing Mennonites in South America:

- How to understand the Bible?
- Do the Mennonites still have a “mission” in Paraguay?
- How to deal with economic success and wealth?
- How to live in a capitalistic, technological, global society?
- How to relate to other social groups (Paraguayans, Brazilians)?
- How to interact justly with Aboriginal people (e.g., ASCIM)?
- How to interact with other religious groups?
- What holds the Mennonite community together (e.g., family, community, congregation, religious faith)?
- Is the traditional Mennonite peace witness still valid?
References

- *GAMEO*
- *Mission and Migration* (A Global Mennonite History: Latin America), 2010

Focus of next session:

- Mennonites in Europe

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