

**Accompaniment** - in the argentinian Chaco-, an alternative missionary practice case study for micah-global consultation 2015-9

- Willis Horst

The book *Mission without conquest* represents a **case study of a way of doing mission which we as a peace church are especially interested in because it is an effort to recover the missional posture of the early church**. The classic Christian missionary movement began and was largely carried out during the era of colonialism. The paradigm was constantinian. The western worldview assumed superiority to the rest of the world because empire could be imposed through the use of force. Along with this mentality, those who went to foreign lands to convert the heathen assumed that the truth of Christianity was clear and that it was just a matter of time till Christendom would in fact take over the whole earth and then would be the end of time.

Today we encounter the world in all its diversity and multi-faith reality. Persons and empires who claim to belong to the Christian faith have shown themselves capable of being every bit as barbaric and evil as those of any other religion. We Mennonites have tried to dissociate our mission enterprise from empire and its style of imposition of the stronger over the weaker. As a missionary presence, we have sought to be in the world in ways which seem to be more closely aligned with Jesus' own way of being in the world.

Stanley Green has referred to this newer style of mission presence in these words: (The Mennonite, Nov 17, 2009, p 18)

“Beginning around the midpoint of last century, Mennonites took seriously the need to reflect the example of Christ in their encounter with people of other cultures. That approach can best be described as **accompaniment** and is reflected in the stories in this issue [of this issue of The Mennonite] of Melanie Quinn (in Botswana), Moriah Hurst (in Australia), and Willis and Byrdalene Horst (in the Argentine Chaco, with the whole Mennonite Team), each of whom [...] have been modeling a different way of being in mission.”

“To **accompany** others in mission is to listen, discern and share with our companions what the good news of Jesus means in their context and find ways to empower them for their response to God's call. Mennonite Mission Network has been attempting to find [for] ourselves and encourage Mennonite Church USA congregations on this journey toward a new way.”

Throughout the history of the church it is missionary practice which gives birth to changes in theology. Our time in the Chaco raised many questions for me. I came to the conclusion that my own theological formation did not have answers to some of the questions which came up. I increasingly felt the need to listen, to be present as a guest, to be careful not to take upon myself the responsibility to do that which by rights belonged to another to do.

### **Post-conquest culture**

Mennonite mission workers in Western Europe have for some time referred to their context as post-Christendom. In Native American circles we talk more about a **post-conquest** culture. Christendom is still very much present in Latin America but the conquest of Indigenous America is the historical fact which most dominates the lives of the indigenous survivors themselves.

The Chaco still lives and breathes the mentality of the conquest of its original peoples. The legacy of the historical conquest of the native Chaco peoples is etched into every cell of their memory. Not a day passes without their being aware of the continuing effects of the conquest. Nor was it limited to the military conquest; it included cultural and spiritual violence—what we nowadays call genocide, ethnocide and deicide. Besides, the atrocities committed by the conquerors were carried out in the name of their “Christian” god, and under his authority.

During the whole process of constantinization of the church, the term “Christian” came to designate all those who belonged to a certain empire, the Holy Roman Empire in that case. That

meaning is still a weight the church carries. In the Chaco context, and in fact throughout much of Latin America, the term "christian" still carries a cultural rather than a theological meaning. When one identifies oneself as "Christian" in **post conquest** Latin America the meaning is still first of all "of those who came to conquer", in contrast to those who were already here and were conquered—the First-Nations peoples. It designates one as a non Indigenous. Thus, throughout the Chaco, there are so called christian neighbors and indigenous neighbors. There are indigenous churches and there are "christian" churches, i. e., non-indigenous.

Illustrations.

In years past, when military service was obligatory in Argentina, the Toba conscripts were often baptized "christian" by a Roman Catholic priest as a normal part of their training. According to the testimony of Domingo, now a Toba pastor and Bible teacher, he had high hopes that this would end the discrimination against the indigenous soldiers during boot camp. He thought surely following baptism they would be treated like real persons. After all, the priest had told them they would then be real Christians. However, the day after the Catholic baptism ceremony, when they took their places in line for morning exercises, the commanding officer barked as usual, "OK, you Indios over here!" So it was, as Domingo put it, just one more lie. "We were still indios. Baptism did not make us christian.

In addition, during the conquest of the Chaco by the Spanish, the term "evangelize" was commonly used for the action of violently subduing the indigenous population, and subsequently forcing them to accept Christian baptism.

**Brief history of the Mennonite Mission** among the Toba-Qom people.

To better understand the alternative missionary practice which the Mennonite Team seeks to carry out in the Chaco, we must take a brief look at the history of the Mennonite Mission there. In 1943, when Mennonite missionaries from Canada and the United States established a mission to the Toba people in the Argentine Chaco, they did so in the style of the already ongoing evangelical missions to Indigenous groups at the time. They sought to serve the Toba in the best and most holistic way possible. Therefore they did not limit their ministries to evangelization in a strictly spiritual sense, but also sought to civilize the Toba, whom they considered unfit to follow Jesus in their uncivilized state at the time. They believed their calling was to guide the Toba through a time of transition into a thoroughly Christian life and culture. During the first few years the Mennonite Mission established a mission compound completely equipped to carry out worship and Bible teaching, health and basic education services, training in farming and carpentry, sewing and homemaking skills, as well as managing a store in order to provide basic living supplies at fair prices for Tobas living on the mission farm and in the surrounding area.

This was indeed a complete mission program. However, it was carried out without valuing traditional Toba culture. The indigenous way of life and native spirituality were considered only as negative influences to be overcome. The missionary vision did not include the possibility that God's wisdom was already present in the Toba culture. The missionaries' language of communication with the Toba was Spanish since it was thought that Spanish was the language of future integration of the surviving indigenous population into the dominant Spanish speaking society. After all, at the time Toba was an unwritten language. Neither did missionaries drink mate tea with their new Toba neighbors. They considered this custom of sharing a common metal straw to be a potentially dangerous way of passing on contagious diseases, such as TB, which was widespread. Thus, missionaries took for granted that the civilization process for the Toba should include use of the Spanish language—that of the conquerors, and support for their families in a sedentary style of life through cotton farming.

The mission strategy was that the Toba families who were invited to live on the mission farm would be taught how to live in the new setting and would be converted to a Mennonite way of understanding the Gospel of Jesus. They would then return to their respective areas as emissaries of the new way of life as well as evangelists to their own people.

Within a relatively short time, however, missionaries became the "patrón" (used in the Chaco for the boss, foreman, or owner) of the Toba adherents to the Mission program. Those in charge of the mission program were inadvertently participating in the same goals which the government and immigrant population of the time were practicing, which were to erase the

Indian culture and transform the Indians into participants of the dominant “Christian” culture. Thus, Toba participants in the mission program understood its demands to be simply another version of the larger social changes required by the so-called “Christian” culture which surrounded and dominated the surviving Toba. At the same time, of course, they must have realized that the mission personnel were acting with all good intentions, and talked also about the love of God. But pressure to leave their indigenous ways was ever present.

However, we must remember that the missionaries involved in the Mennonite program at that time were sent out with no specific training for understanding cultures so foreign to them as that of the Native American Indigenous peoples. This was also true of many missionary efforts of the time, both Roman Catholic as well as evangelical—Mennonites included. And not only in the Chaco, but in all parts of the world. They thought they were proceeding in an acceptable way since they included the message of salvation through Jesus as part of their civilization program. Today this approach looks like “ethnocide”, no matter by what name nor with what intention it may be carried out.

By the early 1950s, ten years after the founding of the mission, Mennonite missionaries were so busy being in charge of the entire program, they had little time left for teaching the Bible; neither were the Toba people understanding the Gospel message because they did not hear it in their own language. Something had to change!

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In 1957 Albert Buckwalter wrote a letter to his colleagues responding to an article written in 1955 by Darcy Ribeiro, chief of the Indian Protection Service (IPS) Studies Section of Brasil, and which appeared in *Boletín Indigenista*, December 1956, published by Instituto Indigenista Interamericano, Niños Héroes 139, México.

An excerpt from that article:

“Acculturation and suppression of the Indian tribes

In the critical balance sheet which we had occasion to present jointly on the activities of the I.P.S. and the Religious Missions, we showed that all the tribes which entered into peaceful contact with civilization during the last 50 years, those taken care of by the I.P.S. as well as those aided by the Religious Missions, were extinguished or are on their way to extinction. And it cannot be said that they were assimilated or acculturated, fusing into the civilized population. From every place where we have been able to obtain information, it appears that the Indians simply died or that only a very small part of them managed to survive, always remaining Indians, notwithstanding their having adopted the clothing and vices of civilization.

[Factors leading to the obliteration of Indians populations]

- a) The diseases brought by civilization, many of which take a grave form among the Indians;
- b) The forceful incorporation of the Indians within our economic system when they are not prepared,
- c) The creation of a real trauma, provoked by the impact of a society endowed with material things far superior which assume a great prestige in the eyes of the Indians. This trauma determines a collapse in their beliefs and values by which they explained the world and their place in it, finding reasons to live and love existence.”

Following are Albert’s comments on the above excerpt:

“It is *no passing interest which prompts me to bring your attention to this article*, but the deep and growing conviction that we missionaries too easily cast aside such direct and obvious warnings under the pretext that we are following the Holy Spirit’s leading in bringing the Gospel to the Indians, and are therefore immune from bringing tragedy to the very people we serve.

“Most of us are guilty of not caring one whit what the Indians’ concepts are, and for that matter, of being pre-convinced that their ideas merit no serious respect from the missionary. The notion that we missionaries confront nothing but pure “paganism” when we face the Indian is a white man’s illusion, and as such, it is sin. The truth is that it “just ain’t true”, no matter how many seminary degrees you have, or how calloused your knees are.

“A case in point is my own personal experience in the Chaco. We missionaries to the Tobas busied ourselves in the Lord’s work, that of doing just what all missions to Indians do: trying to help the Indians become good Christians like the missionaries. Now, this can be good

if it isn't taken too far. But unfortunately, we took it too far. We thought that a Christian should have the same completely materialistic concept of the causes of disease that we have. We also thought that he should be economically and socially individualistic. And what's more, as long as we thought that way, we were frustrated in our work, since all the reward we got for all our hundreds of dollars worth of material aid, and the hundreds of hours of patient teaching was the persistence of this detestable (from our "superior" viewpoint) Indian character.

"Thank God that in spite of us, He saved Tobas. In fact He saved so many of them that we had to become convinced that salvation is not by works. To make our position all the more precarious, God fortified the very beliefs which to us seemed so sub-Christian. The Toba Christian is more convinced than his unbelieving counterpart that healing of the body is basically spiritual- an act of God. Moreover, the communal spirit inherited from his non-Christian past is augmented to a devastating degree. One Toba recently said: "All I have the Lord has given me; therefore, when any of you come this way, don't go to the hotel, come to my place." Only those who have lived with Tobas know the utter impossibility of that man's so much as ever getting a bank account.

"It's high time we missionaries reconsider our Gospel. Are we teaching that faith in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, saves from sin and gives us eternal life, or are we so confused in our ultimate issues that we try to peddle off the social and economic concepts of the occident (and more particularly, of the Mennonites, if you please,) as an integral part of that faith?"

--Albert Buckwalter, Sáenz Peña, Chaco, Argentina, January 24, 1957

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### **A bold new approach in missionary practice**

In 1954, The American Bible Society, upon request from the Mennonite workers, sent William and Marie Reyburn to the Chaco. With their training in cross-cultural communications, anthropology and linguistics, and their years of field experience as Bible translation consultants, they were engaged for the purpose of helping missionaries in the Chaco understand the intercultural dynamics of their context. In addition, the Reyburns carried out a preliminary linguistic analysis of the Toba language with suggestions for a scientifically defined orthography. (According to oral history, on one occasion, when the conversation was about whether or not to drink mate tea with the Toba, Bill Reyburn asked the missionaries, "After all, who should missionaries really come to save, the Toba or themselves?")

Based on the Reyburns' work, Albert and Lois Buckwalter, who were directing the Toba Mennonite Mission at the time, underwent a profound conversion in their way of understanding their calling in the Chaco. They became the main protagonists of an innovative approach to intercultural mission, a non-paternalistic presence which did not propose to form denominational churches, or to impose imported theology. This was *Mission without conquest*, an experiment in being a nonviolent missionary presence. Albert and Lois, in responding to the wisdom brought to their dilemma by specialists in academic disciplines other than those normally considered sufficient for missionaries, clearly understood this change as coming from the Lord. They wrote to their mission headquarters, Mennonite Board of Missions, probably at least in part to help them comprehend such a radical change, "The Holy Spirit took the church away from us!" By the grace of God, J.D. Graber, mission administrator overseeing the work in the Argentine Chaco at the time, was willing to accept the change, even though it seemed like uncharted waters for the Mennonite Church.

Thus, in the mid 50s a bold, new pattern of missionary praxis was born in the Argentine Chaco. The indigenous survivors of the Conquest of the Chaco were thereby free to experience the Gospel as invitation rather than imposition.

Following this watershed change, Mennonite missionaries focused on various ministries designed to strengthen ethnic identity as well as to encourage the development of a thoroughly indigenous church. The goal was to relate to the indigenous on as nearly an equal basis as possible, as brother among brothers, as sister among sisters, so that God's love would be felt as a non-intrusive presence.

In addition to learning the local indigenous languages and **translating the Bible**, ministries now given high priority were: 1) a program of **pastoral visitation** serving indigenous churches over a vast geographical area and participating in their worship; 2) distribution of **literature**, primarily Bibles and hymnals the believers requested; 3) the preparation and circulation of a

**pastoral letter** to indigenous church leaders; and 4) **Bible teaching** when invited, but always as a guest, never taking charge of how that Bible study actually happened. The what, how, when and where was now in the hands of Toba church leaders themselves. When the missionaries from outside began to call themselves “fraternal workers”, it empowered the Toba leaders to name their own missionaries and pastors from among their own people. This was clearly understood as a way of being present with the Toba believers unobtrusively, respectfully, yet with the unshakeable conviction of the relevance of Jesus for the Toba reality.

### **1971 We arrived in the Chaco**

Byrdalene and I arrived in the Chaco mission field in 1971. This alternative way of missionary presence was already well established. As we sought to deepen and expand the model, we soaked up all we could from previous workers and from the indigenous people themselves. Spending time with the indigenous leaders and their families convinced us of the **mutuality of the accompaniment style**. While we sought to accompany them, at the same time they also accompanied. They hosted us both physically and culturally, they gave us counsel, encouragement and often prayer for special needs. We learned that the gospel is perhaps announced most effectively by listening, by being fully present to the other person, that **conversion itself is best achieved mutually**.

In time, the Mennonite Team’s accompaniment of indigenous people in the struggle for human rights—especially in their **claims for land**, which is indispensable for maintaining indigenous identity—led the team to begin broadening their involvement beyond the growing institutional church. Gerald Mumaw, who had been director of MCC’s program in Bolivia became our Latin American secretary. Gerald encouraged us to explore moving into other areas with the same accompaniment style which had been developed for our involvement in the church. Today the team accompanies indigenous initiatives in areas of bilingual-intercultural education, social organization, recuperation of land, as well as church leadership formation, intercultural Bible studies, Bible translation, and the production of Audio Scripture recordings in indigenous languages.

At the same time, we recognized the importance of **being witnesses**. We began to understand that evangelization often takes the shape of a simple word of testimony which identifies God’s presence. Sometimes that word affirmed the achievements and victories of the people in order to strengthen dignity and self esteem. Sometimes it was a word to endorse self-determination as a viable road for the achievement of human dignity in the world. In other instances, it took the form of denouncing injustice.

Our indigenous friends themselves taught us the profound value of **intercultural theological dialogue**. We found that in order to hear God’s voice through the Biblical texts from an indigenous viewpoint, the circle is the best format. In what we called the *Bible Circle*, everyone teaches and all learn from each other. Together with them, the Mennonite Team continues learning how best to be present without conquering the other—neither for expanding the Christian denomination which sent them out nor for spreading the culture of the workers themselves.

As time passed we realized that the future of the fraternal accompaniment of the indigenous peoples in the Argentine Chaco should be **in the hands of Argentines**. Today three very capable Argentine families are serving on the Mennonite Team. Though not all from Mennonite background, all three came to the team convinced of an Anabaptist theological stance. Personally, it has been a source of profound gratitude to see Argentine workers join the team, take on the accompaniment model and keep developing it. It has also been a confirmation to see several other mission efforts in the Argentine Chaco, Catholic as well as evangelical, adopt the accompaniment model for their own mission efforts.

We as a Chaco Missionary Team claim with conviction that this is the most adequate way to carry out Christ’s mission in the context of the First Nations in the Chaco.

**Ignacio Silva** is a Pilagá bilingual schoolteacher and a preacher in his church. He read some important parts for the recording of the New Testament. When we gave him his copy of the finished recording, Ignacio told us,

“I’ve worked with anthropologists, technicians, teachers, gone to conferences; but you people, you made me feel like a person. I would like for all our people, especially the youth, to become more aware of the importance of using our language, both oral and written. We are a marginalized people. What better way to strengthen our understanding of who we are? And

who better than we ourselves to transmit the value of our own culture, especially by respecting our elders. That's why this effort to record the Bible texts in our language is so important for us."

May God receive all the glory for allowing the Mennonite Team in the Chaco to learn about *Mission without Conquest*.

(Talk based on the English translation of Willis Horst's presentation of the book, *Misión sin Conquista*, November 27, 2009 at the Argentine Bible Society in Buenos Aires, Argentina. To contact the author: frank.paul@ojc.de

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