

# Remembering forward

**Celebrating a century of  
Mennonite ministry in Argentina**

**BY LINDA SHELLY**

*Missio Dei* is published by Mennonite Mission Network to invite reflection and dialogue about God's mission in today's world. Some features in the series focus primarily on the biblical and theological foundations of the mission task. Others present ministry case studies or personal stories of attempts to be faithful to Christ's call. Perspectives represented reflect the passion and commitment of the agency: to declare in word and demonstrate in life the whole gospel of Jesus Christ, across the street, all through the marketplaces and around the world.

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ISBN 978-1-933845-24-4

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*Printed in the United States of America.*

*All photos were taken by Linda Shelly, unless otherwise indicated. All Scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).*

# Remembering forward

## Celebrating a century of Mennonite ministry in Argentina

By Linda Shelly

In 1917, two families from the United States accepted the life-changing call of the Holy Spirit to serve in Argentina. Mae and Tobias (T. K.) Hershey, their two children — Beatrice and Lester — and Emma and Joseph (J. W.) Shank and their children — Elsa and Robert — were the first Mennonites sent as mission workers to Latin America. The two families eventually settled in a rural zone of the Buenos Aires province and began ministries in the town of Pehuajó.



Photo provided by Mennonite Church USA Archives

Mennonite Board of Missions (MBM) — a predecessor agency of today's Mennonite Mission Network — sent the first missionary families in 1917. Front row: T.K., Mae, Lester and Beatrice Hershey; and Robert, Elsa, Emma and J.W. Shank. Second row: First Argentine Mennonite pastor Albano Luayza, with a Bible Society representative and visitors from the U.S.

During the next 100 years, a national church came into being — *Iglesia Evangélica Menonita Argentina* (IEMA, Argentina Mennonite Church) — and spread across Argentina. By the mid-20th century, IEMA was taking responsibility for church planting, and in the 1990s, regional mission programs began forming. Delbert Erb, North American Mennonite mission worker and longtime resident of Argentina, has described the first century of mission work and the church in Argentina in three stages:

- **1919-1954** — A council of North American missionaries made decisions for the direction of the church.
- **1954-1989** — The council of missionaries was dissolved, and a directive board was formed. Under this new Argentine entity, North American missionaries would no longer be sent to start new churches, though they did continue to support the emerging churches in other ways. This stage brought growing pains, as the church transitioned from receiving financial resources from North America to developing self-supporting congregations and leaders.
- **1989-present** — A third stage emerged as IEMA began developing its own mission programs in different regions of the country, the *Proyecto Misionero Patagónico* (PMP, Patagonia Mission Project) in the south, the *Visión Evangelística y Misionera de la Región Central* (VEMCE, Evangelistic and Missionary Vision of the Central Region), and *Programa Misionero al Norte de Argentina* (PROMINOA, Missionary Program of Northern Argentina).<sup>1</sup>



Pastor Daniel Oyanguren prays for the youth and young adults who responded to a missionary call at the 2017 IEMA convention in Choele Choel. IEMA sends missionary church planters to share God's good news throughout the country.

<sup>1</sup> These mission programs of IEMA are known by their acronyms: PMP; VEMCE and PROMINOA. VEMCE was initially known as VEMZO, with the change in name resulting from restructuring in IEMA.



Pehuajó pastors Mario and Mónica Centeno and Anita and Raúl García receive a bamboo plate and chalice from Sara Wiegner of Akron (Pennsylvania) Mennonite Church at the 2019 centennial celebration of the Pehuajó congregation. Akron is one of the Atlantic Coast Conference congregations in a partnership with VEMCE, which includes the Pehuajó congregation.

In addition to the North American missionaries' church-planting work in central Argentina, these missionaries felt called, in the mid-1940s, to reach out to the Indigenous people of the Chaco region in the northeast. For decades MBM, and then Mennonite Mission Network, worked separately with IEMA and with the Indigenous churches in the Chaco, but since 2011 the Chaco ministry has been led by Argentine Mennonite missionaries José Oyanguren and Alfonsina Finger. They were sent by the Bragado Mennonite Church, in partnership with Mission Network, with support from two North American Mennonite congregations in Ohio — Sonnenberg Mennonite Church in Kidron and Pike Mennonite Church in Elida.

Partnerships between the various mission initiatives of the Argentina Mennonite Church and Mennonite people and congregations in Illinois, Minnesota, Montana, North Dakota, Ohio, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin have been facilitated by Mission Network and fostered over the past three decades. These deepening friendships have strengthened the church in both North and South America and contributed to mutual communication, inspiration and exchange visits.

Through various stories of ministry and exchange, this booklet highlights working and learning together. The 2017-2019 centennial celebrations in Argentina recognized the contribution of early missionaries from North America, while highlighting the current mission work of IEMA. Participants from North and South America shared what they experienced:

“The message I absorbed from the celebration was, ‘Let’s go forward another 100 years.’ Even as the Argentine church was celebrating the past, what I was hearing was, ‘Let’s not be lethargic and rest on our laurels. There is more work to do.’” — Steve Zuercher, representing Sonnenberg Mennonite Church, Kidron, Ohio

“The challenge for the next century is the same, to carry the message ‘to every creature.’” — Sara Buhlmann, retired gynocologist and current VEMCE church planter in Buenos Aires province

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## **Eyes to see, ears to hear, hearts to respond: Reflections on a learning tour to *Proyecto Misionero Patagónico* (PMP, Patagonia Mission Project) in Argentina<sup>2</sup>**

By Cathy Schmid

“Then turning to the disciples, Jesus said to them privately, ‘Blessed are the eyes that see what you see! For I tell you that many prophets and kings desired to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it.’” — Luke 10:23-24

For Mennonite Mission Network, as Stanley Green reminded us, “mission” means Christians being instruments of grace to others, in the name of Christ: proclaiming the word of God and demonstrating,

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<sup>2</sup> Editor’s note: The Argentina Mennonite Church (IEMA) mission programs have a strong impact in both Argentina and the United States. Through formal partnerships and learning tours, travel in both directions contributes to developing relationships and learning together. This section was written by learning tour participant Cathy Schmid while on a trip led by Stanley W. Green, the then-executive director of Mennonite Mission Network. Schmid’s reflections illustrate the missional learning that takes place during these visits, and much of the missiology she describes is applicable for the other IEMA programs with stories in this booklet. Her reflections were reviewed by Argentine leaders, to ensure that what is written reflects their emphases in their mission work.



At a 2017 centennial celebration, people involved in PMP gathered in front of a map that indicates locations in which PMP is doing mission work.

through our lives and deeds, the good news of Jesus. Furthermore, vision for mission must emerge in a *local* context, where the congregation is always the gospel's best witness. Thus, as learning tour participants, our role on our trip to Argentina was to observe that vision and discern, together with our hosts, how Mission Network might support their local efforts. They had much to teach us.

**Mission: It's not rocket science.** Jesus himself conducted “learning tours” with his disciples, and the details of those trips are found in the Gospel of Luke. When Jesus sent the twelve disciples on their first missionary experience, they were given no small task:

“Then Jesus called the twelve together and gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal. He said to them, ‘Take nothing for your journey, no staff, nor bag, nor bread, nor money — not even an extra tunic. Whatever house you enter, stay there, and leave from there. Wherever they do not welcome you, as you are leaving that town shake the dust off your feet as a testimony against them.’ They departed and went through the villages, bringing the good news and curing diseases everywhere.” — Luke 9:1-6

“Drive out demons! Cure diseases! Preach the kingdom of God! Heal the sick! And for heaven's sake, don't sweat the details. Don't pack a bunch of stuff, trying to prepare for anything that might come up.

Just go. Stay with folks that you meet, whomever receives you.” And remarkably — before the twelve could have possibly understood all that Jesus was saying — they set out and went.

Jesus organized another learning tour with seventy additional disciples shortly thereafter (Luke 10:1-12). His pre-travel information to this larger group was equally sparse. Again, “Don’t pack a bunch of stuff. Stay with folks who invite you in. Eat what is set before you. Expect not to be too comfortable. After all, I’m sending you out like lambs among wolves.” And they went — again. The seventy returned with joy and in amazement at all they had seen and experienced on their trip (Luke 10:17).



Young people from the PMP churches in Argentina travel together with a youth delegation from Illinois in the Argentine church vehicle — a 1961 Mercedes Benz mobile home — to visit Patagonia mission locations in 2004.

As our group of five learners from North America traveled together, getting to know the congregations in Patagonia and experiencing the Patagonia Mission Project (PMP) in action, we, too, were surprised by the overflowing joy demonstrated by the leaders of the congregations and mission team members, as they shared their struggles and successes with us. Clearly “mission” for them — while requiring much prayer, preparation, commitment and even the sacrifice of material goods — was a joyful exercise in trust and dependence on God. More than that, it was the way of “being the church.” Almost everything in the life of each congregation we visited appeared to revolve around finding ways to meet and welcome strangers, to learn and grow with them, and to celebrate together as the kingdom expanded.

For much of the 20th century, “mission,” for many North American Mennonite churches, meant sending persons out to work in other countries, establishing and developing programs at the hands of “specialists,” who were trained in the intricacies of outreach and evangelism. Because of this approach and mindset, today, many people in the local North American settings have lost the ability, and even the willingness, to share faith stories with their neighbors. Doing mission work feels onerous on top of all of our other responsibilities. We give it short shrift, and it remains one of many “programs” in our congregations.

By contrast, Jesus’ disciples, who barely understood the full importance of Christ’s mission on earth, learned to share the good news of the kingdom, as they obediently *went out* when Jesus sent them into the surrounding towns and villages. Mission was local: sharing stories, making friends, meeting needs, relying on God’s care for them. For the disciples, “mission” was a learn-as-you-go exercise in trust.

Such is true, too, we discovered, for our South American sisters and brothers for whom mission is very natural, incredibly rich and wonderfully blessed work. For almost every one of the dozen or so congregations we visited, being missional simply involves making friends and inviting neighbors — old and new — to experience for themselves the joy of reconciliation, through the death and resurrection of Jesus, and the total restoration that God offers.



Teams from established Argentine churches travel together to other communities and spend time visiting with people, listening to their stories, praying with them, and inviting them to a new or deeper commitment with Christ.

**Common traits of missional congregations.** Without exception, pastors and leaders of the congregations were eager to share their growing points with us, and we noted common traits in the various ways their churches are being missional.

- 1. Developing a strategy.** First, nearly all of the congregations have a mission strategy. In Choele Choel, Delbert Erb, a mission worker serving in retirement with his wife Frieda Erb, declared that “a missional church will not decorate with banners, but, instead, with maps.” And maps were everywhere, noting strategic places where contacts have been established, mission work has begun, mission work has been established or churches have been started. Those maps are prayed over weekly.
- 2. Calling and sending missionaries.** Second, each congregation actively calls and sends missionaries into the mission field — whether that is to a town far away or to a neighborhood down the street. As many as are able prepare for the work through their local training institute in Choele Choel, the *Seminario Intensivo Misionero* (SIM, Missionary Intensive Seminary). Bible study and spiritual growth classes are central, as are studies in Anabaptist roots. Students are offered orientation and experience in missionary work at the congregational level. The SIM group that we observed included a couple of young men in their early 20s, a truck driver, a housewife and bi-vocational pastors.



Photo by Cathy Schmid

Pastor Edgardo Sánchez shows visitors Leslie and Gladys Harder the northwest zones of Patagonia, where the Neuquén Mennonite Church coordinates the PMP mission outreach.



Delbert Erb leads one of the missionary training classes with students participating in the SIM program in 2012. Some participants serve locally, while others feel called to share God's love in more distant locations.

**3. Living in solidarity.** Third, missionaries are willing to get out of their comfort zones and live in solidarity with others. The Christians we met understand that Jesus calls us to leave our safe places and “to be on the way to [those places] where God’s purposes have power.”<sup>3</sup> As Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 8:9, “For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.”

It was clear to us, in talking with a wide variety of local mission workers, that choosing to live in solidarity with others brings consequences. Sacrifice is clearly one of them but, most especially, so is the joy of mutual relationships with others unlike themselves. Friendships that cross the divisions of class, education, race, ethnicity, age and ability are gained, and these are seen as crucial for reconciliation and the life of the church.

We saw in the Argentine congregations a clear understanding that the church’s common life is about taking the gospel to people who have not yet heard the good news; living abundantly in fellowship with one another, no matter the differences between them; and being good disciples, by building neighborhoods of shalom. Truly, those that “go” have eyes to see, ears to hear and hearts to respond.

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<sup>3</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Bible Makes Sense*, Revised Ed. (Cincinnati: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2003), 51.



Men in a program for drug rehabilitation, which is run by Osvaldo and Miriam Monroy of the Mennonite church in Roca, enjoy sports as part of their journey towards a healthy lifestyle.

### **Reconciliation, restoration and resurrection — salvation indeed!**

Salvation for our Christian brothers and sisters in South America does not seem to be uniquely oriented as life after death but, instead, concerns the restoration of life to the way God meant it to be lived — healthy, whole, shalom-bringing, abundant life in Christ in the here and now. By making friends and sharing the good news, the missionaries share the message of salvation, so that people find purpose in their lives and receive healing in their whole being. In some cases, they distribute food and clothes and collaborate in the tasks of building churches or homes for people in need.

**What will our response be?** Walter Brueggemann reminds us that “to bring people home is God’s work. But it is work entrusted to us. We are also called to deal with the homelessness of our time. That means to transform public institutions that are a part of the alienating process. But it also means caring intervention in people’s lives to end estrangement and to give people a sense of belonging. . . . Our vocation is to end exile and bring people to a sense of being home.”<sup>4</sup> In other words, as the body of Christ, our task is to offer all whom we meet reconciling and restorative salvation — new life in Christ and a new home with the people of God. Resurrection, indeed.

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<sup>4</sup> Brueggemann, *The Bible Makes Sense*, 71.

On our learning tour to Argentina, we were presented with three key challenging questions that we all would do well to consider:

1. *Do we have eyes to see others as God sees them?* Do we allow Scripture to inform and transform the way we perceive the world and those who live in it, so that we can see the needy, the lonely, the hungry, the estranged and the misguided in our midst? Are our eyes working properly, so that we can be useful to God?
2. *Do we have ears to hear God's word in all its fullness, as it speaks into our lives and invites us to be transformed into Christ's likeness?* Indeed, do we have ears to hear the cries of our neighbors? Are we even listening? Are our ears functioning properly?
3. *Do we have hearts that are able to respond to Christ's presence in others?* Can we be good neighbors when Jesus comes to us in the disguise of the stranger, the prisoner, the one who is naked, or the one who is hungry for companionship and bread? Henri Nouwen reminds us that "Mission-workers go where there is pain, not because we are masochists, but because God is hidden in the pain and suffering of the world."<sup>5</sup> After all, Jesus' name is Emmanuel, which means, "God with us" (Matthew 1:23). Are our hearts as tender toward others as Jesus would have them be?



Juan and Amaris Sieber receive prayer for their ministry, which has included mission work in both Patagonia and Illinois.

<sup>5</sup> Henri J. M. Nouwen, with Michael J. Christensen and Rebecca J. Laird, *Spiritual Direction: Wisdom for the Long Walk of Faith* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), 135.

## Calling forth workers to plant a business and a church — a ministry initiative of the *Visión Evangelística y Misionera de la Región Central (VEMCE)*<sup>6</sup>

Mónica Canan, from Villa Mercedes, San Luis, needed a solid fence around her property, so a neighbor gave her Ramón Godoy's phone number. Canan reflected, "He gave me confidence in how he spoke as a man; he was very respectful. He talked with me about the love of Christ and the impact of this love in the relationship he has with his wife and in their family, with their daughters. It was all very clear. Then, his wife, Mariana Romero, came to visit me at the house. Woman to woman, it's better. One can talk more profoundly about everything ... I said 'yes,' I want to receive Christ in my heart. That's how it was." Canan said that, since she came to know the Lord, her life has totally changed. "Today," she said, "I can be in peace, feel joy and enjoy every day. Despite each person's struggles, everything really changes."



In Villa Mercedes, Mónica Canan (far left) and her daughter, Loana, talk with church and business planter Ramón Godoy, about how his arrival to build the fence pictured behind them transformed their lives. More important than the fence is their commitment to Christ and a church that became family for them.

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<sup>6</sup> Editor's note: The missiology of the mission work in the Patagonia region of southern Argentina, described above by Cathy Schmid, influences ministries elsewhere, as can be seen in the stories from the central and northern parts of the country. These stories — written by Linda Shelly, Mennonite Mission Network's director for Latin America, after a series of interviews with Argentine missionaries — represent only some of the many stories that could have been recounted here.

It was in February 2010 that Ramón Godoy, Mariana Romero and their two young daughters, Ludmila and Priscila, arrived in Villa Mercedes, after leaving the city of Carlos Casares. They had a strong sense of calling and believed in the vision of their pastor, Sergio Curto. As they looked at the empty lot Curto had purchased, Curto shared his vision for a business, a house for the pastoral family, fruit trees and a church. Godoy reflected, “It seemed a long way off.”

The first years were difficult, but they had support. Their church in Carlos Casares made and sold *pasteles* — a popular Argentine pastry — to help raise funds. In addition, the Carlos Casares congregation was part of the VEMCE mission program, in partnership with a cluster of eastern Pennsylvania-based Atlantic Coast Conference Mennonite congregations. Godoy reflected, “We rented an apartment. VEMZO,<sup>7</sup> with U.S. support, paid the rent. . . . Some months we had very little: enough for lunch but not for supper. We believed in what God had placed in us. This was not just a whim but a vision from God for our lives.”

The business helped them meet people. In the process of working in homes, they made contacts, developed friendships and shared meals together. Romero explained, “The intention has always been that we could get to know families through their purchase of the product and the work that the men do in the homes; like in the home of Mónica, in some other homes, Jesus has arrived through this work.”

Eleven years later, the once-empty lot now holds a thriving business, two houses, fruit trees and a church building in progress. Thirty-two people have been baptized and church participation hovers around fifty. Two other young Argentinian families have arrived to help in the ministry. The business provides employment for about six people, some of whom came to Villa Mercedes looking for work and are now a part of the church. Some members have begun to think about returning to their home communities to share their new-found faith. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the church followed the example in the book of Acts, meeting in homes in groups of 10, sometimes more with children.

“Now God has given us a new vision,” Godoy explains, “that Villa Mercedes will be the mission center for this zone. From here, pastors and workers will go out to extend the kingdom in other cities — in

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<sup>7</sup> VEMCE was initially known as VEMZO.



Ramón Godoy, Renso Adami and Jonathan Curto work together to plant both a church and a business.

San Luis, Mendoza, San Juan and Córdoba — places where we are now visiting. Here, couples and young people will be prepared to be sent to extend the kingdom of God to more places in Argentina.”

Indeed, this is the vision of VEMCE. Coordinator Daniel Oyanguren explains the three steps in VEMCE’s mission strategy: (1) Training, through workshops and a more formal program, called *Seminario Intensivo Misionero Menonita* (SIMM, Mennonite Missionary Intensive Seminary), in their region; (2) Serving in short-term opportunities; and (3) Being sent to start a business and a church. The business will support the workers and some costs of the mission project, in addition to providing needed jobs for people in the community. Developing a business, together with a church, motivates Mennonite businesspeople to invest in the projects.

Godoy now serves as a coordinator and consultant, helping new business initiatives. “We don’t want future workers to go through the same needs we did at first. This was the pioneer vision, so we needed to go through it, but today, the business gives support to VEMCE, which sends workers with a vision for business initiatives and church planting to other places.”

Pastor Javier Miguel coordinates the training portion for VEMCE. He is pastoring in Pellegrini, which is the location of one of the early Mennonite mission projects. What is now known as VEMCE originated as a vision of churches in the historic central region of IEMA, to plant churches in neighboring communities, especially ones where a Mennonite church had been started in the past but failed to survive.

At the Argentine church and mission centennial celebration in September 2019, Daniel Oyanguren focused on discipleship as critically important and challenged people with these words: “What is the example that you are going to give people around you? ... If we want to transform lives, we need to be disciplers.” Godoy applies this counsel to his daily life and says that discipling others means “being honest in all the work we do, being Christians 24 hours a day. We always show that we love God first.”



In a partnership meeting, Daniel Oyanguren, Ramón Godoy and Javier Miguel explain the mission strategy of VEMCE to Sara Wiegner (Akron, Pennsylvania) and Stephen Crane (Ridgeview, Pennsylvania), who were representing a cluster of Atlantic Coast Conference congregations in partnership with VEMCE. (All names listed left to right.)



Mariana Romero and Ramón Godoy, with their daughters, Ludmila and Priscila, have served in Villa Mercedes since 2010.

# Over two decades of developing

In the mid-1990s, a movement towards partnerships brought the mutual value of relationships that encourage and inspire mission into focus for both *Iglesia Evangélica Menonita de Argentina* (IEMA) and Mennonites in the United States. These relationships became known as Global Mission Partnerships. With time, Mennonite Mission Network helped develop four partnerships in Argentina. One of the features of these partnerships is travel in both directions, between North and South America, which allows mutual relationships to form. Partnerships generally don't continue forever but the relationships often do.

1. **The Patagonia Mission Project (PMP)** was the first mission program to develop and form a partnership. Their partner, known as "Arm in Arm," was a group of churches and individuals in Illinois. This story has been documented in the *Missio Dei* booklet series as "The Patagonia Story, No. 9," and is available for free online, in both English and Spanish: [www.MennoniteMission.net/MissioDei9](http://www.MennoniteMission.net/MissioDei9). In addition to partnership travel, learning tours have also offered participants the opportunity to experience mission firsthand in Patagonia. The feature by Cathy Schmid in this booklet, "Eyes to see, ears to hear, hearts to respond" (pages 4-11), illustrates, in the context of PMP, some of what North Americans have found inspiring in Argentine mission work.
2. The **Evangelistic and Missionary Vision of the Central Region (VEMCE)** originated in the early 2000s, as a vision of congregations in the historic central region of IEMA to plant churches in neighboring communities, especially ones where a Mennonite church had been started in the past but hadn't survived. This regional group of Argentine churches entered a ministry partnership with a cluster of Atlantic Coast Conference Mennonite congregations in eastern Pennsylvania. In each location, and in diverse ways, congregations sought renewal within and energy for mission beyond themselves. The Villa Mercedes story on pages 12-15 illustrates this partnership.

# Global Mission Partnerships

3. The third Argentine church-planting mission program, the **Missionary Program to Northern Argentina (PROMINOA)**, partnered with what was then the North Central Conference of the Mennonite Church (NCC) in the United States, as both faced the challenges of trying to do mission work across long distances within each of their regions. PROMINOA coordinator Sergio Flores said, "There really is a very beautiful relationship of fellowship in which language does not set a total barrier. We can communicate. Sometimes, in our eyes, we can understand that we are loving each other as the Lord says. I want to highlight this. It has been a huge blessing." The Tafi Viejo story on pages 18-20 illustrates this partnership.
4. The fourth partnership differs from the other three and focuses on the ministry of the **Argentina Chaco Mennonite Team** among Indigenous peoples in the northeast (see pages 20-24 of this booklet). In this partnership, mission work with Indigenous evangelical churches was carried out for decades by Mennonite Board of Missions (MBM) — a predecessor agency of Mennonite Mission Network — and then entered a new era, with leadership from mission workers from the Argentine Mennonite Church of Bragado. Two Ohio Mennonite congregations — Sonnenberg Mennonite Church in Kidron and Pike Mennonite Church in Elida — have partnered with the Bragado congregation to provide support for the workers through Mission Network. This story has been recounted by Willis G. Horst in *Toba Spirituality: The Remarkable Faith Journey of an Indigenous People in the Argentine Chaco*, in the *Mission Insight* series, No. 19, edited by James R. Krabill (Elkhart, Indiana: Mennonite Board of Missions, 2001), and more recently in *Mission Without Conquest: An Alternative Missionary Practice*, by Willis Horst and Ute and Frank Paul (Carlisle, UK: Langham Global Library, 2015). For English, see: [www.MennoniteMission.net/MissionWithoutConquest](http://www.MennoniteMission.net/MissionWithoutConquest); and Spanish: [www.MennoniteMission.net/MisiónSinConquista](http://www.MennoniteMission.net/MisiónSinConquista).

## Sending workers “back home” to share their faith — the *Programa Misionero al Norte de Argentina* (PROMINOA)

“Returning to Tafi Viejo to serve in this place is a very good experience, because I was born in the town of Tafi Viejo,” says Gloria Roldán. As a child, Roldán participated in Bible school, and she remembers that “what I asked for, I had to ask in Jesus’ name.”

With the passage of time, her family, like so many others, went to live in Buenos Aires. She met her husband, Orlando Rodas, in the Mennonite church at kilometer 30, while Delfin (Nacho) Soto was the pastor.

Rodas was 11 years old in 1976, when, during the civic-military dictatorship in Argentina, men arrived at his house and took his father. After this happened, the family never saw his father again. In 1987, a law was issued that gave a lifetime pension to the children of *los desaparecidos*, “the disappeared ones.” Rodas first saw it as receiving money for death. Then, he spoke with Pastor Soto and recognized that



Orlando Rodas and Gloria Roldán returned to Gloria’s home community of Tafi Viejo as missionaries in 2015.

it was simply due to him by law. It was an eight-year process, but the pension began in March 2015. Roldán said, “Thank God. With this pension we can manage. We told the Lord that we wanted to have our own finances in order to serve full-time.”

According to Rodas and Roldán, “The best gift our pastor left with us was teaching us missionary work ... we were taught Matthew 28, to go out to all the world.” As some brothers and

sisters in the congregation made frequent trips to northern Argentina, where there were many fewer Christian witnesses, Rodas and Roldán prepared themselves to move to Tafi Viejo.

Sergio Flores, the current coordinator of *Programa Misionero al Norte de Argentina* (PROMINOA, Missionary Program to Northern Argentina) explains, “The various mission locations in the north arose from contact with people who accepted the Lord in the churches

here, in Buenos Aires, who, then, returned to their places of origin for different reasons. This was due, in part, because they wanted to return for their family or for work, but, above all, they had a desire to be able to talk with their relatives about what they found in Christ. ... PROMINOA tries to provide them with the means to use their lives for planting a church to communicate the good news even more.”

In 2015, Rodas and Roldán felt it was time to go live in Tafi Viejo. PROMINOA was in a partnership with a U.S. conference, what was then the North Central Conference of the Mennonite Church. PROMINOA invited a group from North Central to

come work with them in the construction of a pastoral house, where the couple would live. Rodas said, “It was an experience of putting our hands to work in construction ... I had the privilege of teaching the visitors to work with blocks ... we have beautiful memories of this work ... we experienced friendship and fellowship with them.”

There was a church building from an earlier effort, but it was in need of repair. The Mennonite church of Tres Lomas in the Central Region sent funds and found a truck driver who traveled with his truck empty to Tafi Viejo to bring back a load of honey. Tres Lomas decided to send used clothes in the truck to sell for the new initiative. “People bless us by buying clothes,” says Roldán. “And they say that we bless them, because they can buy the clothes.” With profits from the sales, Rodas and Roldán repaired the church building and purchased chairs, fans and audio equipment.

The church-planting couple has developed many friendships in the community. A group of about 20 people gathers for fellowship, and recently, they named five people as collaborators in the ministry.



Photo by Tammy Yoder

Juan Carlos López (on the ground), Orlando Rodas, Sergio Flores and Bryant Swiers (left to right) work together to build a house for Orlando Rodas and Gloria Roldán.



Photo provided by PROMINCA

Children in Tafi Viejo enjoy fun activities in the street in front of the church. These activities were organized as a part of mission outreach.

In addition, Rodas and Roldán make visits in other communities. Smiling, they say they want to give a good testimony and bless children, adolescents and the entire community.

## **Walking alongside Indigenous evangelical churches — the Argentina Chaco Mennonite Team**

Alfonsina Finger grew up in Bragado, in Central Argentina. While still a child, a friend invited her to the Mennonite church. Then, she attended the Mennonite youth camp and met two people who would play important roles in her life: a friend, Emily Horst; and her future husband, José Oyanguren.

She listened with interest as Emily Horst shared about the work that her parents, Byrdalene and Willis Horst, did with Indigenous evangelical churches in the northeastern Chaco region. Mennonite Board of Missions (MBM) began work in the Argentine Chaco in 1943. In the 1950s, the focus shifted from planting Mennonite churches to accompanying the emerging Indigenous churches, focusing especially on the translation of the Scriptures into Indigenous languages. The missionaries had learned that Indigenous believers planting and leading churches in their own cultural ways were far more effective, and prioritized working with leaders to translate Scriptures into their languages.



Photo provided by Mennonite Church USA Archives

Albert Buckwalter (seated on the ground in the center) listens to a recorded Toba Qom sermon, together with Indigenous brothers and sisters. Soon after Albert and Lois Buckwalter's arrival in 1950, the focus shifted from planting Mennonite churches to accompanying Indigenous churches, especially in the translation of the Scriptures into Indigenous languages.



The Mennonite Team in the Chaco, pictured here in 2006, grew to include workers from Argentina, Germany and the United States between 1995 and 2011.

Byrdalene Horst recounts, “When Alfonsina was 17 years old, she became interested in missions, and in 1994, she came to Formosa for a week to visit Emily and to learn about our ministry.” Finger and Oyanguren married, and then, they continued their education in Córdoba. “It was early in 2003,” said Oyanguren, “and we were

servicing in Agua de Oro, a small town in the mountains of Córdoba, supporting a church plant. In those days, we received a visit from Willis Horst, coordinator of the Mennonite Team in the Chaco.” Finger and Oyanguren visited the Chaco, participated in a retreat and were invited to join the team.

Finger recalls, “After several more trips to the Chaco to get to know the Indigenous communities and churches, we moved to Castelli in January 2004.” From 1995-2011, the Mennonite Team included workers from the United States, Argentina and Germany, and served



Photo provided by the Oyanguren family

Alfonsina Finger and José Oyanguren, with Emilia, Felipe, Juan and Tomás, began serving in the Chaco city of Castelli in 2004. Since 2011, they have coordinated the Mennonite Team ministries with Indigenous brothers and sisters.



Indigenous students who benefit from the high school degree completion program at the *Centro Educativo Sajaten* (Qom Knowledge Educational Center) gather for a photo.



Photo provided by the Sociedad Bíblica Argentina

A procession of church members in Fortín Lavalle, Argentina, celebrates the arrival of complete Bibles in the Toba Qom language in 2015.

as an intercultural, interdenominational, international team. The group provided the coordination and support that facilitated Indigenous leaders in completing a full translation of the Bible into the Toba Qom language, as well as study guides and audio Scriptures. They also facilitated Scripture ministries with the Mocoví and Pilagá people.

As the other workers retired or entered different life stages, Finger and Oyanguren built a house in Castelli and made plans for long-term ministry. Through Mennonite Mission Network, Pike Mennonite Church and Sonnenberg Mennonite Church in Ohio joined with the Bragado congregation in supporting Finger and Oyanguren, to ensure that more of their time would be available for ministry, while also caring for their family of four children: Emilia, Felipe, Juan and Tomás.

Finger and Oyanguren developed strong relationships with local Indigenous leaders, together developing a series of significant ministries — a Toba Qom library, a Bible institute, a high school degree completion program, a recording studio and radio station — all now housed at the *Centro Educativo Saʒaten* (Qom Knowledge Educational Center). As advocates for bilingual education, Finger and Oyanguren worked with others to set up a certified bilingual teacher training program and have developed many educational materials.

Recognizing that the print Bible can't reach everyone, Finger and Oyanguren coordinated an oral project with the Argentine and Bolivian

Bible societies, engaging 33 readers from eight denominations and 12 Indigenous communities, to create a full recording of the Toba Qom New Testament. Accompaniment of the Indigenous churches has always been an important part of the Chaco ministries, and Finger and Oyanguren continue to visit Toba Qom churches and take part in special celebrations.

## **Conclusion – Remembering forward**

Celebrating 100 years of mission work in Argentina sets the stage for looking ahead. The IEMA mission programs have established their missiological approaches and ways of sending workers. Some workers start businesses, as well as churches, in new communities. Others return to their home communities to start churches, after developing a commitment to God in a distant city. Planting Mennonite churches is a goal for most of the mission programs, while in the Chaco region, Mennonites work together with Indigenous evangelical churches that are independent or part of other denominations, strengthening communities, through encouraging the use of Scriptures in Indigenous languages.

The first missionaries were sent from North America to South America. Especially during the past decades, serving and learning have become increasingly multi-directional. Together with IEMA, we look forward with hope to what God will do in the years ahead. To God be the glory.



**Note:** Places identified are ones mentioned in this booklet. IEMA has a presence in many more locations throughout the country.

## Timeline

**1917:** Arrival of the first Mennonite missionaries in Latin America: Mae and Tobias (T. K.) Hershey, Emma and Joseph (J. W.) Shank, and their families.

**1919:** The first baptisms in Pehuajó, to the west of Buenos Aires, resulting in the first congregation and the beginning of the Argentina Mennonite Church (IEMA). Missionaries focus on planting congregations along the railroad in towns where there are no evangelical churches.

**1920:** The Shank family moves to Trenque Lauquen to start a new church. Anita Cavadore, one of the first to be baptized in Pehuajó, joins the team as a home visitation Bible reader, Sunday school teacher and evangelist. The same year, Albano Luayza arrives to lead evangelism meetings. Luayza later becomes the first Argentine pastor in the Mennonite church.

**1923:** IEMA is formed and meets as a conference for the first time in Trenque Lauquen.

**1935:** Missionaries are sent to the Córdoba province, the first Mennonite work not along the railroad line west of Buenos Aires.

**1940:** Following the rural-to-urban migration, a Mennonite church is started in Buenos Aires. Twenty-five churches had already been planted in rural towns.

**1943:** Mennonite missionaries feel called to the Indigenous people of the Chaco in northern Argentina. Property is purchased 25 kilometers north of Sáenz Peña and named Nan Cum, "with the Indigenous." A church, school, clinic and vocational training program are established.

**1954:** In the Chaco, through the guidance of missionary anthropologists William and Marie Reyburn, the decision is made to shift from planting Mennonite churches to accompanying the emerging Indigenous churches, with a special focus on working with Indigenous people to translate Scripture into the Indigenous languages.

**1954:** A directive board, made up of Argentine and North American leaders, is formed and takes responsibility for IEMA. The previous North American missionary decision-making council is dissolved.

**1969:** At IEMA's 50th anniversary celebration, Floyd and Alice Sieber are commissioned to go south to Choele Choel and begin a new ministry in the Rio Negro valley of Patagonia.

**1994:** Patagonia Missionary Project (PMP) is birthed by the five pastors of the Rio Negro valley.

**1996:** Visits between Patagonia and Illinois Mennonites begin and lead to a mission partnership. This formal partnership ended in 2016, but the relationships continue.

**2003:** An exploratory visit from a cluster of Pennsylvania churches from the Atlantic Coast Conference leads to the formation of a partnership with VEMCE, which continues today.

**2004:** Alfonsina Finger and José Oyanguren are sent from the Bragado church in central Argentina to join in ministry with the Mennonite Team in Castelli, Chaco. Two Ohio Mennonite congregations — Sonnenberg Mennonite Church in Kidron and Pike Mennonite Church in Elida — join the partnership in 2006 and continue to be actively involved.

**2007:** Visits between North Central Conference in the United States and Argentine PROMINOA leadership result in a formal partnership that continued through 2017, with ongoing relationships today.

**2017:** Centennial celebrations in Choele Choel and Buenos Aires commemorate the arrival of the first Mennonite missionaries in Latin America.

**2019:** Centennial celebrations in Pehuajó and Bragado mark the founding of the first congregation in Argentina and the beginning of IEMA.

**Today:** The commitment to being a church in mission continues into IEMA's second century!

## Questions for reflection and discussion

1. What stuck out to you the most in these stories from the church in Argentina and their ministry partners in North America?
2. The Argentina Mennonite Church experienced a strong beginning with missionaries who were sent from North America. Why do you think it is important for the Argentine church to have their own mission strategy now?
3. How do you respond to the three challenges that Cathy Schmid shared from the people she met during her time in Argentina:
  - Do we have eyes to see others as God sees them?
  - Do we have ears to hear God's word in all its fullness, as it speaks into our lives and invites us to be transformed into Christ's likeness?
  - Do we have hearts that are able to respond to Christ's presence in others?
4. Delbert and Frieda Erb pointed to the maps decorating the church walls as a sign of a missional church. How do you think these maps help the church to focus its priorities? Do the decorations in your church communicate your priorities?
5. Daniel Oyanguren focused on discipleship as critically important and asked, "What is the example that you are going to give people around you? ... If we want to transform lives, we need to be disciplers." How did Ramón Godoy and Mariana Romero model this passion for discipleship to the people around them in the VEMCE story?
6. Gloria Roldán and Orlando Rodas, who serve with PROMINOA, shared their story of urban migration and their call to return home to share the good news of God's love. Have you or others you know felt that call to return to your roots and share God's good news in your home context?
7. Alfonsina Finger and José Oyanguren reported that, after a decade of ministry in the Chaco, the missionaries shifted from planting Mennonite churches to focusing on supporting Indigenous churches in Bible translation and ministries using Indigenous languages. Why do you think it is important for Indigenous people to worship and learn the Bible in their own languages and cultural contexts?
8. Each of the churches involved in ministry partnerships has brought gifts to share, and through working with others, the ministries have deepened and expanded. How is your church or your ministry enhanced and made stronger through relationships with others who bring different gifts and experiences?

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# Remembering forward: Celebrating a century of Mennonite Ministry in Argentina

Centennial festivities began in Argentina in 2017 to celebrate the arrival of the first Mennonite missionaries sent to Latin America. They were sent by Mennonite Board of Missions (MBM) — a predecessor agency of today's Mennonite Mission Network. Two years later, in 2019, *Iglesia Evangélica Menonita Argentina* (IEMA, Argentina Mennonite Church) commemorated the centennial anniversary of its first baptisms, which marked the beginning of the church. While expressing gratitude for their mission history in each of these events, IEMA focused on their current mission strategy, which includes regional mission programs and partnerships, and challenged the churches to move into their next century with energy and commitment.

This booklet shares mission strategies and stories from some of the current Argentine missionaries and raises important questions for any faith community interested in actively participating in God's mission. Readers should consider studying and discussing this booklet in small groups, Bible study circles and congregational Sunday school settings.



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