

# ***Ältester Martin C. Friesen (1889-1968): A Man of Vision for Paraguay's Mennogemeinde***<sup>1</sup>

**Titus F. Guenther**, *Canadian Mennonite University*<sup>2</sup>

[The Mennonites] will build a city in the [Paraguayan] Chaco – not a state within the state – and we, the people from Asunción, from Pilar, from Concepción, and from Villa Rica will go there to greet them; all who hunger and thirst for justice/righteousness will go to behold the Mennonite city, where the motto of our flag – peace and justice – is seen burning in the hearts of these citizens who honour the name of God, and who will not shed the blood of their neighbours nor that of their enemies, and they will not grow rich at their neighbour's expense.<sup>3</sup>

## **Preamble**

These words from one of Paraguay's leading newspapers in 1921 show what high expectations that country's government had for the prospective immigrant Mennonites. Would the newcomers be able to fulfill these promises in the coming years? Or would they disappoint their new hosts and prove right the critics who bitterly opposed the government's plan of welcoming this alternative faith community to pioneer in the inhospitable Chaco? This article seeks to answer this question.

On June 25, 2002, the Menno Colony in the Paraguayan Chaco celebrated its 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Together, North Menno (or Old Menno) and South Menno, consist of some 80 villages with 9146 inhabitants.<sup>4</sup> Of the 1763 Canadian immigrants that settled in Paraguay in 1927, nearly one tenth (167 persons) still lived in the colony and were able to participate in the celebration of their lengthy sojourn in that country.<sup>5</sup>

Several significant achievements can be noted about Menno Colony today. First, although the emigration from Canada to Paraguay resulted from an uncompromising stand on private, church-centred education, the Menno community has thoroughly overhauled and "updated" its education system in the intervening decades. Besides

transforming schooling on the elementary level, it has also created quality high schools and helped to establish a university-level teacher training school. And it has played an important role in the founding and running of a theological seminary, Centro Evangélico Menonita de Teología Asunción or CEMTA, as well as the Evangelical University of Paraguay.

Second, this group's church life in Canada was austere and form-bound, while in Paraguay, over time, far-reaching innovations have been carried out. For example, a more collegial district church leadership has replaced the *Ältester* (elder) system in the *Mennogemeinde* (Menno Colony church) and choral singing and musical instruments have been introduced in worship as well as a freer style in the delivery of sermons.

Third, the emigrants left Canada without any interest in doing outreach mission. Yet after a time they enthusiastically engaged in mission work, which included service projects inside the colony boundaries and beyond. Critical observers from the outside, like anthropologist Jacob A. Loewen and historian James Juhnke, have praised particularly the Mennonite-Indian Mission Settlement project in the Chaco for its exceptionally holistic character.<sup>6</sup>

These developments happened not in spite of, but rather because of the values the community and its key leaders held when they decided to move to the country in which they would eventually build a prosperous new home. Much of this community advancement, it can be argued, is attributable to the creative leadership of *Ältester* Martin C. Friesen. The Elder knew how to promote and implement reform in church and school at a pace that brought significant change but did not alienate the sizeable conservative segment in that community. Only a small number eventually separated from the *Mennogemeinde*, leaving for Bolivia in the 1950s because things were "going too far" in Paraguay. A history of the life and work of Elder Friesen will help readers understand better the history of the colony as a whole.

### Biographical Data

*Ältester* Martin Cornelius Friesen "was born on the east side of the Red River in the village of Osterwick (later renamed New Bothwell) [in] southern Manitoba and died in [Loma Plata] Menno Colony, Chaco, Paraguay. He was the [fifth] son of Cornelius T. and Katharina Friesen who had emigrated from Bergthal Colony, Russia, to Manitoba in 1875." Thus begins the terse sketch of the elder's life-story in *The Mennonite Encyclopedia* by Martin W. Friesen, the late historian and archivist of Menno Colony and eldest son of Martin C. Friesen.<sup>7</sup> It also notes that

“Martin attended elementary school and later took initiative for study on his own, particularly in theology,”<sup>8</sup> which suggests that although he never attained formal higher education, he nevertheless exhibited a hunger for learning.

Other specific biographical details could be added. His paternal grandparents were Cornelius B. and Anna (Toews) Friesen, who came from the village of Bergthal, in Bergthal Colony, Russia, in the 1870s and his great-grandparents were Peter and Anna (Banman) Friesen.<sup>9</sup> His father, Cornelius T. Friesen, served as chair of the *Waisenamt* (trust fund for orphans) for 29 years. Katherina, his mother, died in 1908 when Martin was 19, and he also lost a brother to typhus. Martin, himself, was laid up for weeks with the same illness in 1909, but he recovered. (No doubt, this experience with serious illness proved to be valuable preparation for the future leader when the migrants would be plagued by the same sickness in Paraguay in 1927). On June 1, 1909, after his recovery, he was baptized by Elder Peter Toews, thus becoming a member of the Chortitzer Mennonite Church. Martin’s father, having lost his first wife, married Gertruda Dyck Wiebe in 1909, thereby bringing together two large families. Two years later Martin married his stepsister Elisabeth Wiebe, who also came from a prominent Chortitzer family, her father being Heinrich D. Wiebe, the son of Ältester Gerhard Wiebe (1827-1900). His marriage to Elisabeth lasted 57 years, and produced three sons and four daughters.<sup>10</sup> In 1924 Martin was elected minister in the Chortitzer church and then in 1925 at the age of 36 he was chosen Ältester.<sup>11</sup> He would serve in this office for 41 years, stepping down only two years before his death in 1968.<sup>12</sup>

My own recollections about the elder include his occasional visits to our home in Menno Colony and of course the many church services in which he preached. On his visits to my family, the elder knew how to earn my affection as he paid me attention and talked to me. I got to hear Elder Friesen preach quite often and witnessed him conducting communion and baptismal services on Pentecost. His sermons were always pastoral, and consisted of engaging interpretations of biblical passages and, as I recall, a favourite passage of his was Romans 12.

By the time I reached conscious age, the *Mennogemeinde* had already undergone substantive innovation. For instance, externally it had done away with the unbearably hot *Predigerrock* (minister’s frock) and I cannot even remember a time when he himself still wore the frock. (According to my father, Elder Friesen first allowed the younger ministers to lay aside this formal attire in the 1940s.<sup>13</sup>) I also remember that he gave his ongoing support to innovative endeavours introduced by his son Martin W. Friesen. Martin W., for example, was among the first to organize a choir in Menno Colony’s Ebenfeld village. It was also in Ebenfeld that Martin W. in the 1950s first opened the

doors of the "Bible School" – a forerunner of the later *Zentralschule* (high school). In fact, Ebenfeld, eventually became an example and a resource for other parts of the colony.

### The Migration: Causes and Motives

Friesen's leadership role is most apparent during the migration to the Paraguayan Chaco in 1927, as well as in the life and development of the church and colony that followed. Leading a diverse group such as the Paraguay-bound Mennonites was not easy. Historian Martin W. Friesen explains: "The 1927 emigrants to Paraguay from Canada came from three different Bergthal Mennonite groups: 70 percent from the Chortitz congregation (located in Manitoba's East Reserve), 20 percent from the Sommerfeld congregation (in Manitoba's West Reserve), and 10 percent from the Saskatchewan Bergthal congregation (located in the Rosthern, Saskatchewan, area, and closely related to the Sommerfeld Mennonites)."<sup>14</sup> These groups made serious efforts to unite under one elder prior to the migration but failed to reach a formal agreement, even though they were otherwise agreed on the core convictions of their faith and on the necessity of the emigration, no less than a "divine command."<sup>15</sup> As will be explained further on, Friesen would play a central role in having these diverse groups get along in the Chaco.

One of the foremost concerns underlying the move to Paraguay, as Elder Friesen's writings show, was the education of their children. Citing a petition from October, 1920 to the government a good five years before he was ordained as elder, he identifies this concern by saying: "There is nothing in the world, for which we would hand over to others the important responsibility of the upbringing (*Erziehung*) of our children." And if the pressure toward a "religionless classroom" (*religionsloser Unterricht*) should continue, he warned, "we will be obliged to seek out a new homeland, where we and our children will be able to live by our faith."<sup>16</sup>

The reason for leaving Manitoba in Friesen's mind, therefore, was not scarcity of land or worries of military conscription, motivations in some previous Mennonite migrations. In fact, the fear of the imposition of universal military conscription that, according to the elder, arose for Mennonites as early as 1916, had soon dissipated when the government did not proceed with the dreaded legislation. Rather, as explained by fellow Menno Colony minister Abram A. Braun, the migration of 1927 was caused by the Manitoba government's intervention in the Mennonite church-based education during and after World War I.<sup>17</sup> As their petitions to the government reveal, especially disconcerting for these Mennonites was their experience of the suppression by the

government of religious and moral education in the classroom.<sup>18</sup> To achieve its aim of (supposedly) raising the educational level among the Mennonites,<sup>19</sup> and imposing the English language so as to assimilate the German, French and Ukrainian minorities,<sup>20</sup> the government installed English teachers in the community's schools. As the elder recalls, matters became especially difficult after the government imposed monetary fines or prison on those who would not co-operate, thus ending educational freedom for the Mennonites.<sup>21</sup>

While Elder Friesen mentions that the government schools, with their prescribed curriculum and their banning of religion from the classroom,<sup>22</sup> had to be conducted in English, this latter point was clearly a subordinate one, as it does not appear in the final petition cited above by Friesen. Rather, freedom of education and religion were at the heart of their concerns. Of course this "freedom" was dependent on their being able to use the language that they knew. Why was religious schooling so important? The petition spells this out: "For it is our conviction, that schooling without religion would be damaging to the moral formation of our children, would weaken their faith, or might even lead to the loss of faith."<sup>23</sup> Thus, the often presumed idea that Mennonites in Paraguay were so conservative and so fearful of the English language that they fled the country is without foundation. As Martin W. Friesen notes, the Mennonites insisted on being allowed to use German "alongside English"<sup>24</sup> and not necessarily to the exclusion of the latter.<sup>25</sup>

When negotiations with the Canadian and Manitoba governments remained fruitless, Elder Friesen and the Mennonites turned their sights on South America.<sup>26</sup> In 1921 they sent a delegation to Paraguay and it returned with a warm invitation from that country along with written guarantees of exemption from military service (Law #514) and freedom of education and religion. Six years later, in 1927, 266 families (1763 persons) emigrated to Paraguay.<sup>27</sup> The family of Martin C. Friesen left Canada on August 23, 1927 with the second last group of migrants.<sup>28</sup> His thinking on the issue of emigration is clear from a farewell service held on Sunday, August 21<sup>st</sup>, which filled the Chortitzer church to overflowing. His farewell speech was based on Jeremiah 51: 6: "Flee from the midst of Babylon, save your lives, each of you! Do not perish because of her guilt, for this is the time of the Lord's vengeance; he is repaying her what is due."<sup>29</sup>

Unfortunately, we have no evidence of how he interpreted that text. But surely all listeners were conscious of this being a significant move. The elder had sent off the first group on November 21, 1926 with the reminder that "This is a serious undertaking. We are in need of God's help and we need his grace. Jesus says 'Without me you cannot do anything'."<sup>30</sup> Another source reports a similar exhortation:

"Remember, without God you can do nothing. There is malice in the world; be alert. Pay attention to your children. When you reach your destination, do not forget to be thankful. Do not quarrel on the way, but try to practice love among yourselves."<sup>31</sup>

All too soon Elder Friesen was put to a serious test. The migrants met with disappointment when upon arrival they had to wait for months in Puerto Casado (the port town on the Paraguay River) before they could occupy their land, land which had yet to be surveyed. Many of the newcomers became sick with typhus and other ailments; about ten percent of the immigrants died and were buried in Puerto Casado. As Edgar Stoesz and Muriel Stackley record, Elder Friesen was bombarded by complaints from the men at church business meetings. Their complaints were numerous: "The children are sick. We have had to dig too many graves. Lines to the makeshift toilets are intolerable. The sand flies are unbearable. The mosquitoes are relentless." They continue:

Martin C. Friesen absorbed this verbal pounding for hours in that Puerto

Casado camp. These were reasonable folk whose frustrations had simply overflowed. One after another, their voices cracking with emotion, they reminded their *Ältester* (elder) that money and patience were being exhausted by the delay in Puerto Casado that should never have occurred. The land they had bought in the Chaco should have been surveyed before they arrived from Canada. When would they be permitted to possess the land they had bought?

The elder listened, then answered slowly:

It is hard. It will get harder. Why do we make it harder by disobedience and hesitation? ...I sense a spirit of service is lacking. We must not think "I have" but rather "we have." Have you spent your God-given strength and willing spirit to do your share of the work? Don't ask for things to come to you. Just be faithful in doing your duty...Aren't these just temptations? Is every bit of suffering too much for us? We have absolutely not been pushed to our limit.... Let's not crave the things our neighbors have. Lead a good life. Bring up your children with discipline and to honor God. Use God's word as a guide and be led by His Spirit.<sup>32</sup>

When, after their meeting with Elder Friesen, the men returned to their tents, their wives, not satisfied with their report, went as a group,

seeking to convince their leader “that the migration to the Chaco should be abandoned.” Martin C. “reminded them...that they came to Paraguay confident that it was God’s will. God would sustain them.”<sup>33</sup>

But holding the congregation together was difficult. The three groups that had left Canada came with two *Ältesten*; besides Elder Martin C. Friesen there was Elder Aaron Zacharias, who led the Saskatchewan Bergthaler group. Zacharias, however, became ill and died at age 56 in the temporary Bergthaler village Palo Blanco on October 10, 1928, thus “increasing the leadership load borne by Martin C. Friesen.”<sup>34</sup> In spite of Elder Friesen’s efforts to hold the emigrants to their course,<sup>35</sup> 323 of them did return to Canada, leaving between 1200-1300 people to begin the settlement in early 1928. In the end “one out of four either died or returned to Canada.”<sup>36</sup>

Still, it is clear that this young elder led with a sense of authority. Long-time colleague and minister Abram Reimer would assert much later that Friesen “was a born leader.” But his knowledge of sickness and death from personal experience -- his brush with typhus in Canada, for example -- also seem to have helped. He presumably understood and shared the people’s hardships and was described as a gentle but resolute leader. Being of robust build and health himself, he could perhaps bear more than most people. But he was also a person of deep piety, prayer and a life-long ardent student of Scripture. And he was humble. After patiently enduring complaints and abusive accusations from distressed fellow migrants, for example, his simple response was: “You are right, I am as bad as you say, and worse. It is only by the grace of God that I stand before you.”<sup>37</sup>

Time would heal these early conflicts between the elder and his people. When the newcomers finally reached their new land in present-day Menno Colony, they lost little time in carving out a new existence. They built simple adobe brick homes (many used thatch) along straight street villages and tried farming. Their grain seeds from Canada however proved unfit for these climes, so they had to switch to cotton, peanuts, castor beans, watermelons, manioc, and other more profitable crops.<sup>38</sup> That they achieved a modicum of comfort in a short time is attested to by the report of T.K. Hershey and Amos Swartzentruber, Old Mennonite Church mission workers in Argentina under the United States-based Eastern Board of Missions and Charities. Their home church in the U.S. had instructed Hershey and Swartzentruber to travel from Argentina to visit Menno Colony in early 1929 to investigate the reports in the media of great suffering among the new settlers. They issued the following report: “The hardest time for those Mennonite settlers in the Chaco has been overcome. The time of waiting [at Puerto Casado] was very difficult...It is hard to imagine what these people have gone through...Today, however, one

can see that they are of good cheer, generally content and are glad to finally be on their own land....”<sup>39</sup>

### Developments in Education

Martin Friesen would go on to provide special influence on the subsequent developments in Menno Colony in the overlapping areas of education and church life. To a certain extent he even influenced the economic sphere. The colony’s remarkable economic developments have been reported on by Stoesz and Stackley, by Mennonite Economic Development Agency’s <sup>40</sup> *The Marketplace* magazine and most recently by “insider” authors Abram Hiebert and Jacob Friesen<sup>41</sup> in connection with the colony’s 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary celebrations. However, while the elder was a member of the administration of the settlement initially, he soon handed this over to other capable persons. But he maintained an ongoing, intimate relationship with the colony administrators to the end of his life.<sup>42</sup>

His foremost concerns, however, were the church and the schools. The first church building in the colony was built in Osterwick, Elder Friesen’s village. Here it served also as a venue for larger colony-wide meetings such as *Bruderschaft* (church-brotherhood meetings) and perhaps *Koloniessitzung* (colony business meetings). Schools, however, were built in each village. In keeping with past tradition, these schools usually doubled as “churches” on Sundays. Schooling at this time consisted of the Russian Mennonite “classic” four components or levels: the Primer, the Catechism, the New Testament and the whole Bible. The educational objective and methods were simple, and have even been dubbed “medieval.” The objective was to teach pupils – boys age 7 to 14 and girls 7 to 12--to read, write and do arithmetic.<sup>43</sup> The teachers were laypersons or ministers, chosen by each village community.

Although this model prevailed in Menno Colony for about 25 years, the elder’s eldest son, Martin W. Friesen, eventually organized a summer school for teachers. This “upgrade” for teachers enabled them to introduce additional subjects from Germany’s school curriculum during the 1950s. During this same period, Martin W. also started a Bible School in Menno Colony, a forerunner of what soon became the *Vereinsschule*, then the *Zentralschule*, and finally *Escuela Secundaria* (High School) in Loma Plata. This Spanish nomenclature hints at the fact that gradually the national curriculum was introduced, including extensive use of Spanish, alongside German, a move that would later achieve recognition from Paraguay’s ministry of education.<sup>44</sup> Other innovations in the secondary schools became possible by generous



support received from Germany in the form of lab equipment, maps and textbooks. Moreover, Germany provided a salary supplement to German teachers in all schools of the Mennonite colonies for many years. This proved to be very helpful in a country in which the colonies had to create and maintain their entire social services and safety net, including the financing of their whole education system.

In the 1970s and 1980s, as a result of Elder Friesen's vision, and as the means of transportation were improved, district schools with teams of teachers replaced the one-room village schools. Also, as support for secondary education gradually grew throughout the colony, satellite *Zentralschulen* were opened in various regions of the colony. A report from around 1990 about primary and secondary schools states:

Eleven [district primary] schools are in operation with ca. 1,100 students [in 2001 - 1300 students] and 50 teachers. An accredited secondary school is operated in *Loma Plata*, with six branch schools in other areas [with some 600 students in 2001].<sup>45</sup> Fernheim and Menno [Colonies] together maintain a teacher training school (located in Fernheim) and an agricultur[al] school (located in Menno).<sup>46</sup>

During the same time Menno Colony became an active player in the development of two post-secondary institutions. The first one was set in motion in the 1960s when five Mennonite colonies co-founded the Mennonite *Lehrerseminar* (teacher training school) in Filadelfia. Later the *Lehrerseminar* began offering a complete university-level program with national recognition. The second university-level institution, of which the *Mennogemeinde*, a member of the *Vereinigung der Mennonitengemeinden von Paraguay*, was a co-founder in 1994, was the Evangelical University of Paraguay (*Universidad Evangélica del Paraguay* or the UEP), which by 2005 had about 1100 students.<sup>47</sup> Another more practically oriented inter-colonial training center was the *Berufsschule* (vocational school), which was located in Loma Plata, Menno Colony.

How did Menno Colony obtain teachers for upgrading its education? Elder Friesen proved to be resourceful also in this regard. He encouraged his son, Martin W., to become a self-taught pioneer in education.<sup>48</sup> Elder Friesen was in regular contact with his counterpart Elder Jakob Isaak of the neaby Fernheim Colony, founded by Mennonite refugees from the Soviet Union in 1930. The former surely received help from the latter in terms of ideas on how to foster education and obtain books for the advancement of his sons.<sup>49</sup> The leaders of Menno Colony also sent Andreas Sawatzky,<sup>50</sup> a young adult, to get more education in Asunción in the 1950s in order to teach in the *Vereinschule*. But

homegrown resources soon proved insufficient. Helmut Isaak (son of Elder Isaak) was hired by Menno Colony in the early 1960s and served in Menno for a number of years.

The hiring of Jakob Redekopp of the third Chaco Colony, Neuland, founded by a second wave of Soviet refugees in 1947, is a further indication of Elder Friesen's proactive approach. Redekopp at first declined the elder's invitation, whereupon Friesen remarked to Redekopp: "Yes, you *Neuländer* are like that. You like to make light of [Menno Colony's] poor education. But when one invites you to help out, you refuse." Shortly thereafter Redekopp joined the staff at the *Vereinsschule*, where he made a significant contribution.

Menno Colony eventually also obtained a number of teachers from Canada, including Hans Dueck, Abram A. Teichroeb, Franck Dyck, Theo Friesen, John and Edna Peters, and Frank and Marianne Zacharias and, from Germany, Gerhard Neufeld, and Michael and Maria Rudolph. These teachers helped to improve the calibre of Menno's education. A number of Latin Paraguayan teachers were also eventually hired for the Colony's *Escuela Secundaria*, located in the town of Loma Plata. All of these teachers worked alongside the numerous local colony teachers.

### Elder Friesen's Vision for the Church

Martin C. Friesen saw education as inseparable from the life of the church. That the formation of the young was of paramount importance to the elder and his church is evident in several early statements by him, as well as in the above quotation, which the elder highlighted from the church's 1920 petition to the Canadian government (cited above). His writings and the testimony of others indicate that in Friesen's view education required the colony's best efforts and depended on the support of both home and church. In a published sermon on "The True Church of Jesus Christ"<sup>51</sup> he discusses "sanctification" (defined as "turning away from evil and doing the good") and elaborates: "A life of sanctification has educational effects first in the family. It brings us to the cross of Christ, where we should lead our children also....The joy, toward which the human being tends from youth – and human beings are looking for joy – should be directed to the better way, so they may flee from self-centred joy and instead come to know joy in the Lord."

For Friesen, moreover, Christian education was aimed at building up the church: "When children are raised up on a biblical foundation, where a life of sanctification is cultivated and practiced, then the church has a good future. The good influence of father and mother, passed on to the children through the life of faith [of the parents], will receive

God's blessing" (March 16, 1969:1). The elder calls this "preventive church discipline" which begins in the family and is much preferable to "reactive" or "corrective" discipline. The elder did practice corrective discipline from time to time in the form of excommunication from the church but he was not in favour of the ban.

Abram Reimer, long-time fellow minister, noted in his eulogy at the elder's funeral that youth always had held a special place in the elder's heart: "His greatest joy was to know that the young people were constructively occupied." Conversely, "the undisciplined carrying on" of youth worried him greatly. One thing was very clear to him: "the youth of today is the congregation of tomorrow."<sup>52</sup> Not surprisingly, therefore, and as part of his "preventive church discipline," Friesen promoted a holistic program of building sound character in children and youth on a broad front. This caused considerable opposition from those who did not share his views, causing him to go through what Reimer calls "grievous and dark times."

In an editorial comment in Menno Colony's *Jubiläumssonderausgabe* (of *Menno informiert*), Andreas Sawatzky describes this opposition, and shows how Martin C. Friesen's original address, entitled, "The True Church of Jesus Christ and its Calling as Seen in the Light of the Gospel Teachings,"<sup>53</sup> openly challenged this conservatism. According to Sawatzky, this address was delivered at a *Bruderschaft* on October 1, 1955, precisely in order to address the "accusations" from the "tradition-bound church members." People who reproached Elder Friesen claimed that through his innovations in the church and the starting of a *Fortbildungsschule*, "the church under its ministerial leadership (but especially its elder) was abandoning the biblical teaching and becoming more and more worldly, indeed was taking the 'wrong way' [*Irrweg*]." "These innovations," the reproach went on, will "foster the very 'worldliness' for which we had left Canada." Sawatzky notes that in this speech Ältester Friesen argued that the "ministerial of Menno [Colony] wanted the exact opposite: through innovations and more programs like Bible study and choral singing... all of which can be defended with the Bible; [the *Lehrdienst*] was aiming to revive the church and lead it to a deeper reading of the Bible." Significantly, this speech was published in the *Mennoblatt* in 1969 as a sermon a year after the elder's death and republished in full again in 2002 in the Colony's *Jubiläumssonderausgabe*.

The rewards for these efforts indeed far outweighed the frustrations. Minister Abram Reimer noted that Elder Friesen "later also observed and enjoyed many blessings," including the youth ministry, and "experienced many a joyous hour listening to choirs and the singing of youth groups." The youth evidently reciprocated the elder's love for them by honouring him and his wife Elizabeth with musical

evenings on their birthdays in their later years. These welcome results did not come about easily or quickly. Martin W. Friesen sums up the process this way. Upon the arrival of the immigrants,

Churches and schools were established according to the old ways. Ältester Friesen soon recognized that these institutions were suffering severely, as they were too restricted by tradition. He worked hard for renewal, which however progressed very slowly but which did not come to a standstill either. A small group encouraged him in this endeavour.... Ältester Friesen was the right man for the right job at the right place and time. He challenged church and school to move beyond the practices of their ancestors and directed them towards spiritual renewal.<sup>54</sup>

Martin W. Friesen continues: "Originally the large majority of his parishioners were against this" reform to the point of making "an attempt at splitting the *Gemeinde*." The attempt, however, "was not successful and slowly but surely the impact of the new efforts widened and worked for the blessings of peace and unity," concludes Martin W.<sup>54</sup> More than successfully averting the threatened schism, Elder Friesen, with the help of able ministers, actually managed to win over the other two groups, the Saskatchewan-originated Bergthaler and Manitoba-originated Sommerfelder congregations, into one united *Mennogemeinde* under one ministerial leadership. Thus, in about "1950 the joint name 'Chortitzer Mennonite Church of Menno' was changed to 'Mennonite Church of Menno'."<sup>55</sup> Writer Peter Klassen, of neighbouring Fernheim Colony, calls this unification "one of the most remarkable phenomena" from the point of view of Mennonite history. "The three church groups [*Gemeinden*] came together in a few years into one; and this [unified] church in turn carried out the most radical reforms, without this leading to further splits," Klassen writes.<sup>56</sup> In one sense the conditions for this union were provided by the developments of the migration itself. The Sommerfelder had left Manitoba without their Elder Heinrich J. Friesen, who stayed with his church in Manitoba.<sup>57</sup> They thereby effectively joined the Chortitzer church already in 1928, actually placing themselves under Elder Friesen's leadership from the beginning. The Bergthaler, whose elder died in *Palo Blanco* in 1928, hesitated for a while but eventually joined the *Mennonitengemeinde zu Menno* or *Mennogemeinde* around 1950.<sup>58</sup> However, all three groups had in effect depended on the services of Martin C. Friesen as the overall elder all along.

Martin C. Friesen was the leading elder until he retired from the position in 1966, passing on his office to Minister Jacob T. Dueck as

his successor. But for many years already he had the assistance of two ordained assistants (*Hilfsältesten*), Martin T. Dueck in South Menno and Abram B. Giesbrecht in North (Old) Menno. Undoubtedly, Martin C's leadership, his style of collegiality, had laid the groundwork for the new developments in church leadership practice that were introduced around 1980: the centralized *Ältesten* system was deliberately replaced and the *Mennogemeinde* was reorganized (by ministerial action) into district churches with leading ministers in each district.

Perhaps it is not surprising that a church that conquered the historic separation of its constituent groups should also show increasing openness towards the larger Mennonite world body. We may note that the *Mennogemeinde* joined the *Vereinigung der Mennonitengemeinden von Paraguay* (Union of Mennonite Churches of Paraguay) as early as February 12, 1968, about two months before Elder Friesen's death.<sup>59</sup> But it did not stop with uniting churches in Paraguay. Martin W. Friesen could report further by 1990:

This [Menno] conference is a member of the General Conference Mennonite Church of North America, as well as of the Conference of Mennonites in South America,<sup>60</sup> the *Vereinigung der Mennoniten-gemeinden* in Paraguay, and the Chaco Mennonite Conference (the latter consists of all Mennonite congregations in Neuland, Menno and Fernheim colonies)<sup>61</sup>

This implies that the greater *Mennogemeinde* participates in one conference with Mennonite Brethren and Evangelical Mennonite Brethren churches of Fernheim and Neuland.

Martin W. Friesen characterizes church life in Menno around 1990 as follows:

[A]ctivities....take place in eleven large church buildings. Total membership is about 3,000 [4831 in 2001],<sup>62</sup> including 55 ministers and 40 deacons. The entire *Gemeinde* is divided into nine regions... [14 in 2002], with a leading minister responsible in each. Several local churches have organs. Each local church has a choir and musical instrument groups, which serve on Sunday mornings and on other occasions. Singing in harmony rather than unison has been practiced for some years already.<sup>63</sup>

As indicated above, these innovative changes are attributable in no small measure to its long-time *Ältester*. Historian Martin W. Friesen rightly notes:

Martin C. Friesen served as leading elder of the entire *Gemeinde* [practically from 1928] until 1966 and was responsible for many of the changes in congregational practice, as well as [for] the introduction of higher levels of education.<sup>64</sup>

A fuller description of other aspects of life in the Menno Colony would show the same type of collaboration with other Mennonite colonies in Paraguay in education, economic matters and in the remarkable Mennonite-Indian Mission Settlement project, during most of the history of the Chaco colonies.<sup>65</sup> Again, these aspects are summed up well by Menno Colony's resident historian, Martin W.:

Menno Colony has long cooperated with the other Chaco colonies (Neuland, Fernheim), as well as with Friesland and Volendam [in East Paraguay] in every possible way. It is also a member of the *Asociación de Servicios de Cooperación Indígena Mennonita* [Council for Indian & Mennonite Cooperation]. The colony also has its own relief organization, the *Comité de Asistencia Social* [the Social Assistance Committee], which seeks to help poor [Latin] Paraguayans in a special way. It is helped in this by the International Mennonite Organization of Europe.<sup>66</sup>

For many years Mennonite Central Committee North America has also rendered significant assistance in monetary terms and by way of consultation. Today, however, the Paraguayan colonies, including the mission-settlement project, are largely self-sufficient.

### Factors in Church Renewal

The above portrait of the life and work of Elder Martin C. Friesen, if sketchy, readily confirms Menno Colony Minister Abram Reimer's attestation: "He was a born leader, chosen for this by the people and confirmed by God." Fernheim Colony historian Peter Klassen also notes in relation to the Chortitzer group: "it had in its Elder Martin C. Friesen a powerful leader."<sup>67</sup>

Klassen also asks the question: "Where can we find the explanation for this process of change" that has occurred in the *Mennogemeinde*? He ventures some guesses:

The influences [may have come] from the neighbouring colonies. After many years of fearful avoidance followed a time of mutual openness. Contacts increased through joint

events, like faith and ministers conferences. Many young people from Menno developed relationships with the youth of the other colonies through shared educational institutions. Frequent visits by ministers from North America, many of them evangelists, did their part.<sup>68</sup>

But Klassen defers to Menno's "insider" historian for an additional explanation:

[Martin W.] Friesen however is of the opinion that the strongest influence derived from a will to change that was directed from within [came from]...Elder Martin C. Friesen, even if this will-to-change [*Wandlungswille*] initially found only a lukewarm reception. However, the circle of those who accepted his vision has steadily grown over time. In any event, the 'Mennonite Church of Menno' has by [1988] entered fully into a levelling process [*Nivellierungsprozeß*], which makes the Mennonite churches in Paraguay increasingly similar to each other.<sup>69</sup>

Neuland Colony historian Jakob Warkentin in connection with Menno Colony's 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary History Symposium has advanced another plausible reason for the opening up of the conservative people of Menno. Namely, when the worldly-wise Mennonite refugees (the Neuländer-to-be) arrived in the Chaco in the late 1940s, they were housed for several months in the homes of Fernheim and Menno Colony [the Mennos] residents. Through this the Mennos discovered that people with more education, who sang in four-part harmony, were lively and dressed colourfully, could still be genuinely committed Christians. In Warkentin's words, "the Mennos realized that... differentiated school system and a variegated church life need not lead to a falling away from God or the rejection of the faith tradition of their forebears, but offered genuine help" to the community against getting stuck in too strict a traditionalism. Moreover, argues Warkentin, the "ongoing interaction between the Neuländers and Mennos resulted in the gradual normalization of the relationship between Fernheimer and Mennos."<sup>70</sup>

We may grant that this encounter likely influenced significantly the opening-up process (which was a two-way process, according to Warkentin), but its beginnings had been stirring for some time, indeed from the colony's beginning as was noted above. But in the decade to follow, major changes took place which were evident everywhere.

### Theological Moorings of the *Mennogemeinde*

We have seen that the uniting of the various groupings of Menno Colony into one “conference” happened at least partly by default. But it is evident from Martin C. Friesen’s extant sermons that his patient yet persistent efforts at building unity was instrumental and was clearly built on a solid theological vision of the one true church of all committed Christians. In the sermon on “The True Church of Jesus Christ,” cited above, the elder declares that this church has two key characteristics. It must model a life of “sanctification” and of “unity” (not to be mistaken for uniformity). The conditions may have been favourable for uniting the three church groups into one *Mennogemeinde* from the outset, as suggested earlier.

We have already touched on the elder’s definition of “sanctification” above as “turning away from evil and doing the good.” On unity he writes: “Many organized churches exist but there is only one true church of Jesus Christ. This church was elected before the foundation of the world was laid (Ephesians 1:4) and its origin is in the suffering, death, and resurrection of Christ.” He then shows that “Christ himself laid the first stone” in Peter’s confession. “On this rock – the confession spoken by Peter – I will build my church. First [it was built on] Peter and the other Apostles and then on each individual disciple until today. On this ground each brother [and sister] must stand.”<sup>71</sup> On this personal groundedness the elder is emphatic: “Thus, not by baptism or the reception into the outward congregation do we become members of the church of Jesus Christ, but through regeneration [citing Titus 3:3-7 & Eph. 5:26-27]. Every one must personally speak the confession, worked by the Spirit of Christ (not just a memorized one): ‘You are the Christ, the Son of the living God’.”<sup>72</sup> In summary, says the elder,

The characteristics of the true church of Jesus Christ are that each person in it: 1) is grounded on the Rock of Jesus Christ, 2) has received forgiveness of sin through faith in Christ, 3) has received the Spirit of Christ, 4) walks on the road of sanctification, [and] 5) his[/her] name is written in heaven. This church is the light of the world. It is equipped with the Holy Spirit (John 20:22) and has received the task of mission, to be the bearer of the light and to proclaim the Gospel throughout the whole world.<sup>73</sup>

Clearly, Friesen’s Christ-centred understanding of the church contains an explicit theology of missions. He notes that “in order to be able to fulfill this great mission, it is important that the church pay attention to, and preserve/practice, these two conditions, ‘unity’ and



‘sanctification.’”<sup>74</sup> As biblical grounding and to sketch the content of this unity, Elder Friesen cites Jesus’ High Priestly prayer (John 17) and the Apostles’ Gathering (*Apostelversammlung*) in Jerusalem of Acts 15. At that gathering, he notes, unity remained “victorious” because “the Apostles wanted what the Holy Spirit wanted.” However, this is no mindless literalism for the elder. For he writes: “The model of that Meeting of the Apostles is exemplary in making decisions according to God’s will: They let the Word of God speak; they let themselves be led by the Holy Spirit; they also used their minds, they thought about things and took the circumstances into account. The goal of the Apostles was Jesus Christ. If one turns one’s gaze from this goal, things go badly”<sup>75</sup>

The elder makes sure to nuance the meaning of Christian unity, saying: “Christ wills like-mindedness and not uniformity.” Thus, while strongly pressing the personal dimension of Christian faith and life, he stresses with equal force the collective, churchly nature of Christ’s body: “The Spirit of Christ binds us together with God and unites the hearts, when [the Spirit] dwells in us. Therefore, ‘be zealous to preserve the unity in the Spirit and the bond of peace’”<sup>76</sup> For the elder this translates into a practical rule of thumb: “May the following also be our motto: ‘In the main thing unity, in secondary matters freedom, [but] above all love’.”<sup>77</sup>

### Summing Up

The goal and efforts of Elder Martin C. Friesen’s life were to renew and build up the “true church of Jesus Christ.” For Friesen this consisted of the ingathering of believers who were in living relationship with God in Christ, united in one living church body with all other believers, past and present. As he described it in a letter of 1927, these believers are not individualistic, saying “I have,” but rather say “we have,” and they are willing to suffer for and with Christ and serve one another. Though conversion and union with others were paramount for the elder, he held that ongoing sanctification was of equal importance to the health and growth of the church. The growth was to happen in two ways: a) by raising the young in “the way of the Lord” and incorporating them into the church, and b) by missionary witness to the world. Both tasks were to be realized primarily through the example of Christian living – of parents before the children, and the church before the watching world<sup>78</sup> – that is, by being bearers of the “Christ light.” In fact, the church’s unity and sanctification were to be the condition for fulfilling the calling to mission.

I have made limited reference to the mission initiatives of the Chaco Mennonites in their joint efforts between the various churches and

colonies. Though, as stated above, they originally had no intentions of undertaking mission in Paraguay, they have in fact practiced the "migration evangelism" that John H. Yoder wrote about in 1961 in his classic pamphlet on missions, *As You Go: the Old Mission in a New Day*.<sup>79</sup> The *Mennogemeinde*, in concert with neighbouring churches, has been actively engaged in the Indian-Mennonite Mission Settlement project, which has resulted in a church with about 7000 Indigenous church members from about a half dozen tribal societies. This is not to mention the additional educational, service and church outreach programs among Latin Paraguayans (in the Chaco and in East Paraguay) in which Menno Colony also strongly participates along with the churches from the neighbouring colonies.

The *Mennogemeinde* is, of course, not a perfect community. It faces major challenges about how to stay focused on striving for nothing else but building "the true church" in order to illumine the world within and around it. For all its work at creating a caring community with an elaborate social safety net, and for all its church renewal and updating of the education system, its total autonomy in all things (*Selbstverwaltung*) has placed this Christian community into its own kind of Constantinianism in a microcosm. This is becoming more evident as the third and fourth generations are coming onto the scene. Not all offspring are embracing a consciously Christian life and many have not responded to the elder's "preventive church discipline," although church attendance is surprisingly strong even today. Perhaps we could say that when the colony became prosperous, many parents became less diligent in attempting to model the sanctified life.

Nevertheless, the overall achievements of *Ältester* Martin C. Friesen are considerable, although he did not work alone. Just as the emigration to Paraguay was "a decision made by the Chortitzer Mennonite people as a whole,"<sup>80</sup> in which the church leaders acted as "discussion leaders," so in the Chaco the elder showed great skill in delegating tasks to co-workers and to the whole congregation.

Today the time of the *Ältesten* system is past in the Chaco. Now it is up to the current generation to be creative in finding ways of carrying on the work of God's kingdom, of leading through modelling and thereby inviting participation from members in the church as well as outsiders to join the church. We have indicated some ways in which they are rising to the challenge.

As *Ältester* Martin C. Friesen had lived for the church so he died in and for the church. When he felt death approaching he prayed for the grace to celebrate communion once more, which was granted to him. Following the celebration, he stood up to deliver a moving farewell speech. This included asking forgiveness for when he had shown insufficient love to his fellow-members. A couple of hours later he died

during his *siesta* (*Mittagschlaf*) in the hospital room where he was visiting his ailing wife. As his church in Chortitz, Manitoba, had sent him off to Paraguay in 1927, so his *Mennogemeinde* in Loma Plata gave him a moving farewell. The biggest church in Loma Plata was filled to overflowing as thousands – including many from the churches of the neighbouring colonies – came to say their goodbyes to their beloved leader of 41 years.

Indeed, in one way “a lifetime of kingdom work” had come to an end with the elder’s death. Yet, in other ways the seeds sown in his lifetime have sprouted and are still prospering in thousands of Christian lives throughout the *Mennogemeinde* and beyond. The improved quality of education, through the conscious initiative of the faithful traditional community’s leadership,<sup>81</sup> has benefited Menno on many levels, and even benefited communities abroad through Menno’s emigrants. Its educational innovations have instilled greater self-confidence in the community’s ability to face internal challenges and enabled it to relate constructively and missionally to the surrounding aboriginal communities and the Latin society in Paraguay. It has created a spirit of openness in the formerly isolated colony.<sup>82</sup>

One may ask whether, seeing that the colony has developed its own progressive education system over time, it was worth the trouble and cost of leaving Canada. How can one justify the loss of 170 lives upon the group’s arrival in Paraguay? Still, one must realize that the emigrants were interested less in “escaping higher education” (as noted earlier) and more in recovering the freedom to keep religious/ethical formation integrated with general practical and academic education. Their freedom in Paraguay enabled them to pursue this goal and to a large extent they put it into practice. And besides preventing education from becoming secular or an end in itself,<sup>83</sup> the Paraguayan Mennonite churches are using education to equip workers for vocations within their communities and beyond. As a recent study shows, these colony churches are involved in a variety of mission and service projects today in and around the colonies and throughout the country – home to them now for more than 75 years.<sup>84</sup>

Service involvement for Paraguayan Mennonites, including those of Menno Colony,<sup>85</sup> has also increasingly come to include the holding of political office. Three Mennonites, two of them from Menno Colony,<sup>86</sup> have successively held the position of governor in the Chaco province of Boquerón (a post comparable to a Canadian premier). As well, an educator and a medical doctor, both from Menno Colony, are now holding the positions equivalent to minister of education and minister of health, respectively, in the province of Boquerón.<sup>87</sup> Of late, the Paraguayan president has also appointed several Mennonites to key ministries in the national government.<sup>88</sup>

Have Mennonites, in whom the government of Paraguay placed lofty hopes in the beginning, fulfilled those hopes? At the initial 1921 reception of the Mennonites, the nation's leaders assured the opponents of the Mennonite immigration that the Mennonite immigrants would "not build a state within the state" but would build a "city" filled with "peace and justice," the ideals enshrined in the nation's flag. To be sure, their present level of participation in the life of that nation, including its political life, is not without risks to their community's Christian calling and cohesion, and they are conscious of this.<sup>89</sup> But many colony members believe that the biblical injunction to "seek first God's kingdom" and engaging in "servant leadership" (Mark 10:42-45) includes serving in political office and participating in party politics as well as participating in business or industry. In any event, the fact that Paraguay's Mennonites were invited by the government now around the turn of the century to serve in public administration is a huge vote of confidence in them.

Will Mennonites be able to live up to the government's expectation and carry out this calling with integrity while remaining true to their Christian ideal? Time will tell. Mennonite history, also in Paraguay, is clearly a dynamic one and is continually unfolding. Would Elder Friesen have affirmed the increased degree of involvement by Mennonites in the nation's public life? It is hard to say. But in light of the many changes he formerly both initiated or supported, the elder seemed to understand and accept that for the Christian church to be "in the world" but not "of it" meant that it could not stand still. He would have insisted that the church must be *en via* (on the move), balancing its rootedness in its faith tradition with innovations that enable it to be a recognizable sign of God's kingdom and God's mission in and to the world.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This article contains the augmented material, which the author presented at the Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society workshop at the Thresherman's Museum, near Morden on October 27, 2001. By way of method, this article does not aspire to be an exhaustive "biography" of Elder Martin C. Friesen, nor a rigorous "history" of Menno Colony. Rather, it wishes to put together a biographical and historical sketch of the elder and his community that will help readers to understand his significance or role in the birth and development of the *Mennogemeide*. To this end, a selection of sources have been consulted, both older and current ones, but with no claim to exhaustiveness. Having lived his first 25 years in this community, the author was able to draw on his memory at many points in the discussion.

<sup>2</sup> The author was born and grew up in the *Mennogemeinde* in Paraguay. He is Associate Professor of Theology and Missions at Canadian Mennonite University in Winnipeg, Canada.

- <sup>3</sup> Cited by Peter P. Klassen from *El Liberal* (July 22, 1921), a leading newspaper of Paraguay, in *Die Mennoniten in Paraguay: Reich Gottes und Reich dieser Welt*, Band 1 (Weierhof: Mennonitischer Geschichtsverein e.V. Bolanden, 2001) 73f.; my translation.
- <sup>4</sup> From personal communication with Michael Rudolph, Paraguay, April 2001.
- <sup>5</sup> "Von den damaligen Einwanderern leben heute noch 167 in der Kolonie Menno," reports the community paper, *Menno aktuell* (June 2002).
- <sup>6</sup> Cf. Jacob A. Loewen, "Missions Today: Three Models of Kingdom Building," *Mennonite Reporter* (Oct. 3, 1977); James C. Juhnke, "Paraguay: The Great Exception," chap. 10 in *A People of Mission: A History of General Conference Mennonite Overseas Missions* (Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press, 1979) 185-192. This is, however, only the most notable of a number of Christian service projects with which the colonists would benefit their host country.
- <sup>7</sup> *The Mennonite Encyclopedia* (ME), vol. 5 (1990) 313; cf. *Mennoblatt* (1 May 1968): 3. The elder's niece notes that he was "the fifth of twelve brothers and sisters..." Katherine Friesen Wiebe, "Bishop Martin C. Friesen 1889-1968," in *Preservings*, No. 7 (December 1995): 12-13.
- <sup>8</sup> ME, (1990): 313; Friesen Wiebe, 12.
- <sup>9</sup> Royden Loewen, ed., *From the Inside Out: The Rural Worlds of Mennonite Diarists, 1863 to 1929*, (Winnipeg, MB: The University of Manitoba Press, 1999) 316; Adina Reger and Delbert Plett, QC, *Diese Steine: Die Russlandmennoniten* (Steinbach, MB: Crossway Pub., 2001) 350.
- <sup>10</sup> Friesen Wiebe, 12; Reger and Plett, 607.
- <sup>11</sup> ME (1990): 313.
- <sup>12</sup> Reger and Plett, 606, mistakenly date the elder's retirement in 1965. In the *Namensverzeichnis*, 677, his death date is also wrongly recorded for 1965. The dates for Elder Friesen's father, Cornelius T. Friesen, are given as 1860-1922 (607) but the writers claim that he was still alive to witness the departure of his son's group to Paraguay in 1927 (606).
- <sup>13</sup> Cf. Peter P. Klassen, *Die Mennoniten in Paraguay: Reich Gottes und Reich dieser Welt*, (Weierhof: Mennonitischer Geschichtsverein e.V. Bolanden, 1988), 319.
- <sup>14</sup> Martin W. Friesen, ME, vol. 5, (1990) 554; his brackets.
- <sup>15</sup> Cf. M. W. Friesen, *Neue Heimat in der Chaco Wildnis* (Asunción, Paraguay: Chortitzer Komitee; Altona, Manitoba: D. W. Friesen & Sons Ltd, 1987), 147-153. Cf. Abraham S. Wiebe, "Die Berghaler Mennonitengemeinde aus Russland über Kanada nach Paraguay," in *Jahrbuch* 3 (September 2002) 15-17; cf. J.A. Braun, *Im Gedenken an jene Zeit: Mitteilungen zur Entstehungsgeschichte der Kolonie Menno* (Loma Plata, Chaco, Paraguay: Herausgegeben vom Geschichtskomitee der Kolonie Menno, 2001), 18.
- <sup>16</sup> Martin C. Friesen, "Die Auswanderung nach Paraguay - 1927", Martin W. Friesen, *Kanadische Mennoniten bezwingen eine Wildnis: 50 Jahre Kolonie Menno - erste mennonitische Ansiedlung in Suedamerika*. Kolonie Menno, Chaco Paraguay, 1977, 15-17.
- <sup>17</sup> Abram A. Braun, "Religionsfreiheit und unsere Schulen," in *Mennonitische Rundschau*, (15. April 1925) 4 (Braun formed part of the ministerial in Menno). Cf. Reger and Plett (p. 605). The question of whether this "Garantie" fell within provincial or federal jurisdiction remains without clarification here.
- <sup>18</sup> Adolf Ens points out that "the Manitoba School Act of 1890 only removed sectarian education, not religious/Christian [education]. During W.W. I, it forbade anti-war indoctrination and use of an enemy alien language. As far as I know, 'Mennonite' public school districts continued to teach religion" (from personal communication, September, 2002; my emphs.). To many of these Mennonites, however, these restrictions were too limiting. And did forbidding the use of German not severely reduce the Mennonite church's ability to be a protagonist in their children's education? Did forbidding "anti-war indoctrination" still allow the teaching of pacifism?

Abram A. Braun, one of the emigrants, knew well enough that the government regulations were not a complete proscription but left room to teach religion and German outside of regular school hours. He asked rhetorically: "Wenn uns die Religion eine halbe Stunde d[en]Tag vorgeschrieben wird, ist die Religionsfreiheit dann noch für voll zu halten?" He is not against Sunday Schools, but "Mit den Sonntagschulen können wir nicht alles gut machen, was in der Woche verboten wird" – though Sunday School is preferable to young people being idle. As to the use of German, he notes also that the restrictions are not absolute. However, "Minister Braken hat selber gesagt, daß das einsprachige Gesetz da steht wie eine Mauer." Some German was permitted, "aber genügt das, um die Sprache, unsere Muttersprache zu erhalten?" Compared to this, the Privilegium offered by Paraguay, "das ist mehr Religionsfreiheit als in Canada" (1925) 4.

- <sup>19</sup> The purported inadequacy of these private schools, as well as the presumed superiority of the English state schools, is open to question, as the following comment by historical- anthropologist James Urry shows: "The negative accounts of Mennonite schools need to be re-read against two considerations. First, Mennonite schools constructed as a means of acquiring basic numeracy and literacy did not need to be organized in the same way as state schools with qualified teachers, timetables, curricula, etc. What appears [to be] chaos and a low standard is just a more easy-going pragmatic approach to schooling. Secondly, the state schools were terrible! They were under-resourced and the teachers were often barely out of school with no proper training or qualifications. But they were like little military units with order and control like the barracks." Personal communication, January 17, 2002.
- <sup>20</sup> Cf. E.K. Francis, *In Search of Utopia: the Mennonites in Manitoba* (Altona, MB: D.W. Friesen & Sons Ltd., 1955).
- <sup>21</sup> Martin C. Friesen reports: "Viele zahlten längere Zeit Geldstrafen und auf der Westreserve wurden auch Brüder ins Gefängnis gesteckt, um sie zum Schicken ihrer Kinder in die Regierungsschule zu zwingen." "Die Auswanderung nach Paraguay - 1927," in Martin W. Friesen, *Kanadische Mennoniten bezwingen eine Wildnis* (1977), 16; cf. Edgar Stoesz and Muriel Stackley, *Garden in the Wilderness: Mennonite Communities in the Paraguayan Chaco 1927-1997*, (Winnipeg, MB: CMBC Publications, 1999) 24, who make reference to an "epidemic of fines" and "a series of arrests."
- <sup>22</sup> For a nuanced discussion of the 1916 School Attendance Act and a 1919 court case against Mennonites violating the act, see Adolf Ens, *Subjects or Citizens? The Mennonite Experience in Canada, 1870-1925* (University of Ottawa Press, 1994) 138-153.
- <sup>23</sup> Martin C. Friesen, in M.W. Friesaen, *Kanadische Mennoniten bezwingen*, 16; my translation. For the original German, see my note #16 above.
- <sup>24</sup> Cf. Martin W. Friesen, *Neue Heimat in der Chaco Wildnis*, 48f. In *Kanadische Mennoniten bezwingen* (1977: 9f.) M.W. Friesen carefully clarifies the group's priorities, admitting that German was of great importance, but not of highest importance; religious instruction was.
- <sup>25</sup> On the relative unimportance of the German language to the various Mennonite groups from 1916 to 1919, see Adolf Ens, *Subjects or Citizens?* (1994) 156f. Ens confirms that the petitions to government around 1919 clearly differentiate between the German language and religion (and the freedom to teach it); they were willing to give up the former but not the latter.  
This assertion, that language was secondary, derives credibility from the fact that when the Menno Colony in Paraguay later developed or upgraded its education system, it introduced Spanish as a second language of its own accord. And the colonists have progressed far in this regard. After attending the 75th Anniversary celebration in Loma Plata, at which the President of Paraguay was also present, Dr. John Schmidt noted that most of the speeches were delivered in Spanish (from

personal communication with Dr. Schmidt, July 18, 2002). This shows that many colonists are fluent in Spanish, one of the nation's two official languages. Fewer have acquired Guaraní, the other official language of Paraguay.

<sup>26</sup> Stoesz & Stackley, state: "Finally in July 1920 the Supreme Court of Canada ruled against the Mennonites: they would not be allowed to control their schools. It was the definitive word. Cost what it would - and cost it did - those considering emigration were now ready to migrate." *Garden in the Wilderness* (1999) 27; my emphasis.

<sup>27</sup> M.W. Friesen, *Neue Heimat in der Chaco Wildnis* (1987) 174.

<sup>28</sup> This should be the sixth group as reported by Menno Colony's senior statistician, Abram B. Giesbrecht, ed., *Die ersten mennonitischen Einwanderer in Paraguay - Einwandererliste*, 2. Auflage. (Loma Plata: Druckerei Friesen 1995) 52; cf. especially his *Einwandererliste*); see also M.W. Friesen, *Neue Heimat in der Chaco Wildnis* (1987) 172f. Royden Loewen, ed., citing from C.T. Friesen's diary, reports that Martin C. Friesen left in the 5th group (*From the Inside Out*, 324). (Loewen seem unaware that Martin C. is C.T. Friesen's son, describing the former as "a frequent associate" of the latter [cf. 316]). Whether it was the 5th or 6th group, it definitely was not the "last group," as Reger and Plett write (*Diese Steine* [2001] 606). For there were seven groups in all - Giesbrecht lists each group with its respective members.

<sup>29</sup> Friesen, *Neue Heimat* (1987) 173. The paper, *Der Northwesten* says that in spite of rainy weather, 200 cars and 100 horse-drawn carriages had come to the send off. During the service they sang the following songs: "Willkommen, liebste Freunde, hier," "Als Lot und Abrah'm schieden," and "Die Gnade sei mit allen" (cited by Friesen, *Neue Heimat* (1987) 173.

<sup>30</sup> See Friesen, *Neue Heimat* (1987) 155; my transl.

<sup>31</sup> Stoesz and Stackley, *Garden in the Wilderness* (1999) 26.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>35</sup> M. W. Friesen, reports that "They were convinced that this was a holy undertaking." Cited by Stoesz and Stackley, *Garden in the Wilderness* (1999) 27.

<sup>36</sup> Stoesz and Stackley, *Garden in the Wilderness* (1999) 29; one source says 170 died.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. the listing by the pioneer couple, Peter T. and Gertrude Hiebert, "Ostewick, Meno-Kolonia [sic], Paraguay," in *Mennonitische Rundschau* (2. Januar, 1929) 9.

<sup>39</sup> Cited by M.W. Friesen, *Neue Heimat* (1987) 353; also 373-391. Cf. John Horsch, "Offizieller Bericht über den Besuch [by Hershey & Swartzendruber (sic)] auf der Mennonitenkolonie in Paraguay," in *Mennonitische Rundschau*, (serialized) February 1929 & June 12, 1929 issues.

<sup>40</sup> MEDA stands for Mennonite Economic Development Associates. Cf. the 50th Anniversary edition *The Marketplace: MEDA's Magazine for Christians in Business*, Vol. 33, Issue 6 (November December 2003).

<sup>41</sup> Hiebert, Abram W. und Jacob T. Friesen. ...eine bewegte Geschichte...die zu uns spricht. *Materialien zur Entwicklungsgeschichte der Kolonie Menno*. Ein Beitrag zur 75. Gedenkfeier Juni 2002. Loma Plata, Paraguay, 2002. Cf. especially part three of this book on the economic history.

<sup>42</sup> M. W. Friesen *Mennoblatt* [May 1, 1968] 3; A. Reimer *Mennoblatt* [May 1, 1968] 5.

<sup>43</sup> Peter P. Klassen . *Die Mennoniten in Paraguay: Reich Gottes und Reich dieser Welt*. (Weierhof: Mennonitischer Geschichtsverein e.V. Bolanden, 1988) 66.

<sup>44</sup> For a careful study of the history and development of the Paraguayan Mennonite education system, the reader may be referred to Jakob Warkentin, *Die deutschsprachigen Siedlerschulen in Paraguay im Spannungsfeld der staatlichen Kultur- und Entwicklungspolitik* (München- Berlin, 1998).

- 45 Michael Rudolph's 2001 figures are as follows: *Secundarschüler*, grades 7 - 12: 600; *Primarschüler*: preschool to grade 6: 1300 (personal communication, October 2001).
- 46 Friesen, "Menno Colony," 554.
- 47 Both the so-called General Conference seminary, CEMTA (*Centro Evangélico Menonita de Teología Asunción*), and the Mennonite Brethren seminary, IBA (*Instituto Bíblico de Asunción*) – along with other participating schools – constituted significant players in the UEP.
- 48 Another son, Cornelius W. Friesen, also thrived through these educational helps from elder Friesen and was to be a long-time influential minister in the churches of South Menno and, for a time, as teacher in the Bible School. Some of his insightful articles appeared in the *Mennoblatt*, of which one, "Die erste Fahrt in den Chaco," is reprinted in the 75th Anniversary edition of *Jahrbuch für Geschichte und Kultur der Mennoniten in Paraguay*, Jahrgang 3 (September 2002) 146-151.
- 49 Whether this included advice on what books to use may remain an open question. But Martin W. makes the claim that the elder simply wrote to Germany and ordered Richard Lange's grammar books. But the teacher conference rejected their use and insisted he take them back home. But some interested teachers privately picked up copies and slowly began to use them in class. "Das war im Jahre 1933." *Kanadische Mennoniten bezwingen...* (1977) 118.
- 50 His article, "Der Einfluss der Schulen im internen Wandel der Kolonie Menno in den fünfziger und sechziger Jahren," im *Jahrbuch...* 3 (Sept. 2002) 59-82, sheds significant light on the philosophy of education and the far-reaching developments in Menno Colony's educational undertaking – especially from the late 40s and into the 70s (Sawatzky, 2002, 62).
- 51 Martin C. Friesen, *Mennoblatt* 1969 (posthumous), March 1, pp. 1f. & March 16, p. 1. This sermon is re-published in its entirety in *Menno informiert*, Jubiläumssonderausgabe, No. 6 (June, 2002), 2-4.
- 52 Abram Reimer, *Mennoblatt* (1. Mai, 1968) 5; my transl.
- 53 Martin C. Friesen's sermon was re-published in *Menno informiert*, Jubiläumssonderausgabe, No. 6 (June, 2002) 2.
- 54 Martin W. Friesen, "Martin C. Friesen in Paraguay," in *Preservings*. Delbert Plett, ed., No. 7 (December 1995) 13.
- 55 "Mennogemende," in *Mennonite Encyclopedia*, V (1985), 554.
- 56 Peter P. Klassen. *Die Mennoniten in Paraguay* (1988) 318.
- 57 Martin C.'s father, C.T. Friesen notes in his diary entry of October 24, 1927: "on October 25 Ältester H[einrich] J. Friesen (of Altona ) served us with communion at Chortitz and on October 26 served communion in Grunthal..." (Royden Loewen, ed., *From the Inside Out* [1999] 324). (The elder, accompanied by Peter Dueck, arrived on Oct. 24; hence the early entry.). According to Katherine Friesen Wiebe, daughter of Peter C. Friesen (niece to Martin C. Friesen), the Sommerfelder Ältester had also ordained Martin C. Friesen as Ältester just two years earlier. In her words: "the worship house in Chortitz was filled to overflowing when [in December 1925] Elder Heinrich J. Friesen and Rev. Peter W. Dueck came from Altona, West Reserve, to ordain Rev. Martin C. Friesen as Bishop of the *Chortitzer Gemeinde*." (*Preservings*, No. 7, Dec. 1995, p. 12). Thus the relationship between the Chortitzer and Sommerfelder was an open and cordial one.
- 58 Klassen, *Die Mennoniten*, 318.
- 59 *Richtlinien* 2002, 5.
- 60 Andreas T. Friesen, grandson of Elder Martin C. Friesen, has served as president of the Conference of (the German) Mennonites in South America for a period of time.
- 61 Friesen, "Menno Colony," 554.
- 62 A recent statistic reports 9146 inhabitants for Menno Colony and 4831 church members (personal communication with Michael Rudolph, April 2001).



- 63 Friesen, "Menno Colony," 554.
- 64 Ibid.
- 65 For an earlier profile of this project, cf. Titus Guenther, "Social Change Without Violence," in *Missiology: An International Review*. Vol. 9, No. 2 (April, 1981) 193-211; also James C. Juhnke, "Paraguay: The Great Exception" - in chap. 10 in *A People of Mission*, (Faith and Life Press, 1979) 185-192.
- 66 Friesen, "Menno Colony," 554.
- 67 Klassen, *Die Mennoniten*.
- 68 I recently heard a story from Martin Sawatzky (a native of Paraguay) in which Elder Friesen, in the early years, is said to have come home from a visit to Philadelphia bringing with him schoolbooks for use in Menno. However, because they were authored by the pro-Nazi teacher, Julius Legiehn, the Menno people rejected the books and asked the Elder to return them - which he did. (From personal conversation with Sawatzky October 12, 2001.) Cf. also the above documented parallel incident with the Richard Lange books at the teachers conference of 1933.
- 69 Ibid.
- 70 Jacob Warkentin (*Jahrbuch* 2002: 114).
- 71 Friesen, "True Church," 1.
- 72 Ibid.
- 73 Ibid.
- 74 Ibid.
- 75 Ibid.
- 76 Ibid.
- 77 Ibid. "In der Hauptsache Einigkeit, in Nebensachen Freiheit, vor allem Liebe."
- 78 On this point, Martin C. and his church community anticipate by half a century the profound insights that John Howard Yoder develops in *Body Politics: Five Practices of the Christian Community before the Watching World* (Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 1992, 2001) 88.
- 79 We could argue that the Mennonite churches of Paraguay are a close embodiment of the mission strategy of Yoder's "migration evangelism" - again their practice predating theory. For instead of sending singles or individual families as missionaries, a sizeable group moved to, and took up residence in, the "mission field." The "missionary community" was large enough to forestall extreme loneliness and small enough to necessitate ongoing interaction with the local people around them. This migrant missional community did not return for "furloughs"; it cast its own destiny with that of their new neighbours. By living as a loving disciplined Christian community, its light shines in the society where it has chosen to live.
- 80 Irene Enns Kroeker, "Emigration to Paraguay 1921-27," in *Preservings*. 7 (December 1995) 10-11. She concludes: "All information taken from documents held in the Chortitzer Mennonite Church Waisenamt Archives as well as the Jacob Enns collection (unpublished)."
- 81 That this was a deliberate and "christianly pragmatic" step is plausibly suggested by James Urry who states: "Of course Martin C. Friesen had to contend as much with a conservative negativism from within as much as forces from without. Recognizing that being in the world but not of it still required a pragmatic approach to a changing wider world. To be 'in' needed responses if they were to remain 'not of,' otherwise the community would fail. I think this is what has happened in some areas of Mexico." (From personal communication with Urry, January 17, 2002.)
- 82 Similar conclusions were drawn also in a recent Historical Symposium regarding changes/ developments during Menno's 75-year .(Cf. Geschichtssymposium zum Thema "Kolonie Menno: 75 Jahre Tradition und Wandel," gehalten am 6. und 7. Juni in der Kirche der Mennonitengemeinde Loma Plata - *Menno aktuell*, June 2002.)
- 83 Abram A. Braun (in "Religious Freedom in our Schools," 1925, p. 4), I believe, had this in mind, when, after asserting the primacy of "religious formation" for the

church, he explains that he is not in principle against all education; he opposes the pursuit of a detached “worldly” education.

<sup>84</sup> For a convenient recent summary of some of these programs, cf. Stoesz and Stackley, “From Isolation to Outreach Service & Mission,” chap. 15 in *Garden in the Wilderness* (1999), 161-170.

<sup>85</sup> For Menno Colony, to have a former *Oberschulze* hold the office of governor of Boquerón Province, would seem to constitute a paradigm shift from their original vision for Mennonite life in Paraguay, since one of the principles set up in a ministerial meeting on January 17, 1923 in Saskatchewan (in which Elder Friesen was present) notes explicitly: “es wurde gänzlich verboten, ein obrichkeitliches Amt zu bekleiden” (Abraham S. Wiebe, 2002, 17, based on minutes).

<sup>86</sup> Incidentally, both of them are married to daughters of Martin W. Friesen, and thus granddaughters of Elder Martin C. Friesen.

<sup>87</sup> From personal conversation with Michael & Maria Rudolph on Jan. 19, 2005.

<sup>88</sup> cf. Kroeker 2004.

<sup>89</sup> There are Mennonites who wrestled with this decision for a time and, “after much study of the writings of John Howard Yoder,” concluded “that politics should be seen as ‘service for the well-being of all’,” reports Kroeker (2004: 8).

## Appendix: Additional Reading

“Die Neue Ansiedlung in Paraguay (von einem Freunde) in *Steinbach Post* (Februar 2, 1927) p. 2; the opening caption reads: “Feierlicher Empfang der ersten Mennoniten durch den Präsidenten der Republik. – Religionsfreiheit und deutsche Sprache gesichert. – Wichtigkeit der deutschen Sprache für Erhaltung der Sitten der Väter.”

Friesen, Martin C. “Pioniere erzählen - Ältester Friesen” in *Mennoblatt* (16.Juli, 1995) 3-4. Posthumous: Letter of admonition to the disheartened immigrants.

Friesen, Martin C. “Die wahre Gemeinde Jesu Christi,” in *Mennoblatt* (1. & 16.März, 1969) 1-2 & 1; two instalments; posthumously published. (See also the entry under Andreas Sawatzky, below.)

Friesen, Martin W, “Und es begab sich... Aus dem Leben und Sterben des Ältesten Martin C. Friesen, Menno,” in *Mennoblatt* (1 May, 1968) 2-4. Obituary.

\_\_\_\_\_. “Aus Nacht zum Licht,” in *Mennoblatt* (1. April, 1968) 1. An Easter sermon.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Mennonitische Kolonisation im Paraguayischen Chaco unter Gesetz Nr. 514*. Zweite erweiterte Auflage, 1984; herausgegeben von der Verwaltung der Kolonie Menno.

Geschichtskomitee der Kolonie Menno (Hrsg.). *Unter der heißen Sonne des Südens*. Loma Plata, Paraguay, 2002.

Giesbrecht, Kennert, “Kolonie Menno: 75 Jahre Geschichte und Entwicklung” in *Der Bote*, 79, Nr. 16 (August 14, 2002) 6-8.

Guenther, Titus. “Acentos de un Cristianismo Radical: Presencia y Obra Misionera Menonita en América Latina,” in *Protestantismo y Cultura en América Latina: Aportes y Proyecciones*, ed., Tomás Gutiérrez, Quito, Ecuador: co-published by CLAI/CEHILA, 1994, pp.185-211.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Rahner and Metz: Transcendental Theology as Political Theology*, Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1994.

\_\_\_\_\_. “Las teologías del Tercer Mundo y la identidad anabautista,” *Del Sur al Norte: Aportes teológicos desde la periferia*. Buenos Aires: Ediciones Kairós, 2003, pp. 51-96.

Hershey, T. K. and Amos Swartzendruber, "Offizieller Bericht über den Besuch auf der Mennonitenkolonie in Paraguay," in *Mennonitische Rundschau*, (serialized) February 1929 & June 12, 1929 (submitted by John Horsch).

Kroeker, Wally. "MEDA checks out Economic Progress in Paraguay," in *Canadian Mennonite* (July 2, 2001) 18-19.

\_\_\_\_\_, ed. *The Marketplace: MEDA's Magazine for Christians in Business*, Vol. 33, Issue 6 (November December 2003) – the 50th Anniversary edition.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Cleaning up their Act," in *The Marketplace: MEDA's Magazine for Christians in Business*. 34, Issue 5 (September October, 2004) 4-8.

McCallum, Charlotte, "Québec's Reactions to the 1920 Manitoba Mennonite Search for Land," in *Journal of Mennonite Studies*, Vol. 20 (2002) 43-57.

Neufeld, Korny, *Conociendo a los Menonitas: Su origen, su fe y su presencia en el Paraguay*. Filadelfia, Fernheim: Allgemeine Schulbehörde, 2003.

"Nachrichten aus Paraguay" (anonymous), including, "Besuch des Präsidenten Der Republik, Dr. Eligio Ayala, bei den ersten angekommenen Mennoniten," in *Steinbach Post* (August 10, 1927) 4.

Quiring, Walter. *Im Schweisse deines Angesichts : ein mennonitisches Bilderbuch Paraguay, Brasilien, Argentinien, Uruguay und Mexico*. Steinbach, MB: Derksen Printers, 1953.

Ratzlaff, Gerhard. *Ein Leib - viele Glieder - Die Mennonitengemeinden in Paraguay*. Asunción, Paraguay: Gemeindegemeinschaft (Asociación Evangélica Mennonita del Paraguay), 2001.

Reimer, Abram B. "Ältester M. C. Friesens Leben und Arbeit," in *Mennoblatt* (1 May, 1968) 4-5. Obituary.

*Richtlinien der Vereinigung der Mennonitengemeinden von Paraguay* (März 2002) 22 pages.

Sawatzky, Andreas F., editorial comment on Martin C. Friesen's "Vortrag [delivered at the "Bruderschaft" 1. 10. 1955] über die wahre Gemeinde Jesu Christi und ihre Aufgabe, gesehen im Lichte der evangelischen Lehre" (re-published in *Menno Informiert, Jubiläumssonderausgabe*, No. 6 (June, 2002), p. 2).

\_\_\_\_\_. "Der Einfluss der Schulen im internen Wandel der Kolonie Menno in den fünfziger und sechziger Jahren," in *Jahrbuch für Geschichte und Kultur der Mennoniten in Paraguay. Zur Geschichte der kanadischen Mennoniten in Paraguay*, Jahrgang 3 (Sept. 2002) 59-82.

Töws, Maria (Frau H. B., geb. Wiebe). *Meine Erinnerungen und Erlebnisse in Canada und Paraguay*. Ohne Ort und ohne Jahr, 83 Seiten.

Töws, Johann W. *Unser Leben in Paraguay*. Loma Plata, Paraguay, 2002.

Warkentin, Jakob. *Die deutschsprachigen Siedlerschulen in Paraguay im Spannungsfeld der staatlichen Kultur- und Entwicklungspolitik*. München- Berlin, 1998.

Warkentin, Jakob. "Begegnung Zwischen Neuländern und Mennos 1947/48," in *Jahrbuch*, 3 (Sept. 2002) 102-115.