

Walking the Tightrope: Mennonite Entrepreneurs from Paraguay, Mexico and Belize in Manitoba

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Mennonites and Business

Readers who find the phrase “Mennonite entrepreneur” paradoxical probably are not alone. In the book bearing this phrase as its title, Calvin Redekop, Stephen C. Ainlay, and Robert Siemens acknowledge that one “image almost certain not to come to most people’s minds is that of the Mennonite businessperson.”¹ And yet, as the authors themselves argue, once one begins to take note of Mennonite entrepreneurs, they are hard to miss. A January 2002 issue of Canada’s *Maclean’s* magazine featured three southern Manitoba “Mennonite Millionaires” on its cover.² A December 2001 *Winnipeg Free Press* headline, declaring “Immigrants Putting Town Back on Map,”³ reported on Mennonite immigrants from Latin America and their dramatic business success. Why, then, are Mennonites so slow to acknowledge, or accept, those from their own ranks who have been recognized by Canadian society? One simple

answer identified by Redekop and Ainlay is envy: Mennonites who have not pursued business yearn for the same luxuries enjoyed by those who have. But this explanation is surely an oversimplification. The social intricacies of Mennonites, an ethnic and a religious people, require a fuller, more complex explanation.

Throughout history, Mennonites have demonstrated significant degrees of intolerance of the larger world. In the 1527 Schleitheim Confession, considered to be the first Anabaptist confession of faith, Michael Sattler left little room for interaction with the non-believing world, stating: "We simply will not have fellowship with evil people, nor associate with them, nor participate in their abominations. That is, all who have not submitted themselves to the obedience of faith..."⁴ In 1875, nearly 300 years later, Johann Wiebe, the revered leader of the Reinlaender (Old Colony) Mennonite Church in Canada, preached a similar message: "Do not love or follow that which is in the world, for whosoever shall love the world, in him is not the love of the Father..."⁵ These leaders articulated the Mennonite separation of society into two spheres, theirs and the "world's."

The exact boundaries between these spheres have not easily been defined. In some instances, "the world" existed as anything outside of a particular congregation or denomination. In others, it existed beyond a particular group of Mennonites. On the other hand, it was also sometimes seen as anything beyond a local community of predominantly ethnic—but not necessarily religious—Mennonites. Wherever the boundaries fell, or were drawn, their influence was powerful. Repeatedly, Mennonites were ordered to rebuke the "world" for the good of their own spiritual well-being. In the late 1700s, the principle of "world avoidance" helped drive the Mennonites from Prussia to Russia, and then, in the late 1800s, on to Canada and the United States. Finally, in the twentieth century, this principle helped spur the flight of those who clung to it most fervently—members of the Old Colonist, Sommerfelder, Chortitzer and Kleine Gemeinde churches—from Canada to Latin America, and specifically to Mexico and Paraguay.

Of course, principle and practicality do not always coincide. Over the centuries of Mennonite existence and flight, survival dictated that some interaction with the non-Mennonite world must take place. Mennonites cultivated relationships with governments in Prussia, Russia, and Canada to secure safe settlements where a separated existence could be achieved. Furthermore, once these settlements were established, a trading relationship usually evolved with local markets.⁶ This occurred even as Mennonite traders continued to live under the authority of the Mennonite colony. The only condition was that the Mennonite businessperson's interaction with the

marketplace exist for the good of the community, not primarily for individual profit.

Today's entrepreneur, however, lives in a different system. In most cases, the twenty first century Canadian Mennonite lives, works, and socializes in a heterogeneous, urban society. Old Anabaptist fears of the world as an "abomination" have been replaced with the modern notion of integration. The Mennonite entrepreneurs belong to Mennonite communities that have learned to reinvent themselves. This reinvention allows for the continuance of select traditional values, the discontinuance of others, and, most intriguingly, the replacement of traditional values with replicas or redefinitions of the old ones.

Nonetheless, Ainlay and Redekop warn that North American Mennonites are not yet fully conscious of their own reinvention. In fact, the authors suspect that North American Mennonites deny their own reinvention and, for that reason, tend to alienate the most explicit examples of it—the entrepreneurs—as "scapegoats."⁷ As a result, Mennonite entrepreneurs walk a fine line. Torn between commitments to both their traditional communities and the outside world, they have been challenged to reinvent themselves in ways acceptable by both their Mennonite community and the society that comprises their marketplace.

Some of the most successful Mennonite "reinventors" have been the resilient Low German Mennonite entrepreneurs from Latin America who have returned to Canada, the land their forebears rejected as too "worldly." And they have come with a passion to engage it. Having had grandparents who first tilled the virgin soils of Canada, parents who broke unyielding Latin American ground, and having grown up in an environment with minimal resources, a Mennonite work ethic has been essential to their survival. In turn, so have the values of honesty, dependability, reliance on relatives and neighbours, and an uncanny knack for frugality and innovation. These tools have become the cornerstones of their entrepreneurial success in Canada.

Most importantly, however, they have also been able to adapt business activities to the old value of world avoidance. Separation theology may hinder the integration of many Latin American Mennonites, but the same theology has been dealt with successfully by the entrepreneurs. Whether they hail from the more autonomous Old Colony in Mexico or the more integrated Chortitzer Mennonite groups in Paraguay, these immigrant entrepreneurs represent the most progressive elements of their former communities.⁸ They have rejected the polemic cultures that hampered their entrepreneurial spirit. In Canada, they have embraced the business world with

enthusiasm, and shrewdly justified their new activities. Having rejected the letter of the law with respect to separation, they nevertheless have striven to demonstrate that they can still maintain its spirit. They have sought to earn the respect of Mennonite churches and communities by giving generously to both. Thus, while many Mennonite entrepreneurs have fallen from the tightrope of cultural adaptation, tripping up on either the expectations of the church or the lure of the market, most Latin American Mennonite entrepreneurs have balanced on it with grace and agility. This study of Latin American Mennonite entrepreneurs in Manitoba, thus, attempts to analyze the intricate way in which they have struck a balance between Mennonite responsibilities and broader world realities.

The ten interviews that comprise the basis of this study represent a wide range of entrepreneurs. Five of those interviewed grew up in Paraguay, four in Mexico and one in Belize. The participants included Mennonites from the Old Colony, Chortitza, Sommerfeld, Kleine Gemeinde, and Evangelical Mennonite Conference churches. Three of the entrepreneurs were involved in the lumber/construction industry, three in travel agencies, two in trucking firms, and two in manufacturing. Six of the businesses were located in southern Manitoba towns (three in Winkler and three in Steinbach), two in the city of Winnipeg and two in the Vidor district, in Manitoba's interlake region. The entrepreneurs had come to Manitoba over a period of time, one of the older men had arrived in Canada as early as 1952, another as recently as 1997. Despite this variety, the subjects seem to demonstrate a common set of values, a similar entrepreneurial spirit, and parallel social struggles and successes.⁹

Hard Work and Ethnic Boundaries¹⁰

Throughout the ten interviews, numerous business-conducive values were discussed. One such value, mentioned without hesitation by every entrepreneur, was hard work. As Bernhard Wiebe of Klassen Travel put it, "you work as many hours as you have to."¹¹ Most others agreed, noting that they had learned to work much longer than an eight-hour day or forty-hour week. This seems to have been essential to success, especially in getting established. For the most part, hard work also seems to have been emphasized by parents. A business woman recalls: "The number one value established in our household by my parents [was] that of hard work." They would say, "Arbeit macht dasz leben süß"—work makes life sweet – [and] we heard this line many times when we were young and complained about work."¹² In this instance, the future businesswoman's parents took a

proactive approach, repeating a German proverb to her when she “complained about work.” Many others, however, found that their parents taught them hard work simply by example.

Regardless of how it was taught, many saw hard work as a value taught well by Latin American Mennonites. When asked how her Mennonite background helped her in business, Helen Funk of South East Travel stated: “Hard work. You work hard. You’re committed to your clients and to your own job. That is a Mennonite value.”¹³ Of course Funk, along with most others who spoke about “Mennonite values,” insisted that Mennonites were not the only ones who know a hard day’s work. Nonetheless, the interviewees agreed that the work ethic had been taught exceptionally well in Mennonite families, and to the benefit of the entrepreneur. As Irwin Kornelsen of Pro-Fab Manufacturing put it: “Most [Pro-Fab customers] connect Mennonites with hard work and that is good for business.”¹⁴

Two entrepreneurs explicitly connected hard work with another beneficial value, loyalty to the Latin American Mennonite community. Both explained that they had given jobs to numerous other Latin American Mennonites who, as Irwin Kornelsen put it, “know hard work.”¹⁵ Kornelsen tied this attribute to their under-privileged background, noting that Mennonite workers from Latin America, unlike some Canadians he observed, had learned to work for everything they got. Although few offered their reasons, nearly every entrepreneur employed a high number of fellow Latin American Mennonites. Having an employer who spoke fluent Plautdietsch (or ‘Low German’) appears to have helped attract many of these employees. When asked, “Do you speak Low German in your business?” most business-owners answered, “Yes, with my workers.” The very knowledge of Plautdietsch created a strong sense of an immigrant community that extended beyond the Latin American national borders. Kornelsen, for example, explained that “most of my employees come from Bolivia, Paraguay, Mexico, or Belize.”¹⁶

For seven of the ten entrepreneurs, speaking Plautdietsch extended advantageously into the marketplace as well. Referring to his ability to speak Plautdietsch with customers, a lumberman asked rhetorically, “all the returning Mexican Mennonites, where do you think they came to shop?”¹⁷ Abe Wiebe, Sr. of Winkler Concrete (not be confused with Rev. Abe Wiebe, a former co-owner), reasoned, “because the [Latin American customers] speak [Plautdietsch], they come here. Other businesses didn’t speak it as fluently.”¹⁸ Apparently, the sense of a Plautdietsch community that the entrepreneur in the lumber business maintained with his customers also extended into the other Latin American countries; he referred to the patronage of the “returning Mexican Mennonites,” while he, himself, was an

immigrant from Paraguay.¹⁹ Similar comments about the importance of Plautdietsch came from the entrepreneurs in the travel industry. Helen Funk referred to customers who called from throughout North America: "It seems to be that way with the Mennonites; if they know they can speak with a travel agent [in their own language], they will call all the way [to Steinbach]."²⁰ Bernhard Wiebe of Klassen Travel insisted that speaking Low German had its benefits in Winnipeg too, and demonstrated that over the course of a few hours he could converse with more clients in Plautdietsch than in English.

With so many Mennonite families in Manitoba with relatives in Latin America, trips between the two countries were popular and this ongoing linkage also aided in establishing credibility between retailer and client. Funk and Wiebe used their experiences in Paraguay to become experts on travel to South America: "The more you go to a place...[the more] you can sell it and that's why I can sell South America so well...I can give [the customers] a price off-hand. You go to [Winnipeg] and they won't even know how to route you...."²¹ Wiebe and Funk also pointed out that their background helped them win other customers from Anabaptist circles, noting that they had "tapped into a Holdeman market...[and] also the Hutterites."²² In addition, Funk's customers called her from all over North America, including from Ontario, Saskatchewan, Alberta, Minnesota, Kansas, and Texas. Still, even then they hailed mostly from "the Mennonite areas."²³ Funk figured that this expansion was the result of "word of mouth" advertising, something her Mennonite customers seemed to have done quite well.²⁴ In fact, Funk even had some customers from Brazil, as she saw it, the probable result of Mennonite "socializing."²⁵ Foreign language skills associated with travel among Latin American communities also contributed to Funk's and Wiebe's ability to serve both their Mennonite clientele. Growing up in Paraguay, Funk also learned to speak High German and Wiebe learned English, German, and Spanish along the way; as he noted, languages are "quite helpful in the travel industry."²⁶

Not all the entrepreneurs emphasized their ties to Latin America with pride. Indeed, one of the entrepreneurs deliberately downplayed her origin:

"In my...business, I tried early on to establish my agency as a 'professional' and 'modern' store. I catered to the sophisticated traveller, and did everything BUT encourage 'Paraguayans' with their typically large families to 'take over' the office. I did not voluntarily speak Low German, and was embarrassed when I needed to do so in order to communicate with an immigrant customer."²⁷

When her Latin American Mennonite clientele nevertheless did grow, she created two categories of clients, the Latin Americans and the Canadians, thus keeping her two worlds apart. As she noted, "I think that I was insecure about my own immigrant status, and eager to 'fit in' to the Canadian mainstream." This "insecurity" stemmed from the discrimination she experienced throughout her youth in Canada. Describing her and her siblings' first experiences in a Canadian classroom, she wrote: "We were treated like six-year-olds even though I was twelve. I remember having to march up to the teacher's desk after recess to show her that we had washed our hands. This was very humiliating to say the least."²⁸ Later, she experienced "an incident that happened when I was in grade 12: I thought I spoke English as well as my classmates; I thought I dressed like everyone else, thought I fit in completely, only to overhear two guys talking about me, one of them telling the other that I was a 'prug' [a derogatory term for 'Paraguyan']."²⁹ Discrimination had affected the way she did business and even explained the reason why she went into business in the first place: "The success of my business would at last prove that I had overcome the stigma of being seen as a 'prug.'"³⁰ And she was not alone. Many of the other entrepreneurs mentioned small doses of discrimination. Two entrepreneurs recalled that they had dropped out of school in Canada because of "difficulties," arising from being "treated differently."³¹

Those who arrived in Canada at a more advanced age, that is, after their sensitive "teen" years, often seem to have experienced less discrimination, and worried less about it. The relative progressiveness and wealth of parents also seems to have alleviated discrimination. Helen Funk, who recalled little, if any, discrimination also noted that her parents "were never conservative."³² Despite growing up in a "conservative background" in Paraguay, she recalled her parents telling her that you "can cut your hair when you want, you can go to dance, you can even have a drink."³³ But as she noted they "were very different from the neighbours" and it may have stemmed from the fact that my "grandfather, I was always told, was one of the richest men in Paraguay."³⁴ Nonetheless, she was not oblivious to the existence of discrimination towards Latin American Mennonites in Manitoba. The threat of discrimination against her children, even when born in Canada, was still feared: "My youngest didn't want to be identified with [the Plautdietsch language]...He looked at the Paraguayans as being joked about and made fun of."³⁵ Henry Enns, a Paraguayan businessman in Winkler, recalled allowing his children to "dress like everyone else" so that they wouldn't "stick out."³⁶ Regardless of how well-received they were in Manitoba, or how well-receiving they were of other Latin-American Mennonites,

most of these entrepreneurs agreed that they had benefited from the way their background interacted with Manitoba culture.

Religious-based Values

Latin-American Mennonites cited more than the social values of hard work, knowledge of Plautdietsch, informal advertising networks, and the disassociation of discrimination-inducing behaviour. Several also mentioned religious-based values of honesty, respect, dependability, and fairness as helpful values they brought from Latin America. Some made specific reference to their faith in God. Bernhard Wiebe, for example, noted that the Christian faith makes one “feel stronger because you know whom you can depend on.”³⁷ Others spoke about success in terms of divine blessing. Referring to his father, Jake, who established JADE Transport, Larry Dyck reported that “I think God really honored him.”³⁸ It was a comment with an irrefutable religiosity, expressing a depth of trust that cannot be underestimated.

A common religious faith, however, did not bind the Latin American Mennonites into a harmonious unit. At least two entrepreneurs related substantial complaints about doing business among Mennonites. An entrepreneur in Vidir, a community in Manitoba’s interlake district and consisting mostly of Mennonites from Mexico, complained that other Mennonites “are always trying to get a deal.”³⁹ Another entrepreneur spoke about “discouraging” business practices within the Paraguayan Mennonite community, explaining that the “typical Paraguayan would come in to my office and expect a good deal, perhaps even to dicker on the price” and even “distant relatives might expect preferential pricing and treatment.”⁴⁰ Few of the other entrepreneurs shared this viewpoint, although several others identified the prevalence of at least “some bad customers.” The others, while occasionally bothered by Mennonite “dickering,” appeared at ease with the way Mennonites did business. In fact, by “playing the game” and bartering, the entrepreneurs claimed to reap the benefits of “word-of-mouth” advertising. Either way, both groups of entrepreneurs—those who played along, and those who refused to—succeeded with their preferred clientele.

Another main religious challenge for the entrepreneurs, however, was the need to reconcile the fact that their forebears had once left Canada to avoid unnecessary contact with the very non-Mennonite world they now engaged. By returning to Canada from their Latin American communities, the newcomers implicitly rejected aspects of the old separation theology. Only one entrepreneur, Bernhard Wiebe,

believed that his Conference Church in Paraguay was every bit as involved with the world around it as was his church, Winnipeg's Douglas Mennonite, in Canada. But Wiebe's Paraguay experience may have been unique, his church being one of the most progressive in Paraguay, and his 1997 entry to Canada, coming after fifty years of "slow, caring change."⁴¹ For the rest, leaving the colony and eventually coming to Canada meant rejecting some of the reasons their parents and grandparents had for going to Latin America in the first place. Jake Dyck of Mexico experienced this tension especially when he "left home at the age of sixteen...something that was completely unheard of in those days."⁴² He had left in order to work for a Mexican lumberyard, something strictly forbidden in his colony. Neither did his colony give him its blessing to move to Canada. For others, especially those who left later or those who came from more progressive Latin-American communities, community disapproval was less pronounced. Nonetheless, some tension remained. One man recalled that although he "burned no bridges" in leaving his Sommerfeld colony in Paraguay and later was "welcomed with open arms" when he returned for visits, some of the "die-hards," that is, those who had been most concerned about the "school issue" in Manitoba, were "upset" with his decision to migrate.⁴³

Given this tension, and the choice these entrepreneurs made to leave it behind, it is not surprising that each of the entrepreneurs remembered living on the progressive edge of the Latin-American communities. Helen Funk, for example, recalled that although "I came from a conservative background [in Paraguay], my parents were never conservative."⁴⁴ Manuel Penner also remembered having a father who, having left the Old Colony Church in Mexico, stood out because he wanted to truck. A retired businessman with close ties to the Sommerfeld Church in Manitoba was ambivalent about that link, having hoped to find a more progressive church than his Paraguayan Sommerfeld Church. He only joined the Sommerfeld Church in Manitoba after he had been convinced that it was "quite a bit more open than what we had over there" in Paraguay⁴⁵ and that he saw opportunities for even more change, a requirement as "the world around you changes."⁴⁶ Other interviewees recalled feeling skeptical about the original move to Latin America, citing pressure from church leaders or parents to leave Canada. Some like Jake Dyck showed disdain for the move, a move that "was hotheaded...the worst mistake they ever made."⁴⁷ Others were more discrete, Irwin Kornelsen, for one, simply pointing out that his dad "always wanted to" return to Canada.⁴⁸

The Canadian Appeal

What started as a rejection of certain Mennonite controls oftentimes ended in a move back to Canada. Since Canada still had Mennonite communities, however, moving there offered the opportunity to maintain some semblance of the old beliefs. More importantly, it also offered opportunities to do business without much explicit criticism. For that reason, Canada has been particularly attractive for, and conducive to, the exceptionally progressive, entrepreneurial, and outward-looking elements of Latin America.

Canada was appealing also because it offered a more stable economic and political system. Recalling his family's experiences in Mexico and Belize, Irwin Kornelsen said: "There was a lot of [tension] between natives and the German-speaking [Mennonite] people...The Germans were looked upon as rich and the blacks were poor, so there were a lot of thefts."⁴⁹ Kornelsen directly linked this racial conflict to "political turmoil."⁵⁰ Another businessman recalled being haunted by the bribes he had to give to his government to get anything done. He admitted that "ethically, I have struggled with [bribes]." And thus "when we moved to Canada, I gave away a certain number of dollars; I didn't want any dollars that I shouldn't have...Like Zachaeus, that [resolve] helped me come to terms [with my guilt]."⁵¹

Manitoba may have drawn numerous Latin American Mennonite entrepreneurs with its political and economic stability, but the Mennonite churches in Manitoba played an equally important role. Every one of the ten entrepreneurs, but one, belonged to a Mennonite Church. Mennonite newcomers were clearly most comfortable with other Mennonites. A paradox underlay this attraction. Business criticism in Canadian Mennonite churches may have manifested itself more discretely, but just beneath the surface, say Redekop and Ainlay, it still continued to fester.⁵² Why then did these entrepreneurs backtrack across the continent to take the chance of experiencing it again? Why would these progressive, entrepreneurial immigrants set themselves up for more conflict?

In part, these men and women did not want to reject the ideologies of their Mennonite background; they only rejected its more legalistic applications. The rejection of the legalistic approach, as shown above, took place when they returned to Canada. The maintenance of a communitarian approach to business is revealed in their involvement in Mennonite churches and their conscious contribution to society.

The pressure to maintain social equality within the congregation may have driven some Mennonite businesspersons out of their churches, but for the Latin Americans, it was barely noticed. Compared to the restraints they once lived with, Canadian Mennonite

expectations were low. Furthermore, they may not even have noticed those restraints. Redekop and Ainlay's research shows that most North American Mennonite entrepreneurs feel exceptional, even alienating, pressure from their congregations.⁵³ Yet the Latin Americans in this study barely mentioned it. Even those who shared candidly about the alienation they experienced in Mennonite communities and schools had few concerns about fitting into their churches. In fact, two entrepreneurs even served as ministers and others were involved as club leaders and Sunday school teachers. One such teacher, Helen Funk, also served on numerous church committees, sang in her church choir, and acted as a church deacon for sixteen years.

The owner of a trucking business recalled that as he first started his business, some of his friends began leaving him. "They assumed I'd be too good for them now," he said.⁵⁴ This trend lasted only a short while, however, succumbing to the credo that "he was my friend; he is my friend; he will be my friend."⁵⁵ This entrepreneur may have rapidly moved up the ladder of business success, but many of his friends continued to be "blue collar" workers. Similar "blue collar" connections were mentioned by other entrepreneurs. Irwin Kornelsen, owner of Pro-Fab Incorporated and pastor of the Rosenberg Fellowship, stated: "I've changed my work because of it...I used to be the one dealing with employees, telling them what to do, and I changed my job because I was a pastor...I didn't want them to feel like I was their master in their workplace; I wanted to be their friend."⁵⁶ Even Bernhard Penner, the previous holder of two prestigious positions in Paraguay—president of the Mennonite Co-op and Canadian consul—attended Douglas Mennonite Church, a Winnipeg congregation known for its predominantly "blue collar" Latin American congregation.

Mennonite entrepreneurs also felt accepted for their contributions to the church community. The most common response to the question, "how do you think your business is contributing to your community?" was, "I employ people." Comparing her career to one of the most traditionally respected Mennonite professions aside from farming and pasturing, Helen Funk described it this way: "What's the difference, a teacher or an employer?"⁵⁷ According to her logic, and the logic of most interviewees, employing others was the most natural way to support the local Mennonite community.

There were also the gifts from the pocketbook, with nearly every business owner speaking of donations to local causes. At times, this generosity extended beyond the local community and into more far-reaching Mennonite endeavors as well.⁵⁸ One of the most service-oriented entrepreneurs articulated his philosophy in detail. He put it

this way: "I was never interested in becoming...very wealthy...just [having] enough to live [on]...This frees you up to do whatever you want..."⁵⁹ What he wanted to do included serving as an unpaid minister and also contributing to the Mennonite Central Committee board. In addition, he worked with numerous smaller organizations "right here in the area."⁶⁰ Bernhard Wiebe also referred to charitable work in his community, stating that "almost everyone who comes in here with a specific project gets something."⁶¹

Finally, the entrepreneurs also seemed to take great pride in the very nature of their business ventures. One man pointed out that the houses and apartments he built have provided homes in a growing community. Of special importance to him were his seniors' housing projects. Wanting to offer "affordable," community-oriented options, these seniors' homes reflected the "smaller is better" philosophy⁶² where seniors could "care for one another."⁶³ Not only did this businessman support his Mennonite community, he found satisfaction in promoting a cherished Mennonite virtue, community consciousness.

Maintaining their Mennonite Heitage

Most immigrant entrepreneurs justified their class-based position in their Mennonite communities with similar arguments. They insisted that their businesses were not only profitable, but by nature they were essential to the local community's needs. Ted Regehr's description of Mennonite entrepreneurship is relevant: "Canadian Mennonites tended to enter and prosper in those businesses where their traditional values and family and community patterns can be applied with relative ease."⁶⁴ In addition, he posits that "Canadian Mennonite entrepreneurship had its origins within and grew out of a rural context."⁶⁵ In other words, Mennonites entrepreneurs were most likely to do business in areas that were consistent with Mennonite traditions. As a result, Mennonites were more likely to engage in businesses that related to agriculture or craftsmanship. Other Mennonites, in turn, were most likely to support those businessmen as well.

At first glance seven of the ten entrepreneurs – those involved in the lumber and construction enterprises, the manufacturing of farm machinery, and trucking – fit this mould. In their own way, though, Latin American-Mennonite travel agents fit the mould also. Helen Funk was the clearest example. When her family moved to Canada in the 1960s, she left much of her family behind in Paraguay. Her fiancé, who followed her to Canada, left his family behind as well. As a result,

Funk often wished she could “spend more time with [her] husband’s parents.”⁶⁶ Once she joined the travel industry, however, travel between Canada and Paraguay became easier, and later “we [became] much closer.”⁶⁷ Bernhard Wiebe also recalled that Klassen Travel began with a lot of travel packages to and from Paraguay. Sometimes these trips were visits and other times they were moves, but they often served to connect Mennonite families and friends with one another. In the minds of these entrepreneurs, then, the travel industry served to maintain and promote family values. The enterprise may not have been traditional, but within the Mennonite diaspora in the Americas, the travel industry served as a new way to maintain old values. The travel agents even prided themselves in their ability to offer their expertise to Mennonite service agencies and historians. Several helped organize history tours through Russia, Ukraine, Poland, Holland, and Germany. Helen Funk noted that when she sold tickets to Mennonite Central Committee, Mennonite Disaster Service, and Commission for Overseas Missions, she tried to “work extra hard.”⁶⁸ Young people who did “voluntary missions” obtained her ready sympathy: “you know how much they get [paid]...so I tried to find an extra discount.”⁶⁹ In the end, she was satisfied, that her services did “help [the] Mennonite faith.”⁷⁰ And she did seem to share the observation of another travel agent, that mission trips were more predominant in the beginning and later the sales were mostly “sun vacation packages” or “adventures... [for] mid-lifers.”⁷¹

Some of the entrepreneurs continued to look for ways of finding acceptance in the Mennonite community by focusing on business ethics. Clearly, most of the businesses were expanding well beyond their local communities, often purely for profit. And yet new challenges were considered. One entrepreneur, Henry Enns, reported using profit sharing and another noted having tried it until it became clear that employees responded poorly to annual profit fluctuations. If these Latin American entrepreneurs experienced the same ostracism that Redekopp and Ainley discovered in their study, the newcomers did not seem to know it.

Conclusion

How well did these entrepreneurs adapt their Mennonite values to the marketplace? The interviews seemed to indicate that a successful reinvention providing the business people a uniquely Mennonite sense had occurred. Nine of the ten business owners in these interviews attended Mennonite churches, employed Mennonite workers, and gave money to Mennonite organizations. Over time,

however, reinvention may simply become a form of assimilation. This transformation would be consistent with the findings of Ted Regehr who has concluded that “increased involvement in entrepreneurial ventures...has greatly facilitated and in many cases forced Mennonite accommodation and assimilation into Canadian and North American society.”⁷² This change would also be consistent with the entrepreneurs’ own future predictions. Most seemed unconcerned that their children join the Mennonite Church. What mattered most was that the children simply join a church, preferably a Protestant Church practicing adult baptism. That said, however, most seemed to echo the words of Bernhard Wiebe, when he stated: “There are so many churches that are close to Mennonites these days, I don’t care [which one my children choose].”⁷³

Latin American Mennonite business owners and their children, therefore, appear to be approaching a crossroads. At the time of the interviews, they seemed to be walking the fine line of full and successful Mennonite reinvention and outside world relevance. Arriving later than most, and carrying traditional values with them, they walked the tightrope of Mennonite identity after many had given up on it. Before long, perhaps, they may have to face a modern reality. They will have to decide if they will battle or embrace secular society. Can they drop into the sea of Canadian culture and still keep their community-consciousness? In the end, the questions they face are the questions that all Mennonites face. And if the answers to those questions are not found and studied, Mennonites may someday find that the dilemma has passed them by entirely, and that the “Mennonite question” no longer even exists.

Notes

- ¹ Calvin Redekop, Stephen C. Ainlay, and Robert Siemens, *Mennonite Entrepreneurs*, (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1995).
- ² “Mennonite Millionaires” graced the cover of the January 14, 2002 *Maclaen’s*. The article with that title was: Danglo. Hawaleshka, “Mennonite Millionaires,” *Maclaen’s*, 14 Jan. 2002: 22-26.
- ³ Bill Redekop, “Immigration putting town back on map,” *Winnipeg Free Press* 10 Dec. 2001: A4.
- ⁴ Michael Sattler, “The Schleithem Articles,” *The Radical Reformation*, ed. Michael G. Baylor (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991).
- ⁵ This admonishment was written from Rosengard (Canada) and directed at the “Gemeinde” who remained in Russia. Johann Wiebe, “Aeltester Johann Wiebe (1837-1905), Documents,” trans. Delbert F. Plett Q. C., *Old Colony Mennonites in Canada*, ed. Delbert F. Plett Q. C. (Steinbach: Crossway Publications Inc., 2001) 55.
- ⁶ It should be noted that, before persecution drove them into the countryside, many of the earliest Dutch Anabaptists worked in the non-Mennonite world as “businessmen, craftspeople, and industrial workers?” This could raise some

questions as to how much separation was originally spurred on by theology, and how much of it grew out of a necessity for survival. Either way, the case for separation became theological. For more details on 16th to 19th-century Mennonite economic activity see Redekop, Ainlay, and Siemens 18-23.

7 Ibid 39.

8 It should be pointed out that the terms, “progressive” and “conservative” are not used in the political sense in this paper. Instead, they are used to help contrast the comparative levels of tolerance that different Mennonites have for the non-Mennonite world. As such, the reader should keep in mind that what might otherwise be “conservative” to most, may, in comparison to a particular Mennonite’s church and/or local community, actually be called “progressive.”

9 Although issues of innovation, capital formation, accumulation and utilization came up, they are left for others to study

10 Two participants asked not to be named in this project. To respect this request, I will be referring to their interviews by number. In other cases, I have also used my discretion to withhold the names of participants who did not request anonymity if I believe it to be in their best interest. This has been done on a statement-by-statement basis, so these names would not necessarily be withheld throughout the paper. When they are withheld, however, they will also be assigned a number. This particular statement was made in a written response to my interview questions: Interview One, 12 June 2002

11 Bernhard Wiebe, interview by author, 23 May 2002.

12 Interview One.

13 Helen Funk, interview by author, 28 May 2002.

14 Irwin Kornelsen, interview in author, 3 June 2002.

15 Kornelsen.

16 Ibid.

17 Interview Three., 11 June 2002.

18 Abe Wiebe, Sr., interview by author, 3 October 2002.

19 Interview Three.

20 Funk.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.

26 Bernhard Wiebe.

27 Interview One.

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid.

31 Interview Four, 28 May 2002.

32 Funk.

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid.

35 Ibid.

36 Henry Enns, interview by author, 30 May 2002.

37 Bernhard Wiebe.

38 Larry Dyck, interview by author, 21 May 2002.

39 Interview Five, 6 June 2002.

40 Interview One.

41 Bernhard Wiebe.

42 Larry Dyck.

43 Interview Three. For More information on the “school issue,” and the Reinlaender reasons for leaving Canada for Latin America, see Plett, 17-19.

- 44 Funk.
45 Interview Three.
46 Ibid.
47 Jake Dyck, interview by author, 21 May 2002.
48 Kornelsen.
49 Kornelsen.
50 Ibid.
51 Interview Three.
52 Redekop, Ainlay, & Siemens 39.
53 Ibid.
54 Interview Six, 28 May 2002.
55 Ibid.
56 Kornelsen.
57 Funk.
58 It should be noted that for at least one entrepreneur, charitable work beyond his own community was looked upon with considerable skepticism. When asked if there was anything he would like to share with the author that had not been asked about, this man chose to share his opinion of Aids relief in Africa: "The curse of the western world is that we're so concerned about going in there and saving the children. Now there's far too many of them and they're dying of hunger. If we were responsible, we would go in there, yes, and we would save the children. But after a woman has her second, she wouldn't have any more, you know what I mean? You want medical help? This is how you give medical help? The biggest problem in Africa is that there are no morals. They get Aids. Aids is a self-inflicted disease. And us poor, bleeding heart westerners think that we've got to spend millions of dollars giving them some serums that will help them get more people sick." Despite his critical stance, however, he still remained vehement that worldwide charity was important to him, adding: "It's hard to say that without sounding crass or uncaring. I'm just telling you? we're doing more damage out there than good." Interview Five.
59 Interview Three.
60 Interview Three.
61 Bernhard Wiebe.
62 Interview Three.
63 Interview Three.
64 T. D. Regehr, "From Agriculture to Big Business: Canadian-Mennonite Entrepreneurs After 1940," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 6 (1988): 64.
65 Ibid., 62.
66 Funk.
67 Ibid.
68 Ibid.
69 Ibid.
70 Ibid.
71 Interview One.
72 Regehr 67.
73 Bernhard Wiebe.