

# Toward a Latino/a Mennonite History

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## Background - How Has the Story Been Told

Mennonites began formal mission work among Latino/as<sup>1</sup> during the 1930s, the (Old) Mennonite Church in Chicago in 1932 and the Mennonite Brethren in Texas in 1937.<sup>2</sup> These efforts were part of renewed Mennonite missionary commitments that began during the latter part of the nineteenth century. For Mennonite Brethren the ministry in south Texas began in the midst of the denominational transition from German to English and the cultural and ethnic issues related to that transition.

The early “histories” of these projects were the missionary reports written for the supporting churches. The stories published in denominational periodicals gave glowing testimonies of the impact of the missionary efforts. If they mentioned any hardships, it was to explain the difficulties of the work and to reinforce the importance of what was being done.<sup>3</sup> By the 1950s some home mission leaders were questioning whether it might be time to change aspects of the missionary strategy. But these initial efforts at analyzing Mennonite ministry among Latinas/os were done by missionaries and agencies from a “missionary” perspective. Mennonite ministry among Latinas/os was too young and too “foreign” to analyze in any other than missiological terms.<sup>4</sup>

This situation did not begin to change until the late 1960s. The Civil Rights movement had an impact on the (Old) Mennonite Church (MC) and the General Conference Mennonite Church (GC) and through them on the Mennonite Brethren (MB) and, to a lesser extent, on the Brethren in Christ (BIC). The formation of the Urban Racial Council in 1968, which became the Minority Ministries Council in 1970, opened the door for Latinos/as to take some leadership in relationship to their own future within the Mennonite Church.<sup>5</sup> It also allowed them, for the first time, to “claim” a place at the Mennonite history table and to begin to tell their own stories as Latino/a Mennonites.

*Ecos Menonitas*, a Spanish language periodical of the Mennonite Church, began publication in 1975. Latina/o Mennonites were able to share news and perspective among themselves and to tell each other

their stories. In the early 1980s, the editor, Arnaldo Casas, convinced the Mennonite Church to make Latina/o MBs and GCs part of *Ecos*, making it an inter-Mennonite periodical. This made it possible for Spanish-speaking Mennonites in the different denominations to “discover” each other and to begin contacts among themselves. It also created a space for Latina/o Mennonites to meet with each other and dream about their future and about the best way to tell their own story.

The Latin American-focused *Currículo Anabautista de Educación Bíblica Congregacional* (CAEBC) project also opened the door for Latina/o Mennonites to make plans to write and publish their own history. The project’s goal was to write a Christian Education curriculum in Spanish from an Anabaptist perspective for the Spanish-speaking world. But the meetings and interactions between leaders of various countries and Mennonite denominations began to stir up hopes of developing other projects.<sup>6</sup>

As part of this new enthusiasm for telling the Latino/a Mennonite story, a number of Latino/a students at Goshen College wrote papers about specific Latina/o congregations and began to address some of the historical and missiological issues involved in Latino/a Mennonite history.<sup>7</sup> During this time there was also an increase in the number of articles in Mennonite periodicals relating to Latina/o Mennonites and/or to Mennonite work among Latinas/os.

From a historian’s perspective the most important document that came out of this period was Rafael Falcón’s history of MC Latinas/os, *La Iglesia Menonita Hispana en Norte América: 1932-1982* (Herald Press, 1985). Falcón collected oral histories, the papers written by the Goshen College students, denominational records and miscellaneous documents to tell the stories of the various Latina/o MC churches in the United States. He also included short appendices on Latino/a GCs and MBs. Though the book was a compilation of stories and not an attempt to write a history, it was the first time Latino/a Mennonites had their stories told by one of their own and pointed to the possibility of something broader in the future.

Marco Güete, working out of the General Conference Mennonite Church office, attempted to take a step toward a larger project, that of telling the Anabaptist story from a Latina/o Mennonite perspective. His goal was to develop a study manual to introduce new Latino/a pastors to Anabaptist history and theology and to be used in training a new generation of Latina/o Mennonite leaders. Originally written as a programmed text in Spanish, the first draft included sixteenth century Anabaptist history, the development of the larger Mennonite denominations and the principal doctrinal distinctives of Anabaptism. It also included a chapter on the history of Latino/a Mennonite churches in

the MC, GC Mennonite Church, MB, BIC and Evangelical Mennonite Conference (Canada).<sup>8</sup>

In 1977 José Ortiz published the first more scholarly analysis of MC work among Latinos/as in *Mission Focus*. Lupe de León wrote another article for *Mission Focus* in 1978. A decade later (1987) I wrote a similar type of analysis for *Direction* looking at MB work among Latinas/os. What all three had in common was a recognition that missiology was crucial in understanding Latino/a Mennonites. Since Latinas/os were becoming Mennonites because of an evangelistic effort, a missiological perspective would be crucial to understand their history. Each of these articles began to ask some of the types of questions that needed to be answered if a Latino/a Mennonite history was to be written.

The Mennonite Brethren also published a history of the work in south Texas written by one of the pioneering missionaries, Anna Hiebert Esau. *What God Has Done* was a compilation of stories and pictures published to celebrate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the LAMB conference.

José Ortiz' *Reflections of an Hispanic Mennonite* (1989, reprinted 2002) was not a historical text, but it opened the door to ask the question of a Latino/a Mennonite identity. It recognized that being a Latino/a Mennonite is not always an easy task and that such an identity means negotiating among three cultures, the Mennonite and Latino/a sub-cultures within the reality of the majority culture in the United States.

The last major text of this period was my Th.M. thesis, "Ministry Among United States Hispanics by an Ethno-Religious Minority: A Mennonite Brethren Case Study." This was the first document with an explicit historiography. Using Miriam Warner's study of German-Russian Mennonite Brethren in California as a background, I analyzed the problems of ethnic identity maintenance, and shift, issues in both communities, and their impact on MB home mission efforts among Latinas/os. I demonstrated that MB home mission work among Latinos/as was adversely affected by the ethnic identity issues faced by the German-Russian MB community and their assumptions as to how Latinas/os were supposed to response to the same issues. This thesis was an attempt to take the next step in Latino/a Mennonite history, namely, developing a historiographic framework to organize and analyze the Latina/o Mennonite story.

All of these efforts gave direction for the future. The work by Rafael Falcón, Anna Esau and the students from Goshen College involved collecting the data and writing down the stories. Others were beginning to give Latino/a Mennonites a framework for the analysis of their own story. It became clear that any historiography would need to focus on missiological issues, motivations for mission, relations between missionaries and Latina/o converts, ethnic relations, and mission strategy. Some of the key underlying questions for Latino/a

Mennonites were: Why did Mennonites want Latinos/as to become a part of their community and what impact did a specifically Mennonite mission effort have on the Latino/a community?

The energy of the 1980s never progressed beyond this point due to a series of financial and leadership issues. On the one hand, financial cutbacks meant the end of CAEBC and *Ecos Menonitas*.<sup>9</sup> The fallout from these decisions impacted many of the leaders who had been behind the efforts to write Latina/o Mennonite history. People left denominational roles (willingly and unwillingly) and were no longer able to influence decisions related to potential publication projects. On the other hand Mennonite home mission agencies put new energies into new church plants. The focus was once again on the initial stages of ministry, leaving little felt need for Latino/a historians, at least among those making strategic decisions.

But probably the issue that had the most impact was the MC/GC unification of the late 1990s. Latinos/as in those denominations needed to spend their energies on learning what these changes would mean for them. But, since this was a unification of only two denominations, it also meant that other Latino/a Mennonites (MBs and BICs in particular) were no longer a part of discussions about how Latino/a Anabaptist/Mennonites might work together. Denominational decisions encouraged unity among some Latino/a Mennonites, but also effectively separated other Latina/o Mennonites from each other.

Because of all these changes, the 1990s became a lost decade as far as telling the Latino/a Mennonite story was concerned. The earlier historians either left the scene or focused on other issues. Latina/o Mennonite leaders were too busy with other efforts to think about whether it would be important to tell their story or how to tell it.

## Issues

Any attempt to write a history of Latino/a Mennonites needs to address a number of crucial issues if it is to have an impact. The first question has to do with identity, specifically the identity issues being addressed by several of the Anabaptist/Mennonite denominations and their impact on Latina/o Mennonites. For the most part Latinos/as have been on the fringe of these discussions in their denominations.<sup>10</sup> Yet they are impacted because these discussions raise the question: What, in fact, is a Latina/o Mennonite?

The question has both historical and contemporary facets. Historically, many Mennonite missionaries either did not have a distinctive Anabaptist theology or they did not see the usefulness of teaching it to the Latino/a converts. Also, some of the mission work among Lati-

nos/as included adopting leaders who had Evangelical or Pentecostal backgrounds without requiring an understanding and/or commitment to Anabaptism. Therefore, some Latino/a Mennonites have a limited understanding of Anabaptist theology. Their experience has been such that they have seen little difference between being a Mennonite and being a Pentecostal (or an Evangelical).

The contemporary facet has to do with the current debates in some Anabaptist denominations about their Anabaptist identity.<sup>11</sup> This leaves Latinas/os with an identity crisis greater than the one faced by “ethnic” Mennonites. What is a Latino/a Anabaptist? What is the relationship between a Latina/o Anabaptist and a Latino/a Mennonite? Though this is a theological question, it has a direct impact on this issue: Is there a distinctive community that needs to claim and tell its story or is the discussion merely about the story of Mennonite mission efforts among Latinos/as? What is the core identity that brings these people together to tell their own story?

Who will tell the story? This is another crucial issue. Again, it depends on the story to be told: the North American volume of the Global Mennonite History Project (GMHP) needs to include the Latino/a Mennonite communities. They are a part of the larger North American Mennonite story. But this type of effort will not likely produce the history of the communities. It may be difficult, if not impossible, for Latina/o Mennonites to recognize themselves in the GMHP volume or in the work of any historian from outside the community.

All this also relates to the question of identity. To tell one’s story is to develop an identity. Minority communities in the Mennonite denominations have not had access to the resources or the tools to tell their own stories. Latino/a Mennonites need to take ownership of their own story. This means that they need to develop storytellers and potential historians, something that was lost after the 1980s. The challenge will be to find someone who will both be respected by the larger Mennonite community and be heard from within the Latino/a Mennonite communities. This may mean the need for more than one person writing aspects of the work or a collaborative effort. The person, or team, needs to bring together interest, historical tools and credibility among Mennonite historians and within the Latina/o Mennonite communities. This may not be easy since the type of credibility necessary to be heard in one community is very different from what is needed in the other. It may be that young historians like Hinojosa, Plett-Wiedenhoefer or Padilla, whose works are described below, will be able to develop that credibility, with the right support and training.

Related to the issue of credibility of the historians is the question of the purpose of a Latina/o Mennonite history. GMHP would like to see a worldwide history of Mennonites to be written from the perspective

of those who have not had a chance to tell their stories. But who would be served by this type of effort and how? What steps need to be taken to make sure that the various overlapping constituencies (i.e., Latinos/as, denominations, MWC, Mennonite historians) would benefit from and read a history of Latino/a Mennonites in North America?

There are also a number of practical issues that need to be addressed. One is the question of sources. On the one hand this is still very much an oral history. Who can collect the data and get people to tell their "whole" story? A few of the pioneers are still alive and will need to be interviewed by someone they trust. On the other hand, some Mennonite home mission agencies are still not ready to allow scholars to read the correspondence of some of the early missionaries because they have not been dead long enough. Without reading the correspondence it will be difficult to ascertain deeply felt attitudes and perspectives related to Latinos/as among the early missionaries and home mission leaders.

This effort will also face the broader issues related to telling the story of Latino/a Protestants. The Latina/o community is very dynamic, constantly impacted by new immigration and by the pressures of acculturation from the majority culture. Some Latino/a Mennonites are not in Latina/o Mennonite churches. Should they be included in the story? How? Recent immigrants also bring their own stories. There are a small number of immigrants from Latin America who are bringing their own Mennonite stories. How does the small number of Latin American Mennonites or German-Russian Mennonites migrating back north fit into the story if they join Latino/a Mennonite churches? Given the number of Latinas/os who were adopted by Mennonites from other denominations, how do their stories fit into the larger history?

The Canadian Latino/a Mennonite experience adds another layer to these issues. There are many ties between US and Canadian Latina/o Mennonites, but they have had different national experiences and their futures are likely to go in very different directions. Canadian Latina/o Mennonites will need to ask how their story can be told in a way that it is not merely subsumed in a larger history about Latinos/as in the United States.

### **Toward a History of Latino/a Mennonites**

Recent events have brought the Latino/a Mennonite story back into focus. The GMHP has encouraged North American Mennonites to rethink their own history without imposing their historiography on Mennonites in the rest of the world. Part of that effort includes the recognition that the North American story cannot merely be told

through the lenses of the Swiss-German and German-Russian majorities. Minority communities, such as Latinos/as, need to be included and be given the opportunity to impact a North American Mennonite history from their own perspective.

But stirrings among a younger generation of Mennonites are leading to new questions related to what it means to be a Latino/a Mennonite, at least in the United States. In particular two MCC volunteers have recently completed Masters' theses that study Latino/a MBs. Felipe Hinojosa brings new questions to bear on the history of the Latina/o MB churches in south Texas. And Sheri Plett Wiedenhoefer asks relational questions as Latino/a and "Anglo" MBs struggle to live and minister together in the San Joaquín Valley of California.

The most extensive effort at this moment is what Saulo Padilla is doing at Goshen College in Indiana. He is focusing his undergraduate work on updating Rafael Falcón's work. Saulo is filling in the stories of the churches that were included in Falcón's book. He is also writing similar summaries of all of the new churches that have been started since 1982 using Falcón's methodology of written surveys sent to church leaders.

These new efforts have just been recently completed or are still in process. It remains to be seen whether these new efforts will result in a new generation of interest and the next steps in writing a Latino/a Mennonite history in North America.

The issues addressed above are a crucial part of any future project. Of these, identity is probably the most crucial. Working on a history of Latina/o Mennonites implies that there is a common story that needs telling, a story that will strengthen the identity of the community. In part, this will mean making peace with the parts of the past that created the hybrid Latino/a Mennonite identities that exist today. But it may also imply challenging denominational decisions that impact Latina/o Mennonites, decisions in which they have not been given a voice. What is Latinas/os' place at the denominational table and at the historians' table?

As the Latino/a Mennonite story becomes a part of the larger Mennonite story in North America, the larger Mennonite community will be impacted. Theological and historiographical issues will need to be revisited. In particular, Latina/o Mennonite historians will need to address the issue of Anabaptism and Pentecostalism. Where do these intersect and how to they come together to form a theological and denominational identity? This discussion will also mean revisiting the sixteenth century and how it is read in Mennonite circles. The polygenesis historiography being adopted by Mennonite historians has given a new place to some of the sixteenth century Anabaptist leaders that were "shunned" by an earlier generation of historians. This shift

makes room for some of the early Anabaptist leaders with whom many Latina/o Mennonites can most easily identify.<sup>12</sup>

Academic historians or sociologists will be needed to provide tools for the work ahead. But the new generation of Latino/a Mennonites will need to be supported, encouraged and trained to tell the stories, but also to ask the hard questions. The GMHP goal of having Mennonites around the world tell their own stories is crucial for minority Mennonite communities in North America and for Latinas/os in particular.

Given the ongoing development of Latino/a Mennonite churches, missiology will need to be an important part of the story. Latino/a Mennonite history is about the evangelistic encounter between Mennonites and Latinos/as. That encounter is ongoing and will continue to be a crucial part of the story for many years to come. But, in North America, the encounter is also about acculturation and the role that Protestantism has had and is having in acculturating ethnic Mennonites and Latino/a converts into the majority culture. This means that the uneasy and changing relationship that Mennonites have had with the larger culture in the United States and Canada impacts the Latina/o Mennonite story.

A Latino/a Mennonite history will also play a crucial role in the continuing development of a Latina/o Mennonite identity. As the community appropriates its history and tells the story from its own perspective it will develop the roots it needs for long term stability as a part of the worldwide Mennonite community. As a Latino Anabaptist/Mennonite my hope is that this happens soon.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Throughout this paper I use the term Latino to describe people who have a Latin American background but who live in the United States or Canada. This includes immigrants and their descendants, but also the descendants of those who were conquered by the United States when it took over what is now the southwestern United States. It is a term synonymous with Hispanic. Because Latino is a term in Spanish, issues of gender impact its usage. Latino/a and Latinas/os are used throughout this paper, unless there is a clear gender reference.
- <sup>2</sup> Both the Mennonite Church (Chicago and south Texas) and Mennonite Brethren Church (Los Angeles) report Latino/a converts before these dates. But 1932 and 1937 mark the beginning of specific mission efforts focused toward Latinas/as.
- <sup>3</sup> Harry Neufeld's *Eight Years Among Latin Americans* (Hillsboro, KS: Mennonite Brethren Publishing House, 1947) is apparently the first "published" work documenting Mennonite work among Latinas.
- <sup>4</sup> Rudy Dahl's study of Mennonite Brethren work in California "A History of the Spanish Mennonite Brethren Church in the Dinuba and Reedley Area." (M.A. thesis, Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary, Fresno, Calif., 1969) is the first "scholarly" analysis of Mennonite work among Latinas. Her focus is principally missiological.
- <sup>5</sup> The Minority Ministries Council opened the door for Latinas/os to take leadership positions within the structures of the Mennonite Church (MC). This had an impact

and similar result on the General Conference Mennonite Church (GC). Several years later the formation of the Hispanic Caucus among Mennonite Brethren (MB) in California also opened the door for Latinos/as in that denomination. In south Texas the formation of the Latin American Mennonite Brethren (LAMB) Conference in the 1960s gave Latino/a MBs some control over their local ministries, but little voice in the denomination beyond south Texas. By 1980 MCs, GCs and MBs all had Hispanic Councils or Caucuses.

- <sup>6</sup> The project was never able to reach its goals. After publishing four of the anticipated ten volumes, the project was discontinued.
- <sup>7</sup> See the bibliography in Rafael Falcón's *La Iglesia Menonita hispana en Norte América: 1932-1982* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1985) for a complete listing of these student papers.
- <sup>8</sup> The original work was edited to become a study module using the FLET (*Facultad Teológica de Educación Teológica*) self-study model used by many Mennonites in South America. *Historia y teología de la reforma radical: Un desafío actual* (Juan Martínez, Colombia: CLARA, 1993) was edited and only included 16<sup>th</sup> century Anabaptist history and the principal doctrinal distinctives of Anabaptism. The manual has been used extensively in Latin America and has been translated into Portuguese. It has had limited distribution among Latina/o Mennonites.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ecos Menonitas* ceased publication in 1990.
- <sup>10</sup> Mennonite denominations have made decisions about mergers, denominational names, doctrinal statements, etc., based on the felt needs of the core constituencies. Because they are a small percentage of the total communities and because they do not have long historical links within the various denominations, Latinas have not had much to say about the decisions. Their role has been to figure out how to deal with the implications of decisions taken outside of their control.
- <sup>11</sup> For example, MBs continue to struggle with the issue of what it means to be an Evangelical Anabaptist. If being an MB does not have a theological distinction from other Evangelical denominations, what is the distinctive core that identifies Latina/o MBs?
- <sup>12</sup> The most obvious example is the attraction Central American Mennonites have had for the more charismatic and revolutionary of the 16<sup>th</sup> Anabaptist leaders. For example, the Latin American Anabaptist Seminary (SEMILLA) in Guatemala City named its annual lectureship the Hans Denck Lectureship in the 1980s.