

Intervention and Resistance: Two Mennonite Visions Conflict in Mexico

David M. Quiring, *University of Saskatchewan*

To casual onlookers, the Mennonite world presents a bewildering array of factions, all of whom claim to follow in the tradition of Menno Simons and other early Anabaptists. Although seemingly motivated by sincere desires to discern and follow the will of God, spiritual leaders often have failed to agree on theological issues. As a result, they have led their adherents into separate spiritual enclaves. While some have remained in close physical proximity to the larger society, others have gone to the extreme of seeking geographic isolation. One group that has sought to live secluded from the rest of the world is the Old Colony Church in Mexico. But other Mennonites have not respected that desire for separation. In the past decades, various Mennonite groups have waged what resembles an undeclared war against the Old Colony Mennonite Church in Mexico. Although the rhetoric often resembles that of a war, fortunately both sides ascribe to pacifism and have restricted their tactics to non-violent methods of attack and defence.

When this research project into the Mexican Mennonites began in the mid-1990s, like many average Canadians and Americans of

Mennonite descent, I lacked awareness of the conflict between the Mennonite groups in Mexico. My initial interest in the Mennonites of Latin America, and particularly the Old Colonists, derived from several sources. While curiosity about these obviously quaint people provided reason enough for exploring their history, a more personal motivation also existed. The Old Colonists and my family share a common ancestry. For centuries, our forebears lived, worked, and worshipped in the same villages. Together they rejoiced at births, baptisms, and marriages, and sorrowed at funerals. And then, about 130 years ago, the forebears of today's Old Colony group left for Canada, while my family remained behind in Russia. At that time and later on in Canada and Mexico, the Old Colonists developed a vision of themselves as a distinct people. Since that dream increasingly varied from that of other Mennonites, the distance between the groups grew. The Old Colonists became known for living in isolated and closed communities, protected from the world by physical and cultural barriers. Seeing this raised the intriguing question of whether the Old Colonists had discovered a better way to live and maintain the Mennonite vision and impart their beliefs to succeeding generations. My own experiences growing up in Canada and the challenge of raising children there lay behind this question. Too often, parents find themselves fighting losing battles against intrusive negative influences that originate in the larger North American society.

Teaching their offspring the distinctive beliefs of their church appears to be of primary importance to most Mennonite parents. Yet, examples abound where descendants of Mennonites have left the fold. Some years ago, for instance, needing help with a construction project, I hired a young man. Although he obviously took pride in looking, dressing, and acting like a member of a well-known biker gang, he carried a common Mennonite surname. Later, while working together, I asked him if he came from a Mennonite family. He looked at me and asked, "what kind of a family?" Somewhat surprised that he had not even heard of Mennonites, I told him a little of the history of that religious and ethnic group. Some time later, his father stopped by the job site. Taking advantage of the opportunity, the young man turned to me and said, "ask my dad about that group, if we are, you know..." Since he could not remember the word "Mennonite," I finished the sentence for him. On hearing the term "Mennonite," his father seemed startled. Then, after a moment's pause, with an embarrassed look, he replied, "Well, there used to be some talk about that." He then reluctantly admitted that his grandparents were Mennonites who had come from Russia.

What would these and other grandparents think if they could see their descendants now? After all, did not they and their ancestors

move from country to country in an attempt to ensure that their offspring would not lose their identity as Mennonites, and all which that involved? Yet all too frequently, life in North America has resulted in the breaking of the Mennonite chain. So, in addition to the historical aspects of the research, to study the Old Colony Mennonites of Mexico presented an opportunity to seek an answer to the dilemma of what is the best way to pass on beliefs to children: in a diverse ethnic and religious setting or in a separate and controlled environment inhabited by like minded people.

In recent decades, the outside world increasingly has focussed on the Mennonites in and from Mexico. Various writers from Canada and the US have written extensively in newspapers and books about these people. Also, videos and internet web sites provide graphic portrayals of their lives. These sources depict a peculiar and colourful people, who in many respects seem stuck in a bygone age. Only rarely do reporters explore or appear to understand the reasons for the distinguishing attributes. As a result, the outside world does not know that Old Colonists choose many of their seemingly peculiar ways in order to maintain a distance from the "world." Their choice of remote communities, conservative dress styles, and use of the archaic Low German dialect help create a barrier to intruders. Prohibiting the use of cars and using horses and tractors with steel wheels prevents young people from easily travelling to non-Mennonite communities where temptations await. Other prohibitions, including those against telephones, connections to state electrical lines, and the use of other modern technology, also serve to protect the Old Colony communities from worldly influences. In a sense, not having outsiders understand the reasons for their chosen lifestyle adds protection for the Old Colonists.¹

In addition to depicting the colourful side of Old Colony life, outsiders have focussed on a dark side of these Mennonites' experiences. Only rarely does an observer suggest that the Old Colony group has met with success – material, social, or spiritual. Onlookers frequently stress the problems and failures that have plagued the Old Colonists. As a result of unsatisfactory circumstances in the Mexican colonies, thousands have relocated to Canada, from where their ancestors fled in the 1920s. Numerous sources also chronicle how compassionate representatives of other Mennonite groups have helped their needy brethren, both in Mexico and on their return to Canada.² But again, the descriptions remain incomplete and one-sided. In particular, the accounts fail to sympathetically describe Old Colony goals. Neither do they tell of the group's successes, which have been many.

Fortunately, while the readily available literature fails to tell the complete story of life on the Mexican colonies and particularly about the ongoing role that Canadian Mennonites have played in the lives of Old Colonists, records stored at the Mennonite Heritage Centre in Winnipeg and the National Archives of Canada in Ottawa tell a more balanced story. Additionally, staff of the various church agencies involved with the Mexican Mennonites who have emigrated to Alberta, Manitoba, and Ontario openly speak about the programs they have designed and administered. Some immigrants from the colonies also willingly tell of their experiences. Both archival records and conversations reveal the presence of a decades-old war, waged against the Old Colony Church in Mexico. Canadian Mennonites, who have disagreed with and opposed many of the decisions and actions of the leaders of the Mexican colonies, often have led the charge.³

Certainly, the common portrayal in Canada of the Old Colonists, which stresses their failures, is based on factual information. Yet that point of view fails to provide the complete picture. It usually does not include the perspectives of the Old Colony people and their leaders. Neither does it adequately consider and value the vision that originally brought these people from Canada to Mexico, and which accounts for many of their actions. Although the Old Colonists rarely seek an audience and communicate little with the outside world, they appear welcoming, open, honest, and willing to tell their story. Only by visiting the Mexican colonies is it possible to hear their version of events.

Visits to the settlements in Chihuahua, Durango, and Zacatecas states confirm that, even though the Old Colonists who left Canada for Mexico in the early 1920s sought to sever ties with the northern nation, in recent decades Canadian history and that of the Mexican Mennonites have become increasingly intertwined. Interviews with leaders of the various groups involved, as well as with their followers, confirm that a war is in progress. In spite of sharing common roots, a profound division separates the Old Colonists from most other Mennonites. While these other groups possess their own histories of schisms and disunity, they have united in their campaign to bring change to the Old Colony church.

Although contact between other Mennonites and the Old Colony Church in Mexico long existed, it has intensified greatly in recent decades. Three groups or organizations have had the greatest effect on the Old Colonists. The first is the group known until recently as the General Conference Mennonite Church. After Canada refused entry to some Mennonite families from Russia in the 1920s, some of these families settled in Mexico, near the Mennonite colonies in Chihuahua state. Eventually, in 1939, some of these Mennonites

joined the US-based General Conference Mennonites. But, for a time, their numbers remained small and did not represent a major threat to the integrity of the Old Colony church.⁴

Whatever harmony may have characterized relations between the General Conference and the Old Colonists disappeared after the General Conference in 1950 embarked on a concerted effort to bring change to the Mexican colonies. Directed from outside Mexico, the newcomers developed schools and churches in the Cuauhtémoc area, including at Bluemenau in Manitoba colony, Steinreich in Nord Colony, and Burwalde in Swift Current colony. They sought to provide an “alternative church for those who want to leave the Old Colony church.”⁵ Numerous church workers moved south to Mexico to staff programs designed to bring change and assistance to the Mexican Mennonites. Since that time, Canadians and Americans laboured in agricultural development, educational projects, and evangelization. Sometimes intentionally, and sometimes as a side-effect, they helped break down the walls, carefully erected by the conservative Mennonite communities.

Another Mennonite group, the *Kleine Gemeinde*, also developed into a major threat to the Old Colony. Similarly to the early General Conference presence there, the *Kleine Gemeinde* Church did not go to Mexico with the intention of interfering with the Old Colonists. The newcomers themselves fled the Canadian world in the late 1940s and early 1950s, establishing the Jagueyes or Quellen Colony near Santa Clara. But it soon became apparent that their presence threatened the Old Colony communities. The new arrivals accepted excommunicated Old Colonists, weakening that group’s discipline. Over time, the *Kleine Gemeinde* also implemented an active evangelization program among the Old Colony group. By the mid-1990s, they established a presence in various former Old Colony bastions, including in the Manitoba, Nord, Swift Current, La Honda, and Durango colonies. Many disgruntled members of the Old Colony Church accepted the educational, social, and church alternatives offered to them.⁶

The third and possibly most serious challenge to the Old Colonists has come from the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC). In theory at least, MCC concentrated more on economic, educational, and health initiatives than on spiritual conversion. The organization’s interest in the Mexican Mennonites dates back at least to 1946 when P. C. Hiebert and William T. Snyder visited Mexico on behalf of MCC, headquartered in Akron, Pennsylvania, in an effort to place Mennonites fleeing Russia. The Old Colonists made it clear that they did not want the refugees in their colonies. That same year, an educator, Winfield Fretz, a physician, Dr. C. W. Wiebe, an

agriculturalist, Dr. A. D. Stoesz, and a farmer and pastor, Dr. D. V. Wiebe, visited the Mexican colonies. Their reports provided support and direction for subsequent MCC actions. The eminent Mennonite theologian Harold S. Bender wrote the forward to Fretz's most widely circulated account, giving his blessing to the idea of intervening in the lives of the isolated Mexican Mennonites. "The author is concerned about the future of the Mennonites in Mexico, and rightly so," said Bender in support. Fretz himself suggested that North American Mennonites become aware of the "life and needs of the large block of 12,000 of their brethren in Mexico."⁷ In a less widely distributed report also written by Fretz, the message stood out more aggressively and clearly. There Fretz wrote: "The Mennonites in Mexico are definitely in need of spiritual awakening and of cultural grounding. This is indicated in the areas of religion, education, and sanitation." He called for MCC to become involved, but in a covert manner. "MCC...should remain in the background because of suspicion on the part of the Old Colony leadership...much of the work that is established should be made to appear as an individual project rather than an organization sponsored project."⁸

MCC quickly complied with Fretz's plan by offering seed loan, well digging, and food relief programs. It also provided medical care and teachers for a new school. But, faced with resistance from the conservative Mexican Mennonites and possibly from the Mexican government, MCC left Mexico in the early 1950s. True to its reputation as a humanitarian organization, MCC returned by 1954 to offer aid to help the Mexican Mennonites through a severe drought. Yet the Mexican Mennonites did not appreciate what they viewed as interference. "MCC is DDT," was repeated in the colonies. Again, opposition drove MCC out, and the organization did not reenter the Mexican colonies until 1975. This time MCC Canada led the way. It established the Kanadier Mennonite Colonization Committee, later replaced by the Kanadier Mennonite Concerns Committee, to work with the Mexican Mennonites, both in Mexico and Canada. Aware of MCC's negative reputation in the colonies, the Canadian Mennonites used great care in designing interventions. Beginning in 1977, MCC published *Die Mennonitische Post*, a German language newspaper that inherited much of the credibility of its independent predecessor, the *Steinbach Post*. The new *Post* continued to provide a welcome forum for conservative Mennonites in various parts of the Americas to exchange letters and news. MCC added its own content, in many cases at variance with Old Colony norms. *Das Blatt*, an MCC sponsored children's publication followed suit.⁹

MCC personnel also worked directly with the Mexican Mennonites, both in Mexico and when they came to Canada as migrant

workers or immigrants. At times, MCC staff expressed their opinions about the traditional Mennonites of Mexico. In 1991, for instance, one worker wrote about the Old Colony system: "It is *Bankrupt*. It has been built on premises which have more in common with the dark ages, of pre-reformation days than with the generally accepted, enlightened values of today."¹⁰ He and others supported the idea that they should help destroy the Old Colony system.

By the mid-1990s, MCC became increasingly direct in its efforts, placing staff and opening offices in several locations on or near the Mexican colonies. Operating with a fairly open mandate, the workers delivered a multi-faceted program to numerous Mexican colonies. Many of these staff persons firmly believed in the correctness of their efforts, including those directed at undermining the Old Colony community. Certainly, some representatives of MCC demonstrated sensitivity and understanding towards the Old Colonists. But others, including some who accepted the assignments in Mexico and some who directed them from Canada, cast the issues in black and white terms, condemning the Old Colonist leaders, goals, theology, traditions, and structures.

Since the return of MCC to the Mexican colonies, relationships with the Old Colony leaders often have been rocky. The determination of the Canadian Mennonites to proceed with their programs, even without the consent of the Old Colony leaders accounts for much of this. An MCC clothing distribution program in 1996 provides a small example. In one Mexican colony, MCC workers offered donated clothing to poverty stricken conservative Mennonites, who eagerly accepted the much needed items. Yet the popular North American styles violated Old Colony regulations of dress. While it may seem a small thing, the clothing distribution played its part in breaking down the Old Colony defences.¹¹ In countless other ways, MCC and the other Mennonite organizations also have undermined, sometimes inadvertently and at other times intentionally, the integrity of the Old Colony church.

In addition to the three groups or organizations already mentioned, the presence of other Mennonites from Canada and the US has helped bring change to the Mexican colonies. The Mennonite Brethren came to Mexico in 1950. In the years that followed, they concentrated their medical, educational, and mission interventions on the Nuevo Ideal (Durango) colony. After decades of limited success, the Brethren turned to the Evangelical Mennonite Mission Conference to take over their work. In another initiative, the Kentucky-based Mennonitische Gemeinschaft brought workers from Ontario to staff a mission and school on Manitoba Colony. The Canadian Evangelical Mission Conference provided mission or educational programs in several

areas. And the Church of God in Christ, Mennonite Church also had a presence for a time. Additionally, Reinländer Mennonites from Manitoba became a force on Swift Current and Santa Rita Colonies. Unlike most other groups, the Reinländer came by invitation, welcomed there by Old Colonists who remained behind after their leaders left for new colonies elsewhere in Latin America. Later, the Reinländer presence spread to Buena Vista Colony. Sommerfelder Mennonites, who also fled Canada in the early 1920s, settled on Santa Clara Colony northwest of Cuauhtémoc. While somewhat less conservative than the Old Colonists, the Sommerfelder have usually left the Old Colonists alone, although some movement between the groups, including through intermarriage has taken place.¹²

While seemingly unable to reach agreement on some other matters, many Mennonite factions long have agreed on the need to reform the Old Colony Mennonites. Quite likely, the attempt by other Mennonite groups to bring change to the conservative Mennonites of Mexico and elsewhere in Latin America represents one of the most concerted efforts ever directed by Mennonites at any one group. Already twenty-five years ago, one estimate of the number of missionaries working with the Old Colony people stood as high as one hundred, with an annual budget of one million dollars.¹³ Since then, these efforts only have increased.

For its part, since the 1940s the Old Colony church has reacted with resistance and opposition to the often aggressive interventions of other groups of Mennonites. As a result of both offensive and defensive actions, the history of the relationship between the colonies' leaders and those who came to bring change is one of conflict and animosity. Demonstrating great passion, some on both sides have characterized their opponents as wrong and even immoral. Although the Mennonite factions have not resorted to violence, much like in many violent wars those on each side believe that God supports their cause.

The differences between the Old Colonists of Mexico and the other Mennonite churches have multiple origins in the history of the Mennonite church. Four places and times stand out: in the Ukraine in the 1870s, the early years in Canada, Canada in the 1920s, and the recent decades in Mexico. From the Old Colonists' point of view, at each of these crucial junctures, a large number of their people have fallen by the wayside, leaving the core group to continue faithful to the vision of their ancestors.

In the 1870s, approximately twelve to fifteen thousand Mennonites belonging to various groups emigrated from southern Russia to North America.¹⁴ Their number included many Mennonites from the Chortitza Colony region, the first area settled by Mennonites in the

Ukraine. The more conservative leaders led their followers away from their comfortable and prosperous farms in the Ukraine, not because of the lure of adventure and riches in the new land, but because of threats to their religion and way of life in eastern Europe. They perceived two primary threats. First, the Russian state increasingly demanded that the Mennonites become less distinct from the larger society. A second threat came from those Mennonites who believed they could remain in Russia and comply with the demands of the state. The more conservative of those who chose to leave saw spiritual danger in that call for compromise. Those who remained in the Ukraine decided they could live with the demands of the Russian state. They prospered there, not far from the shore of the Black Sea, until the Russian Revolution brought a permanent end to their former way of life.¹⁵

Many of those who arrived in southern Manitoba settled in what became known as the West Reserve. During the next decades, some who had emigrated from the Chortitza area became increasingly distinct from the other Mennonite communities in Manitoba. Since they lived in Reinland Municipality, the emerging group took the name of *Reinländer Mennoniten Gemeinde*. More commonly, they referred to themselves as “*Altkolonisten*” or Old Colonists, because they came from the old colony of Chortitza in Russia. The Old Colonists rejected various technological innovations and attempted to limit contact with those from outside their group. Threats to their isolation, from Mennonites and non-Mennonites alike, and overcrowding in the Manitoba colonies motivated many Old Colonists to move farther west, to Saskatchewan, beginning in 1895.

The next major point of crisis for the Old Colonists came in Canada during WW I and the years that followed. This time it was the Canadian state that made demands that these Mennonites believed they could not in good conscience comply with. So, thousands sold their promising farms in Manitoba and Saskatchewan and departed on trains bound for Mexico. Again, as in Russia, others fell away from the group and did not join the migration. In various ways, those who remained in Canada accommodated themselves to the demands of Canadian society.¹⁶ In time, many of these Mennonites came to thank God for the opportunity to live in Canada, rather than viewing it primarily as a nation that threatened their beliefs and way of life.

The fourth winnowing began in Mexico and still continues today. There, over the past decades, many have separated from the Old Colony community. The core of adherents that remains persists in seeking ways to survive as a group, both in Mexico and other Latin American countries to which they have fled. In the view of those who still adhere firmly to the Old Colony Church, many, if not all, other

Mennonites have abandoned the true faith. A personal experience illustrates this. While in Mexico some years ago, I attended a Sunday morning worship service held in the Old Colony church on La Batea Colony in Zacatecas state. As the guest of a well-respected member of that congregation, no one challenged my presence at the service. And the reception accorded me was polite and friendly. On the way into the church, my host introduced me to a group of his neighbours. While we stood there talking, one man, in a typically forward Mennonite manner, asked the man who brought me whether I was one of them. The others and I listened intently for the answer. After a thoughtful pause, the reply came. "No." At the moment, I felt a little disappointed that they did not consider me as a brother. After all, had not our ancestors once lived next door to each other? Would not a geneticist, on testing the blood from our veins, find a close relationship? Did not our extended families still include the same names? But my host was correct. Our paths had diverged, and they had become a separate people.

In order to understand the aggressive interventions of the other Mennonite groups among the Old Colonists, it is necessary to seek an answer to the following question: What is it about the conservative Mennonites of Mexico that has prompted other North American Mennonites to refuse to allow that group to go its own way? A number of explanations stand out. First of all, unlike the Old Colonists, who no longer consider those who fell away as belonging to their group, other Mennonites continue to think of the Old Colonists as their brothers and sisters. This imposes a special obligation to remain involved with their needy kin.¹⁷ Secondly, other Mennonites have a long tradition of helping those in need, Mennonites and non-Mennonites alike. Those intervening see the serious economic problems that long have plagued the Mexican colonies. And without doubt, many of the Mennonites in Mexico have experienced severe financial difficulties, caused by drought, unchecked population growth, and various national and international circumstances.

Thirdly, some justify their interventions by decrying the perceived backwardness and even ignorance among the Old Colonists. This line of reasoning argues that, although the group's members possessed little education when they left Canada, education has become increasingly important and even essential since that time. Instead of responding appropriately, the colonies' leaders have allowed many of their followers to sink into illiteracy. Proponents of this point of view believe that depriving the colonies' youth of the opportunity to receive an education amounts to abuse and that outsiders should not turn a blind eye. What some do not understand is that this is not a new dispute. Instead, it dates back at least to the mid-nineteenth century,

when the ancestors of today's Old Colonists resisted similar arguments in Russia.¹⁸ But those who intervene remain convinced of the importance of education. To quote one who went from Canada to the Mexican colonies, "I'm often convinced that ignorance is bliss, but I'm not convinced that it is Christian."¹⁹

As a fourth justification for intervening, many outsiders claim that Old Colonists and other conservative Mennonites have called for help. And, without doubt, that has occurred. Even though Old Colony leaders and many of the people often wished and even asked the interveners to go away and leave them alone, other Old Colonists welcomed the interest and interventions from the north. This latter group includes many of the most destitute and needy, those for whom the Old Colony system has failed to provide. The high rate of population growth, a shortage of farm land, and a lack of vocational alternatives certainly has meant that many of the less fortunate have found themselves in dire straits. Yet, the group that has welcomed the other Mennonites also includes some Old Colonists who have rebelled against the restrictions – educational, vocational, economic, social, and spiritual – imposed by their church and community.²⁰

A fifth rationale derives from the claim made by other Mennonites that the Old Colonists have brought their problems into the home communities of Mennonites in Canada and the United States. When they travel north from Mexico, whether temporarily or permanently, the Mexican Mennonites become the legitimate concern of Canadian and American Mennonites. This argument has served as a justification for various interventions in Canada as well as in Mexico.²¹

Finally, some Mennonites claim that the Old Colony leaders have betrayed and misled their followers, teaching them unchristian beliefs. In turn, the Old Colonists assert that the more worldly Mennonites have lost the essential elements required for life as a faithful Mennonite and Christian. Three theological differences stand out. First, while the Old Colonists strongly believe that they can only remain true to their faith by separating themselves from the world and its influences and temptations, many other Mennonites vehemently disagree. As their ancestors did in Russia and Canada before them, the Mexican Old Colonists have attempted to isolate themselves geographically. In addition, the passage of time has aided them in constructing other barriers. Their rejection of many technological advances and their choice of distinctive manners of dress and other cultural attributes increasingly have separated them from those around them, even when in close physical proximity. In contrast, other Mennonite groups have kept pace with the western world in most technological and cultural matters.²²

A second theological disagreement concerns the importance of evangelism. Consistent with their desire to minimize their interactions with the outside world, Old Colonists generally do not try to convince outsiders to believe as they do. Nor do they seek to bring others into their group. In contrast, many other Mennonites assert that their religion requires them to bring the truth to those who do not know it. Consequently, they view the entire world, including the “lost” on the Mexican colonies, as their mission field.

At least part of the reason other Mennonites view the Old Colonists as spiritually lost derives from a third difference in belief. Old Colonists believe it is wrong and even sinful to claim that they know they are spiritually saved and that they will spend eternity in God’s kingdom. They think that the most they can say is that they hope they are saved. In contrast, other Mennonites believe that an essential condition for salvation from eternal damnation is to confidently say “I know I am saved.” Members of each group consider those in the other as lost because of their stand on this issue.²³ A former Old Colonist, a man who no longer belonged to that group, explained this discrepancy and its fundamental importance. He had spent many hours agonizing over the issue. Having accepted the non-Old Colonist view, he felt great concern for the souls of his family members, who remained in the Old Colony church. Peace finally came to him one day when, after speaking with his father about this issue, he concluded that both sides really believed and said the same thing, although their words sounded different. But others continue to believe that their opponents teach unchristian beliefs.

In summary, some other Mennonites view the Old Colonists as brothers in need, destitute, uneducated, calling for help, bringing their problems to Canada and the United States, and spiritually lost. Which explanation appears most appropriate depends on the viewer’s perspective. Frequently, interveners combine several or even all of these explanations.

Without doubt, Mennonites from outside the colonies have provided invaluable aid to many Old Colonists. Compassionate interveners have worked with the surplus population, the weak, and the dissatisfied, attempting to protect them from the inadequacies of the Old Colony system and the jaws of secular North American society. But the Mennonites from outside have gone far beyond picking up those who fall from the Old Colony tree. They have reached into the colonies, offered alternatives to the residents, and even enticed the vulnerable with promises of better lives outside the old church community.

Had the other Mennonite groups kept their distance, limiting their hospitality to those who actually left the Old Colony group, the Old

Colony leaders may have grumbled but they would not have felt under siege. Their attempts to enforce discipline within their community, both by the use of excommunication and other methods, likely would have met with more success. But once alternate groups offered acceptance and membership to the disobedient and excommunicated, community and church discipline lost much of its force.

Some who intervene with the Mennonites in and from Mexico have gone yet further by directing a war of words at the Old Colony leaders.²⁴ Outsiders commonly have claimed that the bishops and ministers failed to deal with the problems that confronted their flock. This point of view blames the clerics for many of the colonies' problems, including rapid population growth, land shortages, the absence of educational and vocational opportunities, poverty, and the flight of thousands to Canada. The design of programs has proven consistent with the rhetoric.

While the Old Colony leaders see many of the same economic, social, and even spiritual problems diagnosed by others, they refuse to accept much of the blame. From their point of view, they faithfully have led their flock. They argue that the causes of many of the problems have remained completely outside their control. Some difficulties have come from the Mexican physical and political environment. Year after year of drought, a shortage of suitable land on which to build new colonies, international currency exchange problems, national economic crises, and NAFTA all have added difficulties for them and their people. But, even though beset by drought and pestilence, and surrounded by an often hostile world, they nonetheless still persist as a separate people, the self-proclaimed true carriers of the Mennonite and Christian tradition. And they claim other successes as well. Where others see a shortage of land, the leaders point to the many new colonies they have established. Instead of lamenting the rate of population growth, they talk about how their numbers have grown and what a blessing large families are. Rather than focussing on the poverty, the clerics say, "Es geht noch." They believe that they will outlast the various threats to their survival as God's people, including that which other Mennonites represent.

Some interveners divide the Mexican Old Colony people into two groups: the spiritual leaders and the common people. According to this characterization, the latter group opposes the leadership of the bishops and ministers. And certainly, sometimes Old Colonists have appeared alienated from their leaders and church. Some of this distance can be attributed to the normal discontent that members of groups feel towards their leaders and organizations. But often the growth of dissatisfaction has seemed directly proportional to the extent of the inroads made by other Mennonites into the colonies. An

example comes from the Durango colony. When Mexican banditos attacked residents there in the 1940s, resulting in the Mexican government establishing army posts on the colony to protect the Mennonites, the people stood together and survived as a group. But in the mid-1990s, an internal crisis threatened to irrevocably shatter the community. The turmoil came from the aggressive presence of the Kleine Gemeinde Church, which in recent years increasingly won the loyalty of many residents. The once unified Old Colony community had broken into two hostile camps. Certainly, in cases like that, large numbers of Old Colony members have become alienated from their leaders and church.

Yet, in many instances, to claim that the leaders do not represent their people appears false. Particularly in some geographically isolated daughter colonies of the original settlements, the barriers, those of a natural physical nature and those constructed by the group, continue to function. The ordinary people of the colonies still participate in choosing their leaders. And a large majority of the people, young and old, remain faithful to the vision of their ancestors who came to Mexico. Contrary to the common image of these people as naive and ignorant, many colony residents hold a keen awareness of the problems and challenges confronting their group. Not only the bishops and ministers but other adults, young and old alike, understand that their colonies do not have sufficient land for all who want to farm. But, instead of blaming their leaders, wanting to join another church, or fleeing to Canada, they optimistically look for solutions within the limits permitted by their community. Trusted members travel far and wide, following up on leads for new areas where their people can farm. Young families speak of the \$10,000 they need to begin new lives in Bolivia. Parents look forward to seeing their offspring live independent adult lives in a new colony, much as other North Americans visualize their children pursuing careers. Instead of denying that problems exist, the leaders and their people make plans for their group to survive in a changing and often hostile environment.

Many residents of the Old Colony world have made conscious decisions to remain faithful to the old vision. Their number includes some who have taken a good look at the outside world. Not only those remain who do not realize that alternatives exist to living in closed, technologically backwards, and conservative communities. The loyal still firmly believe in the correctness of their ancestors' dream, to live as a separate people, faithful followers of the will of God. Many who left the original colonies for more remote areas did so largely to escape the change that they saw coming, change in large part brought by the other Mennonite churches. Some of those living in isolated areas,

including at La Batea and in the colonies of the Buenos Aires area, moved there in part because they believed they and their families could not remain true to their faith among the temptations introduced by other Mennonites to the older colonies.

Interviews, conducted in 1996, with a number of Old Colony bishops and ministers permitted glimpses into their thoughts about the interventions of other Mennonite groups. It became apparent that leaders from relatively isolated and traditional colonies were the most receptive to taking aid from outsiders, including from Canadian Mennonites. This relative openness seemed partly due to having experienced less disruption from the actions of outsiders. In addition, much of their willingness to accept help appeared motivated by desperation. Many of their people found themselves in extremely difficult financial situations, brought to the brink of financial disaster by drought, high diesel fuel prices, and various local and international economic factors. But even those who took aid from the other Mennonite churches feared the potentially disruptive consequences of contact with the outsiders.

At the still relatively isolated Buenos Aires Colony in northern Mexico, the bishop, Franz Wall, and minister, Isaak Fehr, offered a warm reception. In the wide-ranging conversation that followed, the two expressed gratitude for a loan of money and seed grain from other Mennonites. Also, \$150,000 borrowed from the American Amish had allowed them to buy land in southern Mexico, in Campeche. Yet, these leaders made it clear that, while they would accept various forms of aid, they did not agree with many of the changes the outsiders wanted to introduce. Excommunications had taken place because of disobedience to the church, including over the use of motorized vehicles. But the total of those excommunicated in the two colonies for which the bishop had responsibility numbered only four. They also did not want to see an alternative to their educational system, but mainly more "fleiss" (diligence) in their existing schools. Although their own colony seemed weighed down beneath the pressures of change and worsening poverty, these leaders had not given up. Much of their hope came from the possibility that their families and friends might move to new colonies, elsewhere in Mexico or in South America. Those who would leave for the new colonies would receive another opportunity to pursue their chosen way of life by distancing themselves from the dire economic situation and those who sought to change their way of life.²⁵

On another colony, one near Nuevo Ideal in the state of Durango, the disruption brought by the presence of other Mennonites had advanced much further. While some old ways still survived, the walls that kept out change were visibly crumbling. Bishop Bernhard

Bueckert and Waisenamt (mutual aid association) official Gerhard Klassen proved very open to discussing the situation confronting them and their people. They acutely felt the presence of a crisis. As elsewhere, the colony did not have enough land for its population and suffered from serious economic problems. But those difficulties seemed to concern the leaders less than the threat to the unity of their community brought by other Mennonites. In recent years, the Kleine Gemeinde Church had taken away many adherents from the Old Colony Church. Also, the seasonal movement to Canada, when young families went north to earn money and then returned to the colony, represented a great menace. To deal with the various pressures, the colony had bought land in Paraguay, Campeche, and Argentina. Even though the mother colony seemed to be sinking, those who moved to the new colonies carried the group's hope for renewal and survival.²⁶

Certainly, no Old Colony leaders interviewed said they welcomed the presence of evangelizing Mennonites. But in the colonies where the influence of other Mennonites remained weak or only recently had grown, the clerics still seemed friendly and trusting of outsiders. In contrast, some of the clergy and their faithful in the areas that had experienced the greatest pressures for change, such as in the Cuauhtémoc area, proved less welcoming. Although they remained polite, they obviously distrusted outsiders. Their suspicions seemed particularly directed at other Mennonites.

One bishop, who must remain unnamed out of respect for his concern that his comments could create difficulties for him if widely published, did confide some concerns. His worries were not difficult to understand. The area's Old Colony churches already had lost a majority of their former adherents to other churches. Further, the leaders held little control even over the diminished numbers that still belonged to their congregations. Any attempt to enforce the old rules could result in the loss of more adherents. Excommunication no longer worked as a measure of discipline and control. While some Old Colonists there still went through the motions of resisting the outsiders, they seemed to do so in a half-hearted, defeated manner. The group also had purchased land elsewhere, far from the difficulties of the original colonies. But many of their youth and those recently married with young children did not dream of a beginning new lives in Bolivia or elsewhere in Mexico. Instead of aspiring to live within the strict dictates of the old church, they seemed more concerned about how they would obtain the pickup truck or stylish clothes that they wanted. For most, the horse-drawn vehicles, steel tractor wheels, and traditional attire still found on the more remote colonies belonged to another age. The barriers between the Old Colony community and the world largely had disappeared. It appeared that the leaders in the

original colonies knew that they had lost the battle, and the old vision seemed weak. They still attempted to care for those who for one reason or another had not left. Little else remained for the leaders to do but to fume and rail against the forces that they blamed for the change. The Canadian Mennonites stood at the top of the list of those who had destroyed their church and way of life. Had these outsiders kept their distance, the Old Colony Church might have succeeded in holding back change and would not have lost so many adherents.

For the most part, the Old Colony leaders in Mexico do not fit the stereotypical portrayal sometimes put forward by their opponents. Instead of appearing uneducated, they possess a strong knowledge of and interest in their history. They know the identity of their people, where they come from and where they want to lead. A clear vision of what their community should be and how they should live guides many. More than anything, they seem committed to live in obedience to their Maker, something they believe they can only do as a separate people.

The world of the Mexican Mennonites has proven much more complex and even interesting than expected. While no clear answer emerged to the question of whether the Old Colonists have found a better and more successful way to teach and retain their offspring in the faith of their ancestors, the research confirms the great importance Old Colonists place on doing so. It also has become apparent that the experience of the Old Colony Mennonites cannot be understood without examining the ongoing conflict between two now distinct branches of a once unified faith. Although these two issues may at first appear disparate, they are closely linked. Without doubt, both the aggressive actions of other Mennonites and the Old Colony's resistance to these interventions are motivated by sincere concern for future generations. Each side seeks to pass on their version of the truth.

Notes

- ¹ While the rationale for some prohibitions seems clear, even some Old Colonists do not understand the reasons for some rules. The church's insistence that members who bought combines should replace the machines' rubber tires with steel wheels provides one example. While the fear that the colonies' young people might take a rubber tired tractor to town might seem justified, it seems extremely unlikely that teenagers would take the combine. Some farmers refused to follow the seemingly pointless prohibition. Other examples of rules lacking an obvious purpose abound. On the other hand, even illogical rules serve the purpose of creating a distance from the "world." Elders also argue that members should follow rules without questioning their correctness. They stress obedience to the church.

- ² Kelly Lynn Hedges, "Plautdietsch and Huuchdietsch in Chihuahua: Language, Literacy, and Identity among the Old Colony Mennonites in Northern Mexico," Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, Yale University, 1996; Hildegard M. Martens, "Mennonites from Mexico: Their Immigration and Settlement in Canada," Report submitted to Research Grants Program, Canada Manpower and Immigration and the Mennonite Central Committee (Canada), 30 June 1975; Calvin Wall Redekop, *The Old Colony Mennonites: Dilemmas of Ethnic Minority Life* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1969); Harry Leonard Sawatzky, *They Sought a Country: Mennonite Colonization in Mexico* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971); Walter Schmiedehaus, *Die Altkolonier-Mennoniten in Mexiko* (Winnipeg, Manitoba: CMBC Publications, 1982).
- ³ Both the Mennonite Heritage Centre in Winnipeg and the National Archives of Canada store substantial records dealing with the Mennonites in and from Mexico. The Provincial Archives of Manitoba cares for the Walter Schmiedehaus papers, another valuable source. Staff of MCC and the *Mennonitische Post* cooperated in this study, both by opening records and participating in interviews.
- ⁴ Interview by author with Margaret Klassen, Durango, Durango state, Mexico, December 19-20, 1996; Interviews with George Rempel, Cuauhtémoc area, Mexico, December, 1996. Cornelius Klassen, for example, barred from entering Canada because of suspected trachoma, took his family to Cuauhtémoc. Klassen, who quickly learned Spanish and worked in a local department store, helped some from the colonies with various interactions with Mexican society.
- ⁵ William Janzen, "Now we see through a mirror dimly: A report on a ten day visit with Kanadier Colony Mennonites of Mexico," 20 May 1977, 14.
- ⁶ Interview by author with Bernhard Bueckert and Gerhard Klassen, Durango colony, Mexico, December 12, 1996; Interview by author with Jacob Unger, Durango colony, December 18, 1996; Interview by author with Jacob Friesen, Durango colony, Mexico, December 19, 1996.
- ⁷ J. Winfield Fretz, *Mennonite Colonization in Mexico: An Introduction* (Akron, Pennsylvania: The Mennonite Central Committee, 1945), 39-40.
- ⁸ Provincial Archives of Manitoba, MG8-B94, Schmiedehaus papers, file 23, J. Winfield Fretz, "Report of the MCC Commission to Mexico," 13 September 1946.
- ⁹ Unpublished Masters Thesis, University of Saskatchewan, 1997, 88-97. See also the published version: David M. Quiring, *Mennonite Old Colony Life: Under Siege in Mexico* (Steinbach, MB, 2004).
- ¹⁰ Victor Fast, "Issues affecting the Low German colony system in Latin America," a report presented at the KMCC meeting in Winnipeg, 18 October 1991, MCC Canada files.
- ¹¹ Personal observations on Manitoba colony, 1996.
- ¹² Quiring, "Mennonite Old Colony Life," Chapter 5.
- ¹³ Janzen, "Now we see through a mirror dimly," 13.
- ¹⁴ James Urry, *None But Saints: The Transformation of Mennonite Life in Russia: 1789-1889* (Hyperion Press Limited, 1989), 215
- ¹⁵ Cornelius Krahn, *The Mennonite Encyclopedia: A Comprehensive Reference Work on the Anabaptist-Mennonite Movement*, vol. 4, (Scottsdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 1990), 38-39; Redekop, *The Old Colony Mennonites*, 246; Urry, *None But Saints*, 162, 280.
- ¹⁶ T. D. Regehr, *Mennonites in Canada, 1939-1970: A People Transformed*, vol. 3, *Mennonites in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996). Regehr uses the term "accommodation" to describe the relationship of many Canadian Mennonites with the larger society.
- ¹⁷ Abe Warkentin, "Projections for MCC Canada Kanadier Work in Mexico 1992-1995," to MCCC Canada board members, May 1992.
- ¹⁸ Urry, *None But Saints*, 162.

- ¹⁹ Mennonite Heritage Centre, Vol. 3584, File No. OS-054, George Reimer, "Again on Education," letter from George Reimer to Abe, 31 December 1981.
- ²⁰ Warkentin, "Projections for MCC Canada Kanadier Work in Mexico 1992-1995."
- ²¹ Ibid.
- ²² Hedges, "Plautdietsch and Huuchdietsch in Chihuahua"; Redekop, *The Old Colony Mennonites*; Sawatzky, *They Sought a Country*; Schmiedehaus, *Die Altkolonier-Mennoniten in Mexiko*.
- ²³ Lois Barrett, "Rubber tires, schools, and a mission," *The Mennonite*, 9 August 1977, 471; Mennonite Heritage Centre, Vol. 2535, File No. OS-31, William Janzen, "A Report on a two day visit with the Mennonites who have come from Mexico to southern Ontario," 23 June 1976; "Unique missions retreat held in Mexico," *Mennonite Reporter*, 21 July 1975, 13; "Evangelistic meetings in Northern Mexico," *Mennonite Reporter*, 10 July 1995, 2.
- ²⁴ Abe Warkentin, Director, Kanadier Concerns, Letter to various MCC and Kanadier Mennonite Concerns Committee members, 12 July 1995; Warkentin, "Projections for MCC Canada Kanadier Work in Mexico 1992-1995."
- ²⁵ Interview by author with Franz Wall and Isaak Fehr, Buenos Aires Colony, December 29, 1996.
- ²⁶ Interview with Bueckert and Klassen, December 17, 1996.