

# Reflections on Bolivian Mennonite Realities

*by Jack Heppner*

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## CONTEXT

My wife, Ruth, and I recently spent about eight weeks in Bolivia. The main purpose of our trip was to connect with our children, Carl and Kathy Heppner, who work with MCC in a support role in Santa Cruz, and of course our grandchildren, Joel, Kezia and Asha. We left on December 16, 2009 and returned on February 11, 2010.

Before we left we had heard from various sources about the alleged rapes on the Manitoba Colony and beyond. One voice came from the academic community at the University of Winnipeg, Manitoba. Royden Loewen suggested that this incident simply demonstrated the fact that Mennonite colonists experience the same kinds of trauma other people groups face. The fact that Mennonite leaders on the Manitoba Colony had delivered the alleged perpetrators to the law is an indication of the health and vitality of the Old Colonist societies, he argued. They too are outraged at such sexual abuse, like leaders in any other society would be.

Others, however, were saying that this tragic series of events illustrated the depths of the social problems on the colonies. I had regular contact with Abe Warkentin, former Editor of *Die Mennonitsche Post*, who stated emphatically that on the basis of his contact with colony Mennonites over the years, he felt this incident pointed to larger sexually deviant behavior within Bolivian colonies. He argued that MCC should be much more assertive in addressing these underlying issues in a more creative and courageous manner.

I also met personally with George Reimer, former MCCer in Bolivia now living in Mexico, who felt strongly that instead of helping bring hope to the situation, MCC Bolivia was complicit in protecting the reputation of colonists by not providing sufficient information to the outside world regarding the rape incidents. Later in January 2010, Reimer stated his opinion publicly in *Kurze Nachrichten* as follows, "The scandal is little more than an enlargement of social problems, in which more energy is put into hiding them than confronting and solving them."

Although the purpose of our trip was not to investigate the alleged rape cases on the colonies in Bolivia, I had a sense that in one way or another I would be propelled into the vortex of this situation. Abe Warkentin suggested openly that I do my own investigation while in Bolivia. Being a member of the Evangelical Mennonite Mission Conference, I was aware that EMMC missionaries were working with the situation on the ground. The fact that I would be meeting with them frequently also meant that I would not be able to avoid dialogue about the situation. And added to that, I carried with me my impressions of colony life in Bolivia from having lived in Bolivia for four years – three in the mid-1970s, and one in 1991-92. It was obvious that I could not be oblivious to the present crisis facing colony Mennonites.

Shortly after arriving in Bolivia, I had a number of in-depth discussions with César Flores, MCC Bolivia Director. He indicated to me that he felt some of the criticism coming from the north about the laissez-faire approach MCC was taking with regards to the sex scandal in the Manitoba

Colony was unfair. He noted that he and other MCC staffers had been to the Manitoba Colony and offered counseling assistance for abused women but colony leaders had indicated the only help they wanted was to help keep the alleged perpetrators in prison. He felt it was both impossible and unrealistic to arrive en masse on the Manitoba Colony with a delegation from the North and demand that they change their social practices in order to address deep-seated problems they were having, as some northern critics seemed to be suggesting.

César Flores requested that I keep my ear to the ground while in Bolivia as a somewhat “independent” reporter. And as the weeks went by I reported to him what I was picking up and thinking about. As our dialogue intensified, especially around historical and theological perspectives related to current life on Mennonite colonies, Flores requested that once back in Canada I write a report on my findings, perspectives and any tentative conclusions I might come to – both on the sexual scandal on the Manitoba Colony in particular, and issues facing colony Mennonites in Bolivia in general.

I am not under any illusion that this report will be the defining document that addresses Mennonite Colony issues in Bolivia, and the sex scandal on the Manitoba Colony in particular. I am aware that Isbrandt and Martha Hiebert are currently on a six-week assignment in Bolivia to investigate and write about the larger Mennonite experience in Bolivia. No doubt they will be traveling much more extensively among Old Colonists than I did and will report on many more aspects of colony life than I will in this document. My hope is that they will provide a balanced report.

I can see a possible temptation for them to attempt to “redeem” the colonists’ reputation by focusing mostly on the positive dimensions of the sixty some colonies in Bolivia. One side of me is sympathetic to such an approach. I agree with Royden Loewen that all too often evangelicals, especially those who have little knowledge or appreciation for anything Mennonite or “Anabaptist,” are much too enthusiastic in their denouncing all things Mennonite on the colonies as being diabolical – and that colonists must be rescued from all things “Mennonite.” I am also sympathetic toward the notion that to be anti-modern may be a good thing. (I am an active crusader on the Canadian scene to help us all understand the damage that modernism has done to our society and churches, especially in the past century. I am a founding member of the South Eastman Transition Initiative here in the Steinbach Manitoba region, a movement that advocates for a more sustainable and healthy lifestyle than modernism has delivered.) In various ways I am attempting to move toward a simpler lifestyle in ways that might even parallel some of the patterns on Mennonite colonies.

I doubt that Isbrandt and Martha will be tempted with the other extreme to focus mostly on the negative aspects of colony life in order to negate all things Mennonite or “Anabaptist.” That will continue to be done by those who have little understanding or appreciation of the larger Mennonite experience. My challenge to Isbrandt and Martha, however, is to do their investigation and reporting in a balanced way – to keep both eyes open. With one eye take note of the positive dimensions of colony life and issues. With the other eye take note of situations and issues that speak of the “shadow side” of colony experience. To get this balanced perspective it will be important to listen not only to the official voices of colony leaders but to engage men, women and young people from within the colonies. A few days at “6 de Agosto” in Santa Cruz would be a

good start. Also dialoguing with former Old Colonists, other Mennonites living in Bolivia, Spanish speaking Bolivian Mennonites and the various agencies attempting to relate to Mennonites would be helpful.

I have lived long enough to know that both individuals and social groupings have an inclination toward showing only their positive sides and deliberately hiding negative dimensions of their existence. I also know that wholeness and healing can only come as we face the shadow sides of our existence. Pretending shadow sides do not exist simply serves to exacerbate the pain and dysfunction in the lives of individuals and social groupings. Outsiders who assist a people group to hide their internal pain and dysfunction are complicit in the abuse that inevitably emerges in such contexts.

A question I have, even before I begin my report as such, is whether this present sex-scandal crisis in the life of Bolivian Mennonite colonists might become, in the end, a time for personal and corporate renewal and healing. Personally, I hope so.

### **PERSPECTIVES I BRING WITH ME TO THE PRESENT CRISIS**

As I indicated earlier, I have lived in Bolivia in the mid-seventies and later in 1991-92. So I did not come to the Bolivian scene now in 2010 with a blank slate. During those years, especially, in 1991/92, I had numerous opportunities to observe and dialogue with Colony Mennonites. Sometimes I found myself defending them, especially in the context of evangelicals intent on rescuing Mennonites by stripping them of their entire identity and leading them toward evangelical fundamentalism. There was much good one could say about colony life as I saw it. Colonists were, generally speaking, industrious folks, busy transforming jungle into productive farmland. Indeed, Santa Cruz depended largely on Mennonites for many of the agricultural products consumed in the city. Mennonites had close family ties with most of their offspring who usually married and settled close to home. They were generally polite in their business dealings, keeping as a low a profile as possible. And they received visitors graciously, even those not keeping their customs – as long as their own customs were not criticized.

I also found myself interpreting and defending colony Mennonite life in the context of the Spanish-speaking group of Mennonite churches I was working with – La Iglesia Evangélica Anabautista en Bolivia (LIEAB). One of my mandates for that year was to help the LIEAB churches come to a fuller understanding of Anabaptist Theology and an appreciation for the Mennonite story. To do this I wrote, with the editorial help of Esteban Cuya – a political refugee from Peru – a twelve-lesson series on Anabaptist Theology, *Temas Anabautistas*, and a five-lesson series on Mennonite History, *Una Breve Historia de los Anabautistas*, and I taught both series to LIEAB leaders. One of the questions that kept surfacing among these Spanish-speaking, Bolivian Anabaptists was in what way their faith, life and history was connected to colony Mennonites whom they knew quite well. Many of them had worked in the colonies and had otherwise encountered them in the city. This was an interesting challenge for me. On the one hand I wanted to say that these are our brothers and sisters in the faith, which I did. But at the same time I had to point out to them where, in my opinion, the colonists had diverged from the Anabaptist ideals we had talked about in the lessons I was teaching. I had to admit to them that isolated colony life had brought about some characteristics in their faith and life that tended to deviate from the Anabaptist vision. I remember one poignant moment when one of the Spanish

leaders suggested that it then was their responsibility to speak with the colonists to help them understand more fully the Anabaptist vision. I think I got goose bumps that time. On one occasion I spent a Sunday morning and afternoon in one of the Mennonite churches related to MCC, I believe in the Paurito area, outlining the Anabaptist vision. Some Colony Mennonites came to listen in as well, although they were not Old Colonists.

(I should note that in this document I will use the terms “Colony Mennonites” or “colonists” when referring to all the Mennonite Colonies in Bolivia. And I will use the term “Old Colonists” when speaking about those colonies specifically who think of themselves as such – in most cases those whose men wear the mandatory overalls and use steel wheels on motorized vehicles.)

Through all of this it became clearer to me and my Spanish students that Colony Mennonites had at some point diverged from a positive Anabaptist vision. So it was difficult for me to tell them to go to the colonists to discover the Anabaptist story and faith they were beginning to embrace. As a matter of fact, I discovered from some direct dialogue with colony church leaders that they had no intentions of interpreting their faith and life to their Spanish neighbors. One Mennonite bishop told me that the whole world had been evangelized during the time of the apostles and that the forefathers of these Spanish-speaking people had rejected the gospel. So now there was no hope for this generation of Spanish speakers. They were all damned and there was nothing they could or should do about it. When I pushed back on this assertion a little, this bishop told me that on the Day of the Lord it would be mostly the members of his particular church that would enter heaven. There might be a few others, he admitted, but not very many.

So I found myself caught in a difficult position: on the one hand holding up the Anabaptist vision and story for Spanish leaders to embrace, but on the other needing to point out that while Colony Mennonites in Bolivia had their roots in this faith story I was teaching, they had in fact developed some characteristics, which in my view, had diverged from a biblical-Anabaptist vision of faith and life.

It was also this year, 1991/92, that I worked closely with Carl Zacharias to develop Die MennoBote, a German, Bolivian monthly periodical which we hoped would help to bring a somewhat wider worldview to colonists in Bolivia, help them become aware of one another in the Bolivian context, and help them ask some difficult questions about their faith and life. I am pleased to note that the MennoBote is now in its nineteenth year of publication under the direction of MCC staff. At present, my son, Carl, is supplying the material for the devotional section on page two. And, while in Bolivia, I consented to begin a short monthly column entitled, *Wurzeln der Mennonitentum*, in which I will, in a question and answer format, attempt to delineate the essence of the Anabaptist faith and story as it developed in the 16th century. In the process, I hope to begin asking questions for present-day colonists to ponder.

I hope it is obvious by now that my approach in the past has not been to negate all things Mennonite and seek to direct colonists toward an alien fundamentalism as some evangelicals were doing. However, during this year in Bolivia I could not help but become aware of some of the shadow sides that were beginning to become evident within colony life. In discussing this shadow side of colony life, I wish to say emphatically that the shadows I am writing about are not evenly distributed throughout Bolivian colonies. It might well be the case that in some villages or even colonies, these darker realities had not found much traction to any major extent. And it is

important to affirm that amidst so much darkness I encountered, there is no doubt in my mind that in some Mennonite families faith was alive and well.

Yet the anecdotal reports of darkness appeared, at times, to point toward an endemic deterioration of faith and life within the colony context. It was during that year that violence among Old Colony youth was reported on by the Bolivian press. Further probing indicated that it was common practice for gangs of youth from one village to travel to another village on Saturday or Sunday evenings in order to carry on “beatings” of the youth gang in that village. On one such occasion a young person had been killed by receiving a blow from an iron pipe. I began to wonder what sociological dynamic was at work in the colonies to give rise to such violent gang activity.

Shortly after this incident, I picked up a young Old Colony couple looking for a ride into town. I discussed this situation with them, and wondered aloud if the youth of the villages would be offered some wholesome activity whether they might not be diverted from such destructive activity. The couple was in full agreement, stating that many parents in their colony also felt the same way. When I asked why, in that case, they didn't begin something for the youth, they replied that in such a case they would immediately be excommunicated from the church (and effectively from a livelihood) because that would be something new and new traditions were not permitted to take root on the colony.

Gradually I began to understand that the bottom line on any issue in colony life was that nothing was allowed to change. Colonists had moved away from “the world” in order to keep things the way their parents and grandparents had had it. From one perspective we would say they were anti-modern, but to me their anti-modernity seemed to be motivated less by the desire to remain a biblical people than by a stubborn notion that nothing should change from the way their forefathers had had it. Didn't the Bible say, “Bleibe bei was du gelernt hast!” (Stay with what you have learned.) And this idea was clearly tied to the notion that to introduce changes that their forefathers had not thought of was to dishonor them. Stuck in this mode, colony leaders were in a difficult position to deal with emerging problems and issues with any degree of elasticity or freedom. There was little discernment or logic available. The only thing they could fall back on was the promise people had made at baptism to remain true to the church – the way they had received it from their forefathers.

However the notion that nothing should change was applied selectively. When it came to modern farm machinery (minus rubber tires of course), use of fertilizers, pesticides, trucks owned but not driven by Mennonites, using taxis, etc., changes were accepted quite readily. The notion of keep all things unchanged was, however, most stringently applied with respect to social and religious life.

This was especially true with respect to what youth activities were allowed. Any kind of sports activity involving a ball was forbidden. (I repeatedly heard the pagan god “baal” referred to as a “ball” – Judges 6:31 – and thus it was clear that ball games were wrong.) Table games were allowed, but little that involved physical activity. To have older people present at youth functions was particularly frowned upon. I am not sure why, except that it could possibly be seen that adults were, in that case, involved in organizing activities not accepted by the colony leaders. So little was left for young men to do but to hang out in the streets, race with their horses and

buggies, drink alcohol, fight with neighboring village youth and get involved sexually with village, and sometimes neighboring Bolivian girls. And in light of this, the constant refrain heard from bishops and ministers was that parents should do more to control the errant behavior of their youth. The church could not excommunicate the youth because they were not members, but neither could they stop the activities they were involved in unless parents constrained their own children.

Keeping things as they were was also true with respect to their school system. Their idea was to keep schools at a primary level – teaching reading, writing and arithmetic, in High German, with the hope that this education would serve them well as farmers in the future. I came to understand that while some of the brighter students did indeed become literate in High German, others simply got lost in their system of “buchstabieren” (sounding out and spelling syllables) and for all intents and purposes remained functionally illiterate.

It was a common thing to have finished school without having gained even a rudimentary understanding of what the catechism they had memorized or the Bible they had read so much in school meant. (I was told that it was forbidden for the teacher to explain the meanings of either the catechism or the biblical passages read.) One of the difficulties colonists encountered regularly was to find teachers for their schools. In most cases they hired persons who had proven to be inept at farming or keeping a job. It was reported that sometimes the oldest children in school knew more than the teacher did so that the older students had to teach the teacher before he, in turn, could teach them.

And without any geography taught in the schools, I discovered a concentric worldview had emerged, probably similar to one villagers had in the medieval ages. One’s village was the center of the world. The next circle encompassed one’s colony. The next a number of neighboring colonies. The next the big city of Santa Cruz and Bolivia as a country. Beyond that was a vast unknown without any kind of geographical orientation. One colony teacher I spoke to said that he might be interested in looking at a map of the world sometime. After 17 years of teaching, he himself had not moved past this concentric, medieval worldview where everything that is not visible to the naked eye remains a blurred mystery. I understand that such a worldview is common in young children, but when it becomes the worldview of an entire community, it seems to me that what emerges is a serious disconnect from reality.

And without history being taught, I discovered that most people had only a very limited understanding of their own Mennonite story. Most had heard about Canada, which was a bad place their forefathers had left behind. But beyond that they did not know the Mennonite story. They had heard of Menno Simons as a founder of Mennonitism and assumed that their way of life reflected his teachings well. When I began telling some of them their larger Mennonite story their curiosity and interest was limitless.

On an official level, colony leaders were intent on holding their members to a high moral standard based on the Bible. Part of the reason for moving as far away as possible from civilization was to keep immoral influences from the larger world from infiltrating colony life. While this was perhaps a noble motive, I came to understand that it was based on a faulty assumption that sin can be kept at bay by moving away from the world. As Jesus once said, it is not what comes into a man that defiles him but what comes out of him. In other words, the sin

nature could travel with them into those isolated communities and there find its own expressions if not dealt with in a healthy way.

So the image that began forming in my mind was that on a theoretical level colony leaders were trying to “keep things as they were” which they assumed to be a life style that was healthy and balanced. The reality, however, when viewed over time, was that a gradual deterioration was in process on a variety of fronts. Recently someone suggested to me the imagery of left thread on a bolt instead of the standard right thread. When problems erupted in these isolated colonies, leaders would tighten up the bolt by turning it in a clockwise direction, thinking that by so doing they were in fact lifting their people back up to the desired place where nothing had changed. In reality, however, simply tightening up the rules by turning the bolt in a clockwise direction was futile because the bolt had left thread and therefore actually propelled them downwards culturally, socially, morally and spiritually.

Isolation as a social grouping can do unexpected things to its people. For one, a sense of superiority develops with respect to the people living around them. And in some ways that sense might be justified in this case. After all, colonists were productive farmers drawing large crops from the land that had formerly been jungle. Villages were neatly laid out and people were busy from dawn to dusk in an industrious kind of way. Ironically, however, as a sense of superiority grows, there is often a corresponding decline on other fronts.

So in the context of this “superior” colony life, it gradually became evident that social, religious and moral life began spiraling downward along the pathway of the left thread of the bolt leaders thought had the standard right thread on it. It comes as a surprise to some people that many Colony Mennonites attend church only sporadically. Children never attend church until after they have finished school and then often infrequently along with their parents. And at home audible prayers and Bible readings were not normally practiced. So many young people really only had a very sketchy understanding of the biblical narrative and gospel imperatives. Severe tensions frequently erupted within the colonies over the smallest of deviations from dress and behavior codes. And sexual deviance, including rampant sex among young people and with neighboring Bolivian girls, men using prostitutes in town, brothers using sisters and fathers using daughters began to emerge.

To be sure, not everyone in the colonies followed such deviant pathways, but as one generation moved into another such practices were known to exist among colonists with very little done to stop it. To their own amazement, colony leaders began finding it harder and harder to keep their people in line. The only ultimate threat they had was excommunication, which was a fearsome tool indeed because it banned people from eternal life in heaven. And the only ultimate reasoning they had was that they did not want to depart from the ways of their forefathers. Those who did try to engage colony leaders on the basis of what they had found in the Bible frequently found it fruitless. One such person told me that when leaders could not answer questions he posed based on the Bible he was told it did not matter what the Bible said. They would be following their “ordnung,” and if he persisted in questioning them he would be excommunicated. Which indeed he was.

But all this had little effect on the young people who were not members. One line of thinking was that young people should be expected to “sow their wild oats” while young but come clean at the

time of baptism and then commence with a moral life. While it is likely true that many took their vows seriously and straightened out their lives at the time of baptism, for others the patterns developed during their youthful fling did not die easily and kept manifesting themselves in life beyond baptism. The other line of thinking was that really youth should not live on the wild side before baptism, but there was little that could be done about it except to scold and shame them, which usually did not help. But certainly God would understand and forgive such youthful delinquency.

Now it could well be argued that the problems inherent in colony life in Bolivia as I have depicted them are simply based on a random selection of anecdotal reports and experiences and therefore not valid. I admit that I have not done a thorough study of all Bolivian colonies nor have I done any statistical surveys. On the other hand, I could argue that the picture that emerged via these anecdotal reports in the context of the rough and tumble of life in Bolivia, especially when on-going reports corroborated what I had heard earlier, should not be disregarded. In my opinion that picture might even be more valid than the one that emerges by speaking mostly to colony leaders over the span of a few weeks in Bolivia, who no doubt are interested in presenting a positive image of colony life. In my case, I was able to verify some of these reports by speaking to the Bolivian people in Spanish, many of whom had had intimate connections with the colonists, either by working on the colonies or by encountering them in the city.

It might also be suggested that anecdotal reports cannot verify the extent to which various problems exist in the colonies. I accept that. On the other hand, when certain reports are consistent and persistent it is hard to surmise that such problems only exist in rare cases. In my opinion, it is up to those who think these reports do not point to pervasive problems in the colonies to come up with evidence to the contrary.

The question that haunted me regularly was how one might relate to these colonists in ways that are respectful of them as individuals and as people groups, but in ways that can help them deal with some of the pressing issues they face, especially those that end up in abuse of individuals. I now turn my attention to that question.

## **FORMULATING RESPONSES**

I have wrestled long and hard in an attempt to formulate an appropriate response to colony realities in Bolivia. As we all know, the options open to us range all the way from seeking to rescue colonists from all things Mennonite to affirming colony life and helping them out whenever they ask for help without questioning anything about their way of life. I should say at the outset that all the people I know across this spectrum are sincere in their motives and efforts. They are doing what seems to them to be the right thing in each circumstance.

Personally, I think we do the colonists a disservice if, in our process of trying to help them, we convince them to abandon all things Anabaptist. In that case we are telling them that their 500-year story was illegitimate all along and that there is nothing worth salvaging from it. Better just to take a sharp right turn and adopt a version of North American fundamentalism that has no appreciation for anything Anabaptist, either historically or theologically.

Some individuals and organizations operate on this premise and no one can stop them from doing

so. With respect to such persons and organizations I suggest that it can be helpful to engage them around the issues of Anabaptist history and theology. Sometimes such persons simply have no idea of the rich heritage that can be found within the Anabaptist story and are open to learning about it. Others are more indifferent.

Ideally, in our encounter with Colony Mennonites, we would help them discover the rich heritage they carry with them, albeit sometimes only in a latent and/or distorted form. (It is important that we all admit that none of our lives are totally true to the Anabaptist vision. Mennonites from North America have their own unique set of struggles in this regard.) In recent years the Bible has been published in Low German, the heart language of all Colony Mennonites, and hundreds if not thousands of such Bible are now circulating on the colonies. A few weeks ago, while visiting in an Old Colony home, I noticed a Low German Bible on the desk. When we inquired about it, the man we were visiting with said that it was easy to read and he appreciated it. It is good to remember that early Anabaptism was nurtured and flourished in the wake of finally having the Bible available in their heart language.

In the wake of the new Low German Bible becoming available, a new translation movement is under way. Mennonite documents like the catechism, for example, are now also available in Low German. My *Temas Anabautistas* lesson series is presently being translated into Low German. I take note, however, that organizations with no understanding or appreciation of Anabaptism are also translating their standard documents into Low German and offering them for free to Colony Mennonites. Of course this adds to the confusion some of them are experiencing.

Any way you cut it, Colony Mennonites, who up to this point have followed colony dictates without reading or thinking for themselves, face a difficult future once they start to do so. They are extremely vulnerable to latch on to any “wind of doctrine” that passes by. In this respect the fear colony leaders have of outside influences is valid. Once people start searching for themselves, and especially when they begin comparing notes with one another about their search, people can easily be misled. So colony leaders regularly warn their people to steer clear of outside influences and simply be obedient and follow the colony “ordnung” and all will be well. And they forbid corporate Bible Studies and the attendance of services other than their own in an attempt to keep people in line.

But whether we, or they like it or not, colonists are being bombarded on many fronts, at least alerting them to the fact that there are other ways to think and live. Street evangelism in Santa Cruz will continue. Bibles will continue to be distributed. Cell phone, officially banned in the colonies are however plentiful and offer a communication link to the world outside colony boundaries. Radio transmissions in Low German are finding their way into colony consciousness. Of course radios too are not allowed in many colonies, but on the other hand are plentiful. One new radio program produced by Carl Zacharias, former MCC worker in Bolivia, is very popular. His folksy style of sharing news from Low German speaking people around the world, a little biblical lesson for “something to think about,” and then of course his jokes to get people to laugh makes the program irresistible. Colonists listen, if not on their own radios, then on those of their workers or taxi drivers. It is interesting to note that the short Bible lesson Zacharias offers are taken directly from my lesson series on Anabaptist Theology – the ones now being translated into Low German.

## THE ANABAPTIST VISION AND COLONY LIFE

A question that keeps surfacing in my mind is whether colony life can, in fact, reflect the Anabaptist vision in appropriate ways. To be fair, one also has to ask the question how well the Anabaptist vision can be expressed in the context of a pervasive individualism in North America. It seems to me that Anabaptism will always have a difficult time finding appropriate expression wherever it moves to or emerges. Nevertheless, thinking now about the Bolivian context, could it be that some of the difficult problems that arise among Colony Mennonites are rooted in the fact that the colony – as a sociological reality – actually works against them?

For a historical perspective on this question, it might be helpful to remind ourselves that one of the central convictions of the early Anabaptists in the 16th century was that the church should be free. That is, the church should be joined voluntarily without any outside political or economic forces compelling them to do so. Of course this conviction was contrary to a thousand years of history in Europe. Ever since the time of Constantine in the 4th century, the church and state had basically been blended together. Even the great reformers like Luther and Zwingli had kept the church/state union intact.

Anabaptists, however, said that the church/state union was responsible for endemic nominalism and low moral standards in the general population. It had become custom, they said, to go through appropriate religious rituals in order to ensure one's place in this blended society. Without belonging to the church in a particular city or state it was impossible to marry, register children, find employment, and indeed in many cases secure a place to live. The idea of a free church was a major threat to society. If enough people believed that the church and state should be separated the very foundations of society would have to be reconfigured. So it was precisely this issue that generated more opposition from the establishment than any other Anabaptist idea. It is fair to say that the notion of a free church lay at the very root of the fierce persecution early Anabaptists suffered.

Fast-forward five centuries and we recognize that most of the Christian world has now adopted this radical notion of the separation of church and state first pioneered by the Anabaptists. While we wrestle with other issues as Mennonites in many parts of the world, in most cases we are able to establish "free" churches. But, from my perspective, a very interesting and devastating twist took place within the Dutch Mennonite story that would put the "free" church of the Anabaptists into jeopardy. Two hundred and fifty years on in their story these Mennonites of Dutch ancestry were on the move to the steppes of Russia. Czar Catherine the Great had offered land to these Mennonites on the condition that Mennonites on the steppes would look after their own "local" affairs – dividing up the land, building roads and drainage ditches, dealing with recalcitrant members of the community, etc.

In effect, in order to make this settlement possible, Mennonites had to set up their own local government. They chose to do this by establishing colonies with a system of government that filtered right down to the villages. At the same time the bishops and ministers considered themselves to be the "real" leaders of their people. Anyone familiar with this story knows about the tensions that often erupted in this context with respect to who had the final say on decisions that had to be made.

In any event, for all intents and purposes, the colony system as it emerged, began to emulate the old church/state synthesis that Anabaptists had so vigorously opposed early on in their movement. There was only one official church on each colony and it worked together with the colony government. It soon became clear that in order to survive on a colony one had to be a member of the “state” church. If one chose not to join the church in proper fashion, or if one had a major quarrel with that church one would be ex-communicated from the church. In earlier times, ex-communication had been a “religious” affair, banning a person from fellowship in the church and entrance into heaven. Now it also became a political and economic affair, because there was no room in the political setup of the colony for someone not in good standing with the church.

It could be argued that the Mennonites of the time simply were doing what had to be done to survive. But, from our vantage point in the present, it is not hard to see how the new threat within the Mennonite church became similar to the one in the state church the Anabaptists had opposed. This may not have been immediately apparent at the time. But over the generations of colony life one begins to sense the trend toward nominalism; that is, in some cases people joined the church for political, economic and social reasons. This sometimes resulted in irregular church attendance. And of course, those who entered the church for ulterior reasons, found it difficult to live up to the church “ordnung” but had to find ways of staying in the good graces of the church in spite of their deviation from church expectations.

I have documented elsewhere at some length how in the ensuing years internal and external forces combined to undermine this new Mennonite church/state synthesis. (See: *Search for Renewal: The Story of the Rudnerweide/EMMC*, Jack Heppner, 1987; *Chapters one and two*.) In hindsight it is possible to discern some fairly regular patterns. Somewhere, beginning either in the second or third generation of colony life, some kind of disintegration began to happen to disrupt this idealistic colony construct. I will illustrate briefly.

### **In Russia**

Twenty five years after the first Mennonites moved to Russia in 1789 the Kleine Gemeinde emerged on the scene, claiming moral laxity among colonists as a key reason to begin a renewal movement. Ten years later, in 1824, when the Ohrloff congregation began calling for higher education, conservatives split off to keep things unchanged. In 1835, a group of late-comers from Prussia established the village of Gnadenfeld and founded a church with definite pietistic leanings. For the next generation it became a hub for colonists seeking some form of renewal or other. It was largely through this congregation that Eduard Wuest, a German Baptist pastor at Neuhoffnung, found a foothold within the Mennonite colony. His message of the “full and free and present grace of God,” according to J. A. Toews, was eagerly received by many Mennonites who were looking for something new. After Wuest’s death, his followers formed the Mennonite Brethren Church in 1860.

And even within the main colony church, a teacher and preacher from Halbstadt, Bernhard Harder, stayed within the main church but worked diligently to bring renewal from within. Cornelius Krahn says of him that: “Harder did more than anyone else during the second half of the 19th century to revive the spiritual life of the Mennonites in Russia...” By 1905, the Allianz Gemeinde had arisen – a kind of mid-way point between the Mennonite Brethren and the main

colony church – and many Mennonites gravitated in that direction. So by the turn of the century the closed church/state model of colony life in Russia had largely disintegrated because of both external and internal forces.

A major exception was in Bergthal, a daughter colony of Chortitza established fifty kilometers east of Molotschna in 1836. Most of the reform movements described above did not affect Bergthal significantly, partly because of its isolation. And it was this conservative colony which first perceived the threats to its way of life in Russia and emigrated en-mass to North America in 1874-76, mostly to the East Reserve in Manitoba. Their hope was to simply transfer their state/church colony to new territory. Another large group of Mennonites from Fuerstenland, a daughter colony of the “Old Colony”, Chortitza, settled on the West Reserve in Manitoba. From the beginning, its leaders were intent on turning back the clock to re-establish the ideals of original colony life.

### **In Canada**

Once in Canada both groups quickly became frustrated in their attempts. As soon as they had established themselves in their new homes they became aware of attempts by the newly formed province of Manitoba, to implement municipalities throughout the province, including on Mennonite reserves, and to implement a uniform English-based school system across the board. Even before the turn of the century the most conservative among these Mennonites had moved westward toward the Rosthern area, now in Saskatchewan, in the hope of finding the freedom to carry on with colony life as they envisioned it. However, within a few years the province of Saskatchewan was formed and similar pressures were applied to Mennonites as they had experienced in Manitoba. So within a generation or two colony life had largely disappeared on the Canadian prairies. Indeed some church leaders like Bishop Johann Funk were instrumental in establishing the Mennonite Educational Institute at Gretna which invited colony youth to experience higher education. And, of course, the Mennonite Brethren had sent missionaries to this new region so that by 1886 they had baptized their first converts.

By the end of World War I, colony life in its original form was dead in Canada. (Those Mennonites who had chosen to move to the American mid-west in the 1870s never got a chance to even attempt the re-establishment of colony life. A major impediment for them was the fact that they were not able to secure large blocks of land committed only to Mennonite settlers. And, for whatever other reasons that may have been involved, American Mennonites basically gave up on the colony dream. As far as I know there have been no major emigrations out of the USA to re-establish colony life elsewhere.) In Canada, the dream only remained alive in the minds of those who longed for a return to a more utopian world away from the influences of a corrupting world.

And it was this impulse that gave rise to the Mennonite migrations to Mexico and Paraguay in the 1920s, only fifty years after arriving in Canada. In a major revival of colony idealism, a large group of Old Colonists on the West Reserve emigrated to Mexico, and a similar group of Bergthalers from the East Reserve and beyond moved to Paraguay. To be sure the hopes for re-establishing colony life further south met with considerable success. Following World War II a large group of the most conservative Kleine Gemeinde on the East Reserve also re-established their own brand of colony life in Mexico at the Quellen colony.

## **In Paraguay**

After a very difficult start in Paraguay, involving many deaths, Mennonites finally established the Menno Colony in the Chaco. With no connecting road to the wider world, for a time it seemed they had reached the promised land of colonial freedom. But within a few years, without warning, Mennonite refugees from Russia had, with the help of MCC, established their own colony, Fernheim, just north of Menno. These were Mennonites who by this time had pursued higher education and were much more liberal on many fronts than their neighbors on Menno Colony. Paradise lost! And to top it off, the Bishop on Menno Colony, Martin Friesen, quietly but persistently promoted higher education on his colony. And once the road to Asunción was completed the “world” began encroaching on conservative idealists from the South. By the 1960s, two generations after the original move, it became evident that there would be a variety of churches on the colony. While vestiges remained, the closed church/state synthesis was rapidly disappearing.

## **In Mexico**

In Mexico unrest was stirring within a few decades of the move in the 1920s. The General Conference Church of Canada soon had established new churches on the colonies, offering people an alternative to the one state church on the colony and a chance for improved education. Another problem that soon emerged was the need for land for children to settle on. While some adapted to the changing realities in Mexico and found land nearby for their children, others could not resist the urge to move once again. One group of Old Colonists moved to British Honduras, another to Bolivia. By the late 1950s a group of Kleine Gemeinde had also relocated to British Honduras.

## **In British Honduras**

In British Honduras (now Belize), Old Colonists were quickly overwhelmed by internal discord. For a variety of reasons, including rubber tires on tractors used for clearing the jungle, the church excommunicated a large group of its members. Without ministers among them, that group felt lost and forgotten and called out to the larger Mennonite community in Canada for help. Jacob Neudorf and Isaac P.F. Friesen of the Winkler EMMC Manitoba went down to work with this excommunicated group and eventually the EMMC church was formed at Blue Creek. In the wake of this development, a number of Old Colonists then joined their cousins from Mexico in a move to Bolivia. Others continued on in places like Shipyard. But soon Blue Creek was reaching out to Shipyard and today there is an alternative church and school on that colony as well.

At Spanish Lookout, the Kleine Gemeinde were more successful in maintaining their isolated colony way of life. But only for about thirty years. By the late 1980s and early 1990s there were signs of major upheaval on the colony. In their distress, a group of colonists invited the Blue Creek church to come offer an alternative to what they considered to be a confused and troubling situation. So at this point there are a variety of churches in Spanish Lookout. And all these groups continue to work together in colony government.

## **In Bolivia**

And in Bolivia, the center of attention in this paper, Old Colonists set up colonies south of Santa Cruz, implementing a rejuvenated conservative code of conduct, maintaining very distinctive clothing styles, and especially prohibiting the use of rubber tires on motorized vehicles. Meanwhile, a group of disaffected Mennonites from Menno Colony in Paraguay, had established themselves east of Santa Cruz in the Chorovi area. This group did allow the use of rubber tires, but in essence they were intent on re-establishing once again an ideal form of colony life with one church and one local government working hand in glove with each other. My young family and I lived on the edge of this colony in the mid-1970s where EMMC had established a medical clinic. For about three years we related both to Bolivian nationals and to these colony Mennonites among whom we discovered a number of relatives. Many hours of first-hand experience and second-hand accounts about life both here and south of Santa Cruz among Old Colonists began shaping my understanding of colony dynamics.

By 2010, the present time, there are about 60 Mennonite colonies in Bolivia. Quite a number of them are daughter colonies of the original colonies. But many other groups have found a haven in Bolivia as well, all seeking to re-establish colony ideals as seen through their eyes. Most of these colonies do not work together. In fact many look upon their neighboring colonists as having missed the ideal colony experience in one way or another and even refuse to allow their young people to inter-marry.

But the pattern we have discerned in colony life since its debut in Russia is at work in Bolivia as it has been everywhere else. Because of a combination of external and internal forces, the colony system as such is beginning to crumble. In spite of a relatively long run within colonial idealism, cracks are beginning to appear in many sectors of the Bolivian Mennonite colonies. And this is precisely where a divergence of opinion has emerged as to how non-colony Mennonites from abroad should relate to colony Mennonites in Bolivia. Some, including those following in the wake of Delbert Plett's interpretations, insist that if only the outside world, including liberal Mennonites, would leave these people alone they would be able to work out their problems in an amicable manner. However, what is most-often missing in their arguments is the recognition that the colony church/state synthesis is, in fact, antithetical to Anabaptist ideals. And that this system serves to create the same problems early Mennonites saw in the church/state system of the 16th century. It is not at all clear that the problems Mennonite colonists encounter arise mostly because of external pressures. While external pressures surely play a role, it is more reasonable to assume that the root of their problems lie in the colonial, church/state setup within which colonists live.

### **In the Wake of Colonialism**

The problems on the colonies, as I have discussed above, bear witness to a kind of nominalism that always emerges in a state/church context. Already evident in Russian colonies, nominalism has plagued colonies wherever they have arisen. And now, after a considerable period of relative isolation in Bolivia, is again becoming self-evident. In fact, because three or four generations have passed in relative isolation, I would argue that what formerly might have been seen as a relative benign nominalism – somewhere on the opposite end of religious enthusiasm – has now spiraled downward on the left thread of the bolt toward a more destructive and abusive way of life.

It seems to me that the deficiencies inherent in a church/state colony system can not be ignored in our search for an appropriate response to the present crisis on the colonies in Bolivia. And this is especially true with respect to the sex-scandal now consuming the Manitoba Colony.

From the many voices I heard these past two months in Bolivia, it seems to me that, while still potent, the colony system is beginning to show signs of disintegration. In some colonies, like Valle Esperanza, the Kleine Gemeinde has succeeded in establishing a second church on the colony. Unfortunately it seems as though they are in the process of establishing a small colony within a larger colony. Villa Nueva is a community made up of former Old Colony families finding a future outside the Old Colony system. Fortunately, Villa Nueva is taking pains not to establish another colony. Church membership is not a requirement for living there, although everyone is invited to attend the church in the community. In Canadiense II, there are now a number of churches people can choose to attend without jeopardizing their livelihood on the colony.

And beyond this, radio, cell phones, Low German Bibles, street evangelism, youth Bible studies, etc., whether we like it or not, are all contributing to an awareness among many in the colonies, including the Old Colony, that another way of life is in fact possible and perhaps even desirable. And on the other hand, the chorus of testimonies emanating from the colonies that speak of abuse, especially of women and young girls, is gaining momentum. Leaders in the Villa Nueva community say that everyone living in that community has been either a victim or a perpetrator of especially sexual abuse in the Old Colony context, and often both.

Based on historical precedent as outlined above, and on my own observations on the ground, I suggest that in the next few decades we will continue to witness the disintegration of colony life in Bolivia. Of course, part of the blame could be placed on the many new voices colonists are hearing and beginning to follow, rooted in the more liberal Mennonite and evangelical centers in North America. On the other hand, I suggest that the greater reason will be that the colony system will be crushed by its own weight. The church/state colony system will be harvesting the seeds it has sown, albeit unwittingly perhaps, from the beginning.

If my thesis is correct, the question facing the larger Mennonite world is how we can best assist the many individuals and social groupings during this massive disintegration that is under way?

Is our role to help support a colonial structure that simply cannot work well over time? We should keep in mind that in the larger world of Mennonites comprising the Mennonite World Conference, the colonial structure is only evident in that branch of Mennonites I have followed above. And it is clear within this global Anabaptist framework that colonial structures, especially when kept in their purest forms, simply cannot produce a positive dynamic to meet the needs of their own people and to bear witness to the Kingdom of God openly in the world.

Or is our role to help individuals and groups make the transitions leading out of a church/state colonial setup? If that is discerned to be our role, then we must be prepared to work with many people who simply have not been prepared by colony life for the many changes they will be facing. Having lived in isolation for so long and having been taught not to think for themselves, many people will find themselves foundering. On the one hand, they will have lost confidence in colony leadership and on the other they will be surrounded by many competing voices each

offering differing options for them to accept.

(This was the EMMC experience in Southern Ontario in the 1960s when the Old Colony system began crumbling in Mexico. Many who could not cope with the system as it was had the option of fleeing to Canada at that time, an option most Bolivians don't have. Once in Canada, many simply did not have the preparation to deal with life when they had to make their own decisions about matters pertaining to faith and life. The colony system had not prepared them for what they faced and there were not a few casualties.)

If, in fact, disintegration of colony control will continue to happen in Bolivia, as I think it will, I see three alternatives that might be worthy of support.

1. One would be to establish another four or five "Villa Nuevas" where individual families disaffected in one way or another by the colony system could come and find a future: a church, a home, a school and employment.
2. Another would be to encourage groups in the colonies that desire changes in their way of faith and life to stay within the colony if at all possible to establish a new and "free" church community. Colonies that will eventually allow room for such "free" churches, will in my mind, be moving closer to the Anabaptist ideal their forefathers died for than their present colony system affords.
3. And thirdly, we would do well to keep connected to colony leaders in order to help them understand what is happening to their idealized vision of Mennonite faithfulness to help them figure out how to proceed in a healthy manner. In this process it will be helpful to remind colony leaders that their desire "to keep things from changing" would be better directed towards maintaining the Anabaptist ideal of a free church than a later idealism embodying a church/state synthesis on their colonies.

#### ADDRESSING THE PRESENT SEXUAL CRISIS IN MANITOBA

It is important to note that I view the present sexual crisis on the Manitoba Colony through the lens of history, theology and experience I have outlined above. I am well aware that this perspective will be challenged. Nevertheless, it is one voice among others that I think needs to be heard. I found it noteworthy that my present observations these past few months have been very much in line with what I had discovered during my earlier experiences in Bolivia, except that it seems to me that the shadow sides of the Mennonite experience in Bolivia have darkened significantly since 1991/92, as has the increase in alternative options arising on and off the colonies for individual families and larger groups.

#### **My Contacts in Bolivia**

As noted earlier, a short time after arriving in Bolivia on December 18, 2009, I had a series of dialogues with MCC personnel, most notably César Flores, MCC Director for Bolivia. I also had extensive dialogues with Hans Schroeder and Jerry Hiebert, staff persons at Centro Menno. They reflected to me their frustration in dealing with the criticisms coming from the North; namely, that MCC Bolivia was not assertive or bold enough in its response to this crisis. I kept in contact

with these persons throughout my two months in Bolivia. Their regular input was invaluable in helping me think through Mennonite realities in Bolivia this time around.

I also had repeated contact with EMMC mission staff members, specifically David and Lisa Janzen who have worked with excommunicated Old Colonists for about 12 years and now head up the Villa Nueva community project. Also Wayne and Sadie Thiessen offered valuable insights. Wayne is the present pastor of the church at Villa Nueva. Both couples have more stories to tell than anyone has time to listen to. Dealing as they do with the “fallout” of Old Colony dysfunctions in Villa Nueva on a daily basis, they are aware of the temptation to paint the whole Old Colony picture more darkly than it really is.

In our visits to a number of colonies, I was constantly on the lookout for persons who were knowledgeable about the situation and who were willing to talk openly about it with me. In Canadiense II, my dialogue with Abram Falk was particularly helpful. In Colony Chihuahua, Abram Rempel brought some valuable perspectives to light on the subject.

On a number of occasions I hung around 6 de Agosto where Mennonites tend to congregate during the week. I had the opportunity to speak to a number of Old Colony persons about their perspective on the situation on the colonies in general and the sex scandal in Manitoba in particular.

On the Spanish front, I had the opportunity on a number of occasions to talk to taxi drivers in Santa Cruz about their perspective on Mennonite life and specifically also the sex scandal in Manitoba. I also was able to discuss Mennonite realities with a number of church leaders within the various Anabaptist, Spanish-speaking churches in Santa Cruz.

I visited the six Mennonite men in the Cotoca prison for about an hour and a quarter to get their perspective on why they were in prison and what they were experiencing there.

On February 8, 2010 I, along with my son Carl and Hans Schroeder made a trip to the Manitoba Colony to speak with Bishop Neudorf and then stopped in at another home to visit at length with a Mr. Martens.

Besides these main contacts, there were many chance encounters with a variety of persons who all had a perspective to share with me about the sex-scandal I was trying to investigate.

Because my dialogue with Bishop Neudorf came near the end of my investigation, I will document briefly what we talked about in that context. Many of the perspectives I had gained by speaking to others were touched on in this conversation.

### **Dialoguing with Bishop Neudorf**

Hans Schroeder and I had a very civil but forthright conversation with Bishop Neudorf. I told him that I was a minister in Canada and was interested in getting solid information to share with people back home. I told him that the news of happenings on his colony had spread around the world and that many in the North are seriously concerned about the situation. He could understand that and told us so.

The story he told differed remarkably from the story I had heard in the Cotoca prison, which I had expected. According to him, the men now in prison had voluntarily admitted their involvement in the sex crimes and colony leaders had kept them in isolation for a number of days before bringing them to Cotoca in order to protect them from enraged colonists. I told him that the Cotoca prisoners had insisted on their innocence and that they had been forced to confess under threat of beatings, burnings and death. This the bishop denied vehemently.

Hans and I pressed Bishop Neudorf a number of times during our conversation about our perceived need to get some counseling help for the women who had been raped. We suggested to him that if women who are sexually abused do not get help, they frequently experience various forms of dysfunction later in life. His response was to say that if these women had been violated sexually while drugged, they would have no recollection of the experience and therefore would not need any help either.

I asked the bishop where such gross sexual misconduct had come from. He implied that this was a special case involving outside influences and an alignment with evil spirits in order to carry out these evil deeds. I posed the question whether there was any connection between these rapes and the reports I had heard of rampant sexual misconduct among Mennonites. I asked him to tell me if what I had heard was not true. I then told him what one man in prison had related to me. How that the standard practice for colony youth was to begin drinking on Sunday afternoon, then when they were quite drunk by evening they would go to the end of the village to participate in sex with one another. The bishop did not deny any of this but did lament how the drinking of alcohol had brought a lot of trouble into the colony.

I asked him whether it might not be helpful to offer the young people something else to do in their spare time – perhaps some volley ball, Bible lessons, something to eat, etc. to give the youth something else to do that was pleasurable. He responded by saying that, in spite of a wayward life during their younger years, when these young people come to baptism before they get married they always promise to leave this wayward life-style in favor of a straight and narrow walk. I responded that I thought for some this would in fact work, but that it would be very hard for others to simply turn away from a life to which they had become addicted and therefore would continue on into adulthood with these patterns of life. I suggested that it would be better for the whole colony if these youth had not become addicted to alcohol and sex before their baptismal vows. I told him about having lived in Santa Cruz and how I had connected with Spanish-speaking Bolivians who had reported to me how many Mennonite men used city prostitutes on a regular basis. This, too, he did not deny. However, in the end he insisted that since their forefathers had at one time left Canada in order to maintain things the way their elders had had things, there was nothing they were willing to change to address these issues among their people.

I then queried whether wide-spread sexual deviancy among Old Colony Mennonites, which he did not deny, could possibly be the root problem that had most recently found expression in more overt kinds of sexual misconduct in terms of rapes using chemical sprays. I do not recall that he responded directly to this idea. As I had heard from other reports, the official colony line that this was an isolated experience inspired by outside forces seemed to be what he was most comfortable with.

I asked him how the truth would ever really come out, especially in the light of the fact that the

judicial system in Bolivia can be manipulated with money. He insisted that the truth would eventually come out. When I asked him how the colony would respond if, in a trial, the accused were given life sentences, he responded that then the colony would be able to breathe more easily and carry on with life as usual. And the abused women would find their way through quite well in that case. When I posed the possibility that there might not be enough evidence in court to convict these men, he simply stated that that would be an impossible outcome and he would not even speculate what the colony would do in such a case.

In the end we parted with a firm handshake and I reminded him that many people outside of Bolivia were praying for all those involved in this situation. Much more was said during our visit but this is the gist of our conversation as I recall it.

#### QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER IN THE CONTEXT OF THIS CRISIS

**1. Is it true that there have been a series of rapes on the Manitoba Colony and beyond? I**

believe it is quite likely that women and girls have been used sexually against their will. Something major happened at the Manitoba Colony and beyond involving sexual misconduct, most likely including rapes.

**2. Is it true that these rapes were inspired and directed mostly by forces outside the colony and that those Mennonite men responsible made “deals with evil spirits” to help them carry out their crimes?**

While there may have been some collaboration with outsiders, I believe that the source of the crimes originated within the context of colony life by persons who did not have their sexual appetites under control. While in a sense all evil could be said to be done in cooperation with evil forces, I think it unlikely that the men involved in these crimes made “pacts with evil spirits” to help them carry out their crimes.

**3. Is it possible that the men now in prison are not guilty of the crimes as alleged?**

According to the men in prison, they are not guilty of the crimes they have been charged with. However, on the colony witnesses insist that they voluntarily admitted to their evil deeds. How will the truth ever really be known? Willi Reimer, who meets with the prisoners regularly in Cotoca, told me shortly before we left Bolivia, that at first he had believed the prisoners who said they were all innocent. But, he noted, that more recent discussions would seem to indicate that at least some of them may have been involved in sexually deviant behavior. However all insist they never used a chemical spray as alleged. Those insisting a chemical spray was used to anesthetize women and girls do not have any specific evidence of such spray or containers. One rumor is circulating that after a raid on the home of the man who is said to have supplied the spray cans they did find a few such cans. Other sources say that these cans were planted in the house and then later “discovered.” It is not clear that the chemical in these containers had the anesthetizing effect as suggested.

**4. Is it possible that the official line coming from the colony involves a certain amount of “scape-goating”?**

In my mind, given the consistent and persistent reports of sexual deviance among colony Mennonites, especially involving the abuse of women and young girls, it is possible that whatever happened in this situation was a spill-over of sexual misconduct carried on regularly within the colonies. No one had anticipated that sexual license on and off the colony would lead to such gross behavior as breaking into houses and raping drugged women and girls.

However, once it did, the natural response was to place all the sexual sins of the community on a few individuals and send them off into the desert to perish – to use the biblical imagery. In that way, attention would be focused away from their on-going sexual sin and their reputation would once again be “clean.”

**5. Is it likely that the Bolivian court system will be able to discern the “facts” surrounding this case?** I don’t think so. Everyone is aware that the Bolivian court system is plagued by endemic corruption that is fueled by bribe money. Since the colony has much more economic clout than those accused, the chances of an unfair conviction, if one happens at all, is quite possible. I have heard second-hand reports that the Manitoba colony has already spend well over \$100,000 American in order to keep these men in prison without trial. According to the law, prisoners are not to remain in custody longer than six months without a trial. Many believe that “money” is what is keeping them in jail. I tend to agree.

**6. What can the larger Mennonite community do to address this specific sex scandal on Bolivia colonies?** There is very little that the larger Mennonite community can do. It is really quite impossible to go to a colony like Manitoba as representatives of the larger Mennonite world and demand that they change their life-styles and patterns that we might suppose have led to the present crisis. Of course, wherever possible, I think it is appropriate to address colony leaders as Hans and I did – even to challenge them to consider how their approach to life might be exacerbating sexual misconduct. It will be appropriate to pray individually for the entire situation and the people involved as well as to sponsor special services for corporate prayer and lament as was done on February 7th in Winnipeg. It would, however, be my recommendation that our prayers encompass the on-going issues colonists face, including those who no longer find it possible to remain within the Old Colony system.

**7. What can agencies like MCC and other mission organizations with a special interest in Mennonite realities do to address the on-going crisis on the colonies?**

- a. We need to continue “picking up” the casualties that the colony system produces in Bolivia in places like Villa Nueva and possibly other similar centers that will be established in the future.
- b. We need to encourage groups in the colonies that desire changes in their way of faith and life to stay within their respective colonies if at all possible to establish a new and “free” church community.
- c. We need to support those emerging centers in Bolivia intent on offering support and help to people from the colonies with specific needs. The Women’s Shelter now nearing completion near Pailon hopes to provide counseling for Mennonite women caught in sexual and other abusive situations. The Rehabilitation Center for Alcoholics, soon to come on stream also needs our full support.
- d. We need to be in dialogue with all the various individuals, groups and agencies attempting to work with Mennonites in Bolivia. Where needed, we should help them understand a positive interpretation of Anabaptist history and theology. This will serve to help Bolivian Mennonites understand that they do not have to drop all things “Anabaptist” in order to seek help or find a better way of faith and life.

e. And finally, we would do well to keep connected to colony leaders in order to help them understand what is happening to their idealized vision of Mennonite faithfulness and to help them figure out how to proceed in a healthy manner. In this process it will be helpful to remind colony leaders that their desire “to keep things from changing” would be better directed towards maintaining the Anabaptist ideal of a free church than a later idealism embodying a church/state synthesis on their colonies.

#### **8. What should agencies like MCC and other mission organizations not do?**

a. We should not assume that we can solve the sex scandal issue on the Manitoba Colony from the outside and in the short run. We should keep abreast of developments and stay in contact with the key players in this drama, offering help and insight when appropriate or asked for. It will be unfruitful to seek any kind of formal “intervener” status in this case before a court system that is still deeply flawed.

b. We should not assume that connections with Mennonites in Santa Cruz or on their colonies by short-term volunteers from the North will be sufficient to deal effectively with the on-going struggles and disintegration happening among colony Mennonites. While short-term, individual contacts may provide some inspiration and help to some Mennonites, long-term relationships where trust can be developed will be more effective in helping colony Mennonites adapt to changing realities in the long run.

c. We should not work with the colonies with the assumption that the colony system is a valid expression of Anabaptist ideals. We should remain cognizant of the fact that the church/state colony synthesis is not a viable or biblical arrangement. We should not reject people because they happen to be living in a colony setting, but neither should we give them the false hope that by tweaking the system and helping them out here and there that we can help colonies become centers of healthy and dynamic faith and life towards which biblical Anabaptism points.

When I began this report I asked the question whether this present sex-scandal crisis in the life of Bolivian Mennonite colonists might become, in the end, a time for personal and corporate renewal and healing. I have a deep conviction that this, in fact, might be the case.

So help us God!