

# Why we didn't plant a 'Mennonite' church in Argentina

## How God changed our minds

**W**e went to the Chaco region of northern Argentina in 1950, never imagining the profound change awaiting us in our first term with MBM. We dutifully followed the traditional patterns of Mennonite mission already established: to form a church clearly identifiable as Mennonite using a tradi-

tional mission compound — church building, school, clinic, carpenter shop, store, farmland and dwellings — established nine years before our arrival.

But as we worked among the indigenous, semi-nomadic Toba tribe, which lived off the uncultivated products of their subtropical environment, we increasingly sensed that the Toba people weren't really interested in hearing us. In fact, it seemed they would not become Mennonite in even 200 years. So, how could it possibly be God's will for them?

In our deep frustration, we turned to a Christian anthropologist-linguist couple, who were invited to help us with the previously unwritten Toba language. They introduced us to scientific language analysis and, far more significantly,

they opened our eyes to what was happening, a reality we had flatly rejected. The Toba people were themselves developing their own culturally appropriate response to the Christian gospel, but were hiding it from us lest we be offended and leave (a too typical missionary response). They knew rejection.

We remember how threatened we initially felt the time it was pointed out to us that the Toba were holding unauthorized meetings in their own language in one of the "Mennonite" churches. Several times a week, they were worshiping in their own fashion with their own chosen leaders. When we arrived on Sundays, they conformed to the "Mennonite way" with worship in Spanish.

It was a momentous decision for us to announce that we were no longer in charge of their churches. Initially, they assumed we were abandoning them. At that point, we promised we would continue to visit their churches and bring the word of God — a promise that soon included Bible translation. In practice this meant that, despite biting criticisms from non-indigenous Christians, we would stand by the Toba as we responded to their invitations.

With faith in God's ability to raise up a church, we watched the Toba people turn to Jesus Christ to heal them — body and soul. They were losing their faith in their native healers, the traditional taboo system and in the spirits they believed had healed them in the past.

The United Evangelical Church, which they formed, became the principal integrating factor in indigenous life in the Chaco region. They elect their own leaders in their own way. They are deeply evangelical. Their theology is authentically their own. They have the capacity to confront problems that are very difficult to resolve, and to handle them with true wisdom from God.

Because of that, the Toba Christians drew many into their Bible-centered fellowship, where they could authentically hear and respond to God's voice. Who would dare to rob a people of their God-given privileges and responsibilities by interfering?

As we have walked with them for more than 40 years, it has cemented into our souls the reality of a God with far greater power and love than we could have known without having experienced it among the indigenous Christians of the Argentine Chaco. It helped us understand that every people has its own history, its own way of coping with reality, and that any new concept has to be received and reinterpreted in light of its own experience. It is impossible for people to respond to God authentically in any way other than their own. When we are too easily convinced of our superior knowledge of how the Christian faith should be expressed, we rob ourselves — ourselves, mind you — of seeing the glory of God in its fullness.

*Albert and Lois Buckwalter served for 43 years in northern Argentina, ministering among the indigenous tribal groups relating to the United Evangelical Church and directing the translation of the entire New Testament into the Toba, Mocovi and Pilaga languages, and selections of the Old Testament into Toba and Mocovi. They live in Gosben, Ind., where they attend College Mennonite Church.*



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