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A history of the Mennonite Voluntary Service program, under the auspices of Amish Mennonite Aid, in El Salvador, Central America.

by

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Background and Origins of the Program

Sectarian, ethnocentric, closed. These three terms have often been employed as descriptions of the Mennonites. No doubt the use of such terms has frequently been justified, but you would hardly agree if you were to listen to the praise many Salvadoreans (people from El Salvador) heap upon the Mennonite name in their country. From Cabinet Officers to customs officials to the peon you may hear expressions of appreciation for the concern the "Menonitas" (Mennonites) have shown towards the needs of El Salvador. This concern has manifested itself in such tangibles as a co-op bakery, improved farming methods, bridges, and even in persons who call themselves Mennonite Christians. The purpose of this paper is not to prove or disprove the validity of using such expressions^{as} sectarian, ethnocentric, or closed to describe the Mennonites, but to examine the historical developments of the Mennonite organization in El Salvador and let that history speak for itself.

The program I refer to is "Servicio Voluntario Menonita", the voluntary service program in El Salvador, Central America which is under the auspices of Amish Mennonite Aid (AMA), the official "Agency of the Beachy Amish Mennonite Churches."¹ AMA was organized in the mid fifties to operate a relief goods dispensing program for refugees fleeing from East Germany into West Berlin. The original objective of this, the first officially organized overseas mission program of the Beachy Amish church, was "Dedicated to the rendering of material, moral, and spiritual aid in the name of Christ, to destitute and needy people."² The purpose of this paper is to follow the path of the organizational and philosophical development of Servicio Voluntario Menonita (SVM).

There are several factors seemingly quite unrelated which contributed to establishing the AMA project in El Salvador. The first factor was the erection of the Berlin Wall in 1961 to prevent the free exit of refugees into West Berlin. That phenomenon drastically reduced the flow of refugees which greatly reduced the need for AMA's relief program there. Thus the Beachy Amish churches were left with an aroused interest in missions and an efficient relief program but no place to utilize it. During this same period there was an increased emphasis in the Beachy Amish churches on providing Beachy Amish operated missions to be staffed by their own people, especially JW's.³ Meanwhile, a natural phenomenon, Hurricane Hattie, had devastated extensive areas of Belize, British Honduras. Mennonite Central Committee responded to the emergency need in British Honduras by sending a delegation to investigate the possibilities of setting up a disaster or relief program. The delegation, which represented several mission boards of the Mennonite church, also included Jacob J. Hershberger, who represented AMA. Although this would be another story, the foresight of certain MCC personnel in inviting AMA representation on the above delegation because they were aware of the interest and potential of the Beachy Amish churches must be acknowledged.

Not only did AMA establish a relief program in British Honduras as a result of the investigation, but the same delegation went to El Salvador to look into the possibility of responding to a call for assistance in agricultural development which Aaron Weber made to MCC. Weber was at that time president of the Baptist Home Missions Society in El Salvador. Weber had contact with the "Instituto de Colonización Rural" (ICR) which was establishing

and operating an agrarian reform program in the country. Knowing the Mennonites and their reputation for being good farmers Weber suggested to ICR that maybe they would be willing to assist in agricultural development. Via Weber, ICR invited MCC to consider setting up an agriculture program in conjunction with land reform projects. As outlined above, certain MCC personnel had the foresight to invite Jacob J. Hershberger along on the investigation realizing that AMA would probably be interested in such an opportunity.

The delegation visited El Salvador in early December, 1961, contacting the executive officials of ICR. Apparently the initial contact was a fruitful one as evidenced by the fact that Jacob J. Hershberger came back reporting "the invitation of the El Salvador government"⁴ to the Mennonites to set up a program in the country. That move by the Salvadorean government, which in all practical terms is Catholic and militaristic, must be considered an extraordinary one. The invitation was not without its restrictions, though, as we shall see later. Within the month AMA had tentatively decided to respond positively to the invitation.

The original concept of the program, which was to be set up as an agency under the jurisdiction of ICR which is a department of the federal government of El Salvador, was to basically work in agricultural development since "many of the people have had no experience in farming" and it was felt that by "our IW or PAX boys coming in and giving some practical demonstrations of farming... including crop rotation, hybrid seed, fertilizers, etc."⁵ they could make a significant contribution. Even though in the original contract drawn up between AMA and ICR it stated that the AMA

workers were not to engage in any kind of evangelizing, it was strongly emphasized right from the beginning that the "service will be in the name of Christ and the way of life they will be seeking to demonstrate will include the Gospel in action."⁶ This restriction of evangelization was to become a major matter of concern and discussion for a number of years, but it did not prevent the initiation of the work. One of the AMA board members made this statement, "We stepped out in faith that the restrictions would be lifted."⁷ In short, we might conclude that starting the program as an agency of ICR, which was the only way for an evangelical group to be recognized by the government at that time, was considered a means to an end; evangelization.

Sitio del Niño, Pilot Project

The unit center and the first work project were set up at the Sitio del Niño Colony on May 1, 1962. That was barely five months after the initial investigation had been made. But before outlining the specifics about the initial project it is necessary to explain in more detail what the ICR is and how it functions.

El Salvador, which has a little more than eight thousand square miles, is densely populated. Today there are approximately 390 persons per square mile. Most of the land, until recent years, was in the hands of only a few families. The number of families most frequently quoted is fourteen, although I never was able to document that. Sometime during the fifties a more progressive government established the "Instituto de Colonización Rural" (ICR), which stands for Rural Colonization Institute, in an attempt to initiate land reform. ICR, headed by ex-president of the Republic, Osorio, bought up a number of large plantations in the coun-

try and subdivided them into plots of around five to ten acres. New housing facilities were constructed in colonies and then the land and houses were sold on long term loans to eligible landless families. (Sitio was one of those colonies.) Although this project has been criticized as being paternalistic, in all fairness it must be said that it is a legitimate attempt at social justice. Not only were the families landless, the majority were also deficient in education and social development, conditions which ICR also tries to remedy.

Sitio del Niño, which is about twenty miles northwest of San Salvador, the capital, lies in the heart of one of the most fertile plateaus in the country. There the first unit, made up of seven persons who arrived in the first month, was set up in a building which had been designed to be a restaurant. With some innovations it provided adequate facilities for the living quarters for the workers. The building was owned by ICR and was used by the unit, rent free, until the mission moved off all ICR property in 1968. Jacob J. Hershberger, representing the board, accompanied the first workers to Sitio, assisting them in getting established. Ben Stoltzfus, who had served as a VSer in Honduras for several years, consented to assist in El Salvador for six months. He taught the new workers Spanish and of course he made the initial contacts since he knew the language and had experience in the same kind of work. Ben's contribution was valuable, as reflected in a statement by one of the first volunteers that "Ben was a real asset to our work."⁸ Both Ben and Aaron Weber, neither of which represented the Beachy Amish church, were instrumental in getting the work started and their contributions were greatly appreciated.

Of Weber, one volunteer said, "He was sort of our guardian angel that first year."⁹

Agricultural development was a new approach for AMA so there wasn't much experience to draw on to initiate a project in the tropics. Some books on agriculture were made available to the volunteers, but the initial thrust was to put practical background experience to work. The very fact that the approach and methods changed through the years indicates that the projects served as educational experiences for the workers as well as the community. Probably one of the key factors leading to the early discovery of effective development techniques was the relationships established with other agencies in the area: the National School of Agriculture, Peace Corp (there was a volunteer in Sitio), the ICR social worker, and ABC, a rural credit association. Vital information was exchanged with these.¹⁰

The very first work projects were in the nature of demonstrations. In the newsletter reporting on the first month the unit director reported that "we have planted some corn...we put fertilizer on part of it" and also "we have planted a few radishes, lettuce, tomatoes, cabbage, and onion plants in a hot bed."¹¹ Projects like these were concrete involvements for the volunteers; only someone who has been in development work can appreciate the frustrations a volunteer feels at not being engaged in concrete activity. Although ICR basically expected Servicio Voluntario Menonita to engage in agricultural work it was not long until other avenues of interest were stirred.

By September it was reported that someone had been working

with 4-C Club (4-H in the U.S.) boys. This involvement led to opening a carpenter shop which was basically used as a training program for the boys; however, the shop soon developed a program for men whereby a man could learn carpentry skills while making useful items of furniture for his home.¹² The one single lady volunteer had started sewing and cooking classes by October of the first year with 4-C Club girls. Two months later she was doing canning demonstrations with the ladies in the colony and by February had set up regular baking classes.¹³ Also by November of the first year a project of 100 New Hampshire Red chickens, imported from Miami, was started and by March nine Nubian goats had been imported from Pennsylvania. The purpose of the goat project was to increase milk in the diet of the people.¹⁴ It is noteworthy that in January 1963, only eight months after arriving, some of the volunteers were participating in a colony exposition put on by ICR. This list of projects and activities is not all-conclusive, but it gives a general idea of the early trends.

Several of the initial projects developed into thriving enterprises. "The canning and baking in Sitio del Niño is now on its own....The bakery project is growing and is an asset to the colony,"¹⁵ was reported in July 1963. The bakery co-op that developed produced so well that it soon expanded its facilities, bought its own delivery truck, and was selling as much as 1300 loaves of bread alone in the capital city weekly. The chicken project, which at first was with layers, eventually grew into a broiler co-op which was dressing and delivering as high as 300 birds per week by 1967. Sometime in 1967 the bakery and broiler co-ops started working closely together in sharing facilities and labor. They continued

selling in the capital city and also installed a produce stand along the Pan American highway near Sitio. These projects not only served as pilot projects for other Mennonite extensions, but other organizations like Peace Corp, the Agriculture Extension Agency, and the Agriculture School sent delegations to learn from them.

The successful projects were not without their problems. Organizational inefficiency was always a potential deterrent to progress in the co-ops. Closely related to that was the problem of when and how to completely turn over projects to the nationals. Although the present operations are only token symbols of the success they once were, valuable lessons were learned from them in that some of the local citizens were spurred on to progress and the working ideas were employed in similar projects in other locations.

Generally speaking, the Sitio del Niño project set the precedent for others which were to follow, although the other extensions were in no way restricted to those same specific projects. Already in June of 1962 mention is made of working in Joya de Ceren, an ICR colony about four miles from Sitio. In 1964 a new extension was opened at San Isidro Lempa, an ICR colony in a more remote area of the country. Many of the same tactics were used as at Sitio, but at San Isidro the chicken project failed because of climate and transportation differences and problems. It was at San Isidro that interest in working in areas off ICR property was really sparked. Requests for assistance from neighboring villages were the cause of that.

ICR was generally well-pleased with the Mennonite program.

Jaimie Chacon, assistant director of ICR, told Jacob J. Hershberger in 1965, "Mr. Hershberger, we want more of your people here in El Salvador. We have room for several new agricultural projects."¹⁶ By this time there was growing discontent among the workers with the evangelistic restrictions and sometimes hindrances to community development at the hands of ICR. More and more the possibility of leaving government property altogether was talked about. But before discussing the move towards an authentic Mennonite program mention must be made of one unique project.

The Baptist Association in El Salvador requested a Mennonite couple to manage a small old people's home and farm at Ayutica. Eli and Verda Glick were sent to operate the project. The old people's home never was completed, but a farming program was started whereby local farmers farmed plots "on a half and half basis... learning first hand the value of good seed and fertilizers."¹⁷ The farming and chicken raising projects there were very successful. In addition, a medical clinic was established to meet the dental and medical needs of that rural area. A doctor and dentist made regular visits to assist Verda, an LPN, who operated the clinic. By the end of 1969 Elis bought their own farm at Sacamil, continuing in the same kind of work and enlarging the spiritual outreach.

With this general view in mind of the specific kinds of projects that SVM set up, I will now attempt to backtrack and trace the significant trends in the development of the philosophy of the program.

Trends In the Development of the Philosophy of Missions

Three general periods of distinct character can be outlined in tracing the development of the philosophy and methods of Servicio Voluntario Menonita. The first might be called the period of demonstration and experimentation; the second, the community organization approach; and the third, the institutional services period. Closely interwoven with this topic is the development of the evangelization work which will be discussed in another section.

Although there have been definite changes in the philosophy of development there is one basic objective that has undergirded the program from the start to the present. That is the assertion that "we truly help people only when we help them help themselves."¹⁸ At the very beginning attempts were made to accomplish that by assigning projects to individual volunteers in a rather structured way. After six months the structure was greatly loosened and each volunteer was more or less free to investigate and initiate projects on basis of adaptability to the unique conditions he found. At this point the program became more flexible to community needs. Jacob J. Hershberger stated at this time that "we sense a need of making more contacts with the local people..... and also of working more in cooperation with the agricultural experts and officials of El Salvador."¹⁹ One of the volunteers felt that "This is when we really began."²⁰

From then on during the first period there was a more or less conscious effort to learn better techniques in promoting change. During this period developed a keen awareness of the cruciality of human relations. Projects like carpentry, for example, were seen "as a way to get near to the people"²¹ and there was a feeling

that "we must win the people to ourselves before we can win them to Christ."²² The workers then were conscious of the total person. As late as 1967 the idea was reiterated that to induce change it is necessary to "work with persons to promote change in attitudes."²³

During the latter part of the period of demonstration and experimentation the value of formal project evaluation was discovered. Evaluation led to decisions to halt projects or methods that created dependence or paternalism, or for some other reason were not achieving desired results. The Service Manual published in 1967 reflected the concern that the projects should be the people's and not the mission's. The role of the volunteer was seen as more that of a liaison for the poor man with the institutions that offered assistance.²⁴ Some of the successful projects were valid evidence that the philosophy of the first period was very workable even if it was in the formative stage.

It is rather difficult to separate the first period from the community organization period because the developments of the first period led to the approach taken in the second. Right at the time the second period might be said to have been starting, mid 1966, SVM started sharing learning resources for orientation with the programs of Eastern Mennonite Board in Honduras and Conservative Mennonite Board in Costa Rica. It was that summer that the first volunteers went to Costa Rica for language study and orientation. The 1967 Service Manual and an AMA committee report affirm the new trend in philosophy by stating that there will be "more emphasis on community development."²⁵

One facet of this second period was the offering of specialized

services to the greater community in some of the extensions. Veterinary services were offered by one of the volunteers. These included medical, breeding and educational services. At the same time the medical clinic at Ayutica was started and also an attempt at a community wide literacy program was made. Community-wide co-ops were quite widely and strongly promoted by volunteers.

The second facet of the second period was the adoption of the community organization tactic in contrast with the services to individuals approach. At Texistepeque, where the first SVM extension was opened ^{was} that not under the jurisdiction of any other organization, a community improvement committee was organized with the goal of helping a group of concerned citizens "unify into a functioning body where ideas will be born, take root, and grow into community development projects."²⁶ The objectives were to help develop healthy social relations, community consciousness, and leadership ability. The same approach was taken at Concepcion Quezaltepeque and San Antonio Masahuat later on. Some of the projects which were done as a result of those committees were; a moral improvement program, basketball court, footbridges, public library, school houses, public toilets, and others. Those committees gained sufficient acclaim to receive substantial financial assistance from U.S. AID, the El Salvador Highway Department, Department of Education, etc. The emphasis was on community wide participation.

The third distinct period in the philosophical development might be called the institutional services period. This period basically coincides with the move of all VS extensions off ICR property. This phase was spurred on by starting to give programs at the girls' reformatory. The dire needs observed there led to

a concern for providing some kind of adequate homes for unfortunate children. Definite plans and purchase of land for constructing a children's home have been made.²⁷ A day school for Texistepeque is also in the offing for the 1971 school term. It should be noted that it was in this period that the formal preaching program was started. This third period is closely related to and leads us to the next topic; trends in the evangelization work.

Significant Trends in the Evangelical Work

The evangelization work of the Menonitas in El Salvador has experienced great changes. The trend has moved all the way from complete prohibition (legally) of evangelistic activities to buying church buildings and being completely free to evangelize. The restrictions of the original contract with ICR were a constant "thorn in the flesh", but there was a feeling the contract should be respected, as evidenced by Jacob J. Hershberger's correspondence "recommending the keeping of the mission work to a minimum at present.....because of working under the government."²⁸ Although the contract was respected the ICR officials were informed from the start that the mission desired to evangelize along with the other aspects of the work.

As early as 1964 it was stated that "We trust our next venture in El Salvador will be one in which we are entirely on our own."²⁹ In 1966 the move from San Isidro to Texistepeque marked the beginning of the move to get entirely off government property. But in the meanwhile there was a feeling that the pressures against evangelization even in the colonies was lessening. That feeling was probably in part due to a gradual moving out from under the

jurisdiction of ICR even in agriculture projects. But the restraint remained to some extent until April 1968 when the unit center was moved from Sitio del Niño to San Salvador, the capital. "Now we were entirely off government property leaving the workers more free to witness and preach the Gospel,"³⁰ expressed the feeling of relief felt by the workers, board, and supporting constituency.

The evangelization work can be seen in three stages. The first few years might be called the personal work stage. Workers shared personally their testimony with individuals. During this time the workers frequently visited other evangelical churches and participated in the services in special singing, giving topics, etc. This period was a time of building meaningful relationships with individuals.

The easing up stage as outlined earlier resulted in the organized approach. Sunday Schools and Bible study groups were established, the first being in Sitio sometime in 1965 or possibly earlier. A correspondence Bible course program was started sometime during the same general period of time. It became a rather extensive movement. In January 1967 a two week vacation Bible School session was conducted at Sitio del Niño. That brings us to the final stage; formal preaching by an ordained minister.

Roman and Amanda Mullet began to serve in San Salvador in April 1968 marking the debut of a Mennonite preaching ministry in El Salvador. Now the main thrust of the mission was geared to organizing to preach the gospel. Less emphasis was placed on the social aspect of the work. In 1969 a regular preaching schedule

was established. "On November 16, 1969 the first public services were held"³¹ in a church that could rightfully be called a Mennonite church, at least by virtue of being a building used exclusively for that. That was not the first public service, though. That service was the crowning affirmation of the founding of the Mennonite church in El Salvador, although it followed by about three weeks the baptism of Santiago Delgado on October 26, 1969 "as the first member of the Mennonite church in El Salvador."³² Early in 1970 two more Salvadoreans were baptized and on "May 13, 1970 the first communion was held in San Salvador with the Latin members-it was a landmark, it was fruit from the early work in Sitio."³³ Two of the persons baptized had had much contact with the workers in Sitio the first years. That first communion was held exactly eight years to the month after the initiation of the first project in Sitio del Niño.

In September 1969 a second minister and his family moved to Texistepeque to start full time evangelization there. AMA bought a building there that was "converted into a church house. This building was originally built to be used as a theater."³⁴ Buildings weren't the only ones experiencing conversion. After a successful two week Bible School in January 1970 several persons committed themselves to Christ. Within several months services were also being held in two neighboring cantons.

The Mennonite church in El Salvador is too young to predict what the trends in its development will be. Surely there will be difficult times along with the times of rejoicing as the church grows, but surely she will emerge victorious if the philosophy of evangelization is followed that was stated so well by one of the

first Mennonite volunteers in the country when he said, "We must remember that the missionary purpose is to evangelize and not to westernize..we must remember that the Gospel of Christ is free from all social customs and that the Gospel adapts itself to all cultures."³⁵

Summary

Eight years of innovation and development have brought the Mennonite Voluntary Service program in El Salvador through the gamut of being a dependent agency of the government all the way to an officially recognized and independent growing church. Official recognition was attained in mid 1970, ending a process almost two years in the doing. Faith that initial restrictions would some day be removed has been rewarded. Regardless of what has been said about Mennonites in the past and no matter what the future will reveal, of the first eight years of development of the Mennonite movement in El Salvador it must be said they were years of creativity and fearless launching of innovative programs. The constant change and growth leaves one with the feeling that the work is still new.

APPENDIX

I. Workers and terms served:

Harvey and Kathryn Kauffman	May 1962-64, July 1969-
John Glick	May 1962-64, June 1966- August 1966
Wayne Schrock	May 1962-64
Ben Stoltzfus	May 1962-Sept. 1962
Elmer Hershberger	May 1962-64
Malinda Hershberger	May 1962-65
Allen Zook	June 1963-65
Sadie Yoder	May 1963-65
John and Mahala Mast	May 1964-68
Menno Mast	May 1964-66
Gideon Petersheim	May 1964-66
Henry Petersheim	May 1964-67, June 1968-
Jacob and Barbara Hershberger	May 1965-68
Floyd Miller	May 1965-Nov. 1965
Ernest Hochstetler	Jan. 1966-April 1967
Eli and Verda Glick	April 1966-
Nelson Miller	April 1966-August 1968
Herman Bontrager	June 1966-68
Peter Weaver	June 1967-69
Glenn Yoder	June 1967-69
David Beachy	January 1968-70
Roman and Amanda Mullet	January 1968-
William Mullet	January 1968-70
Mervin Lapp	November 1968-
Roy and Rachel Kline	February 1969-
Betty Stephenson	September 1969-
Sue Troyer	September 1969-
Irma Miller	October 1969-
Elmer and Fannie Stoltzfus	December 1969-

II. Extensions:

Sitio del Niño (ICR)	May 1962-68
Joya de Ceren (ICR)	June 1962-68
San Isidro Lempa (ICR)	May 1964-66
Texistepeque	October 1966-
Ayutica	August 1966-70
Concepción Quezaltepeque	August 1967-
San Antonio Masahuat	March 1968-Aug. 1969
San Salvador (capital)	June 1968-
Casitas	February 1970-
Sacamil (Not really an AMA ext.)	May 1970-

Footnotes

¹ Marie Yoder, Amish Mennonite Aid's Witness in Berlin, Germany (Orange, Virginia), p. 6, *Aug., 1968.*

² Ibid.

³ Interview with Elam Kauffman, Ronks, Pennsylvania, October 3, 1970.

⁴ Letter, Jacob J. Hershberger, Sec. of AMA, Virginia Beach, Virginia to Peace Section, MCC, Akron, Pa., (January, 1962).

⁵ Amish Mennonite Aid (AMA) Newsletter, #68, Lynnhaven, Virginia (December, 1961).

⁶ Ibid., #73.

⁷ Interview with Elam Kauffman, Ronks, Pa., Oct. 3, 1970.

⁸ Interview with Wayne Schrock, Syria, Virginia, October 10, 1970.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ AMA Newsletter, # 76, and Wayne Schrock interview.

¹¹ AMA Newsletter, # 74.

¹² Ibid., # 77.

¹³ Ibid., # 78, # 80, # 82.

¹⁴ Ibid., # 79, # 84.

¹⁵ Ibid., # 87.

¹⁶ Leroy Miller, "He Held His Place," Christian Living, (March, 1966), pp. 4-5.

¹⁷ AMA Newsletter, 11th year, # 2, and El Salvador VS Activities report, 5th year, # 3.

¹⁸ Jacob J. Hershberger, Report of AMA delegation visit to AMA unit at Sitio del Nino, (Wayne Schrock personal files), October 30, 1962, p. 2.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 1.

²⁰ Wayne Schrock interview.

²¹ AMA Newsletter, # 100.

²² Jacob. J. Hershberger report, p.1.

²³ AMA Newsletter, 12th year, # 2.

²⁴ AMA Voluntary Service Manual, AMA, East Rochester, Ohio (June 15, 1967), p. 3.

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Footnotes (cont.)

· 24 "Evaluation of San Isidro Projects," report done by Henry Petersheim, Ernest Hochstetler, and Herman Bontrager, October 1, 1966 (Servicio Voluntario Menonita files).

· 25 Andrew J. Hershberger, "Report of Central America Trip," October 4, 1966, p. 2. (Wayne Schrock personal files).

· 26 AMA Newsletter, 12th year, # 2.

· 27 Letter from Roman Mullet, Unit Director, San Salvador, El Salvador, October 3, 1970.

· 28 Jacob J. Hershberger report, p. 1.

· 29 Jacob. J. Hershberger, "Visit to Central American Missions and Projects," report by AMA secretary of delegation visit, October 22, 1964. (Wayne Schrock personal files).

· 30 Letter from Roman Mullet, October 3, 1970.

· 31 Ibid.

· 32 Ibid.

· 33 Ibid.

· 34 AMA Newsletter, 14th year, # 10.

· 35 AMA Newsletter, # 77.

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