



## **A Wasteland Transformed to a Garden: The Mennonite Settlers of the Gran Chaco of Paraguay**

**by Darrow Miller**

People often ask us, “Can you really disciple a nation? Is it really true that nations can be transformed, desolate lands can become gardens?”

Our answer is a resounding “Yes!” But there’s a vital piece that must be in place, a key, if you will: God is the primary worker and He acts in response to the obedience of His people. 2 Chronicles 7:14 places the emphasis where it belongs: “If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land.” It is God that heals the land and builds nations. But His work is in response to the faithful obedience of His children.

We have sought to chronicle how God has used individuals and groups to transform the land and their nation in a relatively short period of time. At the Disciple Nations Alliance website you can read about some examples: Korea, England, Norway, Switzerland.

This paper points to a remote part of Paraguay, the Gran Chaco, the largest dry forest in South America. The Gran Chaco spans 400,000 square miles in four South American nations—Argentina, Paraguay, Bolivia, and Brazil. The Chaco is a hot and semi-arid lowland, intermixed with marshland, and sparsely populated. This inhospitable area has the descriptive title, “The Green Hell.”

In the 1920’s a group of impoverished refugees settled here and, in less than 100 years, transformed a wasteland into a garden. Theirs is a remarkable story of how God used a group of poor refugees with virtually no natural resources to create a flourishing land that supplies food and commodities not only to their nation of Paraguay, but also exports the same to Europe.

This story provides another model for how God can work through a faithful people to transform the land, to make it flourish, to reach its full potential. If you work among the poor, or come from a poor community and want to see your community transformed, you may find much to appropriate for your situation from the Mennonite story.

Before the Mennonites arrived, the Chaco was an uninhabited wasteland. The soil was infertile and the water had a high saline content. European settlers to Brazil, Paraguay, Bolivia, and Argentina found the land unwelcoming. They chose not to settle there. About 500 indigenous people eked out an existence that could be accurately described as near starvation.

In 1536, Anabaptist reformer Menno Simons founded the Mennonite Church. The rallying cry of the Mennonites was, “For true evangelical faith … cannot lie dormant; but manifests itself in all righteousness and works of love; it … clothes the naked; feeds the hungry; consoles the afflicted; shelters the miserable; aids and consoles all the oppressed; returns good for evil; serves those that injure it; prays for those that persecute it.”

The Mennonites were often mistreated. Their persecutions drove them from Germany and Holland to immigrate to Russia, Canada, and the United States. During subsequent persecutions, wave upon wave of Mennonites moved to the barren lands of the Paraguayan Chaco. The first wave arrived from Canada in 1927. The second wave traveled from the Soviet Union in 1930, fleeing the Bolshevik Revolution. A third wave from Russia arrived in 1947, following the displacement of World War II. In 1948 more Canadian Mennonites immigrated. Finally in the 1960’s small numbers of Mennonites moved from Mexico and Switzerland.

They founded five colonies in the heart of the vast Chaco: Menno, Fernheim, Neuland, Friesland, and Volendam.

After eighty years of Mennonite faith and labor, the Chaco had been transformed. That's the report from Food and Resource Economist Kate Pankowska. In June 2014, Ms. Pankowska wrote an article, “Paraguayan Chaco- The Story of Thorn Forest or Cattle Ranchers?”<sup>1</sup> She describes how the Mennonites transformed a desert into a garden.

*In March 2012, I visited Paraguayan Chaco and had a chance to see it all with my own eyes. I managed to talk to some Mennonites living there and to see what they had built over these last eighty years since they started to settle in the region. Frankly, I was quite impressed by how they had organized their lives in the middle of nowhere with a desert-like climate (it was above 40 degrees Celsius at that time, so I know how the “green hell” can be). During my stay in the area of Filadelfia I visited a dairy farm with state of the art equipment for milk storage. Children were running barefoot around a well maintained farm house that had a very ordered and clean front and backyard. I talked to a*

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/20140614182752-145572124-paraguayan-chaco-the-story-of-thorn-forest-or-cattle-ranchers>, accessed 11/1/16. Pankowska is positive about the Mennonites' achievements but troubled by what she considers the dangerous deforestation that has accompanied their success.

*dairy farmer, who owned the farm. With pride he told me about his cooperation with dairy scientists from Quebec to improve genetic material of his Holstein cows.*

*In the city, in Filadelfia I saw many things, including a Mennonite-run hospital that was just about to gain a new wing for an intensive care unit, the booming service industry in the city, Mennonite-run museums, impressive schools, restaurants, and clean streets, a rare find for Paraguay. I went through an impressive milk processing facility in Loma Plata, visited a highly mechanized processing factory of maní, and drunk[sic] water from the reverse osmosis system installed by the Mennonite cooperative in Filadelfia. As I found out later, it was all maintained internally by Mennonites, without any help from the Paraguayan government. The local people that I talked to told me the following: "the government comes here only to collect taxes and doesn't do anything else."*

How did the descendants of German and Dutch followers of Menno Simons transform the Green Hell into a garden?

Edgar Stoesz' book, *Like a Mustard Seed*, tells the story of the Mennonites' effort to heal the land. Stoesz identifies eight principles that, when applied, transformed the wasteland into an abundant garden that exports to overseas markets. In this article we will explore these principles.

- The Church – providing the spiritual foundation for the society
- Community – cooperating to develop the economic engines for flourishing
- Commerce<sup>2</sup> – leveraging the hard work of the people
- Roads – connecting the colonies to the larger world
- Scientific Agriculture – applying science to food production
- The Dignity of Woman – benefitting from the unique contributions of women
- Health – addressing the practical need to stay alive
- Education – preparing the next generation for life and work

### **The Church – providing the spiritual foundation for the society**

The first principle is the preeminence of the church in the development process.

How can a people prosper in the midst of hardship and poverty? To a large degree, the answer has to do with the connection between the church and development. If we

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<sup>2</sup> We are using the term "Commerce" in place of Stoesz's term "Banking."

understand the power of God's intentions we will not be surprised that the church and development go hand in hand.

The Disciple Nations Alliance promotes Seven Foundational Truths. Four of these relate to the local church:

- [God's] key agent in this task [of discipling nations] is the local church (Ephesians 3:9-11)
- The ministry of the church must be wholistic (Colossians 1:19-20)
- The ministry of the church must be incarnational (John 17:15-19)
- The local church must operate intentionally from the biblical worldview (Colossians 1:15-18)

Every healthy society has two primary institutions: the family and the church. The health of each is important for the health of a society. The DNA's conviction is that the local church is God's primary instrument for social transformation. The church and development go hand in hand.

Edgar Stoesz agrees. In *Like a Mustard Seed* Stoesz states that the Mennonite colonies that transformed the wilderness into a garden were usually sponsored or founded by a church. The earlier settlers in the Chaco suffered hardship from lack of food, limited water, and poor shelter. They often lived in tents, suffering extreme heat, drought, and major diseases. In the early decades of the settlements, hundreds of these pioneers died from disease and starvation. The hardships to tame this land were immense. It was the church and the Mennonites' faith in God and His call upon their lives to settle this land which enabled the colonies to persist through the hardships.

Stoesz lists seven reasons<sup>3</sup> the church was so critical in the transformation of the land:

1. The church is a unifying force that contributes to group solidarity.
2. The church lays an ethical foundation for the larger community by teaching biblical values such as honesty, hard work, and above all, love of neighbor.
3. The church serves as the conscience of the colony and helps bring balance to the materialistic and secular tendencies inherent in all human institutions.
4. The church teaches and practices mutual aid, whereby the strong help the weak, making it possible for all to survive.
5. The church serves as a social coordinator where friends meet each other.

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<sup>3</sup> Edgar Stoesz, *Like a Mustard Seed: Mennonites in Paraguay* (Scottdale, Pa: Herald Press, 2008), 121.

6. The church brings a transcendental dimension to the harsh realities of pioneer living and invokes a divine blessing on the effort.

Each of these helps to create a community of people who have the ability to live beyond their circumstances, a people with a vision for the kingdom of God that can call them forward even in the most dire circumstances.

### **Community – cooperating to develop the economic engines for flourishing**

The second of Stoesz' principles applied by the Mennonites was Community. It was the Mennonite cooperatives that provided the economic engines for transforming a desolate countryside into a prosperous and flourishing land.

Too often, the modern church has been influenced by a catastrophic combination of materialism and misguided spirituality often called the prosperity theology. Essentially, this doctrine teaches that Christians who have enough faith will become materially wealthy. Another way to understand this teaching is as a combination of the mysticism of animistic religions (such as African Traditional Religions and shamanism), on the one hand, and Western materialism on the other.

The Judeo-Christian worldview argues that God has ordered the universe to function a certain way. When people discover God's laws and principles and steadfastly apply them, they experience positive consequences. When people deny the existence of such an ordered universe, or rebel against that order, negative consequences result.

The Pentateuch tells the history of God transforming a slave nation into a free nation, an impoverished people into a flourishing people. God says that the secret to human flourishing is to live within the framework of His creation order. We see this in Deuteronomy 4:5-6:

*See, I have taught you decrees and laws as the Lord my God commanded me, so that you may follow them in the land you are entering to take possession of it. Observe them carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, "Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people."*

What transformed an impoverished nation into a great nation? Simply speaking, it happened as people observed the ordinances of God and lived under them. Similarly, we read in Deuteronomy 30:11-20,

*Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach. It is not up in heaven, so that you have to ask, "Who will ascend into heaven to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?" Nor is it beyond the sea, so that you have to ask,*

*"Who will cross the sea to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?" No, the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it.*

*See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction. For I command you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in obedience to him, and to keep his commands, decrees and laws; then you will live and increase, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess.*

*But if your heart turns away and you are not obedient, and if you are drawn away to bow down to other gods and worship them, I declare to you this day that you will certainly be destroyed. You will not live long in the land you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess.*

*This day I call the heavens and the earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live and that you may love the Lord your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him. For the Lord is your life, and he will give you many years in the land he swore to give to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.*

The correlation between behavior and consequences is not mysterious. These are God's manifest ordinances, right before our eyes. There is a clear "if ... then," consequential relationship.

IF

- You love the Lord your God
- walk in obedience to Him, and
- keep His commands, decrees and laws;

THEN

- You will live and
- [You will] increase, and
- the Lord your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess.

The Mennonite Colonies that settled in the Chaco of Paraguay had a godly vision of what this barren land could become and understood that if they loved God and were obedient to His order, the land would prosper. There is no mystery here. There is trust, obedience, and hard work.

Community is a biblical concept born out of the reality that God is Trinity. Before the creation of the world, God existed as Trinity – the One and Many. Within this three-in-one nature God communed, lived in community, and communicated. When the Triune God created human beings, He created us in His image to reflect community,

communion, and communication. This is the theological foundation for the Mennonite value of community in the Gran Chaco.

The Mennonites adopted a position that avoided two unacceptable extremes. On the one hand, they eschewed the modern Western concept of individualism which makes the individual autonomous. On the other hand, neither did they give credence to communalism, the elimination of the individual for the sake of the many. Rather, they understood the importance of individuals and individual families banding together in communities, creating cooperatives that helped to fuel the economic development of their societies.

Werner Franz, director of the Mennonite seminary in the Paraguayan capital of Asunción, spoke of the Mennonites' theological foundation for the formation of cooperatives: "For many, the cooperative became the institution that serves to give practical expression to the words of Jesus, 'Thou shalt love the Lord your God ... and your neighbor as yourself.' Or in Paul's words to the Galatians, 'Bear ye one another's burdens.'"

### **Commerce – leveraging the hard work of the people**

Both the Reformers in Europe and the Puritans in the United States understood that one of the biblical principles of economics was a moral responsibility to the larger community. Hard work and savings, two other biblical economic principles, generate wealth. That wealth is not simply for personal consumption. There is a cultural principle of generosity that stands in stark contrast to the secular/materialistic culture of greed. The Mennonites understood the concept of generosity. This was reflected in a common saying that captured their understanding of community: "*Gemeinnutz vor Eignnutz* (the common good ahead of personal gain)."

Stoesz identifies four functions of these cooperatives as they related to the Mennonite colonies:

- **Quantity Purchasing:** While the colonies were self-sufficient, producing most of what families needed, some staples were not produced in the colonies. The cooperatives allowed the colonies to purchase these staples in large quantities in the Paraguayan capital and ship them to the colonies for local sale.
- **Marketing:** This was the reverse of the purchasing system. Individual farmers produced perishable goods which they could not get to a market in a cost effective and timely manner given the distances involved. The cooperatives allowed the colonies to share the transportation costs to solve this problem.

- Banking: Early on, the colonies had a barter economy; there was little cash and there were no banks. The cooperatives functioned as a banking system to manage money flow and create lending services.
- Financing Social Services: A small fee was charged by the cooperatives for the purchasing and marketing of products. These fees were pooled to support the colonies' social services such as schools and healthcare.

Families came together in churches for spiritual and social benefits, and banded together in cooperatives for economic benefits. These cooperatives allowed for the economic growth and the flourishing of the whole community.

Community existed before the creation in the three-in-one God. The God of community made humans to live in community, and then gave a mandate to that human community, a mandate to create commerce:

*Then God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals,<sup>[a]</sup> and over all the creatures that move along the ground."*

*So God created mankind in his own image,  
in the image of God he created them;  
male and female he created them.*

*God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground."* Genesis 1:27-29

This commission is known as The Cultural Mandate or The Creation Mandate, and it includes two subordinating clauses: one social and one developmental.

The social dimension in turn has two distinct parts. The first is demographic: we are to be *fruitful*, to create families and communities of families. The second part is geographic: we are to *fill the earth*. We are not to stay in one place. The horizons are wide, human beings are to spread to the ends of the earth where there is further potential to flourish.

The second subordinating clause of the Cultural Commission is to "have dominion" over creation, to take what God has made and do something with it. We are to develop the earth and create godly culture.

All that leads to this observation: human beings were made to engage in commerce. That term comes from the Latin *commercium* comprised of *com*, "together" and *merx*, the genitive form of *mercis*, merchandise.

1 Kings 8:63 reveals that the people of God carried on commerce at the public market, chiefly the open spaces near the gates, where goods were brought for sale by those who came from the outside the city.

King Solomon extended commerce through shipping (2 Chronicles 9:21). The king's ships went to Tarshish with the servants of Huram. Every three years these ships returned bringing gold, silver, ivory, apes, and peacocks.

Commerce in Israel was governed by law; it was to be carried on in justice. "You shall have just balances, just weights, a just ephah, and a just hin: I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt," (Lev 19:36 ESV).

Webster's 1828 dictionary shows the comprehensive nature of commerce: "**1) ... an interchange or mutual change** of goods, wares, productions, or property of any kind, between nations or individuals ... **2) ... mutual dealings in common life.** **3) ... a vast commerce of ideas.**" (emphasis added)

### **Roads – connecting the colonies to the larger world**

Commerce depends on connections between families and communities. Which brings me to this historical observation about the Mennonites in the Gran Chaco: when these immigrants arrived, there were no roads.

After 20 years, the Mennonites had built a sense of community, but each settlement was isolated from the others and from the rest of Paraguay. Without roads, a trip to Asunción took from five days to several weeks. The journey was by oxcart on pathways, connecting to a freight rail line and finally via unpredictable river boat. This extended travel resulted in pillage and spoilage, often erasing all profits from their labors.

By this time the colonies were no longer starving but still poor. The people worked hard. Their work was productive but they lacked the dynamic of commerce. Besides this economic impact of their profound isolation, the limited human contact with the rest of the world was demoralizing.

The Paraguayan government had promised the pioneers roads and a rail line to the colonies. These promises were unfulfilled. Development of the colonies was stifled. The government's failure created a challenge, but not an insurmountable barrier. The settlers did it themselves!

The Mennonites knew they needed to connect to the larger world for the development of trade, both economic commerce (goods and services) as well as the commerce of ideas. So they began to construct roads. They created voluntary associations and linked with Mennonite communities in Canada and the United States to build needed roads. Stoesz

writes, "When the kilometers of roads built and maintained by Mennonite colonies in Paraguay are laid end to end, they reach from New York to Vancouver."

These roads allowed the colonies to move from isolated, subsistence agriculture to a vibrant commercial economy connected to the rest of Paraguay and the world. The Mennonites' roads brought flourishing to "the Green Hell." The God-given dream to transform a wilderness into an abundance was being accomplished. Much of the reason was the building of roads that opened the pathway of commerce.

### **Scientific Agriculture – applying science to food production**

Too often, in the 27 years I worked for a relief and development organization, I heard two messages:

- From impoverished indigenous peoples the message was, "We have no resources, we are poor and there's nothing we can do about it."
- I heard the poverty fighters tell those poor communities, "You are poor, there's nothing you can do about it, but we will help you. We have resources to give you. This is how you will get out of poverty."

When the first wave of Mennonites arrived in the 1920s, the 250,000 square miles of the Chaco could not sustain 500 indigenous people. Today, not quite a century later, the same land supports 10,000 Indians and 23,000 Mennonites. What brought about this difference? The key part of the answer is that the Mennonites had a different vision for the land than did the indigenous inhabitants. The latter thought nothing could change; they considered themselves ruled by their history. The Mennonites, on the other hand, had a God-given vision of what this wasteland could become. They believed they could transform the Chaco and change history. And they did.

But in addition to a different vision for the land, the Mennonites understood that science and technology could be harnessed to actually change the conditions of the Chaco, to make the land flourish so as not only to provide a better life for them but also to support more inhabitants.

Stoesz describes the conditions of the land and the refugees that settled there:

*These were agricultural communities dependent on what they could grow with the hot sun overhead. Rainfall was sufficient, although not necessarily at the opportune time. The bush and tall grass showed that the soil was fertile, but the grass was bitter and the cattle would not eat it. The farmers wondered what to plant and when, where to get the seed, and how to till the soil when all they had were human hands and unpredictable oxen pulling improvised implements.*

*Compounding their predicament was the fact that, while some had experience with farming the steppes of Russia or the prairies of Canada, they knew little about farming in the tropics. Many of their members were not even farmers.*

The ecology of the Chaco was relatively unique and very different from anything the Mennonites had experienced. To survive in this land, the Mennonites needed to cultivate a strong desire to learn, to become, in fact, lifelong learners. It was not enough simply to learn to read and write. They needed to continue to experiment with new crops and new agricultural techniques. They needed to do research and learn from others. They needed to discover the secrets that would make this unique ecology flourish. They became good experimental learners and within 30 years had transformed the green hell into a paradise.

In addition to being inquisitive, they were practical. They had to be pragmatic to survive. They needed to ask, not “What is ideal?” but “What will work?” When they had an idea, they would create an experiment on a small plot of ground. If the experiment succeeded they would expand the plot into a demonstration so their indigenous neighbors and other Mennonites could learn the lessons of the researchers.

As they found sweeter grasses to replace the bitter native pastures, they introduced more productive cows that could thrive in the new grasslands. Within a couple of generations the Mennonites were producing fully half of Paraguay’s milk needs. After that they began producing beef of a quality fit for export to Europe.

In addition to growing more and more foodstuffs, the men and women in the colonies began to experiment with storing the increased abundance of food. They began experimenting with cooking and preserving food. This ensured a year-round food supply for the growing population of the Chaco.

One woman, Myrtle Unruh, developed a cookbook to help improve the nutrition of Chaco families. This Paraguayan Mennonite cookbook, known in English as *Fed by Mama*, was wholistic in nature. Its intent was to nourish both the body and the soul. After decades of deprivation, hardship, and the death of large numbers of the settlers, Myrtle’s goal was restore to health the soul and the body.

The visionary leaders of the Chaco began to replace ox and hand cultivation of the land with the mechanical power of tractors. This allowed for the cultivation of more land with less back-breaking and health-ravaging manual work. As they learned from their research and experimentation, the colonies began to broadcast hundreds of radio programs to spread their knowledge throughout the Chaco. In addition they started two agricultural vocational schools and a significant agricultural extension service that served the colonies as well as the indigenous communities.

The Mennonites not only excelled in the pragmatic work of farming, they evidenced a growing sense of the need to bring beauty to the land. Tree and rose nurseries were established to transform the homesteads into beautiful gardens that nurtured the soul.

The indigenous and Mennonite farmers have succeeded beyond anyone's wildest imagination in transforming the wasteland into a garden. The land has prospered, benefiting those who live there as well as the nation of Paraguay, the nations of the Southern Cone of South America and Europe. As unlikely as it seems, the once desolate land is now the breadbasket of Paraguay.

If the Chaco can be transformed, there is virtually no land in the world that cannot be made to flourish with the right vision, inquisitive minds, and hard work.

### **The dignity of woman – benefitting from the unique contributions of women**

The unlikely success of this community of immigrants, their transformation of that hostile land, was made possible by the women. Often they were not honored or respected as their humanity deserved. Nevertheless, it is safe to say that the transformation of the Chaco would have failed had it been left to the men only.

The Mennonites came as refugees to this most desolate land in Paraguay. But, like the Hebrews who escaped slavery in Egypt, they came with a God-given vision to live as free people in their land of promise. The men and the women shared the vision for the land; they shared responsibility for the fulfillment of that vision as well.

In any society the family is the fundamental institution. This was no less so among the Mennonite colonies. Any pioneering effort includes immense hardships; the women were the glue that kept the families together and on track.

Part of the contribution was their work to maintain the community's unique cultural and religious identity. It would be difficult, perhaps impossible, given the hostility of the environment and the lack of physical resources, for a modern-day narcissist to succeed in bringing flourishing to such a waste land. Only a strong sense of obligation to the community would serve. This was another dimension in which the wives, mothers and grandmothers helped. They conveyed the cultural stories of this unique people. They called their children to be faithful to the God who had, for so many generations, been faithful to the followers of Menno Simon. Theirs was a unique tradition, rooted in "the radical wing" of the Reformation.

Menno Simon, founder of the Mennonites, was a Roman Catholic priest before he, along with others in the Reformation, rejected Rome's theology. But Simon went further than other reformers; he argued that the institutional church, begun under Constantine, was not the true church and needed to be replaced with simple, believer-based (i.e. believer's

baptism per the Anabaptists) communities similar to the early church. It was the shared commitment of these intimate and devout communities that allowed them to tame the wilderness and make it a flourishing garden.

In addition to their culture-keeping role, the women were involved in every aspect of the pioneering life. It was women who did the lion's share of home construction. They made the bricks that became the walls of their houses. They plastered those walls and put on the roofs.

The women also played a major role in food production. They worked in the fields, planting, cultivating and harvesting the life-giving crops that would sustain them through the winter and help provide the limited cash the family could garner. They were responsible for the summer vegetable gardens that provided the much-needed nutrition to keep the hardworking community alive.

In addition to building, planting and harvesting, each wife and mother had the primary responsibility to steward her household. It was her task to prepare the meals and allocate the limited food supply so the family could survive the long winter between harvests. In these pioneering days of toil, sickness and death, often the only food remaining by the end of winter were some beans, flour, and the occasional egg for protein.

In addition, there was no "maternity leave" when the baby was born. The Mennonite women continued to work through their pregnancy and while nursing their babies.

Alongside their husbands the women suffered greatly from the hard work and harshness of the conditions. And often the women carried an additional burden: domineering attitudes and unjust treatment by the men in the community. This pioneer suffering built a quality into the women that allowed the families and communities to survive and eventually prosper. Edgar Stoesz writes that "it was the quiet, behind-the-scene strength of women that made life in the colonies possible."

These families, refugees of war and oppression in their home countries, were pioneers in a new and strange land. They were frontiersmen and women, trailblazers in a new and harsh environment that none of them had ever experienced. It was a joint responsibility, female and male, to fulfill the cultural mandate and their God-given vision to turn a waste land into a garden.

Besides the mothers and grandmothers, another group of women contributed to the heritage of the colonies: single women, both unmarried and widows. As an example, in 1947, 950 women and 444 men arrived in the colonies. What would be the experience of these women who came without husbands?

While for many it was a lonely and trying existence, the women proved resourceful and courageous. They formed women's villages where they proved both self-sufficient and collaborative, supporting each other as females naturally do. They worked together to survive and contribute to the growth of the larger communities.

As the colonies achieved self-sufficiency, with all the services needed to operate, many women left their homes to receive training outside the community and then returned with their newly gained skills as healthcare professionals, teachers, entrepreneurs, and leaders in the colonies and in the church.

Edgar Stoesz honestly summarizes the impact of women in the Mennonite colonies: "Women had an indispensable if under-recognized role in this rich history. By today's standards, pioneer women were terribly restricted, but they were loved and appreciated."

This is not a man's world, it is not a woman's world, it is God's world. He delegated responsibility for governance of the world to imago Dei humans, both male and female. He tasked both female and male with the purpose of helping all of creation thrive and flourish – including, or especially, human life.

Neither can do this alone. This is a "together" task. To succeed, men and women must value one another's God-given dignity, protect one another in every way, and support the special gifts and unique contribution of their counterpart. When this happens in community, a slice of heaven on earth is not only possible but realizable.

It is too easy for men to be thoughtless, to disregard the God-given dignity and worth of their female counterparts. For the women of the Mennonite Colonies this was too often the case. But it is safe to say that the contribution of women allowed the colonies to survive and thrive. Perhaps today they are receiving the recognition they are due.

### **Health – addressing the practical need to stay alive**

Another important dimension of the Mennonites who flourished in the Chaco was healthcare.

As we indicated earlier, the Mennonite settlers came to Paraguay's Gran Chaco in three waves: 1927, 1930, and finally in the 1940s. They all came as pioneers to settle a strange and hostile land. Like Old Testament Israel, they believed they God was directing them to leave their homes and establish themselves in a foreign land, a place God would provide. They often came poor, with only the clothes on their backs. They trusted God with their lives and their future.

They came to the harsh “Green Hell,” and many died in the early years. Many returned home in defeat. But some persisted and turned the wasteland of the Chaco into a garden.

They came in poverty to an impoverished land. Yet they had their God-given vision, their careful planning and well-ordered lives. They brought a passion for hard work and a willingness to suffer. By these fundamental virtues such pioneers succeed.

But one thing pioneers largely forgot: healthcare. As Edgar Stoesz points out, “Ironically, Mennonite colonists, who in other things were so thorough in their planning, were inexplicably negligent where health was concerned.” They did not plan for illness. As a result, the pioneering generation included no doctors, nurses or healthcare professionals.

They came to Paraguay just as many other refugees and missionaries come to a new and inhospitable place: trusting in God for provision and protection. Stoesz writes, “When illness or accident occurred, they prayed for grace to accept it as God’s will. When death occurred, the community rallied, and somehow life went on.”

In the first few years, they were faced with non-potable water and a wasteland that did not easily yield the food needed for nutrition and healthy and sustained growth. In the early years many died of hunger and many more were plagued by diseases such as trachoma, malaria, and stomach parasites. These diseases, in addition to starvation, led to untimely deaths. These deaths depleted families and the human lifeblood of the colonies.

But the colonists learned from these consequences of inadequate planning. In 1941, 14 years after the first settlers arrived, the first resident doctor, John R. Schmidt, came to the colonies. Schmidt brought with him his wife, Clara, a registered nurse. In 1943, Clara established the first nursing school to train healthcare professionals for the colonies.

In the early 1950s, beginning with Dr. Wilhelm Kaethler, a new generation of Paraguayan-born Mennonites began to establish a medical “network” for the colonies and their indigenous neighbors.

In the mid-1940s the first dentist came to the colonies. The first mental-health facilities were established in 1962. Eventually, the colonies established modest elder-care facilities for the growing senior population needing care beyond what families could provide.

Today, Stoesz writes, Paraguayan Mennonites “enjoy a quality of healthcare equivalent to and at points superior to what their Canadian and American cousins receive.”

Development—of individuals and of communities—must be comprehensive. There’s no such thing as piecemeal development. The Mennonites’ inadequate planning for needed

healthcare brought suffering. But they learned from their mistakes and eventually established a health network within the colonies that served both the Mennonites and their indigenous neighbors.

### **Education – preparing the next generation for life and work**

Finally, we come to the Mennonites' eighth principle of development – education.

Unlike healthcare, a disaster because it was a second thought, education was at the forefront of their minds. Many of the colonies were established because the Mennonites chose to emigrate rather than have others decide what their children would learn.

One of them said, "If we cannot control our schools, we lose our children, and if we lose our children, we have no future." How simple and prudent this thought! As I write it, I am struck by how many parents in many countries, including my own, seem to lack this wisdom. Parents entrust the things that matter most, their children and their future, to state-sponsored schools. The education of their children is put in the hands of an atheistic state with no second thoughts.

My good friend Christian Overman, himself an educator who has written for Darrow Miller and Friends, has put the question this way. *If you were Christian parents, would you send your children to a Buddhist school? A Hindu school? An Islamic school?* Most would quickly answer no! Then he asks, *Would you send your children to an atheistic school?* Most would look startled! They routinely send their children to state-sponsored schools with a Darwinian ideology and think nothing of it.

Not the Mennonites! They moved from one country to another to ensure they could educate their children the way they wanted. Some fled Russia, others fled Canada, so they could educate their children freely.

As historian Edgar Stoesz declared, "Education was an essential part of Mennonites' sustainability and prosperity in Paraguay."

While the Mennonites agreed on the importance of education, they had diverse views on how to educate. There were two principle approaches: the traditional and the progressive.

In the traditional schools, the main purpose was "to pass on the faith as it has been handed down through the generations." Conformity and conserving were of chief value. Rather than standard class divisions, traditional schools used four categories. Children started in *Fibler* where they learned reading, writing, numbers and penmanship. In *Katechism* they were catechized. Next was *Testamentler* where they memorized the

Katechismus. Finally, in the *Bibler*, students read and memorized sections of the Old and New Testaments.

Some colonies subscribed to a more progressive approach to learning. They put education in the hands of a Society of Christian Education rather than in the hands of the church. The focus was not so much on catechizing as on a broader education.

Standards were established for teaching and the treatment of students. Teachers were hired and fired based on these standards. The curriculum was expanded beyond the traditional education to add business and vocational training to help improve economic conditions in the colonies. A teachers' training college was established to provide qualified teachers for more progressive education.

The goal of the more progressive education program was to both preserve the tradition and create innovators, a philosophy of preserving and progressing. Stoesz says that the functions of the schools and their teachers was to "recover what is being lost, preserve what is worthwhile, and explore what is new."

As the colonies expanded and flourished they added post-secondary instruction in four areas:

- Vocational and Agriculture
- Teacher Training
- Home Economics
- Theological Education

In addition to serving their own colonies, Mennonites understood the missional importance of education. They started schools for indigenous people living in communities near the colonies. This helped to develop indigenous peoples and their communities and brought them from poverty into a middle class. The colonies also started mission schools to use education as a tool for taking the gospel to Spanish-speaking Paraguayans.

The Gran Chaco story powerfully demonstrates what imago Dei humans, working for the glory of God, can achieve. The desolate can bloom.

Such transformation begins by understanding the cultural mandate of Genesis 1:27-30. God the primary creator calls his human servants to faithful obedience as secondary creators. When we respond appropriately, deserts become gardens. This is the natural outworking of human capacity enabled by divine grace.

All who long to see healing and growth in their family, community or society ... all who have felt their community lacked some resource necessary for development, who

suspect wholeness of life will always elude them, can benefit much from studying and imitating these hardy Mennonite settlers who turned a wasteland into a garden.