

BOLIVIA

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Mennonite settlement in Bolivia began in 1954 when 11 families from the Fernheim Colony and one family from [Menno Colony](#), both in [Paraguay](#), located near Santa Cruz. Mennonite settlements in Bolivia are all located in the Santa Cruz region of the Bolivian lowlands... Descendants of the immigrants to [Manitoba](#) from the [Bergthal Colony](#) in [Russia](#) ([Sommerfeld Mennonites](#)) have migrated to Bolivia and form seven colonies...[other migrations in the 1960s and 1970s from Mexico and Paraguay]

Most Mennonites came to Bolivia with more experience in colonizing than in similar ventures elsewhere. Some had sufficient money to purchase machinery helpful in carving a settlement out of the forest. Rainfall and temperature are especially favorable for soya beans, corn, and wheat, with Mennonites growing some 75 percent of Bolivia's soya crop in the Santa Cruz region, as well as producing a large percentage of Bolivia's cheese. ...

Colony Mennonites in Bolivia have largely maintained an attitude of social distance from non-Mennonite Bolivians. One index of acculturation is the growing use of the host country's language, Spanish, especially to negotiate business. (Old Colony schools do not teach Spanish.). Children attend school about six months each year to the age of 12 (girls) or 14 (boys). Instruction is in high German, which is not used outside of church and school. There are no Bible schools. Church and colony leadership plan no specific youth activities and no sports are allowed. Church life remains a predictable, traditional source of deep strength and character for many.

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Mennonites agonize over Bolivian rape victims

by Karla Braun of the *MB Herald* for Meetinghouse

The story of Mennonite men drugging and raping women on Old Colony Mennonite settlements in Bolivia hit the news summer 2009, from local Spanish papers to *The Guardian Weekly* in the UK. Meanwhile, English-language Mennonite media has given it scant reportage as Mennonites from conservative to evangelical struggle to respond appropriately —if at all.

"The silence is deafening," says Abe Warkentin, founder of *Die Mennonitische Post*, a German newspaper which connects Mennonites across the Americas. He "plead[s] with [Mennonite Central Committee](#) to address these problems the same way MCC has addressed other issues so effectively in hundreds of programs." Twelve men are

"To the Ends of the Earth": Mennonites in Central and South America: Resources

accused for the 140 officially confirmed cases of rape on 2,000-member Manitoba Colony in Bolivia. Mistrust, denials, and suspicion of authorities make it difficult to accurately report the extent of the tragedy. Anecdotal reports suggest such abuse is ongoing, affecting neighbouring colonies as well.

Ex-communication is the main form of discipline available to colony leaders. Colonists took a vigilante approach in response to circumstantial evidence against one man. After neighbours tied him to a tree by his arms with his feet dangling for nine hours, Franz Klassen did not recover movement in his arms and subsequently died.

Missionaries have been concerned about domestic abuse on the colonies for years, and Kurze Nachrichten Aus Mexiko, a Latin American news source, says a drugging-and-rape incident was reported five years ago. Family Life Network staff reported in 2000 about "the church in crisis" on Old Colony settlements in Mexico (home of the original Old Colony Bolivian settlers in 1967). In 2008, FLN staff said letters received from Old Colony teen listeners in Bolivia told of "addictions, depression, and sexual abuse common in the colonies." Some have called the incidents a wake-up call for North American Mennonites to address the poverty, lack of education, and denial of women's dignity in the closed, patriarchal structure of Old Colony Mennonite society.

"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," Kurze Nachrichten reported.

Responses

Academics research the ways and traditions of these Mennonites but do not make judgments on the Old Colony lifestyle. That the crime came to the world's attention is a sign of the colonies' health, says Royden Loewen, chair of Mennonite studies at the University of Winnipeg. He has a long history of studying Old Colony Mennonites in Canada and Latin America, and visited the Bolivian colonies in July as part of a research project on anti-modernity.

"My impression is of a God-fearing, gentle, hardworking people with high ethical standards," he says of his visits to the colonies. "They are deeply distressed about the rapes."

Loewen recognizes there is abuse in Old Colony homes but "in no greater percentage than any other society in the world." Referencing a 1991 study by Isaac Block, which found 10 percent of Winnipeg Mennonites had experienced abuse, he says the largely urban North American Mennonites "have ways of covering up our abusive situations," while the "isolated but more visible Old Colony Mennonites" are more vulnerable to

disclosure. Jacob and Helen Funk have been coordinators of Low German programming for FLN for the past 15 years.

"We know the problem of sexual and physical abuse is widespread in most if not all colonies in Bolivia," he wrote in an email to the *Herald*, in which he said colony leaders use "extreme adherence to tradition and legalism" to "control membership of the community and church."

Call for understanding

MCC, a relief and development organization, has provided aid and training to the colonies since the 1970s. They released "a call for understanding and prayer" July 9, 2009, in response to breaking news stories about the rapes. MCC Bolivia provides ongoing farming, health, and education training and support to the colonies, but their offer of counselling for victims of abuse was rejected. MCC is careful to work with colony leaders to bring programs and offer aid.

John Janzen, Low German Coordinator for MCC Canada, says "the colony leaders are taking a stand against this." He points to a large ad the colony leaders took out in a Santa Cruz paper shortly after the news broke, stating "we are sorry, we will try to regain lost ground, please remember we are not all like this" (loose translation). "As Christians, we should have concern for both the victims and the perpetrators (men) who did this," Janzen says. "I see MCC in Bolivia striving to make things better," he says, emphasizing the importance of parachurch and denominational ministries supporting each others' efforts.

"It is all very sad," says Warkentin, who advocates for education and a "hemispheric" Mennonite strategy to help the colonies. "While we acknowledge there are things that must change in these colonies, ... we must be conscious that we are also a broken people. "We need people with vision and creativity—and guts to take on this huge problem."

Low German colonies in Bolivia weigh tradition vs. gospel

Getting excommunicated for reading the Bible on your own is something Anabaptists faced five hundred years ago.

But try reading the gospel today in some ultra-conservative Low German Mennonite colonies of Bolivia, and you could be risking your livelihood, or even your life.

"To the Ends of the Earth": Mennonites in Central and South America: Resources

Dan Klaue, recording engineer at the MB rooted media agency, Family Life Network (FLN), visited the colonies last summer to distribute receivers pre-tuned to TransWorld Radio, which reaches the 50,000 Mennonites in the area. The station broadcasts Bible programs by FLN's Jacob and Helen Funk, and Klaue's original Low German worship songs.



FLN recording engineer and songwriter Dan Klaue gathers Bolivian Mennonite colony kids, some holding radios, to celebrate God-given creativity through technology.

“Members claiming to have accepted Jesus Christ run the risk of severe punishments, excommunication from the church and expulsion from the colony,” said Klaue.

Evangelical church leaders outside the colony report that last summer, a woman who accepted Christ through a Bible study led by Jacob Funk was taken by her husband and other elders to a mental institution, where doctors were asked to write a diagnosis which would admit her for life. Outsiders learned of this, and took her out. Though an extreme example, the story is the tip of the iceberg on abuse, says Klaue, in many cases ignored by elders, including generational sexual abuse.

Any such information is controversial among Mennonites in Canada, since Mennonite Central Committee has been working in the colonies for years, establishing relationships with elders and addressing them within their cultural context. It is easy to judge from an outsider's point of view, but another to establish trust and encourage healthy change among authoritarian leadership.

That's why FLN's evangelistic programs are sometimes seen as stirring the pot. Since the Canadian Bible Society (CBS) distributed their latest Low German translation in 2003, TransWorld Radio reported a surprising increase in listeners.

“Each Sunday alone we get up to 40 or more calls,” said Jake Fehr, director of TransWorld Radio. “The people are so needy, if we took [the program] off the air now, we would have a revolution on our hands!”

Though there's a high risk involved, more families are tuning into their clandestine radios. “We decided to openly listen to radio and to declare that we accepted Jesus,” a family with six children told Jacob Funk. “Colony elders have now taken our land and farm away from us.”

One of Klaue's goals this June was to visit youth who had been listening to Helen Funk's children's program, produced in 2004.

“We began receiving letters from kids and teens who listened to these programs where radios are prohibited by colony elders,” said Klaue. “Through them we learned of addictions, depression, and sexual abuse common in the colonies. I was convinced that more needed to be done for these kids,” said Klaue, himself a missionary kid who spent four years as a teen on a Mennonite colony in Paraguay.

“With the proceeds of each of our Low German CDs in Canada, we bought one solar-powered, pre-tuned radio. I took a whole suitcase of these radios to Bolivia.”

Klaue also shared his vision for children’s creative media production, and gave workshops on his new Low German songs to worship leaders.

“Ironically,” he says, “it’s the so-called rebellious youth that are accepting a message of light and hope in the midst of a community that values tradition over evangelical Bible teaching.”

For years, Mennonites in Canada have turned a blind eye to issues of abuse and persecution by their South American kin. As a global Mennonite identity takes shape through the Mennonite World Conference and the International Community of Mennonite Brethren, Klaue is hopeful that Canadian Mennonites will begin to ask the question: “What is our responsibility towards fellow Anabaptists?”

—Andrew Siebert

Bolivia: Life in a Mennonite colony

<http://www.mcc.org/stories/galleries/bolivia-life-mennonite-colony>



Gertrude Neufeld, 9, along with her mother, Sara, and brothers Heinrich, 4, and Franz, 11, extends a warm welcome to Hans Schroeder, a coordinator of the MCC Bolivia Low German Mennonite program, 2006-2010. MCC has programs in Bolivia, Mexico and Canada for the 250,000 descendants of the families that migrated to Mexico from Canada.

A day in the life of Heinrich and Sara Neufeld and their seven children, ages 14 months to 11 years old. The family lives in a closed, church-governed Mennonite colony in Bolivia that is committed to preserving educational systems, civic structures and religious traditions adopted by the founding members of the Reinlaender Mennoniten Gemeinde, also known as the Old Colony Mennonite Church, a church founded in Manitoba, Canada in the 1870s. To preserve these traditions, church leaders and about 6,000 people from their congregations left Manitoba and Saskatchewan for Mexico in the 1920s. This migration and subsequent moves in Central and South America have resulted in

considerable hardships and poverty. MCC has been working with [Low German Mennonite communities](#) since the 1950s and has programs in Bolivia, Mexico and Canada.



It is milking time and Franz helps the family earn income through the sale of milk by bringing home the cows from the pasture. Franz plans to follow in the footsteps of his forefathers to complete seven years of formal education and pursue farming as his primary occupation.



“I like to make the horse go fast,” said Franz, as he prepares to demonstrate his horse-back riding skills through a fast gallop along the driveway leading to the family farm. Confident riding skills are needed to

maintain the old ways and reject changes, such as motorized vehicles.



Denim overalls are mandatory apparel for boys and men in the Swift Current Colony. The colony was started in 1967 by families from the Swift Current Colony in Mexico. About 50,000 Low German Mennonites live in 63 colonies and communities in Bolivia. The first colony in Bolivia was established in 1953 by families from Paraguay.



Through an MCC-supported fruit tree project Heinrich and Sara Neufeld have planted 560 trees on their 53-hectare farm and plan to plant another 140 trees next year. "I want our children to be able to go into the orchard and eat as much as they want," said Heinrich Neufeld. "When all the trees produce fruit and the

fruit is ripe, it will be better than medicine."



Franz looks after a mare and her foal as part of his responsibilities during the evening chores. He also takes care of pigs and chickens and collects eggs. One of his favorite pastimes is playing with his sling shot. He made his first sling shot when he was 5 years old. His favorite subject in school is mathematics. "I like math because I find it the easiest," he said.



Fourteen-month-old twins Nella and Sara watch other family members do farm chores. In keeping with the teachings of the church, girls receive six years of formal education. Instruction is in German and the main study materials are Martin Luther's Bible in Gothic script, "Old Colony Gesangbuch" (hymnal), "Fibel" (primer or reader) and

"Catechism" (basic church doctrines).



Heinrich Neufeld milks cows while his sons Heinrich, 4, and Ben, 8, wait in the horse-drawn buggy that will be used to take the cans of milk to the main road where they will be picked up later the same day. In addition to selling milk, Neufeld earns an income from custom baling.



Elma Schroeder, a coordinator of MCC's Low German program in Bolivia, helps Sara Neufeld find a book in the lending library in Centro Menno, MCC's resource center in Santa Cruz. Other services include the sale of new books, Bibles and teaching resources, the distribution of MCC publications, documentation assistance, counseling and a place to rest and visit.



Anna Fehr, a teenage niece, is the live-in "kitchen maid" for the Neufeld family and helps the family with farm and household chores. After completing six years of formal education, girls in Old Colony communities help their mothers or work for other families until they get married and start their own families.



Surrounded by her children, Gertrude, Ben and Franz, Sara Neufeld reads stories from "Das Blatt für Kinder und Jugend," a monthly publication for children and youth supported by MCC Canada. "Reading is something that interests me," said Sara Neufeld, explaining her parents had encouraged her to read and she is now passing on this legacy to her children.