

MEXICO

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Mennonite settlement in Mexico began in 1922, following the granting of a *Privilegium* ([privileges](#)) by the Mexican government under the leadership of President Alvaro Obregón. The *Privilegium* was similar to those extended to the Mennonites in Russia and elsewhere in Latin America. By 1927 some 7,000 [Old Colony](#) and [Sommerfeld](#) Mennonites from [Manitoba](#) and [Saskatchewan](#) were living in the [Manitoba Colony](#) (1922), [Swift Current Colony](#) (1922), and Santa Clara Colony (1922) in [Chihuahua State](#); and [at ...](#) the Hague Colony, in [Durango State](#). These groups had emigrated from Russia to [Canada](#) in the 1870s in response to offers of reserved homestead lands and privileges and immunities equivalent to those inherent in the *Privilegium* held in Russia. When they perceived developments in Canada, especially the anglicization and secularization of the school system from 1916 onward, as an invasion of these privileges and immunities, and as a threat to influence and authority by community leaders, they left Canada. Following a concerted search throughout North and [South America](#), Mexico proved to be the only country besides [Paraguay](#) willing to accept them on their terms, and Mexico became the choice of all of the [Old Colony Mennonites](#) and a minority of Sommerfeld Mennonites.

By 1940, despite the return to Canada of approximately 20 percent of the colonists [due to difficult farming conditions], and despite many deaths, especially of infants, the colonies needed more land. Since that time the Mennonites of Mexico have been continuously in search of land. While their numbers have increased almost 500 percent from 1940 to the late 1980s, to an estimated 45,000-50,000, their land holdings have increased by only slightly more than 100 percent. From 1948 to 1952, some 150 families (595 persons) of Kleine Gemeinde ...affiliation from Manitoba established the Quellenkolonie (Quellen Colony) on 142 sq. km. ... in Chihuahua...

BBC NEWS

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Drug war hits Mexico's Mennonites

By Kate Joynes-Burgess Chihuahua state, Mexico

Mexico's rampant drug-related violence is making headlines, with thousands of deaths linked to the turf wars this year. But while the focus is on urban centres like Ciudad Juarez, rural communities have also felt the effects first hand.

"They have murdered Mennonite people... the drug-traffickers," says Abraham Peters, a

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

66-year-old retired rancher, who hails from the Protestant Mennonite sect in the agricultural heartland of Chihuahua state.

Their parents and grandparents came to Mexico in the 1920s from Canada after being promised religious freedom in return for resurrecting farmland devastated during the Mexican revolution.

Mr Peters' community is one of many caught in the crossfire as the federal government cracks down on the illegal drug trade.

Despite the comfort provided by his religion, he admits feeling increasingly "unsettled" about his family's safety. "Years ago you never heard about executions," he ponders and tails off.

Few members of his Church are talking about moving to Mennonite settlements in Belize and Paraguay as a result of the violence in Mexico, but the community is clearly concerned.

The strain shows momentarily as Mr Peters rubs his forehead before pointedly adjusting his tall, cream cowboy hat, part of the trademark attire of Mennonite men that is a visual sign of the community's commitment to preserve its traditions.

His dark blue dungarees, originally inspired by the uniforms of Mexican railway workers observed on that momentous journey down from Canada, bear a large pocket at the front.

From it he pulls out a map and points to the place where drug gangs reportedly killed a Mennonite man in Cuauhtemoc and another, closer to home, in the farming corridor outside the city's commercial hub earlier this year.

Putting down roots

Mr Peters looks wistfully upon his immaculate yet modest family home, flanked by waving cornfields. For him, this farmhouse, within the largest cluster of Mennonite colonies in Mexico, is more than bricks and mortar.

It is the only home he has ever known, where he has worked the land and raised cattle since boyhood.

Built by his father, Isidro - a first generation Mennonite migrant from Canada's Saskatchewan province - the house is also Mr Peters' birthplace, where he still lives with wife, Catarina, and Maria, the youngest of their eight children.

All speak the Low German or Plautdietsch language of their forebears, and only the men learn Spanish.

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Two of his sons have taken over the family farming business in Cuauhtemoc, where they are already training up the next generation. Others have purchased agricultural land in Mennonite settlements in the north of Chihuahua.

Putting down roots is rare in Mennonite history, which has been punctuated by periodic mass migration.

Originating in the Netherlands, these followers of 16th Century Anabaptist Menno Simons, a radical Protestant reformer, relocated to Russia in the 1770s and then to Canada in the late 19th Century.

They fled persecution for their refusal to participate in military action or swap their Germanic dialect for the host language.

A 7,000-strong community moved to Mexico between 1922 and 1927 after negotiating temporary fiscal benefits, autonomy over education in their mother tongue and exemption from military service.

Economic success

Since then their numbers have swelled to some 60,000 in Chihuahua's 25 Mennonite colonies, while smaller settlements are found in Durango, Campeche, Zacatecas and Tamaulipas.

Unlike fellow Anabaptists the Pennsylvania Amish, Mexican Mennonites have steadily modernised agricultural techniques in response to the harsh realities of their environment, where drought is a regular threat.

Authorities estimate Mennonite farmers account for at least 60% of the state's agricultural produce, supplying staples such as corn and beans. Nicknamed "vendequesos" or "cheese-sellers," Mennonites make 80% of the region's cheese and some 70% of its dairy produce.

Since Mexico's financial crisis of 1994, they have invested collectively in an exclusive credit union where only Mennonite shareholders are permitted. By safeguarding access to credit, the community has managed to partially insulate itself from the global financial crisis. Good harvests in 2008 and 2009 have also helped.

But these economic achievements have attracted the attention of organised criminal gangs, putting Mennonites at risk of armed robbery, kidnap and extortion.

Katharine Rempennig, director of the state government's Mennonite Outreach Programme, dismissed talk of any mass exodus over fear of violent crime, but admitted some members of the community "were thinking of leaving Mexico".

Crime prevention

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Chihuahua's minority Christian groups are still reeling from the 7 July murder of Mormon anti-crime activist Benjamin LeBaron, and his neighbour Luis Widmar.

Mr LeBaron rose to prominence after his own brother was abducted in May this year. Mennonite groups joined Mr LeBaron's peaceful protests against a wave of kidnappings affecting both communities.

Ms Rempennig, a Mennonite of Russian extraction, is concerned that her community's culture of being "open to others" makes members more vulnerable to becoming victims of crime.

Giving advice on crime prevention - "most importantly, kidnapping" - is a priority for her department, which has an annual budget of 500,000 pesos (US \$38,258).

Meanwhile, Mr Peters suggests some threats to Mennonite values are coming from within.

"There are Mennonites involved in the drug [trade]... in distribution," he alleges.

Uncertain future

While Cuauhtemoc is one of Mexico's fastest growing urban centres, there is also sense of abandonment.

Mr Peters, who in his retirement has been taking tourists around Mennonite country, says he has hardly received any overseas visitors this year because of security fears, compounded by the H1N1 swine flu outbreak in April.

Busloads of Canadians and Americans no longer visit the city's Mennonite Museum for the same reasons.

"We don't know what future awaits us," Mr Peters states with a tone of acceptance. "Only God knows."

But for this Mennonite at least, his future is in the land of his birth. "We are Mexican now," he proclaims as he clasps his hands together for emphasis. "Mexicans and Mennonites are like this!"

"We don't know what God wants with Mexico... but yes, we will stay, yes we are going to pray very much and come together."

This peaceful religious community could be facing its biggest test yet.