“Yours for the salvation of Mexican people”: Race, identity, and the growth/decline of Mennonite brethren missionary efforts in south Texas, 1937–1971

Felipe Hinojosa
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A Thesis

by

FELIPE HINOJOSA

Submitted to the Graduate School of the University of Texas Pan American
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

May 2004

Major Subject: History
“YOURS FOR THE SALVATION OF MEXICAN PEOPLE”: RACE, IDENTITY,
AND THE GROWTH/DECLINE OF MENNONITE BRETHREN
MISSIONARY EFFORTS IN SOUTH TEXAS, 1937-1971

A Thesis
by
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ABSTRACT

Hinojosa, Felipe, "Yours For the Salvation of Mexican People": Race, Identity, and the Growth/Decline of Mennonite Brethren Missionary Efforts in South Texas, 1937-1971

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The Mennonite Brethren (MB) church in south Texas is an anomaly. Mennonite Brethren missionaries were once prominent in Protestant circles in south Texas between 1937 and 1971, planting eight churches during this time. Today, however, the Mennonite Brethren church is relegated to several small congregations sprinkled throughout Hidalgo and Starr County. This research argues that Mennonite Brethren missionary efforts with Mexican Americans were racist and oppressive. Furthermore, the racist ethos that developed was maintained throughout the life of the mission because of the institutional rigidity of the MB church. Both Church Growth Theory and the Contact Hypothesis are applied to better understand the individual and systemic relationship between Mexican Americans and Anglo MB.
DEDICATION

Para las hermanas y hermanos de las Iglesias Hermanos Menonita del sur de Texas.
May God’s spirit continue to guide you.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The completion of this work would not have been possible without the support and guidance of the following people. Special thanks go out to my thesis committee, at the University of Texas Pan American, which consisted of Dr. Roberto M. Salmón, Professor of History, Dr. Paul R. Henggeler, Associate Professor of History, and Dr. Chad Richardson, Professor of Sociology, for their careful reading and critique of each chapter of the manuscript.

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Mil gracias to all the Mennonite Brethren hermanos/as in south Texas who were willing to invite me into their homes, share their stories, and engage in interesting discussion about Protestant life in south Texas. Thank you very much.

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TABLE 1

South Texas
- Cameron County
- Hidalgo County
- Starr County

Rio Grande Valley, South Texas

Tamaulipas, Mexico

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The Mennonite Brethren (MB) church in south Texas is an anomaly. Mennonite Brethren missionaries were once prominent in Protestant circles in south Texas between 1937 and 1971. They helped, for example, to establish the Rio Grande Bible Institute in Edinburg, Texas. They founded eight congregations, a school in Sullivan City (El Faro), and were well known in the community as “los Menonitas.” Today, however, the Mennonite Brethren church is relegated to several relatively small congregations sprinkled throughout Hidalgo and Starr County. Nevertheless, their continued existence, however small, of the Mexican American MB church in south Texas, says much about its enduring commitment.

This thesis will focus primarily on the missionary work of the Mennonite Brethren church along the south Texas Border from 1937 to 1971. Mennonite Brethren missionary work did not begin until 1937 primarily because Mennonite Brethren were migrating to the United States from Russia during the 1870s. According to studies done by Miriam Warner (1985), Juan Martinez (1988), John H. Redekop (1987), Mennonite Brethren are an ethno-religious minority in the U.S. with Germanic and Russian roots. The fusion of ethnicity and religion define the unique experience of the Mennonite

Brethren, which had its origins in 1860 Russia. Mennonite Brethren are part of the Anabaptist tradition, with roots in the Radical Reformation of the Sixteenth century and today consider themselves “Evangelical-Anabaptists.” Three main historical movements heavily influenced Mennonite Brethren theology: Anabaptism, Lutheran Pietism, and Evangelicalism. At the very core of MB theology is Anabaptism, which emphasizes new birth through baptism, a communal faith, and a literal understanding of the teachings of Jesus. Lutheran Pietism, introduced to the MB by Eduard Wüest, emphasized personal conversion and commitment to God. The evangelical influence stresses the need to make disciples through foreign missions and church polity and organization. Moreover, upon migration to the U.S. in the latter part of the twentieth century, the MB church began to be influenced by the fundamentalist and dispensationalist movements of the mid-1920s. Today the Mennonite Brethren church adheres to many of its evangelical and Anabaptist roots, although it is slowly assimilating its theology to fit mainline denominational traditions such as the Baptist church.

THESIS

Subsequent growth and decline of the MB church in south Texas raises the following problems: what were the factors that led to the growth and decline of the MB church in south Texas? Moreover, what impact did the MB missionaries have on Mexican Americans? These questions have not been dealt with in scholarly literature.

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3 Ibid.
except peripherally in Juan Martinez’s thesis (1988). This study proposes several arguments as to why the MB church was both effective and ineffective in its work in south Texas.

The early church growth of the MB was a result of large investments of both financial and human resources by the Southern District Conference (SDC), limited levels of relief work that missionaries did, the rural nature of the mission, and the establishment of the parochial school *El Faro*. These factors helped stimulate initial interest in the church and helped in gaining a church membership of 220 by 1956. Despite racist attitudes by the MB missionaries, the churches grew as a result of the aforementioned contextual factors. But this growth was based on a paternalistic mission strategy that created unhealthy levels of dependency with the receiving community (south Texas) and the sending community (MB in Kansas), eventually leading to the termination of mission efforts in 1971. The following arguments are based on the institutional factors that led to the eventual decline of the church by 1971.

First, MB missionaries were no different than secular society in their ethnocentric and racist attitudes toward non-white ethnic groups. The MB entered south Texas with little understanding of Mexican culture, claiming that “heathenism is present” among them. Although the MB did face early marginalization in the U.S., they quickly (over a span of 40 years) adjusted to American culture and began aligning themselves with “whiteness” as early as 1935. Some MB scholars argue that the language shift did not

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5 Ibid.
6 Southern District Conference Minutes, October 12-15, 1940, Enid, Oklahoma (Hillsboro: Center for MB Studies Archives).
happen until after World War II, but this thesis argues that the transition from German to English was in process by the mid-1930s when major MB periodicals were beginning to publish entirely in English. After eight years in south Texas, Harry Neufeld, identifying himself Anglo-American, wrote:

> A very direct hindrance to a thorough missionary work among the Latin American race in the United States and especially here on the border is the lack of a clean, united, and holy example of the Anglo-American Protestant life.⁷

The MB had benefited from their whiteness in the U.S., acculturating racist ideologies prevalent during the middle part of the Twentieth century. Mennonite Brethren missionary efforts to Mexican Americans were racist and oppressive, and therefore did not allow for an indigenous Protestant/Anabaptist church to develop in south Texas.

Second, missionaries practiced a paternalistic mission strategy that excluded Mexican Americans from having a voice in defining church goals and vision. This resulted in institutional inflexibility by the MB Conferences on issues of contextual and appropriate Christianity. The lack of institutional flexibility manifested itself in paternalistic mission strategies that prohibited structural involvement (developing indigenous worship styles, administrative practice, and having voice in defining institutional direction) by Mexican Americans.⁸ The ill-timed close of *El Faro* school in 1969, the lack of efficient leadership training, and the exclusion of Mexican American women all were manifestations of this inflexibility. As one local Pastor noted, “They did

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⁸ For consistency, I have chosen to use the term “Mexican American” to describe Americans of Mexican descent, “Mexican” to describe Mexican nationals, and “ethnic Mexicans” to describe both groups simultaneously.
everything while they were here.”¹⁹ The closing of El Faro surprised many in south Texas creating antagonism between leaders as the school did not close solely because of a financial crisis as has been argued. At the core of the closing were disagreements over the purpose of the school. Anglo MB believed that El Faro should be peripheral to the more important mission of planting churches, while Mexican Americans believed that El Faro served a community need that in fact did help stimulate church growth. Internal dissents eventually lead to the premature closing of the school.

Tensions between Mexican Protestants and Catholics are addressed as conversion was not only religious but cultural. The manner in which community rituals (funerals, weddings, and curanderismo) changed as Mexican Americans converted will be critically analyzed. Furthermore, the MB missionaries neglected their strongest support system and potential leadership cadre when they prohibited women from taking on any significant roles of leadership. Mexican American women were relegated to such peripheral roles like working with children, teaching Sunday school, and learning how to stitch Mennonite quilts. Mennonite Brethren doctrine prohibited them from becoming pastors or church leaders, greatly hampering leadership development opportunities for the south Texas church.

It should also be noted here that while the MB church lost large amounts of its membership in the early 1970s, later in the decade Mexican Americans began to restore the church stimulating church growth once again. That story is not dealt with in this thesis, but offers questions for future research.

Within this framework there are a variety of foci and questions raised. For example, how did becoming MB distance Mexican Americans from their culture more so

than converting to Methodism or Pentecostalism? Moreover, did the MB church growth become stagnant primarily because it did not adapt, or enculturate, its theology to fit the Mexican American context? How did becoming MB impact social mobility and political leanings? In understanding the identified problems the preceding questions are analyzed and posed to interview subjects.

PROTESTANT MISSIONS IN TEXAS

The history of Protestant missionaries in the Southwest dates back to the middle part of the nineteenth century when Old School Presbyterians sent missionaries to work among Mexican people. The Baptists and Southern Methodists initiated missionary work among Mexicans in Texas in the 1850s, but that work slowly ended as the Civil War approached and many missionaries went home. Both of these endeavors ended before the start of the Civil War and most long-term missionary efforts in the Southwest did not begin until the latter part of the 1860s. During this time the Methodist Episcopal church sent missionaries to New Mexico and south Texas while the Presbyterian Church, USA dispatched missionaries to parts of New Mexico and Colorado in the 1870s. Protestant missionaries, of varying denominations, carried with them notions of their own cultural and religious superiority as they attempted to convert Catholic Mexicans. Many believed they were agents of change against Mexican superstitions, ignorance, and spiritual blindness.10

Protestant missionaries originally prepared to establish missions in Mexico, especially after the Mexican government adopted a new constitution in 1857 liberalizing

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10 Paul Barton, "In Both Worlds: A History of Hispanic Protestantism in the U.S. Southwest" (Ph.D. diss., Southern Methodist University, 1999).
religion and opening the door to Protestant missionaries to legally proselytize in Mexico. The Presbyterian church encouraged this movement into Mexico, which grew out of the work of missionary Melinda Rankin. Rankin arrived in Brownsville in 1852 and immediately established a school for Mexican girls who wanted to learn English. In 1861 she moved to Matamoros, Mexico, where she participated in planting a Presbyterian church. Rankin was part of a larger cadre of Protestant missionaries that entered post-1857 Mexico, bypassing mission work with Mexican Texans. Prior to 1857 Protestant missionaries did evangelize Mexican Americans because of the religious and cultural connections that many Mexican Americans had with Mexican nationals. Evangelizing Mexican Americans thus carried more importance pre-1857 because of the Mexican laws which prohibited Protestant missionaries from entering Mexico. But after 1857 new arguments had to be conjured up as Mexico was now open to Anglo Protestants eager to quell and convert Mexican Catholics. Walter S. Scott, a leader of Mexican American Presbyterian missions in Texas, argued that if Mexican Texans were not missionized “an old gentleman in Rome will do it for us, and he would be glad if we would let him alone in the matter.” Scott continued by arguing that “the Mexican vote is practically in the hands of the priest and the political demagogue.” Francisco Garcia-Treto and Douglas Brackenridge argue that political power and Americanization possibilities with Mexican Texans provided the impetus for Protestant missionary work in post-1857 Texas.

The early Protestant work done in south Texas came primarily from the Presbyterian Church, US foreign missions committee. The work done in Mexico began to spread north as Mexican Presbyterians established a congregation in Brownsville in

12 Ibid., 14-15.
1877. After brief supervision from the Western Texas Presbytery, the Brownsville church became part of the Presbytery of the State of Tamaulipas in 1884. From there the work spread throughout the Rio Grande Valley. Mexican Presbyterian churches were planted in Harlingen, Mercedes, and San Benito.\textsuperscript{13}

In 1883 the First Mexican Baptist church of Laredo was established; it was the first Spanish-speaking Baptist church in Texas. Shortly thereafter the First Mexican Baptist church of San Antonio was established in 1888.\textsuperscript{14} The Baptist work among Mexican Americans was not as fluid as other denominations. For example, most of the Baptist missionary effort was placed on Mexico with little regard for Mexican Americans. According to Juan Martínez, there was not a similar interest in the Tejano population primarily because of their “former deeds of treachery.”\textsuperscript{15} This trend would change by the early part of the twentieth century as the Mexican Baptist Convention eventually became the largest Mexican American Protestant denomination in Texas.\textsuperscript{16}

The earliest Methodist churches in south Texas were initiated in Rio Grande City and Roma (1876). These churches represent the oldest Protestant work in Starr County and the first Methodist work along the Texas/Mexico border.\textsuperscript{17} The Methodist Episcopal church’s work among Mexican Americans grew out of the work of Alejo Hernández, a recent convert from Mexico, who joined the Methodist church in Corpus Christi in 1870 and was licensed to preach that same year. He eventually returned to Mexico, but today

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 17.
\textsuperscript{14} Barton, 4-5.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 176-79.
\textsuperscript{17} Martinez, 156-160; Alfredo Náñez, History of The Rio Grande Conference of The United Methodist Church, (Bridwell Library: Southern Methodist University, 1980), LRGV Special Collections; W.A. Park, "Protestant Work in Starr County," Unpublished Paper submitted to Pan American College course listing History 6300, LRGV Special Collections.
is known as the first Mexican Methodist minister in the Southwest. By 1900 there were a total of seventeen Mexican Methodist churches in Texas.¹⁸

The origins of the Pentecostal movement among Mexican Americans in Texas began with the evangelistic work of Charles Fox Parham who in 1905 first began preaching his Pentecostal message in Houston, Texas. The first Mexicans were converted to Pentecostalism shortly thereafter. Gastón Espinosa argues that Pentecostal evangelism combined with the massive migration during the Mexican Revolution produced a tremendous openness for Protestantism.¹⁹ One of the earliest Pentecostal evangelists to the Mexican community was Reverend George Joyner. The large carnival-like revivals and the divine healing services contributed much to the conversion of Mexicans in Texas. Around 1912 revival meetings began to be held in south Texas and northern Mexico by John Preston in cities like San Antonio, Brownsville, and Matamoros. In 1916 Henry C. Ball, a Pentecostal evangelist, built the first Mexican Pentecostal church in the United States in Ricardo, Texas. That same year it was ripped apart by a hurricane, which prompted Ball to move the church to Kingsville, Texas. Kingsville then became the center of the Mexican Assemblies of God church in the United States.²⁰

Protestant missionary efforts were slow in developing as missionaries faced cultural resistance from Mexicans who were not readily converted to Protestantism. As Juan Martínez writes, “By the end of the nineteenth century Latino Protestants

¹⁸ Martínez, 157-161.
²⁰ Ibid., 150-156.
constituted less than five percent of the total Latino population in the Southwest.”

Much of the growth for Mexican Protestants happened in the early part of the twentieth century amplified by economic and social circumstances that Mexicans faced during this period. There are varying levels of similarity between missionary strategies among different denominations, but consistent throughout was the paternalistic and ethnocentric mission strategy of Protestants. Much of the success of missionaries came as a result of Mexican Americans themselves planting churches and transforming Protestant theology to fit within a Mexican cultural context. This is most evident in the work of the Presbyterians, whose first Mexican American churches were planted by Mexican nationals, and the Methodists and Pentecostals who saw their churches grow once they allowed Mexican Americans to carry on the mission of their respective denominations. This differs greatly from the mission strategy utilized by the Mennonite Brethren which did not allow for an organic MB church to develop in south Texas.

MENNONITE BRETHREN CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS HISTORY

In understanding and identifying the Mennonite Brethren missionaries several problems arise. For example, the Mennonite Brethren church does not easily fit under the Protestant rubric; instead the MB have their roots in Anabaptist tradition which originated during the Radical Reformation of the Sixteenth century.

22 Espinosa, 150-155.
In their theology of non-resistance, pacifism, and non-participation in governmental entities they differ from their Protestant counterparts. Historians place the beginning of the Protestant Reformation in 1517 when Martin Luther posted his famous Ninety-Five Theses at Wittenberg University in Germany. Luther advocated for reform of church politics, economics, and other social factors that, according to Luther, were leading the Christian church toward ecclesiastical ruin. Luther's theses were not without context. Throughout the medieval period, church leaders advocated for an ecclesiastical reform that resembled the pre-Constantinian Jesus movement. But it was not until Luther posted his theses that real institutional change occurred in the church on a broad scale. Luther's theses challenged church hierarchy and became associated with Protest, which later translated into calling the reformers Protestants. Although the Protestants challenged many aspects of church corruption during this period, there were some who felt that Luther and other reformers did not go far enough. This sparked the Radical Reformation, which began around 1525. These new radical reformers advocated re-baptizing adult believers, or ana-baptizing them; they believed in what they termed the Priesthood of all Believers, which challenged church hierarchy allowing all to be ministers instead of a select few. Anabaptists argued for a more literal reading of the Bible, especially chapters five, six, and seven of the Gospel of Matthew which outline the ethic of non-violence, sharing of possessions, and the importance of conversion from a life without God to a life led by God.

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23 Scholars such as Walter Klaassan (Anabaptism: Neither Catholic nor Protestant) and Robert Friedmann (The Theology of Anabaptism) argue that Anabaptists do not fit within the traditional Protestant movement, but instead constitute an alternative to both Catholicism and Protestantism.


25 These reformers include Benedict of Nursia who called for a spiritual reformation in the 6th century. Also, around the same time period Gregory the Great called for liturgical reformation. There would of course be more reforms that led into the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, but no reform movement ever caught any significant hold over the church until Luther posted his theses.
Anabaptists advocated a separation from governmental participation and, heavily influenced by the writings of Menno Simons, non-participation in military service. Early Anabaptists were a unique, almost sectarian, society in the late Sixteenth century, one that advocated equality, mutual sharing, spirituality resembling the early church, and voluntary participation. Historian Richard Kyle argues that early Anabaptists were not fully a sect-type in the traditional understanding, but they did have elements of sectarianism in that they were voluntary, they grew out of a protest movement, and they often had an unrealistic view of their own piety. This point is important to this thesis because it places the Mennonite Brethren, who were birthed out of this movement, within a more complex category that defies a trivial understanding of the Protestant/Catholic dichotomy.

In 1530 a new movement was born when Menno Simons left the Catholic church after being influenced through a segment of the Waldensians, a movement within Anabaptism. They believed that military service, the taking of oaths, and infant baptism were contrary to what the Christian Bible taught. Those who followed Menno’s teachings and writings eventually came to be known as the Mennonites. The story of the Mennonites in Europe is long and complex and can not be dealt with fully in this thesis. But it is important to note that Mennonites were a nomadic people who migrated from Holland and the Netherlands to Prussia, and eventually Russia where they were promised religious freedom in 1786. Upon arrival in Russia in 1789, Mennonites primarily settled in two colonies: the Chortitza and Molotschna. Throughout their various patterns

of migration, Mennonites developed a specific culture which largely identified with their Germanic-Russian roots. Because of their unique theological belief system, Mennonites were persecuted in Europe and many suffered horrific deaths and lived in constant fear.29

Throughout the brief period of Mennonite history there had been factions within the movement but nothing severely threatened their religious identity until 1860. This marked the beginning of the Mennonite Brethren church in Russia. According to one of its founding members, Jacob Bekker, "In the spring of 1859, [Joseph] Hottman, the displaced church official, called together in order to discuss the decadent condition of the [Mennonite] church."30 Some members of the Mennonite church in Russia, specifically those of the Molotschna Colony, began to feel that if they continued to associate with a church that was becoming full of "blasphemers, drunkards, and souls without repent, they prostituted against God."31

The Mennonite Brethren (MB), as they came to be called, advocated a spiritual awakening and a complete disassociation from Mennonites who had lost their religious fervor. The evangelist Edward Wüest, a Lutheran Pietist from Germany who in 1845 became an influential voice among Mennonites in the village of Gnadenfeld, played a key role in defining Mennonite Brethren theology. Wüest's strong emphasis on personal salvation and missions had a heavy influence on the newly organized Mennonite Brethren. Wüest's influence, in concert with German Baptists who helped define evangelism, theology, liturgy and leadership, helped define a new direction in Mennonite Anabaptist identity.32 Even though MB held to the doctrine of Menno Simons, they

29 Ibid., 5-7.
30 Ibid., 31.
31 Ibid., 37.
32 Kyle, 69.
acknowledged more of an emphasis on missions and personal conversion. In this respect they broke from the Mennonite church and began their own denominational movement. Richard Kyle writes:

The Mennonite Brethren movement was literally born in a spirit of missions, and its subsequent missionary zeal has helped break the traditional Mennonite isolationist spirit. Pietism, in fact, did much to infuse the Mennonite Brethren with the passion for missions.33

The fusion of traditional Baptist and Mennonite Anabaptist theology helped shape MB ideology in Russia and formulated much of their zeal for missions.

Mennonite Brethren began migrating from Russia to the U.S. for social and religious reasons during the latter part of the Nineteenth century. The Russian government required that Mennonites no longer live isolated lives and instead had to participate in full assimilation into Russian society. Moreover, the Russian government relinquished the non-military service privilege it had bestowed the Mennonites, requiring them to serve. These two factors most affected life for Mennonites and thus they decided to migrate to the U.S.34 Upon arrival in North America, most settled in Canada or the central part of the U.S., mainly Nebraska and Kansas. Many were attracted to the U.S., even though land was more expensive than in Canada, because lands were considered more fertile in the U.S. during the 1870s.

During the early part of the twentieth century MB were subject to acculturation patterns similar to other white ethnics throughout the country. MB cultural ideas of separatism, theology, and ethnic identity were challenged in the U.S. through rapid rates

33 Ibid., 68. Pietism, as defined by Ernst Troeltsch in Kyle’s research, “applies to all movements or sects that emphasize personal religious experience because of the failure of the established ecclesiastical program.” Kyle, 65.

34 Paul Toews and Kevin Enns-Rempel, For Everything a Season: Mennonite Brethren in North America 1874-2002 (Fresno: Historical Commission, 2002).
of industrialization, commercialization, and the booming economy of the early and mid-1920s. World War I played an important role in accelerating the acculturation process as MB participation in the war, despite their pacifist beliefs, introduced them to ethnic diversity. Moreover, MB began to engage in the political process in Kansas as early as 1910, contradicting their Anabaptist beliefs of non-governmental participation. In terms of racial identity, the "whiteness" of the MB allowed them to benefit from the cultural economy built around racism in the U.S. The MB arrived in the U.S. with the little wealth they had accumulated in Russia, but soon benefited nicely from the general prosperity of the U.S., especially during the 1920s. In addition to the MB inclination for good farming and frugality, the social construction of whiteness allowed them to establish and enrich themselves on the lands appropriated from Native Americans.

The idea of whiteness formulated around immigration law that determined who could have the privilege of living in the U.S. and how they would be viewed by the larger culture. In identifying the MB in a broader context, it is helpful to compare them to other white ethnics who have fit into the malleable definition of whiteness. Richard Delgado writes,

"Early in our history Irish, Jews, and Italians were considered non-white—that is, on a par with African Americans. Over time, they earned the prerogatives and social standing of whites by joining labor unions, by swearing fealty to the Democratic Party, and by acquiring wealth. Whiteness, it turns out, is not only valuable, it is shifting and malleable."  

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36 Kyle, 108.
38 Ibid., 77.
The same can be said of the MB who began to acquire wealth, adopt dominant cultural standards, and lose their primary language because of their whiteness. For example, when Harry and Sarah Neufeld arrived in Los Ebanos, TX., in 1937, they represented the first bilingual (low-German/English) and bicultural generation of MB immigrants. By 1935 most MB families had ceased to speak German regularly in their homes and new denominational periodicals, such as *The Christian Leader*, began to cater to an increasingly English-only audience. Earlier missionary efforts consisted of ethnic subgroups because of a lack of knowledge of other cultures and languages. Although they began work at the Post Oak Mission in Oklahoma among both Native Americans and Mexicans, their biggest commitment to Home Missions (missionary efforts within the U.S.) began with their work in south Texas. Furthermore, when Harry and Sarah Neufeld left their ethnic enclave in central Kansas and moved to south Texas they no longer identified with their ethnic heritage instead opting for the assimilationist terms “Anglo-American” or “white.”39 Martínez (1988) adds that many MB missionaries never made an effort to learn Spanish because they assumed that the Mexican population would eventually assimilate just as they had assimilated American culture. This reluctance is relevant because it affected the perceptions they had about the future assimilation of Mexican Americans.40

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39 Southern District Conference Minutes, October 14-17, 1939, Ebenfeld, KS. (Hillsboro: Center for MB Studies Archives); Harry Neufeld, *Eight Years Among Latin Americans*, 1947.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The history of Mexican American Protestants, or los Protestantes, has only recently received attention by historians and sociologists. Recent studies have dealt with not only how Anglo Protestantism has served as a vehicle for assimilation, but also how Mexican Americans have assimilated Protestantism to fit their cultural heritage. Although secondary sources are limited in this field, the few dissertations and theses provide an adequate framework for the history of Mexican American Protestants. This section is divided up into two parts. The first part examines the representative literature of Mexican American Protestants in the Southwest, and the second part examines the literature of the Mennonite Brethren in relation to their history and identity.

Much of the research that has been conducted on Protestant missionaries in the Southwest has focused on the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Of particular importance to the literature is Randi Walker’s dissertation entitled Protestantism in the Sangre de Cristos: Factors in the Growth and Decline of the Hispanic Protestant Churches in Northern New Mexico and Southern Colorado, 1850-1920 (1983). Walker examines several denominations including the Methodists, Presbyterians, United Brethren in Christ, and Baptists. Walker’s work is comparative in nature and examined in-depth the religious context in which Anglo Protestants developed their missionary zeal. The study is not limited to New Mexico and Colorado; it includes the entire Southwest, arguing that Anglo Protestants failed to adequately enculturate their religious and cultural beliefs with the Mexican population.

Juan Martínez’s dissertation entitled Origins and Development of Protestantism among Latinos in the Southwestern United States, 1836-1900 (1996), analyzes
missionary efforts post-Civil War and the subculture that developed as Latinos in the
Southwest transformed Anglo Protestantism to fit their cultural context. Like Walker,
Martínez examines several denominations and provides comparative data that helps in
understanding the success and failures of different denominations in the Southwest.

Paul Barton’s dissertation entitled *In Both Worlds: A History of Hispanic
Protestantism in the United States Southwest* (1999), examines specifically the history of
the Rio Grande Annual Conference, which is primarily Mexican American, of the United
Methodist church. Barton argues that Anglo Protestantism and Mexican American
culture have blended to the extent that a distinct form of Mexican American
Protestantism has developed, one which synthesizes Anglo religion and faith with
Mexican American culture and values.

The major problem with these dissertations is that they were written by
religious scholars and not historians. This did not hinder the quality of historical work
that was done, but in the manner that the research serves a missiological function it does
hinder its broader use.

One exception is Gastón Espinosa’s dissertation entitled *Borderland Religion:
Los Angeles and the Origins of the Latino Pentecostal Movement in the U.S., Mexico, and
Puerto Rico, 1900-1945*, published in 1999. Espinosa takes an historical approach in
analyzing Latino Pentecostals and argues that the key ingredients to the shift from
Catholicism to Pentecostalism for Latinos had much to do with Pentecostalism’s
egalitarian message, divine healing, personal salvation, women in the ministry, and the
strategy of planting self-governing churches. This pattern is critical because it deviated
from traditional Protestant mission work and provided a cultural space for Latinos who
were otherwise segregated and marginalized in the Southwest. Although Espinosa does a thorough job of including the different denominations and sects that did missions in the Southwest, overlooked was the mission work of the Mennonite and Mennonite Brethren church in south Texas and Central California.

Several books and articles are important as well. The work of John and Jean Comaroff, "Christianity and Colonialism in South Africa" (1986), is important for comparative reasons. Their analysis centers on the interplays of religion and imperialism in South Africa during the nineteenth century arguing that missionaries did not succeed in planting strong black churches, but instead facilitated the community’s integration into a capitalistic and racist society. The Comaroff analysis of cultural interplay and resistance are important because they deal with many aspects of missionization that are dealt with in this research. The work of Francisco Garcia-Treto and Douglas Brackenridge entitled *Iglesia Presbiteriana*, documents the complete history of Mexican American Presbyterians in the Southwest. Similarly, the work of Alfredo Nañez entitled *Historia de la Conferencia Rio Grande de la Iglesia Metodista Unida*, includes the history of Mexican American Methodists dating back to the nineteenth century and documents their subsequent development. Of particular importance in this context is a scholarly article by Larry L. Hunt entitled “Religion and Secular Status among Hispanics in the United States: Catholicism and the Varieties of Hispanic Protestantism” (2000). It argues that Hispanic Protestants have a higher religious involvement than Hispanic Catholics. This study is important because it investigates secular status levels between Hispanic Protestants and Catholics.
MB historians have largely ignored the history of the Mexican American MB church. Marvin Kroeker in his study on Mennonites and Comanches in Oklahoma writes that “[MB] church historians tend to focus on the larger mission fields in India, China, and Africa” than on domestic mission efforts. It is not completely clear why this is the case, but it does highlight the need for a critical review of domestic mission efforts.

The only scholarly writing devoted specifically to the missionary efforts of the MB among Hispanics is Juan Martínez’s thesis entitled *Ministry among United States Hispanics by an Ethno-Religious Minority: A Mennonite Brethren Case Study* (1988). The study is focused on two geographic areas where MB initiated home missionary efforts among Hispanics: Texas and California. Central to Martínez’s thesis is the argument that MB ethnic identity and maintenance hindered missionary work among the Hispanic community. The argument is sound, but it lacks an analysis of how the Mexican American community was influenced by MB racism and how this affected church growth and decline patterns.

With relation to MB ethnic identity, two studies are important in documenting the history. First, Miriam Warner’s dissertation entitled *Mennonite Brethren: The Maintenance of Continuity in a Religious Ethnic Group* (1986), argues that MB have indeed maintained their ethnic identity in the midst of rapid social change since their initial migration in the 1870s. Second, John H. Redekop’s book *A People Apart: Ethnicity and the Mennonite Brethren* (1987), argues that the fusion between ethnicity and religion has become problematic because it has placed ethnicity above theology. Redekop acknowledges that MB are an ethno-religious group, but advocates for a shift in how the MB address issues of religion and ethnicity. While the study has sparked much
debate within the MB church, it was written as religious argument without seriously considering social science theory and broader socio-historical concerns. Both the Warner and Redekop works are limited to understanding the benefit and complexity of MB identity, but fail to examine what that has meant for other ethnic/racial groups that the MB have missionized.

Anna Esau’s *What God Has Done: The Story of the Latin American Mennonite Brethren Conference* (1987) remains the only published work on the MB in south Texas. Esau, a former missionary herself, narrates the history of MB missionaries in south Texas without much analytical insight. The book is written solely from the perspective of an individual missionary experience and therefore is biased in its approach. The book does serve a useful purpose in its inclusion of short vignettes on each MB church in south Texas.

Scholarly articles that address MB missionary endeavors include Conrad Oswalt’s “African Americans in North Carolina: A Symbiotic Relationship” (1994). Oswalt argues that African American MB have successfully enculturated MB faith and practice while maintaining their cultural identity. This essay is rather problematic, however, because it fails to address the racism of MB missionaries among the African American population of North Carolina. Similarly, Paul Hiebert’s work entitled “Ethnicity and Evangelism in the Mennonite Brethren Church” (1987), analyzes missionary efforts and the hindrance that MB ethnicity has had on those efforts.
JUSTIFICATION/SIGNIFICANCE OF TOPIC

According to recent research done by the Hispanic Churches in American Public Life (HCAPL), of the almost 39 million Latinos in the U.S., 8.1 million (23 percent) identify themselves as Protestants. A large percentage of Latinos still identify as Roman Catholic. Although these numbers remain stable due to continued immigration, the study concluded that second and third generation Latinos are more likely to transfer allegiance to the Protestant church.41

Of the studies that have reviewed the origins and development of Protestantism among Mexican Americans, none have dealt with the Rio Grande Valley community exclusively, making this research an important addition to the existing record. This thesis analyzes the nature of MB racism and missionary strategy as compared to other Protestant groups in south Texas. Moreover, this thesis investigates the level of unhealthy dependency that formed as a direct result of an MB mission strategy that remained rigid and oppressive despite continued calls for change. It contends that the intersections between MB racism, institutional rigidity, and the specific manifestations of these factors undermined MB church growth in south Texas.

PROCEDURE/METHODS

Research draws heavily from primary sources from the Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies located in Hillsboro, Kansas, and Fresno, California. Along with documents gathered at the archives, interviews from community members in La Grulla, Garciasville, Mission, and Edinburg, Texas, provide a wide range of perspectives that are

both written and oral. Secondary literature is used primarily to document early Mennonite Brethren History beginning in Russia in the Nineteenth century and the history of Protestant missions in the Southwest. A number of theses, dissertations, and journal articles are useful as well. Addressing this problem calls for a syncretism of history, religion, and sociology. Analyzing and understanding the data requires that a variety of disciplines be used to understand the complex motivations of history.

Church Growth Theory attempts to attach both contextual and institutional theoretical frameworks in order to understand the dynamics of church growth and decline. Contextual factors are external to the specific church yet determine patterns in decline and growth. For example, contextual factors represent birth rates in a community, economic development, and the racial and ethnic demographics of a community. All contribute in some way to the relative health of a church, especially if the entity planting the church is able to adjust its institutional culture to the surrounding context. Institutional factors, religious sociologist Kenneth Inskeep argues, represent the organizational culture of a denomination. Organizational culture represents, among other things, theology, legalisms, church hierarchy and polity. Church Growth Theory is applied to the south Texas context in order to better understand what the factors were in church growth and decline and if they were primarily contextual or institutional in nature.

Relationships across racial and ethnic lines carry specific social structures that historically have given privilege and power to those of European descent or those with the lightest phenotype. When groups of different racial and ethnic backgrounds come together there is both the potential for disaster and for appreciation. The Contact

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Hypothesis, first introduced by sociologist G.W. Allport in 1954, argues that when groups of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds come together under conditions of equality of status (ranking), cooperation (division of labor), close interaction (social distance), and cultural boundaries, then relationships are mutual and positive for both groups.43 “Contact, particularly close and sustained contact,” argued sociologists Christopher Ellison and Daniel Powers, “with members of different racial and ethnic groups promotes positive, tolerant attitudes toward those groups.”44 The Contact Hypothesis is a broad generalization that relies heavily on certain aspects of social structure to produce a positive correlation.

This Hypothesis is used to understand social relationships between Anglo MB and Mexican Americans on both an individual and systemic level. This research argues that structural variables critical to relationships were not in place and even though individual relationships between both groups were at times benign, the systemic relationship remained inherently paternalistic and racist.

Racism is defined as an “institutionalized system of economic, political, social, and cultural relations that ensures that one racial group has and maintains power and privilege over all others in all aspects of life.”45 Racism manipulates power in society

and allows those of European descent to maintain power and privilege over non-white people serving to "create or reproduce structures of domination."\(^{46}\) A major focus of this thesis is the manner in which racial formation played a role in determining church growth and decline. "Racial formation takes seriously the complexity of race," argues Teresa Chávez Sauceda, "as it interacts with economic structures, gender difference, and changing political environments."\(^{47}\) A direct manifestation of racism, specifically within communities of color, is the internalization of racist oppression. Although not thoroughly discussed in this research, it is used sparingly as an exploratory effort to understand the cultural dynamics at play within the Mexican American community. Internalized Racism is the process by which Latinos (or other People of Color) internalize and devalue their own culture while believing in the dominant culture as the human standard.\(^{48}\) Internalized racism undermines political and community action within communities of color and damages the community's sense of identity. This ties in well with how internalized racism, as a manifestation of racism, impacted MB church development in south Texas. From initial interviews it became evident that some Mexican Americans who converted to Mennonitism became apolitical, despite gross injustice against south Texas communities, and they came to reject much of their own cultural heritage as inherently evil. It can be assumed that Mexican Americans internalized many of the


negative sentiments shared by MB missionaries. Such a hypothesis serves well as a catalyst for future research in the post-1971 MB church in south Texas.

SUMMARY OF CHAPTERS

The chapters are designated with specific time periods between 1936 and 1971 with an introduction to MB identity and Protestant missions in Texas that precedes 1936. The first chapter serves as an introduction to both MB cultural and religious history and Protestant missions in Texas in the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth century. MB cultural and religious history is examined with regards to their European ancestry, migration, and subsequent acculturation patterns in North America pre-1936. The MB church embodies a specific cultural and religious heritage that to a limited extent deviates from the Protestant-Catholic dichotomy. The work of Protestant missionaries (Baptist, Presbyterian, Methodist, Pentecostal) is briefly examined as well as the strategies that led to exponential growth in the early part of the twentieth century. Protestant missionaries carried with them both a level of cultural and religious superiority that resulted in paternalistic relationships with the Mexican community. Much of their success, however, hinged on their work in Northern Mexico which in many instances produced Mexican missionaries that planted Protestant churches in south Texas.

Chapter 2 examines Mennonite Brethren missions in south Texas from 1936 to 1956. The MB initiated missionary work along the Texas/Mexico border at the request of the Home Missions Committee of the Southern District Conference in 1936.49 The origins and development of the work are discussed along with a thorough analysis of MB

49 "The Recommendations from the Home Missions Committee," Southern District Conference Minutes, October 24-28, 1936, Fairview, Oklahoma; The Southern District Conference, organized in 1910, is the governing body of MB churches in the South Central region of the United States.
missiology and its impact on the south Texas community. MB missionaries received
staunch resistance from the Catholic hierarchy, which until the arrival of the MB
missionaries was almost non-existent in the small village of Los Ebanos, Texas.50

Chapter 3 covers the time period from 1957 to 1971. This period signaled the
apex and eventual decline of the Mennonite Brethren church in south Texas. Both
chapters 2 and 3 analyze the factors that contributed to the growth and decline of MB
churches in south Texas.

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Chapter 4 takes a theoretical approach in understanding cultural dynamics and
their role in the formation of MB churches in south Texas. Church Growth Theory and
the Contact Hypothesis are applied and the early writings of Harry Neufeld are critically analyzed. Important to this chapter are the cultural inter-plays between the MB and Mexican Americans. The cultural dislocation that resulted as a consequence of conversion from Catholicism to Protestantism deeply impacted community self-perceptions and transformed, at least superficially, cultural rituals such as weddings,

funerals, and baptisms for new MB converts. These frameworks are helpful in placing
the history within a particular context and helps in understanding how culture and contact
manifested themselves in the mission work. Chapter 5 summarizes the previous chapters,
places the mission in broader context, presents the conclusions of this thesis, and
provides questions for further consideration.
Since the inception of the Mennonite Brethren church in 1860, evangelistic missions have been central to MB identity and theology. Church missions have consistently received stronger financial support, thematic precedence at annual conferences and high rates of participation from MB constituency. The centrality of missions has produced a massive demographic shift in MB church membership. At the beginning of the twentieth century most all MB resided in North America or Russia. In 2002, MB church membership is growing fastest in Africa, Asia, and Latin America where two-thirds of its global membership reside. This growth has happened despite an MB mission program that, according to historian J.B. Toews, has mirrored a colonial system of hierarchical and paternalistic mission strategies. Amalgamating colonial prerogatives with mission strategies are not unique to the MB, but representative of modern Christian missions in general. MB mission strategies, however, have created unparalleled growth in the third world while being a critical factor in the eventual decline
of the MB church in south Texas. It is in this context that the mission to plant churches and “save the lost” in south Texas was established in 1937.¹

This chapter examines the origins and development of MB missions in south Texas from 1937 to 1956. The period represents the establishment of the evangelistic mission in Los Ebanos and of the parochial school, *El Faro* (The Beacon), in nearby Sullivan City. Mission stations were also established in the nearby villages of Chihuahua and La Grulla during this period. This mission represented for the MB the first mission outside of the work they initiated in the late nineteenth century in Lawton, Oklahoma among Native American and Mexican people. Furthermore, the chapter examines the context of MB assimilation patterns during the early part of the twentieth century and the racist stereotypes of MB missionaries. Racism was inherently a part of the American ethos during this particular period of history, creating an oppressive and paternalistic relationship that hindered MB missionary work throughout its existence in south Texas. But despite the fact that MB missionaries knew almost nothing about the south Texas community, had no Spanish language skills, and had ethnocentric feelings toward Mexican Americans, the mission grew and expanded to reach a total membership of 220 by 1956.² The factors leading to MB church growth in south Texas are examined within the context MB perceptions of Mexican American religiosity and culture.

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The mid-1930s were significant for a number of reasons to the Mennonite Brethren. First, home missions were launched for the first time in a region outside the Midwest, which had established mission work among Native Americans since 1896. In 1935 A.J. Becker, an MB missionary at the Post Oak Indian Mission in Oklahoma, argued that the Conference should invest funds in a mission to Mexicans in that area. Fifty dollars were subsequently given to the Mexican mission and the same amount was given in 1936 as the need continued. The mission in Oklahoma had been directed almost entirely to Native Americans, but there were Mexicans and blacks, who lived among them and were taken in by many of the local tribes. From the work in Oklahoma grew the interest in missions to Mexicans in other regions of the country. The work among the Native American and Mexican population provided the confidence the MB needed to venture to other areas with other ethnic groups.

Second, acculturation patterns began to speed up. Mennonite historian James Juhnke calls 1935 the “critical year” of language transition in MB communities. By 1935 most MB families began to transition from German to English in the home. While it took longer for churches to make the complete transition, historians have noted that the onset of World War II helped accelerate the transition in the church as members did not

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5 Kroeker, 49.
6 Ibid.
want to be associated with Hitler’s Germany. Furthermore, in 1935 the Zionsbote (the German language MB newspaper) received approval from the Southern District Conference (SDC) to print at least two pages in English. This eventually led to the introduction of the Christian Leader (the English language MB newspaper). By 1937 the minutes taken at SDC sessions were written almost entirely in English, slowly phasing out the German language from formal sessions.

Third, as assimilation patterns accelerated social mobility began to improve and political associations became increasingly conservative. Evangelists like D.L Moody and C.I. Scofield, who advocated a fundamentalist theology, heavily influenced MB theology. These shifts brought the MB into the social mainstream as ethnic loyalties became increasingly peripheral.

The context and culture of MB racism in south Texas was paradoxically inclusive of some Mexican Americans, but exclusive of others not working toward an assimilated resemblance of whiteness. Racism served the MB missionaries in maintaining continued power and control of the mission work. Racism not only served to demean and belittle Mexican Americans, but helped maintain white power for the MB as newly assimilated Americans. In this sense, racism served as the “white scourge,” as historian Neil Foley noted, serving not only as a biologically superior racial status but as a manipulated social

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8 Peggy Goertzen, interview with author, written notes, 10 December 2003, Hillsboro, Kansas.
11 Harms, 64.
and economic power source that served to maintain power and privilege solely with those
colored with a particular hue of whiteness.\textsuperscript{12}

Racism is defined as an “institutionalized system of economic, political, social,
and cultural relations that ensures that one racial group has and maintains power and
privilege over all others in all aspects of life.”\textsuperscript{13} The development of whiteness among
the MB served them as a valid form of social mobility during the early part of the
twentieth century. The MB were part of an evolving Middle West that, as historian Jon
Gjerde noted, held on to their strong ethnic ties until the beginning of World War I when
the forces of assimilation fostered homogenous Americanization.\textsuperscript{14} The first missionaries
sent to south Texas represented the generation that completed the assimilation cycle for
the MB. Their identity development was formulated by a racist ethos in Middle America
that increasingly equated whiteness with being American.\textsuperscript{15}

There are few primary documents that deal specifically with the Mennonite
Brethren and whiteness, but the existing sources speak much to the manner in which MB
missionaries self-identified as “white” or “Anglo American” and the form in which they
increasingly separated themselves from their ethnic heritage. As missionaries in south
Texas they portrayed themselves as full Americans and expected Mexican Americans to
follow similar patterns.\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{12} Neil Foley, \textit{The White Scourge: Mexicans, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Texas Cotton Culture} (Berkeley:
University of California Press, 1997); Tobin Miller Shearer, interview with author, email, 23 December
2003, Edinburg, Texas.
\textsuperscript{13} Louise Derman-Spaiks and Carol Brunson Phillips, \textit{Teaching/Learning Anti-Racism: A Developmental
\textsuperscript{14} Jon Gjerde, \textit{The Minds of the West: Ethnocultural Evolution in the Rural Middle West, 1830-1917}
\textsuperscript{15} Martinez, “Ministry Among United States Hispanics by an Ethno-Religious Minority,” 90-91; Gjerde,
426.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid; Harry Neufeld, \textit{Eight Years Among the Latin Americans}, 1945.
ORIGINS OF MB WORK IN SOUTH TEXAS

Since its inception in 1910, the annual Southern District Conference (SDC) of the MB church served largely as a gathering place for the membership to discuss Conference business, Home and Foreign missions, and to gather for worship services.17 At their annual meeting in 1936, the Home Mission Committee of the SDC recommended that "a work among the Mexicans" be initiated in south Texas and allocating $500 dollars to begin the work. The recommendation to do mission work came from MB people who had settled in Premont, Texas in 1927. Specifically P.E. Penner, from Premont, and H.W. Lohrenz who, at the 1936 conference, called attention to the possibilities of mission work among Mexicans in both Oklahoma and Texas. H.W. Lohrenz was secretary of the Foreign Missions Committee and, interestingly enough, argued that missionaries in Texas and Oklahoma should work at employing local people to do the work of planting churches.18 The committee also recommended that Harry Neufeld, an MB evangelist at the time, take up the work and become the first extension worker to south Texas.19

During his undergraduate years at Tabor College (an MB college) in Hillsboro, Kansas, Neufeld had been designated as an evangelist for the SDC. Born on May 7, 1902 in Fairview, Oklahoma, Neufeld shaped his formative years around becoming a missionary. After graduating from the Bible Institute of Los Angeles (BIOLA) in 1922, he worked at reorganizing a Japanese mission station in Reedley, California.20 In 1926 he moved to Hillsboro, Kansas to attend Tabor College and participated as an evangelist with area MB churches. While in school at Tabor, he met and married Sarah Kornelson

17 Harms, 43.
in 1932 and taught school for the first three years of their marriage.\textsuperscript{21} As early as 1927, Neufeld participated in evangelistic meetings in Premont, Texas, at the request of several MB people who had settled the area.\textsuperscript{22} The desire to do mission work with Mexican people came, according to his own testimony, from a dream he had in 1924. He dreamed that he was preaching to a large group of Roman Catholics and that “he was imprisoned, but many souls were saved.”\textsuperscript{23} Not much is known about the degree of contact that Neufeld had with Mexican Americans growing up in California, but there was probably enough interaction for him to “have a special love for Mexican people around him.”\textsuperscript{24}

In 1937 Harry and Sarah Neufeld reported that they had surveyed the entire Texas/Mexico border for an appropriate location to establish the new mission.\textsuperscript{25} Upon arriving in Edinburg, the Neufelds stopped at the parsonage of the First Baptist church where they asked the local Anglo pastor to tell them about the Rio Grande Valley and if any Mexicans lived in Edinburg.\textsuperscript{26} The pastor responded by stating that he was happy they had come to help in “this great work...But if you people have decided to go to the border towns and villages, let me tell you one thing: you will appear to those people as foreign devils.”\textsuperscript{27}

The survey of the border, or the “hunt” as Neufeld called it, went from the middle part of the Rio Grande Valley in Edinburg to the southeast in Brownsville and as far

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{22} Harms, 240; According to Anna Esau and Orlando Harms several MB families, mostly from Corn, Oklahoma, had moved to Premont in 1927. H.H. Flaming and P.E. Penner were instrumental in beginning the MB church in Premont, which eventually led to the mission work in the Rio Grande Valley.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{25} Southern District Conference Minutes, Oct. 23-26, 1937, Hillsboro, Kansas (Hillsboro: Center for MB Studies Archives).
\textsuperscript{26} Harry Neufeld, \textit{Eight Years Among the Latin Americans}, 10-11.
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid.
northwest as El Paso. The documents do not provide much information about the survey or how exactly they went about choosing where they would establish the mission. In his writings, Neufeld stated that the reason the villages in the western half of the Rio Grande Valley were chosen was because “up till that time [this area] had never been truly evangelized or brought to a knowledge of the true salvation of Christ Jesus.”

Neufeld’s statement is not entirely accurate. Methodists had indeed begun a mission by this point in the small village of Garciasville and had been active in Rio Grande City and Roma since the latter part of the nineteenth century. There were also Mexican Methodists living in Los Ebanos before the Neufelds arrived. Indeed, it was a Methodist, Miguel Carrizales, who first allowed Neufeld to use an old storage space to hold his first evangelical meetings.

The decision to establish the mission in Los Ebanos probably had more to do with the receptiveness of local people to the message Neufeld presented, even though he could not speak a word of Spanish. As Ricardo Peña recalled, “Brother Neufeld felt that after going to all the surrounding villages, the most receptive place was Los Ebanos.” There was really not much else to do in Los Ebanos in 1937 and the allure of a white man and woman performing with a guitar, singing church hymns, and drawing on a chalkboard as a way to communicate their message, was too appealing for some to resist. The only Anglos in the area lived in Sullivan City, just north of Los Ebanos, where oil wells developed in the mid-1930s. There was almost no interaction between Anglos and

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28 Ibid., 11-16.
30 Anna Esau, 13-18.
Mexicans in this area, making the Neufeld visit an oddity and curiosity that many in Los Ebanos could not resist.\textsuperscript{32}

Five months after being in Los Ebanos, Neufeld reported that seventeen people attended the first Sunday School program and that on the second week, forty-nine people attended despite what he called, "a people over whom the enemy rules with all his strength."\textsuperscript{33} The reception that Neufeld received from the Catholic community was mixed. Many people, including the Catholic church, from Los Ebanos tried to run Neufeld out of the village. Several times the local priest tried to disrupt the meetings that Neufeld conducted by yelling to the people, "All the Catholics that are there, get out of there and come this way. You don't belong there."\textsuperscript{34} The resistance that came from young Mexican Americans in Los Ebanos toward Neufeld was creative and intentionally non-violent, but carried a message. Some young people carried firecrackers with them to the meetings and popped them while Neufeld strung his "Hawaiian" guitar, making him have to stop in frustration. Someone had apparently encouraged children to start playing baseball in a field adjacent to where Neufeld preached and call out to people to play in the games instead of attending the meeting. The Catholic church also put on several processions, involving almost the entire community, at the time Neufeld wanted to begin his meeting. The picture of the \textit{Virgen de Guadalupe} and of a patron saint was paraded out in front as followers chanted prayers and sang hymns passing directly in front of the location of the evangelical meetings. The Catholic church, fearing they would lose membership to the missionaries, told people in Los Ebanos that they should "drive out

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{33} Harry Neufeld, Article published in \textit{Zionsbote}, May 25, 1938, Translated from German by Tina Hartman.
\textsuperscript{34} Ricardo Peña, interview with author. 15 July 2003.
the missionary and his family, that [missionaries] were of the devil and had the doctrine of the devil.”

In their first year of missionary work, the Neufelds lived in Mission, Texas, (east of Los Ebanos). Driving in and out of Los Ebanos, the Neufelds feared that Mexicans were plotting disruptive and hurtful tactics against them and their work while they were gone. The Neufelds complained of the girl’s clubs of the local Catholic church who were going from house to house warning people to ignore the missionaries. They were also mindful of the priest who would signal the Neufelds’ arrival by driving around town honking his horn warning people.

Neufeld appeared rather unfazed by all the distractions. “This opposition shows what a grip the Roman Church has on this [sic] benighted people,” he commented. Misunderstandings between Catholics and the MB missionaries abounded as both sides blamed the other for deceiving the people of Los Ebanos. Neufeld complained that Catholics had built up five new churches, which he called “silent sentinels by which [the Catholic Church] holds and continues to deceive the people [in Los Ebanos].” He held the assumption that God was on his side and went as far as to equate Satan with the Catholic church. He used that link to explain the poverty suffered by Mexican Americans. When Neufeld experienced Catholic resistance in Los Ebanos, he took that as evidence that “the Devil was upset in Los Ebanos.” The Neufelds had little or no

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35 Harry Neufeld, Eight Years Among the Latin Americans, 78-79
36 Ibid.
38 Ibid.
understanding of the social context into which they were entering, and it further shaped their ethnocentric attitudes about Mexican Catholics.

The resistance that Neufeld received from the community in Los Ebanos had much to do with an earnest distrust that Mexicans had for Anglos in the area. The lack of healthy interaction between Anglos and Mexicans, primarily because of the historical precedents and the rural nature of Los Ebanos, contributed to suspicions Mexican Americans had toward Anglos and vice versa. Moreover, the tense and oppressive history of the Texas/Mexico border region created a marginal existence for Mexican Americans who lost much of their land to the Anglo colonization following the Mexican American War of 1846-1848. The violence that came at the hands of Anglo Americans led to an insurrectionist ethos that developed in south Texas, giving rise to increasing numbers of Texas Rangers patrolling the Texas/Mexico border. "Texas Rangers were assigned to the area and applied a violent and racial brand of law and order that wrought a virtual reign of terror on the Mexican population," Rodolfo Rocha observed. White racism in south Texas was blatant and ubiquitous as Mexican people were often thought to be "no better than animals." Although tensions between Mexicans and MB missionaries never reached the point of violence, at least not physical violence, the context of white racism made the Neufelds work extra hard to prove that their intentions were benign. What Neufeld considered resistance to what he called "the truth" was more

40 Arnoldo De León, The Tejano Community, 1836-1900 (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1982), 77-78.
a movement to resist yet another cultural and religious encroachment by the Anglo
American.43

Despite opposition, by 1940 Neufeld reported that twenty-seven Mexican
Americans had been converted and baptized. Soon a new church building would be
constructed in Los Ebanos and in the nearby village of Chihuahua. Baptisms for the
newly converted were held in the Rio Grande River and communities from both sides of
the river, mostly Mexican Methodists from the village of Diaz-Ordaz, gathered to witness
the event which for many signaled a cultural and religious dislocation. Being a new
convert in a heavily Catholic area created an immense amount of tension between
Mexican American families and the greater community. Moreover, by 1941, a church
building had been constructed in the village of Chihuahua. Los Ebanos had a church
building by 1942. The Los Ebanos church building was built with lumber from a rough
shack used by the U.S. army during the Tejano revolt of 1915. Above the front door of
the church it read, “La Iglesia del Señor De Los Hermanos Menonitas.” The title was
painted on boards marked with bullet holes from the revolt.44

In 1942, just five years after the mission work began in Los Ebanos, Neufeld
reported that fifty people had converted and that most were now living “quite a good,
separated life” from the rest of the Mexican Catholics.45 In some cases, Neufeld was

43 As historian Arnoldo de León argued, “[south Texas] was a place where Tejanos could move about as
Mexicans instead of Americans, if they had to... Anglo hegemony meant that Tejanos had to contend with
Americanisms and that they could not at all times carry on as Mexicans,” Arnoldo De León, The Tejano
Community, 1836-1900, 77; For an excellent review of the historical context of racial violence in south
Texas see: Benjamin H. Johnson, Revolution in Texas: How a Forgotten Rebellion and Its Bloody
44 “Boards Riddled by Bullets in Army-Bandit Fights Go into Construction of New Los Ebanos Church.”
Article published in The Christian Leader. Exact date of publication and author unknown (Hillsboro:
Center for MB Studies).
rather surprised at how those who were his greatest antagonists in the community still helped when Neufeld organized a Christmas drama.46

FACTORS OF EARLY MB CHURCH GROWTH

The factors leading to this significant growth had much to do with the Mexican American converts and the social charity that the Neufelds practiced. To prove that they could be trusted, the Neufelds provided some practical necessities for community members in Los Ebanos. This type of charity was nothing new to the MB church, which preached a theology at least in theory, of mutual aid and social care. To break the antagonism against them, the Neufelds supplied clothing, food, medicine, and in some cases even housed people in their home who needed immediate medical attention. They served as counselors, advising people on political and domestic issues, and going door-to-door inviting people to the evangelistic meetings they conducted.47 This work was crucial in building trust and promoting the evangelical message that led to early church growth.

Another important factor in the early growth of the MB church was the conversion of several Mexican Americans in Los Ebanos and surrounding villages. The first, Abelardo Mireles, was a bootlegger by trade. He was a man that Neufeld called a “ruthless, hard, and sinful man” who had been caught bootlegging and jailed in the Hidalgo County jail in Edinburg, Texas. Bootlegging in the small town of Los Ebanos was nothing out of the ordinary. Known as “smuggler’s crossing” in the 1920s and

46 Harry Neufeld, Article published in Zionsbote, December 28, 1938, Translated from German by Tina Hartman (Hillsboro: Center for MB Studies). Neufeld was amazed at how helpful some people were, stating that “It is really interesting how even some people, who never come to our meetings, want to help us.”
1930s, Los Ebanos was located on the banks of the Rio Grande and provided easy access for the crossing of alcohol.\(^4\) Mireles participated in the Mexican Revolution, apparently joining forces with Francisco “Pancho” Villa at one point. He also fought in the battles against “los rinches” (Texas Rangers).\(^4\) “My grandfather was a tough person,” commented Rolando Mireles. “In those days he, like many others, did not trust the Anglo and it makes his conversion to Protestantism that much more incredible. He was able to somehow trust [Harry] Neufeld.”\(^5\) Shortly after Mireles converted, Federico Pena joined the church. Pena was a bootlegger who, in 1935, opened a bar in Los Ebanos and in 1937 was jailed for fifty days for smuggling illegal liquor from Mexico.\(^5\)

The conversions of both these men are remarkable for their immediacy based on the critical situations in which they found themselves. Federico Pena converted to Protestantism at the request of one of his sons. Soon, thereafter, he wanted others to do the same and he helped Neufeld by driving around Los Ebanos, with microphone in hand, preaching the new faith. The experience was short-lived. It was not until Pena came down with leprosy in 1940 that he felt the first test of his new faith. “No one would come near us,” recalled Ricardo Pena, Federico’s son, “not even relatives. They only came by to criticize my father for leaving the Virgin of Guadalupe and claiming that the reason he was sick was because he left the Catholic Church.”\(^5\) According to his son, Ricardo Pena, the leprosy was miraculously healed after Neufeld and a preacher from Premont, Arthur

\(^4\) Newspaper article in The McAllen Monitor, 7 October 1979 (Hidalgo County Historical Commission Records, Binder 19); The crossing in Los Ebanos is known as a “natural crossing.” It’s use dates back to Native tribes in the region, Spanish colonizers, and through the latter parts of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In 1950 the crossing began to use a ferry to cross individuals and automobiles across the Rio Grande.
\(^4\) Rolando Mireles, interview with author, 11 February 2004, tape recording, La Grulla, Texas.
\(^5\) Ibid.
\(^5\) Esau, 24-25.
Flemming, prayed over Federico. That single experience convinced Peña that this new faith was indeed real.  

Mireles’s story is not as dramatic as Peña’s, but it followed the same track in that he came to a critical point in his life where he felt he needed to make a change. Furthermore, the conversion healing of his good friend Federico had much to do with his decision to follow the teachings that Neufeld introduced.

Both these men helped Neufeld translate his message into Spanish, making connections with local people and providing Neufeld with much needed credibility. Both men also offered Neufeld needed protection from those in the community who wanted to inflict harm and disrupt the mission. Aside from religious convictions, the conversion of these men served a healthy purpose as both gave up alcohol and tobacco. They began to spend more time at home and redirected their energies to more legitimate business ventures.

In addition to Abelardo Mireles and Federico Peña, several other new converts began to assist Neufeld in 1942. Ricardo Peña, son of Federico Peña, converted before his father sometime around 1939 in Los Ebanos. He became an early helper after Neufeld scolded him for being disruptive during a church meeting. Ricardo Peña began working with Neufeld while still a student at La Joya high school, providing help with translation and community outreach. Shortly after graduating from high school Peña accepted an offer to attend Tabor College in Hillsboro, Kansas, with guaranteed financial help for at least the first semester. He attended Tabor College on and off until 1947.

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53 Ibid.
With Peña's example, other Mexican Americans followed suit and attended Tabor College with the limited scholarships provided by the SDC. Most of these students did not complete academic work because of the financial difficulties associated with going to college in Kansas. While the experiences of students at Tabor were generally favorable, the story of Sosthenes Mireles (son of Abelardo Mireles), from Los Ebanos and a Tabor College student in 1948, was of particular significance. While attending school, Mireles died mysteriously. Not much is known about the circumstances, but family sources and his obituary report that he died of monoxide poisoning shortly after he had taken a shower in a guest house where he was living. Contributions were raised for a proper burial in south Texas, but Tabor College did not provide the family with any further compensation and never acknowledged responsibility for the death. There was no formal investigation conducted by the College and the source of the monoxide was never fully determined.

Upon his return from Tabor College, Ricardo Peña became the first full-time Mexican American missionary in south Texas in 1947. But being a “full-time” missionary did not carry the same financial package for Peña as it did for Neufeld and the newly arrived MB missionaries, the Thomas and Wedel families. While being appointed as full-time missionary might have been seen as a progressive step by the MB missionaries, Peña was not provided with an equal stipend and had limited authority and decision making power. The three MB missionary couples each received a stipend of $1,440 dollars a year ($120 a month) plus housing expenses. They received a combined total of $600 for traveling expenses, a $300 vacation allowance, and a $300 allowance for

their children. This compares to the $900 dollars that Peña was being paid a year ($75 a month) with no extras for vacation, housing, or children.\textsuperscript{60} To make ends meet, Peña worked odd jobs during the day and worked at church development mostly in the evenings. On a number of occasions MB missionaries justified this imbalance by explaining to Peña that he was paid less because “beans, rice and tortillas are low-cost foods as compared to the American foods that are necessary to the missionary.”\textsuperscript{61}

Peña helped found an MB church in La Casita and La Joya and was also involved in establishing a mission to Mexican Americans in Premont. The work in La Joya grew out of an extension of the work in the village of Havana, one mile west of present day La Joya. Both Peña and Ricardo Zapata, a member of the MB church in Los Ebanos, were conducting vacation bible school in Havana in the summer of 1948. When attendance continued to grow, they looked to La Joya to initiate the work of a formal church. With money from a donor in Oklahoma, they were able to secure an old school building which Peña and Zapata worked to transform into a church. The church was completed and opened in 1953, and Peña served as the first church pastor.

The MB church in La Joya represented the first Protestant congregation in the community. Like other encounters, the church initially was not received well within the community. “They [community people] were angry and mad at me because I was starting something, Christian work,” Peña recalled.\textsuperscript{62} Fear of Protestantism prompted death threats against not only Anglo missionaries but Mexican missionaries as well. But the new converts were also guilty of talking down to Catholics and projecting an air of

\textsuperscript{60} SDC Minutes, Oct. 25-29, 1947, Fairview, Oklahoma (Hillsboro: Center for MB Studies Archives).
\textsuperscript{61} Ricardo Peña interview, 15 July 2003; Ricardo Peña, interview with author, tape recording, 8 January 2004, Mission, Texas.
\textsuperscript{62} Ricardo and Carmen Peña, “History of the La Joya Church,” no date given (Hillsboro: Center for MB Studies Archives); Ricardo Peña, interview with author, 15 July 2003; Anna Esau, 63-67.
religious superiority. At the heart of the matter in La Joya were two groups of people, from similar cultural backgrounds, who were being brought against each other by their respective religious leaders. Nevertheless, tempers soon simmered and the La Joya church became not only the first Protestant church in the community, but also the first MB church to be established by Mexican Americans.\textsuperscript{63}

The church in the village of La Casita, located about 5 miles east of Rio Grande City, experienced similar tensions when it was originally founded in the adjacent village of Garciasville. This time, however, the hostility came from the Methodist church. An old abandoned building that was once a Methodist church was brought back to life with the work of Peña and Neufeld in 1948. They began having services without consulting with the Methodists who still owned the building. The services eventually attracted old Methodist members living in the community, helping the church to grow rather quickly. When the Methodists in Rio Grande City heard about what was transpiring they sent a minister to stop the work and reclaim the property. They halted the work and advised both Peña and Neufeld that they had no business there. The Methodist church was going to take over once again.

When Peña and Neufeld returned to the area, it was to establish a church in the adjacent village of La Casita. The project began with an invitation of a local man who had used his own money to build a small concrete church. The members who were attending the Garciasville church (the old Methodist church) eventually moved their membership to La Casita and the church was formally established in 1949. The first

\textsuperscript{63} Ibid.

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pastor at La Casita was Albert Epp who had also been teaching at the MB parochial school, El Faro.\textsuperscript{64}

Marta Espinoza, from nearby Abram, Texas, represented the newly established church in Chihuahua with a report to the SDC at the annual conference in 1942. The reports said little about what exactly Espinoza’s role was at the Chihuahua church, but she was instrumental in garnering support for new missionaries sent to Chihuahua in 1942. In her report submitted to the SDC, she stated, “We are lonesome and afraid that the enemy will attempt to scatter us...Dear Brethren help us in our prayer because we need a director in this our church.”\textsuperscript{65} Based on that request, which was heavily influenced by Neufeld, the Home Missions Committee recommended that Henry and Ruth Thomas be approved as new missionaries to Chihuahua.\textsuperscript{66}

Espinoza was the first person to be baptized and to become a member of the church in Chihuahua.\textsuperscript{67} According to the writings of Neufeld, Espinoza had a traumatic conversion experience. She apparently had been extremely ill and was kneeling in front of a Catholic altar when, according to Neufeld, she stated, “These things are dead and they cannot help me.”\textsuperscript{68} Neufeld continues by adding that after a needed operation was successful, Espinoza confessed the following to a priest who had come to visit her:

> My confession is simply this, that I have been a Roman Catholic all my life. I have sought help in its principles and its doctrines and have found none. Now I am going to get me a Bible and read it and find out for myself God’s plan of salvation for my soul and how to get rid of burdens. And this will be my last confession to a Roman Catholic priest.\textsuperscript{69}

\textsuperscript{64} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{65} SDC Minutes, Oct. 31-Nov. 1, 1942, Hillsboro, Kansas.
\textsuperscript{66} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{67} Anna Esau, \textit{What God Has Done}, 28.
\textsuperscript{68} Harry Neufeld, \textit{Eight Years Among the Latin Americans}, 21.
\textsuperscript{69} Ibid., 22.
It is difficult to determine whether or not Espinoza actually made this staunch declaration, but the context makes it highly unlikely. First, Neufeld knew that his writings carried influence with mission donors in Kansas and Oklahoma. If mission funding in south Texas was to continue, it was important to provide testimonies of people ready to accept the MB church. Second, it is difficult to discern how Espinoza came to a point of denouncing the Catholic church, calling her own salvation into question. Nowhere in the documents was it noted that either Methodists or MB had evangelized Espinoza. Neufeld noted that Espinoza “met some Christian nurses” while at the hospital that helped provide her with new spiritual direction that she apparently had never received before.\textsuperscript{70}

The validity of the stories Neufeld provided were questionable, but were extremely helpful in conjuring up funds for the mission. In 1943 the missions budget totaled $9,564.49, and almost half of that overall budget, $3,172.84 dollars, went to the two mission churches in Chihuahua and Los Ebanos.

In 1947 Inosencio Garcia from Chihuahua became assistant pastor to the newly arrived MB missionaries Henry and Ruth Thomas. Other Mexican Americans who became active around this time were Yolanda Villareal, Ricardo Zapata, and Alfredo Tagle. Their responsibilities varied. Men worked doing the church planting while local women typically worked with the children’s ministry. They were provided partial funding by the Southern District Conference, and their contributions were instrumental in the growth of the Mennonite Brethren church in south Texas.\textsuperscript{71}

\textsuperscript{70} Ibid.
NEW MISSIONARIES AND CONTINUED GROWTH

The Thomas family initiated their work in south Texas with many of the preconceived ideas held by the Neufelds. Their arrival during the onset of WWII provided them ample analogies by which to compare the work: “In Los Ebanos and Chihuahua we are at war with the blackness of the evil that surrounds those benighted people.” Thomas continued by complaining that the War had increased the price of labor among Mexicans and that this had resulted in a “cooling off in the love of Christ…and a following after worldly pleasure.” Living a life of “holiness,” or of “Anglo American values” as Neufeld stated, was something the missionaries constantly stressed. The evangelical meetings in Los Ebanos and Chihuahua by 1943 were held almost every night of the week and sometimes twice a day to curb the “unholy living” surrounding these villages. The themes of “unholy living” and of converts “returning to evil manners” were constantly reported to the MB membership in Oklahoma and Kansas, a reminder of how difficult things were in south Texas for the missionaries.

The arrival of the Thomas family signaled a subtle shift in the mission program of Neufeld. He reported to the annual conference in 1943 that members should no longer donate clothes or other physical items for south Texas; instead they should donate evangelistic tools such as a flannelgraph (a soft woven cloth of wool or a blend of wool and cotton material used to tell Bible stories) for “the portraying of biblical truths.” This put the focus strictly on evangelism and mission, moving away from social charity.

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72 SDC Minutes, Nov. 6-9, 1943, Corn, Oklahoma, South Texas Report written and signed by Harry and Sarah Neufed and Henry and Ruth Thomas (Hillsboro: Center for MB Studies Archives)
73 Ibid.
74 Ibid.

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The strategy of social charity had been used to acquire the trust of the community and by 1943 Neufeld felt he had succeeded.

Like the Neufeld family, Henry and Ruth Thomas met at Tabor College and were married in 1938. They were only the second MB missionary family, and they took over the work that Neufeld had initiated in Chihuahua and surrounding villages. Initially, the Chihuahua church grew rapidly. By 1944 the congregation had grown so big that a larger building was needed. Two years later, with the help of some MB volunteers, a new church was erected and dedicated. A large majority of those who attended the church in Chihuahua were women from the surrounding ranch communities. Ruth Thomas taught Bible classes, sometimes six times a week when she could afford domestic help. This helped to spark early church growth as women not only brought themselves but also their children.

Work among children was perhaps of greatest importance to the MB missionaries. Both Neufeld and Thomas saw the hope for the MB church in the children who could speak English and who appeared to be more assimilated than their parents. Neufeld was hopeful that by 1950 all the MB churches in south Texas would be exclusively English-speaking. This would mean that missionaries did not have to worry about learning Spanish. It was a day that never came for Neufeld. More than fifty years later the MB churches are almost exclusively Spanish-speaking Mexican American congregations. The issue of assimilation was on the minds of the MB missionaries because they represented the first fully assimilated of the Mennonite Brethren. Although Neufeld did speak a little of his native language, he repeatedly stated in the Zionsbote that it was

75 Anna Esau, 31.
easier for him to write in English and therefore would not be writing in German. The MB missionaries failed to understand the complexities of the Mexican American experience assuming that assimilation patterns would be similar to those of the early German experience in Kansas.77

The onset of World War II created a stressful situation for the missionaries. Despite continued church growth, Neufeld reported to the 1945 annual SDC meeting that the past year had been the most difficult for them. Apparently Neufeld became quite pessimistic and worried how the church could continue to grow with the new “gross indifference that is taking hold of the people towards the true gospel.”78 Neufeld’s pessimism likely came from the manner in which the war was impacting Mexican American families. Neufeld argued that many families had regressed into “hopeless worship of idols in the form of saints or the virgin Mary for fear of the loss of their boys overseas…and for others the war has brought some prosperity and they could not take, and pleasure has become the byword.” Many had returned to “the dance, the bingo, the lottery, the dice, horse race and what not.”79

Neufeld also began to concern himself with how marriage between new converts and Catholics would impact church growth. According to Neufeld, a Catholic marriage was almost “99% bad for the believer. No matter how strong their testimony has been before it is usually killed through this act.” Community perceptions about Neufeld had also apparently not improved by 1945 when he reported that there were some in the

77 Ibid.
78 SDC Minutes, Oct. 20-24, 1945, Buhler, Kansas (Hillsboro: Center for MB Studies Archives).
79 Ibid.
community who “hate them like a snake...and they would gladly see that we were removed from this place.”

In 1945, Ruben and Eva Wedel, arrived at La Grulla as the hired missionary couple. The Wedels, originally from Bessie, Oklahoma, arrived with no Spanish language skills and a limited understanding of the community. The town of La Grulla, with a population of 1500 in 1945, was the largest mission station and considered by Neufeld and Thomas as the most difficult and closed place to evangelize. In their first report to the SDC, Wedel stated, “We soon noticed that we were among a strange people who were very inquisitive as to why we came...Because of undesirable circumstances we had to move to another place.” Those “undesirable circumstances” were death threats they received early on. On one particular occasion, Yolanda Villareal from La Grulla was told that some men were plotting the murder of Ruben Wedel and the rape of his wife later that evening. Villareal barely knew the Wedels but she felt she had to warn them about the alleged plan. Wedel moved his trailer immediately to a vacant lot that belonged to Villareal’s grandparents who provided protection for them. It was not easy for the Wedels as they received continued threats and resistance to their missionary message. According to Villareal, Protestant missionaries that had attempted to work in La Grulla did not last very long as they were usually run out rather quickly.

Despite early setbacks, a church was started by 1948 and by 1950 there was a dedication for a church building. The new church was not so much a result of the work

80 Ibid.
81 SDC Minutes, Oct. 16-19, 1948, Hillsboro, Kansas (Hillsboro: Center for MB Studies Archives).
82 Yolanda Villareal, interview with author, tape recording, 15 July 2003, Mission, Texas.
of the Wedels, but of two sisters, Yolanda and Carmen Villareal. They were not given much credit at the time because their work in many ways was considered peripheral.

The Villareal sisters had lost their mother at a very young age and had been raised by their grandmother and father. Both had struggled with various types of illnesses for most of their lives, Yolanda especially. She suffered from thyroid problems and on many occasions visited with doctors and *curanderos* (folk healers) in the community. “Me and my sister were into Satanic rituals that we believed could help us get better,” Yolanda recalled, “we really believed they worked and my father approved because it was a very normal practice back then.”

On one occasion a *curandero* advised her that she should find “*el libro negro*” and read what it says in order to heal. Yolanda began searching for the book without really knowing what she was looking for until she saw “a black book” during an evangelical service her cousin had invited her to in Mission. “I asked the Santos for forgiveness first,” commented Yolanda, “because I knew it was wrong to be in an Christian service... but it was there that I first saw the black book, *la Biblia*.”

It was at this point that Yolanda began reading the Bible and learning more about Protestant Christianity with the understanding that “*la Virgen de Guadalupe* was going to be okay with this.” Sometime later, she saw the black book on Wedel’s tabletop and she asked if she could get a copy of the book. He responded by saying that the book cost one dollar and that he could get her a copy if she really wanted one. Yolanda saw this as a direct sign from “*diosito*” that she was to follow the work of this missionary to help him plant his church.

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84 Yolanda Villareal, interview with author, 15 July 2003.
Yolanda began to help Wedel in his ministry, which started under a tree and was directed mostly at women and children. Because Wedel had no Spanish language skills, Walter Gomez (a Mexican American convert from the MB mission in Oklahoma) would come and preach the sermons in Spanish and was instrumental in establishing the mission. The first converts to the mission in La Grulla were women: Lupita Ortiz, Yolanda and Carmen Villareal, and Guadalupe Gutierrez. With these four women the church in La Grulla was established.

The Villareal sisters (Carmen and Yolanda) worked with women and children in the community. The work of the women, *la femenil*, was important to the history of La Grulla and was one of the main reasons why it continued as the strongest church. While the Wedels worked at teaching the Bible to new converts, cadres of twelve to fifteen women met weekly to pray, organize church events, and sew and make quilts. Along with the Villareal sisters, Ofelia Tagle, also from La Grulla, was instrumental in the organizing of women in La Grulla. The organizing included activities that both benefited the new church and the local community. For example, the quilts the women sewed were sold along with used clothing brought from the north at prices community people could afford. This brought income to the church and helped provide resources for the community. Yolanda Villareal noted that the gatherings of the women provided them a place to "worship God and help each other with needs that we had."86

Consistent with the experience of the Neufelds in Los Ebanos, the Wedels blamed the Catholic church for the people's misery and believed that their work would save these "benighted people." Wedel was described as a skilled cook with a strong tempered

85 *Esau*, 37
86 Yolanda Villareal, interview with author, tape recording, 8 January 2004, Mission, Texas.
personality. He was often critical of the leadership of Neufeld and Thomas, citing that they did not provide the needed supervision for mission work. He was especially critical of Ricardo Peña. As secretary-treasurer Wedel would hand out the monthly paychecks to the missionaries, and as he handed out Peña's check, Wedel chastised him, commenting that he did not deserve his check and that the Conference was paying him an illegitimate salary. 87 “We were doing our work, God knows we were,” commented Carmen Peña, “but Wedel just had a real strong character and we were not getting paid anything at all because of the discrimination.” 88

There was also conflict between Wedel and the other two missionaries, Neufeld and Thomas. It is not clear when or for what reasons the conflict started, but Carmen Peña commented that many times the disagreements had to do with Wedel’s refusal to participate in the building of the El Faro school. Wedel perhaps refused to take orders from either Neufeld or Thomas, which eventually lead to his dismissal from La Grulla and the Southern District Conference in 1956. The Committee on Home Missions cited various “personality conflicts” which apparently had been present for most of the ten years that Wedel served in La Grulla. 89 The departure of the Wedels and the continued growth of the mission presented new challenges for both south Texas churches and the Southern District Conference (SDC).

In 1956 the SDC began to talk more about what they called “indigenization.” After more than twenty years in the field, talk initiated concerning the release of the south Texas mission to become a partner conference instead of a dependant mission. The SDC

88 Ibid.
89 R.M. Baerg, Ervin Adrian, and A.W. Epp, “Formal Letter explaining the dismissal of Ruben and Eva Wedel from La Grulla,” Committee on Home Missions of the Southern District Conference, May 21, 1956 (Hillsboro: Center for MB Studies Archives)
was beginning to encourage churches that they supply their own funds for new building projects, which heretofore the SDC had been funding. Several churches were able to follow the recommendation as the Premont, Chihuahua, Los Ebanos, and La Casita churches funded their own construction projects. The SDC saw this as a positive step, but continued to ignore the fundamental need for indigenous leadership. Anglo missionaries continued to control all aspects of the mission, from *El Faro* school to all eight churches, and with few exceptions continued to dictate theology, ritual, and liturgy in the congregations. The mission had experienced unprecedented growth, establishing eight congregations and investing, without counting the investment to *El Faro* school, a total of $200,289.94 by 1956. The number jumps to $317,114 when the *El Faro* funding is included in the equation.  

Church growth had reached its apex by 1956. The oldest congregations—La Grulla, Chihuahua, Los Ebanos—were reporting an overall membership at or above 50, with Chihuahua reporting the largest number at 70.  

Although the churches would see some growth the following years, it would never again match the growth patterns before 1956. The remaining five congregations—La Casita, La Joya, Mission, Lull, and Premont—reported much smaller numbers due to their relatively new status. These five congregations would see some growth in the following years, but nothing that would reach the level of the three oldest congregations.

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91 Ibid., 168.
Shortly after Neufeld expressed his concern deeming 1945 as “one of the hardest years of our stay,” Thomas proposed to the SDC the prospect of a parochial school. There was little documentation behind this recommendation, but it can be assumed that with things as difficult as Neufeld described there needed to be something in place that could help facilitate not only conversion to Protestantism but Americanization. MB missionaries followed the similar patterns of other Protestant denominations that established parochial schools in the Southwest as a tool to accelerate Americanization.92

The general assumption among the missionaries was that education in south Texas public schools was extremely poor because Spanish was the primary language spoken.93 Public education for Mexican Americans was indeed poor but not for reasons the missionaries were hypothesizing. Mexican American students, as one report noted, were not provided with adequate educational facilities, textbooks, and curriculum because of race prejudice.94 Moreover, by 1945 MB missionary children were reaching school age and both the Neufeld and Thomas families did not want their children going to public school with Mexican Americans, much less with students that were not “saved” and who spoke Spanish primarily.95

The most direct benefit the parochial school presented for Mexican Americans was a safe haven away from their Catholic counterparts who ridiculed them at school for

93 Anna Esau, 41.
95 Alfredo Tagle, interview with author, tape recording, 4 September 2003, Mission, Texas; Henry Thornes, Report to SDC Constituency, 30 April 1946 (Hillsboro: Center for MB Studies Archives).
converting to Protestantism.\textsuperscript{96} Mexican American converts faced ostracism and persecution by their Catholic neighbors, and \textit{El Faro} provided needed separation. The persecution manifested itself in many ways, but the most traumatic was with family members who claimed that conversion had cursed them and their community with a lack of sufficient rain, physical ailments, and other calamities for “switching religion.”\textsuperscript{97} Conversely, new converts wanted to completely disassociate from Catholics. They began to make similar accusations about curses that had been brought to the community because Catholics “prayed to the \textit{santos} instead of the true God.”\textsuperscript{98} Tensions between Mexican Catholics and new converts, the desire of MB missionaries to keep their children out of the public schools, and the continued need for Christian Americanization all contributed to the eventual opening of a parochial school.

A site was chosen for the school just off the main highway 83, two miles north of Los Ebanos in Sullivan City.\textsuperscript{99} By 1948 \textit{El Faro} School, as it came to be called, welcomed its first class of seventy-five students ranging from grades one through eight. The students represented families from all three of the mission stations in Los Ebanos, Chihuahua, and La Grulla. Because of the great demand of parents who wanted to enroll their children in \textit{El Faro}, admissions standards were set giving priority to regular MB church members, then to children of the church members, children who attend missions regularly, and finally to those considered outsiders. There were even some Catholic parents who wanted to enroll their children in \textit{El Faro} but they were denied entry because

\textsuperscript{97} Ibid; Neufeld, \textit{Eight Years Among the Latin Americans}, 30-31.
\textsuperscript{98} Ricardo Peña, interview with author, 8 January 2004.
\textsuperscript{99} Anna Esau, 42.
of their faith.\textsuperscript{100} The school became a mission project of the SDC and subsequently did not charge tuition fees to any student interested and able to meet the stringent requirements.\textsuperscript{101} This proved to be a good strategy for bringing students from the public school to \textit{El Faro} as most families would not have had the financial resources to pay tuition. There were no fees to students until 1965 when twenty-five dollars were charged to each child and three dollars for every additional child in the same family.\textsuperscript{102}

Initially the teaching staff for \textit{El Faro} consisted entirely of Anglo MB. The teachers also had church responsibilities on the weekends in the different mission stations. The school concerned itself with the spiritual needs of their students with daily prayer and calls for conversion a part of the curriculum, which meant that teachers carried secular education hand in hand with the evangelical mission. The reports about \textit{El Faro} highlighted this dual emphasis by stating that “Secular studies become dry and uninteresting many times but when Bible study and Bible story time rolls around, we see faces brighten up.”\textsuperscript{103} The second year of the school welcomed in 53 students on the first day of classes and the number eventually doubled to 106 by the following week. New teachers were also added as the school expanded some of its secular and evangelical curriculum.\textsuperscript{104}

The fund raising strategy for \textit{El Faro} was similar to that of the missionaries. Reports at the annual SDC meetings emphasized the great need among new converts to receive a good education and daily Bible instruction otherwise public school would damage the young person’s spiritual life. For example, in 1951 \textit{El Faro} board

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{100} SDC Minutes, Oct. 16-19, 1948, Hillsboro, Kansas (Hillsboro: Center for MB Studies Archives).
\bibitem{101} Esau, 43.
\bibitem{102} Esau, 43.
\bibitem{103} Ibid.
\bibitem{104} Ibid.
\end{thebibliography}
members—Harry Neufeld, Henry Thomas, Ruben Wedel, and Ricado Peña—agreed that grade levels needed to be extended to reach the high school level. This, of course, required more funding from the SDC and personal testimonies were the preferred strategy for soliciting funds. Harold Warkentin, an El Faro teacher, told the SDC in 1951 that,

> When our pupils graduate from the eighth grade and go on to the wordly public high school, they meet terrific temptations. They are almost forced to attend the dances if they wish to finish high school... Shortly before we left last week we heard of the sin that one of our last year’s graduates had fallen into because of this situation in the local high school... After being questioned he [the student] made this statement. “If only I could have gone to a Christian high school, but there was none to which I could go.” Would you join the ranks of those who are praying that this high school at El Faro might become a reality?  

The strategy was successful, and by academic year 1953-54 El Faro added ninth grade instruction to its curriculum. That same year first grade enrollment swelled to 57 pupils, and total enrollment reached 130, making it necessary for the SDC to construct two new classrooms and an auditorium. Consistent with former years, El Faro enrollment was high and many students had to be turned away by the school board. Furthermore, faculty recruitment came solely from the north and remained almost entirely white, with Mexican American teachers used sparingly and in emergency cases only. This circumstance had little to do with hiring qualified teachers, and more to do with maintaining instructional methods that coincide with broader, evangelical goals of the SDC.  

It would not be until the mid-1960s that Mexican Americans began taking positions of leadership within El Faro School.

By 1956 the school had reached its apex. Enrollment was higher than in previous years, new buildings were being built to accommodate the growth, and ninth grade

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105 SDC Minutes, Oct. 27-31, 1951, Corn, Oklahoma (Hillsboro: Center for MB Studies Archives).  
instruction had become part of the curriculum. The school used standard textbooks approved by the Texas Education Agency (TEA), and interestingly, taught Spanish as a foreign language even though a large percentage of students were Mexican American whose primary language was Spanish.\(^{107}\) *El Faro* was nevertheless successful in achieving appropriate academic goals, as students had little problem going from *El Faro* to public school, and the school existed up to this point with unprecedented growth and financial stability. The following years proved not as fluid, marred by internal dissent over the true purpose of the school.

CONCLUSION

This chapter examined the origins and development of Mennonite Brethren missions in south Texas beginning in 1937. The period from 1937-1956 saw the establishment of six churches in Los Ebanos, Chihuahua, La Grulla, La Casita, La Joya, and Mission. The parochial school *El Faro* was also established and served as a catalyst for early church growth. The reasoning behind church growth is complex and multi-faceted. The various factors leading to early growth discussed were large financial and human investments (by 1956 total funding from the SDC for both churches and *El Faro* equaled $317,114), key Mexican American leaders converting in Los Ebanos (Abelardo Mireles and Federico Peña), the social charity practiced early on by the Neufelds helped in building trust in the community, and the rural nature of the mission which allowed missionaries total access in promoting their message.

\(^{107}\) Esau, 45.
The inherent contradiction in these scenarios is the early church growth despite the racist stereotypes employed by MB missionaries. Exploring this contradiction might lead to an understanding of manners in which Mexican Americans internalized oppression and began to believe in their own inferiority as promoted by MB missionaries. But central to this argument is that even as contextual factors lead to early church growth, the lack of institutional flexibility eventually exposed paternalistic mission strategies that began to come into question in the 1950s and 1960s.

Despite some positive results during the 1950s, some within the SDC were beginning to question the work in south Texas and looked for ways out of the mission. There was also tension being raised by work being done among ethnic Mexicans in California. In 1956 work started by Dr. Schlichting in central California, with almost no outside funds, had grown to almost the same size of the work in south Texas within a short period. Moreover, increased out-migration after World War II from the rural communities where the mission began impacted the church membership and raised new questions about the location of the churches. As these problems were beginning to expose themselves, the SDC began to preach an “indigenization” program that would give more autonomy to south Texas churches. As religious historian Juan Martinez noted, “The MB leadership [wanted] to find a way to get the project [south Texas] off their hands. Everyone was tired of the dependency and no one had a solution.”

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108 Juan F. Martinez, interview with author, email correspondence, 12 March 2004.
109 Ibid.
CHAPTER 3

CONTINUITY AND CHANGE FROM 1958-1971

For twenty years the mission in south Texas remained in the leadership and financial control of the Southern District Conference (SDC) of the Mennonite Brethren. The mission pattern represented a hierarchical and paternalistic system that while stimulating early church growth had no solid indigenous foundation upon which that growth could continue. The consequences of paternalistic and racist mission patterns began to surface when in 1969 El Faro school closed its doors after nearly twenty years of operation. That same year the Board of Foreign Missions, which assumed partial control in south Texas in 1959, began to phase out the MB mission in south Texas citing that “it was a waste of money to spend it on people who could not or would not assume financial responsibility for their own churches.”¹ Both of these events tragically impacted church membership and almost overnight placed local people in charge of the mission. After 1958 church growth regressed and did not pick up again until 1963. This signaled the beginning of one last growth spurt from 1963 to 1966 which brought total church membership to 310. The increase in membership was significant when juxtaposed to figures between 1967 and 1972, which saw south Texas MB churches lose

¹ Tim Kliewer, interview with author, 2 February 2004, email correspondence.
more than 100 members and lose total financial support and direction from the Board of Foreign Missions and the Home Missions Committee.²

Final years of the mission in south Texas are significant for several reasons. First, in the latter half of the 1950s the SDC began to reevaluate its mission strategy making a strong case for the "indigenization" of south Texas churches. The work of the SDC in south Texas had reached a saturation point after twenty years of mission work, and it was becoming increasingly difficult to sustain a mission that reached an annual cost of over $33,000 by 1958.³ Second, in 1960 the evangelical branch of the mission was transferred over to the Board of Foreign Missions based in Fresno, California, while the Home Missions Committee of the SDC maintained control of El Faro school. This merger resulted in the creation of the South Texas Commission (STC), which served as a representative group of both the Home Missions Committee and the Board of Foreign Missions. Third, in 1964 a representative core from the different mission churches established a governing body that came to be known as the Latin American Mennonite Brethren Conference (LAMB). Fourth, the parochial school that started in 1948 as an alternative to south Texas public schools closed its doors in 1969 under intense financial pressure and disagreement over the purpose of the school between the STC and the local community. Last, this particular time period saw membership growth during the mid-1960s, but when the financial cord was cut and the mission terminated, the membership dropped almost immediately between the final years of 1969 and 1972. Also of

² Martinez, "Ministry among United States Hispanics by an Ethno-Religious Minority," 177; Martinez, interview with author, email correspondence, 12 March 2004; Records for this time period are not very accurate. In an interview with Juan Martinez he reports that indeed there was some numerical growth in the 1960s, but that the situation was deteriorating. The loss of membership that is not recorded until 1970/71 actually occurred earlier but was not recorded until that date.
³ Ibid.
importance are the departures of the Neufeld family in 1958 (Harry, Sarah, and their son Gordon), and of the Thomas family in 1960. The departures of these families signaled an arrival of new Anglo missionaries to south Texas including Eugene Janzen in 1958 and Daniel Wirsche in 1960.\footnote{SDC Minutes, Oct. 19-22, 1958 (Hillsboro: Center for MB Studies Archives); Ibid., 94.}

All of these transitions impacted the MB mission in south Texas in ways that it has yet to recover. This chapter analyzes the impact that transition had on the mission work and the factors that led to the eventual decline in membership by the end of the 1960s.

MISSIONARY EXODUS

The departure of Harry and Sarah Neufeld in many ways signaled the end of the boom era of Mennonite Brethren mission work in south Texas. The relationship that Neufeld had with the local community was on one level paternalistic and racist, and on another level sympathetic and courteous. From the standpoint of the Neufeld’s, this dual relationship created an almost love-hate relationship with the local Mexican American community. Neufeld was the embodiment of Christian \textit{curanderismo} (a concept that will be explored in a later chapter) when he promised miracle healings after his prayers and served as a spiritual mentor for many new converts. Conversely, Neufeld made it obvious that he had little confidence in the leadership capabilities of ethnic Mexicans. The manner in which he maintained power solely with the Anglo MB was deeply resented.\footnote{Ricardo Peña, interview with author, 15 July 2003.}
The delicate relationship that Neufeld maintained for twenty years in south Texas came to a critical point when he made his decision to move his family to California in 1957. Neufeld’s departure did not raise much concern for the community at least openly. Many understood that it was probably time for him to step aside and do something else related to ministry. But Neufeld’s explanation left many feeling that he was not being truthful on several fronts. The primary reason Neufeld gave for leaving was that God was calling him to ministry in California. No one challenged the merits of the claim, but some Mexican Americans who were close to him did not feel as if Neufeld was being completely honest. “He [Neufeld] told us one thing,” commented Pastor Alfredo Tagle, “but we all knew that the reason he left was because his son Gordon had fallen in love with a Mexican girl and Neufeld did not believe in the mixing of the races.”6

Apparently Gordon, Neufeld’s adopted son, who grew up in south Texas, fell in love with a Mexican girl with whom he would ride in the school bus on his way to and from El Faro school. Unbeknownst to Neufeld, Gordon and his girlfriend had plans to soon marry, and many in the community knew of their plans. When Neufeld learned of these marriage plans, he informed the Home Missions Committee of his plans and was quickly offered a pastoral position in California. Although Neufeld never admitted that his decision was personal, the rumors that circulated among the Mexican American community was evidence enough for people.

Another factor leading to Neufeld’s quick departure had to do with the turbulent relationship he had with fellow missionary Ruben Wedel. Their relationship was

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6 Alfredo Tagle, interview with author, tape recording, 4 September 2003, Mission, Texas; This comment by Alfredo Tagle was also confirmed in an interview the author had with Ricardo Peña.
characterized by constant bickering over who had ultimate power in making decisions.\textsuperscript{7} “He [Wedel] was a difficult individual,” remembered Carmen Peña, “who had a strong character and didn’t say very nice things.”\textsuperscript{8} Wedel was in charge of handling and distributing the checks that came from the SDC to pay missionaries. On more than one occasion Carmen Peña remembers Wedel yelling at her and her husband for not doing their job adequately, calling them “lazy and irresponsible.”\textsuperscript{9} Wedel clashed with Neufeld on leadership style and was eventually asked by the SDC to resign his mission post in La Grulla in 1956.\textsuperscript{10} Wedel spent ten years working in La Grulla and upon his dismissal did not return home, opting instead to remain in south Texas. The record is not clear concerning the conflict between Neufeld and Wedel, but apparently it forced Wedel to resign and eventually led to the departure of Neufeld as well. The conflict affected Neufeld greatly.

There is also evidence the SDC wanted Neufeld out of south Texas because he had alienated many people and represented the “old guard” of paternalistic mission strategies. Neufeld’s departure created a leadership crisis, but it would quickly be subsided with the arrival of the Janzen family in 1958. In retrospect, Neufeld left at seemingly the perfect moment. Shortly after the departure of Neufeld, the Home Missions Committee of the SDC decided that shifting demographics required a change in mission strategies. But changing mission strategy proved to be more difficult than first imagined. Previous missionaries had already set a paternalistic precedent. The dependency on the SDC that characterized the south Texas churches was so ingrained.

\textsuperscript{7} Alfredo Tagle, interview with author, 4 September 2004.
\textsuperscript{8} Carmen Peña, interview with author, 15 July 2003.
\textsuperscript{9} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{10} R.M. Baerg, Ervin Adrian, A.W. Epp, Letter from Committee of Home Missions of the SDC explaining the dismissal of the Wedel family, 21 May 1956 (Hillsboro: Center for MB Studies Archives)
that "indigenization," as the MB called it, did not allow for the development of Mexican American leadership.

THE PHILOSOPHY OF INDIGENIZATION

The move toward indigenization signaled a new era in MB missions. In 1958 Southern District Conference (SDC) leadership began to seriously consider how power could be transferred from Anglo leadership to the newly converted Mexican American membership without disrupting mission work.

In that year the Home Missions Committee submitted a statement on indigenization to the SDC. The statement was clear about a need for review of the mission field and the strategies it implemented. Moreover, the statement called for a return to a biblical pattern of church planting that apparently was not being practiced to that point. The MB were beginning to realize that the patterns they established for the past twenty years were not necessarily the healthiest. Indeed, they went against what they considered as the biblical mandate.

We must recognize that the reversal of this Biblical pattern, namely, that of emphasizing sending missions, rather than on the churches to be developed will eventually lead to serious results: (1) the missions are not given opportunity to develop spontaneously [because] all controls [are] in the hands of the missionary, the Mission Board, and the constituent churches... (2) a spirit of dependence on the part on the part of the mission churches, both in financial and moral support, makes the financial burden unduly heavy to the Conference.11

Furthermore, the indigenization statement acknowledged the importance of "nationalizing" the churches so that pastors and leaders are ethnically part of the community. At the release of this statement, the involvement of ethnic Mexicans in the

mission was limited, and if they were involved, their power remained often times limited.\footnote{Rolando Mireles, interview with author, 4 February 2004.}

Mennonite Brethren leadership had some basic understanding of the ineffectiveness of their mission strategy. They understood that it would take some years before south Texas churches would be able to stand on their own and function as a separate entity. The indigenization statement called for a leadership development plan, church training, financial training, and better training of missionaries who went into the field in the future.\footnote{Ibid.} As much as this statement called for an empowerment of the mission church, Mexican Americans were left out from the discussions on indigenization. From the beginning of the mission, the Home Missions Committee believed itself to be superior to ethnic Mexicans both religiously and culturally. Although they were now talking about shifting philosophy, the Committee held the power to dictate how and when change was to transpire in the mission field.

The timing of the indigenization statement came at an appropriate point. South Texas churches in the late 1950s experienced substantial growth. From 1948 through 1958 church membership nearly tripled, growing from 89 to 242 members.\footnote{Martinez, "Ministry among U.S. Hispanics by an Ethno-Religious Minority," 177.} Moreover, by 1958 the SDC reached a “saturation point” as financial support for the mission reached levels too high for the Home Missions Committee to maintain. In addition, MB demographics were shifting in Middle America as young people were migrating away from their rural communities into urban areas such as Wichita, Kansas. These migration patterns placed increased pressure on the SDC to focus on planting churches in urban areas for their ethnic kin. In the minds of many MB, the mission in south Texas did not...

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hold the priority that it once did, eclipsed by the need to plant churches for their own people who were beginning to move to urban centers.\textsuperscript{15}

For the Home Missions Committee of the SDC, it was not so much a matter of genuinely working to create self-sustaining mission churches, which heretofore was not discussed seriously, but more an attempt to free themselves to do mission work elsewhere. After twenty years of work in south Texas, MB constituents were no longer as enamored with the mission as they once were. The financial burden, which had reached an annual cost of $33,185 by 1958, had become more than the SDC could handle.\textsuperscript{16} The Home Missions Committee had created a dependant mission, and they were looking for a means to remove themselves from the burden they themselves created.

In 1959 the Home Missions Committee reported that the indigenization process had officially begun as churches were asked to formally organize themselves and begin paying part of their pastor’s salary. The pastors of congregations, including white missionaries, were allowed to make a living through secular means, as the church would not be able to provide the stipend they received from the SDC. The financial records, however, do not reflect a cut in donations by the SDC. In 1959 financial giving by the SDC actually increased by almost $7,000 dollars with most of the increase going to the needs at \textit{El Faro} school.\textsuperscript{17} Contrary to what the Home Missions Committee was reporting to the SDC, indigenization had not begun as planned. With no clear vision as to how to carry out the process of indigenization, the SDC looked to the Board of Foreign Missions for ideas. This created an unexpected change in the structure of the mission.

\textsuperscript{15} SDC Minutes, October 16-19, 1959 (Hillsboro: Center for MB Studies Archives).
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid; Martinez, 173.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
when all missionary responsibilities, with the exception of El Faro school, were transferred to the Board of Foreign Missions beginning in 1960.18

SHIFTING LOYALTIES

At the Southern District Conference (SDC) it was recommended that, in accordance with indigenizing efforts by the MB church world-wide, the south Texas and Mexico churches should align themselves with the Latin American Mission of the Board of Foreign Missions. Meanwhile, the SDC maintained control of El Faro school. The Board of Foreign Missions was a branch of the larger Mennonite Brethren (MB) church in North America. It handled foreign mission efforts for the entire church. The move of south Texas churches to the Board of Foreign Missions, regardless of the fact that the churches were within U.S. borders, had much to do with the foreign board’s attempt to shift toward indigenization on a global scale.19 The desire of the SDC to indigenize the south Texas churches coupled with the paradigm shift of the foreign board made the transfer of power logical for both parties involved. The 1957-1958 annual report given by the Board of Foreign Missions to the MB Conferences cited a major shift in mission strategies. “The world wide national-and-race awakening,” the report stated, “of the past decade presents completely new challenges to the relationship of the mission to the indigenous population as well as to the relationship of the mission.”20 The report further stated that social and economic changes in the world necessitated an evaluation of current mission strategy. This shift signaled a new era of MB missions and challenged the

19 Ibid.
church to reevaluate its place in the world with relation to their desire to continue the evangelization of the “languishing heathen yet in darkness.”

As a result of the attempt to transfer the south Texas mission, the SDC and the Board of Foreign Missions collaboratively formed an “Interim Administrative Committee of Latin American Work in North America.” The group first met in April 1959 to discuss the implications and organization of transfer. The legal incorporation of the work required that the work in Mexico be organized as “Society of Friendship of Mexico” and south Texas as “The Latin American Mennonite Brethren of Texas.” This legal incorporation legitimized the mission along the border by identifying it as a separate entity all its own. The legal name for the south Texas mission, decided upon by the Interim Administrative Committee, was the first and only MB Conference in North America to be identified first by its ethnicity and then by its denominational affiliation. Moreover, whereas in the 1920s the term “Latin American” was a popular naming for Mexicans living in the U.S., by the late 1950s it was rarely in use by the community itself. To this day the south Texas churches identify themselves as Mexican or Mexican American yet they carry the distinction of being the foreign “Latin American” Conference. “That name does not fit us,” commented church leader Rolando Mireles, “it makes us sound as if we are foreigners in our own land.”

The overall goal in amalgamating the work in Mexico and south Texas was an attempt by the Board of Foreign Missions to establish a united “Latin National Church.” This unification would be administered through the foreign missions department and

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21 Ibid.
22 A.E. Janzen et al., “Interim Administrative Committee of the Latin American in North America,” April 14, 1959 (Hillsboro: Center for MB Studies Archives)
23 Rolando Mireles, interview with author, 10 February 2004.

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would function under what the board deemed a “spiritual constitution.” The philosophy behind this spiritual constitution cited that churches on both sides of the border could operate without regard to national boundaries. There were no clear delineations of how this work would actually take place or be administered. There were no ethnic Mexicans working at formulating such a proposal, and it was assumed by Anglo MB that any prospective constitution would be approved by the ethnic Mexican community. “The ‘spiritual constitution,’ stated the report, “should find approval in Mexico and South Texas.”

The Interim Administrative Committee met again in December of 1959 to define the terms of transfer. The Committee, made up of Anglo MB solely, agreed that the transfer of south Texas churches did not guarantee that the mission would continue under the supervision of the foreign board. Upon complete transfer, scheduled for March 1, 1960, the foreign board gained authority to adjust, maneuver, or terminate the mission. The changes to the mission, however, were not immediate and to most Mexican Americans the transfer of power meant little. At the time of the transfer was completed in 1960 there were a total of seven mission churches in the small, rural communities of La Casita, La Grulla, La Joya, Los Ebanos, Chihuahua, Mission, and Lull. Most of these congregations were not larger than forty members, with Chihuahua being the lone exception at sixty members.

The immediate plans were to investigate the possibility of initiating a Bible school that mirrored the work of the Rio Grande Bible Institute. It would be located in the city of McAllen and tailored to the needs of ethnic Mexicans who aligned themselves with the

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24 Ibid.
Mennonite Brethren church. The idea for a Bible school came out of the first meeting of the leadership committee of the Latin American Mennonite Brethren Conference (LAMB) in May 1960. The LAMB committee, made up of both Anglo and Mexican American leadership, put forward a proposal to the Board of Foreign Missions that called for a school that "establishes groups of believers into strong local churches that will carry on the work of soul winning and church building...due to the lack of an efficient training center our churches today are without trained personnel". The proposal was significant because it was the first of its kind to call for leadership training. The proposal implied that leadership training had not occurred in the churches and had therefore created a crisis. "The children have been taught," the proposal claimed referring to Mexican American converts, "but the Christians have not been trained... If we want self-governing churches, then we must face the issue, pay the price or be satisfied with preaching centers, [sic] and continue to bring in workers from the outside as vacancies occur." The proposal, however, went nowhere, and the idea of starting a Bible school to advance the indigenization process was never taken seriously by the Board of Foreign Missions. Instead the foreign board felt that it was more important they evaluate the existing congregations and build an indigenization plan based on those evaluations. However difficult the indigenization process was for the Board of Foreign Missions, it also took a toll on Mexican American leadership. Soon after the transfer of the mission to the Board of Foreign Missions there was an attempt to begin replacing

27 Ibid.
28 Ibid.
29 Ricardo Peña, "Letter to the Committee on Home Missions," 17 April 1961 (Fresno: Center for MB Studies Archives); Peña made a plea to the Home Missions Committee to consider the possibility of establishing a Bible training program in south Texas after the Board of Foreign Missions rejected the idea.
Anglo workers with Mexican American leadership. But after more than twenty years of Anglo leadership it was difficult for many ethnic Mexicans to understand why the change had to take place. The prevailing sentiment remained that Mexican American leadership would not be as effective in doing mission work. This was evidenced early in 1961 when Mexican Americans began to question the indigenization process. In February of 1961 the MB congregation in La Casita, organized a petition against the decision to replace an Anglo preacher with a Mexican American. Most of the congregation’s members signed the petition. They cited how their pastor, Albert Epp, had contributed greatly to church growth and they warned of “a decline in church activeness if they are to leave.”

The petition does not mention the congregation’s fear of bringing in a Mexican American preacher. It can be assumed, however, that the congregation believed that continued church growth required an Anglo needed at helm. The Board of Foreign Missions declined the petition and in July of the same year Inocencio Garcia came to La Casita to become the pastor.

Only a month after the Casita MB church petition, Ricardo Peña made a plea to the Board of Foreign Missions for more Anglo missionaries. The call came in response to the growing fear of the Catholic presence in public schools.

We would highly recommend that we encourage teachers from our [Southern District] Conference of the Anglo-Speaking people to come work as teachers in the district schools... They could also be used as Sunday School teachers, youth leaders, and pianists... We feel they would be a great asset rather than an obstacle. We do not want to interfere in any way with the policies set by the Foreign Mission Board, that is, to

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nationalize the leadership of the mission field here, but we would greatly welcome their service in any way possible.\textsuperscript{32}

The group also mentioned Albert Epp and requested that he remain with the mission and be given an opportunity to teach at \textit{El Faro} school. The “Latin Missionaries,” as they referred to themselves, were the only ones to sign the letter. The request represented much of the “felt” need that local leadership had to make sure that the indigenization process did not produce negative results. The Board of Foreign Missions felt that “the baby had been thrown into the water and he must learn to swim on his own.” It ignored continuous pleas by south Texas leadership for continued Anglo support.\textsuperscript{33} Until this point, ideas coming from south Texas leadership to the Board of Foreign Missions about how to handle the indigenization process, which varied from a Bible school to train local leaders to increasing the number of Anglo missionaries, were ignored and disregarded.

\textbf{EVALUATING THE STATE OF SOUTH TEXAS MB CHURCHES}

Soon after the transfer was complete, the Board of Foreign Missions sent representatives to south Texas to evaluate the state of the mission. They learned exactly what LAMB leadership had stated previously—that the churches were not adequately prepared for self-support and self-government. This changed the course of indigenization and forced the Board of Foreign Missions to reconsider the manner in which they dealt with the south Texas churches. The evaluation team cited several reasons why the mission appeared weak and ill prepared for self-government. First, they noted the constant shift of families who migrated to the north to work and left the churches empty


\textsuperscript{33} Tim Kliewer, interview with author, email, 4 February 2004.
for long periods of time. Most of the members of the south Texas MB churches were migrant field workers, active in church during the off season, but absent during heavy work periods when they migrated to places like Wisconsin, Michigan, Indiana, and California.

Second, the lack of men in the congregations was seen as a major problem. Most of the MB churches in south Texas, as were many other Protestant congregations, were made up almost entirely of women who participated in peripheral ministries in the church but were seen as inferior to men in leading and ministering a congregation. The evaluation report noted that, out of the seven congregations visited, there were only thirty-five men attending MB churches in 1960.34

Third, the report criticized the rural location of the MB churches. In 1960 there was a considerable amount of out-migration by people living in the rural communities of Chihuahua, Havana, and Los Ebanos. “The shift of population,” stated the report, “from rural areas to the cities will necessitate an evaluation as to the necessity of keeping a full-time worker in such areas.”35 Overall the situation did not look positive for the Board of Foreign Missions, especially since they advocated an indigenization program to be implemented soon after transfer from the SDC. The report revealed the total membership of congregations at 244. Most had little or no formal organization. The total dollar amount contributed by these congregations equaled just ninety-five dollars.36

The points noted in the report are crucial in understanding the difficulty of indigenization. But the report fails to mention missionary strategy and method as a key

34 “Report on South Texas Churches,” no author given but the report makes it clear that it was drafted by someone in the Board of Foreign Missions, January 1960 (Hillsboro: Center for MB Studies Archives).  
35 Ibid.  
36 Ibid.
factor. Part of the problem had to do with the Board of Foreign Missions care in not being too critical of the work of the Home Missions Committee. Mission strategy began to be critiqued when the south Texas mission was juxtaposed with work in northern Mexico, which at least initially was doing a more effective job at self-governance. The churches in northern Mexico were started mostly by Mexican Americans beginning in the mid-1950s and the work began to blossom in places like Piedras Negras, Nuevo Ideal, Reynosa, and San Miguel. In fact, Harry Neufeld was often puzzled by the rapid growth as compared to south Texas. “I was dumbfounded,” recalled Neufeld in a letter to the Board of Foreign Missions concerning a pastor in Mexico, “I said to myself Alfredo [Villareal] is no preacher, and the way it seems he hardly even has a message and yet souls are being saved, I don’t get it.”

In 1962 the Board of Foreign Missions decided that it wanted to invest heavily in the work in Mexico placing workers in Durango and attempting to re-open a medical clinic in Nuevo Ideal. Yolanda Villareal, the only female who served as a part-time missionary, along with Ricardo Peña initiated much of the work in places like Durango, Nuevo Ideal, Maguelles, and San Miguel (present day Diaz-Ordaz). Villareal worked primarily with women and children, providing bible studies for children in the summer months and starting women’s ministries. This work was an extension of the work that Villareal had already been doing in surrounding villages in south Texas. But the work in Mexico never flourished in ways that pleased the foreign board. In fact, it created problems much greater than those in south Texas. In one sense both south

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37 Harry Neufeld, Letter to John Ratzlaff of the Board of Foreign Missions, September 8, 1961 (Hillsboro: Center for MB Studies Archives).
38 Board of Foreign Missions, “Consideration of the Fields: Mexico and South Texas,” August 1962 (Hillsboro: Center for MB Studies Archives).
39 Yolanda Villareal, interview with author, 8 January 2004.
Texas/northern Mexico had become the dependant scourge for both the Board of Foreign Missions and the Home Missions Committee. Moreover, regardless of plans to develop a "Latin National Church," the MB never encouraged ethnic Mexican collaboration on both sides of the border. Thus they contradicted their own plan for a "spiritual constitution" without regard to national boundaries.

In 1962 the Board of Foreign Missions developed a plan, Memorandum I. It outlined a strategic plan for the manner in which the south Texas mission would relate to the foreign board. Again, the plan was drafted with no participation by Mexican American leadership. Nor did it take into account past requests by the south Texas community. Memorandum I outlined several key points for future consideration. First, it advocated for a separate conference to be formed independent in its governance. This conference could also include churches in northern Mexico with established ties to the MB mission in south Texas. The idea for a self-governing conference, however, could not happen without increased missionary efforts into large population and professional centers in such places as McAllen, Pharr, Mission, and Reynosa. The idea was for MB churches to attract professional people, both Anglo and Mexican American, as opposed to the largely rural and migrant populations. In addition to this strategy, *El Faro* school was deemed as important to the church’s mission. Funding would continue by the Home Missions Committee at least through grade eight with the possibility of scholarship help for those wanting to continue with a Christian education in another institution past grade eight.

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40 Board of Foreign Missions, “Memorandum I,” 7 May 1962 (Hillsboro: Center for MB Studies Archives).
41 Ibid.
Second, the memorandum encouraged the newly formed south Texas conference to mirror the organizational structures of Anglo MB conferences in the north, specifically that of the SDC. This meant that the newly organized conference had to follow the procedures and administrations of pastoral, mission, and educational ministries. Regardless of previous evaluations about the status of self-governance in south Texas churches, the memorandum recommended that the conference shift from "mission status" to "ministers of the MB Latin American Conference." To establish this conference, it was recommended that an Advisory Commission be organized consisting of Anglo MB from the SDC and the Board of Foreign Missions to assist "the brethren of south Texas." In a rather radical move, the memorandum called upon all Anglo missionaries to move their church memberships from northern MB churches to south Texas congregations to "fully integrate and identify in every way with the churches."42 Memorandum I signaled the first organized plan by the foreign board, and it received quick approval by south Texas leadership. The memorandum, however, remained vague in areas of how to train local leadership and develop better funding strategies.

The preliminary structure with Memorandum I was confirmed with the release of Memorandum II. This new memorandum outlined the new relationship with the Board of Foreign Missions as one that was mutually accountable. It placed more emphasis on the Latin American Mennonite Brethren (LAMB) Conference to administer the work. Only three years after receiving responsibility for the mission, the Board of Foreign Missions, considered transferring the south Texas work to be administered by the U.S. Area

42 Ibid.

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This shift would not happen until 1969 when the LAMB Conference refused to be absorbed by the SDC. Instead, it decided to be an independent conference with peripheral support from the U.S. Conference. That same year the missionary Alvin Neufeld, who operated an independent Mennonite Brethren church in Lull, Texas, requested to the Board of Foreign Missions that his congregation be incorporated into the newly formed LAMB Conference. The Board responded by stating “that the Mission Board nor the office would accept his offer for that was the prerogative of the L.A.M.B. Conference.”

The early 1960s saw the arrival of new missionaries. In 1961 Tim Kliewer arrived in Los Ebanos as part of his Christian Service assignment as a 1-W (Alternative to Military Service). Kliewer taught at El Faro school and pastored the Los Ebanos church upon his arrival. When Kliewer arrived in Los Ebanos, the gender and age make-up of the churches resembled a very young church (most members were under 16 years of age) and the church was dominated by women. Although Kliewer was only in south Texas for two years, he managed to successfully coordinate “Youth for Christ,” which gathered youth from the churches for activities and Christian worship. “The Youth for Christ gatherings were held at El Faro,” recalled Kliewer, “and they served as a rallying point for churches and really helped stimulate church growth in the early 1960s.”

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43 Loyal Funk et al., “Meeting of South Texas Advisory Committee,” 3 January 1963, Dallas, Texas (Hillsboro: Center for MB Studies Archives).
45 Tim Kliewer, interview with author, email, 4 February 2004.
46 Ibid.
47 Ibid.
In 1963 Frank Muñoz (of Puerto Rican descent) heard about the mission work in south Texas from an MB professor at Dallas Theological Seminary. Muñoz moved to south Texas in late 1963. His arrival was a welcome addition by many of the Anglo missionaries because of the practical and academic experience that Muñoz brought with him. The South Texas Commission (STC), comprised of mostly Anglos, offered Muñoz work as a church planter in McAllen “to establish a Latin American church there. He has been promised $250 dollars plus living quarters and permitted to attend school.” But the Administrative Committee of the newly formed LAMB Conference was disturbed by the amount of funding Muñoz received without consideration or consultation. No Mexican American missionary had ever been offered a full salary with the option to attend classes at the Bible Institute. The challenge from Mexican American leadership was so strong the STC apologized to the Muñoz family for no longer being able to honor the promised financial package. Standing up to the dominant Anglo leadership forced both groups to examine what the new roles needed to be as they tried to implement an indigenization process.

LAMB: ORGANIZING FOR AUTONOMY

The 1960s were good years for the LAMB Conference. Church membership grew from a total of 208 members in 1964 to 310 by 1969, a number they have yet to replicate. According to a field study of the LAMB Conference conducted by Don Foul, an MB college student at the time, south Texas MB churches had grown an estimated 29

49 Ibid.
50 Peter J. Funk, John Ratzlaff, and H.R. Wiens, “A Visit to the South Texas Field,” 9-12 September 1963 (Fresno: Center for MB Studies Archives).
percent from 1964 to 1967. That growth resulted in an average membership increase of 6.6 percent annually. These numbers are impressive when compared to MB Church growth at the national level, which was averaging an increase of 4.5 percent and the Southern District Conference, only a 4.0 percent increase since 1964.\(^5\) The rapid and substantial growth had much to do with the increasing importance of *El Faro* as a social and cultural gathering place for MB church members. The weekly radio program of the Mennonite Brethren, *"La Fuente Viva,"* broadcasted Christian programming in northern Mexico and south Texas. By 1965 nearly 200 hundred people from all over the border region were writing in appreciation of the program and requesting Christian literature. Moreover, there were more Mexican Americans in leadership positions, including women. Working child evangelism, Yolanda Villareal became the first full-time female Mexican American missionary for the MennoniteBrethren church in 1965.\(^5\) This leadership challenged Anglo authority and made strong calls for south Texas autonomy without success.\(^5\) Mexican Americans were treated as children in many cases, even by their Anglo co-workers in south Texas. The correspondence with the northern conferences was primarily between Anglos in south Texas and in Kansas.

We [South Texas Commission] wish to thank you [Daniel Wirsche] for not permitting the [LAMB] conference to ask for more help from Hillsboro... even though they did oppose you. It is not that we are so tight, but we feel that we have hurt that work more than helped it by being too liberal with giving them everything they ask for.\(^5\)  

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\(^5\) Don Foul, “Factual Study of the Latin American Mennonite Brethren Conference field of South Texas in terms of Church Growth and the Possibility of planting Self-Sufficient Churches,” 26 December 1967 (Hillsboro: Center for MB Studies Archives).

\(^5\) Regular South Texas Administrative Committee Meeting, 12 January 1965, McAllen, Texas (Fresno: Center for MB Studies Archives).


Regardless of the non-participation of Mexican American MB in the larger civil rights movements of the 1960s, they did work at building equity in church bodies and Anglo/Mexican American relationships by pushing for greater LAMB Conference autonomy. The tension between both racial groups would come to a critical clash when in 1970 the South Texas Commission (STC, joint administrative body of the Board of Foreign Missions and Home Missions Committee) decided to withdraw complete financial support for church work, including *El Faro* school. The decision came directly from the north and surprised and shocked south Texas leaders. A growing antagonism developed among some Mexican Americans toward the Mennonite Brethren church, resulting in the loss of over 100 members from 1969 to 1972. Thus, the 1960s became a time of boom and bust for the Mennonite Brethren church in south Texas.

The first annual business session of the Latin American Mennonite Brethren Conference (LAMB) convened on February 29, 1964. It was the first time that south Texas leadership, which consisted of both Mexican Americans and Anglos, met in an organized and formal manner to discuss church business. Of significance, the leadership met without the guidance of the STC. Still the culture of the meeting reflected Anglo values and worship styles. Hymns sung were in English similar to hymns sung by Anglo MB in Kansas, and the first chairman for the LAMB Conference was an Anglo missionary (Alvin Neufeld). Churches represented at the conference included La Casita, Chihuahua, Los Ebanos, La Grulla, La Joya, Lull, and Mission. Churches now had Mexican American leadership, but overall conference leadership still resided with Anglo missionaries. During this meeting the official transfer of property from the Board of Foreign Missions to the LAMB Conference took place. All the aforementioned churches

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and parsonages were transferred over to LAMB, which placed full responsibility for property for the first time with south Texas leadership. The more critical problems of 1964-65 were the lack of trained leaders in the churches and the tension created over the time that several workers devoted to both teaching at *El Faro* school and work in a church. The LAMB Conference was intent on spreading its message with radio talk programs, extending into Reynosa, Mexico, and educational programs at *El Faro*.57

Just as the south Texas churches were became more autonomous, new resistance began to surface from the church bodies in the north. In 1966 the Administrative Committee of the LAMB Conference probed into the problems facing south Texas churches. They cited several areas of concern, but the major problem had to do with the lack of autonomy and flexibility that south Texas leadership felt in their relationship with the north. “The L.A.M.B. Conference does not have full autonomy,” cited the report. “Decisions made by the L.A.M.B. Conference are referred to by the people of the churches as decisions made by the NORTH and not by them, saying, ‘That’s the way THEY want it.’”58 The leadership was upset over the request by the Board of Foreign Missions requiring the dismissal of all pastors teaching at *El Faro* school to focus on full time church ministry. Moreover, the report claimed the dual affiliation and governorship of the STC created a division among workers in south Texas and required more financial support than necessary. The crux of the problem resided in the perspective that the south

58 “Fourth Annual Business Session Latin American District Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Church,” 2-8 November 1966, Sullivan City, Texas (Fresno: Center for MB Studies Archives).
Texas leadership had about its work (holistic and inclusive of both the churches and the school), and the manner in which the STC competed over whose work was the most important, El Faro or of planting more churches. The Administrative Committee of the LAMB Conference wanted to create a truly autonomous body where it had the power to assess the local needs and respond accordingly without interference from the church conferences in the north. The report posed five recommendations for how work in south Texas should be administered.

A. That the L.A.M.B. Conference continue to receive subsidy on the same basis as in the past.
B. That the subsidy for both the churches and the school be channeled through the L.A.M.B. Conference treasury.
C. That the administration of the churches and the school and all phases of the work be left to the L.A.M.B. Conference. This would mean that the L.A.M.B. Conference would be autonomous to use the funds and workers on the field to meet the needs of the entire work.
D. That the L.A.M.B. Conference continue to receive advise [sic] and counseling from the General Conference and Southern District Conference Mission Boards.
E. That the El Faro School become a part of L.A.M.B. Conference and be administered by it.60

The response from the South Texas Commission (STC) was not favorable. The first recommendation was rejected on the basis that a three year cut back program was to take effect, which would reduce funding from the north. The second and third recommendations were rejected because giving up financial decision-making power was too great a risk. "If L.A.M.B. wants to be autonomous let them be autonomous financially as well," STC reported.61 The last two recommendations were rejected as well. The response went on to criticize the amount of time missionaries were giving to El

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59 Ibid.
60 Ibid.
61 South Texas Commission, "In Reply to your last Minutes and Recommendations," 31 October 1966 (Fresno: Center for MB Studies Archives); In 1964 the Home Missions Committee and the Board of Foreign Missions worked together and were known as the "South Texas Commission."
Faro as opposed to church planting. “It seems that El Faro which was begun as a supplement to the church ministry,” stated Raymond Vogt of the STC, “has gradually become a stumbling block to the church ministry.” 62

By 1967 spirits were low. There existed disunity between south Texas mission workers, many feeling like they were being over worked and under compensated, and the SDC. The majority of the work done during this period focused on the children, primarily through the efforts of Yolanda Villareal. Many felt this strategy was not the most beneficial. Mission workers complained of the need for “more life and rest.” 63 Moreover, racial tensions between Anglo and Mexican American missionaries were still high in 1967. Many Anglos believed “that the Spanish people are insincere...that it takes a long times to win their confidence.” 64

In becoming self-sufficient churches, south Texas leadership was judged by Anglo standards in the north. For example, the requirements for having a self-sustaining church, as defined by the Anglo MB, were: a church building, parsonage, salaried pastor, $4,500 budget, 15 men that could tithe consistently, 25 men for basic church leadership, and a total of 100 members per 4,000 population. 65 This went against the very make-up of the churches as most were comprised almost entirely of women and children. Most only had a membership average of forty-five, and based on income levels in south Texas, individual churches could not have been able to sustain a $4,500 budget. 66

62 Ibid.
63 Alfred H. Quiring, Letter to Henry Brucks, Associate Secretary of the Board of Missions and Services, 3 August 1967 (Fresno: Center for MB Studies Archives).
64 Alfred H. Quiring, Letter to Henry Brucks, 15 August 1967 (Fresno: Center for MB Studies Archives).
Frustrated by the growing threat of being cut off financially, the south Texas churches made a request to the U.S. Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches. They wanted an autonomous status while perhaps maintaining some type of subsidy.

The Latin brethren conveyed the impression that they did not wish to be absorbed within a conference, but desired to retain their Latin identity and be recognized as equals... this factor largely determined their decision to decline to become part of the Southern District Conference and to seek affiliation with the U.S. Conference.”

In 1969 the work in south Texas, along with the African American mission in North Carolina, was transferred to the U.S. Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches. The Board of Foreign Missions committed itself to providing subsidies for the remainder of the fiscal year, slowly phasing out funding in 1971. The decision to withdraw support and the manner in which the Board of Foreign Missions dealt with the situation greatly affected south Texas. The tense relationship contributed to LAMB refusing to be absorbed by the Southern District Conference and instead became its own Conference with peripheral ties to the U.S. Area Conference. “We have pride in what we have been able to do,” stated south Texas leadership, “and we cannot be happy with any gifts that have strings, or conditions attached.” Under the partial leadership of the U.S. Area Conference, LAMB requested that the Committee on Contemporary Concerns (a

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68 Henry Brucks (Associate Secretary Southern District Conference), Letter to Ruben Wedel, 16 June 1969 (Fresno: Center for MB Studies Archives); “Transfer of South Texas Responsibilities To US Area Conference,” no date or author available (Fresno: Center for MB Studies Archives).
69 J.A. Froese (Chairman of the Committee on Contemporary Concerns, CCC), “Letter to Arthur Flaming,” 30 June 1973 (Fresno: Center for MB Studies Archives); The CCC began in the early 1970s with the purpose of helping educate the U.S. MB Churches on peace issues and help bring Anglo MB into a closer relationship with the two minority conferences: LAMB and North Carolina district (predominantly African American churches). According to MB pastor Tim Kliener, the demise of the CCC happened when a survey was done among all the churches of the US Area Conference (LAMB and North Carolina were not invited to participate). The survey indicated that the CCC was not much benefit to the Anglos who were footing the bill. At the annual US Conference Kliener expressed his displeasure at the fact that the very people the CCC was intended to serve were not asked what they thought of the CCC. Kliener’s request to include both LAMB and North Carolina was ignored and the CCC was terminated soon thereafter.

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committee dealing with social concerns within the MB Church) help find "sister congegations" which might be willing to assist financially without placing requirements on how funds might be used.\textsuperscript{70} At the time of the U.S. Area Conference take over in 1969, LAMB reported nearly 400 members and an annual giving of almost $13,000. The U.S. Conference continued to receive a subsidy from the STC, totaling nearly $8,000 in 1969. That amount was reduced in 1970 to $5,400, and the final year of financial assistance when the subsidy was dropped to $2,500 in 1971. From 1937 through 1971 the subsidies totaled a little over $700,000. The money helped plant churches, fund \textit{El Faro} school, and pay missionary salaries.\textsuperscript{71}

The large financial investment in south Texas provided little for leadership training, planting healthy indigenous churches, and little room given to Mexican American leadership to provide their own direction and Church function. "In one sense," recalled pastor Alfredo Tagle, "they set us up to fail because up to 1971 they handled all the business, all the leadership, and dictated the direction and mission. That is work we should have been doing."\textsuperscript{72} The mission work in south Texas ended with the loss of more than 100 members and resentment toward the Anglo MB for the manner in which they handled the mission. Conversely, Anglo leadership in the north felt justified in their actions because it seemed that south Texas leadership could not function without large subsidies from the north.\textsuperscript{73} It was a way out of a mess they themselves created through a paternalistic missionary strategy.

\textsuperscript{70} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{71} Martinez, "Ministry Among U.S. Hispanics by an Ethno-Religious Minority," 173.
\textsuperscript{72} Alfredo Tagle, interview with author, 15 September 2004.
\textsuperscript{73} Martinez, "Ministry Among U.S. Hispanics by an Ethno-Religious Minority," 95.
EL FARO: COMMUNITY SERVICE OR CHURCH MINISTRY?

From El Faro's humble beginning in 1948 with Army barrack classrooms, the school had grown to two large buildings. The barracks housed nine classrooms and an administrative office. In addition, the school added a gymnasium, four apartments for teachers, and garage space for maintenance supplies. By 1963 the school employed nine full-time teachers and offered grades one through ten. Enrollment had grown from eighty students in 1948 to 184 for academic year 1962-1963. From the beginning, problems surfaced as low teacher salaries (teachers received $150 a month) made it difficult to retain and recruit qualified teachers.

By 1964 a significant shift occurred regarding El Faro school and its relationship to the Home Missions Committee of the SDC. The school became a top priority because of the financial burden (nearly $24,000 annually) that it placed on the SDC. As a result the Home Missions Committee was in debt nearly $13,000 dollars by 1964. Actual annual expenses for the school were $31,441. The difference between the Home Missions Committee subsidy and actual cost was paid for by tuition fees, individual donations, and unnamed sources. For the South Texas Commission (STC), El Faro became a financial burden that could no longer be carried. But the growing distress over El Faro did not solely reside with financial concerns but with shifting loyalties over what the true service of the school had become. Many on the STC felt "that it [El Faro] had become seemingly more important than church ministry." The concern of the STC had

74 Daniel Wirsche, "Educational Program of The Latin M.B. Conference," 1 August 1963 (Fresno: Center for MB Studies Archives).
75 Raymond Vogt et al., "Meeting of South Texas Commission," 30 April 1964 (Fresno: Center for MB Studies Archives).
77 South Texas Commission, "In Reply to your last Minutes and Recommendations," (Fresno: Center for MB Studies Archives).
much to do over what they felt were meager returns for such a large financial investment. “Why,” questioned the STC, “has there not been greater results for so much money and effort having been expended... Why has there been such a dearth of young consecrated men added to the Lord’s work here in the Valley.” Conversely, many Mexican American leadership felt that El Faro served as the gathering point for MB church members and a place that provided south Texas children a good education.

There are two identified reasons why El Faro became the primary reason for the continuing growth of the churches. First, the rules that prohibited non-MB children to attend the school were relaxed in favor of an open admission policy where anyone, Christian/non-Christian, could attend the school. This allowed for new families to enter the church who otherwise would not have attended an MB church. Mexican American families trusted El Faro and believed that indeed their children received a superior education as compared to the public school. Second, the churches organized “Youth for Christ” events allowing for relaxed social gatherings every Saturday. According to former Los Ebanos pastor Tim Kliewer, Youth for Christ was popular among the community because its emphasis was both spiritual and physical. El Faro school became a “rallying point” for the churches that otherwise would not have activities for youth on the weekends. Moreover, this shift in purpose, from evangelical and identity shaping (early Americanization efforts) to a social and cultural gathering place, placed much doubt into the minds of the STC over whether funds were being spent appropriately.

if the school was not true to its original purpose. In 1964 *El Faro* collected only $1,000 in tuition fees while the Home Missions Committee contributed nearly $23,000. This imbalance led many at the STC to believe that some pastors who were serving as teachers needed to return to full-time evangelism and church planting for that was seen as “the heart of missions. All other activities are but auxiliary.”

The feeling differed among Mexican Americans who saw *El Faro* as fulfilling an important community need.

Regardless of the dispute between Anglo and Mexican American leadership, *El Faro* school seemed to be doing quite well in 1965. Total enrollment remained steady at 168 with 27 students in junior and senior high and 138 students in primary grade levels. The school received federal aid in the form of supplies for remedial reading, teacher assistants, free meals for children of poor families, and free medical attention for students. Furthermore, the school began an athletics program with a boys inter-scholastic competition and a basketball team for the girls that played teams in places like Brownsville and Laredo.

In addition, the LAMB Conference passed a resolution outlining the continued support of *El Faro*, and deemed it necessary to find ways to raise money to increase the salaries of the teachers every year. But all this success and future planning did not matter. *El Faro* closed its doors after academic year of 1968-1969. From the documents that cite future planning and the development of new athletic programs, it was possible that the LAMB Conference had no clue that school’s end was indeed near.

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82 “Meeting of the Brethren of the Mennonite Brethren South Texas Commission with representatives of the World-Wide Mission concerning their schools in South Texas,” 18 January 1965, McAllen, Texas (Fresno: Center for MB Studies Archives).
84 “Fourth Annual Business Session Latin American District Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Church” (Fresno: Center for MB Studies Archives).
Two major decisions by the STC contributed to increasingly tense relations between them and south Texas leadership. First, the STC recommended that all church pastors be removed from their responsibilities at *El Faro* school, placing a heavy burden on south Texas to find teachers for the school. Part of the problem was in perspective. The LAMB Conference perceived the work as holistic and inclusive of both the school and the mission of planting churches and church organization. Conversely, the STC, which had mutually exclusive responsibilities at the school and church, viewed the work in south Texas as two different missions thus providing extra stress for south Texas workers.85

Second, to curb expenses the STC was incurring in south Texas, they recommended that three congregations be united into one, thus reducing costs greatly. The Commission recommended that the Los Ebanos, La Joya, and Chihuahua congregations blend into one, therefore subsidizing one pastor and reducing costs. The proposal drew criticism from south Texas because of the distance between these three churches (La Joya is about 3 miles east of Los Ebanos). The merger worked for a while but quickly drifted apart as distance made it too difficult for many to continue attending.86 Most of the membership did not have transportation, and driving to the new proposed site, La Joya, was not a possibility for many.87

By academic year 1967-68 *El Faro* was in administrative and financial crisis. Frank Muñoz resigned as superintendent after the academic year under criticism for being an unruly and authoritative leader. That same year overall enrollment had dropped to

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85 L.A.M.B. Administrative Committee, minutes, 18 October 1966 (Fresno: Center for MB Studies Archives).
86 Domingo Villareal, interview with author, 18 February 2004.
87 Peter J. Funk, Letter to Ray Vogt, 8 August 1967 (Fresno: Center for MB Studies Archives)
eighty students primarily because parents were not willing to pay the newly imposed fee of $25 dollars which took effect in 1965.88 The one bright spot at the end of 1968 was that El Faro graduated its second class as seven high school seniors graduated, all of whom started and completed their education at El Faro.89

The Home Missions Committee identified six problem areas in 1968. Finances were listed as a major hindrance as was the lack of qualified teachers willing to teach at the school. But those problems were consistent throughout the history of El Faro and had yet to raise major concern. The tipping point for the school came over internal dissent regarding the true mission of the school. Many on the Home Missions Committee believed that “the work [in south Texas] at times appeared to be school-centered and not church-centered, and consequently the work of evangelism suffered.”90 “The school does play a vital part,” commented H.R. Wiens in a letter to Daniel Wirsche, “but the building of churches is even more important. And this, seemingly, our brethren of Latin descent in South Texas do not understand.”91 The Home Missions Committee voted to terminate the school at the end of academic year 1969. Consistent with historical patterns, the Mexican American community in south Texas was not involved in the voting process even though they adamantly requested that the school find creative funding strategies to remain open.92 “The closing of El Faro,” recalled Rolando Mireles, “began a downward spiral because the school in itself was a big testimony to a lot of the community in the Valley.”93 Many Anglo MB in the north were blind to the manner in which the school

88 Joint Meeting of the El Faro School Board, LAMB Administrative Committee, and Teachers, 2 February 1965 (Fresno: Center for MB Studies Archives).
89 Ibid.
90 SDC Minutes, Nov. 15-17, 1968, Fairview, Oklahoma (Hillsboro: Center for MB Studies Archives).
92 Ibid.
93 Rolando Mireles, interview with author, 15 September 2004.
provided a community service to both Protestants and non-Protestants and how it shaped the identity of the MB churches in south Texas in the 1960s.\textsuperscript{94} Its closing, as one former pastor commented, was a "racial travesty."\textsuperscript{95}

CONCLUSION

The period between 1958-1971 was a boom and bust time for the MB church in south Texas. This chapter analyzed the impact that constant transition had on the mission and the manner in which paternalistic mission strategies began to manifest themselves with increased dissatisfaction and tension about the work. The departure of Harry and Sarah Neufeld, the transfer of part of the south Texas work to the Board of Foreign Missions, the creation of the LAMB Conference, and the closing of \textit{El Faro} school were critical to much of the turbulent times and membership decline in the 1960s. The factors leading to the church membership decline had to with the lack of institutional flexibility on the part of the South Texas Commission. Race prejudice and paternalistic mission strategies contributed greatly to this inflexibility and, in the end, led to an ugly conclusion to what many believed could develop into strong church in south Texas. The STC remained set in their ways and Anglo MB did not have a clear sense of their own identity as Anabaptists and therefore had no clear vision for planting authentic Mexican American MB churches. The church suffered directly back then and they continue to struggle with questions of theological and cultural identity affecting church life.

\textsuperscript{94} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{95} Tim Kliewer, interview with author, 4 February 2004.
By 1971 the mission in south Texas had come to a formal close. The Board of Foreign Missions and the Home Missions Committee had reached a saturation point with south Texas and could no longer justify allocating funds to a mission they felt had reached its climax. From 1937-1971 subsidies totaled a little over $778,000, which placed an increasingly heavy burden on the South Texas Commission. Moreover, Anglo Mennonite Brethren (MB) in the north began to see that their efforts at indigenization were not working. Internal blame began to surface as many MB leaders pointed fingers at paternalistic MB church institutions for the failure in south Texas. When funds were finally cut, it created resentment among many local people who felt like the MB church had set them up for failure. The issue in 1971 was not where pastors and leaders would find the necessary funding to continue but would they continue and under what circumstances.¹

The one rallying point for all the MB churches, El Faro, had been closed in the face of strong opposition by Mexican American leadership creating distrust with both

¹ H.R. Wiens, “Letter to Daniel Wirsche,” 6 April 1966 (Fresno: Center for MB Studies Archives); Alfredo Tagle, interview with author, 4 September 2003.
groups that continues to this day. Leadership in south Texas never felt empowered to make decisions for their community because the funding from the north came heavily restricted. The tension that began to build between Anglo and Mexican American leadership in the 1960s ultimately led to the disagreement over El Faro and created resentment when the South Texas Commission pulled all funding.\(^2\)

The mission had not developed in a healthy manner even after countless attempts of evaluating the missionary strategy—the Anglo MB believed maldevelopment to be a “Mexican” problem. The questions that surface at this point are numerous. Why, with escalating cultural tension, did the churches continue to grow during the 1960s? Why did so many members leave between 1969-1971? Was this exodus related to the withdrawal of the funds by the Anglo MB?

This chapter examines the factors that led to early church growth and decline toward the end of the 1960s. A review of church growth research along with church growth/decline theory is applied to both the contextual and institutional factors that led to eventual church membership decline in south Texas. Moreover, this chapter examines the cultural conversion of this particular group of Mexican Americans, from Catholics to Protestants, and what that meant in relation to identity formation. For example, what did conversion to Protestantism do to cultural customs in weddings, funerals, curanderismo, and baptism? How did the role of women change within the church, and what did the church provide institutionally for Mexican American women? In examining cultural dynamics of race and identity, Contact Theory is used to provide a theoretical framework in understanding the turbulent relationship between Mexican Americans and the

Mennonite Brethren. How did this cultural relationship work/not work and on what level? What were the systemic barriers in place that hindered better collaboration? How was the relationship different systemically versus individually? These questions and others are examined in this chapter along with conclusions about why the Mennonite Brethren were not successful, in comparison to other denominations, in establishing healthy and viable congregations in south Texas.³

The reasons for the rise and decline of MB churches in south Texas are complex and multi-faceted. The Martínez thesis (1988) argued primarily that MB ethnic identity hindered missionary efforts among U.S. Hispanics in both California and Texas.⁴ Mennonite Brethren missionaries expected Mexican Americans to assimilate in ways that Germanic-Russian MB had in the middle of the twentieth century. This resulted in unhealthy relations between both ethnic groups. MB ethnic preservation indeed played a role in formulating paternalistic mission strategies that instead of building indigenous churches, built dependant and oppressed ones. But for the missionaries on the field, ethnic self-preservation played a minimal role. Many people removed from their ethnic enclaves took on assimilationist titles such as "Anglo American" or "white." Race and

³ Religious historians argue that while mainline denominations were racist and paternalistic in their mission strategies, they established congregations based on the support of ethnic Mexicans who in many cases took leadership roles as missionaries and pastors. Moreover, mainline denominations practiced a separatist ideology that allowed ethnic Mexican leadership to develop without intrusion by white Americans. Conversely, the Mennonite Brethren experience practiced an assimilation program that never allowed for healthy, indigenous churches to develop. See: Paul Barton, "In Both Worlds: A History of Hispanic Protestantism in the U.S. Southwest" (Ph.D. diss., Southern Methodist University, 1999); Francisco García-Treto and R. Douglas Brackenridge, Iglesia Presbiteriana: A History of Presbyterians and Mexican Americans in the Southwest (San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 1974); Juan Martínez, "Origins and Development of Protestantism Among Latinos in the Southwestern United States, 1836-1900" (Ph.D. diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 1996); Gastón Espinosa, "Borderland Religion: Los Angeles and the Origins of the Latino Pentecostal Movement in the U.S., Mexico, and Puerto Rico, 1900-1945" (Ph.D. diss., University of California Santa Barbara, 1999).

place (geography) defined the MB identity in south Texas as white people held privileged positions in a predominately Mexican American milieu. As missionaries identified themselves as “white,” they also assimilated theological currents popular during the 1920s and 1930s. Fundamentalist theology, with such leaders as C.I. Scofield, D.L. Moody, and the MB evangelist R.A. Torrey, became a large part of Mennonite Brethren theology.\(^5\) Regardless of the heavy emphasis on nationalistic and militaristic ideology of fundamentalism, which contradicted MB/Anabaptist theology, the MB assimilated fundamentalism and it became a major factor in developing mission strategy and practice in the late 1920s and 1930s. Fundamentalist theology elevated the importance of Anglo American values and practiced exclusivity of people of color. MB missionaries, then, were no different in their racism than secular white society. Regardless of the individual relationships they held with Mexican Americans, which in many instances were benign, institutionally and systemically their mission represented a paternalistic and subtractive cultural travesty. At the core of the eventual decline of the MB churches was racial conflict. This conflict manifested itself in paternalistic strategy, the closing of *El Faro* school, and the culturally subtractive tactics practiced upon Mexican Americans. To become “Christian,” cultural symbolism and practice were deemed evil and un-Christian. Mennonite Brethren mission practices were consistent with other Protestant mission patterns in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in the Southwest. The critical point for many other Protestant denominations, including the Methodists, Presbyterians, and Pentecostals was their ability to shift institutionally to better reflect the cultural

\(^5\) Fundamentalist theology grew largely in the 1920s in direct opposition to the Scopes “monkey” trial in Dayton, OH., 1925. The fundamentalist movement opposed the accommodation of Christian doctrine with modern scientific thought and argued for the complete inerrancy and authority of the Bible. It called for a literal reading of the Bible and was heavily nationalistic and militaristic.
context in which missions were being done. The MB did not shift institutionally, and it impacted their ability to create self-sustaining and self-governing churches in south Texas.

**CHURCH GROWTH THEORY: CONTEXTUAL VS. INSTITUTIONAL FACTORS**

There is a large body of research identifying both contextual and institutional factors which determine church growth and decline. Contextual factors are external to the specific church. They include birth rates in a community, economic development, and the racial and ethnic demographics of a community. All these factors contribute in to the relative health of a congregation, especially if the congregation is able to adjust its institutional culture to the surrounding context. Sociologist Kenneth Inskeep argues that institutional factors represent the organizational culture of a denomination. Organizational culture represents, among other things, theology, legalisms, church hierarchy and polity. Both of these forces are not mutually exclusive and often times equally responsible for determining growth or decline in churches. Dean Hoge and David Roozen, who in 1979 edited a volume entitled *Understanding Church Growth and Decline: 1950-1978*, were the first to incorporate a theoretical framework that acknowledged the importance of both contextual and institutional factors. Included in the volume is the research of Wade Clark Roof on United Presbyterian congregations which raised the question of the power of contextual versus institutional forces. Roof argued that both contextual and institutional factors were important in determining the level of church growth or decline. For example, the affluence of a particular community coupled

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with a clear sense of doctrinal truth and an intolerance of internal theological dissent generally produced church growth.⁷ "It was clear," argued Roof, "that growing Presbyterian congregations were most successful in communities of affluent, young, middle-class, largely white families. Satisfaction with church worship and program, and congregational cooperation and harmony among members were among the most important institutional factors."⁸

A similar study conducted by R.W. Bibby and M.B. Brinkerhoff in 1983 argued that contextual factors override institutional factors especially in rural communities. The geographic and economic location of a congregation is a factor in retention rates as congregations with connections to working-class, rural neighborhoods did not do as well as those with connections to economically viable, urban neighborhoods.⁹

The growth patterns among rural, economically depressed MB churches in south Texas seem to contradict Bibby and Brinkerhoff's thesis. South Texas congregations grew substantially early in the mission not due to "positive" contextual factors, but by the manner in which MB missionaries, at least early on, controlled their relationship to the "negative" context. Contextual factors are negative only when change in adaptation by the out-group is resisted. Congregations that hold conservative theological beliefs, but are institutionally liberal enough to make cultural and contextual changes, grow as a result of their institutional flexibility and their contextual adaptations.

The need for institutional flexibility is a critical point because the lack of it in the case of the MB resulted in its decline in south Texas. Mennonite Brethren theology is an

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⁸ Ibid.
historically conservative theology emphasizing personal salvation and evangelical fervor. But the theology that undergirds the MB church was not the inherent problem as much as it was a lack of institutional flexibility. For example, the MB missionaries never allowed musical instruments (besides the German accordion they used) into the church. Worship styles, the material and manner of how people worship God, were representative of Anglo American values and typically did not match the cultural context of Mexican Americans. Furthermore, Mexican Americans were not allowed the opportunity to define what worship style best suited them or, from an evangelical perspective, what worship style served best to bring people to church. "Now we worship how we feel appropriate," mentioned one church leader recently. "You see all these instruments in our church, the MB would never have allowed us to have them." 10

CONTACT HYPOTHESIS: INDIVIDUAL AND SYSTEMIC REALITIES OF POWER

The relationship that Anglo MB had with Mexican Americans, on a personal and individual level, did not always create points of tension. Harry Neufeld held a privileged position in Los Ebanos because, the more local people trusted him, the better understanding he had of them and vice versa. But Neufeld's relationship on a broader, systemic level—as part of an institution that he represented—created cultural barriers and represented the paternalistic strategies that he implemented. No matter how "good" relationships were with ethnic Mexicans, Neufeld's missionary reality held that the relationship only meant something if converts denied their own cultural understandings concerning faith and accepted Neufeld's view. This individual and systemic structure of

10 Domingo Villareal, interview with author, 18 February 2004.
relationship between Anglos and ethnic Mexicans represented the inherent contradiction of the missionary—befriend in order to convert all aspects of social life.

Relationships across racial and ethnic lines carry specific social structures which historically have given privilege and power to those of European descent or those with the lightest phenotype. When groups of different racial and ethnic backgrounds come together, there is both the potential for disaster and for appreciation. The Contact Hypothesis, first introduced by sociologist G.W. Allport in 1954, argued that when groups of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds come together under conditions of equality of status (ranking), cooperation (division of labor), close interaction (social distance), and cultural boundaries, then relationships are mutual and positive for both groups.11 “Contact, particularly close and sustained contact, with members of different racial and ethnic groups promotes positive, tolerant attitudes toward those groups,” argued sociologists Christopher Ellison and Daniel Powers.12 The Contact Hypothesis is a broad generalization that relies heavily on certain aspects of social structure to produce a positive correlation.

Recent literature, however, demonstrates the manner in which increased contact between racial and ethnic groups, instead of ameliorating conflict, can escalate conflict. The idea that more contact produces more conflict has been argued by sociologists who dismiss the often individual interpretation of the Contact Hypothesis. While relationships might improve on an individual level as contact increases, such systemic forces as race, gender, and class play a critical role in maintaining a social structure challenge equality

and mutuality.\textsuperscript{13} If contact was the only factor to begin building trust and mutuality, then how can social situations of continued tension and inequality be explained? In the southern U.S., for example, black and white people continue to live segregated and tense lives. This situation is now complicated by the large influx of Latino immigrants who are creating new systems of social structure, thus creating more tension with historically oppressed groups in the South. Similarly, the U.S./Mexico border, specifically the Sonora/Arizona border, continues to be a tense and violent environment despite contact and interaction between Anglos and Mexicans that dates back to the early nineteenth century. Urban areas such as Los Angeles and Houston are now seeing Latino immigrants and other people of color struggle for the new social stratification, pitting historically oppressed groups against each other.

These situations do well in debunking the Contact Hypothesis because they are areas where tension has increased because of the lack of healthy social structures despite increased contact—more contact, more conflict. The Contact Hypothesis is reliant on specific structural variables that in place can create amiable social conditions. By examining the social structures that were not in place for Mexican Americans and Anglo MB, the racial conflict between both groups and how that affected church growth and health can be better understood. Structural variables necessary for positive interactions as the Contact Hypothesis suggests are the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Structural Variables</th>
<th>Contact will Increase Liking if</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Ranking</td>
<td>Parties are of relatively equal status;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Division of Labor</td>
<td>Parties work cooperatively for common goals;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Boundaries</td>
<td>Boundaries are over-lapping, non-exclusive;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Social Distance</td>
<td>Interaction is close, personal and stereotype breaking: interaction has support of moral authority.14</td>
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The Contact Hypothesis is housed under the Symbolic Interaction Perspective of sociology. It argues that the manner in which human interaction is structured has an effect on cultural understandings, symbolic meanings, and how specific situations are defined. The focus is how meaning is created based on human interaction in various social situations.15 The aforementioned structural variables necessary for decreased prejudice and tension deal with both the individual and systemic realities of power dynamics within dominant and subordinate group interaction. These are critical in understanding the systemic relationship that developed between MB missionaries and Mexican Americans in south Texas.

**SOCIAL RANKING**

The previous chapters outline the manner in which the MB assimilated Anglo American cultural values in the early and late 1930s speeding up assimilation patterns that by WWII were almost complete in the predominantly Germanic-Russian MB community in central Kansas. The racist stereotypes that MB missionaries had toward

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14 Chad Richardson, "Social Structure and the Contact Hypothesis," (UT Pan Am class handout, 2004).  
the Mexican American population affected social ranking and justified, at least for the missionaries, the subjugated status of south Texas Mexicans. When Ricardo Peña became the first Mexican American MB missionary in 1947, he had already been a Christian for some time. He knew his community well enough to take a privileged status among the missionaries. But his power was limited and his salary was far less than what the Anglo missionaries received, even though he was expected to do similar work. On a real individual level, Peña had close relationships with Anglo missionaries (Thomas and Neufeld), but their systemic relationship (defined by the institutional MB church) did not allow for a healthy social ranking. The church kept Peña in a lower status simply because he was a Mexican American.

The case of Peña was not unique. Other Mexican American workers, including Alfredo Tagle, were ranked below Anglo missionaries so as to create what one person has called a “mother/daughter” relationship among MB missionaries and Mexican Americans.16 Apparently, the ranking changed if Mexican Americans married Anglo women. The case of Ricardo Zapata, who married an Anglo MB woman from Kansas, represented one case where a Mexican American missionary was paid on equal status with Anglo missionaries simply because he was married to a white woman. “I found out what they paid you all simply for being Mexican and because I was married to one of their [MB] women, I was receiving what the other American missionaries were receiving,” Zapata told Peña. “When I found this out I resigned as missionary with the Mennonites.”17

Throughout the years of mission, and especially when more Mexican Americans began to participate, it was often Anglo missionaries like Daniel Wirsche or Eugene Janzen who kept communication with the South Texas Commission leaders in the north. Social ranking kept Anglo missionaries in a privileged position even though more local people were participating in the mission by the 1960s. Moreover, the churches were composed mostly of women who were active participants in church work. Yet they were prohibited from taking on leadership roles other than with women and children. This influenced the mission negatively because the concern missionaries had for future leadership was based on the lack of men who attended church. Had they allowed women to work closely alongside the men in leadership roles, perhaps the churches would not have encountered the leadership crisis. But opposition to women in leadership was so closely tied with the institutional church that it would have been difficult to allow women an equal place among Anglo men (a position not even Mexican American men had). Individual accommodation would not have been enough. The MB needed a shift in institutional identity and accommodate an already oppressed ethnic group. This option was simply not feasible given the history.

The positions of leadership that Mexican Americans did enjoy were often times under direct supervision of an Anglo missionary. This became a point of tension among many of the ethnic Mexican leadership as they often felt “like the puppets” of the north.¹⁸

DIVISION OF LABOR

The division of labor among the Anglos and ethnic Mexicans was often evenly split between administrative authority and actual mission work. Both groups worked

¹⁸ Domingo Villareal, interview with author, 18 February 2004.
cooperatively, at least individually, to convert people to the church. Both cared deeply about developing young men who could lead the church in the future, and both were clear about theological declarations which needed to be followed. For example, consumption of alcohol, dancing of any sort, cigarette smoking, visiting *curanderos*, were all unacceptable in most mainline Protestant denominations, and especially with the MB. But there were clearly delineated lines between what was considered “Anglo” work and “Mexican” work. Mexican Americans did most of the actual mission work in the churches, while primary administrative authority rested solely with the Anglo MB. This arrangement maintained Anglo structural authority throughout the life of the mission and often hindered personal relationships.

Another area where division of labor varied was with respect to women. They were expected to do work primarily with other women and children in activities such as sewing circles, vacation bible school, and Sunday school instruction. Preaching, doing missionary activity among men, or leading Bible studies where both men and women were present was simply not acceptable. The only Mexican American woman to break some of these barriers was missionary Yolanda Villareal. Although paid significantly less than her counterpart Annie Dyck, Villareal was a key reason for the success of churches. She led many children ministries that kept families coming back to church week after week. For the most part Mexican American men went along with this arrangement and held a superior status to women.

Important to this structural variable in order to increase amiability is if both groups divide the work equally and if both are working toward common goals. The documents and interviews reveal that for the most part, excluding the decision over the
direction of El Faro school, missionary pay, and resentment over division of labor, both groups did in fact work toward the same goal of converting people to Protestantism.

SOCIAL DISTANCE AND BOUNDARIES

The Contact Hypothesis argues that if Social Distance and Boundaries overlap and are relatively healthy, then prejudice and fear of the other will decrease. MB missionaries kept distant lives from the Mexican Americans with whom they were working. Often times they lived outside of the direct neighborhood where they worked and could afford modern homes by the standards of the day. This separate life created a social ranking system that held the missionaries above the local community. Harry Neufeld, and other missionaries, were typically referred to as “Mr. Neufeld” or “Mrs. Neufeld.” Even while conducting interviews for this research, participants considered the missionaries close friends but still referred to them as “Mr.” or “Mrs.”

Individual and systemic relationships were also defined on different levels. For example, the systemic relationship did not allow Neufeld to hand over more power on the mission field over to Ricardo Peña, even though Neufeld and Peña had a fairly stable relationship. Institutional requirements and paternalistic missionary strategies were not flexible enough to honor the personal relationship. Even after nearly thirty years of missionary work, the Anglo MB still held negative racial stereotypes toward ethnic Mexicans and doubted their leadership capabilities.

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19 Based on various field interviews.
MORE CONTACT, MORE CONFLICT

The Contact Hypothesis fits this situation well because it argues that if the aforementioned structural variables are not present, more contact will produce more conflict. In the case of the MB missionaries and ethnic Mexicans of south Texas, it did not necessarily create conflict as much as it maintained paternalistic relationships throughout the life of the mission. The forms of social ranking and distance never allowed for an authentic relationship to develop between the MB and Mexican Americans on both an individual and systemic level. Although both groups were indeed working toward similar goals, it was not enough to foster institutional change regarding worship style, women in leadership, and the role of El Faro. The Anglo MB did whatever they felt was best based on their experience and on the overall mission to convert Mexican Americans. At the core of many of the problems of the south Texas mission was not a lack of finances, or a lack of leadership. Rather, a cultural conflict that did not allow for healthy, indigenous churches to flourish in south Texas. The Presbyterians, Methodists, and Pentecostals were all successful in their attempts to establish Mexican American congregations with local leadership primarily because of their institutional flexibility. Most other denominations did not keep a missionary presence in south Texas for as long as the MB did, and it hurt their chances in creating self-sustaining, self-governing churches. This is not to say that church geography (rural) and economic conditions were not important. They were important to the extent that they were contextual factors that
limited church growth because of institutional rigidity based on racist and paternalistic missionary strategies.20

CULTURAL CONTACTS:
HARRY NEUFELD, LOS ALELUYAS, AND THE POETICS OF CULTURE

Cultural contact between ethnic and racial groups in the U.S. has historically carried with it theological implications. "The church, as social institution," argues Teresa Chávez Sauceda, "plays a key role in the processes of racialization. Historically, the church has both sanctioned racism and condemned it."21 The contact of Anglo Protestantism with Mexicans in the Southwest was critical in the continued development of the early racialization of Mexicans in the Southwest. Latino Protestantism was begun in the Southwest in line with conquest, socially and theologically tied to racial politics in the U.S. Edward Spicer argued that the three major contacts with Native Americans came at the hands of the Spanish in the Southwest, the Anglo in the east, and the Mexican mestizo population in the northern rim of Mexico. Each group had a distinct program of inclusion and exclusion of Native Americans, but all were consistent in their need to theologically assimilate or exclude the Native population.22 The Native American and Mexican population of the Southwest have felt this theological crunch at least twice in their history. First with the Catholic Spaniards and, as the idea of "Manifest Destiny" dominated popular thought in the nineteenth century, with the Protestant Anglo.

20 Another factor that does not receive much attention in this research is the lack of Mennonite Brethren theology that was not passed on to recent converts. The MB did not preach their Anabaptist theology of peace and justice and avoided other social theology in favor of a fundamentalist-evangelical doctrine.
This latter contact, as religious scholar Paul Barton argues, helped develop the racial identity of the Anglo American as “white” and the other as “an obstacle to their realization of ‘manifest destiny’”\(^2\) Mexicans and Native Americans were seen by Anglo Americans as outside the plan of God and either had to be missionized or annihilated in order to fulfill their destiny. Furthermore, non-white people and their traditional theological beliefs were seen as inherently evil justifying the racist and exclusive practices that Anglo Americans employed throughout the nineteenth century.

As the American West began to “open up” to Anglos, Protestant denominations followed and began to establish missions among groups of people who they interpreted as being inferior theologically, socially, and racially. These early contacts with mainline denominations such as the Methodists and Presbyterians helped define the theological stance that would eventually influence the MB in their mission strategies. “Anglo American Protestants’ perceptions of Mexican American religion and culture as inferior reveal more about their own self-identity than they do about Mexican and Mexican American life,” argued Paul Barton.\(^2\) In the same chapter, Barton quotes a Methodist missionary who in 1883 wrote about Mexican American life: “Age on age of darkness, duplicity, and degradation have left [Mexicans] so full of evil, so prone to evil, that the task of purification and elevation would be utterly hopeless, leaving out the divinity of the agency.”\(^2\)

The subordination by MB missionaries of Mexican Americans was consistent with other patterns within mainline denominations who worked in the Southwest. Paul

\(^2\) Ibid.
\(^2\) Ibid., 69.
Barton in his work on Methodists in Texas documents the dominant and subordinate relationships that many missionaries held with Mexican Americans in terms of salary, leadership, and institutional power. The MB were no different in their relationships with Mexican Americans. But what is interesting is that by the late 1930s, just as the MB were beginning their mission in south Texas, mainline denominations had for the most part come to terms with many of the relational inconsistencies and paternalistic practices. The MB would have done well to learn how other denominations erred. Instead, they followed similar patterns of other denominations in instituting poor mission strategies, and instead of allowing sufficient flexibility to adapt to changes in the 1960s, they remained stagnant and suffered because of it.

When Harry and Sarah Neufeld arrived in south Texas they came with similar negative stereotypes about Mexican Americans. They arrived, as Paul Barton has characterized, “as the new religious conquistadors, conquering the ‘blighted’ spirit of Mexicans and replacing their Roman Catholicism with what church leaders believed to be an enlightened religion.”

Eight years after being in south Texas, Neufeld collected his journal entries into a small book he aptly titled *Eight Years Among the Latin Americans*. The book serves as a window into the perceptions held by Neufeld, characterizing what he felt his mission and purpose was in south Texas. The book devotes a large portion to the work of *curanderos/as* (folk healers) in the communities of Los Ebanos, Chihuahua, Cuevitas, and La Grulla.

*Curanderismo*, as defined by Robert T. Trotter II and Juan Antonio Chavira in their book *Curanderismo: Mexican American Folk Healing*, constitutes a system of Mexican American folk-healing that is important to many Mexicans Americans

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Ibid.
throughout the Southwest. The *curandero/a* is typically a person from the community who shares similar experiences with those around him/her. "The *curandero* is highly accessible," wrote Chavira, "without the intervening variables of excessive social and spatial distance that sometimes affect the delivery of health care in the United States."

*Curanderismo* is heavily influenced by a variety of social systems including "Judeo-Christian religious beliefs, symbols, and rituals; early Arabic medicine and health practices; medieval and later European witchcraft; Native American herbal lore and health practices; [and] modern beliefs about spiritualism and psychic phenomena." These practices have deep roots in the Rio Grande Valley and were part of the cultural mainstream when Neufeld first arrived.

Neufeld described his early experiences with folk-healers and other "peculiar and superstitious beliefs" in the community. He proceeded to establish his own perceived healing powers given by the elevated level of his faith. Neufeld described local *curanderos* as "people [who] pose as being from another world...endowed with gifts from heaven and have the power of healing...who work their hocus pocus remedies, give some kind of medicine which possibly has no healing potencies or ingredients in it and send people home." There were many experiences that Neufeld shared in his encounter with Mexican American religiosity. The following story is an encounter with a woman and her sick daughter as told from the perspective of Neufeld as taken from his book.

At another occasion, speaking on the subject of superstition, the missionary was called to a home where a girl, about 12 years old, was

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28 Ibid., 25.
29 See also: Américo Paredes, *Folklore and Culture on the Texas-Mexico Border* (Center for Mexican American Studies: University of Texas Press, 1993).
30 Harry Neufeld, *Eight Years Among the Latin Americans*, 44-45.
lying sick with a high fever... After a week or two of treatment, the child not improving very much and the mother being anxious, easily fell into the temptation of old beliefs and age-old remedies of a primitive people. Therefore one day when the missionary made his round to this home to visit the patient, the mother met him [Neufeld] with a peculiar smile and twinkle in her eye and stated in Spanish: “Now we know what is the matter with our daughter.”

“Is that so?” asked the missionary rather surprised, “and what might that be?”

“Well,” the mother said, “she has ‘Susto’.”

“Susto, what is that?” asked the missionary.

“Don’t you know what ‘Susto’ is?” the mother asked in wonderment. The missionary, not being very well versed in the language at the time, returned to his home two miles away, got a dictionary, and found the word ‘Susto’ to mean fear. He then drove back to the sick child’s home and announced that now he knew what ‘Susto’ meant.

“But why do you think that the child has ‘Susto’?” was his inquiry.

“Well, I know, because a lady came here and said so,” was her quick and triumphant reply.

“When?”

“Yesterday.”

“Who was the lady?”

“I don’t know that.”

“Have you ever seen her before?”

“No, I have not.”

“Well, how does the lady know she has ‘Susto’?”

“Well,” and with the typical shrug of the shoulders and protruding of the underlip of the mouth she answered, “I don’t know.”

“And after the girl has been taken to the doctor and the missionaries money has been spent on the medicine and for gas and oil on the car to take her there, and after the missionary has been kind to you and to watch over your girl and you are going to disregard all that and believe a perfectly strange woman that she has ‘Susto’?... I am going to ask you a favor. When that strange woman comes here to cure your daughter, don’t you let her touch this girl. Keep her out of this home and you believe what I am telling you. I will guarantee you that your daughter will get well,” replied the missionary, grasping the “shield of faith.”

There are several matters worth elaborating. First, Neufeld is negatively characterizing curanderismo as a primitive belief system that has no place in the modern world. He assumes that this belief system is not only theologically inferior but primitive and out of date. Second, Neufeld characterizes the curandera in this piece as an unfamiliar person.

31 Ibid., 41-42.
that simply arrived at this woman’s home. It can be assumed that Neufeld embellished
some points in this story to place himself as the insider in the community and the
*curandera* as the outsider. Neufeld goes to great length to defend all he contributed to in
the manner of time, money, and energy, and he was rather perturbed that the woman was
not taking him seriously. Third, Neufeld establishes himself as the new pseudo-
*curandero* when he informs the woman to not let *curanderos/as* into her home and
instead believe in what Neufeld was telling her. He was attempting to place himself as a
“faith-healer” and trying to gain insight into a community that often did not have access
to adequate health care. Neufeld decried traditional *curanderismo* as a false belief
system, but thrived in being perceived as the new “faith healer” in the community.

Neufeld shared many of his healing stories in reports via the *Christian Leader*, the MB
church magazine. Several of these “super-hero” stories are worth mentioning here.

**Instance 2:** There is much crying in the village; a child is dying in the
home of a staunch hostile Roman Catholic. Should we go there? Yes, we
must! We go! We ask permission to pray. The medic has pronounced the
child beyond recovery. But God hears our plea and immediately the child
rallies and gets well. Rejoicing in the village? Surprise and wonderment?
Yes, and not a little bit.\(^{32}\)

**Instance 3:** The girl is bleeding from the nose. Nothing will stop it. The
missionary is called. Prayer is made, but the girl bleeds on. A call to the
doctor is urged, but it is too far to go to one... What shall be done? All
eyes are upon the missionary... all the cotton is pulled out of the nostrils
and washed out... the bleeding recedes and the girl is better.\(^{33}\)

On many other occasions, when speaking about *curanderismo* in the community,
Neufeld made remarks that attempted to discredit *curanderos/as* and credit him as the
new healer in the community.

\(^{32}\) Harry Neufeld, “God Works in Los Ebanos,” in *Christian Leader* 9, no. 5 (April 1945).

\(^{33}\) Ibid.
The missionary could not refrain from smiling as he told the young brother that Christians do not believe such things [speaking of mal de ojo]. "But it is true," remonstrated the believer, "we know it is true because we have seen it too many times." "No dear brother, that is not true, and let me tell you another thing. If it could be true, then we have a glorious Gospel, because the cow did not die but got well, and that very rapidly, and this is because we prayed and trusted in Jesus. So Jesus was the power. But don't believe that about 'malojos' [sic] anymore; it is not true... Now we understand why some people have at times come and placed their hands over our faces or over the face of our little baby.\(^3\)\(^4\)

Neufeld criticized every aspect of Mexican American religiosity when he attacked the *Virgen of Guadalupe*, *Curanderismo*, and other cultural belief systems. He characterized such beliefs as "the worst form of religious falsehood and superstition that exists among them is a sort of fetish or devil worship." Neufeld continued by stating:

Missionaries to Africa write about this and how the natives there are bound by it. Naturally living in a civilized country it is not expected here, but believe me it is here among this people. Some of them live without hope of ever being saved because they have sold themselves to the devil and they worship him in all sincerity, and that in the worst form namely, sex.\(^3\)\(^5\)

The basic premise throughout most of Neufeld's early writings was the spiritual and cultural inferiority of Mexican Americans. Neufeld painted a Mexican American community that was extremely thankful that Anglo missionaries had arrived to "save" them. According to Neufeld several people in the community even composed poetry that expressed that supposed gratitude.

The Mexicans are waiting for you, dear friends, if your purpose is strong and true; if out of your treasures of mind and heart you can bring things old and new. If you know the truth that makes men free, and with skill can bring it to view, the Mexicans are waiting for you, dear friends, the Mexicans are waiting for you.\(^3\)\(^6\)

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\(^3\) Harry Neufeld, *Eight Years Among the Latin Americans*, 39.
\(^4\) Ibid., 49.
\(^5\) Ibid., 70.
It is unclear whether Mexican Americans actually composed this poem, but it did make a large enough impact in the minds of Anglo MB in the north so as to continue the heavy funding that was supporting the mission. Even after eight years of cultural contact with Mexican Americans in south Texas, Neufeld’s personal racism had not diminished and instead had fomented because his contact was structured to produce prejudice.

CULTURAL SHIFT AND MAINTENANCE

For many Mexican Americans conversion to Protestantism created intra-ethnic conflict with others in the community. Many converts were seen as “los adeluyas,” (the halleluiahs), or “vendidos” (cultural sell-outs). Both terms connote negative feelings toward the convert, and for many it was a stress point. Those who converted had to abandon most of their cultural connections, both socially and religiously. For example, seeing a curandero/a was no longer an option. Cultural dances were deemed un-Christian, along with cultural music, alcohol, cigarette smoking, and any connection to Catholicism. This often times created problems because many of the cultural ceremonies were closely tied in with Catholicism, including weddings and funerals.

Rituals did not change in these ceremonies as much as they were adapted to fit within a Protestant rubric. The community typically went along with these changes because, at least in weddings, it was still customary to practice ceremonial rituals that to the missionaries did not hinder Christian faith. But the celebratory aspects of the wedding did change. Alcohol and Mexican cultural music, for example, were the first to go as “dancing and drinking at wedding receptions that went all night were no longer
acceptable." The length of time of celebration changed from all night celebrations to a brief single evening. The menu at Mexican American wedding receptions was also altered. "Secular weddings usually served foods like cabrito (goat) and barbacoa (shredded beef) with pan fino y galletitas (sweet bread and cookies)," commented Yolanda Villareal, "but Christian weddings only served maybe rice and beans with some type of meat with cake, but nothing like cabrito."

Funerals conducted by MB missionaries were altered as well. Again, it was not so much an introduction of new rituals as much as it was a synthesis with Anglo Protestant values. MB missionaries stressed joy instead of validating pain at funerals. They argued that funerals were a prime location to preach an evangelical message. If the deceased was a "born-again Christian," then missionaries denounced mourning and instead demanded that family members rejoice because the deceased was now in a better place. Because of the weakened state of many of the family and friends of the deceased, funerals were used as a manipulative ploy to convert people to Protestantism. Missionary Ruben Wedel, speaking of what he called a "Christian funeral," wrote the following in the Christian Leader:

> This sister’s funeral was a Christian one and although sad, it was without all the moaning and wailing. They knew their mother had gone to glory. The custom among the Mexicans is for the bereaved family, especially the women to stay at home and not go to the graveyard. But today they all came to pay their last tribute to their mother... [I] spoke words of comfort to the bereaved family and also gave a salvation message to all that had come... This certainly was an open door and thanks be to God for giving us a message of salvation.

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37 Yolanda Villareal, interview with author, 8 January 2004.
38 Ibid.
40 Ibid.
It is important to note that the changes to many of the cultural ceremonies were limited and in many instances never fully transformed Mexican American religious rituals. The deep respect of Mexican Americans toward religious leadership often forced them to make concessions with which they were not comfortable. Moreover, the shape of the ceremony was often dictated by the theology of the Anglo missionary. Some tended to be more relaxed than others in the type of food at a wedding or how much "moaning and wailing" was allowed at a funeral. Mexican Americans resisted these cultural shifts in the long run, but were respectful. Anglo missionaries, however, imposed their beliefs on the local community.

CONCLUSION

This chapter synthesized varying theoretical perspectives for the growth and decline of MB churches in south Texas. Church Growth Theory and the Contact Hypothesis were analyzed as useful theoretical frameworks from which to understand the church dynamic among the Mennonite Brethren. Central to this is the increased level of cultural conflict despite increased contact stemming from specific structural variables not in place. Church Growth Theory was analyzed because of its emphasis on the need to understand both contextual and institutional factors in determining church growth and decline. Therefore, understanding the contextual factors of race and place (mainly geography of mission), and the institutional factors of theology and the inflexibility of church polity toward the south Texas mission sheds light on some of the dynamics leading to the closing of El Faro school, the division of labor among men and women (even though women dominated the churches numerically), and the continued racism and
paternalism present in the mission. Even when missionaries began talking about what
they called “indigenization,” it was determined, developed, and undertaken without
Mexican American leadership and input. The indigenization process itself was
paternalistic and racist.

Furthermore, this chapter synthesized theoretical perspectives with the practical
encounters that missionaries had with Mexican American religiosity. Neufeld entered
south Texas with a racist and paternalistic ethic resembling past missionary efforts by
mainline denominations. This created a sense of superiority that critiqued every aspect of
cultural life in south Texas that did not resemble “Protestant, Anglo American values.” Neufeld began to portray himself as the pseudo-curandero offering spiritual salvation and
physical healing. Along with this new representation of himself, Neufeld and other
missionaries attempted to transform cultural rituals in weddings and funerals. Although
semi-successful, Mexican Americans resisted cultural transformation and have since
maintained many of the cultural practices that missionaries tried to subtract, albeit with
an overarching Protestant influence. Mexican American Protestant weddings and
funerals are different than those held by their Catholic counterparts, but much of the
symbolism and ritual remains so as to create an authentic Mexican American Protestant
cultural and religious experience.

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41 Harry Neufeld, *Eight Years Among the Latin Americans*, 97.
42 Paul Barton, “In Both Worlds: A History of Hispanic Protestantism in the U.S. Southwest” (Ph.D. diss.,
Southern Methodist University, 1999). Barton confirms this argument by clearly defining the manners in
which Mexican Americans have adapted and transformed Protestant life to fit the cultural context.
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

This research began by stating that the Mennonite Brethren (MB) church in south Texas is an anomaly. Throughout its life, the church searched for an identity that fit its theological stream and cultural context. Unfortunately, it did not synchronize the two, creating an identity crisis that affected its ability to sustain self-governing and self-supporting churches in south Texas. The MB missionaries that began the work in 1937 entered a context into which they assumed resided a "lost" people in need of Christian "salvation." The subsequent contact with the ethnic Mexican community of south Texas repeated a cycle of contact that resembled other historic dominant and subordinate encounters in the Americas. The MB entered south Texas with negative stereotypes, convinced of their cultural and theological superiority, and with strong support from their ethno-religious community in Kansas—the Southern District Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Church. They were little different from past Protestant missionaries who entered Texas as a gateway to evangelize Mexico in the mid-nineteenth century. Moreover, despite the oppressive history and ethnic heritage of the MB, there is no evidence that racial prejudice toward ethnic Mexicans differed from assimilated white Americans in the twentieth century. Indeed, MB missionaries of the late 1930s were
the first generation to begin full integration into American society, a process accelerated by the onset of World War II. In addition, MB theology began to shift significantly in the early twentieth century as it became closely aligned with fundamentalist theology, which in many respects contradicted Anabaptist theology. Diverse theological beliefs have been a part of the MB church since its inception in 1860. "This multiple inheritance," states Lynn Jost, "has enriched the church, but it has also been the source of some weakness. The tendency toward fragmentation and pluralism have frequently surfaced in the history of the church."¹ Indeed MB theology has been fragmented and inconsistent at times in its history. However, what is clear is the manner and method that MB missionaries used to evangelize in south Texas. They utilized fundamentalist theological understandings not consistent with their Anabaptist theology, advocating a more unilateral theology.

The story of the MB missionaries indicates that their mission strategies were racist and that institutional inflexibility contributed to the overall decline of the churches in south Texas. Racial prejudice helped in defining the manner in which social relationships were to be structured with MB missionaries and Mexican Americans. There is nothing particularly unique about this social order as it was a part of the cultural ethos in twentieth century America. What is of importance is the way these relationships maintained a racist ethos despite increased contact between both groups. Despite over thirty years of cultural contact, the MB continued to hold negative feelings toward ethnic Mexicans and rarely adjusted these sentiments to develop more indigenous leadership. As discussed in Chapter 4, because structural variables were not in place contact did not

necessarily mean less prejudice. In this case specifically, the type of cultural contact
meant more conflict. But as recent literature on nineteenth and twentieth Protestant
missionaries in the Southwest has revealed, these attitudes were prevalent and very much
a part of the mission strategies of other mainline Protestant groups.\(^2\) This being the case,
why have other mainline denominations been more successful in planting and developing
self-governing and self-sustaining Mexican American churches using similar racist and
culturally subtractive tactics? Why, in seemingly similar economic and geographic
locations, have other groups been more successful than the Mennonite Brethren? This
thesis argues that it was the lack of institutional flexibility that failed to allow an
authentic Mexican American MB church to develop in south Texas as other
denominations had done. The lack of institutional flexibility prohibited structural
variables necessary to better ethno-racial relations from developing. Moreover, racist
mission strategies maintained white power, and attempted to assimilate ethnic Mexicans
into the American mainstream instead of allowing an indigenous, culturally competent
church to develop along the Texas/Mexico border.

These inflexibilities manifested themselves in the close of *El Faro* school, which
at one point was considered crucial to church growth. *El Faro*’s mission rested both on
evangelization and Americanization efforts for Mexican American children. However,

\(^2\) Paul Barton, “In Both Worlds: A History of Hispanic Protestantism in the U.S. Southwest” (Ph.D. diss.,
Southern Methodist University, 1999); Francisco Garcia-Treto and R. Douglas Brackenridge, *Iglesia
Presbiteriana: A History of Presbyterians and Mexican Americans in the Southwest* (San Antonio: Trinity
University Press, 1974); Alfredo Náñez, *History of the Rio Grande Conference of the United Methodist
Church* (Bridwell Library: Southern Methodist University, 1980), LRGV Special Collections; Gastón
U.S., Mexico, and Puerto Rico, 1900-1945” (Ph.D. diss., University of California Santa Barbara, 1999);
Juan Francisco Martinez, “Origins and Development of Protestantism among Latinos in the Southwestern
United States, 1836-1900” (Ph.D. diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 1996); Susan M. Yohan, “An
Education in the Validity of Pluralism: The Meeting between Presbyterian Mission Teachers and Hispanic
Catholics in New Mexico, 1870-1912” *History of Education Quarterly* 31, no. 3 (Fall, 1991): 343-64.
for missionary children *El Faro* served an isolationist purpose as missionary families did not want their children in what they perceived as culturally inferior schools.

The [public school] influence is bad. Wordly songs are taught, and the complaint has reached us that the teachers even wanted to teach dancing to the children. The school house is often used for dances. Then our own son, Marlin, will be of school age by next fall. Would you want your children in such a school? We cannot consent to it.\(^3\)

The school remained heavily funded by the Southern District Conference (SDC) throughout its existence. The internal debate that surfaced in the 1960s had to do with the disagreement of both Anglo and Mexican American leadership. Anglo MB viewed the school as a hindrance in its evangelization efforts. They consistently complained of the heavy dollars being poured in without the production of young men to lead the mission. Mexican Americans viewed the school as serving a practical community purpose and a “rallying point” for congregations. This internal dissent, coupled with the need of the SDC to curtail funding, eventually led to the closing of the school. This left a sour feeling for many Mexican Americans and created resentment for the Anglo leadership of the SDC.

The impact of the closing of the school on declining church membership cannot be minimized. As *El Faro* began to struggle in the late 1960s over what its true purpose should be, membership in churches declined dramatically, culminating with a loss of more than 100 members by the late 1960s.

The exclusion of Mexican American women from leadership positions, despite their numerical superiority in the churches, also affected church growth. The only Mexican American female missionary, Yolanda Villareal, was restricted as to what type

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\(^3\) Henry Thomes, Report to SDC Constituency, 30 April 1946 (Hillsboro: Center for MB Studies Archives).
of ministries she participated and provided leadership. Even while there were other Anglo women in the mission, particularly Annie Dyck, Villareal’s salary remained significantly below what Anglo women were receiving from the mission. With the focus on raising male leaders, who were in the significant minority, MB missionaries neglected a major part of their constituency and alienated potential leadership in south Texas.

Women were a major part in planting MB congregations, specifically in Chihuahua and La Grulla. In many instances, they helped maintain the familial aspect of the church. Without the women, the MB church in south Texas would not have developed in the form it did.

In addition, the culturally subtractive tactics that MB used denied Mexican Americans the ability to create a culturally authentic church in south Texas. This lack of institutional adaptability maintained power with the Anglo MB throughout the life of the mission creating serious problems of dependency and Anglo superiority. The MB church “did everything,” as one pastor noted, and made it clear that they (Anglos) were the ones in charge and able to dictate theology. Instruments were not allowed in church, dancing was prohibited, Christian prayer by a missionary replaced folk healing, and Biblical interpretation came solely from the missionary. It also brought on criticisms as early as the 1950s over the amount of money being spent in south Texas and the limited amount of return the work was generating. This was especially troubling when compared with the work of Dr. Schlichting in central California. In the 1950s, he initiated work with ethnic Mexicans with no outside funding and was able to reach south Texas membership numbers in a relatively short time.
PROTESTANT MISSION CONTEXT

The story of Mennonite Brethren missionaries is consistent with historic evangelistic efforts along the Southwest by Protestant missionaries. They, too, used racist and paternalistic mission strategies and characterized Mexicans and Native Americans as "heathens." Where the story differs is in the manner in which other mainline denominations adapted and changed, not necessarily individual ideas about non-white groups, but systemic functions of mission strategy. This does not mean these denominations became less racist. Instead, that they allowed sufficient space for the local community to decipher its religious future.

Of importance is the work of three Protestant denominations which had differing theologies and mission strategies, but nonetheless were able to organize self-governing Mexican American congregations. For the purposes of this study, two denominations that did heavy mission work in the Southwest are analyzed: Methodists and Presbyterians. The third, Pentecostals, emerged out of the Azusa Street Revival in Los Angeles in 1906. The revival created, as historian Gastón Espinosa noted, "a fluid, self-affirming, and transnational Protestant subculture in the North American Borderlands."  

Their work is important in providing a context in order to better understand the consistency and difference with the MB story and that of other denominations as presented in recent scholarship.

The recent dissertation of Paul Barton (1999) tells the story of how Mexican American Methodists, and other Protestant groups, on one level assimilated Anglo Protestantism and on another adapted it to fit the Mexican American context.  

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primary documents and interviews, Barton argues that Mexican American Protestants “developed their religious and cultural identity in dialogue with two primary reference groups—their Anglo-American Protestant co-faithful and their Roman Catholic neighbors.” Barton’s thesis confirms that in order for a healthy, indigenous Mexican American church to develop, there must be some degree of *mestizaje* (mixing) of Anglo Protestantism and Mexican American culture. Otherwise, it either assimilates one cultural stream for another, denying the mosaic of mixing religion and culture. A critical piece to Barton’s study is the manner in which he deals with the evolving relationship of Mexican Americans with Anglo Protestants and Mexican American Catholics. The relationship changed, argues Barton, because while Mexican American Protestants affirmed their ethnic heritage, they were also affirming new theological insights. Important variables in this dynamic relationship are Mexican American affirmation of identity and the flexibility of Methodism to allow itself to enculturate in this particular context. The institutional flexibility did not develop on its own as much of the Methodist institutional culture maintained power with Anglo missionaries and marginalized Mexican American converts. This flexibility came primarily from continued pressure by the Rio Grande Conference of Mexican American Methodists. Their efforts, Barton argues, resemble other secular Mexican American civil rights organizations. Institutional change came for Mexican American Methodists when they were able to use the structures in place, however marginal, to bring about positive change. By 1939, just as the Mennonite Brethren were initiating their mission, the

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6 Ibid.
7 Ibid., 6.
Methodist church in Mexico had autonomy as well as Mexican Americans who now had full control over church organizations.⁹

The history of the Presbyterian Church in south Texas begins with the initial work of Melinda Rankin. Rankin arrived in Brownsville in 1852 and immediately established a school for Mexican girls who wanted to learn English.¹⁰ In 1861 she moved to Matamoros, Mexico, where she participated in planting a Presbyterian church. Rankin was part of a larger cadre of Protestant missionaries that entered post-1857 Mexico, bypassing mission work with Mexican Texans. Anglo missionaries, instead, began work with Mexicans in northern Mexico, eventually leading to the planting of Presbyterian churches in south Texas by Mexican nationals. Mexican Presbyterians established a congregation in Brownsville in 1877, and after brief supervision from the Western Texas Presbytery, the Brownsville church became part of the Presbytery of the State of Tamaulipas in 1884. From there the work spread throughout the Rio Grande Valley. Mexican Presbyterian churches were planted by ethnic Mexicans in Harlingen, Mercedes, and San Benito during the latter part of the nineteenth and early twentieth century.¹¹ This differed in many ways from other mainline denominations, and helped in planting authentically indigenous Protestant churches in south Texas that are vibrant to this day.

Another study on Presbyterian schools in New Mexico by Susan M. Yohan argues that as Hispanics resisted the Protestant message, missionaries were forced to shift strategy and instead focus on providing basic social services rather than focus on

⁹ Ibid., 84.
¹¹ Ibid., 17.
evangelism. This shift, Yohan asserts, forced Presbyterian missionaries to look upon Hispanic culture with less contempt and increased understanding. The shift allowed for Presbyterian missionaries to pay attention to community needs which led to the establishment of schools instead of churches. The story of the Presbyterian church in New Mexico aligns itself well with the Contact Hypothesis proposed in a previous chapter. In this case structural variables were indeed in place allowing for the hypothesis to prove true.

These two cases of the Presbyterian church are critical because they demonstrate the adaptability, not in intention but in reaction, of missionaries who in the case of New Mexico were able to ascertain the Hispanic resistance and adjust their mission accordingly. The Presbyterians in New Mexico moved from an evangelical theology to a social theology that helped, at least superficially, to establish stronger relationships across culture. The first case of Presbyterian churches planted by Mexican nationals in south Texas reflects the exclusionary practice of Anglo missionaries who wanted nothing to do with Mexican Texans. However, this situation created a healthy and indigenous church as ethnic Mexicans collaborated to establish churches with their ethnic kin.

The recent work of Gastón Espinosa (1999) provides a window into the life of Latino Protestants in the U.S., Mexico, and Puerto Rico. Espinosa argues that critical to the conversion experience of Latino Catholics was the “egalitarian message” of the Pentecostal church. “Pentecostal churches,” asserts Espinosa, “often served as

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12 Susan M. Yohan, “An Education in the Validity of Pluralism: The Meeting between Presbyterian Mission Teachers and Hispanic Catholics in New Mexico, 1870-1912” History of Education Quarterly 31, no. 3 (Fall, 1991): 343-64.
13 Ibid., 357; Yohan argues that for many Presbyterian missionaries the more contact they had with Hispanics from New Mexico the more likely they were to gain strong friendships. While this was the case for some, it was by no means unilateral. The new ethic embraced by the Presbyterians of diversity did help to change institutional structures, but not necessarily individual hearts.
transgressive spaces where women, immigrants, and the working class could cross some, though clearly not all, of the borders and boundaries of their day.' The emphases of the Pentecostal church are that of personal salvation, divine healing, women in ministry, evangelicalism, and a mission strategy of planting self-sustaining, self-governing churches. These foci have created a church that is affirming of cultural traditions while relying on its theological fanaticisms to entice new members by acknowledging the spiritual and meta-physical worlds.' The Pentecostal church represents a Protestant subculture that in many ways is more in tune with the complexities of Latino religiosity. Espinosa argues that the Latino Pentecostal church of the Southwest served many of the same functions the black church did in the American South. The ability of the Pentecostal church to respond to social needs within a community, especially in physical healing, has lifted it to the top among the many variances of Latino religiosity in Latin American and the U.S. Southwest.'

**Mennonite Brethren in South Texas**

The above groups each defined varying theological spaces in which mission and vision were implemented. In each case, these denominations either adjusted their own institutional culture or incorporated a theology that very much resembled Latino religiosity as in the case of the Pentecostals. Of course, these cases are not without their critique. Both the Methodists and Presbyterians did have continued cultural conflict with Mexican Americans, especially throughout the 1960s. During that time the Presbyterian

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14 Espinosa, vi.
15 Ibid., 2.
16 Ibid., 7; R. Andrew Chestnut, *Born Again in Brazil: The Pentecostal Boom and the Pathogens of Poverty* (Rutgers University Press, 1997).
church destroyed the Tex-Mex Presbytery along with many Mexican American congregations in the Southwest. The one group that did allow for strong Mexican American leadership to develop was the Pentecostal church for reasons previously mentioned.

The Mennonite Brethren church, like the Pentecostal church, represents a Protestant sub-culture that incorporates both Evangelical and Anabaptist theologies. However, in this particular case they were unable to clearly articulate this theological duality and instead represented a mainline denomination without taking into account the cultural context in south Texas. In many ways the story of MB church in south Texas is not consistent with the arguments that religious historians have made concerning the vitality of Mexican American Protestant churches. The south Texas MB churches have historically represented an anomaly in that they did not successfully enculturate the theology they received from MB missionaries. A major factor in this is the paternalistic and racist mission strategy that in essence attempted to de-Mexicanize the south Texas community. The strategy backfired and it continues to be a sore spot for Mexican American MB as the questions of theological and cultural identity have yet to be synthesized.

The goal of this research was to understand the intersections of race and identity with factors that contributed to the growth and decline of MB churches in south Texas from 1937 through 1971. The study intentionally focused on the MB community in south Texas because of its peculiar history as compared to other Protestant groups. Moreover, because of the lack of Anabaptist theology that was imparted to Mexican Americans, the
MB church in this research is defined as a Protestant church although it encompasses a mixture of both Evangelical and Anabaptist theology.

The MB church in south Texas at once held a prominent position in the community. It participated in the planting of Rio Grande Bible Institute in Edinburg, Texas, and planted eight congregations by 1956 in the western end of the Rio Grande Valley. With this early success, this research set out to understand the factors that led to rapid decline by the late 1960s. The research began by first introducing the Mennonite Brethren community and its theology beginning in 1860. It was determined that despite a strong ethno-religious heritage, by 1930 cultural affiliation came into question as many MB began full assimilation into American society. Although, as Martinez argues, they continue to maintain an historic identity, the MB have nonetheless both theologically and culturally assimilated into the American mainstream as “white” or “Anglo Americans.”

A review of Protestant missions in general was supplied to place the MB story within a broader context of Protestant missions.

The main theses of this research were: racist mission strategies and institutional inflexibility both contributed negatively toward the eventual decline of the MB churches in south Texas. In order to understand the complex interactions across racial and religious lines, both Church Growth Theory and the Contact Hypothesis were applied to better understand what factors contributed to strained relations both individually and systemically. Both contextual and institutional factors were examined and it was deemed that both contributed in the early rise and eventual decline. Racism, defined as an “institutionalized system of economic, political, social, and cultural relations that ensures that one racial group has and maintains power and privilege over all others in all aspects

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of life," dictated the manner in which social relationships would be structured in the mission. The relationship structure, on an individual and systemic level, never allowed for healthy relationships to develop thus seriously hampering church growth.

Mexican Americans, in many cases, did not roll over and allow themselves to remain in subordinate relationships. There are many cases in which they left the church as a result of paternalistic relationships, most evident by the mass exodus of the late 60s. Moreover, Mexican Americans often challenged MB Anglo leadership, only to be rejected and ignored. The Anglo MB felt that, because they were supplying the financial bloodline for the mission work, they had ultimate authority to do what they deemed necessary despite somewhat contradictory messages from south Texas. The superiority complex of the Anglo MB church during the work in south Texas eventually led to the demise of a work where more than thirty years and over $700,000 were invested. Racial identity played a major role in defining the social structure of the mission and in maintaining power with the Anglo MB. The power of Protestant denominations in shaping racial formation is an historical reality that, in this case specifically, did not allow for an indigenous Mexican American MB church to develop.

FUTURE RESEARCH CONSIDERATIONS

Some questions were left unanswered. First, the story of the post-1971 south Texas MB church reflects an attempt by the majority of Mexican American leadership that felt they needed to "do something to save the church." Their work did prove successful but only for a short period. An in-depth analysis of that work, and the

19 Rolando Mireles, interview with author, 10 February 2004.
complications carried over from the mission years, is vitally important to the study of
Mexican American Protestants. Second, a comparative analysis of other sub-culture
Protestant groups in south Texas, such as the Mennonites in Mathis, Corpus Christi, and
the Rio Grande Valley, is also important as it would provide an understanding as to why
some Anabaptist groups were indeed successful in planting healthy, self-sustaining
churches among Mexican American communities. Third, how did Mexican Americans
internalize the racist oppression by the MB and what role did that play in the failure of
Mexican Americans establishing an authentic and culturally competent MB church in
south Texas? Institutional racism was explored in-depth in this research, but the impact
of that racism on identity development post-1971 deserves critical attention.

The story of Mexican American Protestants in the U.S. remains virtually
unexplored by historians. Yet it continues to hold extreme historic and contemporary
prominence within communities all across the U.S. as more Latinos join the Protestant
curch. The history and identity of Mexican American religiosity is a complex mosaic
that challenges the myth that all Mexican Americans belong to the Catholic Church. It is
a small representation of the larger complexities of the multi-lateral Latino community in
the U.S. This research, then, contributes a small piece of the story of Mexican American
Protestants in the Southwest and their continued struggle for cultural and religious
identity.

20 The “Mennonite Church” represents part of the group that the Mennonite Brethren church broke away
from in 1860. The Mennonite church tends to adhere closer to Anabaptist theology of peace and social
justice as opposed to the more evangelical MB. The Mennonite church initiated work in Mathis, Texas, in
1944. From there Mexican Americans planted churches in Brownsville and Matamoros, Mexico. The
church has grown and remains a vibrant, self-sustaining church in south Texas.
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- Ofelia Tagle: helped organize early work among women.
- Ester Garza: founding member of Los Ebanos church.
- Alfredo Tagle: husband of Ofelia and first Mexican American pastor at Los Ebanos.
- Yolanda Villareal: helped organize work among children and women in La Grulla.
- Tim Kliewer: were pastors in Los Ebanos in 1961 and then were pastors in McAllen in 1970.
- Lupita Ortiz: worked with children’s ministry in La Grulla in the early 1960s.
- John Savoia: Missionary from New York that began associating with the MB in the mid-1950s.
• Guadalupe Gutierrez: was one of the first members of the La Grulla church.
• Loyal Funk: Member of the Conference staff that worked with missionaries in south Texas.
• Alvin and Sarah Neufeld: missionaries that started the MB church in Lull, TX.
• Rolando Mireles: Served as Latin American Mennonite Brethren (LAMB) Conference moderator for 25 years.
• Roland Reimer: Current district minister for the Southern District MB Conference.
• Domingo Villareal: Church member from La Grulla.
• Juan F. Martínez: Mennonite Brethren Religious Scholar.


VITA

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While studying at the University of Texas Pan American he worked with a non-profit religious organization (Mennonite Central Committee) in Edinburg, Texas. The work entailed peace and justice education, anti-racism trainings, and constituency relations with Mennonite churches in Texas, Louisiana, and Mississippi.

In 2000 he married Maribel Ramirez and currently they have no children.