

# Mission Without Conquest

Foreword - By James R. Krabill

“Every time we read your prayer letters and ministry reports,” they told us, “we are reminded how much your work in West Africa resembles ours in Argentina.”

The year was 1981. My wife, Jeanette, and I had just completed our first term serving with the Harrist Church, an African-initiated movement in Ivory Coast, West Africa. The comments directed to us came from Albert and Lois Buckwalter, long-term Mennonite mission workers with over thirty years of ministry among indigenous peoples in the Chaco region of Argentina.

I remember initially being somewhat surprised by the Buckwalters’ remarks. Our contexts of ministry seemed far more contrasting than similar in nature. Situated on two vastly different continents separated by 4,500 miles and shaped by politico-religious and cultural histories sharing little in common, it was not immediately obvious to me how and why comparisons were being drawn between the Buckwalters’ work and our own.

With time, however, I learned to appreciate that what held these two stories together was not their *context* of ministry, but their *posture* of ministry—a shift in approach occasioned and inspired in many ways by the remarkable seven-decade long story recounted in this book.

It might simply be called “the Chaco experiment”—the dramatic and intentional decision, made by Mennonite workers and administrators in the mid-1950s, to abandon the classical mission compound approach they had been employing for over a decade, and embrace a creative but uncharted strategy of accompanying and empowering the fledgling indigenous gospel movement gaining momentum throughout the region at that time.

In so doing, the mission found itself rediscovering some of the fundamental principles set forth by Jesus himself in his commissioning instructions to the disciples recorded in Luke 10:

- **Go local.** Visit every town and village. Don’t expect people to come to you. Hang out with folk. Accept their hospitality. Eat whatever food they put on the table. And spend the night in whatever sleeping conditions they offer you.
- **Go light.** Forget the extra trunks and containers. “Carry no purse, no bag, and no sandals.” Keep it simple. Don’t rely on your own stuff. Stay vulnerable. Take the bush taxi. Place yourself in the hands of local hosts. Be accountable. Never forget your guest status.
- **Go looking.** Know that God has preceded you in whatever location you might chance to visit. Find out what God has been up to in that place before you arrived on the scene. Get with *God’s* program; don’t import and impose your own. Build on local wisdom, gifts and resources. Be as gracious with your hosts as they are with you. Greet them with a “peace blessing.” Then, seek out and nurture deepened relationships with anyone responding positively to your gesture of goodwill.

- **Go learning.** Marinate yourself in local ways of thinking, being, and doing. Know that only plants with indigenous roots will produce long-lasting, healthy fruit. Expect to be blessed, nourished, strengthened, and healed by hosts who extend their tables and offer you hospitality. Think “sharing circle,” not “bully pulpit.” Have the mind of Christ. Set aside privilege. Walk the path of humble obedience, remembering that “the servant is never greater than his Lord.”

The lessons from the “Chaco experiment” are in some ways more about *posture* than *program*. Yet they do remind us at the same time that *message* and *medium* are more inseparably linked than generally perceived or imagined.

I believe that the course-altering decisions made in the early Chaco ministry have been foundational and direction-setting for much of our Mennonite mission effort in subsequent years—in partnering with grassroots African-initiated churches; in encouraging the growth of home-grown messianic faith communities in Israel; in nurturing locally-inspired Anabaptist networks in the U.K., South Korea, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa; and in developing North American urban programs in which participants are challenged to “see the face of God in the city,” rather than importing their own personal passions, purposes, or programs.

It is my hope that the remarkable story recounted in the following pages might inspire followers of Jesus far beyond the Mennonite community to examine in new ways what it means to partner with others in God’s reconciling mission “until we all reach unity in the faith . . . and become mature, attaining the full measure of perfection found in Christ” (Ephesians 4:13, NIV).

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