

## Project Leda, Paraguay: Pathways to a Sustainable Future

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### Project: Leda, Paraguay

The 1st Universal Peace Federation (UPF) and South & North America Sustainable Development World Peace USA Corporation, co sponsored a project: “Pathways to a Sustainable Future”. The project was held in Paraguay from July 6 through July 21, with 36 volunteers representing 11 nations. The ambitious project was designed in the hope of building greater cooperation between North and South America—a goal that Rev. Sun Myung Moon extensively invested in for several decades. Following the inspiration of thinking globally while acting locally, the project

highlighted sustainable development as a major, contemporary global challenge. Participants were able to locally address this challenge and live at the Leda Settlement, in Paraguay. In particular, with Leda as their home-base, participants could offer three days of work service in the indigenous village of Esperanza.



The project was cosponsored by the Association for Sustainable Development in North and South America, an organization that helped introduce the pioneering efforts that the Japanese Unification Church elders have made since 1999. At that time, Rev. Moon challenged them to transform the underdeveloped Chaco Region—an area called Leda that to many seemed hellish—into a heaven on earth. The Leda that these faithful men first encountered was a raw wilderness filled with a vast assortment of birds, wild animals, mosquitos and snakes, while the semi-arid soil was considered by most to be a wasteland.

### An Orientation followed by a Visit to the Loma Plata Settlement

Once the diverse group from 11 nations had gathered, John Gehring and Carol Pobanz led an orientation program, for both staff and participants, to clarify the purpose, vision and expectations of the project. In addition, Mr. Evaristo Fernandez, the Director of the Universal Peace Federation in Paraguay, offered a clear, concise presentation to help us understand more deeply, the history, culture and dreams of Paraguay and its people. We went on a walking tour of part of the city that was in the midst of preparation for the historic visit of Pope Francis. Our group left Asuncion and took a long six-hour bus ride to the Loma Plata, a Mennonite settlement in the Chaco. This trip was planned to enable us to see and better comprehend what others have accomplished through practicing a living faith. In 1927, the Mennonite Community in Canada saw the exodus of 1,735 members who chose to become pioneers and settle the wilderness of the Chaco Region in Paraguay. The journey was full of hardships but it was undertaken in an effort to protect their religious identity. Through faith, honesty and hard work, they gradually began to grow and thrive. Today, Loma Plata is a model of a successful religious settlement, both economically and culturally. In fact, “Faith, Honesty and Hard Work” continues to be the settlement’s motto.



The Mennonites, as pacifists, established good relations with the indigenous people. This is something that was not common in Paraguay and something Rev. Moon has often spoken about. The settlers maintained their cultural heritage while becoming full citizens of Paraguay. Over a period of almost 90 years, the local peoples gained a deep appreciation of the Mennonites for their continuous contribution to the nation. Seeing this community of faith was important to help us learn more about the Leda Settlement, and it helped us understand the vision and hope of Father Moon.

### **The Leda Settlement**

The Leda Settlement, an area larger than greater Tokyo, has developed in ways that amazed our participants as well as officials as elevated as Paraguay's President. Turning the muddy waters of the Paraguay River into excellent drinking water, and utilizing practical sustainable advances in agriculture, tree planting and aquaculture exemplified to the participants how world hunger and poverty could be plausibly addressed and eliminated in the future. In thoughtfully digesting the meaning of their experiences during the Leda Project, participants were able to develop a clearer understanding of the value of the lives and work of Rev. & Mrs. Moon, and of their substantial vision for a brighter future of this planet. Education acquired through such international service projects as that carried out in Paraguay is vital in helping people find a clear purpose for their own studies and lives.



Experience is always a great teacher. The participants' personal involvement helped them understand more deeply the heart of the farmer going barefoot into muddy fields, digging taro, cutting brush, and clearing his land, and then planting Neem trees. Everyone spent time fishing and later learned about raising free-range pigs. Some worked with horses, and others chose to repair things on the farm. In Esperanza, participants experienced living in a village that had no running water and no regular electric power. River baths, outhouses and walks on muddy roads frequented by snakes were a part of our village routine. These experiences enabled us to grasp that this is the way of daily life, not only in Esperanza, but for so many millions of people on our shared planet. *Establishing Bonds of the Heart Across National Boundaries*: A substantial part of this project was in experiencing how the international participants came together and shared as a family. Participants were 17-31 years of age and, in most situations, they acted

like older and younger siblings.

Coming from diverse cultures in Latin America, the United States, Canada, Europe and Asia, they spoke different languages but this did not prevent deep bonds of friendship from being formed. Their willingness to accept challenges, and their willingness to share, care and sacrifice for others, were often expressed in bouts of song and laughter.

### **The Village of Esperanza**

Etched into our minds is the image of the children of Esperanza, walking and even running to welcome us as we walked off our boats and into the village. It took just a short time before we were gathered in the school yard singing and even dancing together. In the three days that followed, we painted two schools, planted Neem trees and offered 20 needed school desks to the community. Grace Kim, a recent high school graduate, shared that while we had worked hard in the village, it was the experiences with the children that moved her most. She noted, “I felt God in a deeper way than I ever experienced before—through those children and how they unconditionally accepted me. God’s love became so real to me.” Father & Mother Moon have spoken about the need to respect and work with the indigenous cultures in the Americas. The Leda Settlement has made this a rich part of their outreach into numerous local communities—especially evident in their building schools for three indigenous villages. We were grateful to be able to contribute to those efforts during our project and we were moved by the trust, respect and cooperation between the villagers and our Japanese elders.

### **Celebration in Asuncion**



and a men’s and women’s football match.

**International Day of Friendship and Culture:** The Family Federation for World Peace in Paraguay was anxious to share and utilize the opportunity of having the project members in Asuncion. An International Day of Culture and Friendship was planned which became a time of sharing, worshipping, celebrating and competing together as a global family. Performances of songs and dances of Paraguay were offered and talented international representatives reciprocated. The Sunday gathering included words of encouragement from Dr Chang Shik Yang, the Special Envoy of Mother Moon for Latin America, and outstanding barbecue, cultural performances



Throughout this eventful day the international volunteers could gain a good taste of the local lifestyle and culture. The atmosphere created through sharing opened a window into what it means to be part of a global faith community. The elderly in each society have much to offer to their families and the community. The Women’s Federation for World Peace in Asuncion is working with TESPAPPE-A, an NGO that serves the elderly nationwide. Our international team joined together on a special event that honored these citizens with a morning of song, dance and sharing. Seeing these active seniors do traditional Paraguayan dance, as well as the sharing of songs from around the world, shaped the event into a rich and happy experience. The Senator Emilia Alfaro de Franco—the nation’s former First Lady and an

active supporter of TESPAPÉ-A—joined the event, offering both words of encouragement and a warm personal touch. *ABC News Coverage:* The nation's largest media outlet, ABC News, welcomed our team to their broadcasting headquarters in Asuncion and gave us a tour. The news team interviewed four participants and two staff members, eventually writing a very complimentary, full-page article on the project. Having a full-page story in the nation's main newspaper afforded great exposure to both our project and the "sustainable" work being done in the Leda Settlement. This kind of coverage is not given often and served to stimulate the main Mennonite radio station to make a very positive report on the project. We are looking forward to July 2016 when we will return to Paraguay with brothers and sisters from around the world to carry out the 2nd "Pathways to a Sustainable Future" Project.

## **Support**

The project did have its challenges. A major one occurred early and threatened to disrupt the entire schedule so carefully planned beforehand. Hours of heavy tropical rainfall turned the rural roads into quagmires of mud that were impassible to the buses we planned to transport the project participants from Loma Plata to Leda. As it would have taken many days for the roads to dry out to a passible condition even after the rains had stopped, after consultations, it was decided to charter five small propeller planes to shuttle the participants four at a time into Leda—a gripping experience for all. The unforeseen cost of this placed us \$8,500 over budget. We would be grateful for any and all contributions to help us cover this shortfall. Make checks payable to HSA-UWC and mail to: SNA-SDWP, c/o Mrs Takahashi 69 High St. Tarrytown, NY 10591