

How I joined the Unification Church in Paraguay through a German Missionary

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Around 1920, groups of Canadian Mennonites started to feel uneasy about their right to their way of life. The Canadian government's Ministry of Education was looking into the Mennonite school system, and it was not in sync with the requirements of the official curriculum. Since Mennonites followed a strict view of Christianity, they deemed the "official" government way of teaching children too liberal and not centered on Christian values.

The first thought always was: Let's move! Since the Mennonites claimed to be an absolute pacifist group, they always preferred to avoid conflict by changing location, and this meant often moving from country to country, or even to other continents.

A delegation of twelve men was formed and sent out to investigate new horizons. Their aim was Argentina, but on the ship to South America, they met a Paraguayan ambassador, Mr. Gondra. He convinced them that Paraguay was the chosen country for them and they decided then and there to travel all the way to Paraguay.

A warm welcome from the government helped to inspire a large group from Canada into making this quick decision to leave for Paraguay. In November 1926, the first group of three hundred people plus arrived in Paraguay. A welcome speech in German from the Paraguayan president made them feel embraced, and so began the settlement of the Colony Menno. The gate of entrance to the Chaco Region was Puerto Casado, where they had to stay for many months in tents due to the lack of preparation regarding surveying of the land. Today, this very land belongs to the Unification movement.

A harsh environment

The beginning was incredibly hard; many died of typhoid fever in the first six months and their faith in the whole undertaking was shaken to the core. A few steadfast leaders kept the group together.

I was born in 1944 but still experienced many of these pioneer challenges. Most families had more than ten children and there were no hospitals, doctors, or any other professional health services for that matter. In 1932 a war broke out between Paraguay and Bolivia, and as ironic it might sound, I think it was a blessing to our community, because military doctors and some basic assistance to sustain the new settlement came into the region. Additionally, among the new arrivals existed a complete lack of agricultural experience with tropical growing conditions -- the climate and the soil composition, the drought of the winter months, the terrain, and in particular, the climate, which was more extreme than the Paraguayan promoters had led the Mennonite immigrants to believe.

Most people were farmers, and cotton, which usually we handpicked as a whole family, was for a long time the main crop. Needless to say, this was difficult and exhausting work in often 40-45° heat [104-113° F]. What was left after so many trials and failures was faith and trust in the will of God. Even

today, I am still impressed by how strong this trust was, but looking back, they really had no alternative. They had settled about five hundred kilometers from the capital, Asuncion, in a wilderness area. There were no roads of any kind, no means of communication, no electricity nor any other such infrastructure -- it was sheer physical hardship.

They built schools and churches at the same time as their homes, and this provided a strong sense of community. Everyone considered the community an extended family. Since there was no entertainment, such as movies or television in the strict life of a Mennonite, Mennonites concentrated on music. Every family had a couple of different musical instruments, and every week we had choir practice. On certain occasions, we prepared intercolonial Saengerfests, in which all music lovers came together for about a week to practice and prepare a musical event for the whole community.

Of course, every Sunday we had church, and most everyone attended. In many cases, this was not only due to a spiritual drive but because of the social and fellowship need to come together. The sermons were long and included many Christian hymns, Bible readings and lengthy prayers, but it all had a good vibration.

A yearning for more

After finishing elementary school at the age of twelve, there were no higher education opportunities, so there was not much else left to do but work on the farm. My dad was the president of the cooperative system for many years in our region, and this brought some connections with other Paraguayans and some foreigners who came to visit. In time, simple hospitals were built and Paraguayan doctors visited them periodically. It was for me so inspiring to see professional people and my only wish was to be able to continue my studies someday, somewhere. A number of Indian tribes were in the same area our community settled and so many of them suffered from tuberculosis. It was my earnest desire to study in the field of health sciences to be able to help these Indians to live a normal, healthy life.

It happened that my uncle, who lived in the northern part of the settlement, started to teach evening courses and soon this developed into a plan for a middle and high school. I felt this was my chance and after convincing my parents, I packed my bags for a new start to my life. I promised that I would only ask for one year, but in my heart I knew that I would absolutely not leave school and return home. Since I loved school with every fiber of my being, I finished the first year top in my class. My uncle granted me a scholarship for the remaining years of high school -- I will forever be grateful for that gift!

While I went on to a "normal school" (to gain certification as a teacher), I began to delve into the Mennonite faith a little deeper. It became clear to me that we believed our tenets so fervently because this was our world -- this was all we ever had known. I remember one day when a question popped up in me: Who knows or guarantees that our faith is the only correct one? I started to pray my own prayers, just talking with God and Jesus. We knew many, many long prayers by heart, but I longed to have a more personal, more genuine relationship with God.

It was a tradition that the graduates from normal school present a play for the graduation event. A piece called Judas Iscariot was chosen for our graduation. The author of this script presented Judas in a very different way than we always had thought about him. The play did not cast judgment, but portrayed him as a human being who made mistakes but could also feel remorse and repent for them. This awakened in me questions about Jesus' life and death. Did he really come to die as we had heard in every sermon? If he came to die, why isn't Judas a hero, since he initiated the way to salvation? I felt I had to find an answer, because this questioning traveled like an earthquake through my life of faith. In one of our weekly Bible studies, I raised the question about Judas and Jesus' death.

I still can feel the stare of all the elderly in the meeting. Finally, one older gentleman said, "You know, we never will understand everything," and shook it off like an unimportant matter. Strangely but clearly, I felt at that moment: I will find the answer somewhere, sometime.

A desire to contribute

In the early 1970s, I decided to continue my studies in the capital, Asuncion. I decided on Biochemistry as my major. The Mennonites were in the process of building a state-of-the-art hospital with a modern clinical lab, which I would manage after completing my studies. It all sounded exciting.

I believe I was the only non-Catholic among thousands of students in college, and after many conversations with classmates, I increasingly thought about the unification of religions. It became clear to me that we all basically strive for the same thing -- to be happy and to create a peaceful society based on mutual tolerance and understanding. But after a while, thinking about the stance of Mennonite pastors, and the Catholic ecumenical leadership, I sincerely started to doubt the idea of unification; everyone seemed just too stubborn! However, I still felt convinced that the present world could never be God's will, especially in the spiritual sense.



My spiritual mother missionary, Veronika Klepper

missionary!" What?

At that moment, (April 1975, in the third year of six years of college) when I was about to throw out the idea of unity, a Unificationist German missionary, Veronika Klepper, appeared on campus. One of my classmates called me to come and translate, because this "lady" who talked about God and communism (as he stated), spoke only German and some English. At first I thought something could not be right. She looked like a sixteen-year-old high schooler, and when I asked her what she was doing in Paraguay, she responded with a very forthright and self-confident voice, "I am a

You can't possibly be a missionary at that age, I thought. However, when asking her what church she represented she stated that she was a missionary of the Unification Church. It was like a star lighting up in me -- unification? I took her away from the crowd that surrounded her and told her that I wanted to hear more about that idea of unification. About twenty minutes into our conversation, I told her that I would help her -- which was probably a bit of a premature statement, but I felt a calling.

The pain of severing ties

After studying the entire Divine Principle, so many of my questions were answered; it was a liberating experience. I felt gratitude toward Heavenly Father and was impressed that someone had the courage to take on the challenge of Unification. I was determined to do my part!

This decision, of course, meant a deep disconnect with the Mennonite community -- all my future plans fell through, but that wasn't of great concern to me. My main concern was my family. We always had been a deeply united family; how would my parents and my seven siblings receive my new determination and direction? It was amazing how someone seemed to go before me and prepare the way.

My parents and most of my siblings joined one by one. The majority of my family stayed in the community, and suffered fairly severe persecution for years especially in schools and workplaces, but today it is a very different situation - the good of people usually wins and that is very comforting. Especially my father had to endure countless visits from the Mennonite church leadership and most friends turned against him or just totally ignored him after a while. One day I asked him how he endured all those mistreatments and still kept a good attitude about it, even joining the movement. He responded, "I raised my children; I know it was not perfect but I invested my best. Therefore, I will always first listen to my children and evaluate any matter from that point of view." I was impressed and only wished that one day I could say the same of my own family.

An old lesson about wine

The first years with the three missionaries (German, American and Japanese) were tough, and at one point I struggled to an extent where I honestly questioned my decision to join. I decided to do a three-day prayer condition before I would cut it all off because that liberating feeling after hearing the Divine Principle was deeply recorded in my soul. Early in the morning on the third day, probably in the process of waking up, I saw Jesus clearly standing in the corner of my room. He called me by name and said, "Do you know what your problem is?" I said "No," and with a loving voice he said, "You don't put new wine into old wine skins." This jerked me out of my sleepy mode, and I responded, "Yes, that's it!" I felt almost literally as if a jacket that was too small had been suffocating me. I realized from that experience that I had been trying to put many new concepts into my Mennonite thinking which did not fit anymore. It was again that liberating feeling, but even on a higher level of heart. I am forever grateful to Jesus for that visitation.

Today our family counts more than twenty blessed couples and more than sixty members among us. We are a small community in itself. It almost feels like an undeserved blessing, especially when looking at so many very hard working members whose families never could unite on the same foundation.

I joined in 1975, but after Foundation Day (2013) I felt that I had rejoined on a different level when True Mother declared God as our Heavenly Parent. I so deeply felt that this is the true, original name for God, who is our father and our mother, and all we have done and worked for is to liberate these two intrinsic aspects of God. Once this happens, God's motherly energy can flow freely through the cosmos and all paradigms will change. A feminine and masculine God-like balance has never existed before, and this, I believe, is the very foundation for eternal peace and unity for all mankind. It is my hope and constant prayer that the human family truly can become One Family under God, the parent of all mankind.