Missio Dei is published by Mennonite Mission Network to invite reflection and dialogue about *God's mission* in today's world. Some features in the series focus primarily on the biblical and theological foundations of the mission task. Others present ministry case studies or personal stories of attempts to be faithful to Christ's call. Perspectives represented reflect the passion and commitment of the agency: to declare in word and demonstrate in life the whole gospel of Jesus Christ, *across the street, all through the marketplaces, and around the world.*

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Foreword

"The way we have always seen mission is as a one-way road from the United States to the world. We want a *two-way* relationship. We want a *partnership*." With these words of challenge delivered in 1998, Juan Sieber, son of former Mennonite missionaries Floyd and Alice Sieber, called upon both Argentine and U.S. churches to think some new thoughts and imagine a new kind of future together. Juan, at the time, was one of the pastors of the Choele Choel congregation in the Patagonia region of Argentina.

The vision, call and energy for the Patagonia Mission Project (PMP) emerged within the Mennonite Church in Argentina (IEMA) as far back as the mid-1990s. And as the Mennonite churches in the Patagonia region began their work, they sought partners. In response to this challenge was born Arm in Arm (AIA) — a cluster of people from Illinois congregations who came together to form a partnership for ministry with the Iglesia Evangélica Menonita Argentina and in collaboration with Mennonite Mission Network, the mission agency of Mennonite Church USA.

During the partnership's first six years, the relationship focused on church-planting in Argentina and establishing relationships through exchange visits. In 2004, Juan and Amaris Sieber and their sons felt called to help facilitate missional outreach in Illinois, and AIA invited them to come and spend time in their communities. In a style similar to that of PMP, AIA supported the family for six months, after which they became self-supporting missionaries with housing and limited insurance coverage.

Juan sees his role during this time of ministry as encouraging the historic Mennonite churches in Illinois to become more missional by starting small house-church outreach into nearby towns and communities. He is also encouraging these older, rural churches to join together for planting churches in southern Illinois. As of this writing, the East Bend and Hopedale congregations are taking initial steps to implement this vision for mission. Other Illinois churches are interested in hearing about this outreach initiative as well.

Juan and his family live, work and attend church in the Hopedale community. Juan regularly speaks in Arm In Arm churches and other Illinois congregations. In addition, he is sharing pastoral duties at East

Bend twice a month while the pastor there, Michael Dean, is on sabbatical leave. Michael is spending part of his sabbatical in the Patagonia churches in Argentina — another aspect of exchange visits designed to build relationships. It is significant to note that the partnership among Patagonia IEMA churches, PMP, AIA and the Mission Network is currently entering its eighth year with increased emphasis now being placed on mission in Illinois.

In this booklet, Delbert Erb tells the story of the partnership and its impact on the churches in Argentina and Illinois. Delbert has served as the partnership facilitator from the beginning of the relationship. He and his wife, Frieda, have been encouragers and catalysts for the partnership since its earliest days. Delbert has ably walked the partnership through the inevitable conflicts and growing pains.

The relationships among the various bodies continue to deepen, and the vision to encourage the churches to share God's love with people in Patagonia and Illinois remains strong.

For this we praise God!

Peter Graber
Senior Executive for Missional Church Advancement (Mission Network)

Linda Shelly
Director for Latin America (Mission Network)

The Patagonia Story

Congregations in Argentina and Illinois Link "Arm in Arm" for Mission

Delbert Erb and Linda Shelly

"To the ends of the earth:" The birth of Mennonite churches in Patagonia

In January 1969 an historical and emotional ceremony took place in the Mennonite Church in Pehuajó, Argentina. Floyd and Alice Sieber knelt at the front of the church while Argentine Conference leaders prayed and commissioned these two North American missionaries. The Evangelical Mennonite Church of Argentina (IEMA) was meeting on the 50th anniversary of the first church that began in Pehuajó in 1919.

Now, the church that had grown in numbers and maturity was sending the Sieber family to Choele Choel, 600 miles southwest of Buenos Aires, for a new church-planting project. Several exploratory trips had been made and Choele Choel was chosen because of its central location in the Rio Negro (Black River) area and because there was very little evangelical church presence in the city.

Choele Choel. In the small city of Choele Choel it took time to win the confidence of the people, but gradually, things began to happen. Floyd found a small farm just across the river on the edge of town and soon moved there so that he could raise chickens and sell milk from his own cows. Rafael and Diana Stábile, who had joined the Siebers as part of a plan to start a school, lived on the church property.

By 1975 the room in the city where meetings were held was overflowing. A property in the same block was purchased and a storage shed was transformed into a church. A ministry among Chilean youth was developed because of the large numbers who came to the city looking for work, often without proper documentation. The church needed to be enlarged several times, the work usually being done by the church members themselves. In some years, membership doubled within a 12-month period.

The Siebers' son and daughter, Juan and Wanda, helped with church activities among children and youth, and a church council soon

participated in decision-making. The Choele Choel congregation was always a missional church and early on a work was begun in General Conesa, 108 miles downriver to the southeast. Today this is an organized congregation where Oscar and Lilian Donoso are pastors.

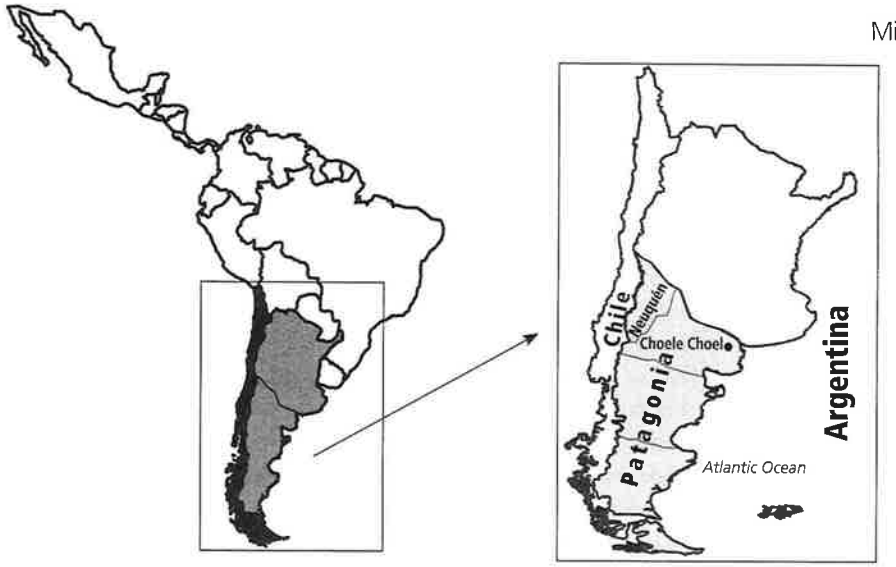
General Roca. In the late 1970s a Mennonite church also began in General Roca, a much larger city located 72 miles to the west in the upper valley of the Rio Negro. Pir Alí Sanchez, a Mennonite from Bragado, had moved there with his family. Pir Alí was an agro-scientist and worked for a government experimental farm.

For some time the Sanchez family was active in another evangelical church. But when doctrinal questions arose, they consulted Floyd Sieber and decided to start their own Mennonite church. The church began meeting in their daughter and son-in-law's garage. In the 1980s they purchased a property and started construction, first meeting in the classrooms at the back of the building and later completing a sanctuary where worship services were held.

Neuquén. When the three Sanchez children — Graciela, Miriam and Edgardo — entered university, they went to Neuquén, 30 miles further west, to study. While there they began meeting with others, sometimes in their car, for prayer and Bible study. This resulted in the formation of a group of believers, mostly university students. They eventually rented a hall in the western part of the city where lower-cost housing was available. Edgardo and his brother-in-law, Omar Mac, were named as pastors of the emerging faith community.

Later the group bought a lot and began to dream about starting a school. They took the first steps in faith. And soon afterward, a Mennonite group from Holland heard of their project, made a visit to the site, and promised to help with building costs. Today there is a church of over 100 members in Neuquén and a complete grade school, with plans for adding a high school in 2005.

These four churches, then — Choele Choel, General Conesa, General Roca and Neuquén — formed the beginning of the Mennonite churches in Patagonia, the southernmost part of Argentina, reaching almost literally to "the ends of the earth."



From vision to reality: the Patagonia Mission Project

Floyd Sieber died in a tractor accident in 1990. Many years before his death he had a dream in which he saw light streaming south from northern Patagonia where the Rio Negro valley is located. He told his family of this dream and they later passed it along to others. In 1992 two small unaffiliated congregations contacted the Mennonites to ask for denominational membership. One was in Caleta Olivia (Santa Cruz Province) and the other in Sarmiento (southern Chubut Province). The latter had a blind pastor. The Choele Choel congregation, with its leadership team — Rafael Stábile and Juan Sieber, newly ordained in the wake of Floyd's death — was asked to give spiritual oversight to the two congregations requesting adherence.

In 1994 the five pastors of the Rio Negro valley, Juan Sieber, Rafael Stábile, Pir Alí Sanchez, Edgardo Sanchez and Omar Mac, met together and decided to make an exploratory trip circling the Patagonia as far south as Caleta Olivia. Following this trip they began to talk and dream of what they called the Patagonia Mission Project. They envisioned establishing five urban centers from which mission work could reach out into neighboring communities. Two would be Neuquén and Choele Choel. The others they imagined might be Bariloche, Comodoro Rivadavia and either Trelew or Puerto Madryn. The pastors challenged their churches to pray and start raising funds to send out missionaries to these places. They even dared to suggest that a new mission couple might be recruited, commissioned and sent out each year.

Building relationships and searching for ministry partners

The leadership team also began to share their vision with others outside of Patagonia. The national Argentine Conference listened to the group's emerging plan and agreed to pray for the initiative and to bless it. The team also began talking about making a trip to Pennsylvania and Indiana in the United States in order to share their vision with churches where they had contacts. Their desire was to establish church-to-church relations with interested congregations, and not just visit Mennonite Board of Missions, the denominational mission agency.

Frieda Schellenberg Erb was at the time Latin American Secretary for MBM. She encouraged the group in its planning and anticipated some funding for the project in the 1996 Latin America budget. In a letter to MBM at this time Juan Sieber wrote: "We are looking for partners. We will invite them to come into our labor, to participate in the sacrifice and hardships of the sowing and the joys of the harvest. We are looking for sister churches that will share not only what they have but what they are."

In early spring of 1995, six adults and two children from the Patagonia region began making plans for a trip to the United States. As preparations for the trip were under way, a letter was received by MBM from a group of people in the Illinois Mennonite Conference of churches who were interested in church-to-church contacts with an international partner. Frieda at once got the various parties together so that when the Argentines arrived in the States, they not only stayed in Pennsylvania and Indiana where they had contacts, but also went to Illinois to share their vision. It was not a mere coincidence that Floyd Sieber had come from the Freeport (Ill.) congregation, one of the interested churches. Later, this Illinois group came together around a growing sense of common call to ministry and named themselves, "Arm in Arm."

Meanwhile back in Argentina, plans were moving forward as well. By the end of 1995, money had been raised to support a church-planting Argentine missionary couple for one year. It was decided that Comodoro Rivadavia should be the place for the first church plant. In March of the following year, a group of seven people from Arm in Arm in Illinois visited the churches in Patagonia and together, they traveled to Comodoro Rivadavia where they joined in the search for a lot.

A young Argentine couple in Neuquén, Damián and Marta Reyes, with their two small daughters, answered the call to be the first PMP missionaries. By the middle of 1996 they had made the move to what was for them an unknown city. They chose to live in the southwestern part of the city where there were many new homes but no churches.

> "We are known as missionaries and feel appreciated by the surrounding community. Generally the people in the zone receive us very nicely; they are hospitable. ...We regularly visit isolated homes and villages. As missionaries our labor has been more in providing emotional support and love than in preaching the gospel. We do it when they ask. Our task is to seek strategies for people to commit themselves to God. Many people lack the confidence to take the step of making a commitment to God. Our goals are that people can get to know God and commit to God, and change their lifestyle. There is much sadness in their lives and this leads to alcoholism; and youth are following the same path."
>
> — *Miguel and Angela Bamonde, Los Berros*

PMP had agreed to give them housing and a very limited salary for one year. Since Damián was a nurse it was hoped that he could get a job in the new location to support the family. Providing church planters with housing and limited salary support for a year became PMP's economic strategy for sending personnel. A grant and loan would help the family with initial housing and vehicle purchases. But by the second year, it was expected that personnel would support themselves through a combination of income-producing work and tithes and offerings from the new church. When the church group became too large to meet in member family homes, the group itself would seek a solution to the problem.

Learning to follow God's leading

While PMP carefully planned the new work in Comodoro Rivadavia, the Lord also had a surprise for the new PMP project. During 1995 Marta Palma, who was converted in the Neuquén congregation told her pastors that she was originally from a rural area in northern Neuquén Province. Her parents, she reported, had sent her to Buenos Aires as a small girl to work in a private home. There she came down with tuberculosis and ended up in a hospital with no one to visit her.

Finally relatives contacted her and brought her back to Neuquén. Eventually she married and was raising a family in Neuquén when she and her family came in contact with the Mennonite church and were converted. Marta reported having harbored hard feelings for many years toward her family because of what they had done to her. But now, she said, she needed to get those feelings out of her heart. And so she asked the pastors to take her to see her parents so that she could tell them what had happened and forgive them.

The trip to Cancha Huinganco where her parents lived was made with much prayer and uncertainty. Cancha Huinganco was in the mountains and the dirt road that led there was often extremely difficult to travel. But the trip went smoothly and Marta was reunited with her parents.

During their encounter she told them what had happened in her life and how Christ had changed both her and her family. When she asked them whether they too might want to accept Christ into their lives, her parents responded affirmatively, followed by several other relatives and neighbors. So instead of going to another big city as the leadership team had planned, the Lord took PMP pastors to an isolated mountain valley where people live many miles from each other, usually traveling on horseback to get together. The Lord used this situation to provide the church with a new vision for the many people living in isolated places all over Patagonia who also needed Christ.

It was clear that it would be very difficult for church leaders in Neuquén to regularly visit these new believers, more than 240 miles away. What would be needed was a base in Chos Malal, the nearest city to Cancha Huinganco. And so the decision was made to seek out a property there. A partially constructed house was purchased which, when completed, could serve as a missionary dwelling.

Partnership discussions progress and a covenant is signed

In mid-1996, Frieda and Delbert Erb traveled to North America to report to the people in Illinois who had visited Argentina earlier in the year. With film clips that the AIA group had taken and with some snapshots of the emerging fellowship in Cancha Huinganco, MBM's media staff in Harrisonburg, Va., produced a short video which the Erbs were able to use in their reporting to churches over the next several months.

The idea of a partnership between churches in North America and Argentina was taking hold. Part of the idea beginning to emerge was that visits would be made every year — on even years to Argentina and on odd years to Illinois. Following this pattern, another Argentine group visited Illinois in 1997, each visitor paying for his or her own trip. The travelers made stops, not only among Arm in Arm churches in Illinois, but also among churches in Pennsylvania where several former Argentines had moved and taken up residence.

By the time the second Illinois group visited Argentina in March of 1998, the idea of a partnership agreement between the two groups had moved well toward formalization. Peter Graber of Mennonite Mission Network reflected on his participation in the 1998 trip: "I joined a group of Illinois Mennonites (farmers, a teacher, youth and young adults) on a visit to the Rio Negro valley of southern Argentina. The group spent a week traveling with local church members on one of two mission trips into the Andes Mountains and down the eastern coast. We then gathered in Neuquén for a full day of worship, sharing, and discernment, developing a partnership covenant that stated our shared vision and the agreements for how we would work at that vision together.

"I represented Mennonite Board of Missions; the local pastors represented the Rio Negro valley cluster of churches within the Argentine Mennonite Church; the Illinois group represented Arm in Arm; and Raul Garcia represented the Argentine Mennonite Church as a whole. Many local church leaders also participated. In between the singing, the laughter and the many rounds of Yerba Mate tea passed around the circle, we came to agreement on the terms of the partnership covenant and signed it the next day in Choele Choel."

The different aspects of the covenant agreement, signed on March 21, 1998, included:

- the mutual exchange of information and prayer concerns
- financial agreements regarding budget and regular reporting
- mission strategy
- responsibility for the administration of the PMP project
- mutual visits, including possible voluntary service interchanges
- the naming of a facilitator for the partnership

The length of validity for this agreement was understood to be six years. Delbert and Frieda Erb were asked to be facilitators. From this

time on, a bimonthly prayer calendar was sent to all member partners. Periodic financial reports were also made available to all participants. A formal partnership meeting has been held each year since 1998 at the time of the exchange visits, either in Illinois or in Argentina. At these meetings, reports are given and budgets are reconsidered.

"The goal of the Patagonia Mission Project was to establish relationships between Argentina and U.S. congregations while encouraging mission outreach. Financial assistance was secondary to the relationship goal. Churches in Illinois were excited about this vision for mission and formed Arm In Arm in partnership with the Argentine churches.

The financial aspect of the partnership was a joint effort to help fund PMP projects. The original agreement was that AIA would fund up to 50 percent of the PMP budget, with PMP churches funding at least 50 percent. This worked well when the dollar equaled the *peso*. When the Argentine financial crash happened in December 2001, budgeting became more challenging. The peso fell from $1 to about 30 cents. How should AIA respond? We talked of ideas ranging from dropping our dollars to match the value of the current peso, to increasing our giving to make up for the peso devaluation. We took a middle-of-the-road approach. Currently, AIA funds slightly more of the PMP budget than the Patagonia churches. We recognize that the Patagonia churches put most of the 'sweat equity' into the projects.

Our second PMP/AIA Partnership Covenant, signed in 2004, dropped any mention of a giving percentage in the budget part of the agreement.

AIA does not want to become the fund-raiser for the partnership. We believe getting the financial share too far out of balance could hurt our goal of building relationships."

— Jeanne and Mark Birky

The PMP branches out in new directions

New work begins in Los Alazanes. Already at the time of the Illinois visit to Argentina in 1998, the Lord was making new plans for the PMP. As the delegation of U.S. and Argentine travelers was returning from a visit to Cancha Huinganco in the old bus, *Lazaro* ("Lazarus"), they saw a woman walking with her children along the highway. They decided to stop and ask if they could offer her a ride. She accepted and they soon discovered that the woman, named Samira, was an indigenous (Mapuche) person returning home 21 miles from a neighboring town. As the group traveled together, Marta Palma — the same woman who had only recently been reconciled with her parents after many years of broken relationships — explained to Samira the love of Jesus and His plan of salvation. And Samira accepted the Lord's forgiveness in her life. Samira had a serious illness, and the group also prayed for the healing of her body. She is well to this day.

When the group reached Samira's home not far off the highway, they were introduced to her husband and got a better picture of the indigenous community where the family lived. Samira invited them back, and this invitation opened the door for the beginning of witness in Los Alazanes, 120 miles from Neuquén. The result of follow-up visits to this community was that Samira's husband also accepted the Lord and the two of them were baptized, forming the nucleus of an emerging faith community in that place.

The ministry is strengthened in Comodoro Rivadavia. Also during this same 1998 visit from Illinois, part of the group traveled to Comodoro Rivadavia where builders from Choele Choel had earlier built a garage onto the side of the missionary family home. During that trip some painting was done on the new addition, and the garage was officially dedicated as a place of meeting. For the missionaries, working together on a project was a very fulfilling activity. Service along with worship and fellowship helped to build relationships.

It was not always easy for the Reyes family living as missionaries in Comodoro Rivadavia to support themselves because Damián could not get a steady job as a nurse and because rotating work hours made it very difficult for him to attend regular meetings. For a period of time both Damián and Marta worked in a fish-processing plant. Anita Pineda, a schoolteacher from Choele Choel, moved to Comodoro Rivadavia to assist in the work as a self-supporting missionary in 1997.

North American missionaries join the PMP initiative. The partnership agreement anticipated the possibility of North American missionaries helping in the PMP. This became a reality in 1999 when Brent and Lourdes Hartzler from the Petra congregation in Lancaster County became the next missionaries to join the team. After several

months in Choele Choel where Lourdes' parents lived, the couple moved to Chos Malal to help finish the house that had been purchased there, and began making regular trips to visit new believers in Cancha Huinganco. The support for the Hartzlers came from a group in Pennsylvania through MBM. Although the couple had agreed to go to Argentina for two years, they decided to return before their time was up for personal reasons. PMP was sad to see them leave. Their contribution was valued even more than they knew at the time.

A church is planted in Valdivia, Chile. Another development, not in the original PMP plans, was the calling and eventual move of three women from Choele Choel as missionaries to Valdivia, Chile, in 2000. The women had spent a summer in Chile sometime earlier, but then decided to return on a more permanent basis with the purpose of starting a church. Wanda Sieber was one of the three women in the group. Another was Waleska Villa, whose family lived in Valdivia. And the third was Marlene Dorigoni, whose parents had moved from Valdivia to Choele Choel many years before.

These three women felt God's call to work in Valdivia, having no idea how that work might actually develop. In Choele Choel they had focused in their ministry on the adolescent population, and so they investigated this same possibility among the already existing churches of Valdivia. Nothing, however, materialized in this area. Rather, the women discovered many adults who were hungry for studying the Bible. This, then, became the foundation of their work and for what is now the Mennonite Church in that city.

The three missionaries are responsible for their own support, but they do not have regular secular jobs. Chilean society is more divided into classes than is Argentina and the women find themselves working primarily with middle-class people who have spiritual concerns, but are turned off by the Pentecostal style of most evangelical churches in Chile.

The SIM (Intensive Missionary Seminary) is launched to meet urgent training needs

As the PMP work expanded and missionaries had to deal with a variety of issues, it became evident that mission workers needed adequate training and preparation to carry out their assignments. It was decided, therefore, that before sending out new missionaries, efforts should be made to provide training in mission strategy, Mennonite church and

mission history, personal discipleship and spiritual growth, Bible studies, and practical guides for intercessory prayer, counseling, conflict mediation, preaching and teaching. This is how the SIM (Intensive Missionary Seminary) was born.

The training was designed to be a one-year full-time study program. Classes began in 1999 in Choele Choel where facilities and teachers were most readily available. The principal requirements for entering the program included:

- a call to do mission work
- a recommendation from the candidate's pastor indicating evidence of this calling
- previous participation in mission outreach in the local congregation
- previous completion of the basic level of Bible study in the congregation (the Programa Unido de Educación Biblico, or PUEB study program)
- a financial arrangement that would permit full-time study

The intensive course of study included academic courses, practical experience on missionary trips and in the local setting, and emphasis on personal spiritual growth.

Three students participated the first year: César and Miriam Riquelme from General Roca and Claudia Ojeda from Neuquén. Delbert Erb was at that time on another assignment in Bolivia, and the Choele Choel pastors had difficulty finding enough time to give to the program. Therefore, the program objectives were only partially realized. The following year it was decided to put the program on hold until the return of the Erbs to Choele Choel in 2001.

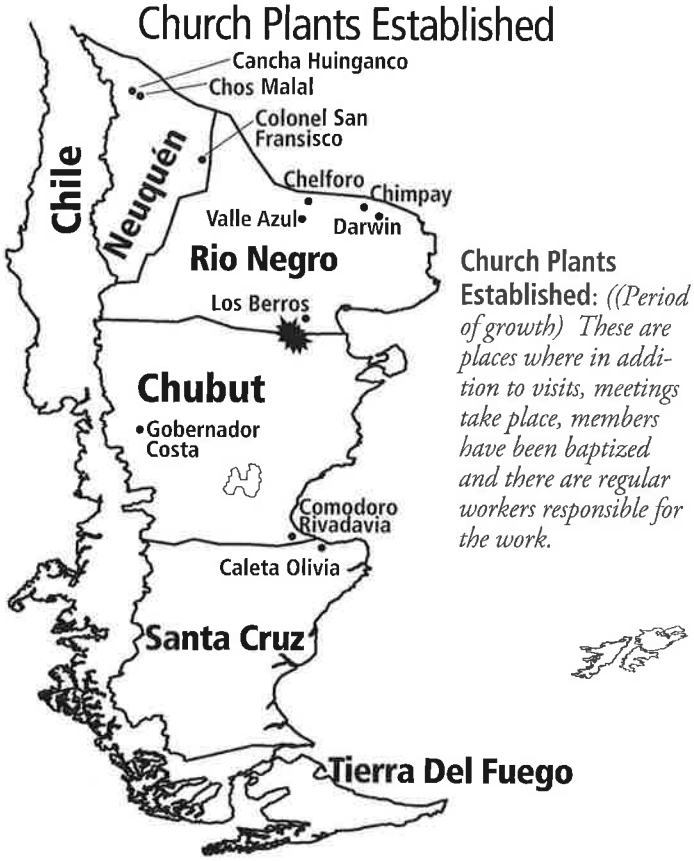
But in the meantime, César and Miriam Riquelme, who had participated in SIM's first training session, began sensing a clear calling to be missionaries in the growing city of Puerto Madryn. This was one of the cities originally chosen for the PMP outreach. They decided to buy their own lot and build a house from which they could reach out into the community. Members from Choele Choel helped them in the construction of their home. The Riquelme family made their move to Puerto Madryn in mid-2000. César was a sign maker and so set out to support himself from the very beginning of ministry in this new location. The first two years were very difficult, partly because of the

The Patagonia Mission Project vision in four stages

Established Churches

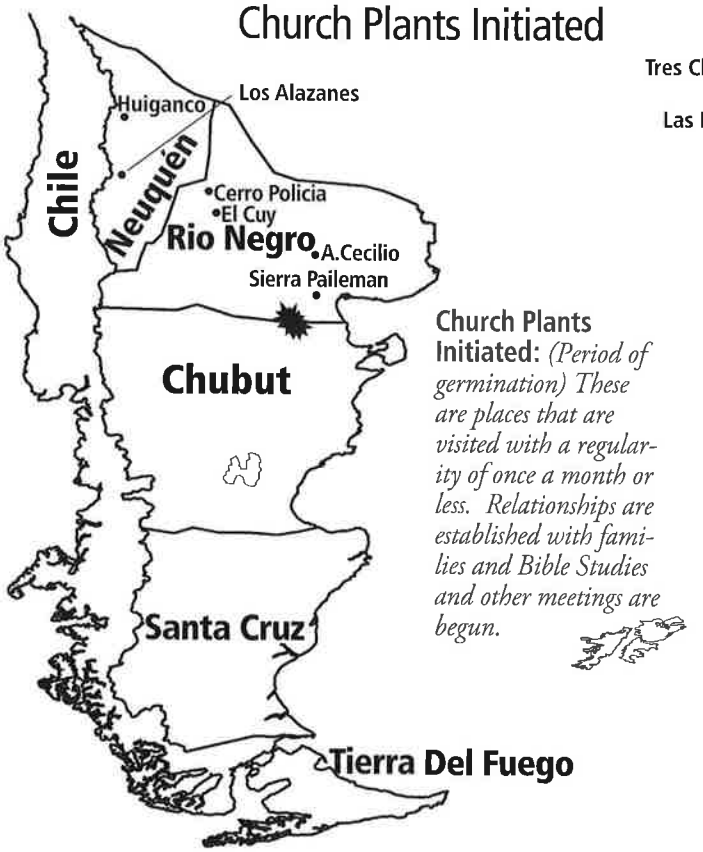
Established Churches: *These are places where a group of believers (usually 10 or more) started their life together in a new church and has completed the process for affiliation with the Argentine Mennonite Conference (IEMA).*

Church Plants Established



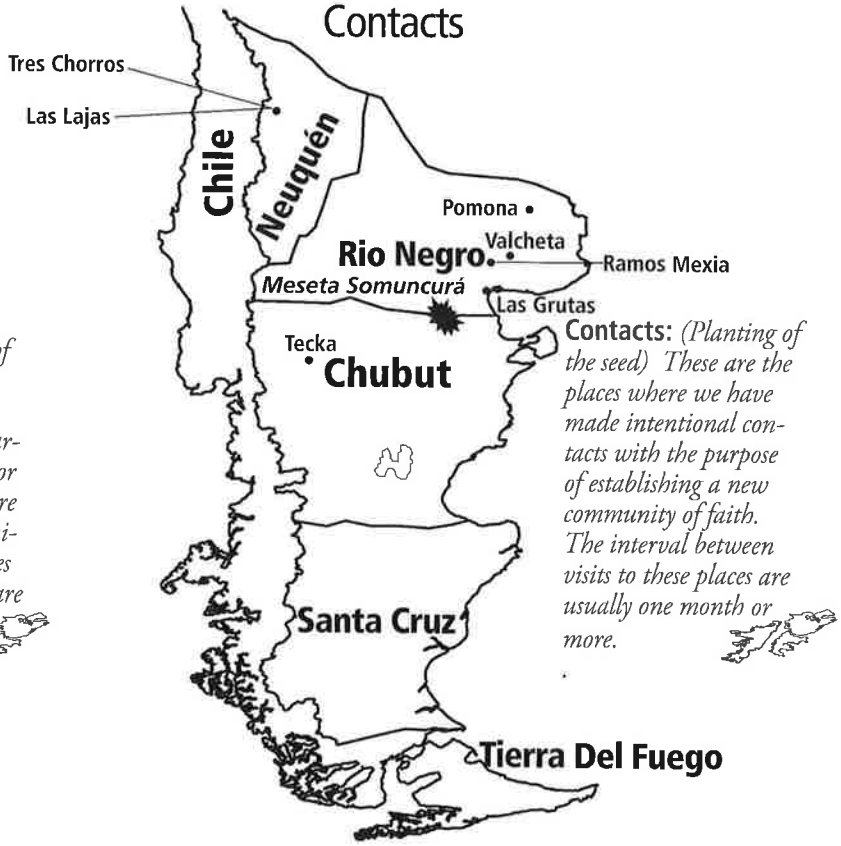
Church Plants Established: *((Period of growth) These are places where in addition to visits, meetings take place, members have been baptized and there are regular workers responsible for the work.*

Church Plants Initiated



Church Plants Initiated: *(Period of germination) These are places that are visited with a regularity of once a month or less. Relationships are established with families and Bible Studies and other meetings are begun.*

Contacts



Contacts: *(Planting of the seed) These are the places where we have made intentional contacts with the purpose of establishing a new community of faith. The interval between visits to these places are usually one month or more.*

competition he encountered, and partly because of the economic crash that came to Argentina in December of 2001.

In 2002, SIM classes resumed once again, this time with seven students, all from Choele Choel. Delbert Erb and Juan Sieber taught most of the classes. Scholarships became available for the students because the Mt. Pleasant Mennonite Church in Virginia had heard of the project and decided to budget $2,500 a year for this program. Some of the students lived in their homes and others in the church apartments that had been renovated. New classrooms were also made available for SIM's use as part of the local church-building renovations. Funds were borrowed for this construction with a plan of liquidation over a number of years.

SIM has trained almost 20 missionaries and other church workers during its first five years (1999-2004).

A "day in the life" of two PMP missionaries

Many stories could be told about the work of each of the Argentine missionaries and the churches in the communities where they serve. We will limit ourselves to what has happened in Chos Malal — a story that includes many of the elements common to other locations as well.

Damián and Marta Reyes moved from Comodoro Rivadavia to Chos Malal in early 2002. Marta sewed clothing to generate income for the couple's self-support. Mission work continued in several places in the region. The couple traveled to the community of Cancha Huinganco every 15 days, and a number of people were baptized there.

Since people in the region live so far from each other, it has been difficult to have an organized congregation that meets for varied activities. Damián has been able to assist the government in installing a running water system for the church and several nearby homes. Both Damián and Marta have held literacy classes for a number of people in several locations. More recently, a group of young people who are studying in a nearby high school have asked Damián to conduct Bible studies with them.

In 2004 a contact was made in a village across the mountain west of Cancha Huinganco. The village is called simply "Huinganco" and is different from other settings in that the people live in close proximity to each other. This makes the possibility of church planting much easier, although due to the distance from Chos Malal, PMP dreams that someday they might be able to place a missionary there.

SIM Alumni

Name	Current Activity
◆ Year 1999 (3)	
César Riquelme	Missionary/pastor in Puerto Madryn
Miriam Riquelme	Missionary in Puerto Madryn
Claudia Ojeda	Neuquén: Participates in trips to Los Alazanes
◆ Year 2002 (7)	
Andrés Pesoba	Missionary/pastor in Caleta Olivia
Faviola Calfín Pesoba	Missionary in Caleta Olivia
Miguel Bamonde	Missionary in Arroyo los Berros
Angela Correa Bamonde	Missionary in Arroyo los Berros
Diego Torrens	Working with a Christian school in Villa Pehuenia
Verónica Stabile Torrens	Working with a Christian school in Villa Pehuenia
Marcela Bonaudi	Choele Choel: Youth leader; tutor in PUEB; local mission outreach in Lamarque
◆ Year 2003 (3)	
Pablo Cifuente	Choele Choel: Assistant pastor; leader in local mission outreach in Chimpay and in missionary trips
Claudia Reyes Cifuente	Choele Choel: Participates with husband in local pastoral work and in trips to Chimpay
Verónica Villasuso	Choele Choel: Works with adolescents; mission outreach in Chelforó
◆ Year 2004 (5)	
Oscar Donoso	General Conesa: Pastor; participates in missionary trips
Lilian Lagos Donoso	General Conesa: Pastor's wife; participates in missionary trips
Marcos Dorigoni	Choele Choel: Participates in sound system team
Clara Grandon Dorigoni	Choele Choel: Worship team member; tutor in PUEB
Eduardo Vuagniaux	Choele Choel

Note: Anita Pineda in Comodoro Rivadavia, and Damián and Marta Reyes in Chos Malal, began serving with PMP prior to the start of SIM. Wanda Sieber, Marlene Dorigoni and Waleska Villa with PMP in Valdivia, Chile, have received other training.

Illinois and Argentina exchange visits, workers, hopes and dreams

Damián and Marta Reyes, the first PMP missionaries, participated in the exchange visit to Illinois in June 2003 with the help of all the partners. In the Hopedale community they spoke one evening to the youth group. Damián's low-key manner and deep consecration to the work struck a chord with a number of the high-school youth and, one year later, five of them participated in the Illinois churches' exchange trip to Argentina, taking time out of their school year to do so.

> "Our church connected very positively with Marta and Damián Reyes when they visited Illinois. People were inspired by their sacrificial living. They lived simply as they supported themselves by growing vegetables and selling various handmade items.
>
> Since their visit, I find myself thinking about Marta and Damián whenever I want to buy something that I probably don't need. I think about how little they seem to worry about financial security and how much value they place on the spiritual. Knowing them encourages me to try to maintain a balance in the midst of the materialistic culture of which I am a part, where the lure to fill my life with and to define myself by possessions is always present. Knowing how they took a big step of faith challenges me to rethink how I can be more obedient to Christ."
>
> — *Kathy Springer*

Among other things, the group visited Damián and Marta in their home and traveled with them to Cancha Huinganco. The impact of these exchanges on the young people has been long-lasting. However, new ways are needed to make these exchanges possible for people at both ends who do not have money to pay their own way.

When asked during their March 2004 visit to Argentina how they had been changed by their experiences with PMP, the Illinois representatives said they had been challenged to be more open and honest, more ready to seek God's will and then move on their faith, sharing the gospel and leaving the results to God. They had become more open to a global worldview, they said, with a new vision of what family and

church are to be. The youth participants felt that the trip had improved their prayer life and given them a new perspective on evangelism. They returned home with more hope and a commitment to share in the work of the church.

Jennifer Oyer, of Freeport, Ill., participated in one of the partnership visits, and as a result felt a strong call to return as a volunteer after graduating from college. Jennifer subsequently taught English in Choele Choel for 15 months in 2002-2003. When she returned to Illinois, she wrote: "My service in Argentina was undoubtedly one of the greatest times of my life. I don't think I have ever cried as much as I did the day I left Choele. ... I realized that I need to take a much more active role in my church and Christian community to help spread the word of God and his love for us. I went to Argentina eager to teach English and help others grow spiritually. I started my service teaching only English, but then quickly added on other responsibilities such as teaching a Saturday Bible school for children, working with an adolescent group, participating in a few missions trips, and making lots of home visits.

"At first my responsibilities seemed overwhelming," she continued. "However, soon my 'extra' responsibilities became my most cherished opportunities. The friendships and the contacts I made there will last forever, and hopefully so will the English classes if we can find volunteers to continue to fill the role! I hope someday to return to Argentina to continue teaching English and making visits along with my husband. César, who is from Choele Choel, was a leader of the adolescents and youth there. We now live in Illinois and are looking for ways that we can serve the Lord here until we are able to return to Argentina, or wherever the Lord leads us."

Jennifer and César Herrera were married in Freeport on Jan. 29, 2005. When an effort was made in 2004 for César to work for the summer in Camp Menno Haven (Ill.), he was not able to obtain a visa. Voluntary service in the United States for Argentines is hindered because of U.S. immigration policies.

There are more possibilities, however, for U.S. volunteers in Argentina. In 2005 David and Starla Moyer of Akron, Pa., began teaching English in the Christian school that the Neuquén congregation operates. There would also be a variety of opportunities for volunteers to accompany PMP missionaries. Language skills remain an important element for making this possible.

In mid-2004, Juan and Amaris Sieber and their family moved to Hopedale, Ill., as part of the exchanges envisioned in the partnership agreement. Juan expressed the purpose of the exchange in this way: "We are praying for AIA and their churches, but have not been able to share effectively the gift of missions in our partnership yet. I feel that the exchange program is one of the key elements to get our partnership back to a more dynamic, two-way vision. In this case we would want to be involved in the church ministry of a congregation in Illinois participating in the partnership arrangement and work in close relationship with AIA in sharing the vision for missions.

"SIM was the ideal environment to discover the plans that God has for me. During a whole year my mind was focused on the objectives of God, which prepared me in a special way to hear the voice of the Holy Spirit."

— *Andrés Pesoba*

"SIM has been part of the school of God for my life. During this time, God dealt with my life in such a way that I could experience that in denying myself, God would grow even more in my life."

— *Faviola Calfín Pesoba*

At the same time, Michael Dean, pastor of the East Bend Mennonite congregation in Fisher, Ill. — a congregation that had participated in AIA from the beginning — spent 8 weeks of his sabbatical in Choele Choel together with his family, March to April, 2005. He had been on an exchange visit to Argentina in 2002 and wanted to expand his exposure to the church and mission work in the Patagonia region. The experience was highlighted by the development of deeper relationships with the Mission Partners and a better understanding of how the Patagonia Mission Project works. It has also given Michael a clearer understanding that what is taking place in the Patagonia is a matter of faithful obedience and living a "worship centered" lifestyle on the part of the Argentine Church. "God is faithfully producing fruit in the lives of brothers and sisters in Christ as they seek Him in and before all activities, from the smallest decisions made on a congregational level to the biggest ones involving the PMP. The mission is focused on building relationships — one at a time. It's not the 'Build it and they

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will come' mentality, but instead, love them and they will know God. The people of the PMP don't have a lot to give financially, but they give what they have. I believe they recognize that all they have is God's and not their own," Michael wrote in a letter. "I'm very excited to watch and learn how the PMP works at mission development and implementation — particularly on a congregational level."

This is the most recent development of the partnership, and time will tell the story of how God can work through these exchanges.

PMP completes its first 10 years

Since its beginning in 1995, the Lord has done marvelous things with the PMP vision for missions. There have been problems that needed to be resolved. As with any project, there is a tendency to accept the status quo after the first years of enthusiasm. But there is growth in the new churches and there is a vision for additional church plants in the future. PMP and the AIA/Network partnership is very much alive.

- During these 10 years, missionaries have been sent out and are living in seven different ministry locations: Comodoro Rivadavia, Chos Malal, Valdivia, Puerto Madryn, Caleta Olivia, General Conesa, and Arroyo los Berros. All the missionaries are self-supporting. Two organized congregations — Valdivia and Puerto Madryn — have been accepted into the Argentine Mennonite Conference.
- SIM, the full-time Intensive Missionary Seminary, was organized, and 18 students have completed the one-year program. Many of these have been sent as missionaries and others are active in their congregations with mission outreach. In 2005, the program took a one-year break from its training activities.
- In addition to missionary housing in Comodoro Rivadavia and Chos Malal, a house was purchased in Valdivia and buildings were constructed in Los Berros, Cancha Huinganco and Los Alazanes. The Puerto Madryn church is purchasing a lot for its future church building. The 2005 budget anticipates other building needs.
- Three used vehicles were purchased for mission projects: a pick-up truck in Chos Malal, a Jeep in Los Berros and a motor home which is based in Choele Choel and is used for mission trips.

- Three of the original congregations have continued with mission outreach nearby, starting what might be called satellite church plants. These are not, strictly speaking, PMP's responsibility. Following the plan for witness expansion set out by Jesus in Acts 1:8, the vision is that congregations should be responsible for "Jerusalem" and "Judea" (witness in their immediate communities) and that PMP should work more broadly in "Samaria" and "unto the ends of the earth."
- The financial crash in Argentina in December of 2001 caused difficulties in the churches where many people were for a time without work. Thankfully the Patagonia region was not as hard hit with unemployment as some other areas of Argentina. In the most recent years the offerings of the PMP churches have increased considerably, speaking of a growing commitment to the mission project. (Most churches give 10 percent of their congregational tithes and offerings to PMP.) The value of the dollar also increased so that North American funds have reached further.
- New contacts for church plants are continually being made. Regular visits are now carried out to Valle Azul on the Rio Negro as well as to Gobernador Costa in the Chubut highlands. A new congregation, Esquel, in the Andean mountains of western Chubut has joined the Argentine Mennonite Church and PMP. In 2004 several trips were made to Ramos Mexía in southern Rio Negro Province where a son of pastors Eddy and Lili Donoso serves as a teacher. And so the Lord leads on.

The partnership agreement is reviewed ... and renewed

The first six years of partnership between churches in Illinois and Argentina have reached completion, and on March 25, 2004, a revised covenant was signed for a second six-year period. Pastoral leadership in Argentina has increased considerably, and new life has come into AIA with younger members — all of them people who had participated in exchange trips to Argentina.

Some aspects of the mission strategy have changed, but the original vision has remained intact. The matter of the exchange of pastors and interns between the two communities has been talked of more seriously.

What changes the Lord may bring about in the upcoming years is not known, but there is a readiness to let the Spirit blow where it will.

Jesus likened the kingdom of God to the mustard seed — something very small that grows into something large. This parable of Jesus has been of inspiration to the PMP and AIA churches participating in the partnership. Of course, one never knows what God can do with humble, consecrated disciples, whether they live and work in a city or in an isolated valley in the Patagonia region of southern Argentina.

But faith is believing that God will make the work prosper and grow. The churches in Patagonia have faith that much more will happen with God's guidance. Those streams of light in Floyd Sieber's dream have still to enlighten many people throughout the Patagonia region — including the city of Ushuaia, the southernmost city on the planet — which takes us almost literally to "the ends of the earth."

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What part of "The Patagonia Story" most surprised or inspired you?

2. What reminded you most — or least — of the mission vision found in your home congregation?

3. Several words and phrases occur repeatedly in this text: *mission vision and strategy, partnership, covenant, missionary training, mutuality*, and *church-to-church relationships*. What is the meaning of these terms as used by Erb and Shelly? How might the concepts described here be applied in your situation of ministry?

4. A 2005 survey has identified Latin America with 623 million Christians, making it the continent with the largest Christian population and some of the fastest-growing churches anywhere in the world. What have you learned in "The Patagonia Story" that would illustrate or confirm why this might be the case?

5. The Mennonite Church in Patagonia has recognized the need for equipping its members for mission and service by creating a congregational Bible study program (PUEB) and a missionary training center for year-long instruction (SIM). What does your congregation do to call out and equip members for ministry in the community and beyond? What might you learn for the church in Patagonia to strengthen your efforts?

6. Has your congregation ever expressed interest in developing a ministry partnership with a sister church in the local neighborhood or elsewhere in the world? What have you learned from "The Patagonia Story" that might nudge and nurture that interest along into becoming a reality?

7. At the 2003 Mennonite World Conference Assembly meeting in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe, Mennonite church bodies from all over the world came together to form the Global Mission Fellowship for the purpose of exploring "new and increased ways of *doing mission together*." How does the partnership agreement between North and South American churches described in this booklet advance that agenda? What other efforts are you aware of that begin to take us as a church to new levels of global cooperation?

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