

STORIES FROM THE GLOBAL MENNONITE CHURCH

Fleeing the influence of the world

SOMETIME AROUND 270

A.D., a young man by the name of Anthony retreated into the eastern desert of Egypt in order to become a better Christian. Like many of the other “desert fathers” who followed his example, Anthony was convinced the only way he could truly follow the hard teachings of Jesus (“be ye perfect, even as my Father in heaven is perfect”) was to isolate himself from the distractions, complications and temptations of human society. Although Anthony eventually became a saint, his effort to escape the seductions of the world was a failure; wherever he went, the world came to him. His biographer, Athanasius, said that by the time of Anthony’s death “the desert had become a city.”

I thought of Anthony while reading a long article in *Die Mennonitische Post* that described “Colonia Belize,” a new settlement under development by a small group of Old Colony Mennonites in a remote corner of eastern Peru.

The Old Colony Mennonites trace their roots to Chortitza, the oldest Mennonite colony in South Russia, settled in the late 18th century by immigrants from Prussia. In the 1870s, facing pressure to adopt the Russian language and join the tsar’s army, several thousand migrated to western Canada. From there, the journey continued—first to Mexico and Paraguay in the late 1920s, and then, in subsequent decades, to new colonies in Belize, southern Mexico, Paraguay, Bolivia, eastern Canada and

Argentina. Like the Amish, Old Colony Mennonites have sought to maintain a cultural distance from the world, speaking a distinctive dialect of German, rejecting electricity in their homes and relying on horse-and-buggy transportation. During the past 50 years, they have grown rapidly, thanks largely to strictures against birth control. At the same time,

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land pressure, church conflicts and an ongoing desire to flee the influences of an encroaching world have made Old Colony Mennonites the most mobile group in the entire Anabaptist-Mennonite family.

Last June, seven families—50 people in all—from the “Little Belize” colony in Belize sold their possessions and said goodbye to relatives and friends. For several years, they had watched as other members of their community accepted telephones, the internet and even cars. The time had come, they decided, to find a new home, one more removed from the encroachments of the world. In collaboration with another cluster of families from Bolivia, the group boarded a plane to Lima, Peru. From there they found a connecting flight to Pucallpa at the edge of the Amazon rain forest before embarking on an 11-hour boat trip up the Ucayali River, where they spent the night

in Orellana. Another extended boat ride to Tierra Blanca, followed by a two-hour trek across muddy roads deep in the rain forest, finally ended at the site of their new settlement—Colonia Belize. The families are now clearing trees to allow enough sunlight for vegetable gardens and for the wood needed to build simple houses and sheds. Far from medical care, the families now face the challenges of insects, heat and uncertainty about how they will market their produce once the gardens are productive.

The story of Colonia Belize is not new to the Christian tradition. Like Anthony, the zeal of Old Colony Mennonites to pursue a Christian life freed from the distractions of modern society has led them repeatedly into the wilderness. Yet their quest to escape the world remains fraught with questions. What is the future of the rain forest they are clearing? What if they are merely an outpost, a beacon drawing hundreds of other Old Colony Mennonites to this remote region in eastern Peru? How long until the world catches up with them? And what if the world is already there, embedded in the very impulse that prompted a church division in their quest for perfection?



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