

Indian Mission - the Example of the Toba in Argentina

Historical Introduction

For many years, the Argentine Indian population was disadvantaged and almost forgotten. >From time immemorial, they settled in large areas of the whole state of Argentina. In the time of the “Conquista” through the Spanish, some Indian tribes were completely extinguished. In other cases, for example as in the case of the Indian population of the Gran Chaco¹, they could survive for a long time because of the dense and impenetrable forests which were for the “white” conquerors inaccessible.

At the time of the foundation of the Argentine Republic, when already a large part of the Argentine Indian population was in complete decline, it was embodied in the Argentine constitution that they were to be treated peacefully. At the same time, they were declared Roman-Catholic.² Although the Toba Indians³ and other predominantly Indian groups fought for the possession of their areas, they could not succeed in gaining possession of their traditional areas of settlement.

Evangelization

There are two main traces of evangelization among the Toba Indians. The oldest trace is of Roman Catholic origin. A Franciscan Order had its seat in the north of the Argentine province of Formosa, which evangelized from there the Chaco with little success. The endeavors from the Roman Catholic side were nipped in the bud by the fact that the Roman Catholic religion was identified with the people who had taken away the land from the native inhabitants.

On the same line were missionary endeavors from the Protestant side, which began a few hundreds years later, a mission work in Paraguay and in the Argentine province of Formosa. Anglicans and Mennonites undertook the initiative in the provinces of Formosa and Chaco. Baptist missionaries, who in the last century (1930 and 1960) preached the gospel to the Toba, began another trace, which however was much deeper and was placed only a few years ago. Their names were Juan Lager and Alba Montes de Oca. They evangelized at their own expense and without the support of a mission society but achieved very much.

These evangelizations were accompanied by great social action whereby the greatest needs of the Indian population were met - among them tuberculosis, malnutrition, the Chagas-illness and other locally spread infectious diseases.

Out own history

We arrived in May 1993 in Pampas del Indio. This location is about 220 km away from Resistencia, the capital of the Chaco. There were only three of us: my wife Gabriela, out two-year-old son Joaquín and I, Daniel Cabañas, a social worker with the calling to be a missionary.

Although we originated from the province of Mendoza, which was 1600 KM away, we felt that God had called us to serve the Toba in Chaco in North Argentina. For us, this was a great challenge but accepted with considerable joy. So we became missionaries of the department of home missions of the Argentine Baptist Association with the support of MASA (Missionary Action in South America), which gave its contribution through the Union.

¹This area consists of the Argentine provinces of Chaco and Formosa as well as the country of Paraguay.

²According to the Argentine constitution.

³This name was introduced after the Spanish Conquista and means “human being with a wide forehead”.

In the context of the mission work, great effort was made in the social area in order to improve the living conditions of the Toba in the areas with a high percentage of Indian population. According to the work strategy of the Argentine home mission board and MASA, our work did not consist of evangelizing the Toba but in training for the service which God already given those among them who had followed his calling. So we served the Toba for ten years in the following areas:

- Training of the local leaders in each Toba congregation
- Biblical and theological training with the help of a bible school as well as workshops, conferences and retreats
- Formation of an association of Indian congregations under the name of “Baptist Association of Nam ‘Qom”⁴
- Support of all common projects to improve the living conditions of Toba: through the building of toilets, the provision of drinking water, the formation of a center for the different work departments, a center for alphabetization, the common fruit and vegetable production etc.
- Transfer of the title of ownership of the land to two hundred families in an area with a high proportion of Indian population

To serve with joy

Looking back, I am very glad about all the things, which God has done, in the past years. Our family was completed with the birth of Juan Marcos and Candela who were born in Gral. San Martin where we have lived since 1994.

In order to name some highlights of our mission work I want to mentioned the following which was for me the most moving:

The transfer of the titles of possession of the land to the Toba families. That was for me an expression of the love and justice of God. Also to experience how my brothers and sisters grew in faith and developed an increasingly deeper relationship to Jesus Christ. One time at a bible study, we thought about the traces that the persecution of Indians left in the memories of the younger ones. Full of pain, they remembered all the things which they had lost through the persecution: “Our land ... our strongest men ...our history ...” After a short silence one began to remember the good things which the gospel had brought to the Toba. Another one responded to this: “We received names and documents.” Another said: “We have schools in which we can learn.” And again another said. “ God put it on the hearts of our brothers and sisters in Germany to buy land for us.” Finally one talked who had pondered this until then: “Do you realize that? All what the Spanish have taken away from us, the gospel of Jesus Christ has returned to us.” Exactly this is the gospel: It is the Good News, the news of life, the news of freedom, the news of the re-establishment of a whole people.

As missionaries, we are grateful for the faithful support of our brothers and sisters through MASA: for the regular visits of brother Dietrich Weiland over all the years, the Christmas greetings and the other faithful brothers and sisters who we will never meet but who supported us through their prayers and offerings. In 1999, I could travel myself to Germany and report about the changes in the lives of the Toba through the grace of God. Also I had the opportunity to say personally thank you for all the work, which could be done thanks to the support.

In July of this year, I officially left our Union and MASA as missionary and began my service as pastor in the congregation of Coronel Du Graty in southern Chaco. With that we left the mission work among the Toba. We are filled with great gratitude about all what God has done and also will continue to do in the lives of those who have become believers in the name of Jesus Christ.

Carlos Daniel Cabañas

⁴The expression Nam ‘Qom can be rendered as “our people”.