PANORAMIC VIEW OF THE HISTORY OF BAPTISTS IN ARGENTINA

The history of Baptists in Argentina cannot be considered apart from the history of the nation. While this is, of course, true of any country and any community, it is particularly true here. Particularly in its social aspect, Argentina has very distinctive features, features which perhaps render it unique in the world, with the possible exception of some other countries in Latin America, especially Uruguay. There is some resemblance to other countries strongly affected by immigration, such as the United States or Australia, but, in those, the early religious foundations were Protestant. It is thus necessary to indicate certain distinctive features in Argentinian history and society before attempting to describe the history of Baptists.

I - A REVIEW OF ARGENTINIAN HISTORY

When, first in 1516, but only effectively from about 1580, the Spaniards arrived at the River Plate - which is the pivotal axis of what is today Argentina - there were few indigenous peoples. There was nothing like the great empires of the Aztecs and others in Mexico or of the Incas in Peru. Inca influence did reach as far as the north-east of present-day Argentina, but in the rest of the territory there were only groups of nomadic hunters, who by their very nature offered scant resistance to European settlement. The situation in Chile was different: there the Indians in the south resisted the Conquest for longer, and then crossed to the plains on the Atlantic side, thus changing demography and politics in the nineteenth century.

The region was somewhat marginal, for various reasons. First of all, and obviously, there was the vast distance from Europe, with no good harbours on the way. Secondly, there was no mineral wealth, which was the great attraction elsewhere. Thirdly, since there had been no dense population of productive indigenous peoples, no colonial society of any significance came into being. For these and other reasons, Spain was least interested in the southern part of the continent, except, of course, for the great inland forests.

This had consequences in the field of religion. In general the priests who came were not of the best, although the missionary zeal of the religious orders in the area was remarkable. With few exceptions, the intellectual ability of the clergy was slight, and there were many disputes with the secular government, which was envious of their power. Despite the activities of the Inquisition (although it did not have a local centre such as those in Lima, Cartagena and Mexico), there were frequent complaints of heresy or indifference. Already in 1582 the priest who wrote the poem 'La Argentina' (thus giving the country its name) was lamenting the presence of a 'Lutheran' Englishman, and the first founder of Buenos Aires in 1536 used to read Erasmus. More or less legitimate contact with traders and pirates from Protestant countries (Great Britain, Holland and Germany), while never leading to the formation of a group or to the distribution of literature, helped to create a very

vague spiritual atmosphere and the practice of religion was purely nominal.

This became more pronounced on the eve of independence, achieved in 1810 as an indirect result of Napoleon's actions. The works of liberal French authors, such as Voltaire, Montesquieu and, above all, Rousseau, were the true intellectual foundation of the new country, which rapidly developed its own way of thinking. Although some members of the lower clergy had supported independence, many were against it and were removed, including all the bishops in the region. The concept of freedom opened the way to freedom of religion, which was in fact tacitly accepted by the political leaders, who were seeking immigrants from Europe on that basis. The country was virtually empty, with only 200,000 to 300,000 inhabitants. This feeling was at its strongest in the capital, and the Province of Buenos Aires declared freedom of conscience in 1825, having already granted it to the English, without being asked as a matter of principle. Alongside that, a spirit of Erastianism prevailed, asserting the right of the state over the Church, which, at least in law, lasted until only months ago.

After many difficulties, the country adopted its first constitution in 1853. This constitution, only really amended in 1994, declared that, among many other rights, 'all the inhabitants of the nation' had the right 'freely to profess their religion', although it retained some of the former provisions controlling the Roman Catholic Church, which the majority, curiously enough, regarded as privileges.

From then on, and especially in the 1880s, modern Argentina developed. A whole generation had the vision and dream of a great country, although they had in fact one of the poorest countries in the continent, with only 600,000 inhabitants. In order to live up to this image of European-style progress, immigrants had to be brought from the Old World. Some three million of them came and totally changed the country, not only in the composition of its population, but also in its geographical spread, for example by settlements in Patagonia.

This means that contemporary Argentinians do not have true national roots. There have been times when foreigners were in the majority, and so in the popular mind the idea of 'foreigner' has no real meaning, since being foreign is simply one further piece of information about someone, not a reason for discrimination. In general, the different communities have mixed freely, with the result that a new mentality is developing, which will perhaps take clear shape in the next generation. Although 40% are of Spanish origin, the vast proportion of these are only children or grandchildren of Spanish parents or grandparents and not descendants of the conquistadores. Around 40% are of Italian extraction, and the rest is made up of peoples with very different origins: British, Germans, Scandinavians, Slavs, Syrian/Lebanese, French, and, more recently, Armenians, East Asians (Japanese and now Koreans) and many others. This has inevitably led to a general spirit of tolerance. Although there have been and still are attempts at coercion and local disturbances, there has never been widespread persecution or murder or serious violence on religious grounds.

There is little room for religion in the minds of the people. Although perhaps 90% would describe themselves as Catholic in a census (the question is not asked), only ten per cent, and in some areas four or five per cent, regularly attend church, although almost all get married or have their children baptized in church. There have been generations of intellectuals who were openly positivist or atheist, even though the conservative sectors have always been very active and influential, especially in government. To this has been linked a certain degree of economic well-being and satisfaction in national achievements, which have placed the country in the forefront of the continent in its level of economic and cultural development.

The situation is perhaps now changing. Political failures and the inability to adapt to new world situations have reduced the standard of living and simultaneously given rise to a quest for spiritual values. The Roman Catholic Church continues to be officially very conservative, but movements within it are attracting young people. New religious movements, including some of African origin via Brazil, eastern religions and some Protestant groups are growing, which may become determinative for the religious future of the country.

The general sense of frustration has placed Argentina in the sights of those international political movements which exploit such situations. The serious results of these influences have given rise to equally serious reactions, which have shaken the life of the nation to its foundations, slowing down development and creating, perhaps out of self-interest, a distorted image of the country. But the liberal, peaceful spirit, which is deeply rooted, has not been lost and it is these values which have to be borne in mind.

II - THE EUROPEAN SOURCES

As has been explained, the great plan for Argentina was to change the country into a nation after the European model. This resulted in more rapid development than elsewhere in the continent. The period 1860-1930 was one of almost continuous advance and institutional stability. This enabled highly efficient health and public education services to be set up, so the opportunities for missions and churches to use the classic methods of establishing schools and hospitals as means of evangelism and service were very rare, since they did not represent the most pressing social needs. These public services, however, have deteriorated since the middle of this century and the churches are consequently taking up their place in these social fields. In the area of demography and culture, we have seen what is Spanish being replaced by a highly cosmopolitan approach, in which all sorts of traditions have lived unselfconsciously together and still do, not alongside one another, but intermixing. At the same time, the factor of the indigenous peoples has not influenced Argentinian life and thought generally, but only locally and incidentally.

Given this background, it would be expected that the first Baptists would have arrived from Europe and left their mark. There is no evidence of Protestant groups during the colonial period, i.e. before 1810, although here is mention of isolated

individuals, especially traders. They appear to have made no effort to spread their faith.

The first personality to emerge in history was larger than life. James Thomson arrived in Buenos Aires in 1818 and stayed until 1821, during a very disturbed period. He came as a worker of the British and Foreign Schools Society and his travel was financed by the Baptist Church in Edinburgh led by the Haldane brothers. Shortly afterwards, seeing that the conditions were favourable, he linked up with the British and Foreign Bible Society, to which he gave distinguished service for the rest of his life. In 1821 he founded the first Protestant group, which continued to develop after his departure, but he did not call himself a Baptist, since his work was interdenominational. Like San Martin and O'Higgins, the liberators of Argentina and Chile, he was revered by the leading statesmen of the continent.

Some decades had to pass before a further Baptist presence emerged in the form of an organised group. In 1865 a daring venture of immigration took place when a group of Welsh people settled in Chubut Valley in the depths of Patagonia. They settled as the only white people in a vast wilderness. They experienced great hardships because of the arid terrain, their isolation and their own lack of farming ability. Their leaders were three pastors, one of them a Baptist accompanied by a small group of fellow believers. He was one of those who quickly moved to a better location, but he was succeeded by William Casnodyn Rhys, who exercised a long ministry and was highly respected by the community. The congregation had all the features of a Particular Baptist church, such as a statement of faith, an organisation with pastor, secretary and deacons, rules for baptism and the Lord's Supper, a Sunday School, a chapel available for community activities and a vigorous discipline of members. It had a tragic end when the chapel was swept away in a flood in 1899 and the members dispersed and joined other churches. Some, however, persisted in their Baptist practices, creating problems for the Congregational pastors when they requested baptism by immersion.

Meanwhile, in the centre of the country, in the most fertile and soon more densely populated region, what is acknowledged to be the origin of present-day Baptist life was beginning. One of the first colonies, made up of Swiss, French and Germans, in the Province of Santa Fe, was given the evocative name of 'Esperanza' (Hope). Today it is the only Argentinian city where the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran Church are both located on the main square. There was also a small group of Swiss and French Baptists in Esperanza who began to evangelize and even baptize. Feeling the need for a pastor, they remembered Paul Besson, a young man from Switzerland who had been a pastor in France and they called him in 1881. Well-educated, he had studied under such great teachers as Godet and Tischendorf and had already distinguished himself in the cause of religious freedom. He had devoted himself wholeheartedly to this, writing in newspapers, and built up relations with many prominent people. He set up the first church in Buenos Aires, which still exists, displaying in some aspects of its life strongly marked European features.

Before his death in 1934, he had in retirement given a sincere welcome to North American missionaries, despite their differences over methods and even matters of doctrine, because of his strong sense of freedom of conscience.

Other Baptists linked with faith missions made their appearance. In 1886, Jorge Graham arrived as an independent worker, but his work was later taken over by other denominations. His widow married Besson. Other strong personalities were Robert Logan, an Irishman, and Robert F. Elder, who had been assistant to Thomas Spurgeon in New Zealand. They joined the mission of the Southern Baptists and made a notable contribution to it.

As for those on the receiving end of mission, even in the North American missionary work, greater results were obtained among immigrant communities (who had been uprooted and were often very free-thinking in their lands of origin) than among the local population. In Besson's congregation, the leaders were of various nationalities, including Spanish. The first pastors to emerge from among their members, the Ostermann family, were of Swiss origin, and maintained their Swiss culture for many years. In the same way, preachers from other traditions entered the ranks of the Baptists, like the Visbeek-Pluis families from a Dutch Reformed background.

The influx of large groups of non-Latin immigrants produced other Baptist congregations. As early as 1894 Germans from Russia set up congregations, which made contact with the other Baptists and even hosted the regular assembly from the beginning. They, however, remained apart for some time for geographical and psychological reasons, and they are still today among the few more exclusive groups in the country. Their churches retain much of their original style. After the communist revolution, large numbers of Slavs arrived (Russians, Poles, Ukranians, and then other smaller groups). They also set up churches in their respective styles, and although, like the Germans, they are now in their third generation and are ceasing to worship in their own language, they still retain many of their original customs. There were also the Baptists from Ireland. Robert Hosford, who arrived in 1899 on a private initiative and initially linked up with Besson, promoted Irish missionary work in Argentina and worked with Argentinian missionaries in Peru. Much of his work was personal to him, but, at his death, his churches joined the mainstream Baptists.

All of these movements brought with them an element of tradition and even conservatism, which was less open to change. A further contributory factor was the strong, highly educated leadership, which is perhaps - together with the typically Latin sense of hierarchy - still to be seen in the important position accorded to pastors. The influence of Godet and C. H. Spurgeon continued in the importance given to exegetical and biblically-based preaching. The sense of congregational government was also marked, in unusual combination with the strong personal leadership. Some Slav churches, for example, which were governed by a 'soviet' (committee), have attempted to maintain their traditions, although this has been

weakened simply with the passing of the generations. During times of major political upheavals, in particular periods relating to the passing of the so-called 'secular laws' (marriage, education, burial), or of social crisis produced by the flood of immigrants, the churches have not been exempt from national problems and have provided a refuge for uprooted people, who, being foreign (or women), have found there a place where they could order their own lives.

A further distinctive feature which has not disappeared is the inter-denominational spirit - a sense of fellowship which is maintained, notwithstanding strong polemic. From the beginning the other denominations have been seen as sister churches, and the prevailing word used to describe all Protestants, particularly churches of missionary origin, including the Baptists, has been 'evangelical', with its British and German associations. Worship has been very much the same in them all, and a style of worship evolved which continued until the great Pentecostal influence of recent years. It has been said - although it cannot be proved - that the custom of the 'concluding voluntary' (*posludio*), a time of private meditation at the conclusion of worship, is of European origin.

III - THE NORTH AMERICAN SOURCES

The Southern Baptists of the United States began their missionary work in Argentina in 1903. Their first representative was Sidney M. Sowell, who had had a vision of the country in his early youth, and succeeded in being sent to Argentina, even though such a development was not in the plans of the Foreign Missions Board, generally known as the Richmond Board. Their missions were in fact already established in Brazil, and, before travelling to Buenos Aires, Sowell visited the first missionary there, which resulted in his marrying the daughter of that country's pioneeer missionary.

When he arrived in Buenos Aires, he stayed in the home of Besson, who was still single. The first missions to Argentina (Presbyterian in 1821, and Methodist in 1836) had been North American in origin, but they then became exceptions, because other groups arriving before the end of the century were British, such as the Plymouth Brethren, the Salvation Army and the Evangelical Union, a faith mission with Baptist origins. The Southern Baptists evidently did not shrink from truly pioneering missionary work; in Brazil work had begun at the invitation of colonists who were former soldiers from the south of the United States. The United States was not yet a great power and Argentina was more inclined towards Europe, holding the government in Washington somewhat at a distance.

The Southern Baptists' plan was to become established progressively in various cities. Sowell began in a popular quarter of Buenos Aires, where, with a colleague, he slowly began to reach out to immigrants. Handing over this work to another, he moved on to Rosario, 250 miles to the north, which was growing rapidly as a centre for farming and was attracting many Europeans. There a modest beginning was made in publishing, in the form of evangelistic tracts and a magazine, *El Expositor*

Bautista (*The Baptist Expositor*), which continues today. Sowell then returned to Buenos Aires, and began training Argentinian preachers, out of which work a seminary ultimately developed.

Later, further missionaries settled in cities in the central part of the country, such as Cordoba, Santa Fe and Parana. They then moved on to Mendoza, close to the border with Chile, and to Bahia Blanca, the southernmost important centre in the country at that time. Erhardt Svenson was sent there by the North American Baptists of Swedish origin. Particularly interesting is Jorge Bowdler, who came intending to devote himself to education but, owing to a spiritual experience, settled in the north of Patagonia, where there was not much more than a railway line, which had failed to reach Chile. Bowdler had the vision to buy plots of land in towns still in the planning stage: today these are prestigious sites. This strategy was without doubt the basis for Baptist expansion, and the Baptists were the first denomination to spread throughout the country. These missionaries came with somewhat different ideas from the Europeans, whom they worked beside but without much collaboration. However, those distinctive features, which were most emphatically stressed in the United States, were modified by the influence of other traditions and their effect on Argentinian leaders.

One of the main features was their organisation. As early as 1908, when there were only five small churches, they set up the National Convention, which later included Uruguay (where a missionary moved from Buenos Aires) and Paraguay (where Argentinians were at work). The Convention was organised very like the Convention in North America, with its Assembly and Boards, initially the Missions Board and the Publications Board. Educational and community work began later, for the reasons already given. These structures were not questioned for many years, since the other groups were attracted by the prospect of not remaining isolated. Moreover, there were no other Baptists until the arrival of the so-called 'conservatives' and 'Swedish' North American Baptists. By tacit agreement they established work in the north-east, where the others had not yet been active. More recently, more exclusive North American groups have arrived, which have not kept in contact with the majority.

North American church structures were also replicated, with the appointment of pastors and deacons, and development of Sunday Schools, women's groups, etc. As would be expected, theological teaching followed the ideas in force in the United States at the time, where considerable internal debate was going on. Much of this, however, did not affect Argentina, but some aspects did, especially keeping at a certain distance from other Evangelicals, while still acknowledging their existence and value. In practice, for many years all denominations respected the geographical areas of the others, even when they had no contact with them.

Varying North American emphases influenced work on the mission field, so that at a particular time there was a special interest in evangelism, or education, or women's work, or social work, etc. In fact, what was not suited to local conditions

soon faded away. There was also considerable influence in matters of finance and music. None of the European churches had stressed tithing and offerings, but, after the initial period, almost forced on them by the economic crisis of the 1930s, the financial autonomy of the churches began to be insisted on. This is normal today, except for Argentinian missions. Their first hymn book, although not produced locally, had a long life. For many decades, the main musical diet consisted of the spiritual songs of the revivals at the beginning of this century. There was not much place for what we might call classical hymnody. Local hymn book production began only recently.

Geographical expansion was the foundation for numerical growth, which went in step with the growth of the country. The great importance of Buenos Aires, as the capital and natural geographical centre of the country, was reflected in Baptist churches springing up in the metropolis itself and in greater Buenos Aires, which today contains forty per cent of the total population. In early years, the national wealth was in cattle raising alone. In some particular areas where Baptists went, such as Mendoza or Tucuman, the general pattern was to have one or two missionaries in each area, working alongside local pastors (although initially not many were Argentinians). Relations between them varied considerably from place to place, and from year to year, largely dependent on the personalities involved. The North American missionaries had a strong denominational base and good academic theological training. However - and this needs to be further researched - the European character of Argentina to some extent moderated the excessive dominance of the missionaries which occurred in other countries.

Other areas were reached substantially through the work of Argentinian preachers, often appointed by the Convention's Missions Board, although in many cases North American missionaries later went out to support them. At the present time, after a series of meetings and decisions, which have demonstrated the distinctive nature of Baptist work in Argentina, hardly anything remains under North American control.

IV - THE ARGENTINIAN SOURCES

When the European Baptists arrived in a sporadic and uncoordinated way, and then the North Americans with their specific missionary aims, they found a country different from the rest of the continent, and this determined the response to their evangelistic work and its continuation. Those who colonised the interior found themselves in an unpopulated land, and so continued their previous life-style. Those whose first contact was with the urban masses discovered an impressive cosmopolitan scene, where Argentinian identity was still being forged. Argentina had established strong cultural and economic links with Europe, which was held up as a model, especially since it was desired to attract further European immigrants. Generally, Argentina has been a country where United States influence has been less evident, and relations with the United States have not always been of the best. This

has been sustained by a succession of able and strongly patriotic rulers, modelling a Latin mentality projected through strong personalities.

The North American missionary movement in particular, which initially targeted the Argentinian population (there has only been one small English-speaking international church during the last few decades), had to take account of these social factors. There were differences from the rest of the continent, either because indigenous people were present only in small numbers and isolated communities, or because there were hardly any blacks or black influence on the nation's culture, or because distinctive Spanish influence was located in the small exclusive ruling class, almost totally cut off by its social status from the rest of society. The North American missionaries had to begin their work from nothing. Although Besson's and the German and the Slav churches later joined the general Baptist movement, they maintained their distinctive characteristics (particularly the Slavs) and still attempt to hold on to some special cultural features. There was no work among the Indians in the north until about fifty years ago, since they lived far from the areas hitherto opened up, but Anglican work there has been one of the great stories in world mission.

There soon emerged what were known as 'national workers', an expression based more on theory than on reality. An anecdote can serve as an illustration: three pastors joking about what it means to be Argentinian, one was Spanish, one Italian and one Latvian, but, in their way of thinking, they were all Argentinians! The role of the churches with European origins over the years can be seen in the number of pastors with German, Slav or other non-Latin European surnames. There is no difference to be seen, however, in their standards or methods, compared with those of Latin extraction. The same may also be said of political and cultural life.

Just as the country came into being thanks to its notable leaders, the Baptist community rapidly threw up outstanding and respected personalities, a few notable for their education, but most for their character, dedication and spirituality. Outstanding names from the early years were Alberto and Julio Ostermann, Maximino Fernandez, Jose M. Rodriguez, Pablo and Natalio Broda, Ramon Vasquez, and Juan Marsili. Their activity opened up the way for the period of the great pastorates, i.e. ministries extending over several decades in the same congregation, which built up the churches with solid teaching so they developed a clearly defined identity. Of the many names that could be mentioned here, some are: Carlos de la Torre, Lorenzo Pluis, Celestino Ermili, Santiago Canclini, Jose Elias, Jose Capriolo, Daniel Daglio, Pedro Libert, Blas Maradei, Jose Pistonesi, and many others.

Of these the best known was, without doubt, Juan C. Varetto, the pastor of the church at La Plata, near Buenos Aires. He was completely self-taught, and was the first Evangelical author in the country, writing books which are still influential today. He was also the first Argentinian Baptist of international repute, making several preaching tours in Latin America and Spain. Above all, he was a great

trainer of Christian workers and a great preacher. His style, modelled in part on the British style of his first teachers, with its direct, expository, biblically-based preaching, stressing the need for conversion, was well suited to Argentina. He himself added a good measure of humour and popular elements. He was decidedly Baptist, but very appreciative of other Evangelicals, since he had been converted in the Methodist Church and had begun his work with the Christian Missionary Alliance. This, and his great interest in social issues, are features of Baptist life which have not always attracted attention.

These factors were influential in creating typically Argentinian Baptists, perhaps because the early missionaries, while well prepared and with a solid spirituality, did not have outstanding leadership qualities. Moreover, for health and personal reasons, some did not remain long in Argentina, limiting their influence. In this respect, Argentinian history stands in contrast to that of Brazil, where powerful personalities left their mark on the Baptist movement. The churches there were simply called 'Baptist churches', whereas in Argentina they have always been 'Evangelical Baptist churches', following the pattern of title used by other Evangelical denominations.

This approach has meant that Argentinian Baptists have been a community recognised in the nation throughout their history. They have produced significant leaders, literature and patterns of church life and have been engaged in struggles for freedom, and this has always given them a distinctive position, particularly because doctrinally they occupy a mid-position, e.g. between those with Reformed origins and dispensationalists. They have always had good relations with other Evangelical groups and have not responded to those wanting an exclusive position.

Such an emphasis can also be seen in the way in which issues outside the church have been tackled. When the history of Evangelicals began in the 1880s, major population changes gave rise to liberal legislation, in support of which Pablo Besson was a notable voice. Over a long period, he and his followers were involved in the struggle against the white slave trade, alcoholism, the exploitation of women and even cruelty to animals. Later, other issues such as religious education in state schools were taken up. The National Constitution maintained the link between the State and the Roman Catholic Church, including the President's religion and a financial contribution to the maintenance of worship, etc: Varetto and others addressed these issues in print.

When Juan Peron became President with Catholic support in 1946, he imposed restrictions, limiting, for example, open-air preaching and religious broadcasting and making registration compulsory. Those were years of intense struggle, when Santiago Canclini led all Evangelicals until almost all such legislation was repealed, substantially because the Roman Catholic clergy fell out with the government.

V - SUMMARY OF HISTORICAL EVENTS

The history of Baptists in Argentina does not have outstanding moments to be

singled out for special mention, but has rather developed steadily with its own distinctive continuity. One reason for this is that conflicting groups have not arisen within the denomination. All the original groups mentioned above became as a matter of course members of the Convention, which officially came into being on 1 January 1909, although some of the so-called ethnic churches have remained more loosely associated. Certainly, in one or two generations, now that the founding fathers have passed from our sight and original languages are being discarded, differences will progressively disappear.

Only in 1946 did a different group arrive, from what was then known as the Conservative Baptist Association (a breakaway group from the Northern or American Baptists), who in Argentina have taken the name of the Evangelical Baptist Society, because of the political connotations of the word 'conservative'. They have grown considerably in the north-east and, although they have good relations with their fellow Baptists, they have not become members of the Convention. Both sides, however, respect each other's area of work. The Society is distinguished by a greater emphasis on the independence of the local church: they refuse, for example, financial assistance from outside for the erection of buildings. By contrast, missionaries from churches of Swedish origin, who settled in other northern provinces in 1957, became members of the Convention in the same year.

When the Convention was first set up with only five member churches, it immediately set up a Publications Board and a Missions Board. In the course of time other boards have been set up, varying in number, for educational, social and other work. In a reorganisation some decades ago, in an attempt to strengthen them, they were renamed departments. The publications work began with the denominational magazine *El Expositor Bautista* (*The Baptist Expositor*), which has continued publication without break. Many books and pamphlets have also been published, many locally produced by Argentinian or missionary authors.

Argentinian missionary work has been of great importance. This was initially in the province of Corrientes, in the north-east, which is very traditional, from which it spread into Paraguay. In general, the churches in the most remote areas (except the north-east, which has always been more integrated with the rest of the country) owe their origin to missionaries. For example, missionary work spread through the region of El Chaco, when this area began to gain importance in the development of the country. It was here that work among Indians also began. Here much has been achieved with the support of Baptists in Germany. At the other end of the country, almost all the churches in Patagonia, from Bariloche, the great centre for tourism, to Ushuaia, the world's southernmost city (and the recently-founded world's southernmost Baptist church), have been founded through missionary work. More recently, missionary work has begun in other more traditional provinces.

There are now churches organized in greatly varying density in every province, although it is only in recent years that some local churches have exceeded one or two hundred members. They are almost all organised in a similar way, mainly

owing to the uniformity of Argentina itself, with leadership in the hands of pastors and deacons. Educational work has been very strong, since many churches have grown out of Sunday Schools. Youth groups and women's groups have also been important. Youth work has followed national guidelines, because it is considered very important and also because there have been few foreign models available, although it is always carried out within the traditional framework of local independence to a greater or lesser degree.

The churches' relationship with the Convention is accepted as a matter of course. This does not, of course, mean that all are involved to the same degree, although it is assumed that they ought to be. North American financial contributions are being reduced, while in certain areas German funding has increased. One area where financial independence has recently been achieved is the Seminary, which has high academic standards. Some lecturers are from abroad, but essentially they are appointed on academic merit. More and more Argentinian lecturers have studied in the United States or Europe. At present it is the largest Evangelical theological institution in the country.

By the very nature of the Baptist movement, there has been no lack of internal debate, but some distinctive features should be noted. As is the case generally with other denominations in Argentina, which have hardly ever experienced divisions, these debates have not so far resulted in splits. Apart from minor groups, which have never been members, the Convention continues to be the sign of unity, and there have been no publishing houses, Bible colleges, missions, etc., in opposition to the Convention's work. Nevertheless, Argentinian Baptists have been prone to influence from other groups, as with certain dispensationalist emphases in the early years, and today the very strong influence of the Neo-Pentecostal movements, which are dominant throughout Latin America and give rise to a succession of disagreements, the outcome of which is not foreseeable. Any idea of division is extremely painful in Argentina.

Finally, something must be said about the participation of Argentinian Baptists in denominational life at world level. Despite their relatively small numbers and their unfavourable geographical position, they have always wanted to feel part of the world Baptist family. From the early World Congresses onwards, Argentina has been represented by leading figures such as Besson, Elder, Varetto, de la Torre, Canclini and others. Until a few years ago, their travel was paid for by national collections. In 1984, the World Youth Congress was held in Buenos Aires, and it is hoped that the 1995 Baptist World Alliance Congress will serve to strengthen the unity, presence and witness of Baptists in Argentina.

ARNOLDO CANCLINI *Baptist pastor in Buenos Aires and Member of the Argentinian National Academy of History*
Translation from the Spanish by **TONY COATES**, *Secretary for International Church Relations of the United Reformed Church*