

# Buried, We Will Grow

## The Story of Meserete Kristos Church

ANDREW MASHAS\*

One day, after I had been working at Eastern Mennonite Missions (EMM) for a few years, I climbed the steps to the attic in my little office building and came across a stack of books. One of them was called *Beyond Our Prayers* by Nathan Hege.<sup>1</sup> In this book, I discovered a story that reflected the dynamic between a small Anabaptist missions agency in Salunga, Pennsylvania, and a grand movement of the Holy Spirit that saw hundreds of thousands come to faith in Christ halfway around the world. It was a story of the Holy Spirit at work—the same Spirit that swept over the waters in Genesis, the same Spirit that commanded light into existence. It is the same Spirit that toppled empires from Egypt to Rome. It is the same Spirit that shut the mouths of lions and gave prophets the ability to speak. It is the same Spirit that gave flesh to dry bones.

The first American missionaries from Eastern Mennonite Board of Missions and Charities (now EMM) intended to witness among Ethiopia's Muslim population; however, it became apparent that traditional Orthodox communities were more responsive to church planting efforts, so Mennonite fellowships began to form with those groups. In the late 1960s, church leadership began to transition to the local people instead of remaining under foreign influence. It was around this time that spiritual revival broke out among the youth, similar to the East African Revival that had greatly influenced Tanzania Mennonite Church in the 1930s.<sup>2</sup> This new revival was more charismatic, with fervent prayer, healings, deliverance, and evangelism. Meserete Kristos Church (MKC) began to blossom as it worked toward self-governance. EMM supplied missionary personnel in the form of healthcare workers, Bible Academy

---

\* Andrew Mashas is the Church Relations and Development Coordinator for Eastern Mennonite Missions. He and his family live in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, and attend Sunny-side Mennonite Church.

1 Nathan B. Hege, *Beyond Our Prayers: Anabaptist Church Growth in Ethiopia 1948–1998* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1998).

2 Alemu Checole et al., *Anabaptist Songs in African Hearts: Global Mennonite History Series: Africa* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2006).

teachers, evangelists, and others who would coordinate the work done by both EMM and Mennonite Central Committee (MCC).

However, by the early 1970s political upheaval took hold of the nation of Ethiopia. In the months following its founding, the Committee of the Armed Forces, Police, and Territorial Army—also known as the Derg—began to gain more power and influence throughout the government. In 1974, the Derg staged a coup that swept through Ethiopia and took political control. In July of that year, the Derg obtained important compromises from the emperor, Haile Selassie, including the power to arrest and detain not only military officers but also government officials at every level throughout the country. Soon, former Prime Ministers Tsehai Taezaz, Aklilu Habte-Wold, and Endelkachew Mekonnen, along with most of their cabinets, most regional governors, many senior military officers, and many officials of the Imperial Court were imprisoned.

So began the systematic toppling of the emperor's control over the country. In August, after a proposed constitution creating a constitutional monarchy was presented to Haile Selassie, the Derg began a program of dismantling the imperial government in order to forestall further developments in that direction. On September 12, 1974, the Derg deposed and imprisoned the emperor. This sparked the Ethiopian Civil War, a conflict that would see at least 1.4 million dead by its end in 1991.

The relationship between the Derg and Meserete Kristos Church was volatile. Military officials would occasionally visit the Bible Academy in Nazareth to try to discover if there were any students involved with the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP), an underground movement that threatened the Derg. Academy staff would wrap all apologetic papers in plastic bags and bury them in various places across campus.

Around this time, MKC was assisting a Reformed group who started to practice the gifts of the Holy Spirit. *Semay Birhan* (Heavenly Sunshine) was a charismatic group known for mass prayer, casting out demons, and speaking in tongues. Their heart for ministry included a focus on university students, and they soon decided to form their own denomination. Due to MKC's connection with this group, it became more Pentecostal than the other Mennonite Churches in East Africa.

Despite increasing persecution, the MKC congregations continued to grow as the Holy Spirit worked through them, giving different gifts essential for church growth. In the capital city, Addis Ababa, three worship services were held every Sunday. EMM missionary Janet Kreider recalls the great crowds waiting for access to Bole chapel when one service was dismissed and another

began.<sup>3</sup> The Holy Spirit swept through those meetings, and many physical healings took place: healing from cancer, paralysis, blindness, asthma. Healings would even extend to people who did not confess Christ, but the miracles would often prompt them to receive his salvation.

Pastor Daniel Mekonnen started to exercise the gifts of the Holy Spirit, such as healing and words of knowledge. His unique ministry attracted many people to Christ all over the country. Daniel's testimony included his initial proclamation of faith in Christ, which came as a result of hearing about the healing of a blind man. He started to have a burden for people with various medical conditions. The Holy Spirit used him to lead the country in a great revival through which the mission of the church could be fulfilled. Even members of the communist government came to the revival meetings because they were interested in what God was doing there.

As the church grew exponentially, the government began to increase its surveillance of Christian worship. Over the course of seven months in 1982, Derg leaders appeared at the doors of all fourteen MKC congregations with the order that the churches were to close their doors and hand over their buildings to the Ethiopian government. The believers in these congregations totaled five thousand at the time. The church complied and eventually transferred its hospitals to the government, too. The Menno Bookstore was nationalized in 1977; the Bible Academy in 1982. When the government closed all of the congregations, they detained and imprisoned five of their leaders for four years.

Many Ethiopian believers were commanded to raise their left hands, curse their enemies, and shout a slogan that claimed the revolution was above everything. Many believers refused because they firmly believed God is above all. Many believed it was the Holy Spirit who gave them the courage to withstand the opposition. They were kept in prison for days and beaten in an attempt to get them to renounce their faith and claim allegiance to the revolution. Many considered it a privilege to suffer for their faith. Most notably, the Derg rounded up six key leaders within MKC and threw them in prison. EMM tried to help by sending Robert Kreider, former president of Bluffton (Ohio) College, to try and negotiate release for the prisoners. Kreider's efforts were to no avail. Even the late Paul Kraybill, executive secretary of Mennonite World Conference, tried to negotiate in 1984 with Derg representatives in France for their release.<sup>4</sup> The Holy Spirit was paramount as their guide, reminding them how Jesus proclaimed that those who were persecuted in his name were blessed.

---

<sup>3</sup> Hege, *Beyond Our Prayers*, 169.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 186.

EMM personnel were not forced to leave the country the way they had been in Somalia a decade earlier.<sup>5</sup> However, the interaction with MKC would have to look different if missionaries wanted to stay in the country. Many missionaries were able to stay in the country because of their particular professions, but keeping a lower profile was necessary. MCC was able to carry on agricultural development work, reforestation, resettlement of refugees, and distribution of food during the famine.

When the Holy Spirit is all a community has, that community will be empowered to do the impossible. The system created during the church's underground period was nothing short of miraculous—a work of the Holy Spirit that subverted the ruling powers in many imaginative and beautiful ways. The Ethiopian church became invisible. It scattered into tiny networks of five believers per cell. House fellowships were comprised of two to four cells. No group discussed or knew anything about other groups. Meeting places were constantly changed. In Addis Ababa, cells were sometimes as large as ten or twelve. When rumors spread that the government was coming, the groups would split. Six weeks after the church's closing in Addis Ababa, the congregation of two thousand members that used to meet in one building was now meeting in a hundred homes throughout the city. Women became active in leadership during the underground. In fact, more women than men were leading cell groups. They also taught Sunday school and served as elders.

New members were added through Spirit-led individual witness. Special evangelists were assigned to disciple people for up to a year. When it was clear that new members were true believers and not government spies, they would finally be introduced to the larger group. As the church grew, the total number of members was not precisely known. An underground General Council was able to meet twice annually, creating a kind of broader fellowship for the MKC. Leaders secretly distributed Bible study material so all believers could study the same courses.

The underground church relied on the Spirit to carry on its ministry against all odds. Once, in 1985, an evangelist baptized eighteen new believers in a government hotel while communist officials were drinking on the porch. The believers came and went by twos in twenty-minute intervals. Evangelists continued to travel around to various regions and house fellowships in secret for ten years. When committees met, they never arrived at a house in pairs, never shook hands, and never greeted one another in the doorway.

---

<sup>5</sup> Peter M. Sensenig, *Peace Clan, Mennonite Peacemaking in Somalia* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2016).

By 1991, the civil war was over and the church was reopened. Its story of complete surrender to the power of the Holy Spirit continues. Meserete Kristos Church has become the largest single Anabaptist communion in the world. MKC continues to be a discipling church as well as a church of prayer. It is well-organized and effectively led. As the church continues to focus on growth throughout Ethiopia, it also looks to send missionaries to other parts of East Africa, including Sudan, Djibouti, and Somalia. Eastern Mennonite Missions and Meserete Kristos Church continue to rely on the Holy Spirit as their guide to share the gospel to all nations.

When Meserete Kristos Church was closed down by the government in 1982, there were fourteen congregations and an estimated membership of about five thousand. When the ban was lifted in 1991, the church had grown tenfold. Today, the membership stands at over 255,000, with about 822 congregations across the nation. There are also over 1,000 church planting centers projected to become full-fledged congregations in one to two years. No individual or group can take credit for MKC's phenomenal growth. It is the work of the Holy Spirit.

There is a beautiful yet assertive passage from the Gospel of John that insists the Spirit of God cannot be controlled or manipulated for personal gain, no matter how hard humankind tries. "Just as the wind blows where it pleases, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit" (Jn 3:8, ESV). We find scripture to be one grand story of humankind building civilizations and empires of oppression and violence, and the Spirit of God constantly overturning humankind's tables of greed and power. This story continues today, often in ways unseen to the world's eye.