
Prayer, Evangelism, and Justice Entwined

Meserete Kristos Church's Holistic Approach in Ethiopia

Henok T. Mekonin

For decades, theologians—and Christians in general—have been debating over the complex relationship between evangelism, social justice, and prayer within the church. I have often noticed that in both Western and African churches, so-called social ministries (peace, service, and justice) are pitted against so-called spiritual ministries (evangelism and church planting). Sometimes churches focus too much on service; while service may address individual needs, it doesn't address the root causes. On the other hand, I have seen churches focusing too much on evangelism, and while it is vital for the church to do evangelism work and share the good news of the gospel with people,¹ those churches too often neglect the kingdom that Jesus taught.² By highlighting the remarks of Desalegn Abebe Ejo, current president of the Meserete Kristos Church (MKC), and Abayneh Anjulo Wanore, Director of the MKC Mission, Evangelism, and Church Planting Department, I aim to showcase the theological vision that has guided MKC's programs and ministries for many years. This vision establishes a balanced relationship among evangelism, church planting, peace, service, and justice.

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1 Al Tizon, *Whole and Reconciled: Gospel, Church, and Mission in a Fractured World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2018), 165.

2 Evan Lenow, "Preaching and Social Ministry," Preaching Source (blog), August 22, 2018, <https://preachingsource.com/blog/preaching-and-social-ministry/>; John L. Rothra, "The Role of Social Ministry in the Church," March 27, 2015, <https://www.johnrothra.com/show/serving-others/the-role-of-social-ministry-in-the-church/>.

Meserete Kristos Church (MKC) is an Anabaptist denomination in Ethiopia with around one million members.³ It is “a church founded on Christ,”⁴ based on 1 Corinthians 3:11 (assumed to be Menno Simons’s⁵ favorite verse).⁶ Two recent events⁷ I was lucky enough to be a part of have given me a snapshot of how MKC emphasizes the power of fervent prayer and reliance on the work of the Holy Spirit,⁸ and how the church combines these elements with relief and peacemaking work to energize the mission of God in the Ethiopian context. At the first of these events—a Zoom conference in early 2023—Desalegn discussed the current political climate in Ethiopia and shared updates on what God is doing in the country. This virtual conversation was organized by Mennonite Church Canada for their monthly Church-to-Church Conversations, and specifically featured MKC.⁹ During the Zoom conference, Desalegn discussed MKC’s response to the conflict in the northern region of Ethiopia.¹⁰ He explained that the church took several measures, including praying for peace and stability and raising funds for displaced people. Desalegn noted that “prayer is not just a program” for MKC members but an integral part of their lives. MKC believes in the power of prayer and prays for everything and every situation. They do not limit themselves to a specific program or time but pray whenever the need arises.

3 This number includes children. Desalegn Abebe Ejo, “Meserete Kristos Church (MKC) 1951–2023” (fundraising for the church presentation, USA, June 26, 2023).

4 Carl Hansen, *Into Abyssinia: The Odyssey of a Family* (Chronicles Hansen’s First Eight Years in Ethiopia, 1967–1975) (Bloomington, IN: Westbow, 2023), 18.

5 Menno Simons—an influential Dutch priest in the early sixteenth century whose followers became known as Mennonite—put this verse at the beginning of all of his writings.

6 Lydette S. Assefa, “Creating Identity in Opposition: Relations between the Meserete Kristos Church and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, 1960–1980,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 83, no. 4 (October 1, 2009): 539–570, 544.

7 The first of these was a Zoom conference on February 15, 2023, featuring President Desalegn Abebe Ejo of MKC. The second event was a visit to the Elkhart-Goshen, Indiana, area in the preceding days by Abayneh Anjulo, Director of the MKC Mission, Evangelism, and Church Planting Department.

8 Andrew Mashas, “Buried, We Will Grow: The Story of Meserete Kristos Church,” *Anabaptist Witness* 4, no. 1 “Following the Holy Spirit in Mission,” ed. Jamie Pitts, (April 2017), 82–87, https://www.academia.edu/32810332/Anabaptist_Witness_4_1_Following_the_Holy_Spirit_in_Mission_.

9 “Church-to-Church Conversation—MKC and MC Canada,” February 22, 2023, YouTube video, 1:10:10, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cvnvRgGBiWM>.

10 News section, “Ethiopian Church Delegation Visits War-Ravaged Northern Province,” *Anabaptist World*, July 19, 2021, <https://anabaptistworld.org/ethiopian-church-delegation-visits-war-ravaged-northern-province/>.

According to Abayneh Anjulo Wanore,¹¹ Director of Missions, Evangelism, and Church Planting, one of the key factors contributing to the growth of MKC is the strong emphasis on prayer and fasting.¹²

The church is not confined to a building and praying to God about interior issues; congregational members and leaders also go to places that are neglected by the government and seek to assist in whatever ways they can to uplift the community. For instance, because of the conflict in northern Ethiopia, MKC had to resort to unconventional methods to transfer funds to the affected areas. The church sent more than 260,000 USD, or nearly 15 million Ethiopian birrs, through the UN Charter to help those in need. The church also mobilized resources to provide essential items like blankets, oil, and flour, and used social media platforms to share short videos and audios with the displaced people throughout Ethiopia. Additionally, they reached out to the affected communities through phone calls to encourage them and offer support. Desalegn also shared that the church sent representatives, including himself, to visit affected churches and Christians, when possible, to offer words of encouragement and prayer.¹³

Once Desalegn finished his presentation on the Zoom call, Norm Dyck¹⁴ gave Doug Klassen¹⁵ the first opportunity to respond before opening the floor for questions or comments directed to Desalegn.¹⁶ Doug thanked Desalegn for his presentation and expressed appreciation for MKC's determination through very turbulent political times, which he found inspiring. He then asked Desalegn a question regarding the balance between doing justice work and evangelism.¹⁷ In North America, he observed, finding such a balance has been a struggle, whereas

11 Attending the Zoom call of Desalegn's presentation was an additional blessing for me, as I'd earlier had the opportunity to be with Abayneh Anjulo, Director of the MKC Missions, Evangelism, and Church Planting Department, during his visit to Goshen and Elkhart on February 11–13, 2023. I was fortunate to hear Abayneh as he shared about what God is doing in Ethiopia through MKC and its missional approach, which prioritizes caring for people above everything else.

12 Mennonite World Conference, "Ethiopians at Risk of Famine Are Cut Off," *Anabaptist World*, November 2, 2021, <https://anabaptistworld.org/ethiopians-at-risk-of-famine-ar-e-cut-off/>.

13 Mennonite World Conference, "Ethiopians at Risk of Famine Are Cut Off."

14 Norm Dyck, the Mission Minister at Mennonite Church Eastern Canada, was the facilitator for the event.

15 Doug Klassen, the Executive Minister of Mennonite Church Canada, also participated in the conversation.

16 "Church-to-Church Conversation—MKC and MC Canada."

17 Dave Rogalsky, "Ethiopian Church Grows in Maturity: Meserete Kristos Church follows New Testament Pattern," *Canadian Mennonite Magazine*, October 10, 2012, <https://canadianmennonite.org/articles/ethiopian-church-grows-maturity>.

in Ethiopia there seems to be no polarity between the two; on the contrary, the MKC seems to be unified and holistic. How, he wondered, does the MKC balance the two and make decisions around them?

Desalegn acknowledged the challenge of balancing humanitarian aid and evangelism efforts within the church, as they can sometimes overlap or occur simultaneously.¹⁸ To address this, the MKC has provided training for church leaders in three main areas: (1) the holistic nature of God’s kingdom, (2) peacebuilding, and (3) reconciliation. Additionally, the communal lifestyle present in Ethiopian society has been instrumental in supporting these efforts.¹⁹

In a recent interview with a local Ethiopian TV podcast, MCK shared why they always avoid direct confrontation with the government.²⁰ Instead, they continue to go to all parts of Ethiopia, especially war-torn places and communities that have been neglected because of various sociopolitical, religious, and ethnic reasons.²¹

The Historical Significance

MKC ministers work in these war-torn and neglected areas because they are the birthplace of the church; early churches in this area were established as places of refuge for marginalized and neglected youth seeking spiritual awakening. Right after WWII, in 1945,²² Mennonite missionaries began arriving in Ethiopia for

18 Dave Rogalsky, “Ethiopian Church Grows in Maturity.”

19 “Church-to-Church Conversation—MKC and MC Canada.”

20 During the Marxist era (1974–1991), under the policy called “የአብዮት እርምጃ”—“Revolutionary Action,” properties of the MKC (church buildings, chapels, schools, guest houses) were confiscated and nationalized by the government. Currently, the MKC is requesting the sitting government to return one of its oldest chapel buildings located in the capital city of Ethiopia. During an interview, the president of MKC was asked why the church is not pushing the government harder and pressuring them through civil disobedience and public protests to return the chapel. The president explained why the MKC doesn’t believe in direct confrontation with the government, especially in Ethiopia, where every direct confrontation has historically turned into violence.

21 ያለ ሀገ ያተወረሱ የቤተክርስቲያን //መጋቢ ደሳለኝ አበበ//Pastor Desalegn Abebe Ejo, November 29, 2023, YouTube video, 27:56, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p_1Z-p50QVo; Mekonnen Gameda, “Children Forgotten in Peacebuilding Activities,” *Canadian Mennonite Magazine*, September 8, 2023, <https://canadianmennonite.org/issue/volume-27-issue-18d>; Niguse Bekele, “Ex-Prisoners Plant Church,” *Canadian Mennonite Magazine* 27, no. 14 (July 10, 2023), <https://canadianmennonite.org/stories/ex-prisoners-plant-church>.

22 Leanne E. Benner, *Son of the Wind* (Harrisonburg, VA: L. E. Benner, 2011), 145–47.

relief work after the Italian Occupation (1936–1941) ended.²³ Emperor Haile Selassie I (1930–1974), considered the “Elect of God,”²⁴ instructed the Mennonite workers and missionaries not to evangelize in areas with substantial Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo²⁵ communities, deeming them off-limits.²⁶ “Some areas in the country,” says Alemu Checole, “particularly those predominantly comprised of Orthodox believers were designated as ‘closed’ areas, off limits of evangelical witness.”²⁷ The emperor directed them to instead focus on rural areas with less infrastructure. Those were open areas²⁸ heavily populated by Muslims—Deder, Bedeno, and Nazareth.²⁹ As Chester L. Wenger noted, “The Ethiopian government had approved land in Deder for this evangelistic witness, because it was a primarily Muslim region.”³⁰

This restriction against evangelizing in Orthodox areas arose because Orthodox Christianity was the state religion at the time.³¹ Haile Selassie famously

23 Tibebe Eshete, *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia: Resistance and Resilience*, Repr. (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2017), 76; E. Centime Zeleke, *Ethiopia in Theory: Revolution and Knowledge Production, 1964–2016*, Historical Materialism Book Series, vol. 201 (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 32, 46.

24 *The Constitution of the Empire of Ethiopia, 1931*; the *Revised Constitution of the Empire of Ethiopia: Addis Ababa, 4th November, 1955*; the *Civil Code of the Empire of Ethiopia: Proclamation, No. 165 of 1960*; and other laws of Imperial Ethiopia.

25 In the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, the word “Tewahedo” (ተዋሕዶ) has significant religious and historical importance; it is an Amharic term that translates to “being made one” or “united.” It reflects the church’s theological belief in the oneness of God and the unity of Christ’s human and divine natures. The church adheres to the ancient Christian doctrine of “Miaphysitism,” which emphasizes the single nature of Christ’s being. The use of the term Tewahedo in the church’s name underscores its commitment to this theological perspective.

26 Nathan B. Hege, *Beyond Our Prayers: Anabaptist Church Growth in Ethiopia, 1948–1998* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1998), 20; Hansen, *Into Abyssinia*, 17; Eshete, *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia*, 94.

27 Alemu Checole (assisted by Samuel Asefa), “Mennonite Churches in Eastern Africa,” in *Anabaptist Songs in African Hearts: A Global Mennonite History*, ed. John Lapp (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2006), 207.

28 Hege, *Beyond Our Prayers*, 76.

29 Hansen, *Into Abyssinia*, 17.

30 Chester Lehman Wenger and Sara Jane (Weaver) Wenger, *Bearing Fruit: A Collection of Memories—As Told to and Shaped by Deborah Anna Good and Betty Wenger Good-White* (Lancaster, PA: Chester Lehman Wenger and Sara Jane [Weaver] Wenger, 2017), 102.

31 *1955 Revised Constitution of the Empire of Ethiopia*, arts 125 and 126, respectively.

stated, “The church is like a sword, and the government is like an arm; therefore, the sword cannot cut by itself without the use of the arm.”³²

Many Ethiopian youths at that time, hungry for education and spiritual awakening, sought alternatives, leading them to the Mennonite missionaries. During this period, these young people were considered second-class citizens and faced persecution from the state church because they were associating with a religion other than the dominant Orthodox Church.³³

MKC members continued to face severe persecution not only during the imperial regime but also after its ultimate demise. In February 1974,³⁴ when Ethiopia transitioned into another form of unjust hegemony—the Communist rule, popularly called the Derg revolutionary government—MKC members still endured persecution.³⁵ At first, MKC thought there would be more freedom and equality because the Ethiopian Orthodox Church lost power in the 1974 revolution,³⁶ officially divorced from the state, and women were encouraged to go to school. However, as time went by, things started to change. The hope was short lived;³⁷ MKC key leaders were imprisoned, the church lost its institutions, and its operations sought cover underground.³⁸ These experiences solidified the church’s understanding of what it means to be marginalized and neglected, shaping its identity from its infancy.

32 G. A. Lipsky, *Ethiopia: Its People, Its Society, Its Culture*, 2nd ed. (New Haven, CT: Human Relations Area Files, 1962), 101.

33 Henok T. Mekonin, “A Sense of Pride and Suspicion: Ethiopia’s Habitus and Its Impact on Interactions with Foreigners,” *Anabaptist Historians* (blog), April 27, 2023, <https://anabaptisthistorians.org/2023/04/27/a-sense-of-pride-and-suspicion-ethiopias-habitus-and-its-impact-on-interactions-with-foreigners/>.

34 Assefa, “Creating Identity in Opposition,” 539–71; Calvin E. Shenk, *When Kingdoms Clash: The Christian and Ideologies*, Peace and Justice Series 6 (Scottdale, PA: Herald, 1988), 54.

35 Eshete, *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia*, 94.

36 Shenk, *When Kingdoms Clash*, 33.

37 Aaron Daniel Lehman, “Aster Debossie: Meserete Kristos Churchwoman in Lay Leadership in Ethiopia 1974–1991” (Goshen College History Senior Seminar, Goshen, Indiana), 18.

38 Brent L. Kipfer, “Thriving under Persecution: Meserete Kristos Church Leadership during the Ethiopian Revolution (1974–1991),” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 91, no. 3 (2017): 297–369.

The Holistic Approach of the Church

The church goes to these war-torn and neglected areas because of the holistic nature of God's kingdom.³⁹ When moving from place to place, the church tries not to be misunderstood so that in the long run their missional work is not hindered. As Desalegn explained, social justice issues in the Ethiopian context can be intertwined with politics, which can create a complex dynamic.⁴⁰

Because Ethiopian politics are rooted in ethnic divisions and there is an ethnic-based political arrangement in the country, justice issues are often viewed through a lens of who benefits from the political policies in place. However, the church focuses first on humanity and supporting individuals, regardless of their religious or ethnic backgrounds. They have intentionally avoided explicitly mentioning their faith in order to prevent it from being a barrier to providing assistance to those in need. Nevertheless, we can see that as church people continue to be present in Christian witness, this opens a door for discussion and dialogue with others, including Ethiopian Muslim Communities. In Ethiopia, there are many Muslim communities throughout the country,⁴¹ and the church's presence in different areas has helped to share God's love with them.⁴²

Truth be told, one can argue that Meserete Kristos Church was born out of social ministries when Mennonites were granted permission to enter Ethiopia and assist His Imperial Majesty, Haile Selassie I, in his efforts to modernize the country.⁴³ When the Mennonite Relief Committee sent workers, it was to serve in the name of Christ by establishing a hospital and clinic.⁴⁴ Being relief workers and trained personnel in various sectors was key to gaining access to the country.

Mennonite missionaries started their mission work in Ethiopia later, after Orie Miller, who is responsible for the presence of Mennonite relief work in Ethiopia, wrote a letter to King Haile Selassie sharing the Mennonites' desire and ambition to "enlarge their present program to include an evangelical mission

39 Kelbessa Muleta Demena, "What Caused the Rapid Growth of the Meserete Kristos Church?," *Mission Focus* 15, (2007): 171–79, 176.

40 "Church-to-Church Conversation—MKC and MC Canada."

41 Million Belete, "Fear and Marginalization in Ethiopia," in *Seeking Peace in Africa: Stories from African Peacemakers*, eds. Donald E. Miller et al., Oikoumene (Telford, PA: Cascadia Publishing House [u.a.], 2007), 104.

42 Barb Draper, "Ethiopian Meserete Kristos Church Continues to Grow," *Anabaptist World* (blog), December 19, 2017, <https://anabaptistworld.org/ethiopian-meserete-kristos-church-continues-grow/>.

43 Checole (assisted by Asefa), "Mennonite Churches in Eastern Africa," 207.

44 Dorothy Smoker, *God Led Us to Ethiopia* (Salunga, PA: Eastern Mennonite Board of Missions and Charities, 1956), 2.

service⁴⁵ in Ethiopia. Dan and his wife, Blanche Sensenig, arrived in Ethiopia with their daughter, Janice, in late December 1947.⁴⁶

To Advocate for Change in the Country

The Meserete Kristos Church continues to go to all parts of Ethiopia, especially war-torn places and communities that have been neglected, in order to make sound theological statements to the people in power. By being in those places and helping the communities in those areas, the church hopes to make strong political and moral statements not just for the government but for all Ethiopians. By taking initiative and doing the work on the ground, the church is setting an example of how the government could be supporting the needs of the community.⁴⁷

To Share the Good News through Actions

The church continues going to different places so that people can see the good witness of the church, and so that the Holy Spirit will eventually convict people to turn to God and God's love and justice will start spreading.⁴⁸ Desalegn shared an example of the church's work in supporting individuals in northern Ethiopia, where it provided a significant amount of financial aid to those in need. While church workers did not explicitly mention their faith in these efforts, they did pray with those they were supporting.

Desalegn emphasized that MKC's ultimate goal is to support and help people in need, and that their faith guides their actions, even if it is not explicitly mentioned. One of the places, for instance, where people are neglected, left out, and outcast is the Ethiopian prison system. Both Desalegn and Abayneh stated repeatedly that MKC Prison Ministry was not born with the sole intention of converting people but that the MKC church, as a peace church, wants to be there and hear from the prisoner communities about how the church can be helpful to them.⁴⁹

In response to a question from a participant about the church's prison ministry, Desalegn demonstrated once again how the church's mission work is woven into its identity and how evangelism and social activism are closely integrated. "In Ethiopia, we have a total of 134 prisons," he explained. "Of these, we have access to minister in 50 of them. The church assigned 60 pastors and social

45 Hege, *Beyond Our Prayers*, 47.

46 Hege, *Beyond Our Prayers*, 40–43.

47 ያለ ሀግ የተወረሱ የቤተክርስቲያን //መጋቢ ደሳለኝ አበበ//Pastor Desalegn Abebe Ejo.

48 Tizon, *Whole and Reconciled*, 164.

49 Asalefew Wolde, "Conflict Mediation in Prison Ministry," *Africa Peacebuilding Institute* (blog), April 1, 2021, <https://africapeaceinstitute.org/prison-ministry-conflict-mediation/>.

workers to work in 37 of the prisons on a regular basis. In our country, if a person is suspected of a crime and sentenced to prison, their children are often allowed to stay with them. This means that many children are living in prison alongside their parents.⁵⁰ As part of our prison ministry, we focus on caring for these children by providing them with food, a kindergarten program, clothes, and sanitary materials.”⁵¹ Desalegn’s response shed light on how the church’s prison ministry seeks to address the complex needs of those who are incarcerated, including the children who are often overlooked in traditional approaches to criminal justice.⁵²

Furthermore, Desalegn went on to explain, the church’s prison ministry provides social support and practical skills training to incarcerated individuals, in addition to building chapels in the prisons where prisoners can receive counseling and guidance. “We try to keep them busy while they’re in prison by providing technical skills training, such as woodworking,” he said. “We also provide basic necessities like socks, sanitary materials, and groceries, as well as educational materials like books.” The church’s chapels also serve as a place where inmates can seek guidance from those who are familiar with the country’s legal system.

The ministry is not without its challenges, however. “We have to be accountable to the government and other officials who help us gain access to prisons to do our work,” Desalegn noted. “But because we have been doing this for a long time and have a proven track record of positive outcomes, many government officials know us and trust our work.” Desalegn’s explanation highlights how the church’s prison ministry operates within a complex system of legal and government regulations while still providing vital support and guidance to those who are incarcerated.

The church’s prison ministry also focuses on facilitating the conversation between the victims and offenders. “We believe in the power of bringing together the victim and the offender,” Desalegn said. “Before an inmate finishes their time and rejoins the community, we facilitate a conversation between the offender and the victim to see if there is a sense of guilt and remorse for the harm that was caused. We encourage the offender to apologize, and we work with the victim and their family to seek forgiveness toward the offender.” This process is carried out using traditional conflict resolution methods that involve church elders and community leaders. By emphasizing the importance of reconciliation and forgiveness, the church’s prison ministry seeks to promote healing and restore relationships between those who have been affected by crime. Desalegn’s explanation

50 Meserete Kristos Church News, “Ethiopia Ministry Cares for Children in Prison,” *Anabaptist World* (blog), June 28, 2022, <https://anabaptistworld.org/ethiopia-ministry-cares-for-children-in-prison/>.

51 “Church-to-Church Conversation—MKC and MC Canada.”

52 Bekele, “Ex-Prisoners Plant Church.”

demonstrates how the ministry approaches criminal justice in a holistic and compassionate manner, with an eye toward healing and reconciliation.

An Evangelistic Calling for All: Grounded in Prayer and Guidance from the Spirit

In the very beginning, the emerging Ethiopian Mennonite Church borrowed some practices like liturgical dance from the Orthodox Church; at the same time, it offered reform and a “new way of life” compared to the traditional faith.⁵³ That impulse and desire became ingrained in the newly forming Meserete Kristos Church early on and made her a missional church. One place you can readily see the church’s missional impulse is in its recognition of evangelism as a calling. Currently, 963 ordained evangelists serve MKC churches throughout the country.⁵⁴ Besides that, all believers are encouraged to share the good news of their faith in their workplace and in their daily lives by living according to the teachings of the Bible.

In other words, in the MKC all believers are evangelists and missionaries. For decades the church has followed the practices of seeking guidance from the Holy Spirit and allowing the Holy Spirit to work through the members of the church. In her work, Lydette S. Assefa shows how early Meserete Kristos converts appealed to the vitality of the Spirit and efficacious practices, reflecting a pan-African emphasis on life-enhancing spirituality, and drawing attention to how Christ is changing the lives of many youths.⁵⁵ Ogbu Kalu explicitly affirmed that it is through this Spirit that the missionary message is set to work.⁵⁶ MKC also engages in intentional and strategic missional outreach with the participation of all local church members; however, communal and private prayer is the most important aspect of their mission work.⁵⁷

Not only MKC but also evangelical churches in Ethiopia in general focus on prayer against social or spiritual powers that perpetuate injustice. The phrase “Powers and Principalities” “is shorthand for a variety of terms Paul employed to refer to Powers that were created by God but in some way are hostile to Christ

53 Checole (assisted by Asefa), “Mennonite Churches in Eastern Africa,” 194, 199, 209–10.

54 Ejo, “Meserete Kristos Church (MKC) 1951–2023.”

55 Assefa, “Creating Identity in Opposition,” 539–71.

56 Ogbu Kalu, ed., *African Christianity: An African Story* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2007), 42.

57 Christian Tsekpoe, “Contemporary Prophetic and Deliverance Ministry Challenges in Africa,” *Transformation* 36, no. 4 (October 1, 2019): 280–91, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265378819866217>.

and his church.”⁵⁸ In almost all evangelical churches in Ethiopia, including MKC, there is a strong belief and conviction that beyond the material world there is a spiritual world, that spiritual warfare is real,⁵⁹ and that there is a power that perpetuates injustices.

In my time in the US, I have come to notice a distinct difference between the churches in the West and churches in Africa, especially in the way we see and define the powers of this world and how we respond to these powers. I agree with Esther Acolatse’s insight that false and unhelpful binaries exist regarding “belief in the powers and their influence on human life, as well as the work of the Spirit in the church,” as displayed through distinctions of “North versus South, First World versus Third World, modern versus pre-modern, and so on.”⁶⁰ I perceive and observe an unhealthy and disturbing association and characterization in the Western churches: if you believe in the existence of spiritual entities and forces commonly seen in churches in the Global South, then you’re labeled as not advanced, traditionalist, and uncivilized. Conversely, if you’re skeptical about the existence of spiritual entities and forces and their influence in your daily life, then you’re considered more theologically versed and civilized.

In Meserete Kristos Church, Christians strongly believe in practicing private and communal prayer using scriptures from the Bible.⁶¹ They also believe in what prayer can do. They pray for their country and its people, asking God to be with them and to draw them closer to him through the Holy Spirit.⁶² One of the many places we see believers strongly relying on scripture and the Holy Spirit to guide them is in weekly Bible study small groups conducted in members’ homes.⁶³ The Spirit-led process in these meetings is evident as prayer and Bible study are

58 Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid, eds., *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 536.

59 J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, “Spiritual Warfare in the African Context: Perspectives on a Global Phenomenon,” *Lausanne Global Analysis* 9, no. 1 (January 13, 2020), <https://lausanne.org/content/lga/2020-01/spiritual-warfare-african-context>.

60 Esther Acolatse, *Powers, Principalities, and the Spirit: Biblical Realism in Africa and the West* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2018), 3.

61 Million Belete, “Meditation and Prayer,” in *Seeking Peace in Africa: Stories from African Peacemakers*, eds. Donald E. Miller et al., Oikoumene (Telford, PA: Cascadia, 2007), 192–94.

62 Demena, “What Caused the Rapid Growth of the Meserete Kristos Church?,” 172.

63 Still today, at Meserete Kristos churches throughout Ethiopia, Bible studies take place in small groups in members’ homes, continuing the underground tradition from the Communist era (1974–1991), when the church was forced to hide their activities from the government.

combined in a two-hour session.⁶⁴ Prayer comes first to invite God's presence and guidance, and the Bible is seen as a living text through which the Holy Spirit works, evidenced in members' lives being transformed, even miraculously.⁶⁵ This shows how the MKC integrates prayer into its relief, peacebuilding, and church growth activities as a way of prioritizing the church's reliance on the Holy Spirit.

One of the most striking things that MKC leaders report about God's activities in Ethiopia is the way that the church always emphasizes the importance of prayer and the presence of the Holy Spirit in their work. While this emphasis may be difficult for some people in the Global North to fully grasp, the leaders in Ethiopia do not rely on church structures or strategic plans to guide their activities. Instead, they focus on maintaining a mindset of humility and openness to the ways in which the Holy Spirit is moving in their midst. This approach enables MKC to be fully present and engaged in all of the church's activities with the community.

In Ethiopia, they do not just use the phrase "our thoughts and prayers are with you" when they want to offer support during difficult times; instead, they engage in acts of genuine private and communal prayer.⁶⁶ The MKC leadership teams and all MKC believers regularly retreat to their rooms, close the door, and seek solace with God. They also come together as a community of believers, seeking God's intervention in their complex situations and asking God to guide them in their work.

When I came to the US, I brought those experiences with me. Quickly, I found myself debating whether MKC is an Anabaptist church or not. There is a debate over how to define "Anabaptist theology,"⁶⁷ given the diversity of groups associ-

64 Mary Schertz and Kelbessa Demena, "The Text Has Something to Tell Us! Bible Teaching in the Meserete Kristos Church, Ethiopia," *Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology* 11, no. 2 (October 1, 2010): 79.

65 Schertz and Demena, "The Text Has Something to Tell Us!," 84–86.

66 Throughout the week, not just before meals and Sunday services at the church, MKC believers are encouraged to have their own private time with God. I used to participate in a prayer chain where you could either set an alarm to wake up in the middle of the night or receive a call from a friend. While at home alone, every person in the entire congregation participates by kneeling in prayer for hours. (Note: We didn't use the phone calls to be on the line throughout the prayer time. Instead, the calls served as reminders that the prayer chain was happening, and then everyone prayed on their own.)

67 It has become very hard for me to follow any lectures or attend any events because I am confused about how Academia defines and differentiates Anabaptist theology and global Anabaptist theology. When people use the term "Anabaptist theology," they are usually referring to theological reflections from North America and Europe. In contrast, when people use the term "Global Anabaptist theology," they are usually referring to Anabaptist theological reflections from Africa, Asia, and Latin America, including North America and Europe.

ated with Anabaptism and the “ordinary” theology practiced in the Global South Anabaptist faith communities.⁶⁸ Mennonite theology has remained predominantly Western and male-centric.⁶⁹ When leading Mennonite theologians of the mid- to late-twentieth century, such as Harold S. Bender, John Howard Yoder, and J. Denny Weaver, distilled the experiences of early sixteenth-century Anabaptism in their respective theological work for Western North American Mennonite churches,⁷⁰ they positioned believers in the Western Mennonite churches at a distance from brothers and sisters in the same faith yet living in different contexts.

For example, Bender,⁷¹ Yoder,⁷² and Weaver⁷³ negatively influenced Mennonite theology by minimizing the role of the Holy Spirit, making it difficult for Anabaptist churches in the Global South, such as MKC, to bring their authentic lived experiences to the forefront and reconnect with brothers and sisters in North America. Steve Dintaman pointed out that Anabaptist theologians were too focused on ethics to the exclusion of other aspects of the Christian faith. He argued that Anabaptist theology needs to pay more attention to spirituality and theology beyond ethics.⁷⁴ Getu Abeche, who is a key leader within the MKC, especially around Addis Ababa after living in the US and studying at AMBS, wrote an essay in which he tried to show the challenges in our ongoing desire to form the global Anabaptist community. Holy Spirit baptism, fasting/prayer, worship styles, and evangelism approach are some of the areas he observed that MKC differs significantly from North American Mennonites, and he called

68 Jamie Pitts and Luis Tapia Rubio, “Anabaptist Theology,” *St Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology*, October 19, 2023, https://www.saet.ac.uk/Christianity/AnabaptistTheology?fbclid=IwAR3BS4QmLKQ_diF94h2KAIPzHl8Jar7oyhJPhUMbdpoz-pMTITdyoY8gJH4.pdf.

69 Hyung Jin Kim Sun, “Intercultural Global Theology,” *Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology* 19, no. 2 (October 1, 2018): 81–89, 81.

70 Paul Martens, “How Mennonite Theology became Superfluous in Three Easy Steps: Bender, Yoder, Weaver,” *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 33 (2015): 149–66.

71 In his work *The Anabaptist Vision*, Bender distilled Anabaptism into three key tenets: discipleship, brotherhood, and love/nonresistance. This distillation was novel and influential.

72 With his various publications, Yoder developed Bender’s three emphases into the single concept of “politics,” qualified by the principle “weakness wins.”

73 With his book *The Nonviolent Atonement*, Weaver revised Anabaptism by equating “weakness wins” with normative nonviolence.

74 Stephen F. Dintaman, “The Spiritual Poverty of the Anabaptist Vision,” *Conrad Grebel Review* 10 (Spring 1992): 205–8.

for greater cooperation and unity between these churches as part of the global Anabaptist community.⁷⁵

I understand that Bender, Yoder, and Weaver were doing their theological reflection to respond to the issue at hand in their own little community. For instance, we can examine Harold Bender's *Anabaptist Vision*⁷⁶—his distillation of Anabaptism into discipleship, brotherhood, and love/nonresistance—and see that it was novel and influential in the 1940s. Additionally, Anabaptists were grappling with how to respond to the trauma of the two World Wars and the conscription of Anabaptist believers in North America into the military, so the dilemma for the church at the time had to do with discipleship and how to respond in action, which were ethical issues. Therefore, ethics became a central focus of Mennonite theology.

The first thing that Anabaptist academic theology did for Mennonites in North America was to try to resolve the challenge of discipleship and peace—how to practically follow Jesus's way of peacemaking in the context of war—which was an ethical problem theologians were addressing at the time. Thus, it can be said that the trauma of the two World Wars and Harold Bender's Anabaptist vision influenced the development of Mennonite theology and its focus on ethical issues.

Responding with sound theological reflection to the issues a given community is struggling with is very important, but that should be done without neglecting the other aspects of the Christian faith. When prayer and actively seeking the Holy Spirit were diminished within the Western church, this influenced theological discourse to the point that it negatively affected not only the North American Mennonite Church but also the churches in the Global South.⁷⁷ I'm not sure yet whether the Mennonite Churches in North America know and understand how

75 Getu Abeche, "Interdependence, Witness and Critical Issues between Ethiopian Meserete Kristos Church and North American Mennonite Church."

76 Harold S. Bender, *The Anabaptist Vision* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1944).

77 When it comes to power, my understanding was and still is that Mennonites are very careful about how to exercise it. It puzzles me why leaders in the Mennonite church in North America do not realize that by virtue of being the church in the United States (people who live in centers of political, economic, and institutional power; and this is the kind of power and capital one gets because of where you are—your citizenship), their words and decisions affect the entire global Anabaptist community. Whereas, any decision in the so-called global churches will not make it out of the respective decision-making countries, let alone influence the churches in North America.

the intellectual capital⁷⁸ in North America overwhelms⁷⁹ and shuts down all the other parts of the conversation within the global church. Either they're not aware of it, or they're aware of it but not responsibly addressing the issue at hand.

It gives me hope when I see current theologians paying attention to this missing important aspect of the Christian faith and bringing it into our theological discourse at the academic level. For instance, my former professor and now my colleague at AMBS, Jamie Pitts, has written a powerful essay on the long and complex history of the Holy Spirit.⁸⁰ In addition, the 2017 issue of *Anabaptist Witness*—which focuses on the theme “Following the Holy Spirit in Witness”⁸¹—and many more great articles and books are important steps in addressing the gap.

Shalom is truly the goal of evangelization. When we go out to evangelize, our aim is to bring people back into the right relationship with God.⁸² The church,

78 The intellectual capital has two parts: (1) ideas and (2) the number of published books. Where things are written, who has the ideas, who is doing the thinking and producing intellectual ideas—this is a significant part of the intellectual capital. But as important, if not more important, is the distributor—the printing presses, the website, the media, the universities and seminaries. All of these two parts combined constitute the intellectual capital. All of that is concentrated, especially in terms of Mennonite capital, in North America.

79 When international students go to study abroad in the US or Europe, they will find other brothers and sisters in Christ who have no clue what is happening in Tanzania, Kenya, or Indonesia. The ironic part is that those international students are already reading most books that come out of North America and Europe. Inevitably those students will enter into uncomfortable conversations; some North American/European students might say to them, for instance, “So, in Ethiopia you do not talk about this topic or that,” implying that the international students are not well-versed in particular areas of theology. These kinds of assumptions position international students in a defensive stance not only because of the language barrier but also because many of the theological nuances from their international home countries are absent from the larger conversation, making it hard to bring them into a discussion. So in addition to dealing with the language and cultural barriers, soon these students will find out they are also speaking with, taking courses from, and creating community with people who have never been exposed to their home country's theological discussions.

80 Jamie Pitts, “Historical Anabaptist-Mennonite Pneumatology: A Review of Confessional, Catechetical, and Devotional Materials, 1525-1963,” *Conrad Grebel Review* 36, no. 1 (Winter 2018): 24–53, https://www.academia.edu/36563037/Historical_Anabaptist_Mennonite_Pneumatology_A_Review_of_Confessional_Catechetical_and_Devotional_Materials_1525_1963.

81 Jamie Pitts, ed., *Anabaptist Witness Journal* 4, no. 1, “Following the Holy Spirit in Mission,” (April 2017), https://www.academia.edu/32810332/Anabaptist_Witness_4_1_Following_the_Holy_Spirit_in_Mission_.

82 Eshetu Abate, *Christian Theology in African Context: Essential Writings of Eshetu Abate*, ed. Samuel Yonas Deressa (Minneapolis, MN: Lutheran University Press, 2015), 76–77.

by focusing on prayer and evangelism, is helping people restore their relationship with God. However, shalom is a more comprehensive term, as it encompasses not only the relationship between humans and God but also people-to-people. Peace work and evangelism are not two separate things; they are inseparable and go hand in hand.⁸³ When you share the good news with people, you are speaking shalom into their life. In her work, Assefa analyzes “several dozen conversion narratives”⁸⁴ that showcase how a life transformed by Christ brings unspeakable joy and peace.⁸⁵

At the core of the MKC leadership team’s approach is the recognition that their power and guidance come from above, through the work of the Holy Spirit; this early realization led the team to prioritize prayer as a central component of their work. While they do have organizational strategies in place, these are seen as secondary to the importance of seeking guidance and wisdom from the Holy Spirit. This approach highlights the importance of relying on God in all situations, rather than simply relying on our own analytical skills and resources. Perhaps the most important lesson we can learn from the MKC leadership team is the importance of seeking God’s guidance earnestly in all aspects of our lives. By doing so, we can tap into a source of power and wisdom that is far beyond our limited human abilities.

For an evangelical, charismatic church like MKC, one quickly understands why there is such an ethos of urgency in sharing the gospel at this present moment. Simultaneously, the full extent to which the MKC has integrated the social ministry of the church can easily be missed if one is operating out of preconceived notions that the overall evangelical⁸⁶ ethos toward evangelism is one of neglecting social ministry. If anyone is curious about how Anabaptism is defined in the Ethiopian context, I highly recommend reading my essay in the Spring 2024 issue of *Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology*, “Commemorating Anabaptism’s 500 years,” where I talk about what the life of the Meserete Kristos Church community looks like, including its various programs that are deeply rooted in

83 Tizon, *Whole and Reconciled*, 162, 169.

84 Assefa, “Creating Identity in Opposition,” 541.

85 Assefa, “Creating Identity in Opposition.”

86 One thing that bothers me a lot about the word “evangelicals” is the dramatic difference in its assigned meaning in the US context versus the Ethiopian context. For instance, I have a strong and positive association with the word because I know and understand its meaning within the Ethiopian context. Since I moved to the United States and started reading other materials, however, I have learned that the word in the US context means so many things that I personally do not agree with.

Anabaptist values, the ecumenical dimension, and the significant role hybridity plays in the identity of the MKC.⁸⁷

Prayer, Evangelism, and Justice Entwined

With close to one million members,⁸⁸ MKC has experienced rapid growth while maintaining a vision that connects spiritual life and social engagement—without separating prayer from action—grounded in care and service. Reflecting on his visit to Ethiopia, John Roth reports:

I witnessed firsthand some of the reasons behind the church's astonishing growth: gifted leadership, dynamic worship, investment in evangelism, active youth programs, a creative prison ministry, innovative relief and development projects, an extensive curriculum for discipling new believers, and a thriving Bible college dedicated to training future leaders.⁸⁹

This case study on Meserete Kristos Church in Ethiopia gives the backdrop to this growth by providing insight into how prayer, evangelism, and activism reinforce one another when grounded in service and care for the marginalized. When social ministry and evangelism flow out of a spiritual foundation of prayer and reliance on the Holy Spirit, Christians do not feel or see prayer, evangelism, and justice as separate or in tension but rather as entwined with and reinforcing one another.

87 Henok T. Mekonin, "Anabaptism in Ethiopia: Six Markers of the Meserete Kristos Church," *Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology* 25, no. 1 (2024): 84–89.

88 This number includes children. Email from Desalegn Abebe Ejo, President of MKC, December 2023.

89 John D. Roth, "And When They Shall Ask," *Anabaptist World* (originally published in *The Mennonite*) April 1, 2013, <https://anabaptistworld.org/shall-ask/>.