Anabaptist Witness

A Global Anabaptist and Mennonite Dialogue on Key Issues Facing the Church in Mission

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Mission and Peace in Ethiopia

2. MISSION AND PEACE AT MESERETE KRISTOS CHURCH

BOOK REVIEWS

Editorial

Mennonite World Conference (MWC) in 2022 reported the baptized membership of the Meserete Kristos Church (MKC) in Ethiopia at around 515,000 adult members, making it the largest national body in the global MWC family. Much has been written in other places about the growth of the MKC since its origins through the efforts of local believers and North American Mennonite missionaries in the 1940s, the founding of its first congregation in 1951, the 1959 adoption of its name (Meserete Kristos Church, "Christ is the Foundation Church"), its underground life during the era of Communist rule in the 1980s, and its growth and ministry expansion in the early decades of the twenty-first century.

With its high ecumenical dimension and the significant role hybridity plays in the identity of the MKC, Anabaptist essentials have been tested and reshaped within the Ethiopian context.[1] Preparations are already underway in Ethiopia for MKC to host a global Mennonite World Conference Assembly in 2028. From January 11 to 17, 2024, Dr. Henk Stenvers, President of MWC, was in Ethiopia on behalf of Mennonite World Conference, and he joined MKC President Desalegn Abebe Ejo in signing a Memorandum of Understanding.

Meserete Kristos Church President Desalegn Abebe Ejo and Dr. Henk Stenvers, President of Mennonite World Conference, signing a Memorandum of Understanding in January 2024 (in preparation for MKC hosting MWC Assembly 2008 in Ethiopia). ***Photos by Liesa Unger.***

So, there is much to report about MKC and its present activities, but in this issue of *Anabaptist Witness*, we will focus specifically on the history and current practice of MKC in its mission and peacemaking efforts in the larger Ethiopian national context. Several things struck us as we prepared the collection of twelve essays and three book reviews appearing in this issue.

1 Henok Mekonin, "Anabaptism in Ethiopia: Six Markers of the Meserete Kristos Church," *Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology* 25, no. 1 (March 19, 2024): 84–89.

Christian origins in Ethiopia. First, almost all of the authors writing here have challenged the oft-held assumption that Europeans brought Christianity to Ethiopia. Most of the articles refer to the fact that Mennonite missionaries, arriving in the 1940s, were not the first to introduce Christianity to Ethiopia. Some authors, in fact, attribute the presence of Christianity in the nation to a time predating the gospel's arrival in northern Europe. This truth might create a "wow" moment for some *Anabaptist Witness* readers, but for the authors in this volume and in the country of Ethiopia more generally, this is simply a well-established fact that everyone knows and recognizes.

The long relational history between church and state in Ethiopia. Secondly, *Anabaptist Witness* readers will learn of the centuries-old marriage arrangement between the Ethiopian state and the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC). This occurred because Christianity entered Ethiopia in a top-down manner with the conversion to Christianity of fourth-century Emperor Ezana, who, in turn, imposed the religion on the entire Ethiopian population.[2] Repeatedly in this issue, reference is made to "the close relationship between the King's palace ideology and governance and the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC) polity and theology" and how this "can be compared to the way that two hands fit perfectly together in gloves."[3] When Socialist ideology (1974–1991), however, began to infiltrate the rich religious and cultural history of Ethiopia, the church and state were, for the first time, divorced officially and the Solomonic Dynasty of Ethiopian Christendom came to an end.

Sources referenced in this volume. In the third place, we were curious to see which sources were referenced by the authors in this collection. To our surprise, we noticed Ethiopian theological materials being used. There is a trend among Ethiopian writers to rely heavily on theological reflections from the West and to integrate these views into the Ethiopian context. The essays found here are not totally free of that influence. But it is encouraging to see writers in this issue reverse the usual impulse by frequently citing the reflections of Ethiopian authors and theologians. Not only are the Ethiopian contributors in this collection engaging in theological reflection in their work, they are doing so by being dependent on other Ethiopian theologians who have articulated theological reflection before them. This is a remarkable and encouraging development and will assist our brothers and sisters in the West to respond to East African professor John S. Mbiti's concern in his address to Western colleagues and theologians:

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2 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/.

3 Mekonin, "A Sense of Pride."

> We have eaten with you your theology. Are you prepared to eat with us our theology? . . . The question is, do you know us theologically? Would you like to know us theologically? Can you know us theologically? And how can there be true theological reciprocity and mutuality, if only one side knows the other fairly well, while the other side either does not know or does not want to know the first side?[4]

The rigorous work and theological reflections during the second and third centuries in North Africa by church fathers such as Tertullian, Origen, Clement of Alexandria, Augustine, and others have been accepted by both Western and Eastern Christianity as integral elements of the global Christian heritage. Our prayer and hope are that the articles found here, written by African theologians, can be as important and definitive as ones of the second-century era.

Statistics and ecclesial understandings. The Mennonite World Conference in its 2022 statistics lists MKC membership at around 515,000 members. But some authors here reference as many as 1,000,000 members in the MKC. They include in these numbers children and unbaptized candidates for membership in their statistics. This raises an interesting question about how one understands the extended church family, particularly in light of Anabaptism's historic emphasis on baptism as central to church membership.

Culturally shaped, contextual terminology. English-language terms hold different meanings in different parts of the world. Readers of this issue of *Anabaptist Witness* may be surprised by certain terms that they would not use or would use differently in their own cultural setting. Most member churches of Mennonite World Conference, for example, consider themselves to be in the "evangelical" stream of ecclesial bodies—including Ethiopia's Meserete Kristos Church[5]—and may even include the term "evangelical" in the title of their denomination. Only a handful of MWC churches are members of the ecumenically minded World Council of Churches (WCC), while many associate with the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA). But readers should not assume that "evangelical" means the same thing everywhere. The Trump era of presidential politics in the United States has heightened the need to be extra sensitive not only to word usage and meaning but also to the fact that the local, contextualized bubble of conversations about and attitudes toward certain terms is not necessarily shared by other members of our global faith family who are living and ministering in very different cultural settings.

A good discipline for readers here might be to make a list of surprising or perceived "problematic" terms or concepts encountered in these articles and then

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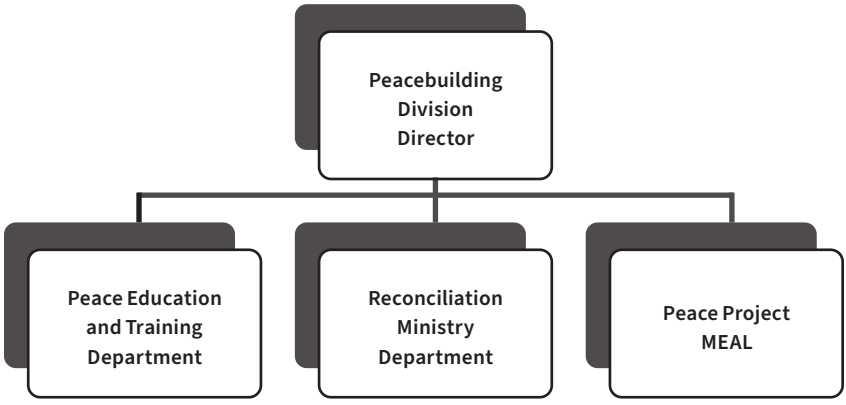
4 John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Garden City, NY : Anchor, 1970), http://archive.org/details/africanreligions00john.

5 Mekonin, "Anabaptism in Ethiopia," 89.

follow up by inquiring of one or another Ethiopian writer or friend what is the use or meaning of that term in their particular sociocultural and historical context.

Western missionary roles and local Ethiopian initiatives. The lives and ministries of Mennonite missionaries are referenced in these articles. Special attention is given to the ways in which they conducted themselves among Ethiopians and the legacy they left behind, impacting many local Meserete Kristos leaders. We are pleased to see this credit given, all the while noting that the most significant church growth occurred when the Ethiopian leadership team took over and the missionaries left the country. In their co-authored reflection, Desalegn Abebe Ejo and Kebede Bekere explain the challenges the church has faced and how the MKC has overcome these obstacles to sustain the growth of the church through "Agenda 28:19"—the current missional initiative among Meserete Kristos churches.[6]

Holding mission and peace together in holistic ways. Several case studies in this collection describe how MKC conducts its various ministries in holistic ways, engaging particular communities in an effort to support impressive peacebuilding and reconciliation initiatives. These are powerful and moving stories, filled with hope in the midst of significant conflict. Meserete Kristos Church is one of only two evangelical church denominations in Ethiopia with a peacebuilding department designed to promote peace, reconciliation, and healing among communities in the country. The MKC Peacebuilding Division has the following organogram:[7]



Meserete Kristos Church in the broader Ethiopian socioeconomic-political context. We considered including in this editorial more background information

6 Henok T. Mekonin, "East African Mennonites Hold Summit," *Anabaptist World* (blog), April 9, 2024, https://anabaptistworld.org/east-african-mennonites-hold-summit/.

7 "MEAL" in Project MEAL stands for Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability, and Learning.

about the broader national context in which MKC finds itself. This would be a serious challenge, however, since there is no such thing as neutral history. The existing conflicts on the ground are very complex, culturally shaped, and historically rooted. In the end, each author will provide here the context of their own choosing, setting forth the overall framework of the argument they wish to develop in their article. A few brief words, however, about the Ethiopian context for non-Ethiopian readers, may be helpful for situating the following articles in their demographic, historical, and geographical setting:

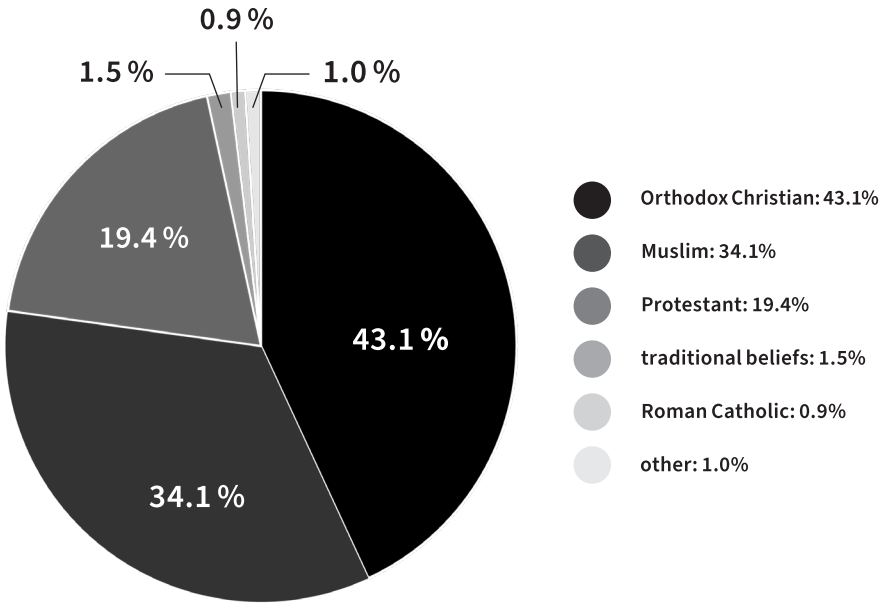
1. ***Population and ethnic identities.*** The Ethiopian population in 2022 is believed to be more than 120 million, with a majority being youth. The nation is home to various ethnic groups, multiple languages, and hundreds of dialects.

2. ***Politics.*** Beginning in 1991, Ethiopia has been using a parliamentary system. Ethiopians do not directly elect their prime minister. Instead, different parties run for election, and Ethiopians elect the party they prefer. Once a party wins the election, that party then chooses the prime minister of Ethiopia. In other words, the party with the greatest representation in the legislative parliament forms the government, and its leader becomes the prime minister. The trend for decades has been that when a party is formed to run for an office of the central government, the members of that party are from one ethnic group, with all of the challenges that this implies. Ethiopia has gone through various styles of leadership, from a feudal theocratic form of governance to socialism (1974–1987) and The Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (1988 to 2019), formed by the Tigrayan people of northern Ethiopia, advocating for "Ethnic Federalism."

   Ethnic federalism is the system of government introduced to Ethiopia in 1991 with the hope of resolving the country's diverse ethnic realities. This system allows each ethnic group to exercise self-rule in its respective region, to preserve its language and cultural identity, to grant autonomy with authority over constitution and policy-making, and to decide on a working language for their region. Ethnic federalism divided the country into regional states based largely on ethnic and linguistic lines. In reality, however, it has been criticized for politicizing ethnic identity and increasing conflicts between groups.[8]

8 Namhla Thando Matshanda, "Ethiopian Federalism Has Fuelled Tensions about Clan Histories," Africa at LSE (blog), June 28, 2023, https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/africaatlse/2023/06/28/ethiopian-federalism-has-fuelled-tensions-about-clan-histories/.

Map of Ethiopia showing the country's twelve regional states and two independently chartered cities (Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa).



Religious Affiliation in Ethiopia (2012): Meserete Kristos Church—the Ethiopian Mennonite church—is considered part of the Protestant tradition. (Reprinted from Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., with permission.)

3. ***Religion.*** Ethiopia is also home to various religious faiths, predominantly the Ethiopian Orthodox Church—called "Tewahedo" in Ethiopia—which accounts for 43.1 percent of the country's population, and Islam, which comprises 34.1 percent of the country.[9] Almost 20 percent of the Ethiopian population is Protestant, including the Meserete Kristos Church.

4. ***Mennonite arrival and presence in Ethiopia.*** Mennonite missionaries began arriving in Ethiopia during the reign of the country's last king—Emperor Haile Selassie I (1930–1974)—in the centuries-long monarchical system. After World War II, Emperor Selassie sought to modernize Ethiopia. It was during this time that Mennonites were granted permission to enter the country and assist the emperor in his efforts to modernize. Being relief workers and trained personnel in different sectors was key to the Mennonites gaining access to the country.[10] The imperial government was more accepting of the mission—despite its desires to evangelize—due to the alignment of the Mennonite approach with the development aspect of the imperial agenda.[11]

5. ***Relevance to current events in 2024.*** It is important to note that the matters addressed in this issue of the *Anabaptist Witness* journal are not simply scholarly or theoretical ones. At the very moment when we were assembling the various articles of this issue on peacemaking initiatives in Ethiopia, an assassination was tragically carried out against a member closely affiliated with the Meserete Kristos Church community. This struck close to home and reminded us of the relevancy of this topic for the biblical grounding of peacemaking, for the recounting of historical precedents in the life of the church, and for contemporary responses to current realities in the Ethiopian context.

Editors' invitation and request. As we have worked on this issue of *Anabaptist Witness*, our hope and vision has been that this collection of essays and book reviews would contribute to the sharing of gifts for mutual growth among

9 *Encyclopædia Britannica*, "Ethiopia: Ethnic Groups and Languages," Britannica Academic (blog), accessed April 20, 2024, https://www.britannica.com/place/Ethiopia/Soils.

10 Alemu Checole, "Mennonite Churches in Eastern Africa," in *Anabaptist Songs in African Hearts: A Global Mennonite History*, ed. John Lapp (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2006), 207.

11 Mekonin, "A Sense of Pride and Suspicion."

Anabaptist/Mennonite churches across the globe.[12] We would also be very happy to see this as one of the resources to which people turn as global Anabaptist communities prepare to attend the 2028 Mennonite World Conference Assembly in Ethiopia as part of the 500th commemoration of the origins of the Anabaptist movement. The friendly request we have for the English-speaking *Anabaptist Witness* readers—especially to sisters and brothers in North American and European Mennonite churches—is to set aside some of your English-language expectations for scholarly articles of this nature. Writing scholarly material in English as a second, third, or even fourth language presents challenges for many members of the global Anabaptist family. We have used editorial and peer-review feedback to work with contributors to the journal, but we also intentionally edited the articles with a lighter touch so that readers can be exposed to the writing styles of theologians, teachers, pastors, and academicians in other parts of the world, in this case Ethiopians.

There is so much opportunity for learning and exchange between people, churches, and institutions located in different global contexts if we open up some space to be exposed to and learn what God has been doing beyond our usual relational and conversation circles. In doing so, not only will Anabaptist churches in Ethiopia, Tanzania, Kenya, India, and Indonesia learn what God has been up to far from their home settings, but Mennonite churches in the West will also learn about God's actions through the church in Ethiopia, India, Indonesia, and beyond. All of us will be strengthened in our faith if we intentionally seek out the voices of sisters and brothers living out their faith in contexts different from our own.

The contributors in this issue have dared to write scholarly articles in English—a language far from the language of their daily use—because they wished to share with *Anabaptist Witness* readers theological reflections of what God is doing in their own context of life and ministry. We are inviting English-speaking readers of the journal to develop new reading skills in order to "hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches" (Rev 2:7).

The organization of this journal Issue. The articles in this issue are organized in two large sections. The first focuses on mission and peace efforts in the broader context of the Ethiopian nation through a biblical reflection (Yimenu Adimass Belay), an application of the Christus Victor narrative within the Ethiopian setting (Geleta Tesfaye Berisso), and a survey of publications promoting

12 Henok T. Mekonin and Rachel Miller Jacobs, "The Postcolonial Mindset and Mutual Gift Sharing: Nurturing Genuine Global Partnerships in the Postcolonial Church," *Anabaptist World* (blog), May 17, 2023, https://anabaptistworld.org/the-postcolonial-mindset-and-mutual-gift-sharing-nurturing-genuine-global-partnerships-in-the-postcolonial-church/.

interfaith conversations between Ethiopian Orthodox and Evangelical Christians (Abenezer S. Dejene).

The second section focuses more specifically on Meserete Kristos Church history and perspectives and is subdivided into two parts: (1) The first subsection is entitled "Missionary Influences and Voices," and is represented by two articles authored respectively by Ruth Haile Gelane and Carl E. Hansen, and an article co-authored by Desalegn Abebe Ejo and Kebede Bekere. (2) The second subsection focuses more specifically on MKC peace and mission efforts in the fields of trauma healing (Kebede Bekere and Mekonnen Gemeda), breaking cycles of "Black Blood" (Amdetsion Sisha), creating safe spaces (Rosemary Shenk), witnessing as a peacemaking "cruciform" community during the revolutionary era (Brent Kipfer), developing a peacemaking culture (Mekonnen Gemeda), and articulating a holistic approach to peacemaking where prayer, evangelism, and justice are intertwined (Henok T. Mekonin).

Three book reviews on various Ethiopian topics round out this issue, featuring a publication on one family's personal odyssey in Ethiopia—Carl E. Hansen (author), Joel Horst Nofziger (reviewer); a study on interchurch conversations between Ethiopian Orthodox and evangelical churches—Daniel Seblewengel (author), Nebeyou A. Terefe (reviewer); and a volume on the painters, patrons, and purveyors of Ethiopian Church art—Raymond Silverman and Neal Sobania (authors), James R. Krabill (reviewer).

—Henok T. Mekonin (Guest Editor)

—James R. Krabill (Interim Managing Editor)

MISSION AND PEACE IN ETHIOPIA

General Reflections

Lessons on the Need for Peacemaking for Mission in Ethiopia from Matthew 5:9 and 2 Corinthians 5:17–21

Yimenu Adimass Belay

> Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. (Matt 5:9)
>
> So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; look, new things have come into being! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ: be reconciled to God. For our sake God made the one who knew no sin to be sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Cor 5:17–21)

For mission to be successful in Ethiopia, peacemaking must be prioritized. Conflicts raging in various parts of the country demonstrate that the need for peace is paramount. This need becomes even more significant when we realize that peace is both the means and the outcome of mission.

Yimenu Adimass Belay (PhD candidate at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, Netherlands) teaches Hermeneutics and New Testament-related courses at Meserete Kristos Seminary, Ethiopia. He also serves as dean for undergraduate studies at the seminary. His major publications include Scripture and Context in Conversation: The Ethiopian Andəmta Interprerative Tradition *(Conspectus, South African Theological Seminary, 2022) and "Paul's View of the Law in Romans and the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church's (EOTC) Use of the Law as 'həgga ləbbunā,' 'həgga Orit' and 'həgga wangle,'"* Stellenbosch Theological Journal *6, no. 4 (2021). Yimenu also serves in the Meserete Kristos Church of Ethiopia in the local church as the member of leadership. In addition, he serves as the member of educational committee at the regional and head office level of the Meserete Kristos Church. He is also a member at the national level of the Meserete Kristos Church theological commission.*

The Bible demonstrates the concept of peacemaking in various ways through a significant number of biblical texts. This essay will focus on just two of those texts as primary sources—Matthew 5:9 and 2 Corinthians 5:17–21—because the discourse by Jesus Christ and Paul in these passages seems to provide a clear indication of how the New Testament teaches about the significant relationship between peacemaking and mission in the Christian community in a way that can be applicable in Ethiopia.

In Matthew 5:9, Jesus says, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God." This verse reminds us that as Christians we are called to be peacemakers in the world. When it comes to mission work in Ethiopia, this means striving to build bridges of understanding and promoting peace between different groups of people by following the example of Jesus and working toward peace and justice to better reflect God's love and bring hope to those in need.

Second Corinthians 5:17–21 talks about how we are new creations in Christ, and that God has entrusted us with the ministry of reconciliation. We are a new creation called to leave behind our old ways and embrace a new life in Christ that can be manifested by demonstrating a transformed way of living. In addition, we are ambassadors of Christ and have been entrusted with the message of reconciliation focused on bringing people closer to God and helping them experience his love, mercy, and grace. Further, we are called to be reconcilers ourselves: we have been given the ministry of reconciliation characterized by efforts to build bridges between people and God, as well as between different communities and groups. Finally, we are empowered by the Holy Spirit to fulfill our mission. Overall, the lessons from 2 Corinthians 5:17–21 remind us that our mission in Ethiopia should be focused on bringing people closer to God—that building bridges between different groups can be both the means and the output of the mission.

Therefore, this essay argues that the lessons in these two scripture texts—Matthew 5:9 and 2 Corinthians 5:17–21—show us that those involved in mission work in Ethiopia must understand the need for peacemaking and reconciliation because the message of the gospel can be more effectively communicated and received when peace and reconciliation are promoted. As peacemakers, we can help break down barriers and bring people together, creating a more unified and peaceful society to be an alternative community through the mission work. And, in turn, this can also be a means for effective mission ministry.

This essay also delves into practical ways in which Christians can engage in peacemaking efforts. Toward this end, the paper is organized into three parts:

1. A literature review on the relation between peacemaking and mission in general and, in particular, on Matthew 5:9 and 2 Corinthians 5:17–21 to show the academic gap that this paper tries to fill.
2. An exegetical analysis of Matthew 5:9 and 2 Corinthians 5:17–21 focused on the historical and literary context of the time to show how

peacemaking and mission can be tied together in these specific biblical texts.

3. The practical application of peacemaking and mission in Ethiopia. This paper uses critical discourse analysis because this method focuses on the communication and use of the text among different communities.[1]

1. Literature Review

The relationship between peacemaking and mission is not well researched in the broader academic world, nor, in particular, in the Ethiopian context where the presence of conflict is ubiquitous and the need for mission work is paramount. With the aim of showing the history of research in this area, I will focus on the important issues related to peacemaking and its place in the mission of the church. In addition, I will review diverse interpretations of Matthew 5:9 and 2 Corinthians 5:17–21 to establish how the relation between peacemaking and mission is tied together in the ministry of the New Testament. Finally, I will review a history of research in the Ethiopian context about the role of peacemaking in mission in order to show the gap the current paper aims to fill.

Matthew's presentation of peacemaking in chapter 5, verse 9 is the seventh beatitude and is demonstrated as an important manifestation of those who have special relationships with God. This beatitude is controversial, however, because it is not clear whether it addresses a theological, historical, or ethical issue.[2] Hans Dieter Betz and Adela Yarbro Collins have pointed out that Matthean communication in this verse indicates that the sons of God following his example are called to make peace with everyone because God is the peacemaker who invites people to come to his relationship.[3] In addition, these scholars argue, Jesus interpreted the whole of the Torah through the lens of God as peacemaker, thus affirming that his followers should imitate God the Father in ethical matters.[4]

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1 Norman Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language*, 2nd ed., [Nachdr.] (London: Routledge, 2013), 4; Norman Fairclough, *Analysing Discourse: Textual Analysis for Social Research* (London; New York: Routledge, 2003), 16; Norman Fairclough, *Media Discourse*, repr. (London: Bloomsbury, 2011), 18–19. Note that I do not indulge in analyzing the critical discourse method itself.

2 Hans Dieter Betz and Adela Yarbro Collins, *The Sermon on the Mount: A Commentary on the Sermon on the Mount, Including the Sermon on the Plain Matthew 5:3 to 7:27 and Luke 6:20–49*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 137.

3 Betz and Collins, *Sermon on the Mount*, 141.

4 Betz and Collins, *Sermon on the Mount*, 141.

Choosing a different focus, Alfred Plummer argues that Jesus as the Messiah has come as Prince of Peace to establish the kingdom of peace, and therefore all peacemakers are agents that spread his rule and sovereignty to those who are in need.[5] Plummer differs from the above scholars by connecting the activity of peacemaking with the activity of mission. Practically, this means proclaiming the Messiah as the Prince of Peace, indicating that peacemaking begins at home in the human heart, thereby addressing the whole family of God.[6]

Lisa Sowle Cahill argues that peacemaking is an important ingredient in the salvation of humanity because the members in a community are united by love of God as well as love for neighborhoods, manifested by forgiveness, reconciliation and hospitality.[7] Cahill further argues that "church members should confine their peacemaking activities to that sphere and stay away from the sphere of violence."[8] Peacemaking, she points out, is a Christian activity that naturally follows conversation and enables a social coexistence and cooperation, avoiding enmity between persons and within communities.[9] In this interpretation, the issue of peacemaking is connected with the activity of social cohesion.

Although the above three scholars interpret Matthew 5:9 in different ways, each of their views on the relation of peace and mission support our exegetical analysis of the text in connecting peacemaking with the mission activity of the church at large and, in particular, in the Ethiopian context where we hear of conflict throughout the country. In this paper, I argue that Christian peacemaking is strongly tied to Christian mission because peace can be both the means of gospel ministry and the result of gospel ministry. This is because peace paves the way for mission, and mission in turn can bring peace.

The interpretation of 2 Corinthians 5:17–21 is also important because, as this text states, Christians have been entrusted with the message of reconciliation learned from God, who reconciles people through Jesus Christ. However, the text is not uniformly interpreted in the same way. In addition, scholars in general have given great emphasis to reconciliation between humanity and God and have tended not to strongly tie together peacemaking and mission, thereby potentially weakening the activity of peacemaking.[10]

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5 Alfred Plummer, *Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to S. Matthew* (Piscataway: Gorgias, 2010), 68.

6 Plummer, *Matthew*, 69.

7 Lisa Sowle Cahill, *Blessed Are the Peacemakers: Pacifism, Just War, and Peacebuilding* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2019), 4.

8 Cahill, *Blessed Are the Peacemakers*, 23.

9 Cahill, *Blessed Are the Peacemakers*, 63.

10 R. Kent Hughes, *2 Corinthians: Power in Weakness* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006), 124–25.

For instance, Craig S. Keener understands the passage as a reconciliation of humanity with God, intending to indicate that the apostles have the authority and the ministry of reconciliation of humanity with God.[11] Keener further argues that the ministry of reconciliation is the new covenant's life-giving ministry manifested through the making of peace among enemies, and that Paul uses the term reconciliation as bringing humanity into a relationship with God.[12] R. Kent Hughes argues that Paul's usage in the context indicates God's activity of reconciling humanity with himself through Jesus Christ and that this ministry has been given to the Christian community to proclaim the good news that God has accomplished the work of reconciliation through the death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. His emphasis is on reconciliation through the gospel as the activity of restoring relationship with God rather than reconciling with oneself and with others. In doing this, he emphasizes that the mission of the gospel is the activity of bringing reconciliation between humanity and God.

In addition to the lack of scholarly works tying peacebuilding and mission together, there is no academic work that considers the current Ethiopian context, where conflict exists in almost every part of the country, devastating the lives and the social fabric of the Ethiopian community.

2. Biblical Explanation of Integrating Peace and Mission

This essay envisions filling the above academic gaps by employing an exegetical analysis of the Matthew 5:9 and 2 Corinthians 5:17–21 texts. These passages, beyond their textual significance, can clearly show (1) the tradition of Jesus in terms of peacebuilding and the mission of the gospel and (2) Paul's use of reconciliation both with God and humanity as part of the gospel ministry. Through this analysis, this paper derives a lesson for the mission activity of the Ethiopian church by tying the activity of peacebuilding and mission together. The church of Ethiopia needs peacebuilding and the gospel because peacebuilding is the means for spreading the gospel, and, on the other side of the coin, gospel preaching can bring peacebuilding, reconciling humanity with God and bringing reconciliation of people with people and community with community.

A. Exegetical Analysis of Matthew 5:9 in Context

In this section, I analyze Matthew 5:9 by addressing three important issues: (1) exploring the context and the background of the text to better understand the issue; (2) showing the meaning of the phrase "blessed are the peacemakers" to draw the lesson of what contemporary Ethiopians shall do; and (3) pointing

11 Craig S. Keener, *1–2 Corinthians: New Cambridge Bible Commentary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 185.

12 Keener, *1–2 Corinthians*, 186.

out some important ways that peacemaking can be connected to the current situation in Ethiopia.

1. Context and Background

Knowing the context and the background of Matthew 5:9 is important for understanding the relationship between peacebuilding and the gospel. Therefore, I will sketch both the literary context and the historical context (background of the text) to better understand the issue at hand.

The presence of five discourses in the Gospel of Matthew is argued by different scholars, and David R. Bauer has pointed out these five discourses, found in chapters 5—7, 10, 13, 18, and 23—25.[13] Robert H. Gundry has also pointed out the presence of the above discourses and draws a similarity with the five books of Moses.[14] Since these discourses are directed at the Jewish community, Matthew seems to use a contextual approach, presenting Jesus in the form of Moses. Our focus here is on the first discourse, Matthew 5—7, which is traditionally called the Sermon on the Mount and contains the Lord's Prayer, the Beatitudes, and the central tenets of Christian discipleship. The Sermon on the Mount contains many teachings, especially the norm of the kingdom demonstrated in different ways by the teaching of Jesus about love, humility, and forgiveness, among others.[15] The text teaches on issues such as divorce, lust, and worldliness; issues about persecution; further instruction on how to pray; and words about false prophets.

In Matthew 5:9, Jesus focuses on the seventh beatitude, saying, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God." Within this literary context, three important background contexts need to be considered—biblical, political, and religious:

1. *Biblically*, 5:9 is part of the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus teaches about how to live a righteous life, using the Old Testament as reference with a reinterpretation of the law of God in the forthcoming verses, especially 5:17–48. In this particular verse, Jesus emphasizes the importance of being a peacemaker—someone who works to resolve conflict and promote harmony. This verse speaks to the concept of shalom, a Hebrew word that means peace, harmony, and wholeness.
2. *Politically*, this verse can be interpreted as a call for leaders to prioritize peace in their context as against the way of peace in the Greco-Roman

13 David R. Bauer, *The Structure of Matthew's Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Sheffield: Almond, 1989).

14 Robert Horton Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art*, repr. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1983).

15 Carl G. Vaught, *The Sermon on the Mount: A Theological Investigation*, rev. ed. (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2001).

world. It can also be seen as a reminder to individuals to strive for peace in their relationships and communities.

3. *Religiously*, in the Jewish tradition, shalom is a state of being that encompasses physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being. In the Christian tradition, peace is seen as a gift from God that comes through faith and obedience to his will. There might be something in common with the Jewish and Christian tradition because the teaching of Jesus emerged from the Jewish context.

2. The Meaning of "Blessed Are the Peacemakers"

To understand what Jesus meant when he said "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God," it's important to look at the context in which it was spoken. In the preceding verses, Jesus is speaking about the need for mercy, purity of heart, and meekness. He then goes on to say that those who hunger and thirst for righteousness will be filled and those who show mercy will receive mercy. When Jesus says "Blessed are the peacemakers," he is referring to those who work to bring about peace between individuals and communities. This involves not only resolving conflicts but also working to prevent them from occurring in the first place. Jesus then goes on to say that those who are peacemakers will be called "children of God." This is significant because it shows that peacemaking is a characteristic of those who belong to God's family. It also suggests that those who are peacemakers have a special relationship with God and are called to reflect his nature in the world.

The broader context of Matthew's Gospel suggests that verse 5:9 pertains to peace between persons and communities and not simply between persons and God. For example, in the Sermon on the Mount itself, one might highlight 5:9 in the context of 5:23–24 because there the call for reconciliation with a brother or sister attests to the strong need for reconciliation before offering a gift in front of God. The teaching of Jesus about non-retaliation and the love of enemies in 5:38–48 is also a clear call for peace between people and people. Furthermore, the teaching on the Lord's Prayer in 6:9–15 indicates the importance of reconciliation with people where forgiveness from God and between humans are part of the same process.

Beyond the Sermon on the Mount, in 18:15–20, Matthew also includes the process of reconciliation between members of the community. This is further illustrated by the parable of the unforgiving servant in 18:21–35, which hearkens back to the concept of forgiveness in the Lord's prayer and clearly illustrates the relationship between vertical and horizontal forgiveness—that God's forgiveness of us is the basis for our forgiveness of others.

Finally, the commission to "make disciples of all nations" (28:16–20) includes baptizing and "teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded

you"—an "everything" that includes what Jesus taught his disciples earlier in the Gospel, in chapters 5—7, 18, and elsewhere! In this light, the call to "peacemaking" (5:9) is one with the call to "evangelism" (28:19), or "making disciples."

In general, the word peacemaker in Matthew 5:9 refers to someone who actively promotes peace, not just someone who avoids conflict. This can be understood in the immediate context of the Sermon on the Mount and the broader context of the Gospel of Matthew. Being a peacemaker means reconciling people who are estranged, promoting justice and fairness, and seeking to resolve disputes peacefully. Jesus is calling on his followers to be active agents of peace in the world, to work toward resolving conflicts and promoting understanding between people.

B. Exegetical Analysis of 2 Corinthians 5:17–21 in Context

The main aim of this section is to analyze the concept of the ministry of reconciliation communicated by the apostle Paul in the context of 2 Corinthians 5:17–21. The first section below focuses on articulating the context and the background of the text in a brief and precise way to better understand the issue we are going to analyze. The second section focuses on the concept of the ministry of reconciliation. Third, as we have articulated in the above, I will connect the relationship of peacemaking with the mission activity of the church of Ethiopia, considering the current situation of the country.

1. Context and Background of 2 Corinthians 5:17–21

Second Corinthians 5:17–21 was written within the context of the broader Pauline theology of reconciling humanity with God and within humanity (Eph 2:14–15). The importance of peace to Paul is well articulated by Edward M. Keazirian, who points out that "peace is not something one does, but a state one seeks to establish (Rom 12:18; cf. Col 1:20) or, having established it, a condition one seeks either to preserve or to recover should it may (sic) be lost (2 Cor 13:11; 1 Thess 5:13)."[16] In addition to this, he argues that even though it is common to include the wish of peace at the opening of the Greco-Roman world letter, Paul is using the Christian element indicating that peace emanates from God framing God's reconciling work through Jesus Christ, and it is not originating simply from Paul but from his understanding of the Old Testament.[17]

In general, Paul in his letters indicated that peace and peacemaking are important elements. Paul used the concept of peacemaking extensively in his letters to the early Christian communities. He emphasized the importance of unity and harmony among believers and urged them to resolve conflicts and

16 Edward M. Keazirian, *Peace and Peacemaking in Paul and the Greco-Roman World*, Studies in Biblical Literature, Vol. 145 (New York: Peter Lang, 2013), 85.

17 Keazirian, *Peace and Peacemaking in Paul*, 88.

disagreements peacefully. Paul believed that peacemaking was crucial for maintaining a strong and healthy community of believers and emphasized the need for forgiveness, reconciliation, and love in his writings. He also stressed the role of Jesus Christ as the ultimate peacemaker and encouraged his followers to emulate Jesus's example in their interactions with one another.

2. The Ministry of Reconciliation

In 2 Corinthians 5:17–21, the ministry of reconciliation refers to the work of bringing people back into a right relationship with God. This ministry is carried out by those who have been reconciled to God through faith in Jesus Christ and who then share the message of reconciliation with others. The passage explains that God has made it possible for us to be reconciled to him through Christ and that we are called to be ambassadors of this message to others. As we share the message of reconciliation with others, we are inviting them to experience the same forgiveness, restoration, and new life that we have received through faith in Christ.

Paul attests that his ministry of reconciliation is mainly bringing people into relation to God through the preaching of the gospel. However, this preaching also brings people-to-people reconciliation and society-to-society reconciliation. Keener has pointed out that the opening of 2 Corinthians 5:17 serves as an opening in Paul's argument indicating the newness that rejects the "appearance in favor of heart (5:12); therefore, he was not interested in a fleshly perspective on Christ or Christians (5:16), but the hidden, eschatological reality of resurrection life that had begun in Christ's resurrection."[18] That Christ's resurrection is the foundation for the ministry of reconciliation can be applied to reconcile humanity with God and humanity with itself. Keener is correct on his argument that reconciliation with God can summarize the message of the ambassadors' entry to the world for the activity of reconciliation (5:19–20).[19]

As verse 19 indicates, the ministry of reconciliation is that "in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them." This does not limit the vertical dimension of reconciliation; the horizontal aspect of reconciliation is also there because reconciliation with God enables humanity to be reconciled with self.[20] It seems clear that verse 19 highlights a powerful truth about the ministry of reconciliation—it involves not only reconciling with God but also with oneself and others. The vertical dimension of reconciliation frees humanity from the burden of their sins and allows them to find inner peace. But the horizontal dimension is equally important because it reminds us of the interconnectedness of our relationships and the importance of seeking reconciliation in all aspects of our lives. It encourages us to embrace the ministry of

18 Keener, *1–2 Corinthians*, 185.

19 Keener, *1–2 Corinthians*, 186.

20 Hughes, *2 Corinthians*, 124.

reconciliation and work toward healing our relationships with God, ourselves, and others.

The interpretation of 2 Corinthians 5:17–21 is best understood in the context of Paul's strained relationship with the Corinthian church. In this letter, when Paul urges the Corinthians to "be reconciled to God," he is not only calling for a vertical relationship with God but also speaking out of his own desire to be reconciled with the Corinthian church. We can see this in how Paul's experience of being reconciled to God through Christ on the Damascus Road has motivated him to pursue reconciliation with all.

Along with 2 Corinthians 5:17–21, Ephesians 2:11–22 is also considered a key text pointing to Paul's view of reconciliation and its contribution to mission. It's worth noting that there may be many other relevant texts on this topic.

3. Integrating Peace and Mission Work in Ethiopia

Ethiopians currently need peace because of conflict in different parts of the country. Between 2020 and 2022, Ethiopia engaged in a devastating conflict with militants from the Tigray region, with consequences that tore apart the social fabric of a society that had lived peaceably together for decades.[21] Further conflict in 2023 between the Ethiopian National Defense Force and the Amhara Fano resulted in a significant loss of lives.[22] The continued conflict in the Oromia region is a clear indication of prevalent conflicts in Ethiopia.

Today, these conflicts are affecting the whole country. From the Christian point of view, this has hindered the mission of the church because now ministers do not go from place to place. The need for peacemaking is clear, where mediation between the conflicting bodies takes place, transforming one-sided attitudes.

The disciples of Jesus have been advised to be peacemakers, which then enables them to identify themselves with God. Peacemaking is very important because it paves the way for mission, creating a peaceful community. On the other hand, the activity of mission is also the means for peace because the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ is reconciliation, which is peace with God and peace with people.

The ministry of reconciliation in the Ethiopian context has a two-fold importance: (1) first is the urgent need for peaceful resolution of devastating conflicts—people to people and citizens with the state; (2) the second is to help people understand that absence of war does not show the existence of peace; the former understanding minimizes the concept of peace that goes beyond the absence of war.

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21 "Conflict in Ethiopia," Global Conflict Tracker, December 19, 2023, https://cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/conflict-ethiopia.

22 "Conflict in Ethiopia."

Megersa Tolera Abdi points out the need for "fostering coexistence between the different groups [in Ethiopia] . . . as a crucial step and even a precondition for the continuation of the process of improving inter-group relations leading to reconciliation."[23] He also acknowledges the problem of identifying peace education and that educating for peace has a great impact on bringing peace and reconciliation in Ethiopia as the nation is passing through various conflicts and challenges. In the midst of this situation, it is difficult to fulfill the mission of Jesus without peacebuilding. Peacebuilding in Ethiopia needs to be considered a crucial element of every Christian community in order to transform the situation of our beloved historical country. The centrality of the biblical norm of peace, reconciliation, and forgiveness might be the priority in the current situation in Ethiopia.

C. Lessons Learned from Matthew 5:9 and 2 Corinthians 5:17–21

This section focuses on important lessons that we can draw from Matthew 5:9 and 2 Corinthians 5:17–21. First is to understand the importance of peacemaking in mission work in general and in the Ethiopian context in particular. Second is the importance of identifying the biblical basis for peacemaking that is derived from the above analysis of the texts. Finally, this section wraps up by attesting to the practical applications for the activity of mission work in Ethiopia.

1. Importance of Peacemaking in Mission Work

The importance of peacemaking within the mission activity of the church can be conceptualized via three important issues. First, mission work often takes place in areas with high levels of conflict. Given the lack of peace in Ethiopia, this point is clearly applicable within the Ethiopian context. The MKC is working to bring peace in all of the areas where there is conflict in the country. The church's peace department, for instance, is working to bring peace to the Shewa of the Amhara region. As a result, the community has testified about how the church is working among them. And the prison ministry department of MKC is working diligently to address the root cause of conflict and engage with those who are imprisoned because devastating conflicts. This approach has led to many individuals coming to Christ, and, as a result, churches have been planted through the department's work for peace and prison ministry.

Secondly, the Meserete Kristos Seminary provides training and education on the theology of peace, intending to use peace as a means to proclaim the gospel. It is impossible to carry out mission successfully without peacemaking. Peacemaking helps to create an environment where people can live and

23 Megersa Tolera Abdi, "The Role of Peace-Education as a Coexistence, Reconciliation and Peace-Building Device in Ethiopia," SSRN Scholarly Paper (Rochester, NY, 2019), https://papers.ssrn.com/abstract=3670334, 61–74; 63.

work together in harmony, regardless of their differences. Furthermore, it helps to address the root causes of conflict instead of just treating the symptoms. Ultimately, peacemaking is essential for achieving long-term sustainable development, which is often a goal of mission work.

Thirdly, mission activity is the way for peacebuilding because the message of the gospel is making peace people-to-God and people-to-people. The gospel message is centered on promoting peace with both God and people, and mission work can be a valuable means of spreading this message and promoting peacebuilding. Both the church as an organization and individuals have the potential to make a significant impact in conflict-ridden areas by fostering peace and reconciliation through their mission work. By spreading the message of love and peace, the Christian community can help create an atmosphere where individuals can learn to live together harmoniously and appreciate one another's unique attributes in the Ethiopian context.

The Meserete Kristos Church in Ethiopia has set practical examples of how the mission activity of the church can lead to the promotion of peace. The role of churches in promoting peace is not limited to simply proclaiming the gospel but also includes participating in practical peacebuilding. The Meserete Kristos Church in Ethiopia has worked to accept the challenges and opportunities that churches face in promoting peace, including addressing the role of religion in conflict resolution. Recently, for example, the MCK prepared a peace dialogue with the main religions in Ethiopia, even though putting it into practice has been challenging.

2. Biblical Basis for Peacemaking

Peacemaking can be effectively performed by proper interpretation of the biblical texts that lead to a strong foundation for peacemaking. The biblical basis for mission can be found in various passages throughout the Bible. In the Great Commission, Jesus commands his followers to "go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19–20). This passage emphasizes the importance of sharing the message of salvation with people from all backgrounds and cultures. Additionally, throughout the Old and New Testaments there are numerous examples of God's heart for the nations and his desire to see all people come to know him and live in peace. In Isaiah 49:6, for example, God says, "I will make you a light for the Gentiles, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth." Overall, the biblical basis for mission is grounded in God's love for all people and his desire to see them reconciled to him through faith in Jesus Christ. This is the basis for reconciliation among different groups in Ethiopia that are under the turmoil of conflict between people-to-people and state-to-citizens.

The Ethiopian Meserete Kristos Church strongly believes in following biblical teachings to promote peace in the country's current situation. This belief is

demonstrated through two actions: (1) the church has established the Department of Peace and the Department of Prison Ministry at its head office, and (2) the church carries out practical activities in various parts of the country to promote peace based on its convictions regarding the biblical principles of peace and the importance of peace to the church's mission.

3. Practical Applications for Mission Work in Ethiopia

The MKC is a growing church with vibrant mission activity and charismatic Christian living. However, as it is within a majority world country, and because of unresolved historical conflicts birthed from painful experiences, it needs strong conflict resolution and peacemaking guided by the biblical principles taught by Jesus and communicated by his apostles, like Paul. The Meserete Kristos Church, as an Anabaptist church, can make significant contributions to peacebuilding by utilizing these biblical principles and building upon the church's past activities.

The teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount anchors Christians' identity to peacemaking since the text indicates that peacemakers are called the children of God. Our relationship with God demonstrates God's love and forgiveness that enables humanity to have reconciliation with God and people. The practical application we can draw from Matthew 5:9 is to use our identity as children of God for peacemaking, knowing that this is part of our mission in this world.

This has two important implications. The first is that we can bring people into fellowship with God, which also becomes a means of reconciliation with each other. The flip side of this is also true; when we reconcile people through our peacemaking message, we pave the way for our mission work to draw people to God. Secondly, it is possible to use the proclamation of the gospel in conflicted areas as a means of conflict resolution. The gospel can bring peace with God and peace between people, making it an effective tool for resolving conflicts. In the Benishangul-Gumez region, where conflict is common, the MK Church Department of Peace has brought practical change to the community, especially in Metekel Zone.[24]

24 Conversation with Mekonnen Gemeda, head of the peace department of the Meserete Kristos Church, 2023. MK Church is working in Metekel Zone to promote peacebuilding. As a result of their efforts, some fighters who were hiding in the jungle have come forward and reconciled with the community. This success is not limited to Metekel Zone only; other parts of Ethiopia such as Northern Shewa and the Southern region are also benefiting from the peace department's work to bring peace within their communities. The church's practical experience in peacemaking has earned it a positive reputation for being a peaceful church in the community. This reputation has opened up an opportunity for the church to preach the gospel in both Metekel Zone and Northern Shewa, as the image of the church in the community has greatly improved.

Paul's presentation of the ministry of reconciliation in 2 Corinthians 5:17–21 is another important text from which we can draw practical implications for the mission of the church in Ethiopia. This passage emphasizes the transformative power of Christ's sacrifice and the role of believers in sharing this message of reconciliation with others. The church needs to understand how to effectively communicate the message of reconciliation to the people of Ethiopia in a way that resonates with the cultural context and experiences of Ethiopia. In such activity, the Ethiopian Evangelical Churches can help to promote peace, unity, and understanding in the country, which brings two important things: (1) unity among the Christian community that enables them to preach the good news of Christ throughout the country, and (2) a clear vision for and shape of the mission of the church, which is addressing the whole person and, in this case, reconciling humanity with God and reconciling humanity with each other.

A Call for Active Peacemaking in Mission Work by the Ethiopian Church

As we have seen in the above literature review, not many scholars have addressed how the activity of peacemaking can be connected with the mission of the church. By focusing on two biblical texts—Matthew 5:9 and 2 Corinthians 5:17–21—I have shown that the relationship between peacemaking and mission has been understood in different ways by various scholars. I have also shown that even though peacebuilding can be both the means for mission and the outcome of mission, scholars have not emphasized the tie between mission and peacebuilding, which becomes very significant in Ethiopia. Neither is there any scholarly work that considers the existing Ethiopian context in terms of connecting peacebuilding and mission in Ethiopia. In a country where conflict exists in almost every region, the mission activity of the church needs to be tied together with peacebuilding to rescue the country from the devastation of its people's lives and the social fabric of its communities.

Therefore, the current paper calls for active peacemaking in the mission work of the Ethiopian church. Since peacemaking and the mission of the church are strongly tied together in the Bible, as we have witnessed in the Matthew 5:9 and 2 Corinthians 5:17–21 texts, we need to bring these two elements together in our day-to-day context in Ethiopia, where conflict is rampant throughout the country and the need for mission is urgent. We need to articulate a theology of mission that incorporates peacebuilding at different levels. And mission organizations need to articulate peacemaking education and the mechanisms of reconciliation to serve our people in need.

Toward a Christology of Peace

The Narrative Christus Victor of J. Denny Weaver and Its Implications for Political and Ecclesial Situations in Ethiopia

Geleta Tesfaye Berisso

Theologians throughout Christological scholarship have developed numerous atonement theories to comprehend why God became a man—Jesus of Nazareth. Among these theories, three are prominent: (1) the classic Christus Victor theory, (2) the Satisfaction model and its Protestant version, the Penal Substitutionary atonement theory, and (3) the Moral Influence theory. A review of these theories points out that violent political and religious philosophies in their context have influenced them; thus, they have had dangerous implications for generating Christian violence in the past and present.

Of the three theories, an investigation of the narrative Christus Victor atonement model shows it to be a unified theory of atonement that is faithful to the New Testament's teaching and that constructively addresses soteriological, social, and political issues. The theory has profound practical implications for Christians of all ages to continue the mission of Jesus by living in His story with their lives, thus witnessing the reign of God on earth.

Revisiting Atonement Models in a World of Violence and Injustice

Jesus was born and taught in the first-century Roman province of Judea. He suffered and was killed at the hands of the Jewish religious and Roman political authorities, and God raised Him from the dead. These were core themes of the life of Jesus for the first-century New Testament Christians and in the writings of the early church fathers, in theological debates of the medieval church, and in the contemporary post-Reformation churches.

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The New Testament epistles are the early church's reflections on the fullness of the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus in their social, political, and religious contexts. Both the Western and the Eastern church fathers theologized the life of Jesus in their contemporary Greek and Roman paradigms. Theologians in Medieval and Reformation periods also reflected on the significance and what they thought were "objective purposes" of the fullness of Jesus's incarnation, life, death, and resurrection.

Prominent models of atonement from these eras are the Christus Victor theory of the early church along with the Ransom theory; the Satisfaction theory of Anselm along with its Protestant version, the Penal Substitutionary theory; and the Moral Influence theory of Peter Abelard. The Christus Victor model was the mainline atonement model for the church fathers until it was marginalized with the emergence of the Anselmian Satisfaction model. Gustav Aulén (1879–1997), a Swedish Lutheran Bishop of Strängnäs and a systematic theologian at the University of Lund, revitalized it.[1] Since then, theologians have given extensive attention to engaging with this atonement model.

In recent years, North American Mennonite systematic theologian J. Denny Weaver has advanced Aulén's Christus Victor model and introduced the narrative Christus Victor (NCV). According to Weaver, all the atonement models of a Christological scholarship were not faithful to the narrations of Jesus: violent political and religious philosophies of their context influenced them.[2] For him, these models have had dangerous implications for generating Christian violence in the past and present.

Weaver's argument is valid as we review these prominent theories throughout the Christological scholarship. The central theme of ecclesiological atonement theology is to proclaim the reconciliatory death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Thus, one of the major tasks of theology is to develop a contextual message of the gospel in an era; however, political and religious paradigms of these eras should not distort theology to the point it loses its faithfulness to the message of the gospel.

As the death and resurrection of Jesus are central truths of Christian belief and praxis, a right understanding regarding the fullness of Jesus's story is essential in Christian engagement in a contemporary world of violence, hate, war, and structural and social injustices. The way we perceive what the scriptures convey

1 Aulén has undertaken a strictly historical criticism of conventional Christianity and argued that Christus Victor was the model for the early church fathers. Gustav Aulén, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of Atonement*, trans. A. G. Herber (New York: Macmillan, 1969).

2 J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent God* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2011), 19.

about the truths regarding God, His essential attributes, and relations with us and the world can affect our convictions and practices.

As an Ethiopian theologian who has an obligation to develop a contextual message of the gospel to my contemporary Christians, and lead a community of faith, I have observed that the salvific work of Jesus has lost its potency and genuineness in influencing the community of faith, particularly in the arena of sociopolitics. Partaking in ethnic rivalries, mass atrocity, normalized gender marginalization, and active participation in systemic operations have become norms for the community. Furthermore, I observe that these pressing issues in Ethiopia have made the community of faith identify themselves with certain discriminatory political and social ideologies above the reign of God among them.

It is therefore imperative for theologians in Ethiopia to ensure that our understanding of the gospel is in line with the teachings of Jesus, which promote peace, unity, justice, and love beyond social constructs. Only through a renewed understanding of these teachings can we begin to build communities where the reign of God is paramount and where we all feel loved and cared for, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, and sociopolitical leanings.

In this article, I argue that NCV of J. Denny Weaver rereads an entire history of God's people, considering Jesus's incarnation, earthly life, death, and resurrection. It emphasizes the resurrection of Jesus as the culminating revelation of the reign of God in history and as God's nonviolent victory against the evil powers that killed Jesus. This atonement model has profound nonviolence implications for Christians living in the story of Jesus, the fullness of Jesus's life in His social, religious, and political contexts.

Methodology

This article is undertaken with a deductive method of investigation. Writings related to atonement theories of the Christus Victor model, the Satisfaction theory, and the Moral Influence theory have been surveyed. Special emphasis is given to the works of J. Denny Weaver concerning his NCV. By analyzing and appraising mainly his two major works on atonement—*The Nonviolent Atonement* (2001)[3] and *The Nonviolent God* (2011)—implications of NCV for contemporary ecclesial and political situations in Ethiopia are developed.

3 J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2001).

Narrative Christus Victor of J. Denny Weaver: An Overview

Thematic Development of Narrative Christus Victor

Narrative Christus Victor (NCV) developed out of the classic Christus Victor, which was a dominant view of the early church, as argued by Gustav Aulén.[4] It significantly diverges from the classic Christus Victor picture of Jesus's confrontation in cosmic-battle imagery, focusing instead on the historical context and narratives of Jesus's life and ministry. For NCV, the accounts of Jesus's public ministry had a social and political agenda—that is, inaugurating the kingdom of God among humanity.[5] This kingdom of God was opposed to the values of the kingdoms of the world during Jesus's earthly life and still today; and by raising Jesus from the dead, God demonstrated the victory of Jesus's way of life over the sinful, violent structures of the world.[6]

At its heart, NCV sees Jesus's ministry, death, and resurrection as a nonviolent confrontation of the powers of sin and death. For the model, Jesus's life and ministry are equally relevant as His death and resurrection for the salvation of humanity: thus, the whole story of Jesus is salvific.[7] Weaver sees these parts of Jesus's story as a package: His ministry is connected to His incarnation, and without His fervent and radical ministry, He would have not been killed.

Therefore, Jesus was executed for His faithfulness to His mission of making the reign of God visible in the world. God's response to the powers of evil that killed Jesus was to resurrect Jesus. In doing so, God's overcoming of death puts on sharp display the contrast between God's *modus operandi* and that of the forces of evil.[8] The forces of evil inflicted death on Jesus as the solution to their supposed problems, whereas God's response is the overcoming of death, the restoration of life. For Weaver, "God saves, not by taking life but by restoring life."[9]

In the development of NCV, Weaver sketches Jesus's story as a social agenda.[10] The story emphasizes the activist and, at times, confrontational dimensions of His ministry. Weaver starts his analysis of Jesus's narratives in the Gospels from the beginning of Jesus's public ministry with His appearance in the synagogue in Nazareth when He reads from Isaiah 61:1–2. Jesus's words indicate that His ministry had a strong social component.[11] Here, Jesus speaks of preaching good

4 Aulén, *Christus Victor*.

5 Weaver, *The Nonviolent God*, 19.

6 Weaver, *The Nonviolent God*, 19.

7 Weaver, *The Nonviolent God*, 14, 27.

8 Weaver, *The Nonviolent God*, 32.

9 Weaver, *The Nonviolent God*, 32.

10 Weaver, *The Nonviolent God*, 23.

11 Weaver, *The Nonviolent God*, 19.

news to the poor, healing the sick, and liberating the imprisoned. Thereafter, Jesus's ministry is filled with actions of social importance: He goes to where the poor live; He frees those who are oppressed under demonic influences; He cleanses lepers and embraces prostitutes and other outcasts of society. Jesus's ministry is antithetical to the status quo of His historical context.[12]

As Jesus deliberately confronts the social elements of His context, which were antithetical to the kingdom of God, He is confronted by the powers of His society. His deliberate choice of these confrontations includes His defense in John 8 of a woman caught in adultery. At this juncture, the Jewish religious code commanded stoning for such offenses. However, Jesus consciously elevates the protection of this woman's life above the strict enforcement of the religious code. He prioritizes protection for the vulnerable and chooses restoration rather than condemnation.

Jesus's confrontational but nonviolent activism in making the rule of God visible provoked hostility in both social and political spheres, as He was perceived as an enemy both by the palace as well as temple authorities. In Luke 23:2, the temple authority accused Jesus of subverting the nation against Caesar. Matthew also tells us that the Jews accused Jesus of blasphemy (26:57–68). These accusations against Jesus led Him to be tried, condemned, and executed by crucifixion.

In these confrontations of Jesus with these powers, God's purpose was to expose the injustice of the powers of evil and inaugurate His just and loving alternative kingdom, even at the cost of Jesus's death. Weaver emphasizes the resurrection as God's victory, which, tellingly, other atonement theories hardly treat or need. In the confrontational narration of Jesus, His resurrection was God's vindication of Jesus's nonviolent resistance to and victory over evil, by empowering God's people to live already according to God's Reign. This is evidenced in Peter's preaching in Acts 2. As he declares, God raised Jesus from the dead (Acts 2:24). Peter also describes Jesus's resurrection as the vindication of how Jesus lived and embodied God's kingdom (see Acts 10:38). Paul also affirms that the resurrection of Jesus is the ultimate victory of God against the forces of evil that killed him, and Jesus continued His victory through His church (see 1 Cor 15:53–55, 2 Cor 2:14).

After his ample analysis of the Book of Acts and some writings of Paul, Weaver analyzes the book that theologians consider one of the most violent—the Book of Revelation. He argues that the story in Revelation is a nonviolent act of God's salvation, with the same message as the Gospels, written in the symbolic and confrontational language.[13] In Revelation, yes, God makes "war" on the powers that structure our world through injustice, but the battle itself is nonviolent, for

12 Weaver, *The Nonviolent God*, 19.

13 Weaver, *The Nonviolent God*, 48.

the victor worthy to unlock the scrolls of history is the slain and bloodied Lamb (Rev 5:1–10).[14]

The resurrection is the key and climactic event in NCV. Weaver declares the victory of Jesus: "The restoration of life in the face of violence constitutes the ultimate victory of the reign of God over the forces of evil. . . . It is thus an invitation to all people to identify with Jesus and to share in the resurrection's victory."[15] Evil is defeated not through mirroring violence but by the vindication of Jesus in the resurrection.

NCV further asserts that these narrations of Jesus in the Gospels, Acts, and Revelation are invitational.[16] Salvation happens as those who are invited to live in the story of Jesus accept the invitation and start to live in it. This is the heart of the New Testament's incessant call for *metanoia,* a radical change of mind that leads to a transformed way of life. The Father's sending of Jesus and Jesus's coming to proclaim the reign of God are not pictured in a way as an innocent victim but as God's action in Jesus reconciling the world to himself.

The Hermeneutics of Narrative Christus Victor

In his development of NCV, Weaver applies Eric Seibert's Christocentric hermeneutics in his readings of the Gospels, Pauline writings, Revelation, and selected Old Testament texts. Seibert argues that "the God Jesus reveals should be the standard, or measuring rod, by which all Old Testament portrayals of God are evaluated."[17] In reading the Old Testament stories, Seibert suggests the reader should distinguish between "the textual God and the actual God." It is "the person of Jesus" that reveals the "moral character" of the actual God.[18]

Weaver makes striking arguments for the nonviolence of God in the Old Testament, despite narratives in which God is involved in violent killings of innocent and powerless people. He contends that identifying the nonviolent character of God requires rereading the Old Testament and re-prioritizing its nonviolent images and practices.[19] Weaver's apparent rejection of violent narrations of God in the Old Testament may bring a solemn criticism against his model.

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14 Weaver, *The Nonviolent God*, 49.

15 Weaver, *The Nonviolent God*, 51.

16 Weaver, *The Nonviolent God*, 26.

17 Eric A. Seibert, *Disturbing Divine Behavior: Troubling Old Testament Images of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), quoted in Weaver, *The Nonviolent God*, 114.

18 Seibert, *Disturbing Divine Behavior*, quoted in Weaver, *The Nonviolent God*, 114.

19 Seibert, *Disturbing Divine Behavior*, quoted in Weaver, *The Nonviolent God*, 118.

Unlike Marcion, who rejected the Old Testament God as a violent monster who cannot be regarded as the Father of Jesus Christ,[20] Weaver does not discard these violent readings of the Old Testament as uninspired and fallible stories. Rather, he argues that the Old Testament presents not one unique representation of God and violence, but multifaceted representations.[21]

Weaver compellingly argues that "the conversation about the character of God in the OT is not resolved by citing a specific story but by recognizing which side of the conversation is continued by the narrative of Jesus, the Messiah who is a son of Israel."[22] He sees Jesus as the hermeneutical key for reading scripture faithfully. Images of God that do not correspond to the account of Jesus should be regarded as distortions.[23]

NCV differs from other atonement models in the way it deals with the object of the death of Jesus, the purpose of Jesus's death, and its overall imagery of atonement.[24] In contrast to other atonement models, NCV redirects the death of Jesus toward the violent earthly powers in social, religious, and political arenas perpetrated by people.[25] The model rejects the death of Jesus as an instrument of God to satisfy Himself from His wrath toward humanity. It rejects Jesus's death as a ransom paid to Satan to release the souls of humanity held captive by him. It also rejects the idea that God's way of influencing humanity is through His love in killing His Son to show them the extent of His love toward them.[26]

The exclusive focus on Jesus's death in alternative atonement models has negative implications for the Christian life. For example, it leads people to neglect the social aspects of Jesus's ministry, like opening the eyes of the blind, freeing the oppressed, casting out demons, and cleansing the diseased. For Weaver, theologies that emerged from these models and practices are more prone to condone violence, not only in war but also against oppressed groups. Meanwhile, the Christian ethic of nonviolence, as Jesus taught and embodied it, becomes marginal.[27]

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20 James Dunn, "'The Apostle of the Heretics': Paul, Valentinus, and Marcion," in *Paul and Gnosis: Pauline Studies* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2016), 105–18.

21 Weaver, *The Nonviolent God*, 96.

22 Weaver, *The Nonviolent God*, 113.

23 Weaver, *The Nonviolent God*, 114.

24 Weaver, *The Nonviolent God*, 75; Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 70.

25 Acts 2:23, 4:10, 5:30, 10:39–40; Weaver, *The Nonviolent God*, 85; Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 74.

26 Weaver, *The Nonviolent God*, 86; Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 74.

27 Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 108, 122, 157.

Implications of Narrative Christus Victor for Contemporary Political and Ecclesial Situations in Ethiopia

In the previous section, I discussed the central tenets of NCV, emphasizing that this model sees Jesus's story—His incarnation, ministry, death, and resurrection—as a nonviolent confrontation and victory over the powers of evil. In this narrative, God is fully present and stands against violence, broadly characterized to include ethnocentrism, sexism, war, poverty, and psychological harm. As such, Jesus's story presents strong social, political, and evangelistic implications for contemporary Christians as they continue Jesus's story and the history of God's people.

In this section, I examine how NCV can be contextualized for Ethiopian society, exploring its potentialities for the contemporary ecclesial and sociopolitical landscape. I argue that NCV has three primary potential implications for the Christian praxis of nonviolence and active participation in the construction of a peaceful Ethiopia.

In the first implication, I argue that NCV demands that Ethiopian Christians firmly oppose violence and warfare, endeavoring to embrace nonviolent responses in the face of pressing sociopolitical challenges. NCV obligates us to serve as ambassadors of peace and reconciliation within our community.

In the second implication, I argue that NCV necessitates that Ethiopian Christians resist patriarchal structures that impede or prohibit the full participation of women in church and societal leadership roles. As agents of change, Christians must work vigorously toward gender equity and the eradication of patriarchal systems that obstruct women's progress and contributions.

In the third implication, I argue that NCV requires Ethiopian Christians to liberate ourselves from self-centrism and cultivate a posture of empathic concern toward our fellow beings, especially toward victims of structural and cultural violence. In essence, Ethiopian Christians must espouse the principles of altruism and dedicate ourselves to enhancing the fortunes of others, particularly those who are disadvantaged, irrespective of arbitrary social constructs like ethnicity or religion.

Implication 1: Narrative Christus Victor Calls Us to Oppose War and Struggle for Nonviolent Solutions to Sociopolitical Conflicts

NCV presents the story of Jesus as a deliberate proclamation of the reign of God mostly in confrontational but nonviolent ways.[28] From this, it can be logically deduced that Christians, who are called to live in the story of Jesus, should continue the mission of Jesus by living in His story with our lives, thus witnessing the reign of God on earth. Weaver argues that NCV is theology for living, a

28 Weaver, *The Nonviolent God*, 12.

theology that is lived by Jesus and His apostles in their embodied witness.[29] What defines this witness is its constant call to participate in the reign of God until it is fully present on earth, in a lifestyle that is (1) deliberate, (2) continual and practical, and 3) confrontational but nonviolent.

NCV invites all contemporary Christians who are living in the story of Jesus to confront the evil powers that killed Jesus and that are still roaming in the world posing the same level of challenge toward them, as they participate now in the victory of God's reign wrought by Jesus's resurrection. Christians are called to join with and follow Jesus in His mission of witnessing to the gospel, the peaceable reign of God. Since being a follower of Christ is to live in His story, the narration of Jesus demands that we choose Jesus's ways over the ways of the enemies of Jesus. Jesus deliberately and nonviolently confronted His enemies, which the early church continued.

Weaver argues that the dominant Satisfaction theory—with its Protestant version of the Penal model—and the Moral Influence theory have contributed to justifying war and violence throughout the history of Christendom.[30] These atonement models supported, in part, the war, violence, and retributive justice systems because they were developed within violent politico-historical settings. Weaver illustrates this by arguing that the American exercise of "just war" has a strong theological ground from the Protestant Penal Substitutionary atonement model. Most Christians in the US supported the war against Afghanistan, Iraq, and other Muslim countries because they thought retribution must be served. For these Christians, their god is a god of retribution. He is a punishing god who takes vengeance on the breakers of his law and responds to the violence made against him with more violence.

We may see a similar situation in Ethiopia today. In the political climate of the 2020–2022 civil war in Ethiopia, we witnessed a troubling phenomenon in which many Christians who subscribed to the Penal Substitutional model of retributive justice supported either the Ethiopian government's retributive war or the backbiting actrocity of the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF) against the Northern Command of the Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF) on November 3, 2020.[31] The war has led to the displacement and victimization of

29 Weaver, *The Nonviolent God*, 15–17.

30 Weaver, *The Nonviolent God*, 71, 127.

31 Dorcas Cheng-Tozun, "Ethiopian Christians Take Sides Over Tigray Crisis," *Christianity Today*, July 6, 2021, https://www.Christianitytoday.Com/News/2021/July/Ethiopia-Tigray-Evangelical-Conflict-Abiy-Tplf-Orthodox.Html/.

countless innocent individuals within the Tigray, Amhara, and Afar regions of Ethiopia.[32]

As per Weaver's observations, trying to serve retributive justice often replicates the same evil that instigated such a reaction, portraying the server as the hated antagonist.[33] In this regard, Ethiopia's government mirrored the violence it detested from the TPLF by waging war against them, resulting in even more heinous atrocities against innocent citizens. It is indeed ironic that retributive response perpetuates killing to demonstrate the wrongness of killing—a misguided strategy that only perpetuates violence.

In response to Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's rallying call on November 18, 2020, a faction of Evangelical Christians, and the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church outside Tigray—together representing over 60 percent of the Ethiopian population—exhibited their solidarity with the Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF) by appealing to "God" and beseeching divine assistance in the destruction of the "enemy" and the implementation of retributive justice.[34] Along the same line, the TPLF instrumentalized "ethnic autonomy" and framed themselves as defenders of their constituents against what they perceived as occupying forces—all but an act of aggression. Most Tigrayan Christians sided with the TPLF's narrative and supported its armed aggression against the ENDF and its forced conscription of hundreds of thousands of youths who lost their lives during the war.

Notably, several of these Christians who supported either the government or the TPLF held positions of authority within their respective faith communities. This raises the pertinent question of whether their obedience to the Prime Minister's and the TPLF's call subverted the tenets of the reign of God and blocked alternative and creative countermeasures that may have curtailed the mounting crisis.

From the perspective of NCV, rather than following the TPLF's and government's call to arms through the dehumanization of ethnic and political "others," Ethiopian Christians could have prioritized the mission of the church, which is to serve as agents of peace, justice, and reconciliation beyond social constructs. This necessitates urgent promotion of reconciliation between the government and the TPLF, as well as addressing the underlying ideologies that drove the conflict.

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32 Kizzi Asala, "Ethiopia's Prime Minister Orders Military Response to Tigray Attack," *Africa News*, November 4, 2020, https://www.africanews.com/2020/11/04/ethiopia-s-prime-minister-orders-military-response-to-tigray-attack//.

33 Weaver, *The Nonviolent God*, 164.

34 Temesgen Kahsay, "When Religion Goes Awry: The War on Tigray and the Perversion of Evangelical Christianity," TGHAT, July 4, 2021, https://www.tghat.com/2021/07/04/when-religion-goes-awry-the-war-on-tigray-and-the-perversion-of-evangelical-christianity/.

Despite the challenging nature of these tasks, we must acknowledge that there can be no shortcuts in the pursuit of lasting peace.

NCV further challenges this flawed perspective on Christianity that promotes retribution, beckoning us instead to embrace the reign of God in our lives and adopt a nonviolent approach to combating social injustice. From NCV's stance, Christians are called to participate deliberately in peacemaking and to love our enemies. Therefore, in following Christ, Christians should say, "I interrupt the cycle of retaliation by acting in such a way as to convert my enemy into my friend."[35] This consciousness of love invites us to pause and ask: As a Christian who is living in the story of Jesus, am I acting to transform my "perceived" enemy into a friend? In our current situation, who we perceive as an enemy could differ from us in political, religious, and/or ethnic identity. Jesus's application of the concept of love demands that those who live in His story break a cycle of retaliation caused by mirroring evil, and work toward friending their enemy.

If Ethiopian Christians could have adopted NCV as a central paradigm of the gospel, our potential role in preventing the outbreak of war between the TPLF and the government could have been strengthened through urgent action toward promoting options for reconciliation, and advocating for political process to bring the perpetrators to responsibility. Addressing the deep-seated grudges and ideologies that fueled the conflict also would have been a critical step in this regard. Unfortunately, even Christians who claimed to be faithful in Ethiopia wavered and only resorted to prayers, effectively rendering themselves helpless when it was already too late to prevent the war. Despite this, rejecting any justification of further violence by the warring parties at the expense of bloodshed in favor of political solutions was within the realm of possibility for Christians after the outbreak of hostilities.

Drawing from Paul's exhortation to the Romans to live in peace with everyone whenever possible (Rom 12:18), Christians in contemporary Ethiopia should work toward a society that espouses values of peace, love, and nonviolence. While the effort required for this is extensive and not pre-packaged, it should begin with theologians and believers engaging in open dialogue with sociopolitical actors in their communities. This way, they can positively influence society's understanding of peace and enhance the nonviolent tenets of Jesus by incorporating them into educational curricula, human-rights-based frameworks, legal instruments, and political activism geared toward limiting the use of armed and unarmed violence in favor of dialogue and nonviolent activism.

NCV upends our paradigm of sociopolitical issues and exhorts us to inhabit the narrative of Jesus and discern the reign of God in our lives. It obliges the body of Christ to delineate itself through pacific ways of redressing injustices. Jesus's life serves as a rebuke to any endorsement of violence in the name of retributive

35 Weaver, *The Nonviolent God*, 71, 127.

justice. The true significance of being a Christian is symbiotically linking with Christ and maintaining an unwavering commitment to manifesting His narrative through nonviolence.

This narrative of Jesus's life story mandates Ethiopian Christians to observe the reign of God in the same manner as Jesus did. The kingdom of God will manifest visibly in the sociopolitical community of faith when adherents perpetuate the nonviolent narrative of Jesus. Weaver postulates that "the Christian calling—the mission of the church—is to carry on Jesus' mission of witnessing to and making present the reign of God in human history."[36]

By identifying His followers as the light and seasonings (Matt 5:13–16) of the world, Jesus beckons us to connect in our sociopolitical milieu in such a way that it redirects society toward greater visibility of the reign of God in the world. The contemporary Christian in Ethiopia can function as a peacemaker and reconciler in our society by eschewing the wrathful God of the Satisfaction model in favor of the nonviolent confrontational God depicted in the life of Jesus, thereby preventing further bloodshed and conflicts. As a faith community, we must adopt an unequivocal stance on war and conflicts, one that is comprehended by both the state agency and the Ethiopian community. This may necessitate theological reflection and chronological advancement.

Witnessing the reign of God involves the promotion and action of justice that can be developed amid the contemporary needs of Ethiopia and the world. The narrative of Jesus is clear that the Christian faith carries a responsibility of commitment to nonviolence, for the promotion of life and life values. This demands that we—the contemporary Christians—create context-sensitive transformative approaches to violence and conflict and discernment of practices that cultivate nonviolence and spiritual development.

Implication 2: Narrative Christus Victor Calls Us to Oppose Patriarchy and Promote the Full Participation of Women in Church and Society

Under this implication, first I shall expound upon NCV's hermeneutical framework, which endeavors to apprehend Jesus's treatment of women in the Gospel stories and parables. Through this hermeneutics, second I shall juxtapose NCV with three areas of violence that women in Ethiopia have been facing—namely, the structural constraint of women from leadership, structural sexism, and cultural violence.

One distinguishing feature of NCV is its reliance on the story of Jesus as its hermeneutical framework to comprehend biblical stories and to deduce contextual meaning from them. By applying Jesus's view about women as a standard for women's roles in societal and ecclesiastical affairs, NCV invites contemporary

36 Weaver, *The Nonviolent God*, 26.

Christians to view Christianity and perceive the realities of oppression and marginalization against women. The hermeneutical questions that we need to ask in the light of NCV include the following: (1) What was Jesus's approach to women? (2) Did he accord them equal treatment to men, or did he regard them in the same manner that the Jewish conservatism of His context did? (3) How should contemporary theologians reconcile Jesus's practice with their current ecclesiastical and political situation?

The hermeneutical approaches to scripture that have been used in crafting other atonement models—chiefly, the Satisfaction model and Penal Substitutionary atonement—are inadequate to describe Jesus's views on women. These theories were developed using the historical, grammatical, and literary approach, which employs various techniques to understand the original author's intended message of a passage in its historical, grammatical, sociological, and literary settings. This hermeneutical approach has been invaluable in revealing the intended messages of the original authors of the scriptures. However, it fails to address overarching themes in the scriptures such as violence against women, slavery, and marginalization of the weak.

NCV sidesteps the limitations of historical criticism by asking the reader to use the story of Jesus as a frame of reference to even evaluate the stories in the Bible. For this model, God is perfectly embodied in the story of Jesus; hence, it is logical to evaluate the stories in the Bible using this ultimate hermeneutic—the life and story of Jesus. Applying this hermeneutic circumvents the spurious realities women have been told by male-oriented Christian conservatism that was predicated on violent passages in the scriptures.

In Ethiopia, women have been excluded from practicing religious leadership roles, and certain cultural and societal norms have been employed to deprive them of vital tools needed for socioeconomic empowerment. The lens of NCV looks at Jesus's ways of reframing social issues, and we can assume that this model will reconceptualize how Ethiopian women interact with religious, cultural, and societal norms to claim a humane space for self-actualization. It is plausible that an engagement with NCV will encourage a re-imagining of the religious response to the social oppression of women in Ethiopia.

In the following part of the subsection, I shall apply NCV presentation of Jesus's interactions with women and stories that emerge from parables to the most pressing issues about women in Ethiopian political and ecclesial circles.

When we refocus on the story of Jesus, as NCV leads us to do, we see women have a leading position equal to men. From His Incarnation, Jesus was born of a woman and had many connections with women during His ministry. The first witnesses of His resurrection were women (see Luke 24:10). He often deliberately confronted societal structures that undermined and removed women from the sociopolitical scene of His context.

The first widespread issue that affected women in Ethiopia was their structural restriction from ecclesial and political leadership.[37] From my experiences as an insider in the Ethiopian ecclesial circle—which broadly encompasses the Gospel Believers' Churches Council,[38] in which the Ethiopian Hiwot Berhan Church (my denomination and the largest Pentecostal church in Ethiopia) and the Meserete Kristos Church (the largest national Anabaptist conference in the world) participate—women comprise less than 1 percent of the positions of leadership in these churches. Although women have achieved some progress in the political realm—with nearly 50 percent of positions at a federal level occupied by women after Prime Minister Abiy's commencement of reforms in 2018—the same cannot be said for the ecclesial domain.[39]

The crux of the problem, I argue, not only rests on the theological foundation that restricts the adoption of NCV's Christocentric hermeneutic that espouses a traditional, patriarchal hermeneutical frame but also does not have a theology for living, which is practical and calls to action. I argue that by utilizing Christus Victor as a narrative for living, a new path can be constructed that eradicates praxis emanating from traditional theology that restricts women's participation in ecclesial affairs, and instead emphasizes equality and full participation of women.

For NCV, Jesus's parables, as one of the pillars of His teachings, have been an essential tool for the propagation of the gospel message. Parables are rooted in the power of storytelling, symbolism, and metaphor to transcend cultural barriers, evoke deeper levels of thinking, and reveal truth. As such, they offer compelling insights into the subversion and transgression levels of narratives that challenge the status quo and issue a call to action. In the context of Ethiopian society, where women face systemic exclusion from ecclesiastical and political leadership spheres, the parables of Jesus come alive as a powerful counter to patriarchy.

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37 Nigist Melese, "Challenges and Opportunities of Women Empowerment in a Leadership Position in Ethiopia," *European Journal of Business and Management* 11, no. 3 (2019), 38–44; Serawit Bekele Debele, "Females' Subversive Interventions in the Religious Field in Ethiopia," in *Female Leaders in New Religious Movements* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2017), 189–207.

38 The Ethiopian Council of Gospel Believers' Churches is a fellowship of more than three thousand Ethiopian gospel-believing churches from more than fifty countries, representing over thirty-two million Christians both in Ethiopia and worldwide. The Ethiopian Council of Gospel Believers' Churches, The Ethiopian Council of Gospel Believers' Churches, September 23, 2023, https://www.ecgbc.org/about.

39 Marijke Breuning and Gabriela Okundaye, "Half of the Cabinet: Explaining Ethiopia's Move to Gender Parity in the Government," *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 56, no. 5 (2021), 1064–78.

One of the most notable parables in this regard is that of the Leaven (Matt 13:33 and Luke 13:20–21). In this parable, Jesus uses the image of yeast mixed into flour by a woman to describe the impact of the kingdom of God on the lives of people and society. The fact that Jesus chooses an illustration of a woman mixing yeast as an illustration of how the kingdom of God operates speaks to Jesus's valuing of women in God's kingdom. As the yeast permeates the entire dough, the impact on society of the kingdom He preaches is transformative, bringing about changes in various spheres of societal and ecclesial situations.

Through this parable, Jesus subverts the norms of patriarchy and amplifies the role of women in His teachings, revealing the intrinsic value and dignity He bestows upon women beyond social constructs. Similarly, the Parable of the Ten Virgins (Matt 25:1–13) underscores that everyone has a role to play in the kingdom of God. The presence of five wise and five foolish virgins shows that no gender is inferior or superior, and everyone is equally important in God's plan. The teaching points to the intrinsic value of both men and women, emphasizing that everyone has a role to play in building the kingdom of God. These parables reveal a Christocentric hermeneutic that focuses on the kingdom of God and its transformative power, challenging the patriarchal systems that relegate women to secondary positions and highlighting the vital role of women in participating in God's kingdom.

Jesus's teachings through the parables resonate with the Ethiopian context, where women face systemic exclusion from ecclesial leadership spheres. This parable serves as a compelling narrative that reveals how Christ's teachings and actions challenge the status quo and call for radical change. Thus, NCV's hermeneutical framework—using the story of Jesus as a theology for living—offers a solution to the patriarchal systems that relegate women to secondary positions, by instead promoting gender equality and emphasizing the role of women in realizing God's kingdom.

The second widespread challenge against women in Ethiopia, which NCV compellingly addresses, is the issue of structural sexism. Structural sexism is an age-old problem that has continued to marginalize and oppress women in various spheres of life. In Ethiopia, women have been subjected to these forms of injustice, leading to prevalent cases of early marriages, domestic violence, and limited access to higher education, among other issues.[40] However, the gospel of Jesus Christ provides an alternative worldview, where the dignity and equality of women are emphasized. Through the use of parables, Jesus taught about the value of women in the kingdom of God and challenged the patriarchal structures of His time.

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40 Taddese Mezgebo, Tewelde Ghrmay, and Menasbo Gebru Tesfay, "Sexism, State, Market, and Society: Evidence from Rural Tigray, Northern Ethiopia," (July 19, 2019). Available at SSRN: https://ssrn.com/abstract=3370790 or http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3370790.

For an illustration, seen through the lens of NCV the parable of the persistent widow (Luke 18:1–8) speaks to the problem of limited access to justice for women in Ethiopia. This is one of the strongest illustrations used by Jesus to teach His disciples about unswerving continuation in prayer and seeking His kingdom. In a culture where men are all heads and teachers of spiritual truths, Jesus's employment of a woman as a model seeking God demonstrates that He had an understanding of women that was contrary to that of the religious leaders of His context.

This parable is situated in the wider context of the Gospel of Luke, which emphasizes the value and dignity of those who are marginalized in society, including women. The parable is an example of an exaggeration or hyperbole, a common narrative technique in Jewish literature that was also used by Jesus.[41] The judge in the parable is meant to represent an unjust system that cares nothing for the needs of the vulnerable. Yet, even in the face of such a system, the widow persists in her pursuit of justice. For NCV, this is a part of the larger presentation of Jesus's victory over the oppressive powers and structures present in the world, including Ethiopia.

One of the prevalent fruits of structural sexism in Ethiopia is an exponential proliferation of prostitution in the country, particularly after the war in northern Ethiopia. A study by *Tearfund Australia* shows that in 2017 an estimated one hundred fifty thousand women worked in the sex trade on the streets of Addis Ababa alone—one in ten females over the age of fifteen.[42] Since the civil war in northern Ethiopia, this number has likely grown exponentially. It can be argued that prostitution in Ethiopia is pervasive and unchecked, perpetuating a cycle of exploitation and victimization primarily directed toward the vulnerable. The root causes of this problem can be traced back to societal structures that undermine women's rights and promote gender inequality—including structural sexism, poverty, civil wars, child marriage, and a lack of access to education.

A particularly troubling aspect of this situation is the ecclesial role—by an institution tasked with upholding morality and promoting social justice—in perpetuating gender inequality and discrimination that drives the sex trade in Ethiopia. I am not referring only to the churches under the umbrella of the Council of Gospel Believers' Churches, but primarily the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church. Studies show that most women in the sex trade in Ethiopia identify as Christians and pay their tithes; yet, despite identifying as Christians and attending church, these women often find themselves the victims of an unjust

41 Marion L. Soards, "The Historical and Cultural Setting of Luke-Acts," in *New Views on Luke and Acts*, ed. Earl Richard (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1990), 33–47.

42 Tearfund Australia, "Off the Streets: Freeing Women in Addis Ababa from the Sex Trade," accessed June 21, 2021, https://www.tearfund.org.au/stories/off-the-streets-freeing-women-in-addis-ababa-from-the-sex-trade.

system built on patriarchal attitudes, misogyny, and a disregard for gender equality. Even worse, the church's teachings and leadership structures can sometimes reinforce these harmful ideas, leading to an even greater sense of marginalization and disillusionment among women.

NCV directly speaks to this disquieting social ill as it underscores that the church is called to be a prophetic witness and a force for positive social change in the world, including in Ethiopia. For Weaver, the church's mission on earth is to continue the work that Jesus began through His life, death, and resurrection. Weaver proposes that Jesus's victory over sin and death offers a model for nonviolent resistance and a way to transform oppressive systems and structures that have led these women into prostitution. Accordingly, the church should focus on creating communities that embody the values of Jesus—such as love, justice, and compassion—and work to bring about God's kingdom of peace on earth. This includes challenging the powers and principalities that perpetuate structural sexism and injustice and actively seeking to create a more just and equitable society.

To truly create change, churches in Ethiopia must strive to become agents of social transformation, challenging the forces that maintain structural sexism and actively seeking to create a more equitable society. Participating in this type of activism requires pushing back against entrenched gender norms and working to dismantle the systems that promote gender inequality. Ultimately, churches in Ethiopia must recognize that their mandate is to create a world of love, compassion, and justice and that this requires a deep commitment to fighting the root causes of societal injustice, including the sex trade.

The third prevalent gender issue in Ethiopia is the issue of cultural violence toward women. In Ethiopia's ecclesial context, the widespread cultural violence toward women is a significant problem that needs to be addressed by society at large. Cultural violence against women in Ethiopia is a complex problem that stems from entrenched societal and ecclesial structures and their underlying imaginations, embedded within the culture of Ethiopia itself. These imaginations perpetuate the myth that men are naturally wiser and stronger than women and that women's worth lies only in their ability to bear children and serve men. This cultural violence limits women's access to education, employment opportunities, and full participation in the sociopolitical landscape. It is a persistent issue that seeks to diminish women's worth and undermine their role in society.

NCV emphasizes Jesus's victory over evil and oppression and can be applied to contemporary contexts to challenge oppressive structures and promote equality. In the parable of the Queen of the South,[43] Jesus demonstrates that wisdom is not limited to one gender or culture. The queen's example shows how women from foreign contexts can bring unique insights and ideas to their communities,

43 Matthew 12:42, Luke 11:31.

challenging patriarchal notions that women are inferior to men. Similarly, the parable of the widow of Zarephath[44] speaks to the plight of disadvantaged women in Ethiopia who struggle to provide for themselves and their families. This parable demonstrates that faith and trust in God's provision can lead to miraculous outcomes, empowering women and giving them hope in the face of adversity.

Further, Jesus's healing of a woman who was hopelessly bent for eighteen years underscores the importance of women's rights and worth. By publicly acknowledging her as a daughter of Abraham, Jesus affirms the woman's equal right to partake in the blessing of Abraham, regardless of her physical situation and gender identity. This act of Jesus is a deliberate nonviolent confrontation against the Jewish sacred custom that marginalized women and the weak, like this woman. This acknowledgment of Jesus was antithetical to the Jewish custom that does not count a woman as a valid line of generation. Thus, it possibly follows that Jesus had no convictions against women's capability of ecclesial and societal leadership. In this way, NCV avoids the problems that feminist theologians have identified in the Satisfaction atonement models.

These parables call contemporary Christians to treat and value women to the same degree as Jesus valued and treated them. Jesus is the ultimate authority to which His followers of every age look. His story thus must call His followers to reinterpret the role of women in ecclesial and societal affairs. The narrative of Christus Victor's focus on Jesus's whole story as a salvific work of Jesus enables us to see His treatment of women as equal to men. Only by promoting these values and affirming women's rights and worth can we create a just and equitable society that ensures equal opportunities for all.

Implication 3: Narrative Christus Victor Calls Us to Oppose Self-Centrism and Live a Life Characterized by Altruism

The third implication of NCV is that it calls Christians living in the story of Jesus out of self-centeredness and into the embrace of others as themselves. This is made evident in Jesus's command to "love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:30–31), a theme that resounds throughout the Gospel and Acts.

Jesus was the quintessential man of the people who acted selflessly for the benefit of others and the glorification of His Father. Even in His call for His followers to "deny themselves" (Matt 16:24), however, He did not demand that they forego self-care. Rather, He enjoined them to treat others as they would treat themselves. It is not a matter of diminishing one's self-worth; rather, it acknowledges that a proper appreciation of one's worth demands an equal appreciation of other people's worth. Therefore, Jesus's disciples in Ethiopia are likewise called to nurture and love themselves so they can extend the same love to others.

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44 I Kings 17:7–16.

Nevertheless, a diametrically opposed practice to altruism has been ravaging contemporary Ethiopian ecclesial pulpits and practices through the proliferation of market-driven prophetic movements.[45] In recent years, because of pressing issues in the country—including poverty, recurring ethnic-based conflicts, and low job market—most Ethiopians are dissatisfied with their lives and are seeking comfort, primarily from the "prophetic" movements. Moreover, the proliferation of social media has made accessible how people in different economic and political contexts live, and this has created a sense of frustration in the Ethiopian public.

In response to this scenario, in Ethiopia and most parts of sub-Saharan Africa, a profitable industry of fashionable miracle "prophets" has been ravaging these people by manipulating them and promising them a better life if they obediently consume their miracle prophecies that supply them with a divine power to change their life instantly. Ironically, these predatory practices are mostly reflections of the social, political, and spiritual evil forces Ethiopia has been experiencing as a nation for the past few years. Subconsciously, the Ethiopian society has gravitated toward these miracle "prophets" as an answer to the impasses in which they find themselves. However, despite the posturing of these "prophetic" markets, they are symptoms of the spiritual ills they claim to remedy.

It makes sense that these miracle "prophets" have flourished in Ethiopia at a time when people have lost faith in state and non-state institutions to provide them with a decent life—when young people who were promised a better future if they worked hard and obtained a college degree now find themselves in an increasingly difficult job market or with no employment prospect. But these miracle "prophets" disregard all these prospects and tell their followers that through the consumption of their service, they can overcome these problems.

Now, NCV calls on contemporary Christians in Ethiopia living in the story of Jesus to firmly expose and challenge these predatory practices and nurture a spirit of altruism that puts others before themselves. It calls for the prioritization of the interests of others over oneself, providing a powerful counterpoint to the selfish and exploitative logic of the market-driven "prophetic" movements. By fostering a spirit of service and love, and by promoting justice and human dignity, the Ethiopian church can challenge and overcome the predatory practices of these movements.

Moreover, NCV invites contemporary Ethiopian Christians to embrace a vision of society in which the government serves the people and individuals are able to reach their full potential. This vision is rooted in a deep commitment to justice and fairness, which recognizes that every individual is endowed with inherent worth and dignity, irrespective of their social or economic circumstances.

45 Andreas Heuser, "Charting African Prosperity Gospel Economies," *HTS: Theological Studies* 72, no. 4 (December 2, 2016), 1–9.

In this way, the challenge facing contemporary Ethiopia is not simply a religious or spiritual one but a philosophical and ethical one. It requires a fundamental reorientation of our values, priorities, and commitments, and a renewed commitment to the common good and the flourishing of all members of society. Only by pursuing this path can we hope to overcome the predatory forces of the market-driven prophetic movements and create a just and equitable society for all Ethiopians.

Another powerful illustration from NCV that speaks to the ecclesial and political situation in Ethiopia is the well-known parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37). In the parable, Jesus exposes the challenges of racial and ethnic discrimination and stereotypes in His context of first-century Israel. He praises the Samaritan man who helped an injured Jewish man found lying on the road. The leaders of the religious establishment walked on the other side of the road, passing by the man. The Jews of Jesus's day regarded Samaritans as being of mixed ethnic origin rather than as Israelites. As a result, Samaritans were despised and experienced discrimination. According to the strict purity code, they were unclean.[46] Jesus had this in mind when he told this parable.

These kinds of discrimination are very alive in our contemporary Ethiopia, where ethnic, racial, and class discrimination and stereotypes are taken as norms. Most of our contemporary Christians in Ethiopia are not even aware of these discriminatory norms and that they are often unwittingly taking part in and furthering them. The irony in the parable is that the Jewish religious leaders were the bearers of their people to God; yet, they despised and looked down upon the object of their very service to God. The religiously and ethnically despised and perceived enemy—the good neighbor, the "Samaritan"—had become the object of love, the one whom the lawyer had just been told to love as himself (Luke 10:27).[47]

This parable challenges us Ethiopian Christians to see beyond our preconceived duplicitous ethnic, religious, and political prejudices and embrace people unconditionally. If the parable were told in today's Ethiopia, it might feature several examples of discrimination in our society. The Samaritan might be a shoe cleaner on the streets of Addis who came from a minor ethnic group to the city in search of survival. In Amhara or Oromia regions, the Samaritan may be a former Tigrayan combatant. This story is at the heart of NCV as it exposes the ethnic, religious, and racial evils of Jesus's society.

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46 Daube David, "Jesus and the Samaritan Woman: The Meaning of συγχράομαι," *Journal of Biblical Literature* (1950), 137–47.

47 Weaver, *The Nonviolent God*, 20.

Living in Alignment with Jesus's Mission

The thrust of this essay has been to delve into narrative Christus Victor (NCV) and its implications for contemporary Christians in Ethiopia. NCV posits that Jesus's ministry, death, and resurrection were a nonviolent confrontation of the powers of sin and death. This study has identified three practical implications based on their relevance for ecclesial and political situations in Ethiopia:

1. First, NCV requires that Christians in Ethiopia become agents of reconciliation and peace in their respective societies. It demands that they oppose war and struggle for nonviolent solutions to sociopolitical conflicts.
2. Second, NCV demands that Christians oppose patriarchy and promote the full participation of women in the church and societal leadership. As agents of change, Christians should work toward gender equality and the dismantling of patriarchal structures that hinder women's growth and contributions.
3. Third, NCV demands that Christians refrain from self-centrism and instead love others with the same intensity with which they love themselves. Christians in Ethiopia, upon learning to love and nurture themselves, must assume an empathetic posture and strive to improve the lot of others, especially the less fortunate.

In essence, NCV necessitates that Christians become agents of change in their respective societies, promoting justice, equality, and freedom for all. It is only by committing to these core claims that Christians can live lives that are in alignment with Jesus's mission.

A Publication to Foment Interfaith Dialogue between Orthodox and Evangelical Christians in Ethiopia

Abenezer Shimeles Dejene

Ethiopia is one of the earliest nations to have embraced Christianity. The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC) dates back to the fourth century, Catholicism to the sixteenth century, and Evangelicalism/Protestantism to the mid-seventeenth century. Religious conflict and tension have been integral to Ethiopia's history, despite the nation's portrayal as a symbol of religious tolerance.[1] Although a few efforts have been made to foster an interfaith dialogue among various Christian denominations,[2] the polarization between religious communities, especially among the EOTC and Evangelical/Protestant Christians, is escalating rather than declining. Even as polarization grows, adequate and productive ecumenical dialogue is not occurring.[3] One source of the problem concerns the information available to members of each tradition. With the sole providers of theological and religious education being seminaries and Sunday schools,[4] the scholarly writings and publications produced by and for these

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1 See Hussein Ahmed, "Coexistence and/or Confrontation? Towards a Reappraisal of Christian-Muslim Encounter in Contemporary Ethiopia," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 36, no. 1 (2006): 4–22; and Terje Østebø, "Religious Dynamics and Conflicts in Contemporary Ethiopia: Expansion, Protection, and Reclaiming Space," *African Studies Review*, 2023, 1–24, https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2023.11.

2 Tibebe Eshete, *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia: Resistance and Resilience* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2009), 232; Daniel Seblewengel, *Perception and Identity: A Study of the Relationship between the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and Evangelical Churches in Ethiopia* (Carlisle, Cumbria: Langham Monographs, 2019), 405.

3 Eshete, *Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia*, 315. See also Desta Heliso, "Theological Education in Ethiopia," *Handbook of Theological Education in Africa,* eds. Isabel Apawo Phiri and Dietrich Werner (Oxford: Regnum, 2013), 173.

4 Heliso, "Theological Education in Ethiopia," 172.

traditions focus, for the most part, on distinctive theological teachings and apologetics rather than mutual understanding.

The purpose of this study is threefold: (1) First, I will briefly review the historical interactions between Orthodox and Evangelical Christians in Ethiopia, exploring reasons for the need to develop more enduring or substantive interfaith dialogue between these communities. (2) Second, I will argue that theological publications and theological education can play an important role in promoting ecumenism. (3) Third, I will sketch a publication strategy that reduces antagonism and encourages dialogue.

Early Christianity in Ethiopia

The primeval genesis of Christianity in Ethiopia is linked to various tales of its origin.[5] Most scholars agree that the prominent one is the story of the Aksumite emperor, Ezana, who played a significant role in leading his kingdom to embrace Christianity in the fourth century.[6] Archeologists have found fourth-century coins of Emperor Ezana with inscriptions of Jesus as his and his kingdom's savior.[7]

In the middle of the fourth century, when a Syrian trader vessel was plundered and its crew died on the coast, two youngsters—Frumentius and Aedesius—survived and were taken as captives to the Aksumite King, who ruled in Axum, an ancient city in the Tigray region of Ethiopia. Eventually, they were freed by the queen and her son. Frumentius then traveled to Alexandria and met Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, to whom he reported the state of Christianity in Axum

5 Dale H. Moore, "Christianity in Ethiopia," *Church History* 5, no. 3 (1936): 271–84, https://doi.org/10.2307/3160789. See also Dale T. Irvin and Scott Sunquist, *History of the World Christian Movement* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2001), 216.

6 The king's conversion to Christianity in the first century cannot be the only means by which Christianity was introduced into Ethiopia. Since the nation's contact through trade and culture with Egypt and the Greco-Roman world, Christianity was introduced to Ethiopians before the fourth century through various means. Christian individual merchants commingled with the local people so that a small community of believers began to form in the urban areas. See Eshete, *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia*, 315. However, the king's acceptance of Christianity contributed to broader acceptance among the people. Unlike most other places, Christianity in Ethiopia gradually spread from the royal court to the ordinary people. This helped Christianity influence and shape the culture, politics, and education for centuries afterward.

7 Steven Kaplan examined the conversion to Christianity of the fourth-century Ethiopian ruler Ezana. One of the inscriptions reads: "The might of the Lord of Heaven, who has created me, of the Lord of all by whom the King is beloved." See Steven Kaplan, "Ezana's Conversion Reconsidered," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 13, no. 2 (1982): 101–9; Sergew Hable Sellassie, *Ancient and Medieval Ethiopian History to 1270* (Addis Ababa, Ethiopia: United Printers, 1972), 103.

and suggested sending a bishop and priest. Athanasius convinced Frumentius to return to Ethiopia himself as a bishop. Frumentius did so and became the first bishop of Axum. He is known as *Abba Salama* (Father of Peace) or *Kesate Berhane* (Reveler of Light) in Ethiopia.[8] From that point on, the tradition of sending patriarchs from Alexandria continued for over a millennium until the Ethiopian church became autocephalous in 1959.[9]

In the fifth century AD, persecuted Syrian monks—widely known as the *Teseatu Keddusan*, or "Nine Saints"—arrived in Ethiopia. They had been persecuted in Syria because of their anti-Chalcedonian theological stance.[10] The Nine Saints engaged in missionary activities, translated parts of the Scriptures into the Ge'ez language, and formed an Ethiopic liturgy. The Ethiopian and Egyptian churches were Monophysite, which means they did not accept the Chalcedonian Council's decision that Jesus had two natures—divine and human—in one person. Instead, they believed in a single divine nature. From its inception, the Ethiopian church was theologically distant from the other Christian traditions, except for the Alexandrian church. The church followed Egypt in rejecting the Chalcedonian council, and the Nine Saints played a crucial role in spreading non-Chalcedonian, Monophysite theology in Ethiopia.[11]

The expansion of Christianity into the south and west continued in the medieval period, from the seventh century to the seventeenth century. This period saw magnificent church constructions, evangelism, and the creation of a vision of Ethiopia as the second Jerusalem, or Zion. Further significant growth in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church happened when King Zara Yaqob was simultaneously a figure of the church and the state. Zara Yaqob is perhaps one of the most significant figures who shaped the church's theology and praxis. He adopted an aggressive policy of evangelization and proselytization, made the Book of the Miracle of Mary part of the liturgy and dedicated holidays for her, helped to publish numerous hagiographical works, and made symbols like the cross to identify Christians.[12]

In the modern history of Ethiopia, which began in 1855, Christianization and unification of the church took place largely through the efforts of the kings. Kings such as Emperor Menelik envisioned expanding the empire and unifying the country; the church also expanded into the new territories that the emperor occupied. Because of its alliance with the emperors, the church functioned as a

8 Irvin and Sunquist, *History of the World Christian Movement*, 215–19.

9 Hable Sellassie, *Ancient and Medieval Ethiopian History to 1270*, 95–104.

10 Eshete, *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia*, 17.

11 Calvin E Shenk, "The Ethiopian Orthodox Church's Understanding of Mission," *Mission Studies* 4, no. 1 (1987): 4–20.

12 Eshete, *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia*, 18–22.

political tool to take over the sociopolitical power in the new territories.[13] The Ethiopian Orthodox Church played a critical role in the country's state formation and remains a central part of its culture, identity, politics, and education. Even the nation's flag is rooted in Orthodox theology and history.

Evangelical Protestant Christianity in Ethiopia

In contrast to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, Evangelical Protestantism has a much shorter history in Ethiopia; its origins are most often traced to the mid-seventeenth century with the arrival of German missionary Peter Heyling in Gondar in 1634–1635. Heyling aimed to rejuvenate the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and worked within the church to introduce a new evangelical life focusing on the Scriptures and evangelism.[14]

Missionaries from the Church Missionary Society (CMS) arrived in 1825 to "revitalize the ancient church" by distributing the Scriptures and other Christian literature. CMS missionary Samuel Gobat and his successors, C. W. Isenberg and Johann Krapf, focused on preparing literature in Amharic and other vernacular languages, multiplying copies of the Bible, and instructing the people in the Scriptures.[15]

Beginning in those early Protestant mission efforts in the seventeenth century, various missionary bands arrived in Ethiopia. The Pilgrim Mission, a group that combined Protestant mission and technical aid, arrived in Gondar. However, because of resistance from the emperor and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, they did not do significant mission work.[16] The Swedish Evangelical Mission (SEM) established a mission base at the coast of the Red Sea. SEM was successful in working with the local Orthodox priests and training and sending ex-slaves as indigenous missionaries to the southern part of Ethiopia.[17]

The peak period for many Western Protestant mission organizations' arrival in Ethiopia was between 1918 and 1931.[18] According to Tibebe Eshete, most of

13 Eshete, *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia*, 33–34.

14 Gustav Arén, *Envoys of the Gospel in Ethiopia: In the Steps of the Evangelical Pioneers, 1898–1936*, Studia Missionalia Upsaliensia 75 (Stockholm, Addis Abeba: EFS förlaget; Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus, 1999), 34.

15 Olav Sæverås, *On Church-Mission Relations in Ethiopia 1944–1969: With Special Reference to the Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus and the Lutheran Missions*, Studia Missionalia Upsaliensia 27 (Oslo: Lunde, 1974), 15–16.

16 Donald Crummey, *Priests and Politicians: Protestant and Catholic Missions in Orthodox Ethiopia, 1830-1868*, Oxford Studies in African Affairs (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972), 142.

17 Eshete, *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia*, 70–71.

18 Western Mission Organizations arrived in Ethiopia between 1918 and 1932: United Presbyterian Mission (1918, US), Swedish Mission BV (1921, Sweden), Mission to the

the mission organizations that arrived during this period attempted to work with the Orthodox Church, except for the few that emphasized building independent Protestant churches.[19] Yet the Italian Occupation (1936–1941) brought an end to foreign Protestant mission activities. The Italians expelled the missionaries and tried to establish the Roman Catholic faith, which was unsuccessful. On the other hand, the termination of most of the Protestant foreign mission movements in Ethiopia brought the era for the emergence and growth of indigenous Evangelical Christianity. As Eshete noted, Evangelical Christianity grew remarkably in the period of the Italian Occupation.[20]

In the 1960s a new indigenous Pentecostal impulse emerged from urban and university-educated youth from various regions, especially in Addis Ababa.[21] The new Evangelical movement served as a bedrock for the later Pentecostal movement that spread like wildfire. The Pentecostal movement has multiple origins, both indigenous and from foreign missionary work. The movement's rise in the 1960s changed the landscape and shape of Evangelical Christianity in Ethiopia; it sprang up in the wake of a hostile sociopolitical situation. As Eshete notes, the movement was a youth-oriented fundamentalist response to the traditions and norms of the established church (the Ethiopian Orthodox Church) and the mainline Evangelical churches. The most significant aspect of the movement was the "baptism of the Holy Spirit," expressed through speaking in the tongues and other gifts of the Holy Spirit.[22]

The Protestant Missionaries' Encounter with the Ethiopian Orthodox Church

In this section, to understand the Orthodox perception of Western mission, it is appropriate to begin by looking at their encounter with the Jesuit missionaries who arrived in Ethiopia early in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The reason for beginning here is that the Protestant missionaries' arrival took place with those earlier encounters as a backdrop. The Jesuit missionaries attempted to evangelize Ethiopia and spread the Roman Catholic (Chalcedonian) faith. Their attempts to change the culture, language, and liturgies rapidly led to a bloody civil war in Ethiopia. The emperor was defeated, and the Jesuits were expelled from Ethiopia in 1632.

Jews (1923, UK), Sudan Interior Mission (1927, US), Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (1928, UK), Hermannsburg Mission (1927, Germany), and the Bible Churchmen's Missionary Society (1932, UK). See Eshete, *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia*, 75–76.

19 Eshete, *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia*, 83.

20 Eshete, *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia*, 77.

21 Eshete, *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia*, 124.

22 Eshete, *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia*, 145–47.

The consequences of this incident were long-lasting. Ethiopia passed through prolonged internal instability and isolated itself from the rest of the world, especially the Western world.[23] This historical incident helped to nurture a xenophobic attitude among Ethiopians toward missionaries and Westerners.[24] Catholics were often labeled as *tsere-Mariam*—literally, anti-Mary (or the enemy of Mary), and eventually this label was used for anyone who was a non-Orthodox Christian "other." Even until the late twentieth century, individuals who had a close relationship with Westerners were accused of abandoning the Orthodox faith and labeled as Catholics. *Koteleke* became a generic tag summoning up apostasy and the name *tsere-Mariam*.[25]

Later in the nineteenth century, during the Italian Occupation, the Italians attempted to spread the Roman Catholic faith for the second time but were unsuccessful in Catholicizing the nation. Even so, they paved the way for the Protestants by weakening the influence of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in the southern and southwestern parts of Ethiopia.[26]

The Catholic mission activities, beginning from the early Jesuit missionaries, had set the tone for how all Western missionaries would be seen in Ethiopia. Unfortunately, that mission activity was not solely about religious matters but also involved political and social issues. This left Ethiopians suspicious about underlying missionary motivations and influenced their perceptions of later Western mission activities. This is one of the backdrops to the Protestant missionaries' later arrival and operations.

One of the significant tones that echoed among all Protestant mission endeavors was the reformation of the established church. The missionaries' conviction of their calling to revitalize the Ethiopian Orthodox Church arose from their common perception that the established church had syncretized true doctrine. They believed that spirituality had become paralyzed and that the church was only nominally Christian. In addition, they accused the church of having become just a tool for the emperor's colonial desires.[27] For instance, Samuel Gobat's perception of the Orthodox Church was that "little . . . of Christianity [had

23 Crummey, *Priests and Politicians*, 7.

24 Eshete, *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia*, 25.

25 Bahru Zewde, *Pioneers of Change in Ethiopia: The Reformist Intellectuals of the Early Twentieth Century*, Eastern African Studies (Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University, 2002), 71.

26 Eshete, *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia*, 38. See also John H. Hamer, "The Religious Conversion Process among the Sidāma of North-East Africa," *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 72, no. 4 (2002): 598–627, https://doi.org/10.2307/3556703.

27 Faqāda Gurméśā Kuśā and Ezekiel Gebissa, *Evangelical Faith Movement in Ethiopia: The Origins and Establishment of the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus* (Minneapolis, MN: Lutheran University Press, 2009), 75–79.

been] preserved" and the church had fallen entirely into superstition.[28] Similarly, Thomas Lambie thought that "the Ethiopian Church faith was a mixture of the Old Testament and African traditional religions . . . distant from the genuine Christian doctrine."[29]

The missionaries were optimistic that reawakening the Ethiopian Orthodox Church could lead to reaching the surrounding Muslims. Various missionaries were sent with this conviction. Some were successful in their efforts, but their actions were significantly hampered because they did not understand the complex history and culture of the nation. Donald Crummey's analysis is that the failure of the missionaries' vision to utilize the established church came from an inability to continue their conviction to keep working with the church and sustain its strategy; instead, they diverted their strategy to proselytization. As a result, the mark of the strategy to utilize the established tradition is no longer visible among the Christian traditions.[30] However, Eshete disagrees with Crummey in this matter; although the marks of the missionaries' ecumenical efforts are not visible at this time, that does not necessarily mean they did not attempt to work with the established church. On the other hand, Eshete agrees that the missionaries' attempts to reform or work with the Ethiopian Orthodox Church did not leave an enduring mark.[31] Instead, the legacy of their inaccurate perceptions of the church is visible among Evangelicals. Contemporary Evangelicals are also keen on reforming the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.

The drawback of the approach to reform the Orthodox Church is that it does not have a consistent objective of what kind or in what areas or doctrines of the church that reformation should happen. The reformation initiatives that arose within the Ethiopian Orthodox Church[32] and the Evangelical churches that

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28 Taddesse Tamrat, "Evangelizing the Evangelized: The Root Problem between Missions and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church," *Missionary Factor in Ethiopia: Papers from a Symposium on the Impact of European Missions on Ethiopian Society*, eds. Getatchew Haile, Aasulv Lande, Samuel Rubenson (Lund University, August 1996, 1998), 24.

29 Thomas A. Lambie, "Pioner Missions in Abyssinia" (St. Louis, MO: Bibliotheca Sacra Company, 1928), 32.

30 Crummey, *Priests and Politicians*, 151.

31 Eshete, *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia*, 54.

32 In the fifteenth century, Aba Estifanos and his followers (who are called *Daqiqa Estifanos* or *Estifanosites*—the Stephanites) began a reformation movement in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Aba Estifanos was a monk, preacher, and martyr who was nonconforming to the reformation that King Zara Yaqob (1434–1468) and the church leaders at the time introduced to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Zara Yaqob was one of the most significant figures in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. He authored and encouraged others to publish hagiographical books and introduce holidays for the saints for the church. Aba Estifanos and his followers raised strong

majorly support those movements do not have a similar objective. Besides that, the Evangelicals and the current reformation movements inside the Orthodox Church consider themselves the heirs of the renewal efforts that arose in the fifteenth-century Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Most Evangelical historians and missionaries equate the fifteenth-century renewal movement's theological differences in the Orthodox Church with the sixteenth-century European Protestant Reformation. Even though it requires a detailed study of the similarities and differences between the two movements, it is evident that the sociopolitical contexts in which they arose are entirely different. Getatchew Haile has called the idea of a "Protestant Reformation of the Orthodox Church" a myth.[33] Even the Ethiopian Orthodox Church clergies have strong disagreement and reservations about the reformation impulses, as they feel that the missionaries have underestimated their wisdom, religious knowledge, and religious traditions. As a result, they have tended to mock the missionaries and create lengthy bureaucratic procedures that have slowed down their activities.[34]

Gradually, a change of strategy occurred among the newly arrived missionaries from 1918; they started to establish new Evangelical congregations. The new community resulted from a combination of missionary interest and of excommunicated Orthodox Church members looking for a new religious identity.[35] The Orthodox Church considered the new converts as *Menafek*, or heretics, and *tsere-Mariam*—the enemy of Mary. This implied that the new congregations were attempting to diminish the tradition and the church.

In the early stage of this missionary work, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church's bitterness toward the missionaries sprang from the perception that their

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questions about the practice of prostration (*segdat*—prostration to the ground) in front of the images of Mary, angels, and saints, which was a new tradition introduced to the church at the time. For Aba Estifanos and his followers, prostration as an act of worship is only for God; they refused to bow down in front of the king and the rulers. They are also well known for their teaching of the Scripture over tradition, and for being against the king. The Stephanites faced unspeakable persecution under King Zara Yaqob and his descendants, including being stoned and dragged to death. See Getatchew Haile, trans. *Deqiqa Estifanos: Behigg Amlak* (Collegeville: Getatchew Haile, 2016).

33 Getatchew Haile, "Review of Evangelical Pioneers in Ethiopia: Origins of the Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus, by G. Arén," *Northeast African Studies* 6, no. 3 (1984): 55–58.

34 Lambie, *A Doctor without a Country*, 170. See also Taddesse Tamrat, "Evangelizing the Evangelized," 26.

35 Aasulv Lande, "Evangelical Mission in Ethiopia: Why an Ecumenical Failure?," *Missionary Factor in Ethiopia: Papers from a Symposium on the Impact of European Missions on Ethiopian Society*, eds. Getatchew Haile, Aasulv Lande, and Samuel Rubenson (Lund University, August 1996, 1998).

missionary purpose was to take the Orthodox Church's flock by offering social services like education and health care.[36] The rancor still exists; some people refer to the Evangelical faith as *be'erdata-yemeta haimanot*, a religion that came with aid. The bitterness and bureaucracy from the Orthodox Church and the government officials made proselytization the easiest way forward. Thus, the early vision of reformation failed, and the Evangelicals were unsuccessful in establishing a firm base within the Orthodox-dominated areas.

The wound in the early interaction between the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and Evangelical mission work has not healed and still hampers attempts at ecumenical dialogue. As Taddesse Tamrat puts it, it has effectively blocked a meaningful dialogue toward a mutual understanding about their differences in faith, worship, and issues of genuine Christian community. The history of Christian interaction in Ethiopia contains theological and narrative differences that demand in-depth studies and conversation.

Growing Polarization and Antagonism between the Two Christian Faith Traditions

As covered in the previous section, the beginning of the early encounter between the different Christian traditions in Ethiopia was filled with contempt, distrust, and suspicion. The polemic of the accusation of being heretical and schismatic has been mutual and contributed to the growing antagonism. The antagonism reached its peak at the end of the twentieth century when Evangelicals emerged from the margins into the public space.[37]

For a long time, Evangelicals have been severely harassed by Orthodox Church clergy and believers. They have experienced ostracization, social/family exclusion, physical attack, imprisonment, and harassment both individually and as a community. The term "mission" was used to express the foreign missionaries' social services, and then it continued as a label to designate Evangelical Christians. The tag *metewoch* ("foreigners/newcomers") identified the Evangelicals as foreigners. As historian Tibebe Eshete has stated, the label *mete* is a politically loaded

36 Taddesse Tamrat, "Evangelizing the Evangelized," 30.

37 Eshete, *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia*, 305. In 1962, the total number of Evangelicals was 250,000—less than 1 percent of a total population of 26 million. Since the Communist government was overthrown in 1991, the number of believers has dramatically grown to 4 or 5 million. As Eshete explains, in the 90s Evangelicals became determined to enter the social and political arena of the nation with the vision of "redeeming" the nation for Christ (305–6, 310). Many Evangelicals have taken higher positions in the government, including the current prime minister. And Evangelicals are currently around 22.8 percent of a total population of 113 million. (See https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/ethiopia/.) Evangelicals claim between 25 percent and 30 percent of the total population.

word chosen exclusively to attack the Evangelicals.[38] A heavily loaded term used to express the new faith as a white people's religion, implying that the Evangelical faith is not the authentic expression of Ethiopian Christianity.[39] Because of this, Protestants were ostracized from social groups, and Orthodox Christian parents kicked their young Evangelical kids out of their houses for fear of being excluded from society.

Evangelical Christianity has snowballed in the past half a century, with many agreeing that the persecution—including ridiculing and insulting—has been a major contributing factor to its growth.[40] Now Evangelicals are no longer on the periphery. Becoming influential in the nation, they have evolved into the attackers' side, ridiculing the Orthodox believers in media, evangelistic campaigns, one-to-one interactions, and theological arguments. Evangelicals consider themselves enlightened people and label the Orthodox believers who live in darkness under the law of the Old Testament as *Ahzab*, or gentiles, denoting people lost without Christ.[41] Evangelicals also view Orthodox Christians as idol worshipers because of the Orthodox doctrine of Mary, the ark, saints, and angels.[42]

Ethiopia is often portrayed by Ethiopians as a unique case of religious tolerance and peaceful relations.[43] Although it's true there has been an experience of peaceful coexistence in the country, religious conflict has also, in parallel, been part of history.[44] Polarization among the two faith communities that includes violent clashes, assaults, ostracization, mockery, and insult toward one another has been increasing in the past decade. Orthodox and Evangelical Christians

38 Eshete, *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia*, 217.

39 Daniel, *Perception and Identity*, 243.

40 Eshete, *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia*, 301–7. See also Jörg Haustein, "Introduction," in *Writing Religious History: The Historiography of Ethiopian Pentecostalism* (Wiesbadan: Harrassowitz, 2011), 1–36, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvc16prg.5.

41 Daniel, *Perception and Identity*, 232.

42 Mega-church pastors and well-known singers call Orthodox believers "idol worshippers" in broadcast sermons or songs. One of the well-known young evangelical pastors recently called them "idol worshippers" in a televised sermon, leading to a nationwide controversy, even among Evangelical theologians. See ተክለ ሐይማኖት፤ ተአምረ ማርያም ዮናታን አክሊሉ 2015 (Marsil TV worldwide), YouTube video, 8:21, accessed April 26, 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HGcnVqkCPcI&list=PLB3jB-nP7wWA0bSZxRfr2MEGV5OV254kg&index=1&t=245s.

43 Zarihun Degu, "Inter Religious Tolerance and Peaceful Co-Existence in Ethiopia," accessed April 5, 2024, https://au.int/sites/default/files/newsevents/workingdocuments/30164-wd-tolerance_and_coexistence_in_ethiopia_by_pastor_zerihun_degu.pdf.

44 Hussein Ahmed, "Coexistence and/or Confrontation? Towards a Reappraisal of Christian-Muslim Encounter in Contemporary Ethiopia," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 36, no. 1 (2006): 4–22.

constitute 67 percent combined of the total population: 44 percent adhere to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, and 23 percent consider themselves Evangelical Christians.[45] Terje Østebø argues that religious tensions are increasing in Ethiopia as groups struggle for dominance and attempt to reclaim lost space. This has led to conflicts and mutual suspicion rooted in questions about political structures, national identity, and the meaning of Ethiopia. This, in turn, has sharpened religious boundaries and deepened interreligious tensions.[46]

Theological Publication as a Bridge for Interfaith Dialogue

The concept of ecumenism among different religious groups in Ethiopia currently seems a luxury. Authentic interfaith dialogue in the Trinitarian Christian tradition—let alone ecumenical cooperation with wider religious groups—is almost becoming impossible. While a few attempts at ecumenical dialogue in history have taken place, broader ecumenical attempts have been unsuccessful.[47] Ecumenism in any meaningful and organized form is not present.[48]

Yet somehow a solid ecumenical tie exists among the Evangelical churches of Ethiopia. The ecumenical relationship grew to establish an umbrella organization in 1976, and from that organization the Evangelical Churches Fellowship of Ethiopia (ECFE) was launched with nine founding member churches.

The ECFE currently claims to represent more than 90 percent of Evangelical believers.[49] One of the many factors contributing to the solid ecumenical tie for Evangelicals is a publication circulated across Evangelical denominational boundaries. The media and publication contributing to the ecumenical collaboration of Evangelicals was Yemserach Dimts radio,[50] which played a significant role since its inception in 1963 in disseminating Evangelical faith, contributing to disciple-making efforts, and consolidating the collaboration among Evangelicals. Publishers such as SIM (currently, Serving in Mission) have also contributed to this unity by publishing works by authors from various Evangelical denominations. Additionally, magazines like *Misiker Berhan*, *Hiwote*, *Berhan*, *Hebron*, and

45 "2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Ethiopia" (U.S. Department of State, Office of International Religious Freedom), accessed April 8, 2024, https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom/ethiopia/.

46 Østebø, "Religious Dynamics and Conflicts in Contemporary Ethiopia."

47 Eshete, *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia*, 232; Daniel, *Perception and Identity*, 405.

48 Desta Heliso et al., "Theological Education in Ethiopia," in *Handbook of Theological Education in Africa*, ed. Isabel Apawo Phiri et al. (1517 Media, 2013), 164–74, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1ddcphf.24.

49 Daniel, *Perception and Identity*, 409.

50 This radio station is no longer functional.

Misiker were published regularly by different denominations but had contributors from and circulated among all Evangelical circles. They served as a space to interpret the Bible together, with contributors representing different Evangelical traditions. In addition, those publications used to serve as a space for dialogue on theological differences, history, and issues arising among Evangelicals.

Though there are few studies of the history and contribution of religious publications, several religious books, magazines, and newsletters have been published in the Evangelical and Orthodox churches.[51] However, publications aimed at interfaith dialogue and fostering ecumenical relations are nonexistent. Established publications focus on their respective faith community, with the aim of discipleship and evangelism; most follow an apologetic approach of protecting their constituents from others rather than attending to mutual understanding. A few were founded from the Evangelical side to instigate reformation and restoration in the Orthodox Church.[52]

Starting in the past decade, print media targeting a general audience has been supplanted mainly by television and social media platforms. Publications that used to be owned by denominations placed restrictions on their content. Now, in comparison, individuals or independent churches operate the new religious television and social media platforms with loose accountability. Those platforms "have become important venues for religious activism, significantly contributing to intensified polarization and exacerbated tensions." A number of faith-based online activists have created "their own blogs, YouTube channels, and Facebook pages, where they—in addition to religious preaching—often launch polemic attacks against each other, thus accentuating violent conflicts and deepening notions of hatred."[53]

Since most of the clergy who play a critical role in ecumenical relations are trained in theological education institutions, those institutions by default also play a critical role in shaping the discussions and ecumenical interactions. Theological education institutions are ideal places to foster ecumenical understanding. As Desta Heliso contends, "One task of theological institutions is generating ideas and starting and sustaining the debate and dialogue in an honest but sensitive, critical but constructive manner."[54]

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51 Mulatu Moges and Terje Skjerdal, "Media and Religion in Ethiopia" (Addis Ababa, January 2024), https://afromedia.network/latest/news/media-and-religion-in-ethiopia-a-research-report/.

52 Eshete, *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia*, 46.

53 Østebø, "Religious Dynamics and Conflicts in Contemporary Ethiopia." Østebø notes that minimal in-depth research has been conducted on the involvement of media sites and individuals in online activism and their contribution to intensifying religious polarization.

54 Heliso et al., "Theological Education in Ethiopia," 173.

When seminaries and platforms owned by churches are the sole providers of theological and religious education, they should have room to contribute dialogue while maintaining their identity. Yet, currently, such effort is minimal or nonexistent. As briefly seen above, one source of the problem concerns the information available to members of each tradition from the trained clergy of the respective faith traditions. Those trained ministers' scholarly writings and publications focus on distinctive theological teachings and apologetics rather than mutual understanding between different faith traditions.

A new publication would develop resources that could be used in theological education curricula and church teaching materials. As publications circulating among the different Evangelical denominations contributed greatly to dialogue and unity in the past, I argue that a new publication today may have a similar effect across Orthodox-Evangelical relations. The publications among Evangelicals served as a space to reflect on biblical interpretation, theological differences, history, and issues among the communities. Similarly, a new form of publication could facilitate dialogue and serve as a space to reflect and reason for Ethiopian Orthodox and Evangelical believers and could also extend to other faith traditions.

Academic Journal: Creating a Space to Reason Together on Differences

In his address at a conference gathered to discuss the ecumenical initiative in Ethiopia, Father Petros Berga summarized the Ethiopian interchurch relations this way: "In Ethiopia, the 'Christian Other' tends to be seen as a rival; the enrichment of seeing ourselves through the conceptual lenses of the other is ignored. Thus, the potential benefit of seeing oneself in a wider perspective is lost." He recommended a genuine dialogue that helps "penetrate the world of the other while gaining a better understanding of self, which permits religious discourse to take its rightful place as a creative and liberating element in the public domain."[55]

As briefly seen in the previous section, one source of the current lack of interfaith dialogue concerns the information available to members of each tradition from the trained clergy. A new publication could help the clergy and theologians "penetrate the world of the other." Furthermore, it could provide a space to see one's Christian identity, tradition, and theology from a broader perspective. Finally, it would contribute to developing resources for theological education curricula and church teaching materials to help address the community's

55 Petros Berga, "The Objective of the Ecumenical Conference in Ethiopia" (An Ecumenical Initiative in Ethiopia—Preliminary Conference Proceedings, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, November 28, 2005).

current issues as Ethiopians rather than fueling the existing polarization among Christians.

An impartial academic journal has the potential to create a "public space" for dialogue for scholars, theologians, clergy, historians, and anyone interested in contributing from both traditions and beyond. Initiating the space for discussion helps to learn how others define themselves and enter the experience and world of others. In the words of Mikhail Bakhtin, language helps to "penetrate the world of the other."[56]

To develop such a journal, its purpose is a crucial question that should be clarified first. Sometimes ecumenical endeavors do not recognize differences, and instead they propose an overnight coming together or unity in Christ. In the conference mentioned earlier, Gemechisa Moroda and Father Petros Berga reasoned that the purpose of ecumenical relations should be to focus on the common threats that Christians are facing and tackling the problems of humanitarian and ecological crises and ethical and moral issues of the community.[57] To the contrary, tackling the common threats should be the benefits of coming together; it cannot be the driving purpose of the dialogue. The significance of inter-Christian dialogue should be beyond the common threats Christians face today, so that the relationship will not halt when those causes stop being a problem in the community.

Indeed, the goal of interfaith dialogue among Christians is to obey Jesus's prayer "that they may all be one" (John 17:21). As Bosch puts it, "It is not simply derived from the new world situation or changed circumstances, but from God's gift of unity in the one Body of Christ."[58] While the aim is unity, that does not mean letting the differences go away and becoming uniform. As Bosch states, the purpose of Christian unity is not "leveling differences, a shallow reductionism, a kind of ecumenical broth. Our differences are genuine and have to be treated as such."[59]

Ethiopia's two Christian faith traditions have genuine differences in identity, history, theology, and liturgy. The new journal should serve as a space that facilitates ecumenical dialogue between these two faith traditions. The aim of the ecumenical dialogue should involve gradually unraveling the layers of the issues

56 Berga, "The Objective of the Ecumenical Conference in Ethiopia."

57 Gemechisa Morodo, "An Evangelical Perspective on the Theme of Conference" (An Ecumenical Initiative in Ethiopia—Preliminary Conference Proceedings, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, November 28, 2005), 53–57. And Petros Berga, "The Objective of the Ecumenical Conference in Ethiopia," 19–20.

58 David Jacobus Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, Twentieth-anniversary ed., American Society of Missiology Series, no. 16 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2011), 475.

59 Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 464.

of the points of division. The end might not be agreeing on everything but getting the wisdom to understand each other, and looking for ways to come together on the agreed-upon issues.

As stated in the historical section above, the primary source of the difference between the Orthodox and Evangelical Christians arises from the political circumstances accompanying the arrival of Evangelicals and Protestants as religions associated with foreign powers and with foreign aid, in contrast with the much longer and more deeply locally rooted history of the Orthodox Church.

The polarity also extends to biblical interpretation and theological differences. As seen above, a new journal would aim to facilitate a discussion of those differences. Therefore, the suitable pathway for the journal to facilitate the conversation would be to follow the concept of "scriptural reasoning." As David F. Ford posits, scriptural reasoning is a "wisdom-seeking engagement" within different faith traditions. It draws people of varying faiths into engagement with each other in conversation, utilizing Scriptures and interpretations.[60] The reason for placing Scripture in the center of the interfaith discussion is that "scripture is at the heart of each tradition's identity."[61]

Ethiopian Orthodox Church priest Fisseha Tadesse suggests starting the ecumenical dialogue from the question of identity, noting that "any communicated facts inevitably carry interpretations, which are influenced by who the interpreter is."[62] An attempt to deal with the identity and issues of the two faith traditions in Ethiopia certainly involves Scripture and its interpretation. As Ford states, the aim of scriptural reasoning might not necessarily be consensus but recognition of profound differences by being open to learning to argue with courtesy and truth.[63]

Bosch reports, "Ecumenism or *ecumenical dialogue* is not a passive and semi-reluctant coming together but an active and deliberate living and working together."[64] This journal should integrate ecumenical sensitivity and critique—sensitivity to the other tradition's memories, history, sacraments, liturgical rituals, and critical interaction with theological commonalities and distinctives. As Jesus said, "The measure you give will be the measure you get . . . in everything do to others as you would have them do to you" (Matt 7:2, 12). This is a perfect

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60 David F. Ford, "An Interfaith Wisdom: Scriptural Reasoning between Jews, Christians, and Muslims" in *The Promise of Scriptural Reasoning*, eds. David F. Ford and C. C. Pecknold (Malden, MA; Blackwell, 2006), 1–22.

61 Ford, "An Interfaith Wisdom," 1.

62 Fisseha Tadesse, "An Orthodox Perspective on the Theme of Conference" (An Ecumenical Initiative in Ethiopia—Preliminary Conference Proceedings, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, November 28, 2005), 47–50.

63 Ford, "An Interfaith Wisdom," 5.

64 Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 475–76.

principle for ecumenical mutual understanding and critique. The foundation for the journal and deeper interaction between the two Christian traditions should be established on Jesus's principle of doing to others as you expect from others.

Ethiopian Orthodox and Evangelical Christians: Facilitating Space for Dialogue

When I started this project, I thought I knew the history of Christianity in Ethiopia. But when I began reading in depth, I realized I needed to learn more. One of the significant benefits of this study is helping me understand the history of the country and how it is interpreted by different faith communities.

The growing extreme polarization among Christians in Ethiopia urgently needs a response and solution. I envision seeing a society that satisfies its soul from the fruit of being united as a Body of Christ. A community that comes together for prayer and reading the Scriptures together and respects others' interpretations and experiences. Publications that preach unity and critical engagements among the Ethiopian Orthodox and Evangelical Christian faith traditions rather than preaching hate. Generally, I suggest initiating a space that facilitates dialogue for believers from both faith traditions.

MISSION AND PEACE IN THE MESERETE KRISTOS CHURCH

1. Missionary Influences and Voices

Sowing and Reaping

A Story of Faithfulness

Carl E. Hansen

You may have heard the news that Mary Kathryn Mishler, at 102 years of age, passed away last summer on September 7 in Goshen, Indiana. To my knowledge, Mary was the last survivor of the original team of Mennonite pioneers who began mission work in Ethiopia seventy-seven years ago.

As newlyweds, Mary and her late husband, Dorsa Mishler, led that first team to Ethiopia with the Mennonite Relief Committee from late December 1945 to 1948.[1] This past summer, it was my privilege to escort two Ethiopian Meserete Kristos Church fraternal guests to visit Mary in her nursing home bed. The one-hundred-and-two-year-old saint told us that her and Dorsa's two years in Ethiopia were among the happiest and most fulfilling of their lives.

Besides doing relief work, Dorsa and Mary, along with their team, "planted seeds," establishing the first hospital in Nazareth. Today, that hospital has grown to become the largest regional referral hospital and medical college in all of Oromia Region.[2]

Other significant seeds were also planted that germinated much more slowly. These seeds took root in the minds and hearts of the people with whom the Mishlers worked. At first, the seeds germinated almost invisibly over a six-year period. Finally, in 1951, the first seedlings, like "ten trees planted,"[3] emerged and grew and multiplied, becoming known as the Meserete Kristos Church (MKC).

Carl Edward Hansen was a missionary in Eastern Africa for more than thirty-two years. To this day, Carl—with his wife, Vera Hansen—continues raising support for Meserete Kristos College, now a seminary in Ethiopia, while living in Harrisonburg, Virginia, close to his daughters and grandchildren. The information in this article is based on the author's extensive experience relating to the Meserete Kristos Church.

1 Nathan B. Hege, *Beyond Our Prayers: Anabaptist Church Growth in Ethiopia, 1948–1998* (Scottdale, PA: Herald, 1998), 47–48.

2 See the Adama Hospital and Medical College website at www.adamahmc.edu.et.

3 Hege, *Beyond Our Prayers*, 128–31.

Sowing Seeds

An ancient writer scratched on velum with a stylus:

> Those who sow in tears will reap with songs of joy. Those who go out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with them. (Ps 126:5, 6 NIV)

I am sure these words were familiar to that small band of fresh, young, committed Mennonite workers as they first set foot in the war-torn country of Ethiopia back in 1945. They came bringing relief supplies and medical assistance to a people devastated by war, poverty, and disease. They came with a deep desire to share good news of deliverance to a people suffering the disadvantages of superstition and unfamiliarity with the gospel message. They came with the "seed" of the gospel, announcing the presence of the kingdom of God. They came determined to establish a church founded upon Jesus Christ.

Their task was not easy. Coming from secure and comfortable homes and churches and monocultural communities, this small band of pioneer missionaries found themselves isolated in a strange land, among a people of unfamiliar language and a culture vastly different from their own. They found themselves and their children surrounded by strange diseases—diseases that earned Africa the chilling label "The White Man's Grave."[4]

They were eyed with deep suspicion by the feudal government, which sought to protect its people's sovereignty from any foreign colonizing aspirations or actions. They were also viewed with equal suspicion by the conservative privileged aristocrats and their Orthodox priests.

In addition, the Ethiopian people were highly suspicious of white people, whom they commonly referred to as "ferengeti."[5] They had just fought a terrible war against white Italian Catholics who had tried to colonize and convert them. In

4 Before the discovery of quinine, "one of the main obstacles to European penetration of large parts of Africa was malaria. Because Africans had lived for generations with mosquitoes spreading malaria, many had some sort of resistance or capacity to fight a malaria attack. This was not the case with Europeans, who died in great numbers. As a result, the coast of Sierra Leone became known as the White Man's Grave because of this." See BBC World Service, "The Story of Africa," Africa and Europe, 1800–1914, https://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/africa/features/storyofafrica/11generic1.shtml.

5 Henok T. Mekonin, "A Sense of Pride and Suspicion: Ethiopia's Habitus and Its Impact on Interactions with Foreigners," Anabaptist Historians: Bringing the Anabaptist Past into a Digital Century (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/.

the minds of the common people, all white people were "Italians" and "Catholics" as well as potential colonizers.[6]

Against these great odds, the pioneer missionaries, motivated and empowered by the love of Christ, gave themselves sacrificially to meet the gigantic human needs they were encountering. Their compassionate medical care, patient teaching, and generous acts of kindness slowly eroded the walls of suspicion while they planted seeds of the kingdom.

Reaping the Harvest

The seeds planted by these early missionaries have sprouted, matured, and borne fruit. Thanks to their planting, there has been a mighty harvest. Today the Meserete Kristos Church bears witness to the kingdom of God in Ethiopia. Each Sunday, over 900,000 Ethiopian brothers and sisters, including their children, join in a mighty chorus of worship in over 1,400 congregations and 1,945 church-planting centers scattered all over Ethiopia.[7]

Clearly, North American Mennonites need not send missionaries to Ethiopia anymore. In fact, even back when Mennonite missionaries were planting seeds among young Ethiopians, the real mission of the church happened when the local people took the message to heart and worked with it. Currently, the Meserete Kristos Church supports over 2,000 full-time evangelists, pastors, teachers, missionaries, and administrators, and 2,500 supporting staff. The church also calls, educates, sends, and supports over 417 Ethiopian missionaries to its neighbor communities within the country and to its neighboring countries. And Desalegn Abebe Ejo, President of the Meserete Kristos Church, recently reported that the church grew by 15.5 percent last year.[8]

Through its Meserete Kristos Church Development Commission (MKC-DC), the church carries out its ministry of "serving the whole person through community-based development programs." With the assistance of several outside funding agencies, it is implementing 93 projects, assisting over 82,000 beneficiaries in poor, marginalized, and vulnerable communities.[9]

The church's Prison Ministry team works in over fifty prisons, meeting human needs such as providing clothing, medication, sanitation, counseling, and pastoral care, as well as Bible studies and evangelism. This ministry has led

6 Hege, *Beyond Our Prayers*, 34.

7 Desalegn Abebe Ejo, president of the Meserete Kristos Church, December 2023 email to the author.

8 Abebe Ejo, December 2023 email to the author.

9 See the current website of the Meserete Kristos Church Development Commission: Meserete Kristos Church Development Commission (MKC-DC), accessed April 9, 2024, https://mkcdcheadoffice.blogspot.com.

to the transformation of several thousand lives and the formation and growth of thriving congregations within many of the prisons. Several transformed prisoners, upon their release, have become effective church leaders. The ministry also works with prison officials and community leaders, giving training in restorative justice, peacemaking, and reconciliation.

The church also has its own leadership training programs. These include local congregational Bible schools and regional Bible institutes. The Meserete Kristos Seminary has over 300 church leaders and potential leaders studying on three campuses. Currently, 39 graduate students are studying in a Master of Arts in Theology and Global Anabaptism (MATGA) program administrated mostly online by the Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary (AMBS) in Elkhart, Indiana. Further, 776 men and women are studying in various programs in the more than 20 regional Bible colleges in various parts of the nation.[10]

While the government concerns itself with the macro level of rebellion, terrorism, and war, youth are the most likely to join in exacerbating conflict through protesting or violent demonstrations on the micro level. They can easily be persuaded or conned into taking sides and joining one of the several dissenting terrorist militias or the government's defense forces. The church's Peacebuilding Department[11] gives trainings to youth, encouraging them to consider alternatives to violence in solving problems. It also carries out dialogues in areas of conflict, bringing community leaders together to seek nonviolent effective solutions.

In ecumenical relationships, the Meserete Kristos Church was one of the ten founding members of the Evangelical Churches Fellowship of Ethiopia (ECFE). Today that Fellowship has more than one hundred denominational members. Since its beginning, MKC members have played prominent leadership roles. In August 2023, at its thirty-eighth annual general assembly, the ECFE elected Pastor Desalegn Abebe Ejo, President of MKC, as its chairperson.[12]

The Meserete Kristos Church is now carrying on the enormous tasks of planting seeds, nurturing new believers, and reaping a huge harvest. They no longer need outside assistance to plant the seeds.

Outside help is still needed, however, for the challenging tasks of institution building and leadership training. Hundreds of brothers and sisters in North America continue to partner with the Ethiopian church through organizations such as Mennonite Central Committee, Meserete Kristos College Link, Northwest Mennonite Conference, and Mennonite Church Canada in support of this huge task of educating the next generation of leaders. With a 15.5 percent growth rate, in the midst of continuing poverty aggravated by wars and famines,

10 This information is based upon the author's extensive experience relating to the Meserete Kristos Church.

11 Meserete Kristos Church Quarterly Newsletter, September 2023, 8.

12 Meserete Kristos Church Quarterly Newsletter, September 2023, 9.

the church's need for leadership training continues to outstrip its internal capacity to meet that need.

God Gave the Increase!

A year ago in August, my wife, Vera, and I attended MKC's annual General Delegates Assembly in the new Multipurpose Hall on the Meserete Kristos Seminary campus at Debre Zeit. For me, it was an overwhelming experience. Memories of the struggles of the past flooded back. In 1967 when we first taught at the Nazareth Bible Academy,[13] the whole church had fewer than six hundred members fellowshipping in five congregations.

I also remembered that after the Derg oppression, when Vera and I returned in 1996, the newly formed MKC Bible Institute had a total of ten evangelists as students crowded into a miniscule, rented compound.[14] And now, seeing that roughly 75 percent of the delegates in that leadership body were graduates of at least one of the college's programs, and meeting in this spacious campus, my heart overflowed with joy. While mingling with these brothers and sisters, they reminded me again and again, with deep gratitude, "This is your fruit!" Of course, they meant this affirmation collectively applying to the whole host of early missionaries who faithfully planted the first seeds. Vera and I are the few surviving representatives of those who went before. What an honor!

This past October, it was my privilege to visit Ethiopia briefly. One of the pastors who had been my student twenty years ago invited me to speak at the Meri Berhan MKC in Addis. More than eight hundred eager worshippers filled this beautiful new house of worship, with more than two hundred others sitting in a shelter outside the open windows. I was told that this congregation had planted four new congregations within the past year and that they were planning on dividing one more time to accommodate the excess members in another church plant.

Again and again, the thought came back to me: *Yes, at least some of this likely would not have happened without the sacrificial service of those pioneers who went before us and planted those first seeds. Nor is it likely that the seminary campus with its 2,270 graduates would have developed without the prayers and financial support of hundreds of other supporters. Truly "we are laborers together with God."* As when the Apostle planted and Apollos watered, God gave the increase!

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13 Before it was closed by the Derg regime, Nazareth Bible Academy was built and opened its doors on September 29, 1959, by missionaries and Ethiopian Christians for young Christian Ethiopians, with the vision and hope of developing better leadership through higher education. See Carl Hansen, *Into Abyssinia: The Odyssey of a Family* [Chronicles Hansen's First Eight Years in Ethiopia, 1967–1975] (Bloomington, IN: Westbow, 2023), 17, 21.

14 January 1 of this year marked the thirtieth anniversary of the launching of the Meserete Kristos Church Bible Institute, which has grown to become the MK Seminary.

Living Cloud of Witnesses to Ethiopia

Ruth Haile Gelane

It was midsummer 2023 in Northern Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, USA, and more than sixty people had gathered together in the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) meeting place. The participants had come from various states, provinces, and cities in the US and Canada to attend the MCC/Eastern Mennonite Missions Ethiopia Alumni Reunion. Most of the people attending had lived in Ethiopia as missionaries; the others had served, and are currently serving, at the MCC Ethiopia office as country representatives. A few of the missionaries and country representatives brought their young children with them. Approximately fifteen attendees were serving as professors at Meserete Kristos College/Seminary (MKC/MKS) and had solid and long ties with the church and the seminary. Also in attendance were the current president of the Meserete Kristos Church, Desalegn Abebe Ejo, and the current principal of Meserete Kristos College/Seminary, Gishu Jebecha Ebissa.

Mennonite missionaries have had a long history with Ethiopia, beginning with their arrival in the country in late December of 1945. The idea of mission work in Ethiopia, however, was not new at that time; it had first been discussed more than fifteen years earlier in 1929. According to Nathan B. Hege, "Ethiopia was not unknown to Orie Miller, Secretary of Eastern Mennonite Board of Missions in Pennsylvania. In 1929 he had prompted I. E. Burkhart of the Mennonite Board of Missions, Elkhart, Indiana, to address its annual meeting on how Africa was calling the Mennonite Church."[1]

Over the next years, the idea of mission work in Africa remained in Mennonites' hearts. As John E. Sharp, author of Orie O. Miller's story, stated, "In January 1933, Eastern Mennonite Board of Missions, (EMM) announced that eight candidates had come forward and that either Ethiopia or Nigeria would be

Ruth Haile Gelane is a second-year Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary student in the Master of Arts: Theology and Peace Studies program.

1 Nathan B. Hege, *Beyond Our Prayers: Anabaptist Church Growth in Ethiopia, 1948–1998* (Scottdale, PA: Herald, 1998), 43.

the probable field."[2] Continuing his discussion of the mission work in Africa, Sharp noted that in the annual meeting people were selected to explore those African countries.

Italy's invasion of Ethiopia, however, held Mennonite missionaries back from the country. The war years, from 1936 to 1941, were a tough time for Ethiopians, especially in the north. Tibebe Eshete,[3] author of *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia*, thoroughly discusses Ethiopian history in relation to missionaries, including Mennonites, who came from various places to Ethiopia. As Eshete stated, "The Italian occupation period lasted from 1936 to 1941. Although brief, the occupation period marked a major decentering phase in Ethiopian history with several disruptive influences and sociopolitical ramifications."[4]

The Italian invasion created many crises within the country.[5] This period was difficult for the Ethiopians, but it also created an opportunity for the Mennonite missionaries to come to Ethiopia. The opening came about because Emperor Haile Selassie I recognized that missionaries could provide relief and development work and thus could be part of his plan for Ethiopian restoration.

Emperor Haile Selassie I always reminded the missionaries of the decree of 1944. Eshete describes this decree as follows: "On August 27, 1944, the Ethiopian government issued a mission decree that was to guide expatriate mission activities in Ethiopia. The imperative for issuing the decree was twofold: (1) to effect closer collaborations between the various agencies of the government and missions; and (2) to channel mission efforts into non-Orthodox areas to avoid overlapping."[6]

In 1945, MCC worked with the Mennonite Relief Committe in Elkhart, Indiana, to send clothing and medical supplies on consignment to post-war Ethiopia. Thus began the long-running period of Mennonite relief and development work in Ethiopia. Because of the emperor's decree, the first relief workers, who arrived in 1947, were constrained to focus on relief and development work. According to the report of the MCC annual meeting held January 9–10, 1948, there were twelve Mennonite development and relief workers in Ethiopia.

The missionaries' work was divided into two phases: healing and teaching. The clinic and hospital in Nazareth served about ninety-five people each day, with the average daily census of the hospital hovering around thirty people. A small

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2 John E. Sharp, *My Calling to Fulfill: The Orie O. Miller Story* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald, 2015), 181.

3 Eshete (PhD, Michigan State University) is an Assistant Professor of History at Calvin College.

4 Tibebe Eshete, *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia: Resistance and Resilience* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2009), 85.

5 The international governments supported Emperor Haile Selassie I in overcoming the Italian invasion.

6 Eshete, *Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia*, 94.

three-ton shipment of clothing was also delivered to the unit over the course of the year, and a fully qualified primary dresser course (a preparatory class to support primary health care) was offered under the guidance of Dorsa Mishler. Seventeen students completed the course and became certified as hospital workers. As a benefit of being part of the program, male employees were provided with supervised recreation and female employees were provided with needlework classes. An essential feature of the program over the years was the visit of Emperor Haile Selassie I, who expressed his interest in and appreciation for the program.[7]

The year 1951 was a transitional period for the Mennonite relief workers. According to the annual report of the Mennonite Central Committee, "The medical work was the center of the Ethiopian program. At the beginning of the year plans were already underway for launching a full-scale mission program under direction of the Eastern Mennonite Board of Missions and Charities. This transfer from relief to missions was made in March."[8]

This decades-long service has lasted for more than seventy years, has produced many fruits, and is a solution for thousands of people in Ethiopia. After the MKC officially opened, the church and MCC worked in collaboration to address the needs of many Ethiopians.

On July 1, 2023, at the Meserete Kristos Church Missionaries Alumni program's reunion, current MCC Ethiopia representatives Rebecca Mosley and Paul Mosley presented a report of MCC's work and that of their partner organizations. They began their report by reading 1 Corinthians 3:10: "According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building on it. Each builder must choose with care how to build on it." Then they shared on the following three themes: (1) education, (2) Meserete Kristos Church Prison Ministry, and (3) Meserete Kristos Church Peacebuilding.

Education

In 1948, the Mennonite Board of Missions, located in Elkhart, Indiana, appointed its first teachers to teach in government schools in Addis Ababa.[9] Those teachers served in the eastern part of Ethiopia and were able to open schools. As Hege noted, the mission school students became successful in different areas, and they were influential in MKC leadership. Schools were the place that shaped a young generation to become better citizens and peaceful persons. One of the strengths of the education program in Ethiopia is that it is highly supported by the churches.

7 Mennonite Central Committee Annual Meeting, January 1948, (Goshen, IN).

8 "The Annual Report of the Mennonite Central Committee" (December 1, 1950), 41.

9 Hege, *Beyond Our Prayers*, 68.

MCC Ethiopia served for decades in Ethiopia. Rebecca and Paul reported that the civil war and economic inflation in Ethiopia challenged the work of MCC and MCC partner organizations. They also remarked, however, that because the missionaries were known and lived in Ethiopia during the challenging time of the Derg regime, their work made a memorable impact on the Ethiopians.

Education is one of the great successes of MCC Ethiopia's partnership with the Beza Community Development Association. To illustrate, in 2023, national exams were given to grade 12 students in a way that was different from normal to prevent cheating. Of all the students who took this exam, only 3 percent passed. Of the twelve students supported by MCC Ethiopia and Beza Community Development who took the exam, all of them passed.

Among the MCC Ethiopia current beneficiaries are needy children and their families. The school funding project initially fed street children and the poorest communities but had to stop doing so because of funding restrictions. Rebecca noted how painful it was to see children with empty lunch boxes because their families had nothing to give them for meals. She reported that MCC Ethiopia is thinking of a systemic solution for the poorest children. This means starting with parents forming a self-help group among themselves for income generating and social support.

Prison Ministry

The Mediation Process

MCC Ethiopia is partnering with the Prison Ministry of MKC. Prayer is a vital part of that partnership; Rebecca mentioned that they pray every week. MKC, which has sustained the ministry for twenty-five years, raises most of the finances for the project through the congregation and members. This is a tremendous amount of money to raise to support a vulnerable group.

Prison ministry clearly holds high priority for MCK. In the local churches, February 7 is a "day of prisoners," and the Sunday worship and sermon are shaped by the Matthew 25:42–43 theme of prisoners: "For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me."

MKC provides mediation through its prison ministry for reconciliation between the offender's family and the victim's family. Eventually, they hold a ceremony where the offender's families bring a lamb to use as part of the reconciliation time. The victim's family slaughters the lamb, and both families cross over the lamb as a sign of crossing a demarcation line to a new relationship of peace. Finally, they share food together. Then the clans reconcile with each other

officially in the prison system. When families use this reconciliation method, there is an opportunity for some reduction of prison sentences.

The prisons and communities where MCK does this reconciliation work collaborate to stop the revenge-killing culture. The MKC prison ministry process includes working with people in the prison and in the local community along with a group of elders who are trained in meditation and can help develop the prisoners' capacity to support themselves when they leave prison. There is also a training program of peer mediators within the prison itself to help those who are struggling with depression and various psychological disorders.

The relationship between Meserete Kristos Church staff and the government prison staff is excellent. To illustrate this, Rebecca shared about a big problem and situation of unrest in the Debre Birhan prison when a military group tried to get some of their members out of prison, and armed people surrounded the prison. When the government military decided it was better for just that select group of prisoners to leave, the other prisoners protested the unfair treatment. In the midst of great unrest and tension, the government military called the MKC chaplain to come and mediate the situation. The chaplain's name is Tigist, and she is a graduate of Meserete Kristos Seminary; now, she is the chaplain for the women in the prison ministry.

The Story of Habtamu Mulugeta

Habtamu Mulugeta's story shows how God works in the MKC prison ministry through his children to rescue vulnerable groups. Frihewet Abera, a peacebuilding officer in the MKC prison ministry, shared Mulugeta's story with me.

Habtamu Mulugeta was born in 1993 in Ejerie, Oromia, region of Ethiopia. When Mulugeta grew up, he was rebellious and quarrelsome. One day he took part in a group fight that resulted in a death, so he was accused of murder and sent to prison in 2016.

When Mulugeta entered the prison, he felt so abandoned and forgotten, and he was in despair. He tried to kill himself many times, but he could not succeed. A fellow prisoner who understood he was in trouble approached him and told him his own life story. Apart from the reason he became a prisoner, his life in prison was almost entirely similar to Mulugeta's life. This friend shared with him a solution by which he got rid of all the anxiety that he had experienced. Then he introduced Mulugeta to the prison chaplain assigned by Meserete Kristos Church prison ministry, who counseled and prayed for him, so Mulugeta slept peacefully that day.

Mulugeta often met the chaplain while going to the prison chapel. Eventually he accepted the Lord Jesus as his savior. Then Mulugeta trained as a tailor. After rising from level 1 to level 3, he graduated from the program. Still in prison, he began working and saving money; his life changed, and he became a different person.

So, when Mulugeta was leading his life well and became stable, he wanted to ask forgiveness from the victim's family that he had wronged. He sent his family to reconcile with the victim's family, but it did not work. Then the reconciliation process was started for Mulugeta through the Meserete Kristos Church Reconciliation Service, and, as his release date was approaching, the process succeeded and he reconciled with the victim's family.

Finally, Mulugeta was released from prison in 2020. He rejoined his family and the community. Everyone accepted him peacefully when they saw that his behavior had changed and that he had become a wise and professional tailor.

Mulugeta also bought a sewing machine with the money he had saved while working in prison and started working independently. He gradually expanded his work and opened a clothing store. He trained two needy children, and they started working with him. Now Mulugeta is married and a father of three children. He always expresses his respect and gratitude to the Meserete Kristos Prison Ministry and the prison chaplain. Meserete Kristos Church has contributed significantly to all the good things that have happened to him, Mulugeta says.

Mulugeta's story is just one example of the successful mission work of MKC Prison Ministry—a ministry that helps people seek to reconcile and make peace with the people they were in conflict with.

Peacebuilding

Peg Engle, a nurse, was part of a mobile health team in the Bale region in Ethiopia from 1968 to 1990. Peg and her husband, James Engle, were also in Ethiopia for short-term teaching assignments at Meserete Kristos College/Seminary in 1997–98, 2004, 2008, and 2013. Both Peg and Rebecca shared an incredible story of God's power through the church, specifically through the MKC Peacebuilding project in the community dialogue process,[10] one of the interventions in the western part of Ethiopia, Benishangul-Gumuz.

The story told of violence between ethnic groups and MKC's role in helping to resolve the conflict. Responding to calls to address individual episodes of violence, MKC brought opportunities for dialogue between the people in conflict. In Benishangul-Gumuz, Metekel zone, they set up peacebuilding training and community dialogue. MKC Director of Peacebuilding, Mekonnen Gemeda, a graduate of Meserete Kristos College/Seminary, led one of the training sessions.

10 MKC peace project is under the MKC Development Commission.

In particular, he asked for two people from different religious traditions—Muslim and Christian. As reported by the Anabaptist-Mennonite publication *Anabaptist World,* "One of the volunteers was Dergu Belena. He was from a Gumuz ethnic group, which initiated armed conflict against the government and killed people from other local ethnic groups."[11] Belena, one of the trainers from the Gumuz ethnic group was Muslim. Gemeda told the volunteers that he was going to wash their feet; at first, they were confused and wanted to refuse his offer. But Gemeda insisted that Belena sit down, and Gemeda washed his feet. After he finished washing, he told Belena that he was cleansed from all of his past acts of violence.

This incident was so moving to Belena that, according to *Anabaptist World*, he went home and thought about it, and the next day he "went to the district government administration and asked for a gun with bullets. The administrator asked him why he wanted to get a gun. He told him, 'I am cleansed from my past wrong thoughts and ready to be an ambassador of peace in my community.'"[12] Belena wanted to go back to the forest, to where the armed militants were located, and needed a gun so he would look like them and be accepted as a member. Belena stated that he was going in to talk with them and convince them to disarm, come out of the forest, and return to the community.

After a number of months, Belena came back out with six hundred rebel fighters, who disarmed and joined the community again. "When the authorities asked why he dedicated himself to doing this, he testified that what he learned in the peacebuilding training changed his life and that no service is more satisfying than restoring peace among people."[13]

Remembering Stories and Pictures across the Decades

At the MCC Ethiopia Alumni Reunion weekend, the session of remembering stories and pictures across the decades took everyone back to the 1960s. Six missionaries who were in Ethiopia during that time were among the participants who gathered: Peg Engle, Arlene Kreider, Carl Hansen, Vera Hansen, Herbert Kraybill, and Sharon Kraybill. Their pictures show that they were young people who responded to God's call and traveled across the ocean.

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11 Meserete Kristos Church News, "Inspired by Footwashing, Ethiopian Turns Rebel Fighters to Peace," *Anabaptist World*, Peace and Justice (May 5, 2023), https://anabaptist-world.org/inspired-by-footwashing-ethiopian-turns-rebel-fighters-toward-peace/.

12 The picture of Mekonnen Gemeda washing Dergu Belena's feet and the whole story can be found at the *Anabaptist World* online article "Inspired by Footwashing," https://anabaptistworld.org/inspired-by-footwashing-ethiopian-turns-rebel-fighters-toward-peace/.

13 Meserete Kristos Church News, "Inspired by Footwashing," https://anabaptist-world.org/inspired-by-footwashing-ethiopian-turns-rebel-fighters-toward-peace/.

Arlene Kreider played an unexpected role in MKC's history in the 1980s. Leading up to that time, she first served at Menno Bookstore in Addis Ababa from 1967 to 1977. Then from 1978 to 1980 she served as part of a mobile health team in the Bale region. From 1980 to 1982, she was a manager of the MKC guesthouse in Addis Ababa. Kreider also taught ESL in a government school in Addis Ababa from 1982 to 1989.

In January 1982, the Marxist government confiscated Meserete Kristos Church's offices, worship buildings, bank accounts, and physical property. Kreider was an eyewitness and the first person who heard from the soldiers that the government was going to close MKC. Kreider then shared with the other missionaries what had happened; she was terrified because officials had told her they were also going to close Menno Bookstore. Before any official actions took place, Kreider was able to forewarn Meserete Kristos Church leaders that the Derg regime was going to take the church property and close the church.

The church officially closed in 1982, according to Hege: "On Saturday, five days after the first arrest began, the Nazareth church building was closed and sealed as well as the Wonji and Shoa churches six miles south of Nazareth. The Dire Dawa church was closed on February 17 and the Awash Valley churches—Abadir, Awramelka, and Metahara—on March 12. Then Deder was closed on May 8, Melkawerer, Algerra, and Melkesedi on August 14, and Asebeteferi on August 16, all in 1982."[14]

In 1991 persecution finally came to an end, and the MKC went through a period of explosive growth. According to John D. Roth, "In 2003, Mennonite Church USA (MC USA), then the largest Mennonite church, reported 110,253 baptized members while MKC membership stood at 98,025. Only two years later, the Ethiopian church had grown by more than ten thousand new members, well surpassing membership in the MC USA."[15]

Living Cloud of Witnesses

Mennonite missionaries were the pioneers of the Meserete Kristos Church. The history of the MKC, MKS, and the Meserete Kristos Relief and Development will always be a part of their lives and families. Hearing their stories and seeing their pictures, I was struck by how these missionaries dedicated their lives as young people to being a witness and serving others to reconcile people with God. Although they experienced difficulties—such as navigating different cultures, languages, and environments as well as the challenges of the Derg regime—they did not let those difficulties deter them. Instead, they chose to move forward, to

14 Hege, *Beyond Our Prayers*, 28.

15 John D. Roth, *Stories: How Mennonites Came to Be* (Scottdale, PA: Herald, 2006), 190.

stay in Ethiopia to be a witness to peace and to serve others.[16] As a result, their development and relief work helped many.

The three-day reunion was a quality time with these wonderful people who chose to serve God and be a witness. The event incorporated history, mission, and peacebuilding, highlighting how the missionaries' love for God led them to serve others. It showed God's incredible work throughout the ages and in the living cloud of witnesses who gave their lives to do His will. The former MCC Ethiopia Representative shared Hebrews 6:10: "For God is not unjust; he will not overlook your work and the love that you showed for his sake in serving the saints, as you still do." This verse is meaningful for those who attended the Meserete Kristos Church Missionaries Alumni program's reunion, because they left behind everything and entered a new culture to be a witness.

16 For instance, Peg Engle, who was one of my teachers, shared how hard it was to be a nurse in those difficult days because of defective equipment or lack of transportation. However, she did not let the challenges stop her from following God's call to be an agent of healing in Ethiopia.

Ensuring Sustainable Church Growth by Implementing Tailored Strategies

A Case of Meserete Kristos Church in Ethiopia

Desalegn Abebe Ejo and Kebede Bekere

Planning is part of God's system. God created the universe with a plan. He created everything in order, and the biblical story is full of strategic planning. Following are three key instances: (1) After the fall of humankind into sin, God promised to crush the head of the serpent with the one who would be born of a woman.[1] That promise was a long-term plan. Many years later, at the appointed time, the Lord Jesus Christ came into the world and fulfilled the promise. (2) Jesus Christ also had a plan when He began His ministry; He knew what He was doing in the short and long term. Jesus was not trapped by the daily routines, because He knew what He was supposed to do while on earth; His daily routines fit within His long-term plan. He chose His disciples and equipped them so that they would carry out the mission of spreading the gospel across nations and making them His disciples.[2] (3) Next was the apostle Paul, who employed a strategic approach in his ministry. He had a plan of where and when to go as well as to whom he should preach and how he would deliver the message to his targeted audience. In addition to teaching the Word of God to people, he also equipped young leaders who would take over the responsibility of overseeing the newly established churches in different cities. When Paul was in prison because of his faith, he used a different approach—he reached out to the churches by writing letters.

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Kebede Bekere is an ordained teacher at Meserete Kristos Seminary and director of a national ministry focusing on supporting churches in training, educational material preparation, and consulting.

1 Genesis 3:15, Galatians 4:4.

2 John 17:4.

Strategic planning in the church continues today. This paper outlines the experience and strategies specific to the work of the Meserete Kristos Church in Ethiopia to undertake the Great Commission of Jesus Christ. By briefly overviewing how the church functioned during the Derg/Communist Regime (1974–1991) and during the post-Communist period (1992–2008), we first explore in this case study how the evangelism strategies of MKC have come to be and then provide practical lessons to other churches engaged in planting new churches. Born out of the missionary efforts of the North American Mennonites in the 1940s and 1950s, the Meserete Kristos Church (MKC) has learned how to be resilient in the presence of various challenges and persecutions to continue sharing the gospel with other people.

The Imperative of Evangelism: A Biblical Mandate for Church Growth and Mission

The Bible in the Old Testament indicates that God wanted to reach out to other nations through the people of Israel. God chose the Israelites to minister and make God known to other nations.[3] In the New Testament, Jesus, the incarnated God, preached the gospel of the kingdom of God to people, chose apostles, and commissioned them to preach the gospel to all nations and make them His disciples.[4] As stated in the Book of Acts, the Christians in the early church were active in evangelism—sharing the gospel with other people and leading them to Christ. The Great Commission has generally been perceived as a biblical mandate of the church (the institution and individual believers) to share the gospel with non-Christians.[5] The church needs to develop and equip leaders to undertake this mission.[6]

Evangelization is one of the most important tools for church expansion. Michael A. Ogunewu argues that the church can expand when it evangelizes people by telling them about the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and Jesus as the only Savior and Provider of eternal life. Evangelization is what the

3 Exodus 19:6.

4 Mark 1:14–15; Matthew 28:18–20; Mark 16:15.

5 Rivosa Santosa, Nira Olyvia, and Victor Deak, "The Relationship between Christian Religious Education and The Great Commission Matthew 28:19–20," *International Journal of Social, Policy and Law* 2, no. 4 (August 2021): 66–72, https://www.ijospl.org/index.php/ijospl/article/view/78.

6 Andy Pettigrew, "Christian Leadership and the Great Commission: Foundations for Building Christian Leaders," *Journal of Applied Christian Leadership* 15, no. 1 (2021): 112–28, https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/jacl/vol15/iss1/9.

church has been doing and continues to do to exist as a meaningful church.[7] The head of the Catholic Church, Pope Paul VI, once stated clearly that the church "exists in order to evangelize," which includes preaching and teaching the gospel of Jesus Christ.[8] Historically, not all churches have been faithful to the preaching of the gospel.

An article published on the experience of evangelical churches in Indonesia stated that the church was supposed to exist to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ but noted that in postmodern times, evangelical churches have shifted from this mission under pressures of secularism, liberalism, pragmatism, and increasing numbers of preachers promoting a prosperity gospel.[9] When the church stops evangelizing, its growth is expected only through biological means, which is dependent on the church's ability to nurture children to grow in Christian faith.

Author Peter Wagner indicates that church growth has divine and human aspects. As stated in the Bible, God always seeks the lost and wants the lost to be found—to believe in Jesus and be saved. The sovereign God wants to use human beings to evangelize and lead people to His kingdom. This demands strategies. The church needs to employ appropriate strategies—church growth principles—to lead many people to Christ.[10] Brent Burckart lists three essential practices to be successful in planting churches: (1) having a compelling vision for church planting, (2) communicating clearly to the churches, encouraging, and empowering congregations, and (3) developing and implementing appropriate church-planting strategies for the local churches.[11]

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7 Michael A. Ogunewu, "The Church and Effective Evangelization in the 21st Century: Contemporary Challenges and New Approaches," *Asia-Africa Journal of Mission and Ministry (AAMM)* 9 (2014): 65–92.

8 Julian Paparella, "Saint Paul VI, Pope of Dialogue Elected 60 Years Ago," SLMedia, June 20, 2023, https://slmedia.org/blog/saint-paul-vi-pope-of-dialogue-elected-60-years-ago.

9 Stevri Lumintang, "The Lost of Gospel in the Church and Evangelism in the World: The Deadly Scream and the Answers," *Jurnal Ilmiah Religiosity Entity Humanity (JIREH)* 4, no. 2 (Dcecember 17, 2022): 195–217, https://ojs-jireh.org/index.php/jireh/article/view/116.

10 Peter C. Wagner, *Strategies for Church Growth: Tools for Effective Mission and Evangelism* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2010).

11 Brent Burckart, "Overcoming Obstacles to Churches Planting Churches" (DMin Dissertation, Dallas: Dallas Theological Seminary, May 2020), 101, https://efcatxok.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Overcoming-Obstacles-to-Churches-Planting-Churches-Brent-Burckart-1.pdf.

MKC during the Derg/Communist Regime (1974–1991)

The Meserete Kristos Church was established by the missionary efforts of the Mennonite Churches of North America. After World War II, these missionaries came to Ethiopia to help, develop, and evangelize the people. The missionaries witnessed Christ in words and actions. Their lifestyle attracted many people to come to Christ. Some of the missionaries did amazing work to share the gospel with people in their local languages. For instance, Loreta Meyer, a registered nurse from the US, working in Haile Mariam Mamo Hospital, brought Bati Ensermu, one of the guards, to Christ by helping him read the Bible in his language. Bati became one of the first evangelists in MKC around Adama.[12]

This good and fruitful missionary service laid the foundation for the establishment of MKC. The first ten Ethiopian believers (seven males and three females) who heard the gospel were baptized on June 16, 1951, by Mennonite missionaries in Addis Ababa. This date marked the beginning of MKC in Ethiopia.[13] By 1951 MKC had established fourteen local churches in Addis Ababa, Adama, Wonji, Dire Dawa, Bedeno, and other places in the eastern part of the country. The name Meserete Kristos Church was given to the church by the General Assembly in 1956. There the church leaders drafted a contextualized constitution of the church.

The revolution that erupted in the country in 1974 accepted the Socialist ideology and caused great persecution of the MKC and other evangelical churches. The Communist regime closed the buildings of many churches—more than three thousand of them in the 1980s, according to Øyvind Eide.[14]

In 1982, the government closed the Meserete Kristos Church, confiscated its properties, and imprisoned church leaders.[15] The local political cadres scheduled meetings on Sundays and took attendance to discourage people from going to worship.[16] As a result, MKC went underground.[17] The church leaders reorga-

12 Nathan B. Hege, *Beyond Our Prayers: Anabaptist Church Growth in Ethiopia, 1948–1998* (Scottdale, PA: Herald, 1998), 58.

13 Hege, *Beyond Our Prayers*, 64.

14 Øyvind M. Eide, "Missionary Dilemmas in Times of Persecution Case Ethiopia," *Global South Theological Journal* 2, no. 2 (January 26, 2024): 3–10, https://doi.org/10.57003/gstj.v2i2.10.

15 Brent L. Kipfer, "Persecuted and Thriving: Meserete Kristos Church Leadership during the Ethiopian Revolution (1974–1991)" (DMin Thesis, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, 2017), 109

16 USDOS, "Country Report on Human Rights Practices for 1988—Ethiopia," Country Report, US Department of State, 1988, https://www.ecoi.net/en/document/1179836.html.

17 In 1979, six MKC leaders visited Russia to meet with leaders of Mennonite churches in Russia to learn from their experiences of persecution. From those meetings, MKC

nized believers into small groups to meet under cover. Many house fellowships were started.

A great spiritual revival in the church ensued. The gospel was preached with the power of the Holy Spirit, people were healed from different illnesses, and miracles were performed in the church. These signs attracted people to the church in large numbers. With the mighty hands of God, the church flourished in hiding. In the aftermath of the persecution, the MKC leaders perceived that the persecution had contributed to strengthening their spiritual fellowship with God, refining their character to practice godliness, and enhancing their spiritual formation.[18]

MKC during the Post-Communist Period (1992–2008)

MKC went underground in 1982 with 14 local churches and 5000 members and came out of the persecution in 1992 with 53 local churches and more than 50,000 members.[19] In the post-Communist period, the number of people who accepted the Lord Jesus as their personal Savior increased day by day. To manage the growth properly, MKC organized regional offices in different parts of the country. These offices began supporting local churches to carry out their ministry effectively. The MKC Head Office took the role of building the capacities of the regional offices and coordinating the ministries of the church at the national level.

In generic terms, in the aftermath of the fall of Communism, MKC gave more emphasis to conducting big spiritual revival conferences in different parts of the country and constructing church buildings. The previous emphasis on small group meetings gradually declined, and more money began to be spent on buildings. Although it was appropriate to construct church buildings for big gatherings, the decline in previous enthusiasm for evangelism and church planting was identified as a growth area to be addressed.

MKC has not conducted significant research to identify the best ways of working in the context of relative religious freedom. A church that had been underground for more than a decade did not know how to make use of the opportunities to expand God's kingdom. For MKC, the growth rate in the aftermath of the Communist regime was not commensurate with its history and experience.

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designed a contextual underground ministry for Ethiopia.

18 Brent L. Kipfer, "Thriving under Persecution: Meserete Kristos Church Leadership during the Ethiopian Revolution (1974–1991)," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 91, no. 3 (July 1, 2017): 297–370.

19 Kipfer, "Thriving under Persecution," 297. Note that while Kipfer states church member numbers in terms of baptized members, our number includes baptized believers, children, and new believers who did not receive water baptism.

MKC after 2008

According to the Ethiopian Calendar, 2007 was the beginning of the new millennium.[20] Despite the decline in growth rate at this time in comparison to the persecution period, MKC established several churches in different parts of the country. At the end of 2020, MKC had one head office; one Ketena office;[21] 42 regional offices; 1,135 local churches; and more than 1,112 church planting centers in all the 10 regional administrative states of Ethiopia.[22]

MKC's head office in Addis Ababa oversees and coordinates the ministry of the Ketena, regional offices, and local churches. The local churches are autonomous but accountable to the head office to synergize efforts and contribute to the overall goal of the denomination.

Addressing the Challenges of Sustaining the Growth of the Church: Getting the Buy-In of Church Leadership

The executive leadership of MKC could not do what it believes without the church's leadership at various levels accepting the importance of developing a tailored strategic plan for the church. Therefore, the first step was to convince the church leaders, pastors, and full-time ministers of the need to have a guiding strategy to ensure the sustainable growth of the church. This goal was achieved by conducting discussion sessions with church leaders at the head office, Ketena, region, and local churches. These sessions showed that the strategic plan is biblical and that, historically, MKC had already been implicitly using it.

In the early years of its history, MKC used development and community services as a gateway to share the good news of Jesus Christ. At the time, the strategy was effective. Then during the Communist regime, MKC devised another strategic approach to survive and thrive under persecution—underground small group fellowship. In the post-Communist period, MKC focused on developing leaders by establishing Bible colleges and schools as well as starting holistic ministry through the MKC Relief and Development Association.

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20 See Ethiopian Calendar, https://www.ethiopiancalendar.net/.

21 A Ketena office is a tier of the church structure. MKC has the head office (located in the capital city), then Ketena is the second lower tier of structure that comprises a minimum of eight regions. Under Ketena, the church has regional offices, and then the lowest tier is the local church. The organizational structure of MKC is local church → regional office → Ketena office → head office.

22 MKC Head Office, "Annual Report of Meserete Kristos Church 2020," Annual Report to the General Assembly of MKC (Addis Ababa: MKC, 2020). [Note: This report is in Amharic.]

Strategic Reflections: Understanding the Situation (Weaknesses and Challenges)

After the president of MKC was installed in September 2019, MKC leaders realized that to ensure sustainable growth, the church should assess its strengths and weaknesses to actualize the opportunities available and mitigate risks in the ministry context. Since the church did not have enough financial resources to hire professional consultants to facilitate the strategic planning, members of MKC who are professionals in strategic plan development were identified and requested to help the church. These professionals were willing to help, and they facilitated the strategic planning process and produced a five-year strategic plan document for the church. MKC employed a cost-effective mechanism to achieve the strategic plan and recognized the efforts of the professionals by awarding certificates of appreciation.

Decline in Evangelism and Mission

One of the weaknesses of the church identified through this process was a decline in the engagement of believers in evangelism and mission. MKC believes that all believers are responsible for sharing the good news of Jesus Christ with other people to lead them to Christ. Regardless of their level of spiritual understanding, any believer can share with non-believers what Jesus has done for his/her life.

During the Communist regime and in the post-Communist period, the Meserete Kristos Church was able to establish many local churches by following its members who, as part of their daily lives, traveled to different parts of the country for government work or other business. The initial step toward establishing a new church begins with cell meetings in the home of an MKC member. The believer starts by worshipping and studying the Bible with his/her family members in a home cell meeting. The home cell then gradually grows into a local church. In most cases, the home cells are run by volunteers until they become a full-fledged local church, at which time they usually request full-time ministers.[23]

In the planning process, MKC identified that some local churches have not been growing in their number of believers. New believers were not joining. Upon closer scrutiny, it was clear that these local churches have not been giving much attention to evangelism—reaching other people with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Members have not been sharing the gospel with others during their social interactions. The pastors have not been encouraging the members to share the gospel with others. In some situations, the church members expect the pastors and evangelists to preach the gospel and bring people to Christ. In addition, the church members do not contribute money to evangelism.

23 MKC Head Office, *Meserete Kristos Church Strategic Plan 2021–2025*, Strategic Plan Document (Addis Ababa: MKC, 2020).

Lack of Geographic Outreach Areas

Another problem identified for local churches in some locations was the lack of geographic outreach areas. MKC follows geographic boundaries to establish a church, which means that local churches are named by their geographic location. Believers in neighboring villages form a local church. For instance, if a local church attracts most of the residents in the villages, that church cannot go further because the next geographic location is occupied by another MKC local church. MKC does not have an alternative strategy to help such local churches go beyond their geographic locations and plant new churches.

Financial Resources for Mission

Financial resourcing to engage in mission activities in strategic areas was another challenge identified. MKC wants to send church planters to hostile areas that resist the preaching of the gospel and that cause persecution of believers even though the constitution of the country allows for religious freedom. Although a high success rate of bringing many people and establishing a local church in a short period is unlikely, the church wants to have its presence in those areas.

Areas Receptive to the Gospel Message

Another strategy is locating churches in areas where many will come to believe in Jesus Christ if the gospel is preached with the power of the Holy Spirit. These areas usually predominantly follow traditional religious beliefs and practices. To send church planters to these places, MKC needs financial resources. A challenge is that MKC head office receives a fixed amount of funding from the contributions of local churches annually, which usually covers only the administrative costs of the office. This has hindered the office from doing what it is supposed to do to accomplish the Great Commission.

Performance Measurements

The absence of appropriate performance measurements for local churches and church planters has made it difficult to monitor and evaluate whether churches and church planters are doing their job properly. There was no benchmark for performance in evangelism and church planting, and local churches did not know how much was expected from them in a given timeframe. For instance, how many people to baptize annually or how many churches to plant in one or two years. Because of the absence of good performance measurements, there was weak accountability.

Designing and Implementing Tailored Strategies to Advance the Great Commission

According to the report of the church at the general assembly of MKC in September 2019, church growth was 6 percent, which was below expectations. To increase growth, the church designed tailored strategies to address the challenges and use the opportunities:

1. *Focusing on the Great Commission*. The first strategy was to create awareness of believers in advancing the Great Commission of Jesus Christ as stated in Matthew 28:18–20. The church crafted a phrase—"Agenda 2819" (Agenda twenty-eight nineteen)—based on the commission of Jesus Christ in Matthew 28:19: "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." The president of MKC was given an assignment to promote this agenda to all church members in all his interactions with the local churches.

   This message was received with appreciation, and church leaders and pastors echoed the president and shared the message to their respective congregations. The message reminded the church leaders and members that the church exists to preach the gospel and make people disciples of Jesus Christ. The gospel in its holistic sense should be preached, and the church needs to give priority to witness for Christ. That core purpose for the existence of the church should be sought and invested in.

   Bible passages focusing on the responsibilities of believers to share the gospel with others were selected from the Scriptures and distributed to the local churches to be read during Sunday gatherings. The preachers were to use those passages to preach at least once a month.

   This strategy of bringing believers and local churches to the core of the Great Commission has had an effect beyond MKC. Other evangelical church denominations have learned from MKC and employed the strategy of reminding their members to focus on the Great Commission.

2. *Expanding into Untapped Districts*. The second strategy was identifying districts where MKC has not planted any churches in the past seventy-five years. Of the approximately 760 rural districts in Ethiopia, MKC regional offices identified which ones had no MKC local churches. Those districts are available to regional offices to focus on planting new churches. Local churches that do not have evangelistic target areas in their neighborhood are given a chance to plant churches in these districts. For instance, Misrak Addis Ababa Church, one of the biggest MKC congregations in the capital city, has sent more than one hundred church planters to these districts to plant new churches.

3. *Mobilizing Financial Resources for Mission*. The third strategy was to mobilize financial resources to undertake the Great Commission. To sustain adequate financial support, the church established one day—the Gospel Day—to contribute money to evangelism and mission activities of the Meserete Kristos Church. On that day, all MKC local churches collect offerings and gifts from the members during Sunday service and send them directly to the MKC Head Office account. The funds are designated for evangelism and mission and are not used for other purposes. The national office uses these funds to assign and pay for church planters in strategic geographic areas. Since the implementation of this strategy, MKC has raised $52,910 annually.[24] On average, each local church contributes about $40.

   In addition to local resource mobilization, the church also reaches out to partners to support MKC's church-planting efforts. The funds obtained from these partners have been used for training church planters, building churches for newly established churches, purchasing bicycles for church planters where appropriate, and providing other necessary support.

4. *Implementing Performance Measurements*. The fourth strategy was to put in place performance measurements for the evangelism and mission activities of the church. The Meserete Kristos Church, in general, set a minimum goal of 10 percent annual growth rate of members for the whole church starting from 2021. Every local church needs to have at least one church-planting center that should grow into a local church status within two years.[25] In the past, it could take more than five years to develop a church-planting center into a local church. Now, each mother church is supposed to invest significantly to nurture the new church plant to grow and become self-reliant in a shorter time.

   Each MKC region is given the responsibility to oversee the performance of the local churches and provide the necessary support to make the plan a reality. The MKC regional leadership is also evaluated in line with this accomplishment. According to the report during the general assembly in September 2023, MKC's annual growth rate was about 8 percent.[26] The church showed a 2 percent increase in growth rate from previous years. One of the challenges stated was the COVID-19

24 MKC Head Office, *Annual Financial Report of Meserete Kristos Church Head Office*, Financial Report (Addis Ababa: MKC, 2023).

25 MKC Head Office, *The Bylaws of Meserete Kristos Church - Revised*, Ministry Guidelines (Addis Ababa: MKC, 2019).

26 MKC Head Office, "Annual Report of 2023," Annual Report to General Assembly of MKC (Addis Ababa: MKC, 2023).

pandemic, which affected the activities of MKC for two years. The church is striving to achieve a 10 percent annual growth rate in the coming years.

Living into the Great Commission

The Meserete Kristos Church has been learning and adapting to the changing situations to undertake the Great Commission of Jesus Christ with full commitment. Critical self-examination and thorough assessment of strengths and weaknesses of the MKC in evangelism and mission, strategies tailored to resolve the church's challenges and use current opportunities, and implementing the strategies with commitment are all bearing fruit.

MISSION AND PEACE IN THE MESERETE KRISTOS CHURCH

2. Mission and Peace at Meserete Kristos Church

Repairing the Broken Souls

Meserete Kristos Church's Role in Trauma Healing in Inter-Ethnic Violence in Nono District of West Shewa[1]

Kebede Bekere and Mekonnen Gemeda

Ethiopia is a multiethnic nation comprising more than eighty ethnic groups, and also a multireligious nation embracing Christianity, Islam, ancient Judaism, and traditional beliefs and practices. The Oromo and the Amhara ethnic groups account for 34.4 percent and 27 percent, respectively, of the total population of the country.[2] These groups have lived peacefully together for centuries, tolerating each other. Recently, however, ethnic conflicts have increased due to various political, economic, and social reasons. Especially in the Oromia region, conflicts have erupted between the Oromo and Amhara ethnic groups. These ethnic-based clashes have resulted in various damages, including psychological trauma of the victims.

This article describes the role that the Meserete Kristos Church (MKC)—the Mennonite church in Ethiopia—has played in healing the sufferings of victims of ethnic violence in the Nono district of West Shewa Zone of Oromia. With a strong belief that God is the healer of those who are brokenhearted, the MKC takes trauma healing as one of her tasks in serving communities. This article

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1 The authors have direct and firsthand experience with the topic at hand in this article regarding violence and trauma healing. So, there might be places where the readers need to consider the extensive experiences and firsthand knowledge of the authors; otherwise, they have provided sources to support their claims.

2 World Population Review, 2019.

briefly shows how the church can transform lives by intervening in a community suffering from the trauma of violence.

Presenting Problem

Violent conflict between the Amhara (the settlers) and the Oromo (the indigenous) began in the Nono district[3] in 2018. The district has been the homeland of the Nono Oromo, which is a subgroup of Mecha Oromia, who have been living in the central and western parts of Oromia.

In January of that year, in one of the Kebeles[4] of the district, the Oromo youth tried to prevent Orthodox Christians from carrying out their Epiphany celebrations in open places. Most of the local Orthodox believers were of Amhara descent. The local police intervened and escorted the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church followers during the celebrations.

Local informants said that the conflict had been brewing for about two years. It was known that the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) in Wollega attacked the Amharas. As a result, many Amharas were killed, especially in western Wollega. It was mentioned that these ethnic-based attacks were intended to drive the Amharas out of Oromia region. The news spread to the Amharas in the Nono district, West Shewa Zone. In 2021, the Amharas were attacked in Dano, a neighboring district of Nono.

The Oromo Liberation Army, which is suspected to be in the Nono district, wants the Amhara people— who were settled illegally in the area by the government—to return to their places of origin. The militant group is said to view the whole of Amhara as an Oromo enemy. On the other hand, the Amharas living in the area tend to portray all Oromo people as both supporters of the Oromo militant group and haters of the Amhara. Both positions are extreme, with attitudes that need to be corrected based on the reality on the ground.

Fear, mistrust, and animosity have gradually grown between the Amhara and the Oromo residents in the area. The Oromo informants have said that people of the Amhara descent have hstopped greeting the Oromos, whereas the Amhara informants have accused the Oromos of distancing themselves from the Amharas. One Orthodox priest said that when they reported the threat to the government

3 Nono district is located in the West Shewa Zone of Oromia Regional State and is bordered by the Gibe River in the southwest, Dano in the northwest, Cheliya in the north, Tikur in the northeast, Southwest Shewa Zone in the east, and the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples Region in the southeast. The Gibe River separates Nono from the Jimma zone in the southwest direction. Silk Amba town, the administrative capital of Nono District, is 96 kilometers from Ambo town, the capital of the zone, and 221 kilometers from Addis Ababa.

4 The district has 33 Kebele (County) Administrations. Kebeles are municipalities, the smallest administrative division in Ethiopia.

authorities, they were told to stay in their villages and that the government forces were ready to come and protect them in case anything happened to them. The Amharas were not happy with the authorities' response and began preparing themselves for self-defense. The priest said, "The attackers will not come to kiss us but to kill us. Therefore, it was essential for us to make necessary preparations to defend ourselves."

One of the incidents that took the tension to the worst stage was the killing of an ethnic Amhara Isuzu car driver and the burning of the vehicle, allegedly carried out by the Shane group. Following the attack, the government tried to de-escalate the situation and organize peace conferences. Government authorities from the West Shewa Zone and Nono District Administration facilitated a peace conference where key people from Oromo and Amhara ethnic groups participated. But the conference could not calm down the tension.

Upon hearing the tension, local Amharas and armed Amharas from elsewhere launched an attack on the Oromos. On the morning of November 19, 2021, the Amhara armed men killed twenty-five people in Mettu Selassie, and sixteen people were buried together in one grave. Many of the victims were from single family units. For instance, in one household five of the six members were killed—only a four-year-old girl was spared.[5]

In addition to the killings, homes and property were burned. Normal people's daily activities were disrupted. Above all, mistrust developed between the two ethnic groups residing in the area. Currently, the Amharas think that the Oromos have been working to expel them from the area. The lack of assistance from the government and aid agencies for the displaced, as well as the lack of response to the victims' traumas, has made the effects of the violence last longer.

Historical Context of Conflicts

About two decades ago, people from the Amhara ethnic groups settled in the Nono area. A total of eighty households from the Wollo area were resettled by the government in Chando, one of the most fertile Kebeles of the district. After that, many Amhara households came and settled in unoccupied areas of the district.

The major causes of the recent conflict between the Oromo and the Amhara ethnic groups were competition over resources (particularly farmland), unhealed historical trauma, and arms trafficking. Prior to this, however, there had been no long history of ethnic conflict in the Nono area; the district had not experienced major conflict beyond conflict among individuals.

The conflict in the Nono district reflects the general instability and contradictory narratives promoted in the country in recent years. That conflict may have

5 Such ethnic clashes have resulted in the loss of lives on both sides.

its unique characteristics, but it has also been linked to the political situation in the country.

The modern country of Ethiopia was molded in East Africa by Emperor Menelik II, who reigned from 1889 to 1913. Under his rule, the Ethiopian empire was consolidated through a series of campaigns resulting in the conquest of autonomous lordships in the eastern, southern, and western parts of the country.[6] The campaign was aided by expanding the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in the occupied territories.[7] While the church tried to legitimize the rule of the king, the Amhara ethnic group dominated politically.

Centralization, control, and coercion started during the reign of Menelik II and continued until the fall of the Imperial regime led by Emperor Haile Selassie I, who ruled from 1930 to 1974. During this time, many ethnic groups and population groups suffered from the violence used to strengthen the control of the central government. The emperor used proxy regional autocrats to suppress the voices of the ethnic groups while he executed his orders.[8]

The military junta—the Derg—came to power in 1974 by ousting the emperor, with the hope of alleviating the suffering of many population groups in the country. In 1991, with the disintegration of the Communist regime, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) came to power by forming a political settlement front with ethnic-based political parties that made up the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). EPRDF introduced ethnic federalism as a system of government in Ethiopia to recognize ethnic pluralism in the country, reduce interethnic conflicts, and ensure equitable distribution of resources.[9] However, the way ethnic federalism was operated caused more ethnic tensions and conflicts in different parts of the country, mainly due to issues regarding ethnic boundaries, ethnic identities, scarce resources, and power rivalry.[10]

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6 Guntram H. Herb and David H. Kaplan, eds., "Ethiopia," in *Nations and Nationalism: A Global Historical Overview*, 1st ed., vol. 2 (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2008), 739; Herb and Kaplan, "Ethiopia."

7 Tibebe Eshete and T. W. Giorgis, "Ethiopian Orthodox Theology: Theology, Doctrines, Traditions, and Practices," in *The Routledge Handbook of African Theology*, ed. Elias Kifon Bongmba, first issued in paperback, Routledge Handbooks in Theology (London, New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2020), ch. 16.

8 Jeylan Wolyie Hussein, "The Subtle Connection between the Greater Ethiopian Image, and Ideology of Blaming and Silencing and the Cult of the Emperor Haile Selassie," *Australasian Review of African Studies* 27, no. 1 (2005): 50.

9 John M. Cohen, "'Ethnic Federalism' in Ethiopia," *Northeast African Studies* 2, no. 2 (1995): 160.

10 Lovise Aalen, ed., *The Politics of Ethnicity in Ethiopia: Actors, Power and Mobilisation under Ethnic Federalism*, African Social Studies Series 25 (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2011), 25–54.

A legacy of exclusionary rule with ethnic undertones continued during the EPRDF. The TPLE-dominated political party, with political elites from a small fraction of the total population, controlled the power, making and implementing top-down decisions.

The relationship between the TPLF-led government and the public worsened after the disputed national election in 2005. In response to peaceful public protests, the government used force rather than employing softer conflict resolution mechanisms such as dialogue and negotiations.[11] The government attempted to silence dissenting voices by formulating anti-terrorist laws that helped outlaw some political parties, imprison their followers, and conduct human rights abuses against individuals, groups, and parties opposing its unlawful approaches and practices.[12]

In 2016, the protests were mainly organized by the youth, "the *Qeerroo*."[13] The Qeerroo popular resistance movement was supported by Oromo human rights activists residing abroad and continued despite a series of efforts by the government to crack down on the movement. Later, the government dropped the implementation of the master plan, but the movement continued.[14]

The instability in some areas of the Oromia and Amhara region led the government to declare a state of emergency in October 2016, which was not lifted until ten months later in August 2017. The situation had an impact on the overall development, including a lack of security on the movement of people, like how late one should stay out and curfews.[15] Anti-government protests continued, however, leading to the resignation of Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn in February 2018.[16] Shortly after, in April, Dr. Abiy Ahmed came to power as a

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11 J. Abbink, "Discomfiture of Democracy? The 2005 Election Crisis in Ethiopia and Its Aftermath," *African Affairs* 105, no. 419 (April 1, 2006): 186, 187, https://doi.org/10.1093/afraf/adi122.

12 Yeneabt Dersolegn and Dersolegn Mekonen, "Assessing Controversial Issues of the Ethiopian Anti-Terrorism Law: A Special Focus on Substantive Matters," *Journal of Law, Policy & Globalization* 40 (January 1, 2015): 54–68, 67.

13 The *Qeerroo* is an Oromo word. In traditional Oromo culture, the term means "bachelor" or "youth." Abebe Gizachew Abate, "The Addis Ababa Integrated Master Plan and the Oromo Claims to Finfinnee in Ethiopia," *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights* 26, no. 4 (2019): 633.

14 Abebe Gizachew Abate, "The Addis Ababa Integrated Master Plan and the Oromo Claims to Finfinnee in Ethiopia," *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights* 26, no. 4 (2019): 632–37.

15 The Ethiopian Human Rights Project, 2018. The State of Emergency (2016–2017): Its Cause and Impact, Research Report, Addis Ababa: Ethiopian Human Rights.

16 BBC News, "Ethiopia PM Hailemariam Desalegn in Surprise Resignation," February 15, 2018, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-43073285.

reformer. That year the new leadership admitted to human rights violations and unlawful imprisonment of political leaders and their followers, and released thousands of political prisoners.[17]

As part of the reform activities within the country, the new leadership of the government also invited all previously exiled political parties back into the country to come and engage in peaceful political struggle. This created an open and transparent political space where parties could indeed struggle peacefully.[18]

One of the political parties that returned was the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF).[19] The party agreed to disarm its guerilla fighters and to struggle peacefully in the country. However, the disarming of the guerilla fighters did not happen on time. Conflict emerged between the government soldiers and the guerilla fighters who called themselves the Oromia Liberation Army (OLA).[20] The conflict resulted in the killing of many people and disruption of public services, businesses, and transportation in the western part of Oromia Regional State. Although the *Abba Gadas*, the Oromo traditional elders, intervened and peace talks were conducted in January 2019, the mediation did not bear fruit.[21]

Interventions

The situation in the area remained volatile. The presence of a small number of government security forces calmed the situation, but efforts to implement a lasting solution to the incident are still ongoing. After long peace training and community conversations, people from both sides have indicated that they want to restore peace through forgiveness and reconciliation. However, no agreement

17 Maggie Fick, "Ethiopia Offers Amnesty to Recently Freed Political Prisoners," Reuters, July 20, 2018, https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSKBN1KA1TZ/.

18 Reuters, "Ethiopia PM Meets Opposition Parties, Promises Fair Elections," *The East African*, November 28, 2018, https://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/tea/news/rest-of-africa/ethiopia-pm-meets-opposition-parties-promises-fair-elections-1407478.

19 Al Jazeera, "Thousands of Ethiopians Hail Return of Once-Banned Oromo group," September 15, 2018, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/9/15/thousands-of-ethiopians-hail-return-of-once-banned-oromo-group.

20 One of the objectives of OLA was to liberate Oromia, and one of the actions was to drive out settlers, mainly the Amharas—a minority group in Oromia Regional State—from the land of the Oromo people. According to the 2007 census, the Amhara population in the Oromia accounted for 7.22 percent of the total population. See Ethiopian Statistical Agency, 2007, "The 2007 Population and Housing Census of Ethiopia," Census Report, Addis Ababa, https://www.statsethiopia.gov.et/census-2007-2/.

21 Marew Abebe Salemot and Namhla Thando Matshanda, "The Causes and Consequences of the 2018 Failed Peace Agreement between the Oromo Liberation Front and the Ethiopian Government," *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 41, no. 4 (October 2, 2023): 148–50, https://doi.org/10.1080/02589001.2023.2193364.

has been reached on how genuine reconciliation could be done. The people from both sides are pushing the local government to play an active role in the reconciliation process. The victims have raised the issues of displaced people, the need for compensation for lost property, and a desire for the offenders to face justice.

The MKC local church in the area invited support from the larger church to help heal the wounds and restore community peace. With the belief that God is healing the broken souls, as stated in Psalm 147:3— "He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds"—the Meserete Kristos Church intervened to help those who were affected by the ethnic violence. Although it was risky, a team traveled to the area and met with various community groups—men, women, boys and girls, religious leaders, community elders, and local government officials—to understand the depth of the people's sufferings in the aftermath of the violent conflict. Following the trip, an emergency project was designed to reduce the impact of trauma and psychological distress on the victims of the violence and to help them recover and re-establish their lives.

MKC facilitated a series of trainings on trauma, trauma-healing sessions, and community conversations in conflict-hit villages. Volunteers were recruited from the Kebele level to attend training conducted at the district level. The stakeholders set criteria for selecting volunteers who could assist in trauma recovery and conducting community conversations on healing the wounds of the violence. More than five hundred people received trauma awareness training. Victims who experienced severe trauma were invited to attend trauma-healing sessions.

The project mainly targeted women affected by the violence. The suffering of the women had been both psychological and economic. The widows of the men who died in the violence are raising their children alone, and their income decreased when the men who had been working on their behalf died. The worst thing was that the community did not give much attention to their suffering. Government officials visiting the area usually talked to the men. Following is the story of Bontu, one of the women who participated in the MKC trauma recovery sessions.

> Bontu lost her husband after seven years of married life. She bore one child before her husband was killed during the ethnic violence in 2021. Bontu was identified by the community as one of the survivors who needed trauma healing because of what she went through during the violence. Bontu and her husband used to live peacefully with their Amhara neighbors. When the conflict occurred, those people killed her husband and left the area.
>
> Before the incident happened, she went to school with her son. While returning from the school, she heard several gunshots. She did not know what had happened. She hurried to return to her home and found her husband lying on the ground. She called his name and cried. He was already dead. The worst thing was that she could not bury him because there were no men in the neighborhood. Some went to fight with the killers, and others hid in the

bush. After two days, women and some men buried him. She said that her husband did not get a dignified burial ceremony. Bontu felt betrayed by her neighbors. She was left alone. She had no one to talk to about her feelings. She was full of anger and hatred for the killers. She could not sleep and lost her appetite to eat. She could not even take care of her child.

When Bontu came to the training, she was distressed and did not want to talk. After the training, when facilitators introduced the training objectives, she started listening with curiosity. She did not know how genuine talking can heal people's inner wounds. On the second day of the training, Bontu opened up and started sharing her traumatic experiences. After seeing what she did, the other women from both ethnic groups began sharing their stories. When one was sharing, the others were crying. All of them were hurt by the violence. They started encouraging one another. A web of support was created.

Bontu attended a series of trauma-healing sessions. After overcoming her distress, she started sharing about trauma and how people can heal it by talking to someone. She used the coffee ceremony, where women gathered to drink coffee to share the information. Then women came to her privately to discuss their trauma with her. She became an active volunteer who tries to help people, especially women affected by violence in her community.

Lessons Learned

The community took the phrase "talking that heals wounds" and associated it with the Meserete Kristos Church. The church had created a safe space for people to talk about their traumatic experiences to facilitate the healing of the wounds. At present, MKC is the only organization that promotes peace, reconciliation, and trauma healing in the district. The community has appreciated the efforts of the church on many occasions.

A number of critical factors contributed to the success of MKC in facilitating healing and reconciliation in the district:

1. First, MKC conducted a thorough assessment of the situation before offering interventions. This helped the church have a clear understanding of the nature, causes, and effects of violence and contributed to designing a need-based peace project.
2. Second, MKC prepared a tailored trauma-healing training manual in two local languages spoken by the two ethnic groups. The manual was presented in simple language so that anyone who did not have a formal education could understand. When the training participants got and read the material, they found that it was clear to understand and share with others.

3. Third, the trauma-healing trainers and facilitators were well versed in the culture of both ethnic groups. They spoke both languages. They could easily communicate and interact with both groups and were able to build rapport with them. They earned the trust of both groups.
4. Finally, the commitment of the church encouraged the community members to undertake their role to achieve the goal. MKC went to the area to conduct the assessment, provide training, and facilitate trauma-healing sessions, taking all the security risks to do so. The efforts of the MKC were noticed by the communities. The little support from MKC encouraged them to contribute their share to address their problems. They developed a sense of ownership of healing the wounds, restoring, and sustaining peace in their community.

In conclusion, MKC is driven by biblical inspiration, taking initiatives to intervene in communities affected by violence to heal the wounds of victims, facilitate reconciliation, and restore peace that lasts. In the spirit of "talking that heals wounds," MKC will continue to take the message and approach of healing to communities suffering from the trauma of violence so that people are healed and experience life in all its fullness.

Breaking the Cycle of "Black Blood"

Amdetsion Woldeyes Sisha

Over time, humans have made significant advances in technology, culture, and affluence, eradicating many negative and destructive beliefs, behaviors, and cultures and replacing them with positive and beneficial thoughts and practices. We are getting rid of things that are harmful to our progress and prosperity, even in our own lives. So, in this day and age, do we have to accept the crime of vengeance murder that hurts ourselves, our families, our communities, and our country?

I believe that the church and elders hold the responsibility for raising public awareness that murder is an abhorrent and despicable act. Actions that praise murder should be replaced by actions that critique and condemn murder. All rituals, sayings, and attitudes that commemorate murder must be changed. Peaceful conflict resolution is a positive method that should be appreciated and practiced. This paper will discuss (1) root causes of conflict in the community and (2) the restorative justice process that is breaking the cycle of revenge in Ethiopia.

I. Background

In the northern region of Ethiopia—in particular the northern part of Shewa—the places called Debre Birhan and Mehal Meda are recognized for religious adherence to "Black Blood," a generations-old tradition of spilling blood as a way of addressing conflict. What has caused this way of life for this community? I believe the root of the issue stems from following the teaching found in Genesis 9:6, whereby "whoever sheds the blood of a human, by a human shall that person's blood be shed, for in his own image God made humans." For those adhering to

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this passage, since God created humanity in his image, anyone who bleeds human blood will also shed human blood.

As a result, the custom of "wearing Black Blood" has caused problems for generations. When a member of one family murders a member of another, blood feuds between the individual families occur. Kin groupings band together and attempt to assassinate the killer or one of his or her relatives. Vengeance is so highly respected that a person who fails to revenge the killing of a kinsman is mocked at social gatherings. In Black Blood practice, settlement of specific disputes between the parties is handled by revenging the offender himself or his relatives.

The cycle of practicing Black Blood needs to stop. Toward this end, in this essay, I will focus on the role of the restorative justice practice of the Meserete Kristos Church (MKC) in Ethiopia, which is the seed of Anabaptism that is promoting the necessary discourse to bring about long-lasting peace in the region.

The following story illustrates the current problem:

> My name is Boja Fayisa Sunbeto. I live in a kebele[1] called Abaya in Amhara Regional district, and I earn my living by farming. I am married and the father of a son. In my past life, I had good communication with the local people and I was praised and praised by the local community for my good behavior. However, my life could not continue in the same way. The reason is that because of the death of my younger brother 15 years ago, I had revenge in my heart. Because of growing up, I was charged with murder for killing my brother's killer in 2016. I was sentenced to 18 years and entered Debre Birhan prison. As a result, I entered the darkness I never knew in my life; my story was messed up, I couldn't be myself, and I was in trouble many times. I spent 5 years in prison reeling with remorse. However, during my 5-year stay, I can't pass without thanking Jabesa Bru, who is the prison ministry chaplain. He helped me through counseling and taught me, and made me capable of taking responsibility for my mistakes. He helped me learn the regular class lesson that I didn't learn because I was a farmer. During my time in prison, I learned a lot about the severity of crime. I learned regular class lessons, and now I am a 6th grader, and I am also trained in weaving.
>
> Even though my life is fixed in this way, I am not happy unless to meet the family I wronged and ask for forgiveness. I was asked for reconciliation before and told to refuse, but after many individual meetings with the victim and the offender, reconciliation was started for me through Meserete Kristos Church's Prison Ministry chaplains, and I made the reconciliation before I left the prison's house; I want to live in peace while teaching the community about the evil of revenge and protecting my family.

Murder is a dreadful problem not only for the deceased but also for the perpetrator and the community. It disrupts local peace and deepens poverty. It destroys

1 Kebeles are municipalities, the smallest administrative division in Ethiopia.

not only marriages and families but also property. But this need not be the case. Conflicts that would otherwise escalate to murder can be readily handled via constructive dialogue and negotiation. Full energy can be used to fight poverty by restoring broken relationships and preserving harmony.

For this to happen, however, people must first be taught about the causes of such terrible disputes and how to settle them. One group that provides such teaching is the Meserete Kristos Church Prison Ministry, an organization that establishes restorative justice practices in the community in order to stop long-time cycles of vengeance killings.

II. Root Causes of Conflict

Of all the Ethiopian regions, the Amhara area has suffered the most over the course of many generations from cultural bondage to blood feuds, vendettas, witchcraft, extravagant ritual feasts, and Black Blood practices—a customary duty to exact violent revenge on family members for wrongdoing. The primary cause of conflict in the communities is competition for limited natural resources, including farming and grazing land. Conflicts commonly arise between brothers and relatives in communities because they share farming and grazing lands. Other contributing factors that have become normalized in the communities include immoral acts such as fornication and adultery, and too much drinking. In addition, the patriarchal and authoritarian culture of the Amhara ethnic group emphasizes that men are superior to women. Simultaneously, the females exhibit a very considerate attitude toward the murderer (as the hero) as well as toward the established system.

All of the above has significantly contributed to the ongoing crisis in the Amhara region. The attitude of retaliation, the low regard for human life, and hasty decisions to kill someone instead of having a dialogue to solve the issue, have had a fatal effect, obstructing the resolution of problems. In an attempt to address this critical situation, the government established "Dem Adrik,"[2] a community-based organization that operates in a top-down manner to educate and demonstrate the gravity and ramifications of intergroup violence. These indigenous dispute resolution practices are preferable to the traditional method of conflict resolution. As of yet, however, this has not broken the cycle of compounded death.

The Dem Adrik resolution process begins with an event associated with religious activity, where a decision maker, or Dem Adrik, becomes aware of a new conflict in one of two ways: (1) One alternative is for the injured party to address the society meeting at the church, whereupon the warring parties' families or

2 Dem Adrik is the process of using traditional beliefs and practices of the society to resolve criminal causes of conflict.

neighbors convince the victim to pick someone to help them resolve the problem. (2) A second alternative is for the elders to directly interfere in order to help resolve a quarrel. This is routinely done in murder cases to avoid exacerbating the conflict through the use of blood revenge. When elders intercede, they first persuade the murderer's and victim's families to seek compromise. They then select experienced and important individuals to handle the disagreement.

In yet another process, the killer may enter the church and ring the church bell to symbolically apologize and request reconciliation with his adversaries. Families of the victim, who may be pursuing the murderer to avenge the death, never kill him/her after he/she enters the churchyard. When the community hears the bell ring, they congregate and choose respected individuals to handle the situation. This form of symbolic apology has frequently been used, but the outcomes have not always satisfied everyone.

These indigenous dispute settlement techniques are based on the understanding that Ethiopians behave out of respect for their culture; they do not want to violate the principles that are linked to the community's beliefs, culture, and traditions. They will accept the outcomes because they are terrified of the stigma created by society otherwise.

In Ethiopia, the legal system has used punishment (prison sentences) to rehabilitate criminals (prisoners). The practical outcome of this method is repetition of the same crime, with the same folks returning to prison over and over again. It's clear that the prison sentence just tackles the symptoms rather than resolving the fundamental causes of the crimes. Even though there is such real proof of the inadequacies of the current punitive system, the government has not developed alternatives to this method.

In general, there are no organized or successful procedures for ex-prisoners to reintegrate into society after their release. Most communities do not accept ex-prisoners, even their own former members. And most former prisoners refuse to return to their original communities for fear of being killed, since, if they had committed murder or attempted murder, the victims or their families could exact retribution by killing them in turn. Instead, ex-prisoners often travel to regions where their background is unknown, thus severing social links to their families, relatives, and acquaintances. In an integrated model between the traditional conflict resolution mechanism and the MKC restorative justice and reconciliation program, the perpetrator and victim could address this prevalent problem in society.

Most of the inmates in prison have committed crimes motivated by retaliation and are frequently housed in prison alongside the relatives they have wronged. Meserete Kristos Church—the Mennonite church in Ethiopia—has been working in Amhara prisons for more than twenty years to break the cycle of vengeance. They began with one prison in Debre Birhan and were so effective in breaking the Black Blood cycle of vengeance that they were encouraged to expand into

another prison in Mehal Meda, another Amhara village. The ministry's core strategy focuses on using restorative justice practices.

III. Restorative Justice Process Breaks the Revenge Cycle

"Restorative justice is an approach to justice that focuses on the needs of victims and offenders" rather than on the need to satisfy the abstract principles of law or the need of the community to exact punishment.[3] Victims are given an active role in a dispute, and offenders are encouraged to take responsibility for their actions, with a primary goal of "repair[ing] the harm they've done"[4] by apologizing, returning stolen money, or doing community service.

Meserete Kristos Church is doing restorative justice in the following way: (1) conducting counseling sessions for inmates in prison; (2) proving counseling services for the victim's family at their village; and (3) holding victim-offender mediation services at the prison as well as inside the prison.

Typically, being charged with homicide and then facing the abrupt loss of everything in their life causes newly jailed inmates great anguish.[5] For prisoners to experience recovery, their counselors must provide guidance, affection, support, help, and care. Professional counselors and chaplains will provide the service both individually and collectively. Each jail that is participating in the restorative justice process has two psychology graduates working as professional counselors. These professionals address the more serious issues while chaplains and co-counselors, who have received in-house training, take care of the other prisoners who require assistance. Inmates who get counseling are more likely to make amends and reintegrate into their communities.

According to MKC Prison Ministry's past experience, the majority of victims' families are eager to move forward with the reconciliation process, while a few hesitate, vacillating about whether or not to move toward reconciliation. Prison counselors and chaplains must devote more time and attention to this latter group, making frequent visits in order for healing to occur after victims' families decide to meet their enemies. Unfortunately, because it is difficult to forecast ahead of time, this type of unexpected activity incurs additional costs for the project. For those who choose to enter this process, it will be provided at the village homes in the presence of other stakeholders such as religious leaders, community elders, and peace committees. The Meserete Kristos Church Prison Ministry can learn

3 "CJC 240: Monte Carlo Quiz #4 Flashcards," Quizlet, accessed April 3, 2024, https://quizlet.com/120040393/cjc-240-monte-carlo-quiz-4-flash-cards/.

4 "Restorative Justice—The Micah Mission," accessed April 3, 2024, https://themicahmission.org/index.php/restorative-justice/.

5 "Restorative Justice—The Micah Mission."

the technique for counseling from professionals and address the villages as the initiative progresses.

One of our prison ministry's main goals is reconciliation, which makes mediation essential to building a harmonious community. The mediation process is as follows:

- Each prison is responsible to choose which convicts will be reconciled.
- Restorative justice training is provided for mediators from each inmate's village, who meet the inmates in the prison.
- After conducting the training, the mediators meet to determine how to proceed and share responsibilities.
- They obtain from the prison administration a list of inmates who are eligible and willing to participate in the reconciliation process.
- The team of counselors in the prison (which includes chaplains, psychologists assigned by the government in the prison, co-counselor inmates, and peace committees) talk to the offender in the jail and determine if he/she is ready to address his/her victim's needs.
- Mediators then visit with the victim's family and try to contact them until they show willingness for the reconciliation process—without pressuring, threatening, or manipulating them.
- When the victim's families are ready, the mediation team meets with the offender's family and waits until they are ready to meet with the victim's family and settle their disputes.
- Once both families have demonstrated their preparedness, a Family Group Conference will be held between the two families in the presence of mediators and security officials.
- Once both sides have achieved an agreement, the mediation team will schedule a victim-offender conference at the village or jail in the presence of security officials, during which communication will take place.
- The offender/offender's family will publicly apologize to the victim's family for the wrongdoing.
- If the victim's family requests restitution, it will be resolved in a participation manner, and a document will be signed by the parties.
- Finally, according to community tradition, there will be a feast and eating together so that no one abandons the covenant. After all of this, the reconciled inmate awaits his release from the prison. He will then rejoin his family and resume his previous life. Restorative justice has then occurred.[6]

Communities that have had a long practice of restorative justice processes have experienced reduced occurrences of retaliation as well as reduced crime

6 GraceandGrit, "Safe Passage," Mystery and Wonder—The Journey Continued blog, February 12, 2021, https://buckshefusethiopia.wordpress.com/2021/02/12/safe-passage.

rates. Inmates' respect for themselves has improved, and they've taken up a variety of income-generating activities. As traditional and religious leaders are learning about restorative justice principles, collaborative engagement cultures are emerging as they create a harmonious society.

IV. Hope for the Future

Conflict emerges, escalates, and de-escalates. Before conflict erupts, structural forms of violence often exist. One or two groups may perceive an unfair distribution of resources or violation of others' rights. Peacemaking intervention should occur before, during, and after conflict. Preventive peacemaking programs intervene before mass violence becomes more serious. Early warning and timely response projects should monitor conflict in their early stages before violence begins. Otherwise, conflict in its negative aspect may lead to violence, death, injuries, destruction of property, and/or environmental damage. As a result, people may lose their beloved family members, have their properties destroyed, and/or be displaced and left in a hopeless situation.

It is human tendency to retaliate when attacked; one side assaults first, then the other side responds. When the other side repeats the attack, the sequence of attacks continues. This mutual vengeance will not bring enduring peace to a society. But reconciliation has the potential to alter the tide of violence by breaking its cycle. Reconciliation of past violence is the point at which a former relationship comes to an end and begins anew. Though circumstances may sometimes seem impossible to address, there is always a chance for reconciliation and the start of a new relationship.

Steps in the restorative justice process include mediators identifying what the conflict is about, who is affected or involved, what should be done to resolve the conflict, what divides and connects people, and what fosters vulnerability to conflict. The more those mediators understand about the context, the more likely they will be to successfully achieve their intended goal.

All relationships based on equality and harmonies improve. It is an open door for them. The idea-based connection of the restorative justice process is founded on truth, justice, and change, which prevents the evil of the past from happening again. Research findings so far suggest that the restorative justice process is often successful. This has been shown to be true in the Amhara region, where the process has been used by the Meserete Kristos Church Prison Ministry to break the cycle of Black Blood practice and offer hope to the people. It follows, then, that the government should introduce victim-offender reconciliation programs directly accountable to justice offices and other compensation schemes to guarantee restitution of the victim and accountability of the offender.

Abebe Degafu during the reconciliation ceremony where two men were forgiven for murdering his nephew.

Safe Passage

Rosemary Shenk

Abebe Degefu knows the price—and the freedom—of forgiveness. He, along with his community, chose restorative justice over revenge after the murder of his nephew, Tegene Chernet.

On a cold October night in 2015, Tegene Chernet left his seven-year-old daughter at his rural village home. He walked through the darkness for a night of drinking at a bar in Anchekorer, the nearest town to his rural Amhara village. He was thirty-five years old.

As the night wore on, Tegene fell into an argument with two men he did not know. No one could reconstruct exactly what the argument was about. It turned into a fight, and, by morning, the two men had beaten Tegene to death.

Eyewitnesses identified the murderers. The two men were tried and given ten-year sentences in the Debre Birhan prison.

Revenge is one of the most powerful human motivators, responsible for blood feuds around the globe. The Amhara region in Ethiopia is no exception. If a person is killed, the victim's family is obligated to kill someone in the offender's family, according to a tradition called "Black Blood." If someone chooses

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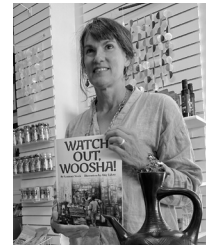

Born in Nairobi Kenya to missionary parents, Rosemary Shenk spent the first thirteen years of her life in Tanzania and Kenya. She returned to East Africa as an adult with her husband, Bruce Buckwalter, to live and work in Kenya and Ethiopia. Bruce and Rose spent five years (2026–2021) as co-country representatives in Ethiopia for Mennonite Central Committee (MCC).

During their MCC term, Rose developed a short story for children set in the vibrant streets of Addis Ababa. It began with interactions or conversations Rose had with children who lived without homes and parents and who begged from cars at Meskel Square. Over time, it grew into a carefully researched story about a boy, his dog, and the other animals they encounter in the city streets. The book is beautifully illustrated with original photo collage and watercolor pictures by Ethiopian artist Abiy Eshete. Watch Out, Woosha! *was published in November and is available from Amazon at* https://a.co/d/gpk1msO.

This photo essay was originally posted in "Mystery and Wonder—the Journey Continued," Rosemary's blog about living in Addis Ababa and working for MCC Ethiopia. See https://buckshefusethiopia.wordpress.com/.

All photos by the author.

The offenders' families cross the open field and walk toward the stream where the ceremony will take place. They carry gifts for a feast, symbols of remorse and reconciliation.

forgiveness over the Black Blood, he may find a woman's dress thrown on his property, indicating that he is not man enough to avenge his family's honor. If a man (or woman) commits a murder, they can look forward to being murdered themselves upon release from prison.

For more than twenty years, the *Meserete Kristos* (Mennonite) *Church* in Ethiopia has worked in the Amhara prisons to reduce this cycle of violence. They started with one prison in Debre Birhan and were so successful that they were invited to expand into a prison in Mehal Meda, another Amhara town.

One of my most memorable experiences as a Country Representative for MCC Ethiopia was witnessing the traditional ceremony of *Sera* that reconciled the families of the two men who committed the murder of Tegene Chernet, with the family of the victim.

The event occurred in a field between the two communities. It was February 2021, five years after the murder had taken place. There was a small crevice running through the field that carried a trickle of water. This tiny stream was to play a large role in the ritual taking place.

The first to arrive were the families of the two offenders. They carried a sheep, homemade bread, barley beer, and other gifts and symbols of their remorse on behalf of the two men still in prison. They would stay on their side of the rivulet of water until forgiven and invited to cross over by the victim's family.

Next to arrive were the *shimageles*, or village elders. They accepted a 20,000 Ethiopian birr restitution payment on behalf of the offenders, equivalent to about $500. The mother of one of the men in prison sold her farm to help raise the money.

After about an hour of waiting, while the offenders' families prepared themselves for what was to come, the victim's family appeared on the opposite hillside. Missing was Tegene's twelve-year-old daughter, deemed too young to participate in such a solemn event.

These two sides, physically separated on opposite hillsides with a stream of water in between, were once part of a close rural community. They were from the same ethnic group, attended the same church, shopped in the same market. But during the past five years, the brutal murder had left them sworn blood enemies. The nearly impossible task of bringing them back together was the role of the *shimageles* (village elders), the church priests, the local government peace office officials, and the *Meserete Kristos* prison chaplains. Would Tegene Chernet's family accept the apology and restitution, and grant the offenders safe passage back into the community after their release? There was still the chance that they would say no and the community fabric would be torn apart forever.

The *shimageles* climbed the hill to meet the bereaved family and to hear their answer. They agreed to accept *gumata*, the apology and restitution. They agreed

Asalifew Wolde, Peace Desk Coordinator for Meserete Kristos Church Prison Ministries, with inmates at the Debre Birhan maximum security prison in Amhara, Ethiopia, 2019.

The shimageles—village elders and peace committee members—count out the payment for taking a man's life.

Priests with a ceremonial umbrella wait at the stream for word from the shimageles.

Elders from the families of the two offenders lay down stones, symbolizing the sin of murder they have been carrying on account of the two men still imprisoned.

A young girl fetches water from a village well. She is about the same age as Tegene's daughter was at the reconciliation five years after her father was murdered. Both communities use this well to collect water for their families.

His life complete, the red lamb was prepared for the feast.

Homemade bread, along with the meat and beer, cements the reconciliation between the two families.

to forgive the offenders and their families and to move forward with *Sera*, the reconciliation.

The *shimageles* returned to the priests who were waiting by the stream, and delivered the answer. After months of painful meetings and negotiations, under a sky that promised the blessing of rain after a long dry season, the formal reconciliation could begin.

The priests began a low, sad chant that was taken up by the offenders' families as the two sides moved closer together. A red lamb nibbled at a green patch near the waterway, oblivious of the role it was to play in ending the blood feud between these two communities; the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, adherents of Old Testament law, would call upon the ancient tradition of sacrifice to seal the covenant between these two groups.

The convicted men's families carried stones on their shoulders, symbolizing the weight of the murder their children had committed. When they sat down by the water's edge, members of the victim's family took the stones and placed them on the ground, symbolically removing their guilt.

The lamb was sacrificed next to the stream. An elder from the offender's family held the animal still while an elder from the victim's family killed it quickly with a sharp scythe. Representatives from the offender's family brought huge loaves of crusty bread, *difo dabo*, to the victim's side of the stream, where they were cut into squares and passed out to everyone. *Tala*—beer made from barley—arrived, and bread and drink were shared, a communion of reconciliation.

Only then could the offenders' families cross the stream to join the others. Friends long separated mingled on the hillside, catching up on the past five years.

The reconciliation was not only symbolic but also formally recorded by the government officials and the village elders. The county Peace and People Security Office would deliver the signed letter to the Debre Birhan prison officials. The agreement was formalized and could not be broken.

The two murderers had officially been forgiven. In time, they would be released from prison. Their community had granted them safe passage back home.

In the time since Rose Shenk and Bruce Buckwalter left Ethiopia in 2021 and the new MCC Representatives Paul and Rebecca Mosley started their term, Ethiopia has experienced the trauma of a civil war as well as increased ethnic tension and unrest across the country. Acts of reconciliation and restoration are needed now more than ever. MCC Ethiopia continues to work closely with the Meserete Kristos Church to bring relief and reconciliation in very difficult times.

The Witness of a Cruciform Community in Revolutionary Ethiopia

Brent L. Kipfer

Manoro Abiyo was a veteran employee of the Haile Mariam Mamo Memorial Hospital in Adama (formerly Nazareth), Ethiopia. More than just a workplace to Manoro, the hospital was part of the terrain in which his community, the Meserete Kristos Church (MKC), lived out its identity and mission in Jesus Christ. Founded in 1946, it was operated by Eastern Mennonite Missions (EMM) until the Derg revolutionary government assumed control of it in 1978. Relinquishing the hospital was one of many painful losses that would test and shape the cruciform faith of evangelical Christians in Ethiopia.[1] Persecution during the Communist era clarified the nature and cost of shalom-making witness to a crucified Messiah. In the 1992 documentary *Against Great Odds* Manoro testified:

> When the Marxist regime took over, the officials told me they wanted the cross in the hospital chapel removed and destroyed. Of course, the cross was built into the wall, so it was quite difficult for them to destroy it completely. But they wanted to paint over it, and they asked me as a maintenance person to do this. We painted it and the cross came out even more distinctly. Then we tried another paint, and it still came out distinctly. We tried five times, but it remained visible.[2]

The cross has long been a symbol of Christianity in Ethiopia. Cruciform beauty is embedded in the art, architecture, and liturgy of the historic national

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1 Nathan Hege, *Beyond our Prayers: Anabaptist Church Growth in Ethiopia, 1948–1998* (Scottdale, PA: Herald, 1998), 45, 96–97, 143, 249–51.

2 D. Michael Hostetler and Joel Kauffmann, *Against Great Odds* (Worchester, PA: Gateway Films/Vision Video, 1992), VHS, 29 min; 16:09.

church; carried by clergy; worn by ordinary believers; and traditionally tattooed on foreheads, necks, hands, or arms.[3]

In Ethiopia, as in other Christendom societies, a cross can convey varied and contradictory messages: it, of course, marks a wearer or space as Christian. As an official Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC) manual explains, it points to "the suffering and death of our Blessed Saviour" and the salvation offered to sinful humanity.[4] Some treat a cross as an amulet—an object of spiritual protection or healing. For sixteen centuries, the cross has also symbolized conquest and Christian nationalism. Rather than symbolizing painful death or shameful defeat, in royal hands the cross signified the opposite. Whether imprinted on fourth-century coins minted by Aksumite King Ezana or on the twentieth-century flag of Haile Selassie, the cross came to speak of political power and the privileged place of Christianity in the Ethiopian empire.[5]

The Socialist revolution and overthrow of Haile Selassie in 1974 severed that alliance between church and state. The Derg order to dismantle and erase the cross in the Adama hospital chapel was a token of the new political reality. What did it mean for the Meserete Kristos Church? Ethiopian evangelicals shared something in common with their Marxist government: both rejected Christian nationalism. For seventeen years, followers of Jesus would be persecuted by the revolutionary regime. Still, they did not pine for a return to Christendom.

In 1992, the Transitional Government of Ethiopia created a Constitutional Commission tasked with creating a legal foundation for a post-Derg state. They drafted the text, shared their work with the public, conducted seminars and symposia, gathered feedback, and prepared the final version for approval by a Constituent Assembly elected in 1994.[6] During the consultation phase, the commission invited MKC leaders to give input.

Solomon Kebede read the proposed draft carefully. He was chair of the MKC Executive Committee and had just finished a four-year term leading the board of the Evangelical Churches Fellowship of Ethiopia, a national organization of denominations. The document would establish stronger grounds for religious

3 Jon Abbink, "The Cross in Ethiopian Christianity: Ecclesial Symbolism and Religious Experience," in *The Routledge Companion to Christianity in Africa*, ed. Elias Kifon Bongmba (New York: Routledge, 2016), 122–40.

4 Aymro Wondmagegnehu and Joachim Motovu, *The Ethiopian Orthodox Church* (Addis Ababa: Ethiopian Orthodox Mission, 1970).

5 Abbink, "The Cross in Ethiopian Christianity," 123–26.

6 Tsegaye Regassa, "The Making and Legitimacy of the Ethiopian Constitution: Towards Bridging the Gap between Constitutional Design and Constitutional Practice," *Afrika Focus* 23:1 (2010): 85–118; Sarah Vaughn, "Federalism, Revolutionary Democracy and the Developmental State, 1991–2012," in *Understanding Contemporary Ethiopia*, eds. Gérard Prunier and Éloi Ficquet (London: Hurst, 2015), 283–311.

freedom than any previous Ethiopian constitution. Still, Solomon was not satisfied. In a 2014 interview, he recalled that it stated, "The government will not interfere with religious matters."[7] That was a good start, but what about pressure from the other direction? He could easily envision harm caused by religious groups (whether Christian or Muslim) trying to advance their purposes through the power of the state.

"This is not sufficient," Solomon told the Constitutional Commission. He insisted the text should also stipulate that "religions also will not interfere in government matters." He remembers his recommendation was received with appreciation and incorporated into the 1995 Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia.[8]

From 1974 to 1991, marginalized Ethiopian churches had pursued the mission of God as a subversive alternative to Marxism. While the Derg used the machinery of government to impose a new social order, MKC found fresh direction and resources for evangelism and peacemaking. Its legal status was precarious until it was outlawed in January 1982. Persecuted—and without political protection or social privilege—MKC could only give witness to the reign of Jesus from *below* while radically trusting the Holy Spirit for faith, love, power, and hope.

What was the result? MKC experienced great spiritual vitality and fruitfulness. Under pressure from the Derg, the church adopted a small-group-based ministry structure, multiplied the number of men and women in leadership, extended its geographic reach, became financially self-supporting, and grew from eight hundred to thirty-four thousand baptized members.

After the collapse of the revolution, MKC naturally was grateful for religious freedom. How, though, could they be faithful to Jesus in these new circumstances? Solomon Kebede's advocacy for a robust separation between religion and government was consistent with the cruciform, charismatic missiology of the church forged in the heat of persecution.

This article will explore how MKC pursued the evangelical, peacemaking mission of Jesus under the government of the Derg and how the church and its witness was formed in the way of the cross. It will also highlight some of the impact on others of MKC's distinctive identity and behavior. The next sections provide further context with an overview of Christian mission history in Ethiopia and initial evangelical responses to the socialist revolution.

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7 Interview with author, May 6, 2014.

8 Interview with author; Article 11 (Separation of State and Religion) of *The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Ethiopia* (August 21, 1995) reads: "1. State and religion are separate. 2. There shall be no state religion. 3. The state shall not interfere in religious matters and religion shall not interfere in state affairs." Article 27 (Freedom of Religion, Belief and Opinion) clarifies additional religious rights.

Sword in Arm: The Beauty and Violence of Ethiopian Christendom

The message of Jesus reached the kingdom of Aksum (now northern Ethiopia and Eritrea) early, possibly through the official whose conversion is recorded in the eighth chapter of the Book of Acts. Small Christian communities were certainly present along Ethiopian trading routes soon after the apostolic era. Early in the fourth century, the Aksumite royal family embraced the gospel and made Christianity the official religion of their realm. Allies of the emperor were naturally motivated to share his faith. The church's missionary strategy became bound to the state.[9]

In the fifth century, Syrian monks—backed by a later king—led a monumental effort to embed Christianity in Ethiopian culture. Throughout Aksumite territory they Christianized pagan temples, erected church buildings, translated the Bible into Ge'ez, and began centers for training church leaders. With grants from the emperor and wealthy families, the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church acquired land and more extensive influence. Monasteries became hubs of evangelism where monks created Ethiopic liturgy, literature, and iconic art to convey the gospel. When missionaries met resistance, they could count on the emperor's protection.[10]

The close connection between church and state nourished a complex, rich history, giving Ethiopia much in common with other Christendom societies. Not only did it yield earnest, genuine faith in the lives of some and an often-stable social order, it birthed a flourishing culture expressed in distinctive painting, sculpture, writing, music, and architectural masterpieces like the rock-hewn churches of Lalibela.

Christianity was also inextricably bound with violence.

The church gained adherents as Christian kings imposed their religion, language, and political system on newly seized territories. For example, amid the nineteenth-century European scramble for Africa, a series of Abyssinian kings carved out their own empire, tripling the area under Ethiopian rule, adding

9 Tibebe Eshete, *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia: Resistance and Resilience* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press), 16–17; Harold G. Marcus, *A History of Ethiopia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 6–8; Richard Pankhurst, *The Ethiopians: A History* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1998), 34–35; Calvin E. Shenk, "The Ethiopian Orthodox Church's Understanding of Mission," *Mission Studies* 4, no. 1 (January 1987): 4–20.

10 Girma Bekele, *The In-Between People: A Reading of David Bosch through the Lens of Mission History and Contemporary Challenges in Ethiopia* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2011), 156–57; Eshete, *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia*, 17; Pankhurst, *The Ethiopians*, 36–39; Shenk, "The EOC's Understanding of Mission," 5.

dozens of tribes and millions of people to the nation.[11] The thirteenth-century legal code, the *Fetha Nagast* (Law of the Kings), inspired them with these instructions:

> When you reach a city or land to fight against its inhabitants, offer them terms of peace. If they accept you and open their gates, the men who are there shall become subjects and give you tribute, but if they refuse the terms of peace and offer battle, go forward to assault, and oppress them, since the Lord your God will make you master of them.[12]

Rulers who submitted to the conquering king could keep their positions. Those who converted to Orthodox Christianity could fully join the ruling class. Uncooperative leaders could expect harsh retribution. After suppressing a revolt in Wollo, Yohannes IV made this appeal to the people of the region in June 1878:

> We are your apostles. All this used to be Christian land until Gragn [a sixteenth-century Muslim conqueror] ruined and misled it. Now let all, whether Muslim or Galla [pagan] believe on the name of the Jesus Christ! Be baptized! If you wish to live in peace preserving your belongings, become Christians. . . . Thereby you will govern in this world and inherit in the one to come.[13]

Christian heretics were given two years to conform, Muslims three, and pagans five. Those who resisted had their property confiscated. At least one man had his tongue cut out. Unsurprisingly, this mode of "evangelism" did not inspire defeated people to joyfully embrace Jesus Christ. The message of the cross was obscured by its imperial packaging. As a result, many superficially adopted a new religious identity, grudgingly accepting Christianity as the price of survival. Retaining previous beliefs and practices, such converts were known as "Christians by day, Muslims by night."[14] In his survey of Ethiopian Orthodox mission history, Calvin Shenk observed that

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11 John Markakis, *Ethiopia: The Last Two Frontiers* (Suffolk, UK: James Currey, 2011), 89–107; Pankhurst, *The Ethiopians*, 131–208; Richard J. Reid, *Frontiers of Violence in North-East Africa: Genealogies of Conflict since c. 1800* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 49–128; Donald N. Levine, *Greater Ethiopia: The Evolution of a Multiethnic Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 26, 74.

12 Markakis, *Ethiopia*, 95.

13 R. A. Caulk, "Religion and State in Nineteenth Century Ethiopia," *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 10, no. 1 (January 1972): 23–41.

14 Eshete, *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia*, 27–30; Pankhurst, *The Ethiopians*, 168–69. In the early twentieth century, evangelical movements took root in conquered territory in rural southern and western Ethiopia. Those on the margins of the empire were especially receptive to the message of Jesus when proclaimed in their own language by converts from their own tribes. Donald L. Donham, *Marxist Modern: An Ethnographic History of the Ethiopian Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 91, notes

> Mission was usually from a position of strength—the superior power of the monk over the local practitioner, the superior power of the Christian kingdom, or the power of the nobles over the masses. Christianity spread by the migration of Christian families, merchants, soldiers, and governors. A powerful instrument for evangelism was the presence of the local worshipping church. Persons responded for varied reasons; many were obliged, others sought advancement through identification with superior power, and some responded to a spiritual quest.[15]

In the twentieth century, Haile Selassie—pursuing a pluralistic, modern vision for his empire—established a legal foundation for the rights of religious minorities and welcomed evangelical mission societies to Ethiopia as partners in nation-building. To create legal space for them and appease an Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC) constituency hostile to foreign missionaries, his 1944 Missions Decree divided the country into closed and open areas. The former were the exclusive domain of the EOTC, mainly in north and central Ethiopia. There mission agencies could provide education, medical care, social services, and biblical teaching if they taught doctrine common to all Christian groups and did not proselytize EOTC adherents. In open regions, they could teach the faith of their denominations as long as they did not disparage EOTC theology or practice. Mennonite missionaries arrived under these conditions in 1945.[16]

In addition to the EOTC, Ethiopia was home to a large Muslim population, a historic Jewish community, traditional animists, Roman Catholics, and evangelical Christians. Despite this and Haile Selassie's relatively generous posture toward religious minorities, the 1955 Constitution of Ethiopia confirmed the EOTC as the established church of the empire. The authority of the emperor was grounded in his "imperial blood" and the anointing of the church. In turn, the church relied on the emperor to bless its "decrees, edicts and public regulations" and the appointment of its patriarch and bishops and was obliged to mention his name in all religious services.[17]

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that it took time for new Christians in southern Ethiopia to realize that their faith "was at all related to the Christianity of their northern conquerors."

15 Shenk, "The EOC's Understanding of Mission," 15.

16 Bekele, *The In-Between People*, 215–16; Øyvind Eide, *Revolution and Religion in Ethiopia: The Growth and Persecution of the Mekane Yesus Church, 1974–85* (Oxford: James Currey, 2000), 35–36; Eshete, *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia*, 93–97.

17 "The Imperial Constitution of 1955," in *Law, Development, and the Ethiopian Revolution*, Paul H. Brietzke (East Brunswick, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1982), 21, 102–3; Calvin E. Shenk, "Church and State in Ethiopia: From Monarchy to Marxism," *Mission Studies* 11, no. 2 (1994): 203–26; Bahru Zewde, *A History of Modern Ethiopia, 1855–1974* (London: James Currey, 1991), 128–49, 201–25.

"The church is like a sword," Haile Selassie once explained, "and the government is like an arm; therefore, the sword cannot cut by itself without the use of the arm."[18]

Marxists and Evangelicals Seeking a Better World

When the winds of revolution began to blow through Ethiopia in 1974, it surprised almost everyone, including those hoping and agitating for change. Some—especially many students—had clear ideological goals. Most who joined the groundswell of protest, however, were simply voicing frustration over scarce jobs, living expenses, low wages, high fuel prices, poor conditions for soldiers, and lack of religious equality.[19]

A committee of low- and middle-ranking officers from various military factions orchestrated the change in government. This Provisional Military Administrative Council (PMAC)—known as the Derg—cast a vision for a uniquely Ethiopian socialism built on equality, the dignity of workers, access to education and medicine, the common good, a state-managed economy, and friendly international relations.[20] Their rallying cry was *Ethiopia Tikdem*—"Ethiopia First!" Ideologically vague, the motto appealed to the nationalism of diverse ethnic groups with a call to move forward in unity. A popular song from the first year of the revolution urged listeners to embrace the optimistic values of home-grown socialism:

> Let us move on the new road,
> Where no one is oppressed and humiliated,
> Let those unaware of the right of equality,
> Awake from their sleep,
> With the slogan "Ethiopia First."[21]

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18 Calvin E. Shenk, "A New Ethiopia: What Place Religion?" *Missionary Messenger* (1974).

19 Bahru Zewde, *A History of Modern Ethiopia*, 419–40; Marcus, *A History of Ethiopia*, 181–89; Gérard Prunier, "The Ethiopian Revolution and the Derg Regime," in *Understanding Contemporary Ethiopia: Monarchy, Revolution and the Legacy of Meles Zenawi*, eds. Gérard Prunier and Éloi Ficquet (London: Hurst, 2015), 209–31.

20 Christopher Clapham, *Transformation and Continuity in Revolutionary Ethiopia* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 45–46; Tibebe Eshete, *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia: Resistance and Resilience* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2009), 203–5.

21 "Socialism," composed by Girmaye Mekonnen, in Neguss Yilma Woldesenbet, "Thematic Analysis of Selected Amharic Song Lyrics: A Sociological Approach," (PhD dissertation, Addis Ababa University, Ethiopia, 2018), 91–93.

Many evangelicals welcomed the revolution as the dawn of a new day. Alemu Checole recalls how some naïvely saw "socialism as a benign system" that could enable Ethiopia to become the "breadbasket of Africa."[22] A leader who served on the MKC Executive Committee remembered socialism presented as "Christianity in another form" since "the rich people are too rich, while the poor don't have anything to eat." It looked like justice.[23] Another MKC leader cautioned others that no government would satisfy all of the physical and spiritual needs. "Just be careful," he said. "Just be patient. You will find out that this is not really the truth." Painfully, many would not listen.[24]

Followers of Jesus not only sympathized with the socialist vision but also hoped the revolution would bring greater religious freedom. In the early 1970s, 2 or 3 percent of Ethiopians were evangelical Christians.[25] Often subject to discrimination and persecution, some joined a crowd of one hundred thousand, mostly Muslim, for an April 1974 demonstration in Addis Ababa calling for the separation of church and state, with religious equality for all citizens. The Derg included this demand in a proposed national constitution, released in August 1974 shortly before assuming power, winning goodwill from those marginalized under the imperial system.[26] Some in MKC believed they were entering "a

22 Alemu Checole, assisted by Samuel Asefa, "Mennonite Churches in Eastern Africa," in *Anabaptist Songs in African Hearts*, eds. John A. Lapp and C. Arnold Snyder (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2006), 231.

23 Interview with author, April 1, 2014.

24 Interview with author, April 24, 2014, translation by Alemu Checole.

25 Emanuele Fantini, "Go Pente! The Charismatic Renewal of the Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia," in *Understanding Contemporary Ethiopia: Monarchy, Revolution and the Legacy of Meles Zenawi*, eds. Gérard Prunier and Éloi Ficquet (London: Hurst, 2015), 123–46, notes that evangelical Christians comprised less than 1 percent of the Ethiopian population in the early 1960s, but by the 1984 census had grown to 5.5 percent. The estimate of 2 or 3 percent is based on accounts of rapid growth before and after the revolution.

26 Andargachew Tiruneh, *The Ethiopian Revolution, 1974–1987: A Transformation from an Aristocratic to a Totalitarian Autocracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 49; *Eide, Revolution and Religion in Ethiopia*, 112; Shenk, "Church and State in Ethiopia," 207; Eshete, *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia*, 264–65, 418, n. 2; Jörg Haustein, "Navigating Political Revolutions: Ethiopia's Churches During and After the Mengistu Regime," in *Falling Walls: The Year 1989/90 as a Turning Point in the History of World Christianity*, ed. Klaus Koschorke (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2009), 117–36. The April 1976 National Democratic Revolution Programme of Ethiopia offered religious freedom for Ethiopians. The "Revised Constitution" adopted January 1987 provided for the legal separation of church and state, freedom of conscience and religion, with the caveat that religion not "be exercised in a manner contrary to the interests of the state and revolution, public morality or freedom of other citizens." This gave legal room for the repression of evangelical Christians.

wonderful time of freedom" to practice their faith, believing "things were going to be much, much, much better with Ethiopian socialism."[27]

By December 1974, Mengistu Haile Mariam had eliminated PMAC rivals who advocated for a democratic republic. In control of the Derg, he announced the implementation of scientific socialism through a one-party state, public ownership of the economy, and collective agriculture. The government soon nationalized banks, insurance companies, major commercial and industrial enterprises, rural land, and urban property. Despite early successes, the PMAC faced pressure from rival Marxist groups competing to shape the ideology of the revolution. Adopting the rhetoric of class struggle, Mengistu and his allies identified enemies of the revolution, including aristocrats, bourgeois classes, and imperialists, and made plans to eradicate them.[28]

The Derg trained government officials and passionate young cadres to promote Communist principles— including atheism—in local peasant organizations (*mahabirs*) and municipal councils (*kebeles*). Neighborhoods and workplaces hosted mandatory "discussion forums" for political indoctrination. The state began to penetrate the nooks and crannies of Ethiopia as never before. Rather than ushering in shalom and freedom, Mengistu's Derg delivered rigid ideology, authoritarianism, fear, and violence.

Evangelism from Below

Tezera Kebede was a student at Atse Gelawdios Comprehensive High School in Adama in the mid-1970s. She remembers a day when teachers and students ridiculed evangelical Christians. "What has Jesus done for you?" they taunted. "Just tell us. List what he has done for you." Some believing students withdrew in fear, but Tezera saw an opportunity to proclaim the gospel. She and her friend Seble replied, "We can tell you all the things that Jesus has done for us." At the end of the school day, teachers gathered the student body in a courtyard, seating them in a large circle. Tezera and Seble were placed in the centre for questioning.

"What did Jesus do for you?" they were asked.

Seble (perhaps trying to be clever) answered, "The Bible says, 'Don't throw your pearls before swine.'" Predictably, some of the students beat her and sent her away.

Tezera stayed. "I will answer the question you asked me." She said:

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27 Interview with author, April 24, 2014, translation by Alemu Checole.

28 Accounts and analyses of the revolution are found in Christopher Clapham, *Transformation and Continuity in Revolutionary Ethiopia*; Donham, *Marxist Modern*; Gebru Tareke, *The Ethiopian Revolution: War in the Horn of Africa* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009); Teferra Haile-Selassie, *The Ethiopian Revolution, 1974–1991: From a Monarchical Autocracy to a Military Oligarchy* (London: Kegan Paul International, 1997); and Tiruneh, *The Ethiopian Revolution*.

> I am free from the fear of death and from the fear of hell, where the fire never goes out, where the worm does not die. I am free from that kind of fear. I am at peace with myself. I have peace of mind from God.
>
> The second thing that Jesus has done for me is he has given me my family: my mother and my brothers and sisters. After receiving Jesus Christ, I also have a family that loves the Lord, so that is another good gift that I have received from Jesus.
>
> The Lord has also given me the wisdom and the strength to witness to unbelievers like you. I have many brothers and sisters in the Lord. And I want you also to be brothers and sisters, you know.

A school administrator directed the students: "Do not ever bother Tezera from here on. She has her stand. Do not come and bother her."[29]

Tezera spoke about her faith in Jesus and offered a loving invitation to her listeners from a position of social and political weakness. She risked ostracism, academic punishment, beating, imprisonment, or sentencing to a political camp for "re-education." Still, she gave her peers a simple, clear testimony without knowing if they would hear with open hearts or entrenched hostility. Thankfully, she received support from an adult authority.

Telling others about Jesus often made believers targets for persecution. Even so, MKC nurtured a culture of joyful, enthusiastic evangelism. "When we are serious about preaching the gospel, there is a price to pay," Ijigu Woldegebriel observed.[30] Like many others, he considered the cost well worth it. In an interview, another MKC member, Haragawein, spoke of her fervor in proclaiming Christ shortly after the fall of the Derg. After God healed her of blindness, she learned to read and decided that no risk was too great to keep her from sharing Jesus with any who would listen. She said, "I go out in the morning and come back at night. I do not choose where I go. I preach to everybody: I don't care what tribe, whether they are priests or prostitutes, on the bus, on the street, anybody I find."[31]

Interviewed MKC leaders who served during the years of the Derg have consistently expressed delight in evangelism. "Our primary goal is bringing people to Christ in order to glorify him," Lema said. "We do have that passion in loving hearts, reaching people for Christ. When people are accepting Christ as their own personal Saviour, that is our joy."[32]

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29 Interview with author, April 4, 2014, translation by Alemu Checole.

30 Hege, *Beyond Our Prayers*, 179.

31 Hostetler, *Against Great Odds*, VHS, 18:27.

32 Interview with author, May 26, 2014. Lema is a pseudonym. For a detailed summary of this research, see Brent L. Kipfer, "Thriving under Persecution: Meserete Kristos Church Leadership during the Ethiopian Revolution (1974–1991)," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 91 (July 2017): 297–369.

For Aster Debossie, speaking of Jesus sprang naturally from her relationship with God. "I am very glad to be a daughter of God and serve God," she said. "Because of this, I love sharing the gospel."[33] Another leader explained how MKC evangelism was motivated by love for others. "We knew . . . most people were in the dark . . . following the world. We wanted to snatch them out of this world and bring them to the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ."[34]

Seeking the Shalom of Ethiopia

In 1973, on the eve of the socialist revolution, the Meserete Kristos Church (MKC) operated eleven elementary schools, two junior high schools, one boarding high school, two hospitals, and two clinics in partnership with Eastern Mennonite Missions (EMM).[35] For a denomination of eight hundred members in eight congregations, it was an extraordinary number of institutions to manage, even with missionary support. MKC had also begun agricultural development programs in Bedeno and Deder to improve crop yields, dairy herds, wool and egg production, and beekeeping.[36]

Haile Selassie welcomed the Mennonite Mission to Ethiopia because it could assist in bringing modern education and health care to his people. From the beginning, EMM workers understood its schools, clinics, and hospitals as expressions of the love of Christ and a means of giving witness to the gospel.[37] Negash Kebede saw some of these institutions open when he was a child. He recalled that people in his community understood that these schools and hospitals were "not motivated by profit" but by compassion, offering healing and learning as a "response to the gospel of Christ." Within them students, patients, and employees could see followers of Jesus in action, sometimes under pressure, observing their character and the results of their commitment to Christ.[38] MKC thus emerged in places where the message of Jesus was proclaimed by people connected with institutions known for improving the quality of life.

When the Derg took power, many in MKC were eager to join fellow citizens in building a more just, prosperous, peaceful country. In a tense political

33 Aaron Lehman, "Aster Debossie: Meserete Kristos Churchwoman in Lay Leadership in Ethiopia 1974–1991," (BA senior paper, Goshen [IN] College, 2003)," 12–14.

34 Interview with author, April 30, 2014.

35 Nathan Hege and Richard D. Thiessen, "Meserete Kristos Church," *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, January 2024, http://www.gameo.org/encyclopedia/contents/meserete_kristos_church.

36 Hege, *Beyond Our Prayers*, 102–6.

37 Dorothy Smoker and Chester L. Wenger, *God Led Us to Ethiopia* (Salunga, PA: Eastern Mennonite Board of Missions and Charities, 1956).

38 *Hege, Beyond Our Prayers*, 101.

environment, they wanted their neighbors, government, and communities to know that their faith was relevant in tackling poverty, injustice, ethnic strife, and other challenges in Ethiopia.[39] Church leaders urged young adults to participate in literacy and development campaigns. Congregations supported development programs that would enhance the community.

Tilahun Beyene explained that if a local government decided to build a road or discuss what to do to help the community, it was crucial for the witness of the church to participate. If church members would say, "I am not part of that. I am not coming," they would appear to be "anti-society." Still, MKC guarded against the use of church property for political purposes.[40] When the kebele wanted to hold literacy classes at the Nazareth MKC site, the church elders said, "This is a sanctuary to worship the Lord. But we are willing to build classrooms for you on the kebele compound." The congregation built four classrooms there.[41]

In the early years of the revolution, MKC was able to expand its work in development through a partnership with Mennonite Central Committee (MCC). Programs were primarily overseen and managed by the MKC Development and Rehabilitation Board. Between 1974 and 1982, projects included equipping people to dig wells, goat breeding and dairy production, a demonstration farm, famine relief, a mobile medical clinic, and afforestation.[42] By alleviating poverty and investing in agricultural infrastructure, the MKC sought to practically express love for their neighbors and give witness to the reign of Christ. Even so, their efforts did not necessarily win them Marxist favor. When MKC representatives offered grain to a famine-stricken area in Hararghe Region, an official said, "We are not sure we can accept aid from you. Although you bring grain in your right hand, you have the Bible hidden in your left hand."[43] In January 1982, the Derg ordered kebele officials to close all MKC congregations, freeze its bank accounts, seize its property, and nationalize institutions still under its control.

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39 Hege, *Beyond Our Prayers*, 109.

40 Interview with author, April 1, 2014.

41 Interview with author, April 28, 2014; also Hege, *Beyond Our Prayers*, 166, 176–77; Gemechu Gebre Telila, "History of the Meserete Kristos Church at Wonji Gefersa, Ethiopia during the Derg, 1974–1991: 'God Works for Good,'" (MA thesis, Eastern Mennonite Seminary, Harrisonburg, VA, 2002), 37. While Nazareth MKC leaders were able to limit government use of church property in the 1970s, kebele officials in Wonji Gefersa used local MKC facilities without permission in 1977, scheduling socialist gatherings when the church would normally have worship.

42 Hege, *Beyond Our Prayers*, 102–18; Jacob Schwartzentruber, "A Closely Knit Partnership: Mennonite Central Committee and the Meserete Kristos Church's Attempt at Preventing Famine in Ethiopia from 1974–1982" (BA senior paper, Goshen [IN] College, 2011).

43 Hege, *Beyond Our Prayers*, 110.

Then, because MKC no longer existed as a legal entity, its public partnership with MCC ended, although MCC continued work in Ethiopia and found ways to informally support the Ethiopian church.

The legal space in which MKC could pursue the mission of God had shrunk considerably. It had lost control of the institutions through which it had invested in the health and thriving of its neighbors, and which had given a measure of credibility to its witness. It was a disorienting, hard loss. Yet the church would still thrive in the work of Jesus.

Loose Screws: Informed by the Logic of the Cross

A notice on an Addis Ababa University wall denounced ten students for spreading "ideology" about Jesus Christ on campus. Those listed—including Tefera Bekere—were ejected from the Revolutionary Ethiopian Youth Association (REYA). What would this mean for them? Membership in REYA was required to enter university, graduate, and get a job.[44] Could they complete their degrees and find work in their fields?

Like all persecution, the expulsions aimed to curb the influence of Jesus-followers, not only by punishing those named but also by intimidating and silencing others. Tefera was not surprised. He knew that suffering came part-and-parcel with embracing a crucified Messiah.

Converting to Christ had profoundly changed him. Within a month of his decision, Tefera read the whole New Testament, joined a Christian fellowship at university, and gave up alcohol and drugs. He was soon leading Bible studies and prayer meetings. He led others to faith in Jesus and mentored them as new disciples. He connected with an underground MKC home group and was baptized in 1985. That year, the Derg closed the university for two months, sending students and staff to help with a resettlement program.[45] Tefera was assigned to a house-building project in western Ethiopia. While serving there, he was arrested for preaching the gospel. He spent a day in jail but was released and, undaunted, he kept proclaiming Jesus.[46]

So, when Tefera was ejected from REYA he was not fazed or disheartened. In fact, he received it as truly happy news. He did not relish pain or hardship but revelled in his spiritual privilege. Echoing the apostle Paul, he said he was grateful "not only to believe in" Christ "but also to suffer for him" (Phil 1:29). Some of his

44 Clapham, *Transformation and Continuity in Revolutionary Ethiopia*, 141.

45 Abebaw Yirga Adamu and Randi Rønning Balsvik, "Students' Participation in and Contribution to Political and Social Change in Ethiopia," in *What Politics?*, ed. Elina Oinas et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 265–84.

46 Interview with author, April 15, 2020.

friends were not kicked out of REYA. With tears, they asked, "Why not?" Had they not sufficiently identified themselves with Jesus?

For Tefera, the cost of following Jesus was not onerous. "If you believe in Jesus . . . you have to pay the price," he explained. Yet he did not serve or suffer alone but in union with Christ. That intimate connection with God gave him joy. With other believers, he was part of God's great redemption story. They were children of God adopted by their heavenly Abba, embraced as brothers and sisters by Jesus, and strengthened by the Holy Spirit. This was their delight.

By God's grace, Tefera testified, he graduated from university with two degrees. One equipped him to teach mathematics. The other, gained from participating in a vibrant Christian community, formed his theology and experience with God. Going out two by two, he and his friends shared the gospel with other students. In all-night meetings, they fasted and prayed for each other to be filled with the Holy Spirit. Not legally able to carry Bibles, they memorized Scripture. They regularly met under a tree in the yard of an Orthodox church. Avoiding religious language in public, they asked each other: "Have you heard anything from Dad for me?" They yearned to hear the voice of their heavenly Father through the pages of Scripture and his Holy Spirit. More than injera, they cherished "every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord" (Deut 8:3). It was a vital lifeline.

Marxists were especially jealous for the loyalty of educated young people. The leaders of REYA, like many others, felt threatened by the growth of evangelical Christianity. Their position in the Communist system gave them power, even as minor political players, to penalize those seen as bad socialists. It was a tried-and-true strategy: hit nonconformists where it hurts. What could university students value more than the approval of their peers, academic success, and good jobs after graduation?

Yet Tefera and his friends were energized by different values. Those who kicked them out of the student organization would have been confounded. What logic governed their lives and leadership? They were part of a story that made no sense to their opponents: the reign of Jesus Christ, whose "power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor 12:9). It marked them as odd. Another MKC leader from the Derg era, Kassa Agafari, once said (with a smile) that those the Holy Spirit fills with the love of God are often seen as "loose screws" in this world.[47]

A Crucified Mind

Western Christians, the Japanese theologian Kosuke Koyama observed, demonstrate a persistent impulse to try to manage and control the gospel. Might that be a temptation for believers in all cultures shaped by a history of Christendom? Pushing against such a mindset, Koyama asked, "Does Jesus carry the cross as a

47 Interview with author, April 3, 2014.

businessman carries his briefcase?" He pointed out that it does not come with a handle. The gospel cannot be mastered. Yet when inviting people to share in his resurrection, Jesus calls them "to take up the cross without a handle." Those trained under the weight of the cross develop what Koyama described as a "crucified mind."[48]

Cruciformity—as evident in Meserete Kristos Church experience under the Derg—emerges from an inner and outer participation in the life of Messiah Jesus. Michael Gorman, in his study of the apostle Paul's spirituality of the cross, defines cruciformity as

> an ongoing pattern of living in Christ and of dying with him that produces a Christ-like (cruciform) person. Cruciform existence is what being Christ's servant, indwelling him and being indwelt by him, living with and for and "according to" him, is all about, for both individuals and communities.[49]

Such cruciformity is generated not by human effort but by the Spirit of God, who animates those who identify with Christ and enables their conformity to him so that the story of the cross can continue to be "retold and relived."[50]

The love and passion for God that informed Tefera Bekere's cruciform logic are common in testimonies of MKC leaders who served in the revolutionary era. Their hunger for personal communion with God motivated them to practice rigorous personal and corporate disciplines of Bible study, prayer, and fasting. Gemechu Gebre wrote:

> The experience of persecution forced us to seek the power of the Holy Spirit. Christians were organized in groups to pray without ceasing, and they prayed specifically for the power of the Holy Spirit. It is their conviction that the God who promised to give his power for those who seek day and night poured his Spirit on his people.

Their "deep intimacy with God" and "living union and fellowship with Christ" filled them with love for others and motivated them to endure under hardship.[51] Their inner life with God was tested and formed by persecution and other forms of suffering.

The Derg, for instance, monitored and limited movement in Ethiopia, making travel a challenge. At checkpoints, government forces searched travelers for

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48 Kosuke Koyama, *No Handle on the Cross: An Asian Meditation on the Crucified Mind* (London: SCM, 1977; reprint Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2011), 3–4, 86.

49 Michael J. Gorman, *Cruciformity: Paul's Narrative Spirituality of the Cross* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 48–49.

50 Gorman, *Cruciformity*, 49.

51 Gemechu Gebre, "History of the Meserete Kristos Church at Wonji Gefersa, Ethiopia, during the Derg, 1974–1991: 'God Works for Good,'" (MA thesis, Eastern Mennonite Seminary, Harrisonburg, VA, 2002), 67–68.

contraband material like Bibles and other religious literature. Trekking alone, Kifle (an evangelist in the Awash Valley) was often hungry, tired, and lonely. He used a single pair of shoes for five years until its soles were full of holes. He wore one jacket until it was a tattered rag. Kifle told of his struggle in a challenging location:

> I came to the house where I was staying with an empty stomach. I was . . . exhausted, and I was trying to pray, but I could not. I was so hungry inside, my stomach gnawing. I almost despaired, but then I saw—kind of like in a revelation—I saw how Christ hung on the cross naked, and . . . how he was beaten and was bleeding. This was all for me. Seeing this strengthened me. So, I got up and I went and started doing my work, strengthened by what I saw and understood what Christ had gone through for me. So, what is this little kind of hunger and thirst and exhaustion?[52]

Jesus First

In interviews, MKC leaders underscored that their experiences of persecution were a natural outgrowth of their faith. While their allegiance to Jesus was profoundly spiritual, it was not private. They practiced discretion to avoid unnecessary suffering but did not hide their Christian identity. Jazarah, for example, displayed the message "Live the whole day fearing God" on a wall in the hotel she owned and operated. Cadres ordered her to remove it, but she replied, "It will stay." Looking back, she testified, "The Lord was really with me. I felt his protection and presence."[53]

The Derg expected citizens to express their loyalty by raising their left hands and shouting slogans in public assemblies. MKC members refused to make the gesture or repeat revolutionary catchphrases that contradicted their allegiance to Jesus and his reign. They believed that to declare "Ethiopia first!" would treat the nation as an idol usurping the devotion that belongs to God alone. Likewise, to say "The revolution above everything!" would deny the lordship of Christ. Many were beaten or arrested for their nonparticipation.[54]

MKC members also rejected membership in the Communist Party, despite the cost in lost opportunities such as promotions, free medical care, life insurance, and scholarships to foreign universities. They have consistently explained their rationale in light of their commitment to Jesus. For example, when a cadre

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52 Interview with author, April 24, 2014; translation by Alemu Checole. Kifle is a pseudonym. Similarly, in an interview with the author, March 31, 2014, Gemechu Gebre said, "It was painful, but the One who suffered it before them on the cross knows the pain."

53 Interview with author, May 1, 2014. Jazarah is a pseudonym.

54 Hege, *Beyond Our Prayers*, 174; multiple interviews with author March 31 to May 9, 2014.

(formerly part of MKC) pressured Yohannes Germamo to join the party, he told him, "I cannot serve two masters at a time." Yohannes later recalled, "Although he threatened me . . . I did not fear. He said, 'You will be executed if you don't join the party.' I answered him, 'It is okay to be executed and to be with Jesus. That would be much better than joining the party and dying without Jesus.'"[55]

How did the Meserete Kristos Church respond to the draft of young people to fight Eritrean, Tigrean, and other Derg opponents? There had been no compulsory military service under Haile Selassie's regime or provision for conscientious objection in Ethiopian law.[56] Some in MKC accepted conscription while others evaded military service based on their understanding of Jesus's call to nonviolence and love for enemies.[57]

While it was rare for MKC members to hold public office in the Derg era, Yacob was elected to a two-year term as a kebele leader in the early years of the revolution. He was given an AK-47 Kalashnikov rifle for self-defence. "I took the gun and hid it in the closet in the house," Yacob said. "I just went out in the evening . . . without any gun, even though they told me to carry it around and threaten people with it." Derg officials questioned him: "We gave you a gun. Why don't you use it? Why don't you carry it with you?" Yacob replied, "What's the use of carrying a gun? If I carry one, they can come from behind and kill me, and shoot me. It is God who protects me. . . . I do not want to kill anyone." He retrieved and returned the gun, saying, "It is not the gun you gave me that protects me. It is God who protects me, so I do not need it."[58]

Gemechu Gebre acknowledged the temptation to compromise one's faith in an oppressive political environment. To counter the temptation, he was intentional about revealing his commitment to Jesus whatever the setting. He said:

> I just always referred to my faith wherever I went: at weddings or at their meetings, they knew that I was a Christian. . . . At a wedding, if I was alone, I bowed down my head and prayed for the food that they were serving me. . . . They knew that I was praying. . . . I want to be consistent with my living.[59]

Gemechu wore a belt that said, "Jesus saves," and a cross pinned on his shirt pocket, even at work as a teacher in a government-run school. His transparency did get him into trouble. He and two other Christian teachers were called

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55 Gemechu Gebre, "Meserete Kristos Church at Wonji Gefersa," 46.

56 Meron Tesfaye, "The Right to Conscientious Objection under Ethiopian Law" (LLM thesis, Addis Ababa University Faculty of Law, 2011), 67–68.

57 Eshete, *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia*, 254; interviews with author, April 30, May 1, and May 5, 2014.

58 Interview with author, April 25, 2014. Yacob is a pseudonym.

59 Interview with author, March 31, 2014.

"imperialist dogs," and "Mete," an Amharic term disparaging followers of a "foreign religion." They were also accused of being CIA agents and "of injecting theism into the minds of the growing children." At a workplace political session, they were presented with a statement of the accusations against them signed by the other teachers and ordered to appear at the regional Communist Party office for questioning.

Their persecutors had a problem, though. A Communist Party official on staff needed to deliver the statement of accusations to a local political office but lacked transportation. "Do you want my bicycle?" Gemechu asked him. "Take it," he said, holding out his bicycle key.

What was the impact of this unexpectedly generous act? Sometime later, while teaching in a community more than five hundred kilometres away, his persecutor was moved by a presentation of the gospel. Because of his previous opposition to Christianity in Gemechu's community—Wonji—he returned there to publicly become a disciple of Jesus. He attended a Sunday morning worship service at which Gemechu presented an invitation to faith. The man stepped forward, weeping, and received Jesus Christ as his Savior. He said, "You touched me the day that you gave me your key for that bicycle." Gemechu noted that the three Derg officials involved in the accusations against him at his school have all become followers of Jesus and approached him individually to seek his forgiveness "for the distress they caused me during the Derg."[60]

The Compelling Power of Cruciform Love

Relationships between MKC members and their persecutors could be complex. Despite the risks, many boldly gave testimony about their faith in Jesus Christ to authorities or others with power to harm them. They sometimes confronted officials about the unjust treatment of Christians. In some situations, they complied with orders to limit ministry activities, and, in others, verbally challenged or quietly defied them. Still, the church was committed to practicing cruciform love among believers and for those who did not yet share their faith. Reflecting on God's use of persecution to expand the church's capacity to love, Tengene, an MKC leader from Addis Ababa, said:

> God brings times of trial to test us and to purify us. We learn patience through suffering. We learn love, true love, during times of persecution. We learn humility when we have arrogant, proud people over us, towering over us.[61]

60 Gemechu Gebre, "Meserete Kristos Church at Wonji Gefersa," 89–93; interview with author, March 31, 2014.

61 Interview with author, May 7, 2014.

Naturally, some found it difficult to overcome their anger against their opponents. Bekele admitted that it could be hard to keep an open heart toward a persecutor in the moment he was being threatened.[62] Louam recalled a young church member who publicly answered an insult at a political meeting with one of his own.[63] Another interviewee confessed to verbally intimidating a man who was unjustly withholding his graduation certificate after he had successfully completed a year-and-a-half-long management course.[64] Still, the theology, church culture, and practices of MKC called its members into the cruciform love of Jesus.

Their testimonies point to a number of influences that shaped their imagination toward this love: (1) the teaching of Jesus on forgiveness and love for enemies, (2) a biblical worldview that trained them to see conflict through the lens of spiritual warfare (recognizing Satan rather than human beings as their true enemy), (3) the example of leaders like Kedir Delchume who kept a journal with the names of sixty-four persecutors for whom he prayed, (4) the miraculous outpouring of love from the Holy Spirit, and (5) widespread empathy—based on experience and significant relationships—for those who did not know Christ.

There are many accounts of former persecutors drawn to the message of Jesus through the witness of MKC members. Dobamo Arficho, a member of the Derg party, was a tractor driver whose assistant spoke to him about Jesus and the offer of eternal life. "I rejected him many times, and frightened him with many evil words," Dobamo said. "Finally, I reported him to the boss for harassing me." Still, his coworker persisted in showing him love. Eventually, Dobamo surrendered. He explained:

> The word that came through that man penetrated into my heart, and the love of Jesus poured into my heart at that time. I really sensed my conversion. I realized that God's love was beyond my imagination. After I received Jesus Christ as my personal Savior, that man handed [me] over to [a church elder who taught me] . . . how to follow Jesus in my own house until the fall of the Communist government.[65]

Although MKC had lost its institutions through which it had once sought to advance the health and shalom of Ethiopian communities, members continued to embed their evangelism in genuine love for their neighbors. They visited the sick, prayed for them, offered emotional support, and spoke of Jesus. They cared for the poor and contributed to worthwhile kebele projects. They attended community weddings and funerals, even when the same courtesy had not been extended to them. They tried to maintain friendships with former Christians who

62 Interview with author, May 19, 2014.

63 Interview with author, April 26, 2014.

64 Interview with author, April 25, 2014.

65 Gemechu Gebre, "Meserete Kristos Church at Wonji Gefersa," 62–63.

had drifted from their earlier faith. They tried to treat others fairly. Imprisoned church members shared their food with fellow inmates.

Miracles reminded believers that while they were called to sacrificial service, evangelism and shalom-making were ultimately *God's* work. The Bole congregation of MKC in Addis Ababa saw many people freed of cancer, paralysis, blindness, and asthma in its public worship services before its closure in 1982. MKC evangelist Daniel Mekonnen described them as "love healings"—a sovereign outpouring of God's compassion on needy people.[66]

Others were healed when followers of Jesus prayed for the sick in homes. Jazarah, an MKC elder in Adama, recalled her regular visits to an unchurched family whose daughter suffered from a serious heart condition and the healing she experienced when an evangelist prayed with her.[67] Lema was invited to pray with a Derg official who had a chronic digestive illness. When he and a co-leader did so, their host immediately said, "I am feeling well," and ate the Ethiopian staple *injera* for the first time in six years with no ill effects.[68]

Obeying Christ sometimes led into uncomfortable places. Gemechu Gebre described a time Teketel Chakiso, one of his co-elders in the Wonji Gefersa MKC congregation, had a vision in which God told him to deliver a message to Tilahun Tute, chair of the Derg party Supervisory Committee. Teketel was unnerved. He told his wife about the vision, hoping she would dismiss it as a crazy idea. "Go and tell him," she said. So, shaking with fear, he went to Gemechu. "I have a message for Tilahun," he said.

"Why don't you go and tell him?" Gemechu asked.

"I fear him! You know the power, the authority that he has." Teketel knew that Tilahun could easily sign an execution order.

Gemechu responded, "Whom do you fear: the One who sent you or the one who is just mortal? Which one do you fear?"

"Pray for me," Teketel begged.

The church gathered to pray for him and for Tilahun. Teketel approached the high-ranking official's house that evening. He knocked on the door, trembling. "Please come in," Tilahun welcomed him. "Why did you come?"

"God has sent me."

"What? 'God has sent me'?"

Tilahun called his wife and children. Together they sat and listened while Teketel said it was time to be reconciled with God. That if they responded in faith, God would bless them and the next generation. If not, there would be four consequences, which Teketel listed. To his great surprise and relief, Tilahun and

66 Checole, "Mennonite Churches in Eastern Africa," 230–32; Hege, *Beyond Our Prayers*, 169–71; Eshete, *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia*, 257–59.

67 Interview with author, May 1, 2014. Jazarah is a pseudonym.

68 Interview with author, May 6, 2014. Lema is a pseudonym.

his family knelt on the floor, weeping. A former Christian, Tilahun repented of having abandoned his faith and sinning against his family. Together, they received Jesus as their Savior. Tilahun later testified:

> I held the highest authorized position and was a popular person in the Wonji sugar state. I had good relationship with the top party leaders. Humanly speaking I had everything on earth at the time. But I did not have peace and rest. Because of this I drank too much to calm my sick soul.

Gemechu explained that Tilahun and others in his family had been physically ill, needing to visit the hospital almost daily. Desperate for a change in his condition, Tilahun had given up drinking and asked God to "send one of his servants" to him. "If you do this, God, I will know that your mercy is still upon me, and your everlasting love is with me."[69]

While extraordinary, this encounter between Teketel and the family of Tilahun reflects broadly shared, deeply held MKC priorities that profoundly shaped its mission in the Derg era, such as (1) relying on the leadership of the Holy Spirit, (2) testing a perceived call from God with others, (3) prioritizing fervent prayer as a community, (4) embracing the cost of faithfulness to Jesus, crucified and risen, even if it could mean death, (5) seeking the shalom of those who may be hostile to the gospel, and (6) understanding that the church does not need legal protection, social position, or political power to pursue the mission and glory of God or to be part of the ongoing story of Jesus.

It was not easy. MKC members depended on each other for encouragement and correction. As a deacon and member of her congregation's pastoral care committee, Abebech and her ministry team regularly made home visits to celebrate births, weep with bereaved families, share food with the hungry, read from the Word of God, pray, and eat together.[70] Such visits—and regular cell group meetings—kept church members in close relationship with each other.

Louam spoke of a time when his courage faltered: "I was so overwhelmed with the pressure from the government, from the politicians, from the cadres." He told Pastor Kedir Delchume, "Oh, this is too much. I can't serve very well in this situation." He skipped their next weekly pastoral care team meeting. A few days later, Kedir came to his home. "Why did you stop coming to the pastoral care meeting?" he asked.

"It's too much of a burden serving God, so I stopped," Louam admitted.

Kedir challenged him, "If you stop serving the Lord, Satan will force you to serve him until it comes out through your nose. He'll make you suffer even more."

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69 Gemechu Gebre Telila, "Meserete Kristos Church at Wonji Gefersa," 63–64; interview with author, March 31, 2014.

70 Interview with author, April 28, 2014.

Louam weighed his words. "He's right, you know. I really should serve the Lord, whatever the circumstances."

When he returned to the meeting the next week, Kedir greeted him warmly, "Louam! Oh, it's good for you to come back. We'll serve. We'll bear the cross of Christ together. We'll go through the suffering helping each other."[71]

Marked by the Cross

When Solomon Kebede sought stronger provisions for religious freedom in the post-Derg Ethiopian constitution, he hoped to not only protect the church from the coercion of the state but also prevent a resurgence of religious nationalism. It was consistent with an evangelical vision for a church whose identity and mission were anchored in the cross and Spirit of Jesus Christ rather than state power.

How does the failed erasure of the cross in the Haile Mariam Mamo Memorial Hospital chapel speak to the experience of the Meserete Kristos Church during the Ethiopian revolution? Rather than serve as a mere decoration, talisman, or token of imperial power, it became a prophetic sign of the power of Jesus Christ dwelling in his people, suffering with them, and empowering them through the Holy Spirit.

What can the church today learn from the cruciform history of MKC from 1974 to 1991? The church in Ethiopia—and globally—is in a different cultural and political moment than in the Derg era. Yet the saving, reconciling story of our living Messiah continues as the purposes of God unfold in this broken world.

In Galatians 6:17, Paul writes of bearing "the marks of Jesus" on his body. While he is likely referring to his physical scars, this phrase invites the church to consider how it gives witness to Christ crucified in its life and mission. David Bosch writes:

> The cross, we ought to remember, is the hallmark of the church. When the resurrected Christ appeared to His disciples, His *scars* were the proof of His identity. Because of them the disciples believed (John 20:20). Will it be different for us? Will the world believe unless they recognize the marks of the cross on us?[72]

Cruciformity is not a human project or program. When Simon Peter identified him as the Messiah, Jesus was quick to dispel any "sword in arm" expectations of his reign. Immediately, he began to speak of his upcoming suffering, death, and resurrection. If that were not disorienting enough, he tied our discipleship to his crucifixion:

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71 Interview with author, April 26, 2014. Louam is a pseudonym.

72 David J. Bosch, *A Spirituality of the Road*, Institute of Mennonite Studies Missionary Studies, no. 6 (Scottdale, PA: Herald, 1979; reis. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2001), 84.

> Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it. (Luke 9:23–24)

What does it mean for the church to be defined by the cross not only in its preaching and architecture but also in its whole life and witness? Evangelical Christians persecuted under the Derg had no illusions that the cross could be comfortably carried like a briefcase or expertly managed like a strategic plan. Instead, they were called into a costly surrender—personally and corporately—to Jesus. United with Christ in their suffering, they discovered the truth of his promise to the apostle Paul: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (1 Cor 12:13). They became witnesses of countless resurrection surprises and experienced the joy of seeing his reign prosper amid their uncertainties, hardship, losses, and pain. The marks of Jesus in the church could not be erased.

How does cruciform witness look in different contexts? How is it affected by the social and economic location of the church, its relation to government, and the prevailing political climate? How is the Holy Spirit calling the church to bear the marks of Jesus as it participates in the shalom-making mission of God today?

Culturally Rooted Empowering Peacebuilding

A Case of Meserete Kristos Church's Peacebuilding Approach in Ethiopia

Mekonnen Gemeda

Each of the many people groups of Ethiopia have their own language and religion, but they are widely interconnected in various ways, particularly via social and religious aspects. No ethnic group is free of intermarriage, and all ethnic groups come together under the shadow of "idir,"[1] religion, and other social fabrics. However, over the past fifty or forty years—and especially for the past six years—innocent lives have been wasted, marriages have broken down under the weight of political tensions causing collective psychological damage, and millions of people have been unjustly displaced. All of this is contrary to the society's normally peaceful coexistence. Politicians and activists at home and abroad use social media to spread the poison of hatred and suspicion (false narrations) into the crowd, leading individuals to fear and distress.

In all areas of the country, Meserete Kristos Church (MKC)[2] is fulfilling her role of being salt and light given to her by the Lord to cause people to practice love instead of hatred, mercy instead of resentment, and to put humanity before language. The church extensively teaches, reconciles, and builds up broken social relations using culturally rooted empowerment to properly address existing

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1 "Idir" is a social institution in Ethiopia used for mutual aid that grants cooperative insurance within specific communities. It is an association that primarily assists people with self-help activities or infrastructure. It also helps bereaved victims with funerals and other security issues in the community.

2 The Meserete Kristos Church (MKC)—the Mennonite church in Ethiopia—has about a million total members in the faith community, including children, throughout the country. The church's head office is located in Kirkos sub-city of Addis Ababa City Administration. MKC also has a department/ministry called MKC Peacebuilding Division that addresses all strategic goals that MKC has put in place.

problems. This article briefly describes one conflict episode, its historical context, the intervention, and the lessons drawn. It shows how MKC is strategically working to solve the problems in some areas through its own people.

Presenting Problem

Benishangul-Gumuz is a region[3] where the Grand Renaissance Dam, the largest hydropower project in Africa, is being constructed on the Nile River. There is much internal and external interest in the region.

In the past six years, all three of the Benishangul-Gumuz administrative zones—Assosa, Kamashi, and Metekele—have experienced violent conflict with overlapping causes and armed actors. The violence that first began in the Assosa zone emerged as a result of conflict among so-called highlanders of Amhara and Oromo origin and the indigenous Berta community living in the zone.[4] The first spark of this conflict occurred in June 2018 after several Gumuz and Berta officials were kidnapped in Oromia region, West Wollega zone, by the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA).[5] Later, the Benishangul People's Liberation Army (BPLA) also got involved in the conflict, operating in the peripheral areas of Assosa zone, targeting civilians and government forces along the Sudanese border.[6] The violence then expanded out to Kamashi, where the Gumuz militia initially began to organize and operate—a reaction to OLA's kidnapping of Gumuz and Berta officials along the Assosa-Addis Ababa arterial road.

Similarly, where there is a much more ethnically diverse administrative zone, in Metekel (where MKC peacebuilding project is operating), conflict broke out in April 2019 between the Gumuz community and so-called settlers in the Gumuz areas (often referred to as "non-indigenous" communities).[7] As the conflict escalated, more armed actors got involved, even some from outside the regional state. The regional and federal governments could control the violence in Assosa but not in the Metekel zone. The violence spread widely throughout the zone and

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3 Benishangul-Gumuz Regional State (BGRS) is one of 12 Federal States of Ethiopia and is located in the midwestern part of the country, sharing a border with the Oromia region in the east and south and with the Amhara region in the north. The region also borders North and South Sudan. See UNICEF, "Benishangul-Gumuz: Regional Brief," UNICEF, April 2022, https://www.unicef.org/ethiopia/media/6501/file/.

4 John Young, "Along Ethiopia's Western Frontier: Gambella and Benishangul in Transition," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 37, no. 2 (June 1999): 321–46.

5 Wendy James, "A 'Frontier Mosaic': Ethiopia's Western Edge," *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 40, no. 1/2 (2007): 277–91.

6 James, "A 'Frontier Mosaic'."

7 Tsegaye Birhanu, "Conflict Trends Analysis; Benishangul-Gumuz Regional State: May–November 2022," ecoi.net, Peace Research Facility (December 2022): 3–4, https://www.ecoi.net/en/document/2087734.html.

resulted in hundreds of deaths and displaced more than 440,000 people.[8] From September 2020 to September 2023, the zone was under the stewardship of a Military Command Post organized and led by the federal government.

Historical Context of Conflicts

Today's uprisings in different regions of Ethiopia have their own unique causes and characteristics, but they also have something in common—many of the disputes, in one way or another, are related to the country's past political system and community culture. Similarly, the conflicts in Benishangul-Gumuz relate to an accumulation of unresolved political tensions that have built up for the past thirty years. These are linked to the issues of underdevelopment, ethnic marginalization, and the expansionism of non-indigenous communities (particularly Amhara and Oromo) into the region for social, political, and economic purposes.[9]

The constitution of Benishangul-Gumuz region states that the Berta, Gumuz, Shinasha, Mao, and Komo are the indigenous ethnic groups in the region.[10] In other words, these groups have the right to self-administration and fair representation under Ethiopia's federal constitution. This is a very common practice in all regional states of Ethiopia; it is not unique to Benishangul-Gumuz.

The unique situation in Benishangul-Gumuz is that non-indigenous groups make up more than 43 percent of the total population of the region.[11] This ratio is even higher in the Metekel zone. In line with the constitutional provisions, indigenous groups dominate political power at different levels in the region where the minority, the non-indigenous groups, have felt marginalized. Because of the increasing ethno-nationalism movement in the country in the past few years, this feeling of ethnic marginalization has become an organizing political principle, where the expedition for fairer representation has gained momentum. While indigenous groups want to preserve their status provided by the constitution, they feel that the increasing quest for fairer representation among numerically increasingly dominant but non-indigenous groups in the region may ultimately

8 Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, "Ethiopia: Benishangul Gumuz Region," January 6, 2021, https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/ethiopia/ethiopia-benishangul-gumuz-region-flash-update-6-january-2021; and Unicef-Ethiopia, "Benishangul Gumuz: Regional Brief," Unicef-Ethiopia, April 2022, https://www.unicef.org/ethiopia/media/6501/file/Benishangul.

9 Birhanu, "Conflict Trends Analysis" 3–4.

10 Revised Constitution of the Benishangul Gumuz-Regional State, December 2002.

11 "The 2007 Population and Housing Census of Ethiopia: Statistical Report for Benshangul-Gumz Region," Ethiopia Central Statistical Agency, Population Census Commission, April 2007, https://www.statsethiopia.gov.et/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Benishangu_Gumuz_Statistical.pdf.

override their right to self-administration. These competing intentions have been the most common cause of fear, mistrust, and ethnic rivalry in the region.[12]

The Meserete Kristos Church's conflict analysis report shows that this tension between the indigenous and settlers communities goes back more than thirty years. According to participants interviewed in the study, the conflict was mainly between the Gumuz ethnic group and non-Gumuz ethnic groups, including the Amhara, Oromo, Agaw, and Shinasha. The Gumuz people have a historical grudge against the non-Gumuz ethnic groups because of the harm those groups caused to their people in the past, particularly during the imperial regime in Ethiopia. They regarded the non-Gumuz people as occupiers or settlers. During an interview, one of the Gumuz offenders shared what prompted him to kill non-Gumuz people:[13]

> Three generations ago, an Oromo ruler seized one of the Gumuz men and sold him as a slave. The man was sold to a family in a remote place. Fortunately, he escaped from his master and returned to his home village after several months. Then he began to live in hiding. He passed this story on to his children before he died. The children grew old without getting any opportunity for revenge. Before he died, the eldest in the family passed the story to his young children. The young children who heard the story became adults, and during the current ethnic violence in 2018, they found the grandchildren of the man who sold their grandfather to slavery and killed horribly 6 households. Then they began to say that they had avenged the abuse of their grandfather.[14]

The youths of Gumuz attacked the non-Gumuz people indiscriminately with modern and traditional armaments to avenge the existing historical harm. Many people were killed, while others were displaced by leaving behind their belongings and villages that they had built for years. The government declared a state of emergency over the region to control the violence, but because the area was densely forested, even though less populated, it was not simple to control the militants.[15]

On the other hand, while historical harming and unresolved cumulative effects are indeed present in the community, the lives of the different ethnic groups are deeply intertwined in common social, economic, and spiritual activities. For example, they often heavily associate with one another during times of mourning, weddings, farming, "idir," marketing, and worship activities. We

12 Birhanu, "Conflict Trends Analysis," 4–5.

13 Meserete Kristos Church Development Commission (MKCDC), "Conflict Analysis Report" (Addis Ababa: Unpublished, 2022).

14 MKCDC, "Conflict Analysis Report."

15 MKCDC, "Conflict Analysis Report."

have also occasionally found intermarried couples, Gumuz with non-Gumuz, during our studies.

Interventions

In 2020 MKC launched a community dialogue peace project in Benishangul-Gumuz Regional State to address the root causes of violent ethnic groups in the western part of the country. The project was funded by both the MKC and Mennonite Central Committee–Ethiopia.[16] MKC has churches in the region, and intervening to mitigate the violence is critical to save lives.

The intervention began by training influential faith leaders, community elders, women, youths, and leaders of community-based institutions. A series of peace and reconciliation trainings were given at various levels for eighteen months. The trainers used tailored training material prepared for this purpose in local languages. The training then cascaded to the village level through those who received the training of trainers.

In 2022 the author of this article went to Dangur[17] district to facilitate training. The series of trainings involve having trainers do—or asking the trainees to do—something that contributes to peace, including planting trees, cleaning the roads or public compounds, sharing gifts, drinking coffee together, and so on. Fifty-five trainees attended from different walks of life in the community, including prominent religious leaders. The trainer shared with the trainees how genuine love and humility help in building peace. Through various training sessions, the participants learned how be humble if they wanted to serve and restore peace in their community. Then the trainer decided to show a practical example of humility:

> It was in the afternoon on the fifth training day. The weather was very hot. The trainer brought water and soap to show the participants what it means to be humble and serve other people. He asked for a volunteer. No one knew what he was going to do. Two gentlemen, one Muslim guy and a young Gumuz guy, came out to the front. He asked them to have a seat. When they sat down, the trainer untied the sandals man and began washing his feet. His feet were shaking out of shock. Then the trainer is continuing washing the Gumuz youth, Dergu Belena. This youth had no shoe, so there is no shoe needed to put off. Now all the trainees were confused. Some started screaming. Others stood up holding their heads with their two hands. The young man tried to resist but the trainer told him that it was part of the training. While washing his feet, the trainer saw tears coming down from the eyes of the Gumuz man. Other participants were also crying. While washing his feet, the trainer also did

16 "Meserete Kristos Church Development Commission Project Proposal" (Addis Ababa: Unpublished, 2021).

17 Dangur district is one of the operation areas located in Benishangul-Gumuz Regional State.

> something. The trainer was saying loudly, "Let these feet change their ways today! Let these feet walk the way of peace! Let these feet run for peace and make history!" The participants responded loudly by saying, "Amen!" When the trainer finished washing the feet and the Gumuz young man returned to his seat, there was quietness in the room.[18]

After the activity, the trainer invited the participants to reflect. Many of them raised their hands to share their thoughts and feelings about the action. Below are some of the summaries of the reflections.

First, the action created a sense of connection that transcended ethnicity, skin color, social status, and religion. The Gumuz people are dark-skinned and discriminated against by light-skinned people. The action demonstrated that a person with light-skinned color washed the feet of a dark-skinned person, which was unusual in their context. A Christian washed the feet of a Muslim. An educated person who was a trainer from the capital city washed the feet of an uneducated person who lived in a rural area.

Second, the humility displayed in the action invited participants to overcome their pride and serve other people. They stated that every one of them had a pride that prevented them from leaving their positions to extend their hands for forgiveness. The father of the Gumuz young man was in the training, and he mentioned that as a father he had never washed the feet of his son. Washing the feet of someone was like doing the lowest job, and no one was willing to do that in the community. Of course, when washing the feet of the young man, the trainer faced challenges. The man's feet were dirty and had cracks that pierced his hands like thorns. It was uncomfortable to do it. But he realized that serving other people takes him beyond his comfort zone.

Furthermore, the Gumuz people experienced discrimination by non-Gumuz people, who considered them as less human. Someone from non-Gumuz lowering himself and washing the feet of the young Gumuz man was unheard of in the community. As a result, the message became significant. It implied that the Gumuz people deserve respect and dignity.

Outcome

The five-day training was over. The trainer and participants went back to their respective homes. However, the Gumuz young man did not go back to his home. After the training, he went to the district administrator and told him what had happened to him. He shared the story of his transformation. He reiterated and owned the statements the trainer told him when he washed his feet. He wanted to do something to save lives and bring people to peace.

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18 As experienced by Mekonnen Gemeda, facilitator, Peace and Reconciliation Training, Dangur District, 2022.

The Gumuz young man asked for a gun and was given one. Then he told two of his friends who were with him in the training to accompany him to the bush. He went to the bush where the armed group was staying. He met the armed men and shared with them what he had learned during the peace training. He was able to persuade five armed men to come to the district administration office and surrender themselves. The young man taught these armed men about peace and sent them back to the bush to convince their friends. They brought back fifteen armed men. Then more men. Within a year, they brought back more than 850 armed men and taught them about peaceful co-existence.

After three blood-shedding wars, gradually all armed groups in the district were convinced to surrender. The government followed the same way of reaching out to the remaining five districts occupied by armed groups. Today all six districts are free, and displaced people have returned to their homes. The government awarded Dergu Belena for his heroic action.

Lessons Learned

As a peacebuilding team in Meserete Kristos Church (MKC), we were taught important things from this case that will help us better serve communities suffering from violence:

- *Empowering the local people for peace.* As a participant, the Gumuz young man obtained relevant knowledge about peacebuilding. He attended the training for five days. He was touched by the feet-washing experience. Furthermore, he was one of the community members who had killed several non-Gumuz people and had friends who were armed and fighting against the non-Gumuz and the government. He knew the people and their culture. MKC's peacebuilding approach was to equip the local people with the necessary knowledge and skills to build peace among their people and neighboring ethnic groups.
- There is an Ethiopian saying—የአገሩን ሣርዶ፥ በአገሩ በሬ—which means "Plough a land with the local oxen." The message is that the locals know how to deal with the challenges and to use opportunities to resolve them. MKC could not have sent people to the armed group to convince them to disarm and return to peaceful ways of addressing their issues. The Gumuz young man did it because of his connections, knowledge of the local culture, and belief in a nonviolent approach to resolving conflicts. He acted as an ambassador of peace to the community.
- A study conducted on Burundi, Guatemala, and Iraq to empower local peacebuilders is impacting communities at a grassroots level by sustaining peace and ensuring ownership in the processes. Findings of the study determined that the local actors-based peace projects have "remarkable success in breaking down ethnic and political barriers, building social co-

hesion among training participants, strengthening collaborative capacities, and boosting institutional transformation."[19]

- *Willingness to serve.* For MKC, peacebuilding is an act of service to the community. The team believes that they are called by God to serve people who are suffering because of violence. Service bears fruit when it is done with humility following the pattern of Jesus Christ. Those who follow the Master are willing to serve others rather than seeking others to serve to meet their interests. Martin Luther King, Jr. observed that all that was required for an individual to be able to give service to others was "a heart full of grace" and "a soul generated by love."[20] "Humility provides such individuals with a sense of perspective that promotes both service and sacrifice and enables individuals to give unselfishly of themselves to change the world."[21] According to the apostle Paul, humility helps us to be empathic and able to see the humanity in all people regardless of differences in color, social status, history, personal experiences, religion, age, and gender. It encourages peacebuilders to see God's image in all people and be willing to serve all.[22]
- *Discernment.* Following the lead of the Holy Spirit is not often discussed in peacebuilding. This does not mean that the Holy Spirit is not working in people's lives to heal the wounds of the past and restore broken relationships. In MKC, Christians speak about the Holy Spirit in prayers, preaching, evangelism, and healing. If peace practitioners listen to the Holy Spirit, they may receive special guidance to discern what they should do in the most difficult situations, as Luke stated in his Gospel: "For the Holy Spirit will teach you at that time what you should say" (Luke 12:12, NIV). Furthermore, as the Gospel of John states, the Holy Spirit leads/teaches "all things," which includes the way of peace and community transformation.[23]

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19 United States Institute of Peace, "Empowering Local Peacebuilders: Strategies for Effective Engagement of Local Actors in Peace Operations," *Building Peace* no. 2, "Practical Innovations from USIP" (March 2012): 22.

20 Martin Luther King, Jr., "The Drum Major Instinct," in *A Knock at Midnight*, eds. Clayborne Carson and Peter Holloran (New York: Time Warner, 1998).

21 Verl Anderson and Cam Caldwell, "Humility, Service, and Sacrifice: Making a Difference in Others' Lives," in *Humility as Enlightened Leadership*, eds. Verl Anderson and Cam Caldwell (New York: Nova Science, 2018), 1, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/326423365.

22 Philippians 2:3–5; Colossians 3:12–14.

23 "But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you" (John 14:26, ESV).

- *Divine intervention.* The trainer in the above-mentioned case washed the feet of the Gumuz young man because of the push he received from inside of himself. He did not plan to do it; he was urged to do it. Listening to the guidance of the Holy Spirit and doing what is appropriate can lead to better results. The trainer believes that the Holy Spirit somehow used the feet-washing activity to transform the life of the Gumuz young man, who later stated, "My life was transformed when you washed my feet." Such life transformation occurs when there is divine intervention. From practical experience, this author argues that professionalism in peacebuilding in a Christian context should not exclude dependence on the God of peace to restore sustainable peace in a broken community.

Serving as Christ's Ambassador

MKC sees herself as Christ's ambassador. She understands that she is there to preach the gospel of peace to this world that seeks peace. As a guiding principle, she is committed to follow the character of Christ—living in the way of justice, humility, forgiveness, neutrality, and so on. She knows that the guidance and power of the Holy Spirit is irreplaceable for her mission. She also believes that reaching out to a community should be through the community itself. So she invests quality knowledge and time in the representatives of the community, sending them back to their communities as Christ did.

There is a living testimony that this principle has not only made Meserete Kristos Church fruitful in the peacebuilding activities where she has intervened with a small budget but is also making her highly accepted in the community.

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's[5] favorite verse).[6] Two recent events[7] 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 Dyck[14] gave Doug Klassen[15] 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

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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-are-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 ሀግ የተወረሱ 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 Gemeda, "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 Tewahedo[25] 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 areas[28] 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

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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* (Scottdale, 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: Cascadisa 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.

service"[45] 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-

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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 Weaver[73] 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-pMTlTdyoY8gJH4.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* (Scottdale, 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 capital[78] in North America overwhelms[79] 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,

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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 evangelical[86] 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/.

Book Reviews

Carl E. Hansen, *Into Abyssinia: The Odyssey of a Family*, Westbow, Bloomington, Indiana, 2023. 335 pp. $24.99. ISBN 978-1-6642-9068-6.

The Mennonite Mission to Ethiopia was, from its conception, integrally linked to the Ethiopian imperial project. Initially invited into the country in 1945 as post-war relief following World War II and the Italian Occupation, the mission continued through the revolution as a player in the imperial nation-building agenda. Even when recognized as a mission and given permission to evangelize in 1948—an expansion of the original mandate permitting the establishment of hospitals and schools—the mission was only officially allowed to do so in non-Orthodox, non-Amhara areas. Carl Hansen's missionary memoir *Into Abyssinia* is an excellent illustration of the ways in which the Mennonite mission struggled with colonial and imperial mindsets even while attempting to evangelize and assist.

Hansen served two terms with the Mennonite Mission to Ethiopia along with his wife, Vera, and family. The first term, 1967–1970, was spent at the Nazareth Bible Academy teaching a wide variety of classes, from chemistry and biology to Bible doctrine and public speaking. A second term, starting in 1972 and terminating with revolution in 1975, was spent doing evangelism and economic development in Bedeno. *Into Abyssinia* gives a narrative account of that time interspersed by commentary on Ethiopian society and culture, family life, and political observations on both imperial Ethiopia and the early phases of the revolution. To write this volume, Hansen supplemented his memory with letters written home during his terms, collected by his mother.

Throughout the memoir, Hansen is consistently critical of the socioeconomic systems that ran imperial Ethiopia. He criticizes land use policy and feudal rents as direct contributors to widespread poverty and corruption as well as points out Amharic ethnonationalism inherent in governance during his tenure. Such is the clarity of his observation that, in contrast to every other piece of Ethiopian missionary literature I have encountered, he interprets the beginning of the revolution with its promises of reform as an answer to prayer (288). While the mission came to Ethiopia through imperial invitation, Hansen did not feel obligated by that provenance in his observation and work.

One of the key differentiations between *Into Abyssinia* and many missionary memoirs is Hansen's openness about failures. Much of the missionary literature tends toward the triumphal and heroic, especially in Ethiopia around the tremendous growth of the Meserete Kristos Church (MKC) under persecution. It is to

Hansen's credit that he does not take this tack, although he does tend toward the heroic in reciting the many difficulties in travel he encountered during his tenure in Ethiopia.

Two examples of failed attempts at community-based development discussed by Hansen illustrate this point and reveal the impact of colonial-imperialist thinking. The first was an attempt to bring wool-producing sheep into Bedeno with the goal of producing wool and hybridizing with local, non-wool-producing livestock. The entire affair is instance after instance of failing to consider appropriate methodology and arrangements, from inadequate preparation for transportation to failing to account for the effect of altitude on the well-being of the sheep; all forty-four specimens died in short order.

Further complicating the matter, local Ethiopians were not consulted in planning or preparing; Hansen reflects, "The people had not felt a need for these sheep; in fact, they did not even know such animals existed" (230). This story replayed itself during the 1974 drought in Burka. Keen to improve the situation and confident in his knowledge of what was best, Hansen arranged for funding to improve two springs with cement forms and water tanks to ensure clean water. But in the rush to solve the problem, Hansen reflects, "we had failed to involve the people in our planning. . . . A rumor began to circulate among them that there was a conspiracy between the Mission and the Amharas of the town to seize all the water rights for the town people and deprive the rural people of their spring altogether" (275). The project was abandoned. Even among the best intentioned, the colonial mindset can infiltrate the work of the church.

Into Abyssinia is not a perfect book. It struggles with organization, especially in the first half where Hansen attempts to give personal background, insight into Ethiopian history and culture, vignettes of mission life, and introductions to individual characters, all through tidbits interspersed with the main narrative. This is exacerbated by conversational prose that lacks structure itself on occasion. By the second half of the book and Hansen's transition to Bedeno, however, the narrative settles down into a simpler chronology that can more easily be followed.

From my interviews with Mennonite missionary women in Ethiopia, the Ethiopian mission community divided itself into categories of "old" and "new," loosely translating to those who had arrived by boat versus those who had arrived by plane. The two groups had markedly different experiences in missionary living because of differences in communication and travel technology as well as the state of the MKC during each time period.

Hansen's memoir joins a group oeuvre of Ethiopia Mennonite missionary literature, including reflections from Chester Wenger, Rohrer Eshleman, Naomi Weaver, and Nathan Hege. This is one of the first published memoirs from a new missionary, a distinction that gives it special value in understanding differences in missionary experiences during the Mennonite Mission to Ethiopia.

Because of this, the book will be of interest to all who are trying to understand the Mennonite Mission to Ethiopia, its methodology and practice, as well as the mission's struggles in context. Since Hansen straddled both evangelism and development, *Into Abyssina* is also a useful book for those interested in Mennonite missions more broadly. It covers a period of transition in the attitude of innovation-minded Mennonites regarding the purpose, effectiveness, and methodology required for meaningful international work.

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Seblewengel Daniel, *Perception and Identity: A Study of the Relationship between the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and Evangelical Churches in Ethiopia*, Langham, Carlisle, Cumbria, UK, 2019. 486 pages. $38.00. ISBN: 9781783686346.

This work originated as the author's dissertation, submitted at the Akrofi-Christaller Institute, Ghana, and has since been transformed into a book. The book delves into the self-perception of and mutual perceptions between Protestants and followers of the Ethiopian Orthodox *Täwaḥədo* Church (EOTC) across historical and contemporary contexts.

The EOTC holds a unique and significant place in Ethiopia, being both indigenous and one of the oldest churches globally. The historical interaction between the EOTC and Protestant churches in Ethiopia has been marked by challenges rather than smooth relations. The EOTC's negative experiences with Jesuit missionaries in the sixteenth century left them wary of foreign-based missionary activities; aiming to convert Ethiopians to Catholicism, the Jesuits had ignited doctrinal disputes, sowed discord, and jeopardized the stability of the country. Their expulsion from Ethiopia resulted from their interference with local customs, including circumcision and the Sabbath.

The Jesuit Mission, arriving in Ethiopia in 1557 to serve the resident Portuguese community and support King Lebne Dengel, sought to convert Ethiopians through patient teaching of Scripture, crafts, and science. Their efforts culminated in the conversion of King Susenyos and the court to Roman Catholicism in 1622. However, this Catholic influence was short-lived, as civil war erupted in 1632, leading to the expulsion of all Catholic missionaries. The conflict arose from the Catholics' desire to place the Ethiopian church under the Pope of Rome.

Protestant missionaries faced restrictions in Ethiopia until the reign of Menelik II, as Emperors Tewodros and Yohannes had previously limited their engagement in evangelism. The exploration of the Nile and James Bruce's renowned book, "Travels to Discover the Source of the Nile" (published in 1770), introduced Ethiopia to Europeans. Bruce's depiction of Ethiopia as a unique land in Africa with a Christian ruling house inspired Protestant Europe to send missionaries to the oldest Christian country on the continent. The book played a crucial role in disseminating information about Ethiopia among Europeans.

In the nineteenth century, Ethiopia experienced a degree of openness to missionary movements, prompting various organizations to attempt to reach ethnic groups such as the Oromo and Felashas. Early mission groups included The Church Missionary Society, Swedish Evangelical Mission, German Hermannsburg Mission, Norwegian Lutheran Mission, Danish Evangelical Mission, American Lutheran Mission, and American Presbyterian Mission. Contrary to the aim of establishing new churches, the primary goal of early Protestant missionaries was to renew and reform the existing EOTC, recognizing the need for correction and reformation within the church.[1]

The arrival of Protestant missionaries in the northern part of Ethiopia was met with resistance from the reigning kings and the EOTC. This resistance prompted the missionaries to redirect their efforts toward engaging with non-Christian communities in the south and west of the country. However, even in these regions, the missionaries faced opposition from the EOTC. The Orthodox church leadership, along with local administrators in the south, vehemently opposed the growth of Protestant churches and consistently worked to prevent the establishment of evangelical congregations.

Despite numerous challenges, several missionary organizations successfully established Protestant churches by engaging redeemed slaves and priests who had converted from the Orthodox Church. Many of these slaves were Oromos initially brought from the interior to be sold to Arabs across the Red Sea. Missionaries intervened by purchasing and freeing these slaves, with some being permitted to attend schools operated by the missionaries. Hika, known as "the translator," was among the freed slaves who had the privilege of studying at the school.[2]

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1 Sven Rubenson, "The Missionary Factors in Ethiopia: Consequence of a Colonial Context" in *The Missionary Factor in Ethiopia: Papers from a Symposium on the Impact of European Missions on Ethiopian Society, Lund University, August 1996, eds.* Getachew Haile, Aasulv Lande, and Samuel Rubenson (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1998), 60. See also Donald Crummey, *Priest and Politicians: Protestant and Catholic Missions in Orthodox Ethiopia 1830–1868*, Oxford Studies in African Affairs (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972), 12.

2 "Interestingly enough, his original name was Hika, 'the translator,' an almost prophetic designation in view of the fact that Onésimos's name was to be immortalized for his translation of the Bible into Oromo language." Bahru Zewde, *Pioneers of Change in*

Through this experience, Hika converted to Christianity and was given the name Onesimos.

In the early twentieth century, missionary activities were largely confined to the peripheries, but the emergence of Pentecostal-type Christianity as an urban movement brought increased visibility to Protestant churches, posing a threat to the national church.[3] This shift led to increased persecution of Pentecostals. They were perceived as a threat due to their bold communication of the gospel, capturing the attention of many. Consequently, Pentecostals faced early persecution from the Derg compared to other evangelical groups.

Seblewengel's books aim to unravel the complex relationship between the Orthodox and Evangelical churches, utilizing historical and theological frameworks to explain the dynamics at play. The exploration of perception and identity in these churches begins with the earliest organized Protestant missionary engagement with the Orthodox Church and extends to the contemporary self-consciousness and perception of each other (9).

The book is organized into seven chapters, with the initial chapter discussing the author's motivations for studying the subject and outlining the intellectual framework of the study. The author utilizes Andrew Walls's framework for the identity discussion. This framework comprises (1) essential continuity in Christianity, (2) the "indigenizing" principle, and (3) the "Pilgrim" principle. The Pilgrim principle encourages both Orthodox and evangelical parties to perceive each other "from a different angle," acknowledging a shared "adoptive past" (404).

These three frameworks, adopted from Walls's insights, encourage Christians to reevaluate their perspective about themselves and other Christian traditions:

1. *Continuity in Christian faith*. Despite the presence of multiple centers and expressions over the years, the "shared Christian identity" (5) persists.
2. *Indigenizing Principle*. This principle "asserts that God accepts people along with their good and bad cultural orientations," attributing this acceptance to Christ's sacrificial death. "Thus . . . to impose one's culture or tradition as *the* correct one has no biblical ground" (5).
3. *Pilgrim Principle*. This principle emphasizes that "God accepts people in order to transform their minds toward Christ. Thus, Christians are to demonstrate Christlikeness," (5) often leading them to clash with societal norms.

Ethiopia: The Reformist Intellectuals of the Early Twentieth Century (Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University, 2002), 47.

3 See Tibebe Eshete, *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia: Resistance and Resilience* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2009) and Jörg Haustein, *Writing Religious History: The Historiography of Ethiopian Pentecostalism* (Wiesbaden, Germany: Harrassowitz, 2011).

The second and third chapters provide context for the formation of Ethiopian Christian identity in the EOTC and Evangelical/Pentecostal movements. Brief histories of both the EOTC and the Evangelicals are provided to establish a historical perspective. As Ethiopia's first church, the EOTC cultivated its unique heritage and traditions. Subsequently, the introduction of Catholicism and Protestantism influenced the religious landscape of the country.

The fourth chapter illustrates the interactions between the missionaries and their Orthodox counterparts, particularly the Church Missionary Society (CMS). It highlights the missionaries' unsuccessful attempts to "revitalize" the Orthodox Church by promoting Bible reading with the aim of reaching the "heathen." However, they succeeded in distributing scripture copies, playing a crucial role in the expansion of the Protestant movement in Ethiopia.[4] Initially, the missionaries did not intend to establish a separate congregation.

The interplay between the Orthodox Church and local evangelicals is described in chapter 5 and is marked by mutual antagonism and misunderstanding. It recounts how each group perceives the other and themselves. The encounter is depicted as fraught with miscommunication and mutual hostility. Seblewengel argues that "[a]t the heart of the Orthodox-Evangelical divide, therefore, is their sense of identity (who they think they are) and their perception of others (who they think the other party is)" (400).

The evangelicals labeled the Orthodox Church as erroneous and አሕዛብ/*'əhəzab* ("without Christ"), while the Orthodox perceived the evangelicals as መናፍቅ/*mänafəq*) ("heretic") and accused them of "sheep-stealing."[5] Pentecostals were branded as ጸረ ማርያም/*Tärä Maryam* ("the enemy of Mary"), መጤ/*Mäṭe* ("foreign/new comer"), and unpatriotic. Initially, Pentecostals were derogatorily referred to as ጴንጤ/*Penṭe*, which later became a general term for Protestants. Each considered the other as not an authentic Christian.

The Evangelical movement challenges certain doctrines of the EOTC, such as Mariology, angelology, and veneration of saints. Differences in worship style contribute to the perception of Evangelicals as foreign. The Evangelical identity reflects aspects inherited from founding missionaries (discontinuity) and local culture and tradition (continuity), differing from the identity of the EOTC and leading to conflicts.

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4 Gustav Arén, *Evangelical Pioneers in Ethiopia: Origins of the Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus*, Studia Missionalia Upsaliensia (Stockholm: The Evangelical Church Mekane Jesus, 1978).

5 Leading historian Taddesse Tamrat wrote an article entitled "Evangelizing the Evangelized" to show the EOTC's reaction to the aggressive evangelism of Protestants. See Taddesse Tamrat, "Evangelizing the Evangelized: The Root Problem between Missions and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church," in *The Missionary Factor in Ethiopia*, eds. Getachew Haile, Aasulv Lande, and Samuel Rubenson (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1998), 21–22.

Chapter six discusses the reformation impulses (*Täḥädəso*, or, "renewal" movements) within the EOTC, examining the interaction among themselves and with Evangelicals, who provide financial and other support. Historical figures like the fifteenth-century monk *Abba* Estifanos are discussed in relation to recent reformation attempts.

The final chapter offers recommendations on how to enhance the relationship and foster a harmonious ecumenical connection between the two denominations. It emphasizes the commonalities that unite the two churches, such as faith in the triune God. Additionally, the book features an appendix detailing early attempts at ecumenism and a glossary of crucial Amharic terms used throughout the text.

The book provides a comprehensive historical analysis of the perceptions between Protestants and the Orthodox Church in Ethiopia, addressing a relatively understudied aspect of the interaction between the two denominations. With limited existing publications on the subject, such as "The Missionary Factor" and "Anthropological Insights for Mission," Seblewengel's work fills a significant gap and invites further exploration of its multifaceted issues. It stands as a valuable resource for religious and mission historians, as well as those interested in ecumenical relations and modern Ethiopian history. To broaden its impact, translating the book into local languages would help make its insights accessible to a wider audience.

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Raymond Silverman and Neal Sobania, *Ethiopian Church Art: Painters, Patrons, Purveyors*, Tsehai, Los Angeles, California, 2022. 331 pages. $74.95. ISBN: 978-1-59907-291-3.

Drawing on the lives, works, and religious commitments of a wide range of Ethiopian artists, the authors of this groundbreaking volume brilliantly describe the vital but little studied art and craft of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church. Authors Raymond Silverman and Neal Sobania, professors of, respectively, African studies and art history, have conducted interviews and carried out in-depth research projects for over twenty-five years to produce this stunning masterpiece. Over two hundred individuals are featured—painters, gallerists, priests, woodworkers, patrons, promoters, and marketers—all participating in a complex matrix of intersectional relationships involving Ethiopian art, creativity, religious culture, faith, and commercial energy.

The presentation of this volume is in "coffee table" format—10 x 13-inch in size, sumptuously illustrated with colorful photography, and amply documented

with accompanying explanatory photo captions and other abundant text. Chapters follow the subtitle of the publication, with deep dives into the lives and roles of painters, patrons, and purveyors of this unique artistic expression. While the authors insist that their interest is in the people who make things, rather than in the things themselves, significant attention is devoted nonetheless to the trades of liturgical metalworking, parchment and manuscript production, and the "illumination" (i.e., the illustration) of religious texts, most commonly featuring portraits of individuals such as the Gospel writers, St. Mary, St. George, and particular archangels, or the depiction of biblical events from the Nativity to the Crucifixion and Ascension of Jesus.

Concluding chapters take the reader into the world of "Painting for a New Millennium" and the Ethiopian "Diaspora," followed by a list of one hundred and fifty bibliographical references for further reading, a helpful glossary of vernacular terms used throughout the text and presented in Ethiopic script with transliterations and definitions, and an exhaustive index of the people, places, objects, and events referred to in the publication.

While this is not primarily a theological or missiological study, students of these disciplines will be intrigued by the potential implications drawn from this extensive research. Significant attention is given, for example, to the veneration of Mary as the focus of many devotional practices in Ethiopian art and culture. Though Mary has always played an important role in the Orthodox Church, her enhanced veneration in Ethiopia, including her thirty-three feast days in the ecclesiastical calendar celebrating her life and miracles, dates back to the fifteenth century. "Believers do not pray directly to Jesus," write the authors, "as he is perceived as being spiritually too distant." Furthermore, as Jesus is God, it is impossible for God to mediate with God. So, petitions are mediated through some other intercessor—Mary, a saint, or a priest (244).

As I was reading *Ethiopian Church Art*, along with the articles about the Meserete Kristos Church (MKC) appearing in this issue of *Anabaptist Witness*, a number of recurring questions kept surfacing in my mind. MKC now numbers over half a million members, one third of the entire membership of the Mennonite World Conference global body. Some new MKC converts come from Muslim religious backgrounds, but many of them are Ethiopian Orthodox in origin. To what extent do they bring along into their new church experience some of the perspectives found in this study? How do they view creativity and the aesthetic values deeply embedded in the Orthodox tradition? Does MKC encourage young artists within the church to paint or produce wood-based-arts expressions of the biblical story for discipling believers in evangelism and peacemaking, or have these practices been largely abandoned because of their association with a previous life and religious experience?

Perhaps new forms of artistry are being born within the MKC, and, if so, what are they and how are they shaped by or in reaction to the predominant

Orthodox artistic patterns and values present everywhere in Ethiopian culture? Answering these questions is beyond the scope of this review but might prove fruitful for discussion and research with MKC fellow travelers at some point in the years to come.

James R. Krabill served for forty-two years with Mennonite Mission Network as an international worker in West Africa and a North American Senior Executive for Communication and Global Ministries. His doctoral work in ethnomusicology has created in him a lifelong interest in world arts and Christian faith.