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FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTED TO THE GROWTH OF THE EECMY IN GENERAL AND CENTRAL ETHIOPIAN SYNOD IN PARTICULAR

by Abraham Mengesha Mitku

Introduction

THIS PRESENTATION IS FOUNDED not only on historical facts, but also on my personal experience and reflections both as a member and ordained servant of the Church.

I came to know Christ at the age of nineteen through reading the Bible. Though I was a strict traditional Orthodox Christian (the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church)¹, I could hardly differentiate between the Ethiopian Saint Täklä Haymanot² (whose monastery is close to my hometown) and Christ Jesus before I found that amazing book known as the Bible.³

¹ **Editor's Note:** The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church was administratively a part of the Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria until 1959. The Ge'ez word *Tewahedo* means "unified" and refers to the belief that the divine and human natures of Christ are unified into one nature. The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church does not subscribe to the Chalcedonian Creed which confesses two natures of Christ.

² **Editor's Note:** Saint Täklä Haymanot of Ethiopia (c. 1215–c. 1313 A.D.) founded a monastery in the province of Shewa. Mariam, Tesfaye Gabre. "A Structural Analysis of Gädlä Täklä Haymanot." *African Languages and Cultures* 10, no. 2 (1997), 181–198. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1771714>, 5. He is "one of Ethiopia's acclaimed indigenous saints, Täklä Haymanot, who lived in the 13th century. He remains the only native Ethiopian saint popular both domestically as well as outside Ethiopia; he is the only Ethiopian saint celebrated officially in foreign churches such as Rome and Egypt. Täklä Haymanot is said to have lived for 99 years and led a religious life, remaining throughout his life a model of humility, ignoring and defeating worldly temptation in all its forms. He was once appointed as the first native bishop during the time when the Egyptian Church suspended the sending of bishops to Ethiopia. However, when the relationship with Egypt resumed, he relinquished his position without hesitation and returned to his monastery."

³ **Editor's Note:** The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church has not undergone a Reformation like that which occurred in the Western Church. Rev. Abraham Mengesha Mitku describes as a conversion experience something akin to Martin Luther's "Tower Experience" where the Gospel came clear for him. Rev. Miku was baptized in the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church and grew up learning its teachings. He learned more about Ethiopian saints than about Christ.

The experience of the early apostolic church showed that persecution of Christians had a great significance to the growth of the Church.

Five years after discovering the Bible, in 1988, I started working in the church as a volunteer and served for six years. In 1994, I was called for fulltime ministry in the church and eventually was sent to the Mekane Yesus

Seminary (MYS) in Addis Ababa. Since my graduation in June 1999, I have been serving as a fulltime minister of the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus (EECMY).⁴ The years of my fulltime ministry as an ordained Lutheran pastor include my service as a theological college teacher, as associate executive secretary and for the last seven years, as the president of the Ethiopian Evangelical

Church Mekane Yesus—Central Ethiopia Synod (EECMY-CES). Thus, some parts of my presentation inevitably reflect my field experience among the EECMY-CES units and my personal life journey.

Until he read the Bible, the Gospel had not come clear: that Jesus Christ died and rose again for the forgiveness of sins.

⁴ **Editor's Note:** Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus is the name of the Lutheran church in Ethiopia and was founded in 1959. It was the result of a merger of various churches primarily founded by Lutherans from Scandinavia, Germany and the United States. Its name "Mekane Yesus" means the "Place of Jesus" or the "dwelling of Jesus." The EECMY's Constitution in Article II says, "The Church (EECMY) believes and professes the Holy Scriptures of the Old and the New Testaments are the Holy Word of God and the only source and infallible norm of all Church doctrine and practice. The Church adheres to the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Athanasian Creed, which were formulated by the early Fathers and accepted by the ancient church. The Church sees in the Unaltered Augsburg Confession, which was worded by the Church Reformers, as well as in Luther's Catechisms, as a pure exposition of the Word of God." At the time of publication, the EECMY reported 7.2 million members, making it the largest Lutheran church in the world.

The Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus, which was officially established 55 years ago as a national Lutheran church, has flourished by the grace of God, and according to the 2013 statistics, it has grown to 6.7 million baptized members and 3.5 million communicant members, organized in 7,823 congregations and 3,403 preaching places.

General background

THE SEEDBED FOR THE BIRTH OF THE EECMY

Traditionally, Christianity is thought to have been introduced in Ethiopia during the apostolic period.⁵ However, it was about the year 300 A.D. that Christianity was spread through the two Syrian brothers Edesius and Frumentius among the people of the Axumite kingdom. After some time, Frumentius went to Egypt to report about the spread of Christianity and eventually ask for a shepherd for the new flock. Athanasius, Patriarch of Alexandria, ordained him and sent him back to serve as bishop of Abyssinia.⁶ On his return to Axum, he succeeded in converting the great king of Ezana of Axum to Christianity. Eventually the king decreed that all the people of his kingdom accept Christianity. With this, the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church was founded and has existed ever since. The first three centuries of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church were times of flourishing. However, Islam then spread rapidly and surrounded Abyssinia. Then the stagnant life of the Church and a political decline resulted in isolation of the Church from the rest of the Christian world. In the middle of fifteenth century, the great king Zera Yacob restored the political conditions but introduced several strange teachings that had no biblical foundation that have been having an impact to the present days.

The Europeans were aware of the difficult condition that the Abyssinian Church underwent. When Ethiopia was subjected to vehement attacks by Muslims in the 1520s, the Portuguese came to help the Church concerning the Muslim invasion and eventually to revive its spiritual life. Although the victory enhanced the rela-

⁵ Editor's Note: See the account of the Ethiopian eunuch found in Acts 8:26–40. Frumentius became the first bishop in Axum, Ethiopia, in 331 A.D. Frumentius, along with his brother, was taken captive by the king of Axum after the ship he was on was captured on the Red Sea. After the king of Axum's death, he released Frumentius from slavery. Frumentius desired for Ethiopia to know Christ, so he traveled to Alexandria, Egypt, and met with Bishop Athanasius, who later sent Frumentius back to Ethiopia as a missionary and bishop.

⁶ Abyssinia is an ancient name for Ethiopia.

tion of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church and the Roman Catholic Church, the Portuguese attempt to convert the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church to Roman Catholicism ended up in civil war and eventually led to their expulsion from Ethiopia in 1632 A.D.⁷

About the same time a learned German, Peter Heyling, went via Egypt to Ethiopia with the intention of renewing the old church. His method was translating parts of the New Testament into Amharic and teaching Evangelical Christianity for children from the upper classes.⁸ Later, he was captured and martyred for refusing to convert to Islam. Heyling's influence on Ethiopia at first glance might seem relatively insignificant; however,

“There is apparently a direct line from Peter Heyling to the founders of the Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus.”⁹

Two centuries later, the missionary Samuel Gobat, engaged by the Church Missionary Society in England, travelled from Switzerland to Alexandria. After three years studying the Amharic language, he departed for Gonder, which was the capital of Abyssinia. Gobat also translated parts of the New Testament into Amharic and taught Evangelical Christianity without being polemic concerning Orthodox Church dogma. He also attempted to improve the

training of pastors, aiming to bring evangelical renewal within the Orthodox Church rather than founding a new church. Gobat's health declined, and he suffered a

Our challenge in the West today is twofold. On the one hand, we are striving not to lose the basic tenets of our Christian faith and values; on the other hand, we are facing new challenges both within and from outside.

⁷ Gustav Arén. *Evangelical Pioneers In Ethiopia: Origins of the Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus* (Addis Ababa: The Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus, 1978), 20. “This formidable attack had been repelled with Portuguese assistance. The victory therefore gave Portugal a favoured position and led to close relations between Ethiopia and the Church of Rome for about a century, when Jesuit missionaries laboured for the subjecting of the Ethiopian Church to the Papal Chair. The period has been described in detail by several authors, so their story need not be retold here. Suffice it to say that the aims and methods (p. 34) of the Jesuit missionaries provoked repeated revolts. The Orthodox refused to renounce their faith. After a bloody battle in 1632, in which the nationalist party suffered defeat, things took an unexpected turn: wearied by this bitter and unceasing dissension, the Emperor Susneyos (1607- 1632) abdicated in favour of his son Fasil, who suppressed the Roman faith and banished the Jesuits.”

⁸ *Ibid.*, 22. “Heyling's influence must have been considerable. His teaching is said to have been a leaven which compelled the Ethiopian Church to issue a doctrinal statement in Amarinnya to vindicate her own position in face of Lutheran views.”

⁹ *Ibid.*

year and a half of bed rest. He decided to return home.¹⁰ Although the missionaries' work of bringing the Scripture to the people in a language they could understand was highly appreciated by the masses, some of the rulers in Ethiopia and many of the clergy disapproved of his work and eventually forced the missionaries to leave various regions of Ethiopia. A particularly contentious doctrine involved the role of the Virgin Mary. One missionary was accused of "having blasphemed God and the saints and of being 'a thief in stealing the Faith.' He was said to have disturbed the country by false doctrine and strange religious practices."¹¹ One of his successors, the German missionary J. L. Krapf, also failed in his attempt to bring revival in Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church. But during his travel in the central part of the country, the Shewa and Welo regions, he became aware of the numerous pagan Oromos, and he eventually developed a concern for mission to them. His experience among the Oromo people drew his whole attention to focus on them, even to the extent of predicting that they "in time might become for Africa, what Germany became for Europe."¹² In fact, his reports about the Oromo and the phrase "the Germany of Africa"¹³ became a catchword that inspired many in Europe to support the mission work in Ethiopia. He had a strong conviction that winning this large ethnic group for Christ would have an important impact in evangelizing the Horn of Africa, which eventually would tackle the expansion of Islam.¹⁴ He remarked his conviction saying, "Give us the *Gallas*"¹⁵ and

Persecution
invigorates
Christian witness.
Quantitatively it has
made a tremendous
contribution to the
numerical growth of
the church. As the
ancient saying goes,
"The blood of martyrs
is the seed of the
Gospel."

Central Africa will be ours,"¹⁶ which became significant importance for the coming of evangelical mission and evangelical churches in Ethiopia.

THE BIRTH OF THE EECMY

Since the early 19th century, there were various evangelical mission societies that had been sending missionaries to Ethiopia hoping and attempting to revitalize the Ancient Ethiopian Orthodox Church that has existed for 1,600 years mainly in the central and northern part of the country. None of them had intended to establish a different church beside the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church. Even Gebre Estatios and his group, who were the first successful native missionaries that were trained

and sent by Swedish Evangelical Mission (SEM) in 1898, just began their work at Boji Saint Merry Church of Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church. However, the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church clergies furiously resisted and fought for their traditional faith rather than accommodating the biblical teaching of the missionaries and eventually begun to expel and marginalize those who had been enlightened and accepted the biblical teaching. Then it was evident there was a need to establish evangelical fellowship side by side.

A turning point in Sweden evangelical mission occurred in 1903

when Karl Cederqvist,¹⁷ who had been working in Jubaland, finally got permission from Emperor Menelik II to begin missionary work in the new capital of Ethiopia, Addis Ababa. He received strong resistance from the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church. In fact, "People were warned against having anything to do with him. Many clerics and monks considered him a dangerous heretic, 'worse than any Catholic.' Those who let a house to him would be jailed, denied church burial and risk eternal

¹⁰ Ibid., 38. "His own health was utterly impaired after a year and a half in bed and he resolved to depart. In September 1836 he left with his wife and the faithful Hadera who helped to carry Gobat on a litter to the coast. The CMS pioneer was forced to give up the thought of a missionary career in Ethiopia. Ten years later he was consecrated Anglican bishop of Jerusalem."

¹¹ Ibid., 40.

¹² Ibid., 44.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., 45.

¹⁵ **Editor's Note:** "Galla" is another term for the Oromo people, predominately used by Westerners during the 19th century. Today the term is considered offensive and derogatory toward the Oromo and should not be used.

¹⁶ Arén, 45.

¹⁷ Gustav Arén. *Envoys of the Gospel: In the Steps of the Evangelical Pioneers, 1898–1936* (Addis Ababa: The Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus, 1999), 105. "In 1892 Onesimos suggested that Cederqvist should be recruited for an endeavour to penetrate from the Indian Ocean via Somali territory into the homeland of Oromo in Borena. On receiving the call Cederqvist took a course in medicine at Livingstone College at Leyton in Great Britain to be better qualified for missionary work in Africa."

damnation, they menaced.¹⁸ Nevertheless, he continued his work in Addis Ababa. Cederqvist taught classes in English, provided medical care and assisted in Bible translation. He also conducted worship on Sundays. The church order followed that of the Lutheran Church of Sweden.¹⁹ Although he conducted services, per the policy of the Swedish Evangelical Mission (SEM), Cederqvist did not establish a Lutheran congregation in Addis Ababa for the Ethiopians. When people came to ask for Baptism or for Holy Communion, he would turn them away and send them to the Orthodox priests.²⁰

The Ethiopians who were attracted to Cederqvist's teaching were in some cases the spiritual descendants of Peter Heyling's work in the 17th century.

They and Heyling's later followers formed a brotherhood of devout churchmen who, each at his own place, strove to inspire true faith by translating readings in Gêez from Holy Scripture into the vernacular, both in church and at public gatherings. Initially they met with a certain opposition but this soon calmed down and they were allowed to labour in peace for almost two centuries.²¹

It is quite amazing that the work of Peter Heyling two centuries earlier played some role in the formation of the Lutheran church in Ethiopia in the 20th century.

Cederqvist received permission to cooperate with the followers of Peter Heyling and established a more per-

It is quite evident that the center of gravity of the Christian world has shifted from North and West to the Southern hemisphere.

manent base of operations in 1912.²² Cederqvist was a tireless worker for the Gospel. He rarely slept more than 3–4 hours a day.²³ He remained there working until his death in 1919.²⁴ On Oct. 3, 1919, five weeks before Cederqvist died, he wrote a letter to his supporters in Sweden explaining why he had not established a Lutheran congregation in Addis Ababa.²⁵ He outlined three reasons:

First, an evangelical congregation required members who lived by the Gospel and were committed to further it. It was no secret that missions in Africa had followed the example of political agents and had tried to attract adherents by offering them material benefits. It was a practice he deplored and would have nothing to do with.²⁶

Secondly, youths from different parts of the country who attended his school were not yet mature enough spiritually to form the nucleus of an evangelical congregation. There were gladdening signs of the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives, but they had not led to conversion or to a radical change of life and character.

Besides, many regular worshippers at his place were very afraid of Abune Mateos and 'feared his curse as much as the torments of hell.' These persons were by no means prepared to form any congregation. They could not see the value of it.²⁷

Thirdly, the Bible readers in the west included many individual persons who wholeheartedly were committed to the Gospel, and Cederqvist believed that the time had come for them to establish evangelical congregations proper. But the leaders among them were not convinced that this was the

¹⁸ Ibid., 115–116.

¹⁹ Ibid., 133. "The church calendar and the ritual might well have been in agreement with the order of the Lutheran Church of Sweden, to judge by relevant entries in extant copies of Cederqvist's diaries. When the main worship service was over on Sundays, Cederqvist welcomed children and youths from the neighbourhood to roam his compound. He was happy to find them eager to learn stories from the Bible which he illustrated by means of pictures in colour which he put on display. A special attraction for the children was his harmonium whose 'singing' was a source of their constant wonder and thrill."

²⁰ Ibid., 134. "Cederqvist did not found any evangelical congregation. Among the clergy whom he got to know in the capital there were six priests and one debtera who shared his interest in Bible study and were eager to foster spiritual maturity within their congregations through a conscientious exposition of the biblical message of salvation. Their common interest led to close friendship. When parents came to Cederqvist and asked him to baptize their children or people desired Holy Communion, he sent them to these priests to avoid unnecessary attention and spare them the risk of persecution."

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., 139.

²³ Ibid., 146. "The last few hours of daylight he might work in the garden or saw and chip firewood for cooking and heating. Burning the midnight oil, he spent his evenings writing letters, studying theology and trying to keep up with contemporary missionary thinking. At about 2 a.m. he went out to inspect the entire fence accompanied by the night-watchman and two big watch-dogs. This scrutiny was necessary. There occurred many attempts to break into the compound to steal. Cederqvist's schedule was gruelling. He seldom allowed himself more than three to four hours of sleep per night, Onesimos affirmed."

²⁴ Ibid., 140. "Cederqvist laboured at this place till his death in 1919."

²⁵ Ibid., 172.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

right thing to do.²⁸

“For those three reasons no evangelical congregation had been formed.”²⁹ “In Addis Ababa, Cederqvist advised persons who desired Baptism or Holy Communion to turn to a group of priests in whom he had great confidence as shepherds of souls because they strove to bring about a spiritual renewal in their congregations.”³⁰

On May 25, 1920, Cederqvist’s successor, the Rev. Olof Eriksson, arrived.³¹ He was intent on modifying Cederqvist’s missionary policy of not establishing a Lutheran church. Eriksson was convinced that “they witnessed the dawn of a new era. The time had come, they all agreed, to modify Cederqvist’s missionary policy. They resolved to form the first autonomous evangelical congregation in Addis Ababa.”³²

On Christmas Day of 1920 Eriksson had begun to chant parts of the liturgy in Amharic in the same manner as he used to do in Tigrinya while he was in Eritrea. The overwhelming majority of the evangelical community in Addis Ababa had an Orthodox background and appreciated an intonation of prayers and other liturgical texts. For this reason liturgical chant henceforth constituted a regular feature of the main evangelical worship service on Sundays in Addis Ababa.³³

Thus, he introduced Sunday service corresponding to the liturgy of the Lutheran Church of Sweden. It was conducted in Amharic. On Saturday, Oct. 8, 1921, Eriksson baptized three Muslims who had studied the Bible and professed the Christian faith.³⁴ The following Sunday

We certainly know that throughout the history of Christianity, the Church has never been without a challenge. Overcoming all its challenges, the Church of Christ has come thus far and will continue leaning on His mighty arm and grace.

on Oct. 16, 1921, Eriksson established a Lutheran congregation in Addis Ababa, marking the early roots of the EECMY.³⁵ “23 March 1922 constituted a milestone in the history of Evangelical Christianity in Ethiopia. On that Sunday, Qes³⁶ Gebre-Sillasse Tesfa-Gaber was installed as the first indigenous pastor of the newly formed evangelical congregation.”³⁷

In 1935, when the Italian force invaded Ethiopia for five years, all the missionaries had to leave the country.³⁸ Although there were no trained pastors or leaders, in many places the Ethiopians succeeded in continuing the evangelical work. Thus, in spite of the Italians’ persecution and hostility toward the evangelical leaders of the young congregations, the number of evangelical Christians (including other Baptist and Mennonites) grew from 1,000 to 20,000 during and after the war.

After the expulsion of Italians in 1941, the Lutheran congregation in Addis Ababa became an independent church under the leadership of Qes Badime Yalew as its pastor. Eventually, this newly established church became an important place of gathering for all evangelical Lutheran groups from all parts of the country that created a fellowship of people

from different ethnic groups and tribes in Ethiopia. This inspired a desire to form a united evangelical church of Ethiopia.³⁹

church to capacity and followed the act with intense attention. For several of them the whole ceremony was an entirely new experience.

³⁵ Ibid., 195. “The following Sunday a resolution was passed which formally established the congregation proposed. The new body elected a council of elders. There is, regrettably, no mention of either names, or members, or statutes. Only the date is definite—Sunday, 16 October 1921. Three months later thirty-three persons had registered as members, according to Eriksson’s report.”

³⁶ **Editor’s Note:** “Qes” is the Amharic word for “priest” and is used by the Lutherans in Ethiopia to designate the pastor.

³⁷ Arén, *Envoys of the Gospel: In the Steps of the Evangelical Pioneers*, 197.

³⁸ Ibid., 474ff.

³⁹ Ibid., 532ff. In a 1944 decree, Haile Selassie I issued a regulation for the establishment of foreign mission work. According to the decree, foreign missionaries are not to work in a “church area,” which belongs to EOC, attempting to convert Ethiopian Orthodox Christians, but allowed to work in an “open area,” where Muslims and traditional believers reside. This regulation not only provided legal ground for the missionaries and indigenous evangelist, but also fostered the growth of evangelical churches in those open area, particularly among the

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., 173.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid., 187.

³² Ibid., 192.

³³ Ibid., 193.

³⁴ Ibid., 194. “At about the same time the merchant himself began to study the Bible instead of the Quran and attended the special service on Saturday, 8 October 1921, when the three youths — Abraham, Yohannes, and Joseph — professed their new faith and were baptized into Christ. Immediately after this part of the service Eriksson turned to the four adults whom he had prepared for confirmation. He questioned them at length about their Christian faith before he solemnly declared them entitled to share in the Lord’s Supper. The audience filled the

After meetings and consultations over years, the delegates of all Lutheran congregations in different parts of the country met April 1958 under the leadership of the Addis Ababa evangelical Lutheran congregation with the help of Lutheran mission societies. Just in two decades, the number of baptized Lutheran grew with 20,000. In January 1959, the Lutheran congregations came together and officially established a national Lutheran church known as Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus (EECMY).⁴⁰

Mekane Yesus,⁴¹ which was officially established 55 years ago as a national Lutheran church, has flourished by the grace of our Lord and Savior who promised to be with His people whom He sent, and according to the 2013 statistics, it has grown to 6.7 million baptized members and 3.5 million communicant members that are organized in 7,823 congregations and 3,403 preaching places.⁴² There are 2,938 pastors; 4,601 fulltime evangelists and 483,123 voluntary evangelists involved in the ministry of these congregations and preaching places.

Indeed, the number of members would have been double if most of our members had not been snatched by Pentecostals and the Baptist denomination. It is always EECMY believers who are pioneers and who pay the cost of evangelizing a new area. After the persecution calms and the community begins to accept us, then others show up to snatch and confuse the community.

In the midst of this rapid growth, the Central Ethiopian Synod (CES) that was established 41 years ago (just at the same time as the Communist military took power) in metropolitan Addis Ababa, having only 8 congregations, has the lion's portion. For the last seven years, its average annual growth has been 35 new congregations and 25,000 new baptized members. (CES has 489 congregations and 31 parishes as well as 704 preaching places).

traditional believers.

⁴⁰ The term "Mekane Yesus" means the "dwelling place of Jesus."

⁴¹ The EECMY is the product of a century labor of five western evangelical missions and the endeavor of notable international and national individuals. Thus it is essential to provide a brief account of these notable individuals and missions to enable the readers to grasp the general overview of the formation of the church. The five founding missions were: (a) Swedish Evangelical Mission (SEM), (b) German Hermansburg Mission (GHM), (c) Norwegian Lutheran Mission (NLM), (d) Danish Lutheran Mission (DLM), and (d) American Lutheran Mission (ALM). Before providing a brief account of these five mission organizations, I would like bring up the contributions of notable international figures God had used as roadmakers for the missions.

⁴² **Editor's Note:** The EECMY's 2015 statistics report 7.2 million members.

Recognizing that the Lord of the harvest has caused the growth of the EECMY, it is still quite worthwhile to ask what the dynamics are behind this growth. What is the main reason for such rapid growth?

In this presentation, among several factors that contributed to the rapid growth of the EECMY, I will focus on the seven major ones that propelled the explosive growth of the EECMY.

- (1) The impact of theological training on the growth of the church,
- (2) The impact of the outreach plan of the EECMY on the growth of the church,
- (3) The impact of literature work and the translation of the Bible into vernacular on growth of the church,
- (4) The impacts of the rediscovery of holistic ministry on the growth of the church,
- (5) Manifestations attributed to the Holy Spirit (particularly in the 1970s to 1990s) are one of the factors for the rapid numerical growth of the EECMY,
- (6) The impacts of the experience of persecution on the growth of the church and
- (7) The impacts of the rediscovery of the priesthood of all believers on the growth of the church (i.e., the impact of lay ministry).

The seven major factors that propelled the explosive growth of the EECMY during the last 55 years

THE IMPACTS OF THE THEOLOGICAL TRAINING ON THE GROWTH OF THE CHURCH

EECMY has been a pioneer in many aspects of its ministry. Mekane Yesus Seminary (MYS) was the first theological seminary that was founded few months after its establishment as a national church! The vision of establishing a theological seminary was present from the missionary era. However, after so many negotiations and planning, this vision was actualized on June 4, 1959. On Oct. 3, 1960, the Mekane Yesus Seminary (MYS) started with ten students.⁴³ For the last 55 years, MYS has gradu-

⁴³ Johannes Launhardt. *Evangelicals in Addis Ababa (1919–1991): With Special Reference to the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus and the Addis Ababa Synod* (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2005), 136–138. Launhardt states that the Swedish Evangelical Mission (SEM) and the American United Presbyterian Mission (AUPM) came up with a vision of establishing a joint theological training program in 1947. But the actualization of this vision was delayed. In the meantime, the AUPM started its own pastoral training center in Dambi Dollo in 1948, while

ated many students (about 3,000)⁴⁴ who are now serving as ordained pastors and leaders. Theological education is a spectacular contribution to the growth of the EECMY.⁴⁵

Currently, the Mekane Yesus Seminary (MYS) awards masters of theology (M.Th) degrees with the help of the LCMS, as well as a first degree: the bachelors of theology (BA.Th). The EECMY's four regional seminaries award a BA.Th. degree, while the remaining 34 theological colleges and Bible schools award a diploma and a higher education certificate. Dr. Debela Birri, in his presentation, "The role Played by MYS and Its Graduates in the EECMY Growth and Development and in the Ethiopian Multicultural Society," during the celebration of the Mekane Yesus Seminary's 50th year golden jubilee, stated that the graduates of the seminary have rendered significant contribution in the growth of the EECMY.⁴⁶ Several of the past and existing leaders of EECMY have been the graduates of MYS. In addition, currently, the presidents of all 26 synods of EECMY are graduates of this seminary.⁴⁷

Beside the residential school, there is a theological education by extension (TEE) program run under the seminary. The TEE program is classified into two parts, certificate and diploma programs. These training programs have trained thousands of ministers for the congregations of the church.

Many of the ordained pastors of the urban and rural congregations of EECMY are graduates of the MYS and regional seminaries. In addition to the above higher levels of training, there are 34 synod Bible schools. These Bible schools train congregational ministers on diploma and higher certificate levels. Many of the fulltime and voluntary evangelists involved in the congregational service are the graduates of these schools.

The rapid growth of the EECMY demands that we work harder to address the need of trained pastors in some 4,000 congregations. This reality makes the need of leadership development so crucial and a priority in our ministry.

the SEM also started its own pastoral training school at Nadjo in 1949.

⁴⁴ Magarsaa Gutta. *From a Humble Beginning to Advanced Standing: A History of Mekane Yesus Seminary 1960–2010* (Addis Ababa: Mekane Yesus Seminary, 2010), 10.

⁴⁵ Since the MYS was the only theological seminary in the country, Mennonites and Evangelical denominations were sending their ministers to the MYS for pastoral and leadership training, who are now serving at various levels of ministry.

⁴⁶ Debela Birri, *The Role Played by MYS and Its Graduates in the EECMY Growth and Development and in the Ethiopian Multicultural Society* (Addis Ababa: Mekane Yesus Seminary, 2011), 11.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 11–14.

THE IMPACTS OF THE NATIONAL OUTREACH PLAN OF THE EECMY ON THE GROWTH OF THE CHURCH

Regardless of the impending influence of the Communist regime, the EECMY had devised a comprehensive national outreach plan and launched its implementation in the 1970s and 80s to reach out to unreached parts of the nation through her few synods and congregations. This outreach plan, indeed, made a great contribution to the explosive membership growth of the church.

This program was supported by the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) department for mission and development. The purpose of this program is to empower the congregational outreach to the unreached areas by training, equipping and sending out ministers. Through such mission endeavors, thousands of ministers have been trained, equipped and sent out. As a result, thousands of people came to faith, resulting in many congregations and mission posts being established. In spite of the imposition and persecution of the communist government, the church increased numerically. The assessment of this plan was stated in the Rev. Gudina Tumsa's⁴⁸ "Report on Church Growth in Ethiopia" at the LWF meeting in Tokyo May 1971:

As outlined in the first five years, alarmed at the high growth rate, the central Assembly decided in 1969 that a plan, whereby the church could be able to know where she stands, be worked out. During

⁴⁸ **Editor's Note:** Gudina Tumsa served at the general secretary of the EECMY and was captured by Deng soldiers and martyred on July 28, 1979. He developed the EECMY's "holistic theology" of caring for the entire person, both body and soul. This theology was outlined in a letter published by Tumsa and the EECMY in 1972 titled, "On the Interrelation Between Proclamation of the Gospel and Human Development." The letter can be found in *The Ministry of the Whole Person: Documents of the Rev. Gudina Tumsa and the Mekane Yesus Church from the Pre-Revolutionary Period 1971–1973*, II:38–45 (Addis Ababa: Gudina Tumsa Foundation, n.d.). Tumsa noted (pg. 42) that the mission paradigm of the 19th century followed this pattern: "The old emphasis in the mission of the Church had been on the verbal proclamation of the Gospel. All other activities in the educational, medical or technical fields were regarded as being of secondary importance or even a 'means to an end' namely, avenues by which the message would reach people [Sic: emphasis original]." He noted that the goal of mission work was reversed in the 20th century: "The new emphasis is on social action, community development, liberation from dehumanizing structures and involvement in nation-building. Proclamation of the Gospel has become a side issue, which should be referred to those who have a special concern for the spiritual welfare of people. The two should be kept apart." Tumsa's "holistic theology" was offered as a corrective. "The division between witness and service or between proclamation and development, which has been imposed on us, is, in our view, harmful to the Church and will ultimately result in a distorted Christianity" (pg. 44).

two years period from 1969 to 1970, the necessary data were collected for assessment. In the process of working out the plan, it became clear that in the past three years, from 1968 to 1970, the average growth was calculated to be about 15 percent. Membership growth for 1970 was 27 percent.⁴⁹

As the above stated assessment indicates, the national outreach plan of the EECMY increased membership growth of the church by 27 percent, which is a very high rate.⁵⁰ Presently, one of the main area of focus in the EECMY's five-year strategic plan is outreach, aiming in five years to reach 30,000,000 people and have at least one-third join congregations.

THE IMPACT OF LITERATURE WORK AND BIBLE TRANSLATION INTO VERNACULAR LANGUAGES ON THE GROWTH OF THE CHURCH

Literature work

Literature work and Bible translation were part of effective outreach strategies since the mission era. The issue of preparation and distribution of Christian literature was raised in the early 1950s by the Lutheran mission committee. In those early days, 5,000 copies of Luther's Small Catechism with Amharic commentaries were prepared and distributed. The Joint Literature Program (JLP) that traces its history of formation back to the early 1950s is one of such services.⁵¹

This program dealt with not only the preparation and distribution of Christian literatures, but also teaching the community how to read and write. It eventually opened a door for several who did not get a chance to join school. Later, it was taken as a model by the Communist government who were high school graduates who had been engaged in teaching in the rural and urban areas. Indeed, the program has played a very significant role in provid-

ing spiritual literature that led new converts to maturity. Later, this program continued after the formation of the EECMY under the name "Yemisrach Dimts" on Sept. 29, 1962. The following entities were included in "Yemisrach Dimts:" the literature program, the literacy campaign and the radio program.⁵²

The term *Yemisrach Dimts* means the voice of the Good News. It had a significant contribution to the promotion of the Gospel. This ministry has reached several millions with the Gospel of Christ. To mention a few examples, the conversion of my own mother, brother and a monk whom I know personally are some examples of people reached by Yemisrach Dimts. Indeed, the radio voice of the Gospel played a significant role through the oral propagation of the Good News, while the literature program served by communicating the Good News in writing. These two services continued up to March 12, 1977, when the Communist government confiscated the radio voice of the Gospel.⁵³ However, for the last 39 years, Yemisrach Dimts has been transmitting the same program from South Africa, via Trans World Radio and continues to reach people with the Gospel.

Bible translation

The translation and distribution of the Scriptures were effective instruments of the promotion of the Gospel in Ethiopia. The first evangelical missionary Peter Heyling who arrived in Ethiopia in 1633, started with the translation of John's Gospel from Ge'ez⁵⁴ into the Amharic language. Subsequently, the entire Bible was translated into Amharic for the first time in 1840, through the initiative of the Church Missionary Society (CMS)⁵⁵ of England by an Orthodox monk.⁵⁶ Gustav Arén states that

⁵² Ibid., 129–130.

⁵³ Launhardt, 243. "The Ethiopian Herald" stated the next day on its front page: 'Government Takes Over RVOG.' The government gazette continued reporting that 'Radio Voice of the Gospel (RVOG) and all its affiliates within the country, their studios and equipment as well as buildings and entire property have, as of yesterday, been wholly taken over by the Ethiopian government.' ... The Yemisrach Dimts Center at Asmara Road with the local Radio Studio, the Literature program, and the Literacy Campaign was confiscated a few days later."

⁵⁴ Ge'ez is an ancient Ethiopian language no longer spoken.

⁵⁵ Editor's Note: F. L. Cross and Elizabeth A. Livingstone, eds., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 372. "The 'Church Mission Society', originally called the 'Society for Missions in Africa and the East', was founded in 1799 with Thomas *Scott (q.v.) as its first secretary. Though later in date than the *SPCK and the *SPG, it became the first C of E society to send missionaries to the indigenous populations of Africa and Asia."

⁵⁶ Gurmesa, 81.

⁴⁹ Gudina Tumsa. Gudina Tumsa Foundation, ed. "Report on Church Growth in Ethiopia" in *Witness and Discipleship* (Addis Ababa, 2007), 138.

⁵⁰ Editor's Note: Gudina Tumsa. "Report on Church Growth in Ethiopia to Commission on Church Cooperation Consultation" in *The Ministry of the Whole Person: Documents of the Rev. Gudina Tumsa and the Mekane Yesus Church from the Pre-Revolutionary Period 1971–1973*, II:1–8 (Addis Ababa: Gudina Tumsa Foundation, n.d.), 7. According to Tumsa's report to the LWF, the EECMY in 1970 had 137 pastors and 143,000 members. At that time, the EECMY also worked with 159 expatriate missionaries in Ethiopia. Tumsa's report indicated that the EECMY desired more missionaries to work in Ethiopia to help them implement their plan.

⁵¹ Launhardt, 130. It was officially constituted on April 18, 1959, by five mission societies: ALM, GHM, NLM, SEM and MBV.

the Scriptures that were distributed in those early years of the missionary era laid a good foundation for the later formation the EECMY.⁵⁷

Then the translation of the Bible into Oromo language for the first time, which took place in the 1880s, was a golden opportunity for Oromo evangelism. It has paved the way for the communication of the Gospel to that particular ethnic group, enhancing and encouraging the communication and the receptivity of the Good News. As a result, today more than half of the synods of the church are in Oromia Regional State. Theologizing in the vernacular played a great role in helping the various ethnic groups in the country to claim their God-given rights and dignity, which were denied them before.⁵⁸

Still the EECMY has continued the translation of the Bible and Christian literature into various local languages. So far, the New Testament has been translated into 24 languages indigenous to Ethiopia, while the Old Testament is in various stages of translation for 18 languages. According to the report of the Ethiopian Bible Society, the entire Bible, so far, has been translated into only 8 of the 85 indigenous Ethiopian languages. The translations of the Bible into various languages and the literature programs are some of the major factors that propelled the explosive growth of the church over the last 55 years.

THE IMPACTS OF THE REDISCOVERY OF HOLISTIC MINISTRY IN THE GROWTH OF THE CHURCH

The holistic ministry of the EECMY goes back to the early days of the formation of the apostolic church (Acts 6). For the EECMY, holistic ministry is a rediscovery. It was not a new invention of EECMY. The fact that human beings are composed of spirit, body and soul is a biblical truth (1 Thess. 5:23). “The preaching and teaching of the missionaries from the start was holistic, involving both the spiritual and the material aspects of life, evangelism and development.”⁵⁹ This missiological innovation has been

articulated in the famous historic paper of the EECMY to the global community to the Lutheran World Federation: “The Interrelation between the Proclamation of the Gospel and Human Development.”⁶⁰ This historic paper deals with the redefinition of human beings and their needs both from biblical and cultural point of views. This thesis challenged the traditional understanding of human beings in the Western worldview, especially in the area of development. This thesis begins with an analysis of the old and new emphasis on the assistance for development and social work from the West.⁶¹ According to this analysis, the old emphasis on mission focuses on the vertical proclamation of the Gospel, where all other activities in education, material, medical and developmental fields are regarded as secondary importance. The physical need was understood as a means to the end whereas the new emphasis was on social and developmental work as well as on liberation from dehumanizing structures and involvement in nation-building.

In the new approach, evangelism was disregarded. As these two approaches dichotomized human needs, the rationale for a holistic ministry was developed from a critical reflection on these two extreme positions. It was in the midst of these realities that the EECMY rediscovered her new ministry motto: “a holistic ministry.” According to the EECMY view, development service is neither the means to the end nor the end in itself. It is part and parcel of the integral human need. It has been, therefore, the firm conviction of the EECMY to the present day that “an integral human development is the only pertinent approach to the development question in the society”⁶² because it incorporates the needs of the whole human person, spirit, soul and body (1 Thess. 5:23).

This rationale also takes into account the African worldview. According to the African worldview, things are holistic rather than segmented. Consequently, the church’s ministry has been addressing the holistic needs of humanity without creating any dichotomy between the physical and the spiritual needs of a person. The Rev. Gudina Tumsa affirmed this fact in defense of holistic ministry:

The division that you have made between what you call body and soul is unfair to man. On Sunday you confess that you believe in the resurrection of the

⁵⁷ Ibid., 83.

⁵⁸ This makes Mekane Yesus a pioneer in reaching every people in their own mother tongues, which was quite different from Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church that used Gêez, a liturgical language that was foreign to the masses.

⁵⁹ G. Decke. “The Role of Gudina Tumsa in a Critical Dialogue Between Marxism/Socialism and Christianity” in *The Life and Ministry of Rev. Gudina Tumsa, General Secretary of the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus (EECMY): Report Volume & Lectures of the Missiological Seminar Sponsored by the Gudina Tumsa Foundation at Mekane Yesus Theological Seminary*: 101–128 (Addis Ababa: Gudina Tumsa Foundation, 2003), 110.

⁶⁰ Launhardt, 269.

⁶¹ See the editor’s note in footnote 48.

⁶² “Document of EECMY Church Officers” (Addis Ababa, 1972), 3–4.

body; during the rest of the week, you tell the world that the body is of secondary importance, what matters is the soul. Therefore, preach the Gospel, the most important thing in the world. For us it is very difficult to dissect human life into various parts, ministering to one aspect while neglecting the other. Man is created by God as a totality.⁶³

As a result of this conviction, the church has been conducting development and social work programs and proclamation of the Gospel side-by-side since the rediscovery of this basic missiological fact. The Rev. Gudina Tumsa remarked on the ministry of the church, “The two dimensions of its service go hand in hand. The church contributed to the nation-building in Ethiopia through its both spiritual and social services.”⁶⁴

Subsequently, the church has been conducting various developmental activities — medical, educational, social and agricultural projects — since the beginning. These development and social work services have played a significant role in the explosive growth of the church. Many of the hospitals and health stations have served as a forum for the promotion of the Gospel. Patients coming to these medical institutions have access to the Good News as there are forums sharing the Word of God both when they are waiting and during pastoral visits. These developmental projects have contributed to the purpose of evangelism, not only in establishing good points of contact for witnessing to the Gospel, but also by serving as practical demonstrations of the love of Christ. Indeed, they made significant impact on the life of the beneficiaries. Youth hostels have served as the center of great spiritual revival for the young generation. Many of the chapels at the youth hostels have served as centers of revivals.

Another development program of special significance for mission has been educational institutions. Educational institutions of the church have a tremendous contribution for evangelistic outreach. The EECMY literacy program, which was mentioned earlier, was one of educational programs of the church that is worthy of mentioning in this regard. It has a far-reaching effect on the numerical

growth of the church. This program launched during the early stage of the formation of the church in September 1962.⁶⁵ This program has great missiological significance. It served for the growth of the church in two aspects. First, it enabled the people to read and write. This in turn provided access to the Good News, enabling people to read the Scriptures and Christian literature. Second, it provided good opportunity for students at the literacy schools to hear the Good News, as the Bible is taught as one of the subjects. Thus, the numerical growth of the literacy schools and students has direct contribution to evangelism. As a result, “Congregations and synods were encouraged to form local literacy committees, find literate persons who were willing to teach and begin literacy classes in churches, schools or private houses.”⁶⁶ The EECMY literacy campaign has been conducted for three rounds of each five-year plans from 1962 to 1980. As Johannes Launhardt stated: “During the 1962–1965 period, the number of schools or literacy centers rose to five hundred and nineteen, located in eight of Ethiopian’s fourteen regions. The number of students who completed the course was eighty-three thousand eight hundred and four (83,804).”⁶⁷

This campaign, in its three sets of five-year plans, has demonstrated spectacular contribution to church growth. Launhardt stated, “The churches and synods participating in the YD Literacy Campaign had during the Five-Year Plan of the program experienced a rapid growth. The number of members in the Mekane Yesus Church had more than doubled.”⁶⁸

In addition to this, the church has been running many elementary schools, junior secondary schools and high schools. As the Bible has been taught regularly as one of the subjects and they are currently conducting devotions every morning, these schools have great missiological significance. Since every student of these educational institutions has access to the Good News, these educational firms have also been serving as forums impacting young people.

⁶³ Gerd Deck, “The Role of Gudina Tumsa in Critical Dialogue Between Marxism/ Socialism and Christianity” in *The Life and Ministry of Gudina Tumsa* (Addis Ababa: Gudina Tumsa Foundation, 2007), 111.

⁶⁴ Tasgara Hirpo, “Rev. Gudina Tumsa’s Contribution to the understanding of the national church” in *The Life and Ministry of Gudina Tumsa*, second edition (Addis Ababa: Gudina Tumsa Foundation, 2007), 87.

⁶⁵ Launhardt, 134.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 135.

MANIFESTATIONS ATTRIBUTED TO THE HOLY SPIRIT (PARTICULARLY IN THE 1970S TO 1990S) IS ONE OF THE FACTORS FOR THE RAPID NUMERICAL GROWTH OF THE EECMY

Editor's Note: The Rev. Abraham Mengesha Mitku presented on how the growth of the EECMY was affected by manifestations attributed to the Holy Spirit. These manifestations happened first in areas that were where traditional African religion was the predominant religion, then in heavily Muslim areas and finally during the time when the church was persecuted. The Rev. Gudina Tumsa in his address to the LWF describes the following:

The following striking example indicates what the religious factors play in the mass movements as they have been seen in Ethiopia. In certain areas of Gamu Gofa (a Southern province), a big tree played an important role in the primitive cult. At a certain time of the year, the people come together there from a wide area to make sacrifices to the spirit in the tree. Just before one of the annual festivals, two schoolboys who had accepted the Gospel of Christ went to the village and started to witness to the people. The people laughed at the boys and scorned them, saying that the spirit residing in the tree was the most powerful god and that they believed in it. The boys said that they would pray to their God that He would reveal His power. On the day of the festival, while several hundred people were gathered for the sacrifice, the tree suddenly fell down. The whole crowd said that this was the hand of the new God. From that day on, they said they would believe in the new God. Similar things have happened in many other places. A sick person was healed, a demon-possessed person was made free, etc., and the crowds took these as divine signs and decided to become Christians.⁶⁹

The Rev. Abraham also presented on how these events, interpreted as manifestations of the Spirit, led some people into Pentecostalism. The Mekane Yesus Church rejects Pentecostal worship and manifestations as being non-Lutheran. Nevertheless, when looking at the history of the EECMY, events interpreted as manifestations of the

⁶⁹ Gudina Tumsa. "Report on Church Growth in Ethiopia to Commission on Church Cooperation Consultation" in *The Ministry of the Whole Person: Documents of the Rev. Gudina Tumsa and the Mekane Yesus Church from the Pre-Revolutionary Period 1971-1973*, II:1-8 (Addis Ababa: Gudina Tumsa Foundation, n.d.), 5.

Spirit contributed to the growth of the Church, particularly when these manifestations occurred in deeply pagan or Muslim areas.

THE IMPACTS OF THE EXPERIENCE OF PERSECUTION ON CHURCH GROWTH

The experience of the early apostolic church showed that persecution of Christians had a great significance to the growth of the Church.⁷⁰ When the early Christians were severely persecuted following the stoning of Stephen, they were scattered out to Samaria and other Gentile world. According to Luke, "Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went" (Acts 8:4). As this experience of the apostolic church suggests, persecution enhances the spread of the Good News. In similar way, persecution of Christians under the Ethiopian Communist government in the past and by the communities of other faith in the present has been making incredible contributions to the qualitative and quantitative growth of the church.

The experience of intense persecution of the EECMY under the Ethiopian communist government, on the one hand, was very devastating and destructive. This horrible experience had caused great damage to the church, resulting in various sorts of sufferings: closing down of churches, banning of worship services, detention, severe trials and the death of many leaders. However, on the other hand, it had great contribution toward the qualitative and quantitative growth of the church. Qualitatively, it had great contribution to the spiritual formation of believers, enhancing the purity of faith.

Just to give one practical example: When the Addis Ababa Synod was established with only eight congregations in 1974, the Communist government took power. Soon persecution, torture and confiscation of property followed. However, after 17 years of severe persecution, the number of congregations grew from 8 to 180. Then, following its expansion and growth, it was necessary to change the name of the synod from Addis Ababa Synod to Central Ethiopia Synod; the Synod had grown by such an amount that it extended well beyond Addis Ababa.

The Rev. Hirpo states the situation in the western parts

⁷⁰ *Editor's Note:* Tertullian (155-240 A.D.) who lived in Carthage, North Africa, wrote how the suffering of believers increases the church. Tertullian, "The Apology," in *Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson and A. Cleveland Coxe, trans. S. Thelwall, vol. 3 of *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Buffalo: Christian Literature Company, 1885), 55. "The oftener we are mown down by you, the more in number we grow; *the blood of Christians is seed.*"

of the country as follows: “At the General Assembly at Najjo, in Wollega, in April 1976, with Bethel Synods that joined it, members were over 400,000.”⁷¹ After 17 years, at the downfall of the Ethiopian Marxist regime, there were 1.2 million members. We can show that the numerical growth of the church increased by 800,000 members during the years of persecution. If the church was closed and public worship was banned, where did the growth take place?

Due to the closing down of churches and prohibition of public worship, a new venue of ministry called small group ministry or home cell group, which was an underground operation, was started.⁷² Following this new development, church members were structured into small groups and continued their services. Small group or cell group ministry was a new experience the church had explored during this horrible time. The formation of small group ministries contributed tremendously to the growth and multiplication of members. It enhanced the growth of the church in two aspects.

First, it enhanced the numerical growth of the church as it provided better access to reach out to family members and the community at large. It brought the church close to the community, as these small groups were among the community and they were so close to individuals interested in the program.

Second, it enhanced the qualitative growth of the church, as it was the best forum for edification and nurturing of faith through group Bible studies and reflections on sharing of personal life testimony. It also enhanced detachment from the things of this world and attachment to the heavenly. It led to the experience of losing things of this world in order to gain Christ. Such a journey of faith draws believers to the life of the cross, which is absolute dependence on God, as Paul depicts such life experience to the Philippi believers: “But all those things that I might count as profit I now reckon as loss for Christ’s sake. Not only those things, I reckon everything as complete loss for the sake of what is so much more valuable, that the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have thrown everything away; I consider it as mere refuse,

so that I may gain Christ and be completely united with him” (Phil. 3:7–9).

The above experience of Paul suggests that persecution of faith enhances transformation of life. It purifies faith like gold. The apostle Peter also encourage those who were under persecution: “These have come so that your faith — of greater worth than Gold, which perishes even though refined by fire — may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus is revealed” (1 Peter 1: 7).

Indeed, persecution invigorates Christian witness. Quantitatively it has made a tremendous contribution to the numerical growth of the church. As the ancient saying goes, “The blood of martyrs is the seed of the Gospel.” In similar way, the seed sown during this horrible experience the church has undergone, and still undergoes in some places, has led to a blooming result in the growth of the church. The testimony of heroes of faith during their trials has been a moving and powerful experience that empowers the witness of the Gospel. The words of the Rev. Tumsa, the General Secretary of the EECMY, are worthy of mentioning. He states: “We as Christians cannot simply tolerate a bad situation and keep quiet. It is our duty to act, to speak and even risk our life. The power of the resurrection is experienced only through death.”⁷³

Such bold and powerful witness has impacted many people and has drawn many cadres to Christ. There were instances where the cadres sent to congregational services for spying and closing churches ended up joining the church, touched by God’s power.⁷⁴ If we take CES alone, there are 24 martyrs who stood firm for Christ, whose living testimony has been inspiring and exemplary for us today. In addition, many were tortured, and thousands of farmers lost their farms and properties just for being followers of Christ.

Because of their firm stand, the victims of that atrocity didn’t retreat from sharing their faith to others even when they were under tragic trials and extended detentions. They boldly witnessed for Christ and won many converts in those hostile circumstances. As a result of their witness and life testimony in the prison, the prison stations have become fields of mission. Through such mission endeavor,

⁷¹ Hirpo, 87.

⁷² **Editor’s Note:** When persecution limits or stops public worship, Christians worship underground in homes or in small groups. What is described here as the result of persecution is not the same as the technics advocated by the church growth movement. In some cases, the church growth movement studied what occurred during times of persecution and attempted to emulate it as a technic to help the church grow in the West.

⁷³ Laundhart, 248.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 266. “The security agent called three times, but Belina did not act. Finally the man came himself with the intention to get the keys of the church. Since the church was packed with people, the agent had to wait in the church for the end of the gathering. In the end of the service, however, he decided to join the congregation.”

converts have been won from many political and legal prisoners, and many Bible study groups have been formed in order to strengthen and discipline these new converts. As a result of this work today, Mekane Yesus has many congregations right in the prison stations of different regions of the country where Sunday worship is regularly conducted. In CES, we have two prison congregations.

THE IMPACT OF REDISCOVERY OF THE PRIESTHOOD OF ALL BELIEVERS ON THE GROWTH OF THE CHURCH

The concept of the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers

As we showed in the preceding presentation, the movement of the laity is a backbone for the evangelistic work of the EECMY. The laity are instruments of mission. The laity are active mission agents. They actively witness about Jesus. They pray and support mission financially. Most of the leaders of the congregations of the church are lay people. In such context, every member of the church is encouraged to share the experience of his or her conversion to the community around them. Indeed, everybody has something to share from the story of his or her life.

The concept of the priesthood of all believers is biblical. By virtue of Baptism, every believer is called to priesthood. Peter says to the community of faith: “You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who has called you out of darkness into his wonderful light” (1 Peter 2:9). According to this text, the believers’ call to a royal priesthood includes a call to witness to the Good News. The phrase “declare the praises of him who has called you out of darkness” implies witness. It means to tell the goodness of God.

The doctrine of the priesthood of all believers is also central to the Lutheran doctrine. The Lutheran tradition promotes the universal priesthood of all believers, joined through Baptism. However, “This doesn’t mean that just anyone can step forth into the office of the ministry of the Word and Sacraments. That will [lead] to anarchy.”⁷⁵ According to Lutheran theology, ministers are those who have been delegated to be the representatives of the people. According to Luther, ordination is for order. If everyone speaks, it will cause chaos. He states, “If many hands perform baptism they will drown the baby

in water.”⁷⁶

Dr. George Wollenburg also states, “With the exception of the biblical doctrine of justification, perhaps, no biblical teaching is more dear to the hearts of the Lutherans than the priesthood of all believers.”⁷⁷ Thus, the concept of priesthood of all believers is both biblical and Lutheran.

The inception and development of this concept

The concept of priesthood of all believers was a rediscovery for EECMY, because as it has been stated above, it had already existed in the Bible and in Luther’s teaching. The rediscovery of the role of the priesthood of all believers in the EECMY started quietly from the very time of its formation, where the first two presidents of the EECMY were laymen.

The role of the laity in the EECMY

As Donald McGavran, the founder and proponent of the Modern Church Growth Movement, pointed out, “If a church is serious about the Great Commission, the involvement of the laity is of utmost importance.”⁷⁸ He states: “Laymen have many more gifts than are needed to maintain the existing body. Recognize and use gifts for outreach. This is an essential ingredient to a healthy growing church.”⁷⁹ In a similar way, the role of the laity has an incredible contribution in the mission of the EECMY.

Launhardt in his assessment of the essence and formation of the EECMY stated, “The Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus is a church with strong laity involvement. This holds true not only for tasks on the congregational level, but also for the church as a whole.”⁸⁰ He further noted, “This trend of lay involvement continued, and was strengthened when many young people found their way into the church. During the time of the Derg [the Communist military government] it was the young sector of the society which joined the Christian church more than any other age group.”⁸¹

Indeed, the ministry of the lay youth in high school and universities has been exerting significant contribution

⁷⁵ Carl E. Braaten, *Principles of Lutheran Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973), 44.

⁷⁶ Martin Luther. “To Christian Nobility of the German Nation (1520)” in *Christian in Society I*, vol. 44 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1966), 175.

⁷⁷ <http://www.lcms.org/pages/intena.asp?NavID=841>, 1.

⁷⁸ Donald A. McGavran and Winfield C. Arn, *Ten Steps for Church Growth* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 108.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 108.

⁸⁰ Launhardt, 297.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 298.

to the explosive growth of the church.⁸² Thus, the church has been wisely mobilizing and using these youngsters, conducting various trainings to empower them for better services. Launhardt stated:

To discover the God-given gifts of an individual and to equip him for an effective service, training is needed. On synod level courses for youth leaders were organized, but the main training of the youth took place within the congregations. At some places it was obligatory for young people to attend a one-year lay-training program [discipleship] after the confirmation course. The training was given on Saturdays or on Sundays after the worship service. Some congregations in town trained their volunteers in evening Bibles schools or arranged for special courses and seminars.⁸³

These trainings were given to equip and mature the young people to enable them make use of their gifts rightly in witnessing to the Good News. After training, the lay ministers are mobilized for service. Some are assigned for specific purpose by their respective elders. Some of such duties, as Launhardt explains, are:

Sunday school teaching for children, leading a Bible study or young group, arranging prayer members, singing in a choir, taking part in outreach programs, visiting sick members, counseling bereaved ones, keeping order during worship services, cleaning the church, preparing bazaars, handling funds and many other tasks.⁸⁴

Launhardt noted about the role of these lay ministers: “There is no question that the lay people were and are the treasure of the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus. The rapid growth of the church is, among others, the result of their active involvement and their readiness to serve voluntarily.”⁸⁵

This is one of the main reasons that, throughout the history of the EECMY, the number of youth in all congregations exceeds by far that of the middle aged and elderly members.

The role of every believer in mission

Every member of the church is aware of his or her missionary call as a priesthood, the call to declare the praise of God who has called him out of the darkness to His everlasting light (1 Peter 2:9). This is done through the discipleship course that each new confirmand takes for at least from six to twelve months after he or she is confirmed as a communicant member. Then each will understand his or her responsibilities of reaching others through sharing their own experiences. Subsequently, every believer actively participates in witnessing the Good News in season and out of season to his or her neighborhood, at the work place, in public busses, at market places or shopping centers. On top of that, every believer actively participates in praying for mission and raising funds.

Congregational participation

Every healthy congregation of the church is aware of its responsibility to bring the Gospel to people within its congregation boundary. The congregations mobilize their members to support outreach ministry with their entire God-given resources. The outreach first grows to be a preaching place and then becomes a congregation. Therefore, in such context, congregational ministry will never be like a football game in a stadium where a few players play the game while the rest of the crowd is just mere spectators (1 Cor. 12:13–25). Every member is in one way or another actively engaged in the mission.

Thus, the main role of effective EECMY pastors is nurturing, empowering, equipping and mobilizing the laity for mission. Within the EECMY, it is believed that if a congregation fails to have a minimum of one or two preaching places every year and eventually bring them up into congregation level within three to seven years, then that congregation is spiritually not healthy. Growth within and in the mission field is a sign of spiritual health. Healthy congregations always move and grow both within and in outreach work.

Currently in CES, all 489 congregations are actively engaged in mission in 704 outreach areas. While each has at least one or two outreach locations, other large congregations are engaged in 7 to 15 outreach locations. There are congregations who have been the instrument for the birth of more than fifty congregations (e.g., the Addis Ababa mother congregation, Ambo, Lemelem and Kachisie congregations). These congregations are responsible for equipping these outreaches with a trained minister and purchased land and eventually building a

⁸² Currently universities and prisons are the major mission fields for the EECMY today!

⁸³ Launhardt, 298.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 299.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

chapel. Then, when they are ready to be on their own, the mother congregation officially applies to the council of the synod to allow them grow to congregation level, and eventually hands them over to the nearest structure of their synod for better follow up.⁸⁶

During your Council of Presidents meeting in 2012 held in St. Louis, I was given the privilege of conveying greetings and eventually shared with you that CES had 413 congregations. After two years, when I am standing before you today, I am representing 489 congregations; 76 were added in the last two years.

THE CURRENT CHALLENGES OF THE EECMY IN GENERAL AND CES IN PARTICULAR

Despite the religious freedom we are experiencing in Ethiopia today, the church is facing potential challenges both within and without. For us, persecution is an inevitable phenomenon as we step up for mission in new territories. Challenges from outside, as it has been proven, are always strengthening the unity of believers and engages them for mission rather than destroying them.

One of the potent challenges we faced 20 years ago that took much of our resources, time and energy was the conflict among believers demanding to use their vernacular for worship instead of the official language that was in use in the city. Indeed, unlike the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church and Pentecostal Churches, EECMY was not totally new to using vernaculars of various ethnic groups. It long ago implemented this. However, the church was not ready for the socioeconomic and political changes that took place in the country 21 years ago. After 14 years of turmoil that slowed our growth, by the grace of the Lord, we were able to resolve it in 2008 and the church has once again united.

Another challenge (a positive challenge) is to address the needs of all these emerging congregations and preaching places; purchasing land, building chapels and equipping them with trained pastors and evangelists has been a huge burden to CES and the church at large.

Another potential challenge (still positive) are the

wide compounds owned by our congregations and parishes. These wide compounds are not yet well utilized and developed as per the master plan of the towns and cities. As a result, they are exposed to outsiders and eventually in danger of becoming prey for investors, including my own office.

In CES alone, there are 12 big compounds that are in a critical situation and in danger of being taken from us and delivered to the investors. Some of these compounds range from 11,000–56,000 square meters wide. According to the land policy of the country, land belongs to the government. We have full rights to use and cultivate it. However, our user rights will be respected if and only if we are able to develop it as per the urban development plan of the government. Otherwise, we will receive a little compensation from the government for what we have had on the land (but not a single coin for the land itself), and they will hand it over to the investors (developers).

Indeed, this is my potent challenge as the president of EECMY-CES. These compounds were given to us or we purchased them some 30 and 40 years ago. As a responsible leader, now it has become my priority just equivalent to the mission, not only to save these compounds, but also to transform and develop them into generating income and being resources for our evangelizing work in five regional states where we are currently operating. I take this opportunity to extend my request for you to keep lifting us before the Lord and your unreserved support.

Before I conclude my presentation, I would like to say few words about the trend of 21st century mission.

THE TREND OF 21ST CENTURY MISSION

It is quite evident that the center of gravity of the Christian world has shifted from North and West to the Southern hemisphere. From the very time of its birth to the middle of the 20th century, Christianity had been flourishing for several centuries in the West and the Northern hemisphere, while most of the Southern Hemisphere and most parts of Asia were not open to Christianity. Thus, Christians in the Northern Hemisphere have been faithfully engaged in God's mission to reach those who were in the darkness. As a result of their sacrificial labor, today churches are flourishing in the Southern Hemisphere.

It seems to me that the season has been gradually shifting to the Southern Hemisphere. Today, the ideology of modern and postmodernism has made its potent impact on the life and ministry of the church in the West as well as the community at large! Unknowingly or

⁸⁶ **Editor's Note:** Congregations engaged in mission coordinate their activities with the Central Office. The Central Office provides locations for mission work and preaching stations according to the church's five-year strategic plan. The congregation will pay for an evangelist to establish a mission station or preaching station. Once that preaching station reaches the point of being a self-sustaining congregation, it will apply to be a member of the local synod (similar to a district in the Missouri Synod).

uncritically, we have allowed it to shape and misshape our worldview, values and people's relationship with God, even to the extent of affecting theological reflection, and eventually the missiological ground of some churches. Of course, we do not deny the numerous and significant positive impacts that it has brought to our lives. However, as Willam Barret remarked, "Every major step forward by mankind entails some loss, the sacrifice of an older security and the creation and heightening of new tensions."⁸⁷

Our challenge in the West today is twofold. On the one hand, we are striving not to lose the basic tenets of our Christian faith and values; on the other hand, we are facing new challenges both within and from outside. As William D. Taylor remarked:

We stand at the start of this uncertain new century, this new millennium. New language and categories have entered our lives. We speak of globalization, and we witness the worldview transitions from pre-modernity to modernity to post-modernity with their respective blessings and curses. Regardless of our culture, our gender, our geography, and our ministry, the times have radically changed, requiring a serious re-evaluation of why we do the things we do in ministry—whether personal or organizational.⁸⁸

Indeed, we are in a critical moment when the tenets of our faith, our identity as well as our unity are challenged, having been put to a serious test. We need to have ways to the future. It is quite evident we cannot survive if we keep on thinking and doing the same as we did in the past.

- We need to pray for special wisdom that surpasses all our human limitations and shortcomings.
- We need to stand together helping one another. As the saying goes, "United we stand! Divided we fall."
- The Lord, who has called us in this critical season, is with us!
- We will never give up fighting against the evident forces of anti-Christian secularism that seek to revive paganism and hedonism in our community.
- We never give up, for the Lord our God is on His throne!
- We certainly know that throughout the history of Christianity, the Church has never been without a challenge. Overcoming all its challenges, the Church of Christ has

come thus far and will continue leaning on His mighty arm and grace.

- It will continue shining His glory, witnessing to His crucifixion, resurrection and His second coming until He comes in glory.

Despite all the challenges we have, we still stand firm and affirm with Paul: "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" (Heb. 13:8). We will never give up! We will keep on walking a walk of faith, carrying on God's mission.

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⁸⁷ Willam Barret. *Irrational Man: A Study in Existential Philosophy* (New York: Anchor Books, 1990), 26.

⁸⁸ William D. Taylor, ed., *Missiology for the 21st Century, The Iguassu Dialogue* (Ada: Baker Academic, 2001), 8.