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THE LUTHERAN IMPACT ON MISSION

by Berhanu Ofgaa

The Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus (EECMY) has built on the foundation of European missions to grow into a large church body. The mission work of the EECMY has historically been and continues to be largely lay driven, while seeking to hold to the truths of Lutheran doctrine.

LUTHERANS ARE ACCUSED of not being mission minded.¹ Some scholars question whether Lutherans even have a vision for mission, arguing that even Martin Luther, the founder of Lutheranism, was not mission minded.² In reality, this argument doesn't hold water. In this presentation, I would like to argue against this distorted view of Lutheranism, enumerating the impact of Lutherans on mission by bringing up evidence from history and current practices. This presentation begins with a brief definition of the term *mission*, just for clarity, since it has been given varied meanings and connotations. Subsequent to this, I would like to examine the significance of Lutherans on mission, drawing facts from history and the present mission of the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus (EECMY) as a living testimony.

I. Luther's View of Mission

A. WHAT DO WE MEAN BY THE TERM MISSION?

The term *mission* has been given different meanings among scholars. David Bosch, in his book *Transforming Mission*, identifies the following traditional interpretations

of the term *mission*: the sending of missionaries to distant areas, the geographical area where missionaries were active, the agency that dispatches the missionaries, and the non-Christian world or "mission field."³

From its terminological definition, the word *mission* was derived from the Latin term *mitto*, which is the translation of the Greek term *apostello*, meaning "to send." It was much later that the English term *mission* was put to use to signify the church focused on the Great Commission⁴ that our Lord Jesus Christ has given to his followers.⁵ It is possible to draw the relationship of *mission* and evangelism from this definition. Evangelism also deals with the same concern of advancing the Great Commission through the proclamation of the good news to unreached people.

In J. Andrew Kirk's book *What is Mission?* he states, "There is no consensus yet among people from different Christian traditions about the relationship of evangelism to mission."⁶ Kirk goes on to say that some scholars believe that mission is the total activity of the church and evangelism is considered one part of it, while others believe that the church's fundamental mission is

¹ Gustav Adolf Warneck, *Outline of a History of Protestant Missions from the Reformation to the Present Time*, ed. George Robson (Edinburgh and London: Oliphant Anderson & Ferrier, 1901), 8, notes, "Notwithstanding the era of discovery in which the origin of the Protestant church fell, there was no missionary action on her part in the age of the Reformation."

² Warneck, *Protestant Missions*, 14, says, "Luther understands the missionary mandate only in the sense that by world-wide preaching the Gospel will be offered to all nations. In this sense, however, it is regarded by him as accomplished. Here again there is no reference to any systematic missionary enterprise. Luther thinks, at most, of an occasional or incidental preaching among non-Christians, especially by faithful laymen or preachers who have been driven for their home."

³ David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in the Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991), 1.

⁴ The origins of the term "Great Commission" cannot be precisely identified. Evidence suggests the term emerged in the seventeenth or eighteenth century in connection with Matt 28:16–20. "It turns out that this passage may have got its summary label from a Dutch missionary Justinian von Welz (1621–1688), but it was Hudson Taylor, nearly 200 years later, who popularized the use of 'The Great Commission.'" Robbie Castleman, "The Last Word: The Great Commission: Ecclesiology," *Themelios* 32, no. 3 (November 2007): 68.

⁵ A. Scott Moreau, *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 636.

⁶ J. Andrew Kirk, *What is Mission?* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 56.

evangelism whereas other diaconal ministries are its subordinates.⁷ In this presentation, I would like to stick to the view that the church's fundamental mission is evangelism and define mission in this context, as the communication of the gospel to unchurched people whether domestic, international, or cross-cultural.

Scott Moreau points out that there is confusion in the understanding of evangelism among scholars. Some claim that evangelism implies only the declaration of the gospel, while others associate it with the establishment of a caring presence in society to secure justice.⁸ However, keeping in line with its terminological definition, evangelism has to mean announcing the good news,⁹ ranging from the witnessing of the gospel to the baptism of new converts.

B. MARTIN LUTHER'S VIEW OF MISSION

Scholars like Gustav Warneck, the “Father of Missiology as a Theological Discipline,” argued that Luther lacked missionary direction and accused the Reformer of not being mission minded.¹⁰ However, Warneck's criticism of Luther does not prove right. Other scholars view Martin Luther as a creative and original missionary thinker and a great missiologist. The starting point of his theology was “not what people could or should do for the salvation of the world, but what God has already done in Christ.”¹¹

It is also worthwhile to quote Luther's metaphor to signify that the proclamation of the gospel moves to the end of the world. He described it symbolically as “a stone thrown into the water—it produces a series of circular waves which moves out from the center until they reach the furthest shore.”¹² By this Luther implied that there is no stopping point for the witness of the gospel. It keeps on, continuing to the end of the earth. This shows that mission was not a new phenomenon for Luther. Mission was the main claim of the Lutheran Reformation.

This doctrine is based on the call to royal priesthood stated in 1 Peter 2:9. This means a call to declare the goodness of he who calls from darkness to his marvelous light. It is a call to witness about Christ.

It was the concern for the authority of the Scripture that drove Martin Luther to study them in depth and immerse himself in the teachings of the Scripture and the early church. This search of the Bible convinced him that the church had lost sight of several central truths, the most important of which was the doctrine that brought him peace with God. This brought him to the conviction that salvation is a gift of God's grace, received by faith and trust in God's promise to forgive sins for the sake of Christ's death on the cross. This very fact was a point of great missiological significance.

The “95 Theses” Luther nailed at the door of the Wittenberg church in defense of the truth of the Scripture had a great missionary significance, as he called the church back to the Scripture, which is the foundation of Christian mission. The initiative Luther took in making

available the Scripture in peoples' vernacular, through his translation of the Bible in the commonly-spoken dialect of the German people, also had missionary significance. According to James Scherer, Luther's conviction of mission is centered on his understanding of the word and baptized believers. These two are crucial forces of mission.¹³ Luther's redefinition of the role of the baptized, which led him to exploration of the priesthood of all the baptized,

was another benchmark of mission. Luther's catechisms, which were designed for equipping the laity with the basic knowledge of the Scripture, have made a great contribution to the missionary task. They empowered the laity for witnessing the gospel, both to their families and to their neighbors.

C. LUTHERANS IN MISSION

There was a difference of perspectives of mission among Lutheran Orthodoxy and Lutheran Pietism. On the one hand, theologians of Lutheran Orthodoxy like Philip Nicolai believed that the Great Commission had been fulfilled during the apostles' lifetimes and was no longer binding on the church,¹⁴ while on the other hand there

⁷ Kirk, *What is Mission?* 56.

⁸ Moreau, *Evangelical Dictionary*, 332.

⁹ David Watson, *I Believe in Evangelism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 26.

¹⁰ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 244.

¹¹ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 244.

¹² Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 244.

¹³ James A. Scherer, *That the Gospel May be Sincerely Preached Throughout the World: A Lutheran Perspective on Mission and Evangelism in the 20th Century* (Stuttgart: Lutheran World Federation, 1982), 7.

¹⁴ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 249.

were Lutheran missionaries who made a great impact on mission. In this regard, it is worthwhile mentioning how Lutheran Pietism leaders like Philip Jacob Spener made people more aware of the mission task.

In support of this view, Stephen Neill enumerates the history of two young Lutheran missionaries, Bartholomew Ziegenbalg and Henry Plutschau. They were sent to India in the beginning of the eighteenth century by the King of Denmark and arrived in Tranquebar, India, on August 9, 1706.¹⁵ These two young Lutheran men, who were the first non-Catholic missionaries¹⁶ in India, made a significant impact in cross-cultural mission¹⁷ among the Danish diaspora and native Indians in spreading the gospel. Bosch states that these missionaries brought a great turnaround on the Lutheran mission perspective.¹⁸ Ziegenbalg wrestled with local Danish officials who claimed that the church had already been planted everywhere and that the office of apostle had vanished.¹⁹ Neill also recounts the history of the Leipzig Lutheran missionaries who arrived in south India in 1840²⁰ as another example of the Lutheran effect on mission.

Much can be said about European Lutheran missionaries who were front liners and pioneers in Ethiopian mission, such as Peter Heyling (1607–1652),²¹ a Lutheran missionary who arrived in Ethiopia in 1634, right after the Protestant Reformation in Europe. Heyling did groundbreaking work by translating the gospel into the Amharic language²² and significantly influencing the clergy of the

Ethiopian Orthodox church to develop an evangelical view. Heyling died a martyr's death in 1652, when, upon leaving Ethiopia, he was captured by the Turks. He was given the choice of converting to Islam or facing the sword. Heyling accepted death rather than deny Christ.²³ His endeavor laid the foundation for the later missionaries from Sweden, Germany, Norway, Denmark, and America who were behind the formation of the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus (EECMY).²⁴

Every member of the congregations of the church participates in witnessing to people in their neighborhoods. ... It is likened to the system of operation of the parts of a living body (1 Cor 12:13–25) where every part is engaged and actively participates.

The history of the German-Lutheran missionaries Bruno Gutmann and Christian Keysser, who played a great missionary role in East Africa and Papua, New Guinea, is another proof of the Lutheran impact on mission. Gutmann worked among the Chagga people in Tanzania, while Keysser worked among the Kate people in Papua, New Guinea. These two Lutheran missionaries predated McGavran in identifying the sociological principle of the homogeneous unit. Keysser

and Gutmann worked out the missiological implications of social ties in tribal societies in 1903, many years before the rise of the Church Growth Movement, and some scholars believe that they were more perceptive than Pickett and McGavran. "Pickett did not see as clearly as did Keysser that the caste (the organism) was becoming Christian while remaining in the caste."²⁵

Scriptural study would engender deeper spiritual life, began to translate Holy Scripture into Amariya for the benefit of the common people, who did not know Ge'ez, the liturgical language. When Gorgorios visited Gondor in 1647, St. John's Gospel had been published and was in great demand."

¹⁵ Stephen Neill, *History of Christian Missions* (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 194.

¹⁶ Moreau, *Evangelical Dictionary*, 444.

¹⁷ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 253–57.

¹⁸ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 249.

¹⁹ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 253

²⁰ Neill, *History of Christian Missions*, 236.

²¹ Gustav Arén, *Evangelical Pioneers in Ethiopia: Origins of the Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus* (Addis Ababa: The Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus, 1978), 20, says, "Accompanying the new Abune Marqos on his journey to Ethiopia was Peter Heyling, a young Lutheran from Lübeck, who had been sent as a missionary to Ethiopia by Duke Ernest of Saxe-Gotha in Germany... the impact of his mission was greater than has hitherto been presumed and some of his followers assisted in laying the foundation of Evangelical Christianity in Wollaga."

²² Arén, *Evangelical Pioneers*, 21, says, "Heyling, who was confident that

²³ Arén, *Evangelical Pioneers*, 22, notes, "Gorgorios emphasized that Heyling left Ethiopia in 1652 with due permission from the emperor to take a vacation in Egypt and that Fasil dismissed him with great honour by presenting him with rich gifts of gold. However, when Heyling passed through Suakin, the Turkish pasha conceived a craving for his riches and clapped him into prison on charges of espionage. Faced with a demand to choose either Islam or the sword Heyling accepted death rather than deny Christ. The pasha drew his sword and beheaded him."

²⁴ Arén, *Evangelical Pioneers*, 22, says, "There is apparently a direct line from Peter Heyling to the founders of the Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus." Peter Heyling's work of translating the Scriptures and the Small Catechism between 1634–1652 left a remnant of people who were instrumental in forming the EECMY in the early twentieth century.

²⁵ Christian Keysser, *A People Reborn*, trans. Alfred Allin and John Kuder (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1980), x-xi. The concept of group conversion (a people movement for Christ) had also been envisioned by Lutheran missionaries Christian Keysser and Bruno Gutmann many years before Donald McGavran and Waskom Pickett.

II. The Impact of the EECMY on Mission

As it has been stated above, the EECMY from her origin was the product of Lutheran missions. This church had been founded as the result of a century-old labor of the following five western Evangelical Lutheran missions: Swedish Evangelical Mission (SEM), German Hermannsburg Mission (now known as ELM Hermannsburg), Norwegian Lutheran Mission (NLM), Danish Evangelical Mission (DEM), and American Lutheran Mission (ALM).

The EECMY has been a church actively engaged in mission work since the days of her inception. This is the major reason for her extraordinary growth. As the statistical reports show, today the EECMY is one of the fastest growing Lutheran churches on the global level. The EECMY was founded sixty years ago in January 1959 with 20,000 baptized members, a few congregations, and a few pastors. In sixty years, the EECMY has multiplied to more than 7.8 million members, organized into 8,500 congregations and 4,000-plus preaching places (mission stations). This incredible growth, from 20,000 to 7.8 million members, taking place in so short a time span is a clear demonstration of the Lutheran impact on mission.

A. LAITY MOVEMENT AS ONE OF THE MAJOR PROPELLING FACTORS OF THE EECMY MISSION

Among the many major propelling factors identified for the EECMY mission, I would like to focus on the role of the laity in mission because of time constraint. The laity are the backbone of the EECMY mission. Johannes Launhardt, in his analysis 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.”²⁶ Launhardt goes on to assert, “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.”²⁷

The EECMY has been a lay mission-driven church from her origin. This means that this church is the

Christian Keysser discovered this fact in 1903.

²⁶ 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, 2004), 297.

²⁷ Launhardt, *Evangelicals in Addis Ababa*, 299.

product of a lay-missionary movement. I realize that the topic of the role of laity and clergy can be a sensitive one, and is a debate among some International Lutheran Council (ILC) churches. What I will try to do is describe what has happened within the EECMY and not prescribe how things ought to be done. Also, despite the heavy involvement of the laity in evangelism, the EECMY follows traditional Lutheran doctrine and practice regarding the role of the pastor. For instance, only pastors administer the sacrament of the altar in the EECMY. The EECMY does not have laypeople presiding at the altar nor do laypeople consecrate the sacrament. The founders of the EECMY were laymen and women driven for mission as a result of spiritual revival. Most of these missions were the products of lay missionary movement and were not from high-church tradition. Thus, the laity mission movement of the EECMY has to do with realities from her background.

B. THE INFLUENCE OF HER EARLY NATIONAL LEADERS

Following the footsteps of the founding mission, most of the notable national individuals who played a very significant role in advancing the strategic goals of the mission were mission-driven lay leaders. This reality has a great influence on the lay missionary motive of this church and has been reflected in the writing of the second president of the church, Emmanuel Abraham, who has led the church for over twenty years. In response to why non-clerical persons were elected to be leaders of the church Abraham says:

It should be understood, in the first place, that the Church is a communion of people who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. All Christians are therefore equal before the Lord God, and they enjoy equal rights and responsibilities. It is abundantly clear from the Bible that there is no difference whatever on that score. “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ.” (GAL. 3:28) Moreover, as Martin Luther, more than 450 years ago, had forcefully reminded the whole Church, all believers are God’s priesthood.²⁸

He went on and expounded his argument: “It is the belief of Evangelical Christians that any believer can serve as a leader of the church even if he is not a called pastor, bishop or archbishop.”²⁹

²⁸ Emmanuel Abraham, *Reminiscences of My Life* (Oslo, Norway: Lundeforlag, 1995), 249.

²⁹ Abraham, *Reminiscences of My Life*, 250.

The third major factor that influenced the lay mission movement in the EECMY mission was awareness of the priestly call. This implies that every member of the church is aware of his/her royal priesthood from the moment of his/her baptism. This doctrine is based on the call to royal priesthood stated in 1 Peter 2:9. This means a call to declare the goodness of he who calls from darkness to his marvelous light. It is a call to witness about Christ. The laity of the EECMY are aware of this very mandate of their priestly call. As a result, they all participate in mission movement.

This doctrine of the priesthood of the baptized is central in the Lutheran doctrine. The Lutheran tradition promotes the universal priesthood of believers, joined through baptism. As Carl Braaten states, “Whoever comes out of the water of baptism can boast that he is already a consecrated priest, bishop, and pope.”³⁰ In a similar way, George Wollenburg 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.”³¹ Wollenburg also affirms that the priesthood of all believers includes believers’ participation in spiritual service.³²

In the EECMY context, the movement of the laity is the backbone of mission. The laity are active mission agents. They actively witness for Christ. They pray for mission. They support mission work financially. Most of the leaders of the congregations of the church are laypeople. They actively participate in mission. Every member of the church is encouraged to share the experience of his/her conversion. Everybody has something to share from the story of his/her conversion.

Donald McGavran, the founder and proponent of the modern Church Growth Movement, in support of the laity in mission states, “If a church is serious about the Great Commission, the involvement of the laity is of most importance.”³³ He goes on to say, “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.”³⁴ In a similar way, the role of the laity has been an incredible contribution in the mission of the EECMY. Below we will specifically deal with this issue.

This initiative of lay movement in the EECMY mission was largely led by the young people and operates mightily among them. In the EECMY context, congregational services are crowded with young people. The youth are active in the life of their congregations, as Launhardt enumerates: Sunday school teaching for children, leading a Bible study or youth group, arranging prayer groups, singing in the 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.³⁵ They also actively participate in witnessing for Christ. As Launhardt writes, “It was the young sector of the society which joined the Christian church more than any other age group during the Communist Government of Ethiopia.”³⁶

C. COMMITMENT TO THE GREAT COMMISSION

The fifth major motivating factor of the laity in the mission of the EECMY is commitment to the Great Commission. EECMY members seriously consider that mission is the main purpose of the call of the church. They are serious about the concern for the lost. As “the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost” (LUKE 19:10), therefore, the church considers mission as the main purpose of her existence. Mission in this context is understood not as an option but a command given to the church by Christ (MATT 28:19–20).

D. THE CONVICTION THAT HUMANITY OUTSIDE CHRIST IS LOST

Every member of the EECMY is aware of the fact that humanity outside of Christ is lost. This conviction is based on the following scriptural verses: People without Christ are lost (1 COR 1:18; 2 COR 2:15). People whose sins are not forgiven will go to hell. They are relegated to judgment and eternal damnation (JOHN 3:16; ROM 2:8). Therefore, mission is critical and urgent. Mission is viewed as rescuing souls from eternal damnation through offering the forgiveness of sins, as God is pleased with the salvation of souls (1 TIM 2:2). EECMY members take this seriously.

³⁰ Carl E. Braaten, *Principles of Lutheran Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 44.

³¹ George Wollenburg, “The Priesthood of Believers and the Divine Service,” *LCMS Worship Library*, 1996, <https://www.lcms.org/Document.fdoc?src=lcm&id=879>.

³² Wollenburg, “The Priesthood of Believers.”

³³ Donald A. McGavran and Winfield C. Arn, *Ten Steps for Church Growth* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 108.

³⁴ McGavran and Arn, *Ten Steps for Church Growth*, 108.

³⁵ Launhardt, *Evangelicals in Addis Ababa*, 299.

³⁶ Launhardt, *Evangelicals in Addis Ababa*, 297.

Many congregations of the church actively participate in bringing the good news to those who are in darkness. Such mission participation is demonstrated in many dimensions. This approach is classified into three parts. The first is mission within their boundary. Every congregation of the church is aware of bringing the gospel to people in their congregational boundary. Every member of the congregations of the church participates in witnessing to people in their neighborhoods. In such a context, congregational ministry is not like a public bus system where few people are engaged in activities, possibly only the driver and the cash collector. It is likened to the system of operation of the parts of a living body (1 COR 12:13-25) where every part is engaged and actively participates.

Secondly, there are congregations who do mission through sending ministers to unreached places outside their congregational boundaries within their respective synods. These congregations are winning converts, equipping leaders, and providing places of worship to plant new churches and hand them over to the nearest structure of their synod. They continue supporting the newly planted congregations until they are self-sufficient.

Thirdly, there are congregations who are actively involved in mission, crossing the boundary of their respective synods. In such an approach, they respond to Macedonian calls from new areas, sending ministers or raising financial support. Some of these congregations make special arrangements with their own synods and the synods in which the programs are implemented or located, and embark on the mission work. Many fruitful results have been achieved through these three mission approaches and numerous preaching places and congregations have been planted.

Individual members of the EECMY are actively involved in mission. Every member believes that mission is part and parcel of his/her calling and that mission is an integral part of his/her salvation. This awareness is built during the process of discipleship training.

There is a lay mission movement conducted by lay professionals or business people. Such people actively participate in mission in two ways: First, they directly participate in witnessing for Christ on an individual level in their leisure time and weekends. Secondly, they finance the lay ministers who are involved in full-time mission. This group wins converts and organizes them into congregations, trains leaders, builds churches, and hands over the neighboring structure of the church.

There is a new initiative of emerging mission

movements conducted by retired people. It includes both retired ministers and members of the church. These groups apply similar mission strategies to those stated above and raise funds for their activities.

Conclusion

Much has been said in this presentation about the Lutheran impact on mission by examining the historical facts and by looking at the practical experiences of the EECMY. However, we are at a critical moment when this mission practice is severely challenged. We are at a historical moment when many mainline Lutheran churches have turned away from the Holy Scriptures, and with the abandonment of the Scriptures, the basic biblical call and mandate to proclaim the gospel to the entire world is lost.

We are at a critical moment when the central biblical truths have been challenged and put at risk among Lutherans. “We are at a crossroads where our theological tradition and teaching of the Christian faith are being placed in jeopardy.”³⁷ These deep and serious challenges call upon us to review our action and consider mission as a priority. “To be evangelical, being true to the Gospel of Jesus Christ requires us to be true according to the Scriptures, both the Old and the New Testaments. The heart of an ‘evangelical’ church beats with a passionate commitment to the preaching of Christ to all who do not yet believe.”³⁸

Mission is a task assigned to all confessing believers. It is a special task the triune God does through his people. It is God’s action done through the church. We are all called to share the gospel with our family and our neighbors. It is also part and parcel of one’s salvation (ROM 10:9). There is no excuse for not doing it. Let us always be ready “to give answer to everyone who asks you the reason for the hope that is in you” (1 PET 3:15).

Dr. Berhanu Ofgaa, General Secretary of the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus (EECMY)

³⁷ Braaten, *Principles of Lutheran Theology*, 31.

³⁸ Carl E. Braaten, *Seeking New Directions for Lutheranism, Biblical, Theological and Churchly Perspectives: Lutheranism at Crossroads* (New York: ALPB Books, 2010), 30.