

---

# Repairing the Broken Souls

## Meserete Kristos Church's Role in Trauma Healing in Inter-Ethnic Violence in Nono District of West Shewa<sup>1</sup>

Kebede Bekere and Mekonnen Gameda

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

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

---

*Kebede Bekere, a freelance consultant, is married and the father of four children. He is also a member of Akaki Meserete Kristos Church and an ordained minister, author of more than twenty books in local languages, a graduate of Eastern Mennonite Seminary (2001), and trained in pastoral counseling, change management, and peacebuilding. Currently, he lives in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.*

*Mekonnen Gameda (Teacher) is working as Director for the Meserete Kristos Church Head Office Peacebuilding Division. He is married and has four children. He has a master's degree in counseling (Addis Ababa University).*

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

2 World Population Review, 2019.

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

## Presenting Problem

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

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

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

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

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

---

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Historical Context of Conflicts

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

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

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

---

<sup>5</sup> Such ethnic clashes have resulted in the loss of lives on both sides.

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

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

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

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

---

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

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

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

9 John M. Cohen, “‘Ethnic Federalism’ in Ethiopia,” *Northeast African Studies* 2, no. 2 (1995): 160.

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

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

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

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

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

---

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Interventions

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

---

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Bontu lost her husband after seven years of married life. She bore one child before her husband was killed during the ethnic violence in 2021. Bontu was identified by the community as one of the survivors who needed trauma healing because of what she went through during the violence. Bontu and her husband used to live peacefully with their Amhara neighbors. When the conflict occurred, those people killed her husband and left the area.

Before the incident happened, she went to school with her son. While returning from the school, she heard several gunshots. She did not know what had happened. She hurried to return to her home and found her husband lying on the ground. She called his name and cried. He was already dead. The worst thing was that she could not bury him because there were no men in the neighborhood. Some went to fight with the killers, and others hid in the

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

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

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

## Lessons Learned

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

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

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



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

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