
Ensuring Sustainable Church Growth by Implementing Tailored Strategies

A Case of Meserete Kristos Church in Ethiopia

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

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1 Genesis 3:15, Galatians 4:4.

2 John 17:4.

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

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

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

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

3 Exodus 19:6.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

13 Hege, *Beyond Our Prayers*, 64.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

designed a contextual underground ministry for Ethiopia.

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

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

MKC after 2008

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Strategic Reflections: Understanding the Situation (Weaknesses and Challenges)

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

Decline in Evangelism and Mission

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

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

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

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

Lack of Geographic Outreach Areas

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

Financial Resources for Mission

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

Areas Receptive to the Gospel Message

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

Performance Measurements

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

Designing and Implementing Tailored Strategies to Advance the Great Commission

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Living into the Great Commission

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