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# Living Cloud of Witnesses to Ethiopia

Ruth Haile Gelane

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

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

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

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

the probable field.”<sup>2</sup> Continuing his discussion of the mission work in Africa, Sharp noted that in the annual meeting people were selected to explore those African countries.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Education

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

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

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

9 Hege, *Beyond Our Prayers*, 68.

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

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

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

## Prison Ministry

### The Mediation Process

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

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

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

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

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

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

### The Story of Habtamu Mulugeta

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Peacebuilding

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

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

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10 MKC peace project is under the MKC Development Commission.

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

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

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

## Remembering Stories and Pictures across the Decades

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Living Cloud of Witnesses

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

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14 Hege, *Beyond Our Prayers*, 28.

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



stay in Ethiopia to be a witness to peace and to serve others.<sup>16</sup> As a result, their development and relief work helped many.

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

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