
Culturally Rooted Empowering Peacebuilding

A Case of Meserete Kristos Church's
Peacebuilding Approach in Ethiopia

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Each of the many people groups of Ethiopia have their own language and religion, but they are widely interconnected in various ways, particularly via social and religious aspects. No ethnic group is free of intermarriage, and all ethnic groups come together under the shadow of “idir,”¹ religion, and other social fabrics. However, over the past fifty or forty years—and especially for the past six years—innocent lives have been wasted, marriages have broken down under the weight of political tensions causing collective psychological damage, and millions of people have been unjustly displaced. All of this is contrary to the society’s normally peaceful coexistence. Politicians and activists at home and abroad use social media to spread the poison of hatred and suspicion (false narrations) into the crowd, leading individuals to fear and distress.

In all areas of the country, Meserete Kristos Church (MKC)² is fulfilling her role of being salt and light given to her by the Lord to cause people to practice love instead of hatred, mercy instead of resentment, and to put humanity before language. The church extensively teaches, reconciles, and builds up broken social relations using culturally rooted empowerment to properly address existing

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1 “Idir” is a social institution in Ethiopia used for mutual aid that grants cooperative insurance within specific communities. It is an association that primarily assists people with self-help activities or infrastructure. It also helps bereaved victims with funerals and other security issues in the community.

2 The Meserete Kristos Church (MKC)—the Mennonite church in Ethiopia—has about a million total members in the faith community, including children, throughout the country. The church’s head office is located in Kirkos sub-city of Addis Ababa City Administration. MKC also has a department/ministry called MKC Peacebuilding Division that addresses all strategic goals that MKC has put in place.

problems. This article briefly describes one conflict episode, its historical context, the intervention, and the lessons drawn. It shows how MKC is strategically working to solve the problems in some areas through its own people.

Presenting Problem

Benishangul-Gumuz is a region³ where the Grand Renaissance Dam, the largest hydropower project in Africa, is being constructed on the Nile River. There is much internal and external interest in the region.

In the past six years, all three of the Benishangul-Gumuz administrative zones—Assosa, Kamashi, and Metekele—have experienced violent conflict with overlapping causes and armed actors. The violence that first began in the Assosa zone emerged as a result of conflict among so-called highlanders of Amhara and Oromo origin and the indigenous Berta community living in the zone.⁴ The first spark of this conflict occurred in June 2018 after several Gumuz and Berta officials were kidnapped in Oromia region, West Wollega zone, by the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA).⁵ Later, the Benishangul People’s Liberation Army (BPLA) also got involved in the conflict, operating in the peripheral areas of Assosa zone, targeting civilians and government forces along the Sudanese border.⁶ The violence then expanded out to Kamashi, where the Gumuz militia initially began to organize and operate—a reaction to OLA’s kidnapping of Gumuz and Berta officials along the Assosa-Addis Ababa arterial road.

Similarly, where there is a much more ethnically diverse administrative zone, in Metekel (where MKC peacebuilding project is operating), conflict broke out in April 2019 between the Gumuz community and so-called settlers in the Gumuz areas (often referred to as “non-indigenous” communities).⁷ As the conflict escalated, more armed actors got involved, even some from outside the regional state. The regional and federal governments could control the violence in Assosa but not in the Metekel zone. The violence spread widely throughout the zone and

3 Benishangul-Gumuz Regional State (BGRS) is one of 12 Federal States of Ethiopia and is located in the midwestern part of the country, sharing a border with the Oromia region in the east and south and with the Amhara region in the north. The region also borders North and South Sudan. See UNICEF, “Benishangul-Gumuz: Regional Brief,” UNICEF, April 2022, <https://www.unicef.org/ethiopia/media/6501/file/>.

4 John Young, “Along Ethiopia’s Western Frontier: Gambella and Benishangul in Transition,” *Journal of Modern African Studies* 37, no. 2 (June 1999): 321–46.

5 Wendy James, “A ‘Frontier Mosaic’: Ethiopia’s Western Edge,” *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 40, no. 1/2 (2007): 277–91.

6 James, “A ‘Frontier Mosaic’.”

7 Tsegaye Birhanu, “Conflict Trends Analysis; Benishangul-Gumuz Regional State: May–November 2022,” *ecoi.net*, Peace Research Facility (December 2022): 3–4, <https://www.ecoi.net/en/document/2087734.html>.

resulted in hundreds of deaths and displaced more than 440,000 people.⁸ From September 2020 to September 2023, the zone was under the stewardship of a Military Command Post organized and led by the federal government.

Historical Context of Conflicts

Today's uprisings in different regions of Ethiopia have their own unique causes and characteristics, but they also have something in common—many of the disputes, in one way or another, are related to the country's past political system and community culture. Similarly, the conflicts in Benishangul-Gumuz relate to an accumulation of unresolved political tensions that have built up for the past thirty years. These are linked to the issues of underdevelopment, ethnic marginalization, and the expansionism of non-indigenous communities (particularly Amhara and Oromo) into the region for social, political, and economic purposes.⁹

The constitution of Benishangul-Gumuz region states that the Berta, Gumuz, Shinasha, Mao, and Komo are the indigenous ethnic groups in the region.¹⁰ In other words, these groups have the right to self-administration and fair representation under Ethiopia's federal constitution. This is a very common practice in all regional states of Ethiopia; it is not unique to Benishangul-Gumuz.

The unique situation in Benishangul-Gumuz is that non-indigenous groups make up more than 43 percent of the total population of the region.¹¹ This ratio is even higher in the Metekel zone. In line with the constitutional provisions, indigenous groups dominate political power at different levels in the region where the minority, the non-indigenous groups, have felt marginalized. Because of the increasing ethno-nationalism movement in the country in the past few years, this feeling of ethnic marginalization has become an organizing political principle, where the expedition for fairer representation has gained momentum. While indigenous groups want to preserve their status provided by the constitution, they feel that the increasing quest for fairer representation among numerically increasingly dominant but non-indigenous groups in the region may ultimately

8 Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, "Ethiopia: Benishangul Gumuz Region," January 6, 2021, <https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/ethiopia/ethiopia-benishangul-gumuz-region-flash-update-6-january-2021>; and Unicef-Ethiopia, "Benishangul Gumuz: Regional Brief," Unicef-Ethiopia, April 2022, <https://www.unicef.org/ethiopia/media/6501/file/Benishangul>.

9 Birhanu, "Conflict Trends Analysis" 3–4.

10 Revised Constitution of the Benishangul Gumuz-Regional State, December 2002.

11 "The 2007 Population and Housing Census of Ethiopia: Statistical Report for Benshangul-Gumz Region," Ethiopia Central Statistical Agency, Population Census Commission, April 2007, https://www.statsethiopia.gov.et/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Benishangu_Gumuz_Statistical.pdf.

override their right to self-administration. These competing intentions have been the most common cause of fear, mistrust, and ethnic rivalry in the region.¹²

The Meserete Kristos Church's conflict analysis report shows that this tension between the indigenous and settlers communities goes back more than thirty years. According to participants interviewed in the study, the conflict was mainly between the Gumuz ethnic group and non-Gumuz ethnic groups, including the Amhara, Oromo, Agaw, and Shinasha. The Gumuz people have a historical grudge against the non-Gumuz ethnic groups because of the harm those groups caused to their people in the past, particularly during the imperial regime in Ethiopia. They regarded the non-Gumuz people as occupiers or settlers. During an interview, one of the Gumuz offenders shared what prompted him to kill non-Gumuz people:¹³

Three generations ago, an Oromo ruler seized one of the Gumuz men and sold him as a slave. The man was sold to a family in a remote place. Fortunately, he escaped from his master and returned to his home village after several months. Then he began to live in hiding. He passed this story on to his children before he died. The children grew old without getting any opportunity for revenge. Before he died, the eldest in the family passed the story to his young children. The young children who heard the story became adults, and during the current ethnic violence in 2018, they found the grandchildren of the man who sold their grandfather to slavery and killed horribly 6 households. Then they began to say that they had avenged the abuse of their grandfather.¹⁴

The youths of Gumuz attacked the non-Gumuz people indiscriminately with modern and traditional armaments to avenge the existing historical harm. Many people were killed, while others were displaced by leaving behind their belongings and villages that they had built for years. The government declared a state of emergency over the region to control the violence, but because the area was densely forested, even though less populated, it was not simple to control the militants.¹⁵

On the other hand, while historical harming and unresolved cumulative effects are indeed present in the community, the lives of the different ethnic groups are deeply intertwined in common social, economic, and spiritual activities. For example, they often heavily associate with one another during times of mourning, weddings, farming, “idir,” marketing, and worship activities. We

12 Birhanu, “Conflict Trends Analysis,” 4–5.

13 Meserete Kristos Church Development Commission (MKCDC), “Conflict Analysis Report” (Addis Ababa: Unpublished, 2022).

14 MKCDC, “Conflict Analysis Report.”

15 MKCDC, “Conflict Analysis Report.”

have also occasionally found intermarried couples, Gumuz with non-Gumuz, during our studies.

Interventions

In 2020 MKC launched a community dialogue peace project in Benishangul-Gumuz Regional State to address the root causes of violent ethnic groups in the western part of the country. The project was funded by both the MKC and Mennonite Central Committee–Ethiopia.¹⁶ MKC has churches in the region, and intervening to mitigate the violence is critical to save lives.

The intervention began by training influential faith leaders, community elders, women, youths, and leaders of community-based institutions. A series of peace and reconciliation trainings were given at various levels for eighteen months. The trainers used tailored training material prepared for this purpose in local languages. The training then cascaded to the village level through those who received the training of trainers.

In 2022 the author of this article went to Dangur¹⁷ district to facilitate training. The series of trainings involve having trainers do—or asking the trainees to do—something that contributes to peace, including planting trees, cleaning the roads or public compounds, sharing gifts, drinking coffee together, and so on. Fifty-five trainees attended from different walks of life in the community, including prominent religious leaders. The trainer shared with the trainees how genuine love and humility help in building peace. Through various training sessions, the participants learned how to be humble if they wanted to serve and restore peace in their community. Then the trainer decided to show a practical example of humility:

It was in the afternoon on the fifth training day. The weather was very hot. The trainer brought water and soap to show the participants what it means to be humble and serve other people. He asked for a volunteer. No one knew what he was going to do. Two gentlemen, one Muslim guy and a young Gumuz guy, came out to the front. He asked them to have a seat. When they sat down, the trainer untied the sandals man and began washing his feet. His feet were shaking out of shock. Then the trainer is continuing washing the Gumuz youth, Dergu Belena. This youth had no shoe, so there is no shoe needed to put off. Now all the trainees were confused. Some started screaming. Others stood up holding their heads with their two hands. The young man tried to resist but the trainer told him that it was part of the training. While washing his feet, the trainer saw tears coming down from the eyes of the Gumuz man. Other participants were also crying. While washing his feet, the trainer also did

16 “Meserete Kristos Church Development Commission Project Proposal” (Addis Ababa: Unpublished, 2021).

17 Dangur district is one of the operation areas located in Benishangul-Gumuz Regional State.

something. The trainer was saying loudly, “Let these feet change their ways today! Let these feet walk the way of peace! Let these feet run for peace and make history!” The participants responded loudly by saying, “Amen!” When the trainer finished washing the feet and the Gumuz young man returned to his seat, there was quietness in the room.¹⁸

After the activity, the trainer invited the participants to reflect. Many of them raised their hands to share their thoughts and feelings about the action. Below are some of the summaries of the reflections.

First, the action created a sense of connection that transcended ethnicity, skin color, social status, and religion. The Gumuz people are dark-skinned and discriminated against by light-skinned people. The action demonstrated that a person with light-skinned color washed the feet of a dark-skinned person, which was unusual in their context. A Christian washed the feet of a Muslim. An educated person who was a trainer from the capital city washed the feet of an uneducated person who lived in a rural area.

Second, the humility displayed in the action invited participants to overcome their pride and serve other people. They stated that every one of them had a pride that prevented them from leaving their positions to extend their hands for forgiveness. The father of the Gumuz young man was in the training, and he mentioned that as a father he had never washed the feet of his son. Washing the feet of someone was like doing the lowest job, and no one was willing to do that in the community. Of course, when washing the feet of the young man, the trainer faced challenges. The man’s feet were dirty and had cracks that pierced his hands like thorns. It was uncomfortable to do it. But he realized that serving other people takes him beyond his comfort zone.

Furthermore, the Gumuz people experienced discrimination by non-Gumuz people, who considered them as less human. Someone from non-Gumuz lowering himself and washing the feet of the young Gumuz man was unheard of in the community. As a result, the message became significant. It implied that the Gumuz people deserve respect and dignity.

Outcome

The five-day training was over. The trainer and participants went back to their respective homes. However, the Gumuz young man did not go back to his home. After the training, he went to the district administrator and told him what had happened to him. He shared the story of his transformation. He reiterated and owned the statements the trainer told him when he washed his feet. He wanted to do something to save lives and bring people to peace.

¹⁸ As experienced by Mekonnen Gemedo, facilitator, Peace and Reconciliation Training, Dangur District, 2022.

The Gumuz young man asked for a gun and was given one. Then he told two of his friends who were with him in the training to accompany him to the bush. He went to the bush where the armed group was staying. He met the armed men and shared with them what he had learned during the peace training. He was able to persuade five armed men to come to the district administration office and surrender themselves. The young man taught these armed men about peace and sent them back to the bush to convince their friends. They brought back fifteen armed men. Then more men. Within a year, they brought back more than 850 armed men and taught them about peaceful co-existence.

After three blood-shedding wars, gradually all armed groups in the district were convinced to surrender. The government followed the same way of reaching out to the remaining five districts occupied by armed groups. Today all six districts are free, and displaced people have returned to their homes. The government awarded Dergu Belena for his heroic action.

Lessons Learned

As a peacebuilding team in Meserete Kristos Church (MKC), we were taught important things from this case that will help us better serve communities suffering from violence:

- *Empowering the local people for peace.* As a participant, the Gumuz young man obtained relevant knowledge about peacebuilding. He attended the training for five days. He was touched by the feet-washing experience. Furthermore, he was one of the community members who had killed several non-Gumuz people and had friends who were armed and fighting against the non-Gumuz and the government. He knew the people and their culture. MKC's peacebuilding approach was to equip the local people with the necessary knowledge and skills to build peace among their people and neighboring ethnic groups.
- There is an Ethiopian saying—የአገሩን ሣርዶ፣ በአገሩ በሬ—which means “Plough a land with the local oxen.” The message is that the locals know how to deal with the challenges and to use opportunities to resolve them. MKC could not have sent people to the armed group to convince them to disarm and return to peaceful ways of addressing their issues. The Gumuz young man did it because of his connections, knowledge of the local culture, and belief in a nonviolent approach to resolving conflicts. He acted as an ambassador of peace to the community.
- A study conducted on Burundi, Guatemala, and Iraq to empower local peacebuilders is impacting communities at a grassroots level by sustaining peace and ensuring ownership in the processes. Findings of the study determined that the local actors-based peace projects have “remarkable success in breaking down ethnic and political barriers, building social co-

hesion among training participants, strengthening collaborative capacities, and boosting institutional transformation.”¹⁹

- *Willingness to serve.* For MKC, peacebuilding is an act of service to the community. The team believes that they are called by God to serve people who are suffering because of violence. Service bears fruit when it is done with humility following the pattern of Jesus Christ. Those who follow the Master are willing to serve others rather than seeking others to serve to meet their interests. Martin Luther King, Jr. observed that all that was required for an individual to be able to give service to others was “a heart full of grace” and “a soul generated by love.”²⁰ “Humility provides such individuals with a sense of perspective that promotes both service and sacrifice and enables individuals to give unselfishly of themselves to change the world.”²¹ According to the apostle Paul, humility helps us to be empathic and able to see the humanity in all people regardless of differences in color, social status, history, personal experiences, religion, age, and gender. It encourages peacebuilders to see God’s image in all people and be willing to serve all.²²
- *Discernment.* Following the lead of the Holy Spirit is not often discussed in peacebuilding. This does not mean that the Holy Spirit is not working in people’s lives to heal the wounds of the past and restore broken relationships. In MKC, Christians speak about the Holy Spirit in prayers, preaching, evangelism, and healing. If peace practitioners listen to the Holy Spirit, they may receive special guidance to discern what they should do in the most difficult situations, as Luke stated in his Gospel: “For the Holy Spirit will teach you at that time what you should say” (Luke 12:12, NIV). Furthermore, as the Gospel of John states, the Holy Spirit leads/teaches “all things,” which includes the way of peace and community transformation.²³

19 United States Institute of Peace, “Empowering Local Peacebuilders: Strategies for Effective Engagement of Local Actors in Peace Operations,” *Building Peace* no. 2, “Practical Innovations from USIP” (March 2012): 22.

20 Martin Luther King, Jr., “The Drum Major Instinct,” in *A Knock at Midnight*, eds. Clayborne Carson and Peter Holloran (New York: Time Warner, 1998).

21 Verl Anderson and Cam Caldwell, “Humility, Service, and Sacrifice: Making a Difference in Others’ Lives,” in *Humility as Enlightened Leadership*, eds. Verl Anderson and Cam Caldwell (New York: Nova Science, 2018), 1, <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/326423365>.

22 Philippians 2:3–5; Colossians 3:12–14.

23 “But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you” (John 14:26, ESV).

- *Divine intervention.* The trainer in the above-mentioned case washed the feet of the Gumuz young man because of the push he received from inside of himself. He did not plan to do it; he was urged to do it. Listening to the guidance of the Holy Spirit and doing what is appropriate can lead to better results. The trainer believes that the Holy Spirit somehow used the feet-washing activity to transform the life of the Gumuz young man, who later stated, “My life was transformed when you washed my feet.” Such life transformation occurs when there is divine intervention. From practical experience, this author argues that professionalism in peacebuilding in a Christian context should not exclude dependence on the God of peace to restore sustainable peace in a broken community.

Serving as Christ’s Ambassador

MKC sees herself as Christ’s ambassador. She understands that she is there to preach the gospel of peace to this world that seeks peace. As a guiding principle, she is committed to follow the character of Christ—living in the way of justice, humility, forgiveness, neutrality, and so on. She knows that the guidance and power of the Holy Spirit is irreplaceable for her mission. She also believes that reaching out to a community should be through the community itself. So she invests quality knowledge and time in the representatives of the community, sending them back to their communities as Christ did.

There is a living testimony that this principle has not only made Meserete Kristos Church fruitful in the peacebuilding activities where she has intervened with a small budget but is also making her highly accepted in the community.