
Sowing and Reaping

A Story of Faithfulness

Carl E. Hansen

You may have heard the news that Mary Kathryn Mishler, at 102 years of age, passed away last summer on September 7 in Goshen, Indiana. To my knowledge, Mary was the last survivor of the original team of Mennonite pioneers who began mission work in Ethiopia seventy-seven years ago.

As newlyweds, Mary and her late husband, Dorsa Mishler, led that first team to Ethiopia with the Mennonite Relief Committee from late December 1945 to 1948.¹ This past summer, it was my privilege to escort two Ethiopian Meserete Kristos Church fraternal guests to visit Mary in her nursing home bed. The one-hundred-and-two-year-old saint told us that her and Dorsa's two years in Ethiopia were among the happiest and most fulfilling of their lives.

Besides doing relief work, Dorsa and Mary, along with their team, “planted seeds,” establishing the first hospital in Nazareth. Today, that hospital has grown to become the largest regional referral hospital and medical college in all of Oromia Region.²

Other significant seeds were also planted that germinated much more slowly. These seeds took root in the minds and hearts of the people with whom the Mishlers worked. At first, the seeds germinated almost invisibly over a six-year period. Finally, in 1951, the first seedlings, like “ten trees planted,”³ emerged and grew and multiplied, becoming known as the Meserete Kristos Church (MKC).

Carl Edward Hansen was a missionary in Eastern Africa for more than thirty-two years. To this day, Carl—with his wife, Vera Hansen—continues raising support for Meserete Kristos College, now a seminary in Ethiopia, while living in Harrisonburg, Virginia, close to his daughters and grandchildren. The information in this article is based on the author's extensive experience relating to the Meserete Kristos Church.

1 Nathan B. Hege, *Beyond Our Prayers: Anabaptist Church Growth in Ethiopia, 1948–1998* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1998), 47–48.

2 See the Adama Hospital and Medical College website at www.adamahmc.edu.et.

3 Hege, *Beyond Our Prayers*, 128–31.

Sowing Seeds

An ancient writer scratched on velum with a stylus:

Those who sow in tears will reap with songs of joy. Those who go out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with them. (Ps 126:5, 6 NIV)

I am sure these words were familiar to that small band of fresh, young, committed Mennonite workers as they first set foot in the war-torn country of Ethiopia back in 1945. They came bringing relief supplies and medical assistance to a people devastated by war, poverty, and disease. They came with a deep desire to share good news of deliverance to a people suffering the disadvantages of superstition and unfamiliarity with the gospel message. They came with the “seed” of the gospel, announcing the presence of the kingdom of God. They came determined to establish a church founded upon Jesus Christ.

Their task was not easy. Coming from secure and comfortable homes and churches and monocultural communities, this small band of pioneer missionaries found themselves isolated in a strange land, among a people of unfamiliar language and a culture vastly different from their own. They found themselves and their children surrounded by strange diseases—diseases that earned Africa the chilling label “The White Man’s Grave.”⁴

They were eyed with deep suspicion by the feudal government, which sought to protect its people’s sovereignty from any foreign colonizing aspirations or actions. They were also viewed with equal suspicion by the conservative privileged aristocrats and their Orthodox priests.

In addition, the Ethiopian people were highly suspicious of white people, whom they commonly referred to as “ferengeti.”⁵ They had just fought a terrible war against white Italian Catholics who had tried to colonize and convert them. In

4 Before the discovery of quinine, “one of the main obstacles to European penetration of large parts of Africa was malaria. Because Africans had lived for generations with mosquitoes spreading malaria, many had some sort of resistance or capacity to fight a malaria attack. This was not the case with Europeans, who died in great numbers. As a result, the coast of Sierra Leone became known as the White Man’s Grave because of this.” See BBC World Service, “The Story of Africa,” Africa and Europe, 1800–1914, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/africa/features/storyofafrica/11generic1.shtml>.

5 Henok T. Mekonin, “A Sense of Pride and Suspicion: Ethiopia’s Habitus and Its Impact on Interactions with Foreigners,” *Anabaptist Historians: Bringing the Anabaptist Past into a Digital Century* (blog), April 27, 2023, <https://anabaptisthistorians.org/2023/04/27/a-sense-of-pride-and-suspicion-ethiopias-habitus-and-its-impact-on-interactions-with-foreigners/>.

the minds of the common people, all white people were “Italians” and “Catholics” as well as potential colonizers.⁶

Against these great odds, the pioneer missionaries, motivated and empowered by the love of Christ, gave themselves sacrificially to meet the gigantic human needs they were encountering. Their compassionate medical care, patient teaching, and generous acts of kindness slowly eroded the walls of suspicion while they planted seeds of the kingdom.

Reaping the Harvest

The seeds planted by these early missionaries have sprouted, matured, and borne fruit. Thanks to their planting, there has been a mighty harvest. Today the Meserete Kristos Church bears witness to the kingdom of God in Ethiopia. Each Sunday, over 900,000 Ethiopian brothers and sisters, including their children, join in a mighty chorus of worship in over 1,400 congregations and 1,945 church-planting centers scattered all over Ethiopia.⁷

Clearly, North American Mennonites need not send missionaries to Ethiopia anymore. In fact, even back when Mennonite missionaries were planting seeds among young Ethiopians, the real mission of the church happened when the local people took the message to heart and worked with it. Currently, the Meserete Kristos Church supports over 2,000 full-time evangelists, pastors, teachers, missionaries, and administrators, and 2,500 supporting staff. The church also calls, educates, sends, and supports over 417 Ethiopian missionaries to its neighbor communities within the country and to its neighboring countries. And Desalegn Abebe Ejo, President of the Meserete Kristos Church, recently reported that the church grew by 15.5 percent last year.⁸

Through its Meserete Kristos Church Development Commission (MKC-DC), the church carries out its ministry of “serving the whole person through community-based development programs.” With the assistance of several outside funding agencies, it is implementing 93 projects, assisting over 82,000 beneficiaries in poor, marginalized, and vulnerable communities.⁹

The church’s Prison Ministry team works in over fifty prisons, meeting human needs such as providing clothing, medication, sanitation, counseling, and pastoral care, as well as Bible studies and evangelism. This ministry has led

⁶ Hege, *Beyond Our Prayers*, 34.

⁷ Desalegn Abebe Ejo, president of the Meserete Kristos Church, December 2023 email to the author.

⁸ Abebe Ejo, December 2023 email to the author.

⁹ See the current website of the Meserete Kristos Church Development Commission: Meserete Kristos Church Development Commission (MKC-DC), accessed April 9, 2024, <https://mkcdheadoffice.blogspot.com>.

to the transformation of several thousand lives and the formation and growth of thriving congregations within many of the prisons. Several transformed prisoners, upon their release, have become effective church leaders. The ministry also works with prison officials and community leaders, giving training in restorative justice, peacemaking, and reconciliation.

The church also has its own leadership training programs. These include local congregational Bible schools and regional Bible institutes. The Meserete Kristos Seminary has over 300 church leaders and potential leaders studying on three campuses. Currently, 39 graduate students are studying in a Master of Arts in Theology and Global Anabaptism (MATGA) program administrated mostly online by the Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary (AMBS) in Elkhart, Indiana. Further, 776 men and women are studying in various programs in the more than 20 regional Bible colleges in various parts of the nation.¹⁰

While the government concerns itself with the macro level of rebellion, terrorism, and war, youth are the most likely to join in exacerbating conflict through protesting or violent demonstrations on the micro level. They can easily be persuaded or conned into taking sides and joining one of the several dissenting terrorist militias or the government's defense forces. The church's Peacebuilding Department¹¹ gives trainings to youth, encouraging them to consider alternatives to violence in solving problems. It also carries out dialogues in areas of conflict, bringing community leaders together to seek nonviolent effective solutions.

In ecumenical relationships, the Meserete Kristos Church was one of the ten founding members of the Evangelical Churches Fellowship of Ethiopia (ECFE). Today that Fellowship has more than one hundred denominational members. Since its beginning, MKC members have played prominent leadership roles. In August 2023, at its thirty-eighth annual general assembly, the ECFE elected Pastor Desalegn Abebe Ejo, President of MKC, as its chairperson.¹²

The Meserete Kristos Church is now carrying on the enormous tasks of planting seeds, nurturing new believers, and reaping a huge harvest. They no longer need outside assistance to plant the seeds.

Outside help is still needed, however, for the challenging tasks of institution building and leadership training. Hundreds of brothers and sisters in North America continue to partner with the Ethiopian church through organizations such as Mennonite Central Committee, Meserete Kristos College Link, Northwest Mennonite Conference, and Mennonite Church Canada in support of this huge task of educating the next generation of leaders. With a 15.5 percent growth rate, in the midst of continuing poverty aggravated by wars and famines,

10 This information is based upon the author's extensive experience relating to the Meserete Kristos Church.

11 Meserete Kristos Church Quarterly Newsletter, September 2023, 8.

12 Meserete Kristos Church Quarterly Newsletter, September 2023, 9.

the church's need for leadership training continues to outstrip its internal capacity to meet that need.

God Gave the Increase!

A year ago in August, my wife, Vera, and I attended MKC's annual General Delegates Assembly in the new Multipurpose Hall on the Meserete Kristos Seminary campus at Debre Zeit. For me, it was an overwhelming experience. Memories of the struggles of the past flooded back. In 1967 when we first taught at the Nazareth Bible Academy,¹³ the whole church had fewer than six hundred members fellowshiping in five congregations.

I also remembered that after the Derg oppression, when Vera and I returned in 1996, the newly formed MKC Bible Institute had a total of ten evangelists as students crowded into a miniscule, rented compound.¹⁴ And now, seeing that roughly 75 percent of the delegates in that leadership body were graduates of at least one of the college's programs, and meeting in this spacious campus, my heart overflowed with joy. While mingling with these brothers and sisters, they reminded me again and again, with deep gratitude, "This is your fruit!" Of course, they meant this affirmation collectively applying to the whole host of early missionaries who faithfully planted the first seeds. Vera and I are the few surviving representatives of those who went before. What an honor!

This past October, it was my privilege to visit Ethiopia briefly. One of the pastors who had been my student twenty years ago invited me to speak at the Meri Berhan MKC in Addis. More than eight hundred eager worshippers filled this beautiful new house of worship, with more than two hundred others sitting in a shelter outside the open windows. I was told that this congregation had planted four new congregations within the past year and that they were planning on dividing one more time to accommodate the excess members in another church plant.

Again and again, the thought came back to me: *Yes, at least some of this likely would not have happened without the sacrificial service of those pioneers who went before us and planted those first seeds. Nor is it likely that the seminary campus with its 2,270 graduates would have developed without the prayers and financial support of hundreds of other supporters. Truly "we are laborers together with God."* As when the Apostle planted and Apollos watered, God gave the increase!

13 Before it was closed by the Derg regime, Nazareth Bible Academy was built and opened its doors on September 29, 1959, by missionaries and Ethiopian Christians for young Christian Ethiopians, with the vision and hope of developing better leadership through higher education. See Carl Hansen, *Into Abyssinia: The Odyssey of a Family* [Chronicles Hansen's First Eight Years in Ethiopia, 1967–1975] (Bloomington, IN: Westbow, 2023), 17, 21.

14 January 1 of this year marked the thirtieth anniversary of the launching of the Meserete Kristos Church Bible Institute, which has grown to become the MK Seminary.