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# The Witness of a Cruciform Community in Revolutionary Ethiopia

Brent L. Kipfer

**M**anoro Abiyo was a veteran employee of the Haile Mariam Mamo Memorial Hospital in Adama (formerly Nazareth), Ethiopia. More than just a workplace to Manoro, the hospital was part of the terrain in which his community, the Meserete Kristos Church (MKC), lived out its identity and mission in Jesus Christ. Founded in 1946, it was operated by Eastern Mennonite Missions (EMM) until the Derg revolutionary government assumed control of it in 1978. Relinquishing the hospital was one of many painful losses that would test and shape the cruciform faith of evangelical Christians in Ethiopia.<sup>1</sup> Persecution during the Communist era clarified the nature and cost of shalom-making witness to a crucified Messiah. In the 1992 documentary *Against Great Odds* Manoro testified:

When the Marxist regime took over, the officials told me they wanted the cross in the hospital chapel removed and destroyed. Of course, the cross was built into the wall, so it was quite difficult for them to destroy it completely. But they wanted to paint over it, and they asked me as a maintenance person to do this. We painted it and the cross came out even more distinctly. Then we tried another paint, and it still came out distinctly. We tried five times, but it remained visible.<sup>2</sup>

The cross has long been a symbol of Christianity in Ethiopia. Cruciform beauty is embedded in the art, architecture, and liturgy of the historic national

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1 Nathan Hege, *Beyond our Prayers: Anabaptist Church Growth in Ethiopia, 1948–1998* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1998), 45, 96–97, 143, 249–51.

2 D. Michael Hostetler and Joel Kauffmann, *Against Great Odds* (Worcester, PA: Gateway Films/Vision Video, 1992), VHS, 29 min; 16:09.

church; carried by clergy; worn by ordinary believers; and traditionally tattooed on foreheads, necks, hands, or arms.<sup>3</sup>

In Ethiopia, as in other Christendom societies, a cross can convey varied and contradictory messages: it, of course, marks a wearer or space as Christian. As an official Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC) manual explains, it points to “the suffering and death of our Blessed Saviour” and the salvation offered to sinful humanity.<sup>4</sup> Some treat a cross as an amulet—an object of spiritual protection or healing. For sixteen centuries, the cross has also symbolized conquest and Christian nationalism. Rather than symbolizing painful death or shameful defeat, in royal hands the cross signified the opposite. Whether imprinted on fourth-century coins minted by Aksumite King Ezana or on the twentieth-century flag of Haile Selassie, the cross came to speak of political power and the privileged place of Christianity in the Ethiopian empire.<sup>5</sup>

The Socialist revolution and overthrow of Haile Selassie in 1974 severed that alliance between church and state. The Derg order to dismantle and erase the cross in the Adama hospital chapel was a token of the new political reality. What did it mean for the Meserete Kristos Church? Ethiopian evangelicals shared something in common with their Marxist government: both rejected Christian nationalism. For seventeen years, followers of Jesus would be persecuted by the revolutionary regime. Still, they did not pine for a return to Christendom.

In 1992, the Transitional Government of Ethiopia created a Constitutional Commission tasked with creating a legal foundation for a post-Derg state. They drafted the text, shared their work with the public, conducted seminars and symposia, gathered feedback, and prepared the final version for approval by a Constituent Assembly elected in 1994.<sup>6</sup> During the consultation phase, the commission invited MKC leaders to give input.

Solomon Kebede read the proposed draft carefully. He was chair of the MKC Executive Committee and had just finished a four-year term leading the board of the Evangelical Churches Fellowship of Ethiopia, a national organization of denominations. The document would establish stronger grounds for religious

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3 Jon Abbink, “The Cross in Ethiopian Christianity: Ecclesial Symbolism and Religious Experience,” in *The Routledge Companion to Christianity in Africa*, ed. Elias Kifon Bongmba (New York: Routledge, 2016), 122–40.

4 Aymro Wondmagegnehu and Joachim Motovu, *The Ethiopian Orthodox Church* (Addis Ababa: Ethiopian Orthodox Mission, 1970).

5 Abbink, “The Cross in Ethiopian Christianity,” 123–26.

6 Tsegaye Regassa, “The Making and Legitimacy of the Ethiopian Constitution: Towards Bridging the Gap between Constitutional Design and Constitutional Practice,” *Afrika Focus* 23:1 (2010): 85–118; Sarah Vaughn, “Federalism, Revolutionary Democracy and the Developmental State, 1991–2012,” in *Understanding Contemporary Ethiopia*, eds. Gérard Prunier and Éloi Ficquet (London: Hurst, 2015), 283–311.

freedom than any previous Ethiopian constitution. Still, Solomon was not satisfied. In a 2014 interview, he recalled that it stated, “The government will not interfere with religious matters.”<sup>7</sup> That was a good start, but what about pressure from the other direction? He could easily envision harm caused by religious groups (whether Christian or Muslim) trying to advance their purposes through the power of the state.

“This is not sufficient,” Solomon told the Constitutional Commission. He insisted the text should also stipulate that “religions also will not interfere in government matters.” He remembers his recommendation was received with appreciation and incorporated into the 1995 Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia.<sup>8</sup>

From 1974 to 1991, marginalized Ethiopian churches had pursued the mission of God as a subversive alternative to Marxism. While the Derg used the machinery of government to impose a new social order, MKC found fresh direction and resources for evangelism and peacemaking. Its legal status was precarious until it was outlawed in January 1982. Persecuted—and without political protection or social privilege—MKC could only give witness to the reign of Jesus from *below* while radically trusting the Holy Spirit for faith, love, power, and hope.

What was the result? MKC experienced great spiritual vitality and fruitfulness. Under pressure from the Derg, the church adopted a small-group-based ministry structure, multiplied the number of men and women in leadership, extended its geographic reach, became financially self-supporting, and grew from eight hundred to thirty-four thousand baptized members.

After the collapse of the revolution, MKC naturally was grateful for religious freedom. How, though, could they be faithful to Jesus in these new circumstances? Solomon Kebede’s advocacy for a robust separation between religion and government was consistent with the cruciform, charismatic missiology of the church forged in the heat of persecution.

This article will explore how MKC pursued the evangelical, peacemaking mission of Jesus under the government of the Derg and how the church and its witness was formed in the way of the cross. It will also highlight some of the impact on others of MKC’s distinctive identity and behavior. The next sections provide further context with an overview of Christian mission history in Ethiopia and initial evangelical responses to the socialist revolution.

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7 Interview with author, May 6, 2014.

8 Interview with author; Article 11 (Separation of State and Religion) of *The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Ethiopia* (August 21, 1995) reads: “1. State and religion are separate. 2. There shall be no state religion. 3. The state shall not interfere in religious matters and religion shall not interfere in state affairs.” Article 27 (Freedom of Religion, Belief and Opinion) clarifies additional religious rights.

## Sword in Arm: The Beauty and Violence of Ethiopian Christendom

The message of Jesus reached the kingdom of Aksum (now northern Ethiopia and Eritrea) early, possibly through the official whose conversion is recorded in the eighth chapter of the Book of Acts. Small Christian communities were certainly present along Ethiopian trading routes soon after the apostolic era. Early in the fourth century, the Aksumite royal family embraced the gospel and made Christianity the official religion of their realm. Allies of the emperor were naturally motivated to share his faith. The church's missionary strategy became bound to the state.<sup>9</sup>

In the fifth century, Syrian monks—backed by a later king—led a monumental effort to embed Christianity in Ethiopian culture. Throughout Aksumite territory they Christianized pagan temples, erected church buildings, translated the Bible into Ge'ez, and began centers for training church leaders. With grants from the emperor and wealthy families, the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church acquired land and more extensive influence. Monasteries became hubs of evangelism where monks created Ethiopic liturgy, literature, and iconic art to convey the gospel. When missionaries met resistance, they could count on the emperor's protection.<sup>10</sup>

The close connection between church and state nourished a complex, rich history, giving Ethiopia much in common with other Christendom societies. Not only did it yield earnest, genuine faith in the lives of some and an often-stable social order, it birthed a flourishing culture expressed in distinctive painting, sculpture, writing, music, and architectural masterpieces like the rock-hewn churches of Lalibela.

Christianity was also inextricably bound with violence.

The church gained adherents as Christian kings imposed their religion, language, and political system on newly seized territories. For example, amid the nineteenth-century European scramble for Africa, a series of Abyssinian kings carved out their own empire, tripling the area under Ethiopian rule, adding

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9 Tibebe Eshete, *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia: Resistance and Resilience* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press), 16–17; Harold G. Marcus, *A History of Ethiopia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 6–8; Richard Pankhurst, *The Ethiopians: A History* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1998), 34–35; Calvin E. Shenk, “The Ethiopian Orthodox Church's Understanding of Mission,” *Mission Studies* 4, no. 1 (January 1987): 4–20.

10 Girma Bekele, *The In-Between People: A Reading of David Bosch through the Lens of Mission History and Contemporary Challenges in Ethiopia* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2011), 156–57; Eshete, *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia*, 17; Pankhurst, *The Ethiopians*, 36–39; Shenk, “The EOC's Understanding of Mission,” 5.

dozens of tribes and millions of people to the nation.<sup>11</sup> The thirteenth-century legal code, the *Fetba Nagast* (Law of the Kings), inspired them with these instructions:

When you reach a city or land to fight against its inhabitants, offer them terms of peace. If they accept you and open their gates, the men who are there shall become subjects and give you tribute, but if they refuse the terms of peace and offer battle, go forward to assault, and oppress them, since the Lord your God will make you master of them.<sup>12</sup>

Rulers who submitted to the conquering king could keep their positions. Those who converted to Orthodox Christianity could fully join the ruling class. Uncooperative leaders could expect harsh retribution. After suppressing a revolt in Wollo, Yohannes IV made this appeal to the people of the region in June 1878:

We are your apostles. All this used to be Christian land until Gagn [a sixteenth-century Muslim conqueror] ruined and misled it. Now let all, whether Muslim or Galla [pagan] believe on the name of the Jesus Christ! Be baptized! If you wish to live in peace preserving your belongings, become Christians. . . . Thereby you will govern in this world and inherit in the one to come.<sup>13</sup>

Christian heretics were given two years to conform, Muslims three, and pagans five. Those who resisted had their property confiscated. At least one man had his tongue cut out. Unsurprisingly, this mode of “evangelism” did not inspire defeated people to joyfully embrace Jesus Christ. The message of the cross was obscured by its imperial packaging. As a result, many superficially adopted a new religious identity, grudgingly accepting Christianity as the price of survival. Retaining previous beliefs and practices, such converts were known as “Christians by day, Muslims by night.”<sup>14</sup> In his survey of Ethiopian Orthodox mission history, Calvin Shenk observed that

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11 John Markakis, *Ethiopia: The Last Two Frontiers* (Suffolk, UK: James Currey, 2011), 89–107; Pankhurst, *The Ethiopians*, 131–208; Richard J. Reid, *Frontiers of Violence in North-East Africa: Genealogies of Conflict since c. 1800* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 49–128; Donald N. Levine, *Greater Ethiopia: The Evolution of a Multiethnic Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 26, 74.

12 Markakis, *Ethiopia*, 95.

13 R. A. Caulk, “Religion and State in Nineteenth Century Ethiopia,” *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 10, no. 1 (January 1972): 23–41.

14 Eshete, *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia*, 27–30; Pankhurst, *The Ethiopians*, 168–69. In the early twentieth century, evangelical movements took root in conquered territory in rural southern and western Ethiopia. Those on the margins of the empire were especially receptive to the message of Jesus when proclaimed in their own language by converts from their own tribes. Donald L. Donham, *Marxist Modern: An Ethnographic History of the Ethiopian Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 91, notes

Mission was usually from a position of strength—the superior power of the monk over the local practitioner, the superior power of the Christian kingdom, or the power of the nobles over the masses. Christianity spread by the migration of Christian families, merchants, soldiers, and governors. A powerful instrument for evangelism was the presence of the local worshiping church. Persons responded for varied reasons; many were obliged, others sought advancement through identification with superior power, and some responded to a spiritual quest.<sup>15</sup>

In the twentieth century, Haile Selassie—pursuing a pluralistic, modern vision for his empire—established a legal foundation for the rights of religious minorities and welcomed evangelical mission societies to Ethiopia as partners in nation-building. To create legal space for them and appease an Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC) constituency hostile to foreign missionaries, his 1944 Missions Decree divided the country into closed and open areas. The former were the exclusive domain of the EOTC, mainly in north and central Ethiopia. There mission agencies could provide education, medical care, social services, and biblical teaching if they taught doctrine common to all Christian groups and did not proselytize EOTC adherents. In open regions, they could teach the faith of their denominations as long as they did not disparage EOTC theology or practice. Mennonite missionaries arrived under these conditions in 1945.<sup>16</sup>

In addition to the EOTC, Ethiopia was home to a large Muslim population, a historic Jewish community, traditional animists, Roman Catholics, and evangelical Christians. Despite this and Haile Selassie's relatively generous posture toward religious minorities, the 1955 Constitution of Ethiopia confirmed the EOTC as the established church of the empire. The authority of the emperor was grounded in his "imperial blood" and the anointing of the church. In turn, the church relied on the emperor to bless its "decrees, edicts and public regulations" and the appointment of its patriarch and bishops and was obliged to mention his name in all religious services.<sup>17</sup>

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that it took time for new Christians in southern Ethiopia to realize that their faith "was at all related to the Christianity of their northern conquerors."

15 Shenk, "The EOC's Understanding of Mission," 15.

16 Bekele, *The In-Between People*, 215–16; Øyvind Eide, *Revolution and Religion in Ethiopia: The Growth and Persecution of the Mekane Yesus Church, 1974–85* (Oxford: James Currey, 2000), 35–36; Eshete, *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia*, 93–97.

17 "The Imperial Constitution of 1955," in *Law, Development, and the Ethiopian Revolution*, Paul H. Brietzke (East Brunswick, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1982), 21, 102–3; Calvin E. Shenk, "Church and State in Ethiopia: From Monarchy to Marxism," *Mission Studies* 11, no. 2 (1994): 203–26; Bahru Zewde, *A History of Modern Ethiopia, 1855–1974* (London: James Currey, 1991), 128–49, 201–25.

“The church is like a sword,” Haile Selassie once explained, “and the government is like an arm; therefore, the sword cannot cut by itself without the use of the arm.”<sup>18</sup>

## Marxists and Evangelicals Seeking a Better World

When the winds of revolution began to blow through Ethiopia in 1974, it surprised almost everyone, including those hoping and agitating for change. Some—especially many students—had clear ideological goals. Most who joined the groundswell of protest, however, were simply voicing frustration over scarce jobs, living expenses, low wages, high fuel prices, poor conditions for soldiers, and lack of religious equality.<sup>19</sup>

A committee of low- and middle-ranking officers from various military factions orchestrated the change in government. This Provisional Military Administrative Council (PMAC)—known as the Derg—cast a vision for a uniquely Ethiopian socialism built on equality, the dignity of workers, access to education and medicine, the common good, a state-managed economy, and friendly international relations.<sup>20</sup> Their rallying cry was *Ethiopia Tikdem*—“Ethiopia First!” Ideologically vague, the motto appealed to the nationalism of diverse ethnic groups with a call to move forward in unity. A popular song from the first year of the revolution urged listeners to embrace the optimistic values of home-grown socialism:

Let us move on the new road,  
Where no one is oppressed and humiliated,  
Let those unaware of the right of equality,  
Awake from their sleep,  
With the slogan “Ethiopia First.”<sup>21</sup>

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18 Calvin E. Shenk, “A New Ethiopia: What Place Religion?” *Missionary Messenger* (1974).

19 Bahru Zewde, *A History of Modern Ethiopia*, 419–40; Marcus, *A History of Ethiopia*, 181–89; Gérard Prunier, “The Ethiopian Revolution and the Derg Regime,” in *Understanding Contemporary Ethiopia: Monarchy, Revolution and the Legacy of Meles Zenawi*, eds. Gérard Prunier and Éloi Ficquet (London: Hurst, 2015), 209–31.

20 Christopher Clapham, *Transformation and Continuity in Revolutionary Ethiopia* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 45–46; Tibebe Eshete, *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia: Resistance and Resilience* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2009), 203–5.

21 “Socialism,” composed by Girmaye Mekonnen, in Neguss Yilma Woldesenbet, “Thematic Analysis of Selected Amharic Song Lyrics: A Sociological Approach,” (PhD dissertation, Addis Ababa University, Ethiopia, 2018), 91–93.

Many evangelicals welcomed the revolution as the dawn of a new day. Alemu Checole recalls how some naïvely saw “socialism as a benign system” that could enable Ethiopia to become the “breadbasket of Africa.”<sup>22</sup> A leader who served on the MKC Executive Committee remembered socialism presented as “Christianity in another form” since “the rich people are too rich, while the poor don’t have anything to eat.” It looked like justice.<sup>23</sup> Another MKC leader cautioned others that no government would satisfy all of the physical and spiritual needs. “Just be careful,” he said. “Just be patient. You will find out that this is not really the truth.” Painfully, many would not listen.<sup>24</sup>

Followers of Jesus not only sympathized with the socialist vision but also hoped the revolution would bring greater religious freedom. In the early 1970s, 2 or 3 percent of Ethiopians were evangelical Christians.<sup>25</sup> Often subject to discrimination and persecution, some joined a crowd of one hundred thousand, mostly Muslim, for an April 1974 demonstration in Addis Ababa calling for the separation of church and state, with religious equality for all citizens. The Derg included this demand in a proposed national constitution, released in August 1974 shortly before assuming power, winning goodwill from those marginalized under the imperial system.<sup>26</sup> Some in MKC believed they were entering “a

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22 Alemu Checole, assisted by Samuel Asefa, “Mennonite Churches in Eastern Africa,” in *Anabaptist Songs in African Hearts*, eds. John A. Lapp and C. Arnold Snyder (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2006), 231.

23 Interview with author, April 1, 2014.

24 Interview with author, April 24, 2014, translation by Alemu Checole.

25 Emanuele Fantini, “Go Pentecost! The Charismatic Renewal of the Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia,” in *Understanding Contemporary Ethiopia: Monarchy, Revolution and the Legacy of Meles Zenawi*, eds. Gérard Prunier and Éloi Ficquet (London: Hurst, 2015), 123–46, notes that evangelical Christians comprised less than 1 percent of the Ethiopian population in the early 1960s, but by the 1984 census had grown to 5.5 percent. The estimate of 2 or 3 percent is based on accounts of rapid growth before and after the revolution.

26 Andargachew Tiruneh, *The Ethiopian Revolution, 1974–1987: A Transformation from an Aristocratic to a Totalitarian Autocracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 49; Eide, *Revolution and Religion in Ethiopia*, 112; Shenk, “Church and State in Ethiopia,” 207; Eshete, *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia*, 264–65, 418, n. 2; Jörg Haustein, “Navigating Political Revolutions: Ethiopia’s Churches During and After the Mengistu Regime,” in *Falling Walls: The Year 1989/90 as a Turning Point in the History of World Christianity*, ed. Klaus Koschorke (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2009), 117–36. The April 1976 National Democratic Revolution Programme of Ethiopia offered religious freedom for Ethiopians. The “Revised Constitution” adopted January 1987 provided for the legal separation of church and state, freedom of conscience and religion, with the caveat that religion not “be exercised in a manner contrary to the interests of the state and revolution, public morality or freedom of other citizens.” This gave legal room for the repression of evangelical Christians.



wonderful time of freedom” to practice their faith, believing “things were going to be much, much, much better with Ethiopian socialism.”<sup>27</sup>

By December 1974, Mengistu Haile Mariam had eliminated PMAC rivals who advocated for a democratic republic. In control of the Derg, he announced the implementation of scientific socialism through a one-party state, public ownership of the economy, and collective agriculture. The government soon nationalized banks, insurance companies, major commercial and industrial enterprises, rural land, and urban property. Despite early successes, the PMAC faced pressure from rival Marxist groups competing to shape the ideology of the revolution. Adopting the rhetoric of class struggle, Mengistu and his allies identified enemies of the revolution, including aristocrats, bourgeois classes, and imperialists, and made plans to eradicate them.<sup>28</sup>

The Derg trained government officials and passionate young cadres to promote Communist principles—including atheism—in local peasant organizations (*mababirs*) and municipal councils (*kebeles*). Neighborhoods and workplaces hosted mandatory “discussion forums” for political indoctrination. The state began to penetrate the nooks and crannies of Ethiopia as never before. Rather than ushering in shalom and freedom, Mengistu’s Derg delivered rigid ideology, authoritarianism, fear, and violence.

## Evangelism from Below

Tezera Kebede was a student at Atse Gelawdios Comprehensive High School in Adama in the mid-1970s. She remembers a day when teachers and students ridiculed evangelical Christians. “What has Jesus done for you?” they taunted. “Just tell us. List what he has done for you.” Some believing students withdrew in fear, but Tezera saw an opportunity to proclaim the gospel. She and her friend Seble replied, “We can tell you all the things that Jesus has done for us.” At the end of the school day, teachers gathered the student body in a courtyard, seating them in a large circle. Tezera and Seble were placed in the centre for questioning.

“What did Jesus do for you?” they were asked.

Seble (perhaps trying to be clever) answered, “The Bible says, ‘Don’t throw your pearls before swine.’” Predictably, some of the students beat her and sent her away.

Tezera stayed. “I will answer the question you asked me.” She said:

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27 Interview with author, April 24, 2014, translation by Alemu Checole.

28 Accounts and analyses of the revolution are found in Christopher Clapham, *Transformation and Continuity in Revolutionary Ethiopia*; Donham, *Marxist Modern*; Gebru Tareke, *The Ethiopian Revolution: War in the Horn of Africa* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009); Teferra Haile-Selassie, *The Ethiopian Revolution, 1974–1991: From a Monarchical Autocracy to a Military Oligarchy* (London: Kegan Paul International, 1997); and Tiruneh, *The Ethiopian Revolution*.

I am free from the fear of death and from the fear of hell, where the fire never goes out, where the worm does not die. I am free from that kind of fear. I am at peace with myself. I have peace of mind from God.

The second thing that Jesus has done for me is he has given me my family: my mother and my brothers and sisters. After receiving Jesus Christ, I also have a family that loves the Lord, so that is another good gift that I have received from Jesus.

The Lord has also given me the wisdom and the strength to witness to unbelievers like you. I have many brothers and sisters in the Lord. And I want you also to be brothers and sisters, you know.

A school administrator directed the students: “Do not ever bother Tezera from here on. She has her stand. Do not come and bother her.”<sup>29</sup>

Tezera spoke about her faith in Jesus and offered a loving invitation to her listeners from a position of social and political weakness. She risked ostracism, academic punishment, beating, imprisonment, or sentencing to a political camp for “re-education.” Still, she gave her peers a simple, clear testimony without knowing if they would hear with open hearts or entrenched hostility. Thankfully, she received support from an adult authority.

Telling others about Jesus often made believers targets for persecution. Even so, MKC nurtured a culture of joyful, enthusiastic evangelism. “When we are serious about preaching the gospel, there is a price to pay,” Ijigu Woldegebriel observed.<sup>30</sup> Like many others, he considered the cost well worth it. In an interview, another MKC member, Haragawein, spoke of her fervor in proclaiming Christ shortly after the fall of the Derg. After God healed her of blindness, she learned to read and decided that no risk was too great to keep her from sharing Jesus with any who would listen. She said, “I go out in the morning and come back at night. I do not choose where I go. I preach to everybody: I don’t care what tribe, whether they are priests or prostitutes, on the bus, on the street, anybody I find.”<sup>31</sup>

Interviewed MKC leaders who served during the years of the Derg have consistently expressed delight in evangelism. “Our primary goal is bringing people to Christ in order to glorify him,” Lema said. “We do have that passion in loving hearts, reaching people for Christ. When people are accepting Christ as their own personal Saviour, that is our joy.”<sup>32</sup>

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29 Interview with author, April 4, 2014, translation by Alemu Checole.

30 Hege, *Beyond Our Prayers*, 179.

31 Hostetler, *Against Great Odds*, VHS, 18:27.

32 Interview with author, May 26, 2014. Lema is a pseudonym. For a detailed summary of this research, see Brent L. Kipfer, “Thriving under Persecution: Meserete Kristos Church Leadership during the Ethiopian Revolution (1974–1991),” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 91 (July 2017): 297–369.

For Aster Debossie, speaking of Jesus sprang naturally from her relationship with God. “I am very glad to be a daughter of God and serve God,” she said. “Because of this, I love sharing the gospel.”<sup>33</sup> Another leader explained how MKC evangelism was motivated by love for others. “We knew . . . most people were in the dark . . . following the world. We wanted to snatch them out of this world and bring them to the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ.”<sup>34</sup>

## Seeking the Shalom of Ethiopia

In 1973, on the eve of the socialist revolution, the Meserete Kristos Church (MKC) operated eleven elementary schools, two junior high schools, one boarding high school, two hospitals, and two clinics in partnership with Eastern Mennonite Missions (EMM).<sup>35</sup> For a denomination of eight hundred members in eight congregations, it was an extraordinary number of institutions to manage, even with missionary support. MKC had also begun agricultural development programs in Bedeno and Deder to improve crop yields, dairy herds, wool and egg production, and beekeeping.<sup>36</sup>

Haile Selassie welcomed the Mennonite Mission to Ethiopia because it could assist in bringing modern education and health care to his people. From the beginning, EMM workers understood its schools, clinics, and hospitals as expressions of the love of Christ and a means of giving witness to the gospel.<sup>37</sup> Negash Kebede saw some of these institutions open when he was a child. He recalled that people in his community understood that these schools and hospitals were “not motivated by profit” but by compassion, offering healing and learning as a “response to the gospel of Christ.” Within them students, patients, and employees could see followers of Jesus in action, sometimes under pressure, observing their character and the results of their commitment to Christ.<sup>38</sup> MKC thus emerged in places where the message of Jesus was proclaimed by people connected with institutions known for improving the quality of life.

When the Derg took power, many in MKC were eager to join fellow citizens in building a more just, prosperous, peaceful country. In a tense political

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33 Aaron Lehman, “Aster Debossie: Meserete Kristos Churchwoman in Lay Leadership in Ethiopia 1974–1991,” (BA senior paper, Goshen [IN] College, 2003),” 12–14.

34 Interview with author, April 30, 2014.

35 Nathan Hege and Richard D. Thiessen, “Meserete Kristos Church,” *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, January 2024, [http://www.gameo.org/encyclopedia/contents/meserete\\_kristos\\_church](http://www.gameo.org/encyclopedia/contents/meserete_kristos_church).

36 Hege, *Beyond Our Prayers*, 102–6.

37 Dorothy Smoker and Chester L. Wenger, *God Led Us to Ethiopia* (Salunga, PA: Eastern Mennonite Board of Missions and Charities, 1956).

38 Hege, *Beyond Our Prayers*, 101.

environment, they wanted their neighbors, government, and communities to know that their faith was relevant in tackling poverty, injustice, ethnic strife, and other challenges in Ethiopia.<sup>39</sup> Church leaders urged young adults to participate in literacy and development campaigns. Congregations supported development programs that would enhance the community.

Tilahun Beyene explained that if a local government decided to build a road or discuss what to do to help the community, it was crucial for the witness of the church to participate. If church members would say, “I am not part of that. I am not coming,” they would appear to be “anti-society.” Still, MKC guarded against the use of church property for political purposes.<sup>40</sup> When the kebele wanted to hold literacy classes at the Nazareth MKC site, the church elders said, “This is a sanctuary to worship the Lord. But we are willing to build classrooms for you on the kebele compound.” The congregation built four classrooms there.<sup>41</sup>

In the early years of the revolution, MKC was able to expand its work in development through a partnership with Mennonite Central Committee (MCC). Programs were primarily overseen and managed by the MKC Development and Rehabilitation Board. Between 1974 and 1982, projects included equipping people to dig wells, goat breeding and dairy production, a demonstration farm, famine relief, a mobile medical clinic, and afforestation.<sup>42</sup> By alleviating poverty and investing in agricultural infrastructure, the MKC sought to practically express love for their neighbors and give witness to the reign of Christ. Even so, their efforts did not necessarily win them Marxist favor. When MKC representatives offered grain to a famine-stricken area in Hararge Region, an official said, “We are not sure we can accept aid from you. Although you bring grain in your right hand, you have the Bible hidden in your left hand.”<sup>43</sup> In January 1982, the Derg ordered kebele officials to close all MKC congregations, freeze its bank accounts, seize its property, and nationalize institutions still under its control.

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39 Hege, *Beyond Our Prayers*, 109.

40 Interview with author, April 1, 2014.

41 Interview with author, April 28, 2014; also Hege, *Beyond Our Prayers*, 166, 176–77; Gemechu Gebre Telila, “History of the Meserete Kristos Church at Wonji Gefersa, Ethiopia during the Derg, 1974–1991: ‘God Works for Good,’” (MA thesis, Eastern Mennonite Seminary, Harrisonburg, VA, 2002), 37. While Nazareth MKC leaders were able to limit government use of church property in the 1970s, kebele officials in Wonji Gefersa used local MKC facilities without permission in 1977, scheduling socialist gatherings when the church would normally have worship.

42 Hege, *Beyond Our Prayers*, 102–18; Jacob Schwartzentruber, “A Closely Knit Partnership: Mennonite Central Committee and the Meserete Kristos Church’s Attempt at Preventing Famine in Ethiopia from 1974–1982” (BA senior paper, Goshen [IN] College, 2011).

43 Hege, *Beyond Our Prayers*, 110.

Then, because MKC no longer existed as a legal entity, its public partnership with MCC ended, although MCC continued work in Ethiopia and found ways to informally support the Ethiopian church.

The legal space in which MKC could pursue the mission of God had shrunk considerably. It had lost control of the institutions through which it had invested in the health and thriving of its neighbors, and which had given a measure of credibility to its witness. It was a disorienting, hard loss. Yet the church would still thrive in the work of Jesus.

### Loose Screws: Informed by the Logic of the Cross

A notice on an Addis Ababa University wall denounced ten students for spreading “ideology” about Jesus Christ on campus. Those listed—including Tefera Bekere—were ejected from the Revolutionary Ethiopian Youth Association (REYA). What would this mean for them? Membership in REYA was required to enter university, graduate, and get a job.<sup>44</sup> Could they complete their degrees and find work in their fields?

Like all persecution, the expulsions aimed to curb the influence of Jesus-followers, not only by punishing those named but also by intimidating and silencing others. Tefera was not surprised. He knew that suffering came part-and-parcel with embracing a crucified Messiah.

Converting to Christ had profoundly changed him. Within a month of his decision, Tefera read the whole New Testament, joined a Christian fellowship at university, and gave up alcohol and drugs. He was soon leading Bible studies and prayer meetings. He led others to faith in Jesus and mentored them as new disciples. He connected with an underground MKC home group and was baptized in 1985. That year, the Derg closed the university for two months, sending students and staff to help with a resettlement program.<sup>45</sup> Tefera was assigned to a house-building project in western Ethiopia. While serving there, he was arrested for preaching the gospel. He spent a day in jail but was released and, undaunted, he kept proclaiming Jesus.<sup>46</sup>

So, when Tefera was ejected from REYA he was not fazed or disheartened. In fact, he received it as truly happy news. He did not relish pain or hardship but revelled in his spiritual privilege. Echoing the apostle Paul, he said he was grateful “not only to believe in” Christ “but also to suffer for him” (Phil 1:29). Some of his

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44 Clapham, *Transformation and Continuity in Revolutionary Ethiopia*, 141.

45 Abebaw Yirga Adamu and Randi Rønning Balsvik, “Students’ Participation in and Contribution to Political and Social Change in Ethiopia,” in *What Politics?*, ed. Elina Oinas et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 265–84.

46 Interview with author, April 15, 2020.

friends were not kicked out of REYA. With tears, they asked, “Why not?” Had they not sufficiently identified themselves with Jesus?

For Tefera, the cost of following Jesus was not onerous. “If you believe in Jesus . . . you have to pay the price,” he explained. Yet he did not serve or suffer alone but in union with Christ. That intimate connection with God gave him joy. With other believers, he was part of God’s great redemption story. They were children of God adopted by their heavenly Abba, embraced as brothers and sisters by Jesus, and strengthened by the Holy Spirit. This was their delight.

By God’s grace, Tefera testified, he graduated from university with two degrees. One equipped him to teach mathematics. The other, gained from participating in a vibrant Christian community, formed his theology and experience with God. Going out two by two, he and his friends shared the gospel with other students. In all-night meetings, they fasted and prayed for each other to be filled with the Holy Spirit. Not legally able to carry Bibles, they memorized Scripture. They regularly met under a tree in the yard of an Orthodox church. Avoiding religious language in public, they asked each other: “Have you heard anything from Dad for me?” They yearned to hear the voice of their heavenly Father through the pages of Scripture and his Holy Spirit. More than injera, they cherished “every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord” (Deut 8:3). It was a vital lifeline.

Marxists were especially jealous for the loyalty of educated young people. The leaders of REYA, like many others, felt threatened by the growth of evangelical Christianity. Their position in the Communist system gave them power, even as minor political players, to penalize those seen as bad socialists. It was a tried-and-true strategy: hit nonconformists where it hurts. What could university students value more than the approval of their peers, academic success, and good jobs after graduation?

Yet Tefera and his friends were energized by different values. Those who kicked them out of the student organization would have been confounded. What logic governed their lives and leadership? They were part of a story that made no sense to their opponents: the reign of Jesus Christ, whose “power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor 12:9). It marked them as odd. Another MKC leader from the Derg era, Kassa Agafari, once said (with a smile) that those the Holy Spirit fills with the love of God are often seen as “loose screws” in this world.<sup>47</sup>

## A Crucified Mind

Western Christians, the Japanese theologian Kosuke Koyama observed, demonstrate a persistent impulse to try to manage and control the gospel. Might that be a temptation for believers in all cultures shaped by a history of Christendom? Pushing against such a mindset, Koyama asked, “Does Jesus carry the cross as a

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<sup>47</sup> Interview with author, April 3, 2014.

businessman carries his briefcase?” He pointed out that it does not come with a handle. The gospel cannot be mastered. Yet when inviting people to share in his resurrection, Jesus calls them “to take up the cross without a handle.” Those trained under the weight of the cross develop what Koyama described as a “crucified mind.”<sup>48</sup>

Cruciformity—as evident in Meserete Kristos Church experience under the Derg—emerges from an inner and outer participation in the life of Messiah Jesus. Michael Gorman, in his study of the apostle Paul’s spirituality of the cross, defines cruciformity as

an ongoing pattern of living in Christ and of dying with him that produces a Christ-like (cruciform) person. Cruciform existence is what being Christ’s servant, indwelling him and being indwelt by him, living with and for and “according to” him, is all about, for both individuals and communities.<sup>49</sup>

Such cruciformity is generated not by human effort but by the Spirit of God, who animates those who identify with Christ and enables their conformity to him so that the story of the cross can continue to be “retold and relived.”<sup>50</sup>

The love and passion for God that informed Tefera Bekere’s cruciform logic are common in testimonies of MKC leaders who served in the revolutionary era. Their hunger for personal communion with God motivated them to practice rigorous personal and corporate disciplines of Bible study, prayer, and fasting. Gemechu Gebre wrote:

The experience of persecution forced us to seek the power of the Holy Spirit. Christians were organized in groups to pray without ceasing, and they prayed specifically for the power of the Holy Spirit. It is their conviction that the God who promised to give his power for those who seek day and night poured his Spirit on his people.

Their “deep intimacy with God” and “living union and fellowship with Christ” filled them with love for others and motivated them to endure under hardship.<sup>51</sup> Their inner life with God was tested and formed by persecution and other forms of suffering.

The Derg, for instance, monitored and limited movement in Ethiopia, making travel a challenge. At checkpoints, government forces searched travelers for

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<sup>48</sup> Kosuke Koyama, *No Handle on the Cross: An Asian Meditation on the Crucified Mind* (London: SCM, 1977; reprint Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2011), 3–4, 86.

<sup>49</sup> Michael J. Gorman, *Cruciformity: Paul’s Narrative Spirituality of the Cross* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 48–49.

<sup>50</sup> Gorman, *Cruciformity*, 49.

<sup>51</sup> Gemechu Gebre, “History of the Meserete Kristos Church at Wonji Gefersa, Ethiopia, during the Derg, 1974–1991: ‘God Works for Good,’” (MA thesis, Eastern Mennonite Seminary, Harrisonburg, VA, 2002), 67–68.

contraband material like Bibles and other religious literature. Trekking alone, Kifle (an evangelist in the Awash Valley) was often hungry, tired, and lonely. He used a single pair of shoes for five years until its soles were full of holes. He wore one jacket until it was a tattered rag. Kifle told of his struggle in a challenging location:

I came to the house where I was staying with an empty stomach. I was . . . exhausted, and I was trying to pray, but I could not. I was so hungry inside, my stomach gnawing. I almost despaired, but then I saw—kind of like in a revelation—I saw how Christ hung on the cross naked, and . . . how he was beaten and was bleeding. This was all for me. Seeing this strengthened me. So, I got up and I went and started doing my work, strengthened by what I saw and understood what Christ had gone through for me. So, what is this little kind of hunger and thirst and exhaustion?<sup>52</sup>

## Jesus First

In interviews, MKC leaders underscored that their experiences of persecution were a natural outgrowth of their faith. While their allegiance to Jesus was profoundly spiritual, it was not private. They practiced discretion to avoid unnecessary suffering but did not hide their Christian identity. Jazarah, for example, displayed the message “Live the whole day fearing God” on a wall in the hotel she owned and operated. Cadres ordered her to remove it, but she replied, “It will stay.” Looking back, she testified, “The Lord was really with me. I felt his protection and presence.”<sup>53</sup>

The Derg expected citizens to express their loyalty by raising their left hands and shouting slogans in public assemblies. MKC members refused to make the gesture or repeat revolutionary catchphrases that contradicted their allegiance to Jesus and his reign. They believed that to declare “Ethiopia first!” would treat the nation as an idol usurping the devotion that belongs to God alone. Likewise, to say “The revolution above everything!” would deny the lordship of Christ. Many were beaten or arrested for their nonparticipation.<sup>54</sup>

MKC members also rejected membership in the Communist Party, despite the cost in lost opportunities such as promotions, free medical care, life insurance, and scholarships to foreign universities. They have consistently explained their rationale in light of their commitment to Jesus. For example, when a cadre

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52 Interview with author, April 24, 2014; translation by Alemu Checole. Kifle is a pseudonym. Similarly, in an interview with the author, March 31, 2014, Gemechu Gebre said, “It was painful, but the One who suffered it before them on the cross knows the pain.”

53 Interview with author, May 1, 2014. Jazarah is a pseudonym.

54 Hege, *Beyond Our Prayers*, 174; multiple interviews with author March 31 to May 9, 2014.



(formerly part of MKC) pressured Yohannes Germamo to join the party, he told him, “I cannot serve two masters at a time.” Yohannes later recalled, “Although he threatened me . . . I did not fear. He said, ‘You will be executed if you don’t join the party.’ I answered him, ‘It is okay to be executed and to be with Jesus. That would be much better than joining the party and dying without Jesus.’”<sup>55</sup>

How did the Meserete Kristos Church respond to the draft of young people to fight Eritrean, Tigrean, and other Derg opponents? There had been no compulsory military service under Haile Selassie’s regime or provision for conscientious objection in Ethiopian law.<sup>56</sup> Some in MKC accepted conscription while others evaded military service based on their understanding of Jesus’s call to nonviolence and love for enemies.<sup>57</sup>

While it was rare for MKC members to hold public office in the Derg era, Yacob was elected to a two-year term as a kebele leader in the early years of the revolution. He was given an AK-47 Kalashnikov rifle for self-defence. “I took the gun and hid it in the closet in the house,” Yacob said. “I just went out in the evening . . . without any gun, even though they told me to carry it around and threaten people with it.” Derg officials questioned him: “We gave you a gun. Why don’t you use it? Why don’t you carry it with you?” Yacob replied, “What’s the use of carrying a gun? If I carry one, they can come from behind and kill me, and shoot me. It is God who protects me. . . . I do not want to kill anyone.” He retrieved and returned the gun, saying, “It is not the gun you gave me that protects me. It is God who protects me, so I do not need it.”<sup>58</sup>

Gemechu Gebre acknowledged the temptation to compromise one’s faith in an oppressive political environment. To counter the temptation, he was intentional about revealing his commitment to Jesus whatever the setting. He said:

I just always referred to my faith wherever I went: at weddings or at their meetings, they knew that I was a Christian. . . . At a wedding, if I was alone, I bowed down my head and prayed for the food that they were serving me. . . . They knew that I was praying. . . . I want to be consistent with my living.<sup>59</sup>

Gemechu wore a belt that said, “Jesus saves,” and a cross pinned on his shirt pocket, even at work as a teacher in a government-run school. His transparency did get him into trouble. He and two other Christian teachers were called

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55 Gemechu Gebre, “Meserete Kristos Church at Wonji Gefersa,” 46.

56 Meron Tesfaye, “The Right to Conscientious Objection under Ethiopian Law” (LLM thesis, Addis Ababa University Faculty of Law, 2011), 67–68.

57 Eshete, *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia*, 254; interviews with author, April 30, May 1, and May 5, 2014.

58 Interview with author, April 25, 2014. Yacob is a pseudonym.

59 Interview with author, March 31, 2014.

“imperialist dogs,” and “*Mete*,” an Amharic term disparaging followers of a “foreign religion.” They were also accused of being CIA agents and “of injecting theism into the minds of the growing children.” At a workplace political session, they were presented with a statement of the accusations against them signed by the other teachers and ordered to appear at the regional Communist Party office for questioning.

Their persecutors had a problem, though. A Communist Party official on staff needed to deliver the statement of accusations to a local political office but lacked transportation. “Do you want my bicycle?” Gemechu asked him. “Take it,” he said, holding out his bicycle key.

What was the impact of this unexpectedly generous act? Sometime later, while teaching in a community more than five hundred kilometres away, his persecutor was moved by a presentation of the gospel. Because of his previous opposition to Christianity in Gemechu’s community—Wonji—he returned there to publicly become a disciple of Jesus. He attended a Sunday morning worship service at which Gemechu presented an invitation to faith. The man stepped forward, weeping, and received Jesus Christ as his Savior. He said, “You touched me the day that you gave me your key for that bicycle.” Gemechu noted that the three Derg officials involved in the accusations against him at his school have all become followers of Jesus and approached him individually to seek his forgiveness “for the distress they caused me during the Derg.”<sup>60</sup>

## The Compelling Power of Cruciform Love

Relationships between MKC members and their persecutors could be complex. Despite the risks, many boldly gave testimony about their faith in Jesus Christ to authorities or others with power to harm them. They sometimes confronted officials about the unjust treatment of Christians. In some situations, they complied with orders to limit ministry activities, and, in others, verbally challenged or quietly defied them. Still, the church was committed to practicing cruciform love among believers and for those who did not yet share their faith. Reflecting on God’s use of persecution to expand the church’s capacity to love, Tengene, an MKC leader from Addis Ababa, said:

God brings times of trial to test us and to purify us. We learn patience through suffering. We learn love, true love, during times of persecution. We learn humility when we have arrogant, proud people over us.<sup>61</sup>

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60 Gemechu Gebre, “Meserete Kristos Church at Wonji Gefersa,” 89–93; interview with author, March 31, 2014.

61 Interview with author, May 7, 2014.

Naturally, some found it difficult to overcome their anger against their opponents. Bekele admitted that it could be hard to keep an open heart toward a persecutor in the moment he was being threatened.<sup>62</sup> Louam recalled a young church member who publicly answered an insult at a political meeting with one of his own.<sup>63</sup> Another interviewee confessed to verbally intimidating a man who was unjustly withholding his graduation certificate after he had successfully completed a year-and-a-half-long management course.<sup>64</sup> Still, the theology, church culture, and practices of MKC called its members into the cruciform love of Jesus.

Their testimonies point to a number of influences that shaped their imagination toward this love: (1) the teaching of Jesus on forgiveness and love for enemies, (2) a biblical worldview that trained them to see conflict through the lens of spiritual warfare (recognizing Satan rather than human beings as their true enemy), (3) the example of leaders like Kedir Delchume who kept a journal with the names of sixty-four persecutors for whom he prayed, (4) the miraculous outpouring of love from the Holy Spirit, and (5) widespread empathy—based on experience and significant relationships—for those who did not know Christ.

There are many accounts of former persecutors drawn to the message of Jesus through the witness of MKC members. Dobamo Arficho, a member of the Derg party, was a tractor driver whose assistant spoke to him about Jesus and the offer of eternal life. “I rejected him many times, and frightened him with many evil words,” Dobamo said. “Finally, I reported him to the boss for harassing me.” Still, his coworker persisted in showing him love. Eventually, Dobamo surrendered. He explained:

The word that came through that man penetrated into my heart, and the love of Jesus poured into my heart at that time. I really sensed my conversion. I realized that God’s love was beyond my imagination. After I received Jesus Christ as my personal Savior, that man handed [me] over to [a church elder who taught me] . . . how to follow Jesus in my own house until the fall of the Communist government.<sup>65</sup>

Although MKC had lost its institutions through which it had once sought to advance the health and shalom of Ethiopian communities, members continued to embed their evangelism in genuine love for their neighbors. They visited the sick, prayed for them, offered emotional support, and spoke of Jesus. They cared for the poor and contributed to worthwhile kebele projects. They attended community weddings and funerals, even when the same courtesy had not been extended to them. They tried to maintain friendships with former Christians who

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62 Interview with author, May 19, 2014.

63 Interview with author, April 26, 2014.

64 Interview with author, April 25, 2014.

65 Gemechu Gebre, “Meserete Kristos Church at Wonji Gefersa,” 62–63.

had drifted from their earlier faith. They tried to treat others fairly. Imprisoned church members shared their food with fellow inmates.

Miracles reminded believers that while they were called to sacrificial service, evangelism and shalom-making were ultimately *God's* work. The Bole congregation of MKC in Addis Ababa saw many people freed of cancer, paralysis, blindness, and asthma in its public worship services before its closure in 1982. MKC evangelist Daniel Mekonnen described them as “love healings”—a sovereign outpouring of God’s compassion on needy people.<sup>66</sup>

Others were healed when followers of Jesus prayed for the sick in homes. Jazarah, an MKC elder in Adama, recalled her regular visits to an unchurched family whose daughter suffered from a serious heart condition and the healing she experienced when an evangelist prayed with her.<sup>67</sup> Lema was invited to pray with a Derg official who had a chronic digestive illness. When he and a co-leader did so, their host immediately said, “I am feeling well,” and ate the Ethiopian staple *injera* for the first time in six years with no ill effects.<sup>68</sup>

Obedying Christ sometimes led into uncomfortable places. Gemechu Gebre described a time Teketel Chakiso, one of his co-elders in the Wonji Gefersa MKC congregation, had a vision in which God told him to deliver a message to Tilahun Tute, chair of the Derg party Supervisory Committee. Teketel was unnerved. He told his wife about the vision, hoping she would dismiss it as a crazy idea. “Go and tell him,” she said. So, shaking with fear, he went to Gemechu. “I have a message for Tilahun,” he said.

“Why don’t you go and tell him?” Gemechu asked.

“I fear him! You know the power, the authority that he has.” Teketel knew that Tilahun could easily sign an execution order.

Gemechu responded, “Whom do you fear: the One who sent you or the one who is just mortal? Which one do you fear?”

“Pray for me,” Teketel begged.

The church gathered to pray for him and for Tilahun. Teketel approached the high-ranking official’s house that evening. He knocked on the door, trembling. “Please come in,” Tilahun welcomed him. “Why did you come?”

“God has sent me.”

“What? ‘God has sent me?’”

Tilahun called his wife and children. Together they sat and listened while Teketel said it was time to be reconciled with God. That if they responded in faith, God would bless them and the next generation. If not, there would be four consequences, which Teketel listed. To his great surprise and relief, Tilahun and

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66 Checole, “Mennonite Churches in Eastern Africa,” 230–32; Hege, *Beyond Our Prayers*, 169–71; Eshete, *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia*, 257–59.

67 Interview with author, May 1, 2014. Jazarah is a pseudonym.

68 Interview with author, May 6, 2014. Lema is a pseudonym.

his family knelt on the floor, weeping. A former Christian, Tilahun repented of having abandoned his faith and sinning against his family. Together, they received Jesus as their Savior. Tilahun later testified:

I held the highest authorized position and was a popular person in the Wonji sugar state. I had good relationship with the top party leaders. Humanly speaking I had everything on earth at the time. But I did not have peace and rest. Because of this I drank too much to calm my sick soul.

Gemechu explained that Tilahun and others in his family had been physically ill, needing to visit the hospital almost daily. Desperate for a change in his condition, Tilahun had given up drinking and asked God to “send one of his servants” to him. “If you do this, God, I will know that your mercy is still upon me, and your everlasting love is with me.”<sup>69</sup>

While extraordinary, this encounter between Teketel and the family of Tilahun reflects broadly shared, deeply held MKC priorities that profoundly shaped its mission in the Derg era, such as (1) relying on the leadership of the Holy Spirit, (2) testing a perceived call from God with others, (3) prioritizing fervent prayer as a community, (4) embracing the cost of faithfulness to Jesus, crucified and risen, even if it could mean death, (5) seeking the shalom of those who may be hostile to the gospel, and (6) understanding that the church does not need legal protection, social position, or political power to pursue the mission and glory of God or to be part of the ongoing story of Jesus.

It was not easy. MKC members depended on each other for encouragement and correction. As a deacon and member of her congregation’s pastoral care committee, Abebech and her ministry team regularly made home visits to celebrate births, weep with bereaved families, share food with the hungry, read from the Word of God, pray, and eat together.<sup>70</sup> Such visits—and regular cell group meetings—kept church members in close relationship with each other.

Louam spoke of a time when his courage faltered: “I was so overwhelmed with the pressure from the government, from the politicians, from the cadres.” He told Pastor Kedir Delchume, “Oh, this is too much. I can’t serve very well in this situation.” He skipped their next weekly pastoral care team meeting. A few days later, Kedir came to his home. “Why did you stop coming to the pastoral care meeting?” he asked.

“It’s too much of a burden serving God, so I stopped,” Louam admitted.

Kedir challenged him, “If you stop serving the Lord, Satan will force you to serve him until it comes out through your nose. He’ll make you suffer even more.”

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69 Gemechu Gebre Telila, “Meserete Kristos Church at Wonji Gefersa,” 63–64; interview with author, March 31, 2014.

70 Interview with author, April 28, 2014.

Louam weighed his words. “He’s right, you know. I really should serve the Lord, whatever the circumstances.”

When he returned to the meeting the next week, Kedir greeted him warmly, “Louam! Oh, it’s good for you to come back. We’ll serve. We’ll bear the cross of Christ together. We’ll go through the suffering helping each other.”<sup>71</sup>

## Marked by the Cross

When Solomon Kebede sought stronger provisions for religious freedom in the post-Derg Ethiopian constitution, he hoped to not only protect the church from the coercion of the state but also prevent a resurgence of religious nationalism. It was consistent with an evangelical vision for a church whose identity and mission were anchored in the cross and Spirit of Jesus Christ rather than state power.

How does the failed erasure of the cross in the Haile Mariam Mamo Memorial Hospital chapel speak to the experience of the Meserete Kristos Church during the Ethiopian revolution? Rather than serve as a mere decoration, talisman, or token of imperial power, it became a prophetic sign of the power of Jesus Christ dwelling in his people, suffering with them, and empowering them through the Holy Spirit.

What can the church today learn from the cruciform history of MKC from 1974 to 1991? The church in Ethiopia—and globally—is in a different cultural and political moment than in the Derg era. Yet the saving, reconciling story of our living Messiah continues as the purposes of God unfold in this broken world.

In Galatians 6:17, Paul writes of bearing “the marks of Jesus” on his body. While he is likely referring to his physical scars, this phrase invites the church to consider how it gives witness to Christ crucified in its life and mission. David Bosch writes:

The cross, we ought to remember, is the hallmark of the church. When the resurrected Christ appeared to His disciples, His *scars* were the proof of His identity. Because of them the disciples believed (John 20:20). Will it be different for us? Will the world believe unless they recognize the marks of the cross on us?<sup>72</sup>

Cruciformity is not a human project or program. When Simon Peter identified him as the Messiah, Jesus was quick to dispel any “sword in arm” expectations of his reign. Immediately, he began to speak of his upcoming suffering, death, and resurrection. If that were not disorienting enough, he tied our discipleship to his crucifixion:

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<sup>71</sup> Interview with author, April 26, 2014. Louam is a pseudonym.

<sup>72</sup> David J. Bosch, *A Spirituality of the Road*, Institute of Mennonite Studies Missionary Studies, no. 6 (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1979; reis. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2001), 84.

Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it. (Luke 9:23–24)

What does it mean for the church to be defined by the cross not only in its preaching and architecture but also in its whole life and witness? Evangelical Christians persecuted under the Derg had no illusions that the cross could be comfortably carried like a briefcase or expertly managed like a strategic plan. Instead, they were called into a costly surrender—personally and corporately—to Jesus. United with Christ in their suffering, they discovered the truth of his promise to the apostle Paul: “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (1 Cor 12:13). They became witnesses of countless resurrection surprises and experienced the joy of seeing his reign prosper amid their uncertainties, hardship, losses, and pain. The marks of Jesus in the church could not be erased.

How does cruciform witness look in different contexts? How is it affected by the social and economic location of the church, its relation to government, and the prevailing political climate? How is the Holy Spirit calling the church to bear the marks of Jesus as it participates in the shalom-making mission of God today?