

CHALLENGING THE POWER STRUCTURE

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Abstract: God, the creator and the proprietor of every living and non-living thing, is the source of power and authority, which he delegates to humans to exercise authority and control, for proper use and care of all God's creation, placed at their disposal and for the well-being of humanity. But with power comes the misuse of power as evidenced is power sharing struggles, misuse of power by the government and misuse of power by the church. In the place of the exercise of power, Jesus gives us the servanthood partnership which is expressed in compassion, humility, obedience, and a genuine spirit of service to the point of sacrificing oneself. If we are motivated by fear, love of God, and compassion, we can see the needs of the people and join them to walk alongside in collaboration with them in order to alleviate their sufferings. True partners do not end their relationship after the goal of temporary relief has been obtained, but move into the critical phase of long-term and lasting development for transformation and growth.

How we define power may determine how we want to use it. In this article, I approach the issue of power from a biblical perspective. In the biblical story of creation, it is stated that God created everything such as the heavens, earth, waters, land, vegetation, animals, birds, fish, etc. At the end of creation, God created male and female and blessed them, saying, "Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it. Have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth" (Genesis 1:27-28).¹ According to these verses, God, as the creator and owner of all living and non-living things, is the source of power and authority. God delegates this authority to humans to exercise control and authority over God's creation for its proper use and care, for the benefit of humanity.

God, the origin of all power and everything He has created, is entrusting His people with a great responsibility and the task of caring for His creation. They have the freedom to utilize this responsibility for their benefit and for the well-being of those they are responsible for. The Apostle John recognizes and honors the magnificence and authority of God with utmost respect and humility in his statement, "You, our Lord and God, are deserving of glory, honor, and power because you are the creator of all things. By your will, everything came into existence and continues to exist" (Revelation 4:11).

In a similar manner, King David, with deep respect and genuine humbleness, recognizes that true greatness and power belong to God. Everything in the heavens and on earth is under His authority. Wealth and honor originate from Him. David honestly confesses that the contributions he and his people have made for the construction of the temple are all ultimately owned by God, the creator. David further expresses, "But who am I, and who are my people, to have the ability to give so generously? Everything we possess comes from you, and we have only given back what you originally provided" (1 Chronicles 29:14).

In this article, my main emphasis is that humans do not possess anything individually or collectively. Everything, including ourselves, is created by God, the father of all good and perfect things (James 1:17). The continents we inhabit, the material resources that countries and individuals claim, all belong to God. People are only stewards of these resources. God has given us the opportunity to use his resources to show compassion, love, respect, and care for other humans and nature. Can we meet this expectation?

¹ All references to the Bible are sourced from the New International Version.

FOR WHAT PURPOSE AND HOW DO WE USE POWER?

We will attempt to answer this question by analyzing the text in the narrative of creation. The passage states, "Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and bring it under control. Exercise dominion over the fish in the sea, the birds in the sky, and every living creature that moves on the ground" (Genesis 1:28). The term "subdue" refers to bringing things under control for the purpose of human use, while "rule over" signifies having complete authority over that which is under control. God granted humans complete control over his creation in order for them to responsibly exercise their authority and care for both humans and the environment. This responsibility does not involve causing harm to the environment and destroying life, but rather protecting, improving, and developing it. Caring for both humans and the environment requires showing respect and love towards them. After all, it is difficult to properly care for something that one does not respect or love.

According to Dr. Martin Luther the reformer, love is the essence of all commandments, as mentioned in Luther's Small Catechism. The commandments instruct us to wholeheartedly love God, with all our heart, soul, and mind, as well as to love our neighbors as we love ourselves (referencing Matthew 22:37-39, Deuteronomy 6:5, and Leviticus 19:18).² The fear of God and love for our neighbors should guide our actions as we strive to responsibly manage the resources that God has entrusted us with.

However, it is likely that due to a relentless desire for power driven by selfishness and greed, we frequently observe humans disregarding the commandment to love and care for others. They cause harm not only to fellow human beings but also to the environment that God has provided for us to use responsibly (Genesis 2:15). In the story of creation, we witness Adam and Eve being tempted by the devil to possess divine knowledge and limitless power. Shortly after, we learn of Cain's jealousy, fury, and ultimate act of fratricide. In a disrespectful manner, Cain replies to God, "Am I responsible for my brother?" (Genesis 4:6). Essentially, Cain is implying that he does not care. However, Cain does not have the authority or permission to take his brother's life. On the contrary, he is expected to love and safeguard his brother from any harm. Those who unjustly take the lives of innocent people will be held accountable by God, as He states, "Do not bring false charges against anyone, and do not put an innocent or honest person to death, for I will not acquit the guilty" (Exodus 23:7).

In support of this viewpoint, Luther explains the commandment against taking someone's life by stating, "We should fear and love God in a way that we do not hurt or harm our neighbor physically, but instead help and support them with their physical needs."³ God recognizes how power could be misused to cause serious harm to both fellow human beings and nature. God requires everyone to obey his commandments and stay within the boundaries he has established, while fulfilling their responsibilities with honesty, integrity, and a wise use of power to benefit the greater good.

God takes serious action against individuals who abuse their power to harm others. An incident illustrating this was reported to us by the prophet Jeremiah in his book. Jeremiah states, "The prophets follow a corrupt path and unjustly exercise their authority. Both prophets and priests lack godliness, even in my temple I witness their wickedness," declares the Lord. As a consequence, their path will become treacherous; they will be cast into darkness and inevitably fall. In the year they are punished, I will bring calamity upon them," declares the Lord (Jeremiah 23:10b-12). Everyone who wields power will be held accountable for how they have used it, and as faith-based organizations, we must exercise greater caution. A day of judgment is certainly imminent.

² Luther, Martin. *Luther's Small Catechism, with Explanation* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1991), 75.

³ *Ibid*, 75-78.

HOW DID JESUS, THE AUTHOR OF OUR FAITH, TEACH HIS DISCIPLES TO EXERCISE POWER?

In the Gospel of Matthew, there is a story about a mother pleading with Jesus to allow her two sons to sit on his right and left sides in his kingdom. When the other disciples heard this, they became angry. Jesus then gathered them and explained, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord over their people and their officials exercise authority over them. But it is not the same with you. Instead, if you want to be great among you, you must become a servant, and if you want to be first, you must become a slave. Just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many" (Matthew 20:25-28).

To emphasize his teaching, Jesus, knowing that the Father had given him power over all things and that he came from God and would return to God, stood up from the meal, removed his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. He then poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel he had wrapped around him (John 13:3-5). In this passage, Jesus affirms his knowledge of his divine origin and destination, his authority over all things, and his intent to set an example. He demonstrates humility and performs an act that others might consider degrading, challenging his disciples to start their service from that point as servants. He explicitly instructs his disciples that their positions should be used to serve others, rather than themselves, which differs from how the world operates. During his time on earth, Jesus displayed great compassion as he obediently and humbly served the people in accordance with his Father's will, setting a remarkable example that he expects his disciples to follow.

EECMY IN THE MIDST OF POWER SHARING STRUGGLE

The Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus (EECMY) was established through the efforts of various missionary organizations from Europe and America. These missionaries arrived in Ethiopia in the late 19th century not only to spread the message of the Gospel but also to provide education, medical care, and support for community development.⁴ The missionaries of the twentieth century, on the other hand, had different intentions compared to those of the nineteenth century, who were often referred to as 'discoverers'. Unlike the earlier explorers, the twentieth-century missionaries came as a result of a spiritual awakening primarily occurring in Europe. They did not come with the aim of exploiting the country economically. Philip Jenkins, in his well-known book titled "The Next Christendom," reveals the motives of the 'discoverers', as he states: "However, Christian explorers bring more than faith. They also bring a profound sense of cultural superiority and a desire for wealth."⁵

However, the missionaries who came later worked in Africa, Latin America, and Asia under extremely challenging conditions. It would not be an exaggeration to say that during those times, missionaries left their home countries to live with very limited resources. Transporting and communicating with their home countries were frequently very difficult. Many even sacrificed their lives while sharing the love of Christ with the people they served. These missionaries collaborated with the local population and were successful in establishing a strong basis for a thriving church, quality education, and necessary medical assistance.

In the Ethiopian context, the EECMY worked with many Lutheran organizations from Europe and America for many years. The church then expressed its desire to fully own and manage the work of the church that had been initiated by different missionary organizations in the country. They understood that the church's endeavors could only be sustainable if they were empowered by assuming full

⁴ Samuel Deressa, "Onesimos Nesib, Ethiopian Evangelical Pioneer," in *Lutheran Quarterly*, Vol. 32, No. 2 (Summer 2018), 160.

⁵ Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (London: Oxford University Press, 2007), 48

responsibility. However, this genuine wish and extremely commendable idea became a subject of disagreement and admittedly took many years to be resolved.

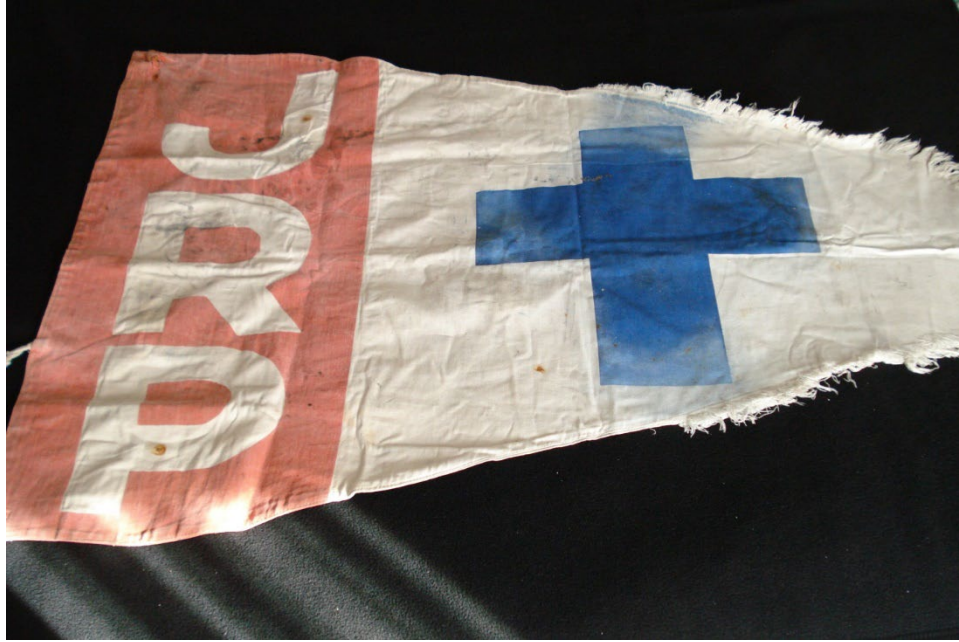
The church had to convince the missionary organizations and their home boards to sign the "Agreement of Integration." This agreement allowed the mission organizations to transfer their work, personnel, and most of their properties in the respective areas of the country to EECMY. However, the church quickly encountered difficulties when it realized that the transfer did not include the necessary budget to sustain these operations. To solve this problem, EECMY had to invite the mission agencies and partner agencies to a discussion where the church presented its argument, explaining why it was crucial for its partners to continue supporting the work they had started. After extensive discussion, the mission agencies and partner agencies agreed to continue supporting EECMY by providing finances and personnel. They solidified this agreement by signing the "Agreement of Cooperation."

I have brought this information here as an example to demonstrate how EECMY carefully attempted to address the issue of power. In this specific situation, we observed the interconnectedness of power and money. Those who possess the financial resources also possess the authority; they can make decisions that benefit their preferred approach to the work, even if it may not align with the church's preferences. However, by relying on the guidance of the Holy Spirit and employing strategic power-sharing arrangements, along with taking on full responsibility for the work, the Church was able to quickly experience remarkable growth, a trend that continues to this day.

EXAMPLE OF MISUSE OF POWER BY GOVERNMENT

In 1990, Ethiopia faced a severe drought and armed conflicts, both of which significantly affected the population, primarily in the northern regions. However, the drought also spread to the eastern and southern parts of the country. The rebels gained control over several districts in the north, including Eritrea. The famine began claiming the lives of many people, and if it weren't for the rebel control, there would have been a large-scale displacement of people from villages to towns. Unfortunately, during that time, the Ethiopian government restricted the International Red Cross Society, Ethiopian Red Cross, UN World Food Program, and all non-governmental organizations and churches from participating in any humanitarian relief efforts in the areas affected by the conflicts.

At the time, I served as the president of the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus (EECMY). I noticed an opportunity and believed I could potentially negotiate with the government to ensure the safe passage of emergency relief assistance. Both the government and the rebels were facing desperate situations due to the severity of the drought and the increasing number of deaths. After obtaining full support from my church officers and convincing the leaders of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and the Ethiopian Catholic Church, I proposed to implement a church-led emergency relief program. This program aimed to provide food and medical assistance to save lives and support the people during their most challenging and critical times. I also shared my vision internationally with The Lutheran World Federation (LWF) and the World Council of Churches (WCC).



This flag is the Joint Relief Partnership logo used to identify the churches relief trucks, vehicles, store buildings and other properties in order that either the government or the rebels may not target them for attack. The flag you see here is the flag which made the breakthrough crossing the no man's land between the Ethiopian Army and the rebels who were at the time facing each other north of Woldia, at Meso Mille, in Wollo province and traveled all the way to Adigrat and back to Addis Ababa.⁶

With strong support from all the consulted parties, I began negotiating with the Ethiopian government through its representative, Honorable Deputy Prime Minister Shimelis Adugna. After almost two months of intensive and prolonged negotiations, a decision was reached at the highest level, allowing us to proceed with negotiations with the rebels. This phase of the negotiation proved to be extremely complicated and messy, requiring the involvement of international humanitarian organizations such as LWF, WCC, Norwegian Church Aid, and others. These organizations had established working relationships with the rebels and could use their influence, sometimes backed by their respective governments, to persuade and ensure cooperation.

Moving forward, an agreement was reached, and all non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working in Ethiopia were asked to voluntarily bring their emergency relief food and medicines to the Joint Relief Partnership (JRP) operation. JRP is a newly established organization that we created to provide the necessary emergency assistance.

Somehow, the British Minister for Development and Foreign Cooperation at the time discovered that the Ethiopian churches had been given permission to distribute emergency food aid in the war-affected areas of Ethiopia. The minister then traveled to Addis Ababa and, with the help of the Swiss Ambassador, who chaired the Ambassadors of the Donor Countries caucus at the time, demanded that the church leaders meet at the British Embassy and immediately transfer responsibility for the delivery of the emergency relief food program to the World Food Program (WFP).

Representatives from the three churches included Rev. Dr. Abune Thimotheos, Director of the Development Department and Inter-Church Relations for the Ethiopian Orthodox Church; Abba Kidane Mariam, the General Secretary of the Ethiopian Catholic Church; and Mr. Francis Stephanos, President of

⁶ This flag was handed over to the author of this article by his driver and preserved by the author. Photo was taken by the author.

the EECMY, who initiated the emergency relief program and coordinated it at the highest level. I, as a church leader, responded to the envoy's demands with permission from the other two church leaders. In my response, I firmly maintained our position and said something along the lines of: "Your excellency, I regret to inform you that we are unable to relinquish responsibility for the delivery of the relief food operation. It was the churches who negotiated and agreed with the government of Ethiopia and the rebels, and it will be the churches who implement this program."

Upon hearing our resolute stance, the British minister verbally instructed the ambassador not to let us leave until we agreed to hand over the emergency food delivery operation. Angry and frustrated, she stormed out of the room and left us to be persuaded by the Swiss ambassador. However, nothing changed.

MISSUSE OF POWER AND AUTHORITY IN MY CHURCH

The constitution of the EECMY clearly states that the power and authority of the church lies within the congregations. They make decisions through their general assembly meetings. However, as the church grew larger and its congregations, parishes, and districts increased substantially, the church became involved in various development projects and relief programs. It expanded its work and had significant financial expenditures. The headquarters of the church is constitutionally obligated to coordinate its activities. However, the leadership, possessing power and authority, has been tempted to manipulate the constitution and alter certain provisions. These provisions were initially included to maintain a balance of power. This expansion of power resulted in serious misunderstandings and conflicts within the church, which took many years to resolve.

CAUSE OF THE CONFLICT IN EECMY (1994-2010)

Most of the EECMY congregations in Addis Ababa use the Amharic language for their worship and office services. However, some members from two congregations in Addis Ababa insisted on having church services conducted in their mother tongue, Oromifa. In October 1994, a group that had been worshiping in the Louis Harms Hostel requested permission from the Gulale Bethel Mekane Yesus Congregation of the Central Ethiopia Synod to have a separate worship service in the church using their Oromifa language. Bethel Mekane Yesus Congregation did not immediately grant permission but continued to discuss the issue. Meanwhile, another small group from the Entoto Mekane Yesus congregation of the Central Ethiopia Synod also requested a separate worship service in the Oromifa language. When the elders of the two congregations could not find a solution that satisfied everyone, the Central Ethiopia Synod leadership intervened and made several attempts, but none were acceptable to any of the groups.

DECISION OF THE EECMY'S EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

At this point, the leadership of the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus (EECMY) intervened and brought the matter to the 91st Executive Committee meeting of the church. The discussion continued until the 93rd Executive Committee meeting when it was decided that worship services could be conducted in different languages. However, in the two congregations, the majority of members preferred to continue worshiping in the Amharic language.

The Central Ethiopia Synod expressed dissatisfaction with this decision, claiming it was made unconstitutionally and interfered with their own synod and congregations' work. They requested additional time to resolve the language issue peacefully. Nevertheless, at the 104th Executive Committee meeting, the church leadership learned that the two congregations did not implement the language decision and consequently removed all leaders of the Central Ethiopia Synod, bringing it under their own leadership.

Many people agree that the EECMY should not have interfered with the work of the Central Ethiopia Synod, as it violated both its own constitution and that of the Central Ethiopia Synod and its congregations.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF ILL-ADVISED DECISION

A group of leaders from large congregations, as well as previous leaders from the Central Ethiopia Synod, made a misguided decision to organize congregations affected by a certain issue into a separate group. They named this new group the Provisional Coordinating Committee.

To worsen the situation, the leadership of the EECMY decided to involve secular courts to resolve the matter. This decision led to over one hundred court cases, resulting in numerous legal battles. As a result, members of the church suffered, bank accounts were closed, and projects sponsoring school children were suspended, impacting thousands of children. Additionally, a significant amount of the church's money and valuable time was wasted. Many employees were not paid for years, retired employees were denied payments from the pension fund, and numerous individuals experienced spiritual and psychological distress. Consequently, thousands of people decided to leave the church, creating an atmosphere of mistrust and hatred. The church also lost its integrity and credibility, and its members and activities endured significant hardships. Moreover, the ability of the EECMY to work effectively with diverse groups was weakened due to its failure in addressing the language problem.

RECONCILIATION AND UNIFICATION

Amidst all these problems, the Provisional Administrative Committee proceeded to register the splinter group with the government on January 17, 2001, as a new church named The Addis Ababa and Surrounding Evangelical Mekane Yesus Church (AASECMY). This decision dashed hopes for resolving the problems and bringing about reconciliation within the body of Christ. Over the next fourteen years, more than sixty attempts were made by different groups to peacefully resolve the issues through reconciliation efforts. However, none of these efforts produced any results. Both sides remained stubborn and unwilling to compromise or make peace for the sake of the church, leading to the detriment of its members and various assistance programs.

Although the conflict within the EECMY never ceased to concern former leaders and members, many of whom now reside in the U.S.A., it was the late Rev. Dr. Eshetu Abate who consistently brought up the issue at every Evangelical Mekane Yesus Lutheran Fellowship for North America (EMYLFNA) board meeting and conference.⁷ He often expressed his restlessness over the problem within the Mekane Yesus Church, questioning what he should do about it. During the EMYLFNA conference held on August 3-6, 2006, in Silver Spring, Maryland, it was resolved that the committee would pray, seek guidance from the Lord, and continue working towards peace and reconciliation in our Church and Synod back home.⁸

⁷ The Evangelical Mekane Yesus Lutheran Fellowship in North America was established by former EECMY leaders and members living in the U.S.A. at its founding meeting, held 22-23 July 2005 at Concordia University, Irvine, California.

⁸ Minutes of the First Annual Conference of the Evangelical Mekane Yesus Lutheran Fellowship in North America, Silver Spring, Maryland, 3-6 August 2006, 11.



The Late Rev. Dr. Eshetu Ababte, the visionary of the reconciliation project, with the author pausing for a picture in Minneapolis.

Two years had passed since the Maryland conference, and the EECMY and AASECMY had not achieved reconciliation. In fact, at that time, information from Ethiopia indicated that various credible groups had attempted reconciliation but all had failed. The EECMY was now preparing for a final confrontation to overcome the AASECMY by enforcing a court decision and taking control of all church buildings used by the splinter group.

EMYLFNA held its first international conference from July 9th to July 13th, 2008 in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Several members of Mekane Yesus from Norway and Sweden also participated in this significant conference, which was hosted by Rev. Francis Stephanos and Rev. Dr. Alemseged Asmelash. During the meeting, the issue of reconciliation was once again discussed, emphasizing its importance and urgency. After dinner, there was a special prayer time for members to reflect on the conflict within the EECMY church. The question was raised: "What should we do now that the situation between the two churches has not only escalated, but so significantly deteriorated?"



Evangelical Mekane Yesus Lutheran Fellowship of North America and Europe conference, held in Minneapolis Minnesota, in July 2008.

Members present that night were encouraged to examine their individual role in the conflict, even if it was clear that the problem was not among the Mekane Yesus members in the Diaspora but rather between the leadership of the two conflicting churches in Ethiopia. That evening the Holy Spirit took charge and moved in a mysterious and mighty way among and within the individual participants, causing many to say in effect, "You know what? It doesn't matter any longer. I want to admit I have made mistakes; I did have a role in worsening the situation. From now on I do not want to talk about what others have done but about what I did or didn't do."

I (Francis) personally have seen and read volumes of letters and files with hard facts regarding the evidences for the conflicts. I just wanted to disarm myself of all those tools I thought would help me to convince the parties to the conflict of their wrong doings. I said to myself, "All-knowing God is on the throne. He cares for his church more than I do. I will now put to rest all my arguments and evidences, and surrender." Many tears were shed, many hearts were touched, and many wounds started to heal. Some were bewildered; some seemed not to have been affected at all. However all those who had this similar unique experience decided there and then to act on it, particularly the following members whose names are singled out below.

With our heavy burden lifted we moved to form a committee which we named Ministers of Reconciliation and Unification (MRU), comprising the following members:

- Rev. Dr. Eshetu Ababte, chair person, pastor of Long Beach Mekane Yesus Church, Irvine, California, and professor at Concordia University, Irvine, California
- Rev. Francis Stephanos, vice chair, pastor of Addis Hiwot Ministries, Minneapolis, Minnesota, EECMY President Emeritus
- Mr. Endalkachew Kidanewold, secretary, president of Mekane Yesus Congregation, Cary, North Carolina
- Rev. Dr. Berhanu Ofgaa, member, pastor of Ohio Mekane Yesus Church, missionary-at-large
- Rev. Tesfaye Dinagde, chaplain, senior pastor of Mekane Yesus Congregation, Washington, D.C.
- Rev. Yadesa Daba, member, Oromo Redeemer Evangelical Lutheran Church, Minneapolis, Minnesota, EECMY President Emeritus
- Rev. Dr. Alemseged Hagos, member, associate pastor of Trinity Lutheran Church, Minneapolis, Minnesota
- Rev. Dr. Gemechis Buba, member, North America and Caribbean Immigrants Mission Director, ELCA, president of the Oromo International Evangelical Christians Fellowship

The first thing the Ministers of Reconciliation did after that unique experience was to contact the two church leaders in Ethiopia and invite them to come to the U.S.A. to meet with the MRU members for the time of reflection and self-examination. Rev. Itefa Gobena President of the EECMY, after grudgingly accepting the invitation agreed to meet with the MRU as he had a plan to come to the U.S.A. Rev. Ayalew Tesema, President of the Addis Ababa and Surrounding Evangelical Mekane Yesus Church, also accepted the invitation, however he expressed his regrets for not being able to come due to prior commitments. During the meeting with Rev. Itefa Gobena in Minneapolis the MRU members each admitted their individual direct and/or indirect role in the conflict and asked each other forgiveness. With sincere humility, they washed each other's feet when the Holy Spirit moved in a mighty and mysterious way and softened the hearts of all present. All cried bitterly and confessed their individual sin. Touched by the Holy Spirit and amazed by what the Lord had done among us, Rev. Itefa Gobena immediately extended an invitation to the group of eight, requesting that they to travel to Addis Ababa and exercise this mission of reconciliation.

MRU members accepted the invitation and took a solemn vow to travel to Ethiopia to serve as wounded healers and impartially help the leaders of the two churches and their respective board members--to confess their individual wrongdoing and role in the conflict that may have exacerbated the situation which led to the split of the church, to ask forgiveness, and to make commitment to reconcile so that the body of Christ could unite and start healing.

On August 13, 2008, exactly a month after the July conference in Minneapolis, MRU members travelled to Addis Ababa, Ethiopia and extended invitations to the leaders of the two churches, their respective board members, and pastors to join MRU "for a time of reflection and repentance to provide opportunity to all participants to sincerely and honestly engage in a soul-searching exercise as related to the conflict in the church."

The late Rev. Dr. Eshetu Ababte, chair of the MRU, in explaining the mission of the group to the invited church leaders and head of the departments, said, "We were worried about the conflict and misunderstandings in our church and have come to seek solutions by praying to God. We were able to discuss and resolve misunderstandings among ourselves through repentance and forgiveness. We are not trusting in our knowledge nor depending on our finances; we have just come to participate in the ministry of reconciliation, trusting in the Lord who has reconciled us with himself and has given us the ministry of reconciliation. We are not arbitrators, mediators, or those who seek solutions through legal means. As reconciled and forgiven individuals we understand we can now work together for the common cause. We therefore have returned to our country to discharge our duties, desiring our church to reconcile and become united

The leaders, department heads, pastors, and elders of the two churches were invited separately and engaged intensively. The story of Joseph, who was able to reverse his horror story of persecution, assassination attempt, betrayal, sale into slavery, and horrific experience in a dungeon helped many to review their individual role in the light of what Joseph was able to endure, forgive, and forget. Joseph received the bad treatment he was made to suffer with grace, humility, and unbelievable patience. He was honest, feared the Lord, diligent and honest in his different responsibilities, which at each stage earned him trust and significant promotion. God used him to bless the palace of Pharaoh and the land of Egypt. When his brothers came to Egypt in search of food during that severe drought, he didn't meet them with vengeance. On the contrary, he said, "Come close to me ... I am Joseph your brother, the one you sold into Egypt! And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you" (Genesis 45:4-5). He used this God-given opportunity to exercise patience, and forgiveness, build bridges, establish peace, save his family from starvation, and thereby became an instrument in the fulfillment of God's grand scheme of salvation.

The story of Joseph helped us to ask ourselves: Who are we, then, to say we have been wronged so badly that we cannot forgive, forget, and move on?

After singing, praying, and hearing the word of God, the MRU stood before EECMY church leaders and said, "we have laid to rest all our arguments. Please forgive us for all the wrongs we have done. We have forgiven each other and are reconciled. We are wounded healers who have come to be healers and ministers of peace and reconciliation." We took towels and basins of water and washed each other's feet in humility and obedience.

Stephanos, "Challenging the Power Structure"



Mr. Mathewos Adaye washing the feet of the current President of the EEMY

We then invited pastors, elders, department heads, mission representatives, and parish and district church leaders forward, and asked them for forgiveness.



Rev. Itefa Gobena former President of EECMY, and Rev. Ayalew Tesema, former President of AASECMY, forgiving each other and bitterly weeping.

All present wholeheartedly and willingly participated in the public exercise of forgiveness and reconciliation. There is a serious lesson to be learned from this elaborate and extensive project of reconciliation that led to the unification of the church. The scope of this presentation is limited, and I am not able to include more information at this time. In the future, I hope to write a book about this process and experience.

MISSUSE OF POWER INVOLVING FAITH AND MONEY

EECMY early on realized that she could not serve the "whole person" (spiritual and social needs of people) alone. As a result, the church entered into partnership with mission agencies and cooperating partners "as members of the body of Christ and partners in congregational ministry, evangelistic outreach, and human development in the fields of education, health care, and the improvement of living conditions of the people among whom they live and work. . . ." (Agreement on Cooperation Between EECMY and Her Partners). In addition to this basis of cooperation, personnel that were seconded to EECMY from her partners 'are regarded as members of the EECMY on acceptance of its doctrinal statements along with responsibilities, obligations, rights, and privileges of such members, this same document states.

With this arrangement and mutual understanding decades of good cooperation passed by without major problems. However, EECMY continued to be exceedingly concerned about how the Global North was changing, particularly as it relates to cultural norms and modernity (or secularism) as it continued to exert much pressure upon the people of faith who did not see the world's standards compatible with the orthodox Christian faith and confessional standards. Some churches and individuals in the Global South who believe that the Holy Bible is the final authority in matters of life, human behavior, and faith found themselves subjected to ridicule, including being called homophobic, backward, politically incorrect, unable to move with time and developing human culture, judgmental, inflexible, fundamentalists, and not reading and understanding the Bible correctly. This is because most of the Southern churches refuse conformity to the world (Romans 12:2) and political correctness, and choose to uphold the biblical truth they believe in and confess.

Faithful partners are partners with integrity, sharing their opinions and positions honestly, respecting each others' positions regarding issues. Faithful partners do not impose on the other party their belief that has been altered with time. A couple of years ago a church leader from North America was in Geneva for a meeting where he discussed with the EECMY delegates about EECMY's decision to sever its ties with the ELCA and the Church of Sweden in reference to the same-sex issue. It was later reported

that EECMY leaders were told that they did not understand the issue of human sexuality and that the two churches in the Global North were prepared to help them understand the issue. It was further reported that the delegates were told that, unless the church decided to rescind its decision, the assistance that they had been receiving would be stopped. Could this be another example of using church money as leverage or power, leading to the abuse of their stewardship responsibilities in an effort to misguide the faithful?

One may understand their frustration and anger, but it is very difficult to understand how bishops who are called to be shepherds and good examples for their flocks could behave in this manner. Thomas C. Oden, in observing how over time moral judgments and emerging human behavior and cultural changes influence people, says, "When moral relativism puts on the face of being true, then ironically it proves itself to be neither true nor absolute. The incarnation is dismissed as a myth. The atoning work of God on the cross becomes lost in situational ethics. Tolerance of evil becomes a virtue" (Oden, 2007, 116). Our church strongly believes in *Sola Scriptura* and that the word of God never changes (Matthew 24:35), as do human behavior and culture. Every human action must be judged by the word of God, but the word of God cannot be changed by majority votes.

We believe that there needs to be some soul searching, especially when it comes to changing our fundamental faith in the Scriptures, simply to appease the secular world. We ask, what changed? Were not Paul and the early church confronting similar moral decay in the Greco-Roman world? What is new? Men of the Old Testament and evangelists of the New Testament time, along with hundreds of martyrs thereafter, gave their dear lives rather than giving in to the pressure exerted upon them to deny biblical truth. We are all equally challenged to stand for the truth against the secularization of our time which has caused thousands of churches to close down, to be demolished or sold every year.

CONCLUSION

The model of partnership that Jesus gives us is the servanthood partnership--partnership which is expressed in compassion, humility, obedience, and a genuine spirit of service to the point of sacrificing oneself. If we are motivated by fear, love of God, and compassion, we can see the needs of the people and join them to walk alongside in collaboration with them in order to alleviate their sufferings. True partners do not end their relationship after the goal of temporary relief has been obtained, but move into the critical phase of long-term and lasting development for transformation and growth.

Genuine partners are those who are prepared to relinquish the power that comes with material resources, developing a strategy of transferring knowledge-based responsibility through education given to the local communities, which empowers the natives to be the main players of changes they desire to see in their life and environment.

Partners who dispense the resources are stewards of the resources of God, equal players to share the resources in the manner that will benefit all members and maintain dignity.

The churches in the South still believe in the Bible as the true word of God from where they receive their guidance. They believe in the work of the Holy Spirit that convicts sinners and equips the church for the ministry. Partners who believe in the mission of the church will join hands and participate in a relationship that allows sharing of resources among the members and strengthen the promotion of the ministry and service.

When misunderstandings and conflicts occur--and they do--the parties to the conflict need to sit down and make genuine efforts to resolve the problem through honest and truthful discussions. In the case of EECMY and AASECMY who were embroiled in a long-running fight, dishonesty and gross misrepresentation of facts worsened the situation and prolonged the suffering. In that kind of scenario it is good to seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit and the word of God. The Apostle Paul, in his effort to address conflicts, writes, "Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbor, for we are all members of one body. "In your anger do not sin": Do not let the sun go down while you are yet angry, and do not give the devil a foothold" (Ephesians 4:25-26).

Let me conclude my presentation with a quotation from Mother Teresa: "I can tell you about my path but I am a little wire—God is power. Talk to the others, the sisters and the brothers and the people

who work with them. Some are not Christians; talk to them. You will know what it is when you see it. It is very beautiful."⁹

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SPECIAL NOTE

All pictures included in this document were taken by Rev. Francis Stephanos.

⁹ Lucinda Vardey, *Mother Teresa & Simple Path* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1995) xi.