

The text has something to tell us! Bible teaching in the Meserete Kristos Church, Ethiopia

an interview with Kelbessa Muleta Demena, by Mary H. Schertz

What's a typical Bible study in Ethiopia? Where does it take place?

I'll speak specifically about the Meserete Kristos Church. Our Bible studies take place in church members' houses. I would like to be very specific, speaking especially of what happens in the capital city and in the towns. The rural area Bible study is different from cities and towns.

Your home is in Addis Ababa?

Yes. When I'm referring to Bible study, I'm talking about small group Bible study and mostly this comes from our small group experience and home-to-home underground experience.

So this is something you did when the communists were in power?

Exactly.

And you have continued the pattern, even though other options would be available now?

Yes, we have freedom, relatively, to meet in a church building. The building is a very simple meeting place for Sunday worship. But we are still trying to organize all members into a home-to-home Bible study program and then a prayer program as well.

Are prayer and Bible study part of the same meeting or are they separate?

We used to have the prayer meeting and Bible study separately to devote ourselves to long prayer and in Bible study to just focus on Bible study and a short prayer. But nowadays things are changing and people get busy, especially in cities, and it's hard to find a specific time for prayer and Bible study separately, so now we are trying to have it together, part of the time for prayer and part for Bible study, usually for about two hours altogether, maybe one hour for prayer, and one hour for Bible study.

Which do you do first, or does it change?

Usually prayer is first. When people come, usually the person who comes first just starts praying, and we do not necessarily wait till everybody comes.

So that means people come quietly and reverently. There's not lots of small talk before you start?

Right. Usually we start with prayer. Then after prayer we greet each other and chat a little bit and then Bible study. Then we stay together for some extra time of fellowship. The time between prayer and Bible study is very short, just an exchange of greeting, because we want to keep our focus. We want to keep ourselves prayerful.

I find it very interesting that you come in with a certain kind of reverence then, or quiet expectation.

Oh, exactly. We have high expectations for Bible study. Our Bible study is a time to have fellowship with each other, and also it's a time to have fellowship with God. We have high reverence for God's presence. We bring whatever our burden, our challenge, our questions, our difficulties, our struggles to God during our prayer session. Prayer is opening ourselves to God, inviting God and inviting the Holy Spirit's guidance to listen to what God is speaking to us. So we have a high expectation.

How is the leader of the Bible study chosen? By the pastor?

Each Bible study group recruits potential Bible study leaders from their own group, looking at each member's activity, contribution, understanding, interaction, and insight. The leader is the one who intentionally recruits other leaders by observing their gifts and by observing their commitments. Their commitment is an important thing.

How big are the Bible studies generally? How many people?

Usually between twelve and fifteen.

They're the people in a certain neighborhood?

Exactly. Their location matters.

Do people walk to the meetings?

Usually, yes, because it's arranged according to the area.

Do you meet evenings in people's homes?

Usually, yes.

Do you move from home to home or do you stay in one person's home for most of the meetings?

One group usually stays in one home.

And what about the children?

Unless they're very small, they stay at home, because we have extended family.

So babysitting is not an issue.

Not an issue.

Do you have a curriculum for your Bible studies? What is it like?

It includes several basic teachings of the Bible. Sometimes we study a book, such as Galatians, and sometimes we focus on a theme like prayer or purity, something like that.

How does the leader get ready?

We have a special group for the leaders, where all leaders from the whole church come together. If it's a big church, we have two or three. They come together and study together, and then there's Bible study for the leaders and Bible study for the members.

How often do the leaders meet?

Once a week.

So if you're leading a Bible study in Ethiopia in the towns or the capital, then you're committing yourself to two meetings a week, a leaders' Bible study and then with the group.

Yes.

That's a big commitment.

You are right. (Chuckles)

And what do the leaders do when they get together? Do they go through the lesson?

Yes, they study together. And we have a different kind of approach. We have inductive Bible study. It involves study questions for a specific passage. For example, if it is a book study, they study a book together and try to prepare study questions. We have a special group who devotes themselves to create those

Bible study materials. That is usually the role of the education committee. We have different committees that do different things. We have an education committee, a prayer committee, etc. Those teams or groups devote themselves to organizing whatever is their area. So the educational committee is preparing teaching materials, and if an inductive Bible study is planned, they encourage all members to read for themselves, to learn something from the text and share with each other, rather than lecturing.

So people prepare before they come?

They study and read ahead and then they come together. We respond to those study questions for our text. We are trying to learn what exactly that passage says to us.

How many questions for a session?

If we're planning to study the Sermon on the Mount, we divide those three chapters into paragraphs. For example, the Beatitudes we take as one lesson, and we prepare maybe ten questions. A few questions focus on the context and the content of the story, and some questions focus on the interpretation, and some questions focus on application. So mostly we are doing those three things, whether we are studying the Gospels, or Epistles, or Old Testament books.

Are some studies controversial? Do you have disagreements?

Yes, sometimes.

Can you give me an example? Relationship to the state—would that be controversial? Would you have some differences in how you read Romans 13?

It was controversial, because the text encourages us to view rulers as God's agents or God's servants. For some it was really hard to view the communists as God's agents because so many people were killed and we had really bad experiences as a conscientious objector congregation. It is really hard to accept, and to say, "Yes, they're doing God's will; yes, they have the sword which is given—they get all this power from God to kill some people." I mean, it was hard to understand those things.

Well, just because God ordained government doesn't mean that government is always being obedient to God, does it?

Exactly. However, despite this controversy we learned something. Yes, what they are doing is bad, but it's OK to find ways to say no to what government is doing. But it's not OK to hate the government officials, even when they are doing wrong. Some people lost their family members and it's easy to be angry. It's not theory. It was something we were dealing with every day, so it was really hard. *You cannot avoid it. Whereas we in this country can avoid things pretty easily. Do you ever disagree about what the Holy Spirit is saying through a particular text, or what God is saying?*

I don't think we disagree if we see God is speaking. Sometimes we struggle to understand what the text really says, and we need to work to understand more.

I just wondered if there were times when you had to make a decision about what the Holy Spirit is saying. How do those things become resolved if there is any difference of opinion about what the Spirit is saying?

If the person says that he or she gets a message from the Holy Spirit on a certain issue, and if that message contradicts what is written, then that is one way of evaluating or discerning whether that message is from God. We believe the Holy Spirit does not contradict the written word and that is how we discern. And of course, there are things which are not directly written and which are hard to discern, and we bring that to our group, and we discuss and pray together and we support each other to have more discernment. Of course individuals finally need to decide on certain issues for themselves, but still we support each other as a group.

So the written word and the community both assist in the discernment?

Exactly. Both are part of the discernment process.

Do you think the church was more faithful during the communist time?

The church was faithful then, and it is faithful now—but there is more confusion and there are challenges in terms of teaching related to freedom. Some of the controversy has been related to teaching about the health and wealth issues, the prosperity gospel, and it became part of the Bible study discussion. It was very important to address those teachings and to give basic lectures. It was not something leaders could just watch and say “Let's just let

everybody discuss it.” This teaching requires some authority, some deeper theological understanding.

And some guidance?

Exactly.

Has attendance increased or fallen off since the communists are no longer in power?

Well—it’s amazing that the church grew faster during the communist presence than now.

It grew faster under the communists than it has since the communists?

Exactly. The church meetings were just small groups gathering underground. It was hard even for the believers to know how much we were growing. Leaders knew, but it was not something everybody knew, partly because we needed to protect ourselves from the communists. It was better not to have information. Then the church grew very, very fast. The church is still growing but not as fast.

Do the participants in the Bible study have interaction between the Sunday meetings and the Bible study meetings? People are friends and they’re in and out of each others’ houses and they know what the problems are for the most part?

Oh, yes. We are community oriented, so the church is almost like family.

So the Bible study isn’t the only place people socialize?

No, it’s more than that.

You mentioned that you have a curriculum. Does somebody sit back ever and say, OK, over five years we’ve studied six Old Testament books and one New Testament book, and we need to study more New Testament books. Is there somebody who takes that sort of long view?

Yes. Especially if we do basic teaching with a book study, that kind of teaching is centralized.

For the whole country?

For the whole region, and sometimes even for the whole country. We divided the country into different regions, and we have special key leaders in each region, and we have teaching programs or training programs in each region twice a year. So we have a

curriculum, and the key leaders in each region have their own sessions before teaching in small groups in their own churches.

So it's pretty organized and intentional? Are there requirements for leaders?

Of course. If they are teachers, they are required to take all courses, whether the study is regional or central. It's important that they can communicate well, if they're going to teach.

The leaders are evaluated on content?

Exactly.

And also on teaching ability? And their spiritual life?

And their spiritual life. And testimony from others, whether they are living what they believe, etc.

Is there anything you'd like to say, Kelbessa, that I haven't asked about?

I don't know whether we talked about the role of the Holy Spirit in Bible study.

What do you want to say about that?

We have a conviction the Holy Spirit is the one who enables us to understand the text and to live the text and to share the text, and that is very, very important. It's not something we can do by ourselves. We really understand that scripture is—no matter how much we try to learn—something beyond us. It's something that belongs to God, so we invite God's presence, to really get the point. In the Emmaus story from Luke 24, when Jesus spoke to the disciples, they were sensing something deeper and their hearts were burning.

Yes. *"Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road?"*

Yes, that is how we see it. The role of the Holy Spirit is not only giving us understanding, but also making the word alive. For example, when we are reading that healing can take place, physical healing, we strongly believe that whatever works there in the Bible also works today. Some of the miracles that happened in the book of Acts are also happening in our ministry. And that is certainly the role of the Holy Spirit. We see the blind get sight. That was what really frustrated the communists. They tried to

discourage the teaching, and they tried to counter it, but something was taking place.

And they didn't know what to do about it . . .

They were sending their spies and they were really testing what was happening. And it was true! And you know, it's hard to argue against it. The best way is just to shut up.

And let the acts speak for themselves.

Yes, that is exactly what I mean when I speak of the role of the Holy Spirit. It's not something we produce. God is working actively with God's word. God's word is not Paul's word or Peter's word or somebody else's. If it's Peter's word, Peter has died. Paul is not here. But something is happening, which means Christ is alive.

So present experience proves the text, over and over and over.

Exactly. And it gives us hope and it gives us courage to give ourselves despite what is taking place. Persecution is taking place, even in different regions, even now. But believers are still committing themselves to follow Christ despite the hardships. I think that is naturally impossible.

We are not capable of that as human beings.

Exactly. Yes. If this word is not God's word, why should I give myself, why endanger myself by committing myself to God? But I see God's grace and God's encouragement, God's power to commit myself. The more I commit myself, the more I see God working and people getting freedom from their bondage. In my context people live under demonic force and that is a serious thing. They fear demons. They fear Satan and they fear spiritual force. The spiritual force in my context is not our imagination.

It's real and present.

It's not something we create psychologically.

You don't make your demons. They're already there.

When new believers start reading, just reading the Bible, sometimes demons reveal themselves. But people get free from that, and they find peace. They find peace within themselves and they find consolation among their family. Their lives change. So over and over and over we see how this text is alive, how God is

working through these things. That is what I mean when I talk about the role of the Holy Spirit. The Bible is not something we just read just for information. It gives us transformation. This is the word which gives us formation in our Christian life to live as disciples of Christ. That's why, in our seminary class "Teaching the Bible in the Congregation," I try to verbalize my opinion when it seems to me that the Bible is not taken seriously. This is what I'm observing. My observation might be wrong, but . . .

Oh, it's not entirely wrong, for sure.

You know, farmers in Ethiopia are reading the Bible. They're not highly educated. Some of them have only completed grade three, grade four; that is the only formal education they have. They can barely read this Bible, but they are excited and they are sharing with others, and their sharing changes the community's life. They're sharing the consolation among the tribes who kill each other. And their sharing changes the family relationships, the husband and wife, the children. Some of them get freedom from addiction.

In your country you are reading the Bible in the context of God's activity among you as a community. That's the context and that's what affects how you read the Bible and what you understand of it.

Yes.

And that is the work of the Spirit.

I get frustrated when the Bible is viewed only as a subject of my research, something I work on to test whether it is correct. And when I become silent about the texts, and when the texts almost become silent, I just say, "No! No! The text has something to tell us!" That's my deep cry.

About the interviewee

Kelbessa Muleta Demena graduated from Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Elkhart, Indiana, in May 2010, and plans to return to Ethiopia in November 2010 to pastor and teach there. He is married and has two children. Read the full text of this interview or listen to it by following the link at www.MennoVision.org.