

# Anabaptism in Ethiopia

## Six markers of the Meserete Kristos Church

Henok T. Mekonin

In visiting the Meserete Kristos Church in Ethiopia, European and North American Mennonites might be surprised at what they see, given the church's hybrid character and high level of ecumenicity. And yet, this church is deeply rooted in Anabaptist values and has evolved in response to various religious, economic, and political factors.

Meserete Kristos Church (“A church founded on Christ”<sup>1</sup>), based on 1 Corinthians 3:11 (assumed to be Menno Simons’s favorite verse),<sup>2</sup> started as a church with ten people’s water baptism in Addis Ababa in 1951. The Meserete Kristos Church (MKC) now consists of 1,400 congregations and 922 church planting centers, comprising 450,793 baptized members, 63,586 believers under instruction in preparation for baptism, and 247,091 not-yet-baptized children—totaling a faith community of 761,470. In 2022 alone, 23,426 new converts came to know the Lord Jesus Christ as their personal Savior and Lord, and thousands have been baptized.<sup>3</sup>

The MKC is organized into fifty-three regional offices across a country of 123,000,000 people with a land mass about the size of the province of Ontario, or twice the size of Texas. Each region has its own office that coordinates the ministries of its outlying congregations.

The MKC head office in Addis Ababa gives general oversight to all fifty-three regional offices and administers special programs in collaboration with the regions.<sup>4</sup> Some of those programs include education, evangelism

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1 Carl E. Hansen, *Into Abyssinia: The Odyssey of a Family* (Bloomington, IN: WestBow, 2023), 18.

2 Lydette S. Assefa, “Creating Identity in Opposition: Relations between the Meserete Kristos Church and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, 1960–1980,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 83, no. 4 (October 1, 2009): 544.

3 Desalegn Abebe Ejo, “Meserete Kristos Church (MKC), 1951–2023” (fundraising presentation, June 26, 2023). In 2023, Desalegn Abebe, the president of MKC, was in the United States for a two-month fraternal visit, and these are the statistics he used from the previous year, 2022.

4 Ejo, “Meserete Kristos Church (MKC).”

and missions, translation and production of important materials into local languages, peace and reconciliation, prison ministries, women's ministry, and relief and development. All of these programs reflect MKC's Anabaptist roots. The various ministries also illustrate how mission is an integral aspect of the MKC's identity with its integration of evangelism and social activism.<sup>5</sup> The church continually demonstrates this commitment by focusing on the following six markers.

### **A teaching church**

First and foremost, MKC emphasizes the authority of the Bible and the importance of being a teaching church. Since its inception, MKC has held a high view of the authority of Holy Scripture as found in the Protestant versions of the Bible. Born within the context of missionary-founded Bible schools, elementary schools, and the renowned Nazareth Bible Academy, MKC has consistently been recognized as "a teaching church" and remains dedicated to biblically based education. The founding missionaries carried that emphasis with them as they established the Dresser Bible School in Nazareth, being sure to include the Bible in their curriculum as they trained medical assistants for the hospital work.<sup>6</sup> They then established the Nazareth Bible Academy as a full boarding high school to train leaders for the church. The Bible was integrated into the curriculum. They felt that any educated Christian must have a good knowledge of the Bible. Even during its darkest days of Marxist persecution when all those institutions were lost, secret home cell churches were nourished by carefully prepared lesson guides to facilitate Bible study.

Anabaptist Christians in Ethiopia employ a hermeneutic of trust when reading the Bible. Since 1994, to safeguard, consolidate, and unite its leadership in a commonly held Anabaptist theological stance, MKC has been developing the Meserete Kristos College as its national school, which now offers baccalaureate and diploma programs in Bible and Christian Ministry. Further, the regional offices have launched local Bible institutes offering Bible and ministry training on the postsecondary diplo-

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5 Henok T Mekonin, "Caring for People above All Else: Integrating Prayer, Relief, and Peace to Build God's Church," *Anabaptist Witness*, <https://www.anabaptistwitness.org/2023/03/caring-for-people-above-all-else-integrating-prayer-relief-and-peace-to-build-gods-church/>.

6 Chester Lehman Wenger and Sara Jane (Weaver) Wenger, *Bearing Fruit: A Collection of Memories as Told to and Shaped by Deborah Anna Good and Betty Wenger Good-White* (self-published, 2017), 117.

ma level to several hundred local leaders on weekends. Curriculum and qualifications of teachers are monitored by the Meserete Kristos College at Debre Zeit, which grants the diploma.

### **A witnessing church**

Second, the MKC is committed to being a witnessing church. It continues to see the Great Commission as its primary calling. Its Evangelism and Missions Department encourages congregations to reach out and establish “daughter” congregations. There are also “tent maker” church planters supported by the head office, along with numerous international “tent makers” in other countries. And yet, all members of the church are involved in these ministries. All members have the authority to preach the gospel, heal the sick, and cast out demons.



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One of the major factors contributing to the rapid growth of the church is its complete reliance on the work of the Holy Spirit in the day-to-day activities of

hundreds of churches across the country. The influx of a high number of people coming to Christ and being filled with the Holy Spirit has led to a complete transformation of their lives, both inwardly and outwardly. This transformation has not only strengthened the church but also attracted other people to come to Christ. The emphasis on prayer and group Bible study has brought about changes in the behavior, attitudes, speech, interests, and morals of new believers, as well as how they spend their time. There is the conviction that all should preach the gospel to their neighborhood under the motto of “Agenda 28/19,” which stands for Matthew 28:19, the text the current president of MKC has cited to encourage all MKC members to preach the gospel. Further strategies are employed, such as limiting the maximum number of baptized members in one local church to one thousand. Once a community has reached this number, it divides into two, thus creating another congregation. Each local church has an outreach center with the goal of increasing its numbers annually by 10 percent.

### **A giving church**

Third, the MKC is committed to be a giving church. Although the MKC is in one of the poorest countries in the world, all members are expected

to contribute a tithe, no matter how small, to their local church office. Beyond the tithe, members bring offerings to the worship services on Sundays. With most members being students or young people with little means, church income is still small.

Nevertheless, with the annual income from all tithes and offerings, the churches support 4,482 full-time ministers (pastors, evangelists, missionaries, and teachers) and 1,282 support staff. Money from tithes and offerings also contribute to administrative expenses and to funds aimed at building or improving church facilities. Of the ministers who are supported, 386 are missionaries or church planters. Church planters' salaries are supported 75 percent the first year, 50 percent the second year, and 25 percent the third year. It is assumed that an emerging new congregation should be able to carry the full responsibility to support its leaders thereafter. Further, the department gives short training to one hundred international "tent making" missionaries who take jobs in neighboring countries. Some of these are quasi-clandestine operations, the details of which are kept secret for security reasons.

### **A compassionate church**

A further commitment of the MKC is to be a compassionate church, a wholistic ministry to a society in great need. This work is facilitated through MKC's Development Commission (MKC-DC), which operates as a semi-autonomous branch of the head office to administer over sixty-five projects relating to poverty alleviation, such as famine relief, food security, child and youth development, HIV-AIDS related ministries, and conflict management and peace building. Administering the successful completion of these projects requires the employment of 393 personnel with an annual budget of multiple millions of US dollars supplied by Ethiopian believers and international non-government agencies such as Mennonite Central Committee, Canadian Food Grains Bank, Tearfund UK, Pact, Compassion International, and other organizations.

### **A church that visits those in prison**

Fifth, the MKC is committed to visiting those in prison. Its prison ministry was started in 1993 when prisoners at Jimma read the MKC's magazine, *Miskir* (Witness) and wrote to MKC for help.<sup>7</sup> Today this ministry is present in thirty-three of the nation's 134 prisons. This ministry follows

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7 Ejo, "Meserete Kristos Church (MKC)."

a wholistic approach, meeting spiritual and humanitarian needs. The prison ministry has placed full-time ministers in prisons who evangelize, teach, counsel, lead Bible studies, give discipleship training, and lead the congregations that have formed inside the prison walls. In some prisons, the ministry even builds latrines, dormitories for women and their dependant small children, and chapels for worship. It also establishes kindergartens for the small children who live with their incarcerated mothers. Congregations have emerged in most of these prisons, and in some of the prisons more than one half of those incarcerated are now committed Christians!

The prison ministry's goal is to bring transformation in the lives of prisoners mentally, spiritually, ethically, physically, and socially. It hopes to see those incarcerated transformed to become upstanding citizens committed to promoting peace and justice in their communities and to reduce and prevent crime in Ethiopia. To do so, it seeks to give a general practical education to all prisoners in areas such as work ethics, government and citizenship responsibilities, human rights, mental health, children's physical and mental development and the role of parents, HIV-AIDS awareness and prevention, peace and justice and reconciliation, and forgiveness as an alternative to revenge killing.

### **A peacemaking church**

Finally, the MKC is committed to be a peacemaking church. MKC's wholistic concept of ministry includes one of reconciliation between the individual and God and between individuals—and to work for peace within a society torn by conflict. Right after the establishment of the church, through the church's experience, MKC leaders became more aware of the fragility of unity and the possibilities for disaster that conflict can bring to an otherwise healthy church. The first responsibility of the peace ministry was to create awareness throughout the denomination's leadership of the centrality and importance of living together in peace and harmony, viewing conflict as a potentially positive growth-factor, and learning the techniques of transforming conflict into a resolution that brings health and growth to personal and institutional relationships. Since that time, the peace office has been preparing training manuals for peace committee membership, conflict transformation and peace building, restorative justice, stress and trauma healing, and HIV-AIDS. With these preparations and materials, the peace ministry is gearing up to transform MKC into a truly historic peace church. The Meserete Kristos College is also

contributing to the promotion of peacemaking as an integral part of the Christian ministry by offering a peace minor with its BA in Bible and Christian Ministries.

## Conclusion

The Anabaptist tradition is rooted in several important theological beliefs and values that have been practiced, shaped, and reshaped by Mennonite communities over nearly five centuries across various parts of the world. The MKC, deeply rooted in Anabaptist values, has emerged in response to various religious and political factors in Ethiopia.<sup>8</sup> The various influences that have impacted the MKC, such as Pentecostalism, evangelicalism, and Anabaptism, reflect the hybrid nature of the community. This hybrid nature has been present in Anabaptism from its inception. For the MKC, Anabaptism is a part of the broader evangelical movement in Ethiopia.

Within the MKC, there is a high level of ecumenical sharing and involvement among leaders and members. Congregations often invite preachers from other denominations to speak on Sundays, or they join together for area conferences and the like. Yet, the six markers of the MKC mentioned above illustrate how the church's work is deeply embedded in its identity, emphasizing prayer, teaching, and a complete reliance on the work of the Holy Spirit.<sup>9</sup> This is what present-day Anabaptism looks like in the Ethiopian context.

## About the author

Henok T. Mekonin is global leadership collaborative specialist at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Elkhart, Indiana, where he provides specialized expertise for the MATGA Ethiopia partnership while also supporting the planning, implementation, and evaluation of AMBS's Global Leadership Collaborative (GLC) initiatives more broadly. Henok's home congregation is Nazareth Western Meserete Kristos, which is part of the Nazareth Regional Office. He is married to Misgana Eshete, and they have two children.

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8 Every time I read about the sixteenth-century Reformation in Europe, it strikes me how similar the theological, religious, social, and political issues are to what happened in Ethiopia. See especially chapter 3 of Tibebe Eshete's book to observe the similarities and differences in theological, religious, social, and political issues between what happened in Europe and what occurred in Ethiopia. Tibebe Eshete, *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia: Resistance and Resilience*, reprint edition (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2017).

9 Mekonin, "Caring for People above All Else."