

# **Mission:Reflexion – 200 Jahre Berliner Mission**

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## **Chapter 8: Inscribed in the DNA: Mission as a basic motif of the church**

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*The Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus (EECMY) is very much focused in mission today as it has been from its inception. The church's numerical growth in the last six decades was tremendous, where its membership has grown from 20,000 in 1959 (when the church was established as national church) to about twelve million in 2023 among a population of 120 million. This fast growth puts the church as the largest Lutheran church globally.*

*The EECMY believes this incredible growth is the outcome of her natural focus on mission. As its DNA, mainly at the grassroots level, the identity of the EECMY is depending on its understanding of mission. Besides deeply believing mission as its core identity, the EECMY practice mission by all its members. Each and every member of the church is expected to bear witness about the salvation in Jesus Christ to those who do not have Him as their Savior and Lord. Thus, this article tries to explain why and how the EECMY is very much focused on mission today, especially among the traditional religion and the Muslims.*

### **Introduction: Three identified pillars of the EECMY**

At the turn of the millennium, the EECMY rearticulated its three pillars as areas of focus in its strategic directions in the years to come. These three include unity, self-reliance, and mission. After briefly defining the three pillars, I will discuss the third one—mission, the concern of this paper, in a slightly detailed manner.

The EECMY has been challenged with various kinds of diversities, including doctrinal tradition, ethnic identity, gender difference and injustice, liturgical practices, generational

gap, etc. It was very imperative for the church to focus and redefine what it means **unity in Christ** against all kinds of diversity and difference. Among other diversities, ethnic conflicts and personal interests arising from it posed an existential problem in the church and it was agreed to be intentional to work on unity if the church has to continue as a church of Christ. This has been a challenge yet to be worked out in depth and based on the scripture as the challenge continues to be the most difficult one the church is facing, to the extent that becoming a hindrance for its core identity, mission.

The second pillar, **self-reliance** (Eigenständigkeit), arises from the challenge of dependency syndrome as the church has been almost completely dependent on resources coming from abroad for all its undertakings. It was a very bold, but challenging decision the church made when it was resolved to freeze the block grant coming from the western countries and mission agencies, Until 2002, the EECMY has been receiving two major kinds of funding from the West, namely block grant and earmarked grant. The block grant is a fixed annual budget sent to each unit of the church as the main source of income. In other words, the basic budget of the church comes from the west and it is called as “block grant,” and it was with this fund the church runs its day to day activities. The second one earmarked grant, which is a budget of projects. Unlike the block grant, earmarked grant is basically project based fund changing depending on the project. This was another existential treat for many units of the church unless it is addressed adequately. Self-reliance was a natural area of focus for the church to continue to exist. It is believed that it needs a united and self-supporting church which can adequately perform mission.

However, above all, **mission** was a foundational and a pillar why the church itself exists. EECMY believes that mission is reaching out to those who do not become children of God through faith in Jesus Christ. We believe that the church is sent to bring the good news of Jesus Christ so that everyone who believes in Him is saved. When the church considers this as a pillar for its faith and practice and focuses in the years to come, it is more specific in terms of reaching out to unsaved people globally, i.e., beyond Ethiopia. The establishment of its **International Mission Society (IMS)** a decade back is the result of this strong conviction.

## Foundations for the Evangelistic Mission of the EECMY

EECMY's evangelistic mission is grounded on a number of elements. First and foremost, as Lutherans, we believe that "Luther's concept of *deus absconditus*, humankind's common experience of 'God-hidden' — in contrast to *deus revelatus*, 'God-revealed-in-Christ' — is a fundamental resource for Lutheran mission theology and practice."<sup>1</sup> Any faith without Christ does not have a salvific effect eternally. Thus, it is mandatory for any human being to believe in Christ if they are going to be saved.

Second, this truth itself is grounded in firm scriptural teaching, where we confess and affirm *sola scriptura*. The teaching of the entire New Testament and in particular texts such as Jn. 3:16-18, Matt. 28:18-20, Act. 4:12, Jn. 14:6, Tit. 2:11-14 clearly point to Jesus Christ as the only way God has provided us with for our eternal salvation.<sup>2</sup>

Thirdly, when the protestant missionaries first came from Germany and Sweden to Ethiopia, they did two things; they tried to reform the Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity and converted people from traditional religion. Their conviction and teachings are based on the above two elements – Christ alone and Scripture alone. This was the strong tradition the EECMY and other Ethiopian Evangelical churches strongly cling with. However, as the reformation attempt of the Orthodox Church failed to succeed, many Orthodox priests, deacons, other ministers and the laity, who were thirsty of the enlightening gospel message, become part of the evangelical movement at the inception of the EECMY in 1959 and before. Almost all of the EECMY founding leaders joined the church in this way.<sup>3</sup>

Last but not least, the practice of mission to those in traditional religion has had huge liberating impact from the inception of the Evangelical Churches in Ethiopia until today. Traditional religious practices have plenty of harmful and evil practices. Among the many ethnic groups in Ethiopia, with a differences in forms, they all have a kind of harmful practice in one way or the other.

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<sup>1</sup> Schroeder, Edward H., "Using Luther's Concept of *Deus absconditus* for Christian Mission to Muslims," A paper presented at the Luther Research Congress, Copenhagen, Denmark, August 4-9, 2002 Seminar: Luther's Writings on the Turks. Accessed on 25/11/2023 from <https://crossings.org/luthers-concept-of-deus-absconditus/>.

<sup>2</sup> This position can be widely argued from the entire scripture, however, as the scope of this article does not allow me, I leave it here.

<sup>3</sup> In fact, unlike the then Ethiopian Orthodox *Tewahedo* Church (EOTC), the current EOTC has gone through several reform processes in the last four to five decades. As a result, many within the EECMY questioned if the EOTC should continue as a mission field for evangelism.

For instance, in my own ethnic traditional religion, with many other harmful traditional practices and sacrifices, they used to sacrifice their own children for the witch-doctors and diviners, or through them, to the evil spirit working in and through the religion. When the teaching of good news of Jesus came, it came with liberating and enlightening power. It is because of this liberating power of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the church has evidently grown from almost nothing a hundred years ago to nearly twelve million current membership of the EECMY.

As my own father told me, his conversion<sup>4</sup> changed his life that of many others in the community towards liberty and life without fear. In those days, where the people were still worshipers of evil things, as understood by Evangelicals (Evangelische), it was the good news of the Jesus Christ that opened their hearts and helped them to transfer from darkness to wonderful light, as it is written in 1 Peter 2:9-10 – “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, **in order that you may proclaim the excellence of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.** Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy” (NRSV).

In our area, as it was the same in many other parts of the country, when the gospel has come, it came with power of casting out demons, getting rid of the fear of death, enlightening them from ignorance of God-given power they own. Exorcism, casting out demons, liberating people from bondage of both sin and the fear of evil, and healing from various kinds of sickness have been unique practices and experiences why many come and join Evangelical churches.

Not only these spiritual aspects, mission in the EECMY is very much wholistic.<sup>5</sup> Mission and evangelism include education, health, agriculture, diaconia, and other development services. It was out of these concepts and practices later on the EECMY adopted her mission as a wholistic – serving the whole person. This includes addressing both spiritual

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<sup>4</sup> It has to be noted that in the EECMY, “conversion” is the right biblical word used in this context, unlike more liberal way of saying it “proselytize”, which is an alien term for Christian mission.

<sup>5</sup> For a detailed discussion on EECMY’s wholistic approach to mission, see Deressa, Samuel Yonas, “Church and Development in Ethiopia: The Contribution of Gudina Tumsa’s Holistic Theology” in *Lutheran Mission Matters* 25, no. 1 (2017) pp. 150-164; at <http://lsfm.global/>. In this article, Deressa further argues the shift in the Western missionaries’ approach to mission, starting in the early 1960s, from a wholistic approach to mission to a new emphasis on social action and community development. However, the EECMY wholistic approach integrates mission both as proclamation and development.

and physical needs of human beings. One cannot be complete without the other; hence, they both go hand in hand.

If I share my own experience of mission and church planting, it starts from the passion of my parents, both of whom are very passionate about mission and church planting. From our family daily devotions, prayer times, and bible studies,



almost every element of our Christian experience directs us to bearing witness about the good news of Jesus Christ for others, who are going to hell if they do not believe in Him, the only way of eternal life. The same teaching and practice continued both in the church and the high school Christian students' fellowships, everything focused on mission.

When I joined the university, there was University Christian Students' movement, where the same trend continues even in a stronger and more organized way. At the completion of our university education at public universities in various fields of studies, there was a final training of evangelism and mission where we were commissioned as missionaries of the Gospel wherever we would be assigned to serve. This was the time of the communist regime in Ethiopia, where Christians were severely persecuted. The persecution itself became a cause of being a missionary against such denial and atheism.

Following my graduation from a university, I was assigned both as a teacher and librarian of a high school by the government. The religious circle I served as a government school teacher was among nominal Orthodox dominant area with sizable, but a minority, group

of Muslims. By converting both from nominal Muslims and the Orthodox members, I planted a couple of churches in the northern part of the country.



It was during the Communist regime I was assigned to a town called Alamata (the then Wollo region, Amhara area during that government, and later on included in the Tigraye region during the EPDRF's regime. Currently, it is one of a conflict area between the Tigrians and the Amharas). Once I arrived there in 1985, I started some religious conversation with some young people and

a number of them showed interest to follow Jesus. Then we started regular Bible study and weekly prayers with them in my small rented room with about 3-6 young men. Some of them started to bring their friends and they joined us. As the number grows from time to time, one group took a formal confirmation class by pastors from EECMY's North Area Work Office.

It was in the third year after my arrival, we were able to have the first believers confirmed and become communicant members of the EECMY. At that point, some of the converts were expelled from their parents' home and they became homeless. Then, it was my responsibility to take care of them wholistically. I would say, it was just like the time of the first century church, we shared everything we have together and those who were expelled from their families stayed at my rented room. That was the first church planted in Alamata town in my room. We made a local kind of bed in mud and mattress of straw, where about seven of us lived together in one room. It was both a church and a living place.

In fact, we faced severe persecution both by the communist regime and the Orthodox Church, including imprisonment, torture, and discrimination from the community and every social aspect. Amidst the persecution and poverty, the number of converts gradually increased and with a connection of the convert, we started the same kind of small group in the neighboring town called Kobo, 30 kms away from Alamata. Today, in about

four decades, there are three EECMY congregations and seven outreach centers. In addition, from this movement, some later on joined other protestant denominations and altogether, there are more than ten congregations 15 outreach areas. This is how the church continued to expand even in such areas where persecution is rampant.

In conclusion, my own testimony and that of my parents are simply generic examples how millions of EECMY members involve in mission as their DNA. This is the cause many have died and ready to give their lives. Needy women contributed from their mites for the cause of mission. Young women and men left their comfort zone to bear witness about Jesus Christ in very difficult contexts and amidst persecution. Reaching out to those who do not know Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord is at the center of EECMY mission. Hence, mission defines our identity as Christians in the EECMY.

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