

## Witness and resistance

On Jan. 24, 1982, leaders in the Marxist government of Ethiopia, who had seized power from Emperor Haile Selassie six years earlier, initiated a series of restrictive policies against the Meserete Kristos Church (MKC), a renewal movement of some 5,000 members that had emerged out of Mennonite mission work begun in the mid-1940s.

In the following weeks, the government nationalized numerous MKC properties, imprisoned all six of its ordained leaders, froze congregational bank accounts and forbade public worship.

The aftermath of that story is relatively familiar to North American Mennonites. Rather than fading away, the church flourished during the years of persecution, adopting new mission and leadership strategies as an underground movement. By the time repression came to an end in 1991, MKC had grown to 34,000 baptized members. That growth continued in the following decades so that today MKC claims some 375,000 members, making it the largest national group in the entire Anabaptist-Mennonite global family.

**Less well-known, however,** are the details of how MKC members adapted to the new context of government hostility. Recently, Brent Kipfer, a doctor of ministry student at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, completed a thesis focused on the nature of MKC leadership during the Ethiopian Revolution. Drawing on extensive interviews with 24 MKC members, Kipfer's description of their strategies of witness and resistance are relevant for all Christians.

Under the revolutionary government, MKC members faced a relentless barrage of tactics pressuring them to conform, including interrogations, surveillance, false accusations, social ridicule, harassment by hostile mobs, economic threats to business and property, forced participation in patriotic rallies and, ultimately, arrest and execution. MKC members did not all respond to these pressures in the same way. But patterns of resistance emerged. And ultimately the church not only survived but flourished.

One key theme, noted by every MKC member Kipfer interviewed, was a clear sense of the spiritual foundations of resistance. When public worship was forbidden, MKC quickly adapted to form cell groups of five to seven people, who gathered secretly in homes for regular Bible study, prayer and mutual support. These groups—joined by a network of lay leaders and a shared curriculum of

discipleship training—were constantly growing and dividing as they welcomed new believers and trained new leaders.

But despite persecution, the MKC witness was public as well. Sometimes it was as simple as a wall motto (“Live the whole day fearing God”) posted visibly in a home or place of business. Some members made it a point to pause for prayer before a meal in public settings or pinned a cross to their clothes. Sometimes, when forced to attend Marxist indoctrination classes, MKC leaders listened carefully to the arguments and offered critical rebuttals. MKC members explicitly rejected slogans such as “Ethiopia first” or “the revolution is above everything,” insisting that loyalty was “first to Jesus and then to country.” Composing and singing new songs was a form of resistance to the ever-present revolutionary chants. When Jazarah, an MKC member, was forced to participate in patriotic events, she always kept a purse in her left hand and an umbrella in her right hand so she would not have to raise her hand with the crowd. “I went through all those years without saying a slogan,” she said.

**MKC members soon came to regard** persecution as a crucible for spiritual formation. “We learned through persecution,” said Desta, “that if you live a holy life...you will face suffering of one type or another.” Virtually every member also recalled a moment when they were no longer afraid. Zere, for example, who was initially hesitant about hosting cell groups in his home, testified that after three days of prayer and fasting, “I realized that God’s presence, God’s glory, was really surrounding us and that we should not be afraid of any coming danger.”

According to the Global Anabaptist Profile, nearly 20 percent of Mennonite World Conference members “often” experience persecution. Mennonites in the United States cannot claim to be included in this number. But recently U.S. citizens were asked to participate in a National Day of Patriotic Devotion where the slogan “America First” was frequently invoked, and nationalist pressures are mounting.

As lines of loyalty, identity and allegiance in the United States come into sharper focus, MKC brothers and sisters may have much to teach us about witness and resistance. Are we ready to listen? Are we ready to consider the spiritual dimensions of resistance in our own uncertain political context? **TM**



**John D. Roth** is professor of history at Goshen (Ind.) College, director of the Institute for the Study of Global Anabaptism and editor of *Mennonite Quarterly Review*.

Are we ready to consider the spiritual dimensions of resistance in our own uncertain political context?