

## 'The past is never dead'

The great Southern novelist William Faulkner once wrote, "The past is never dead. It's not even past." I sensed the profound truth of those words recently at a Sunday morning worship service at the Obwollo Mennonite Church, a congregation of some 50 people who meet in a simple, one-room church house along a small unpaved road just outside Kisumu, Kenya.

**One stream of the Kenyan** Mennonite Church (KMC), still evident in the worship service at Obwollo, goes back to 1934, when Elam and Elizabeth Stauffer, along with John and Ruth Mosemann, arrived in the small fishing village of Shirati, Tanzania, as missionaries sent by Eastern Mennonite Missions (EMM). Over the next decades, North American missionaries left a profound mark on the growing church in Tanzania and on the Kenyan church that emerged across the border in the Lake Victoria region of Migori and Kisumu. In contrast to the free-flowing Pentecostal orientation of many churches in the region today, for example, the Obwollo congregation still follows a carefully planned order of worship, distributed to worshippers as they enter the building.

As I arrived, the congregation was singing, "What a Friend We Have in Jesus" in Swahili, slowly and unaccompanied. The announcements of upcoming meetings, a formal report on the election of church officers, the restrained tone of presenters and, indeed, even the structure of the church itself—a design by missionary Clyde Sherk that was replicated in many Kenyan congregations in the region—all hinted at the deep and lingering influence of Lancaster (Pa.) Mennonite Conference.

At the same time, however, another current from the past was also evident in the worship service. In 1942, the East Africa Revival—a movement of the Holy Spirit that emphasized public confession, evangelical outreach and ecumenical unity—swept through the Mennonite mission school in Shirati. Two young Kenyan students, Ogwada Okach and Nikanor Dhaje, transformed by the revival, returned to their homes in Kenya during a break, preaching the gospel as they went. Their preaching sparked a local mission initiative in Kenya that led to the formation of numerous congregations and the emergence of the KMC. An hour into the worship service at Obwollo, I heard clear echoes of that indigenous renewal movement. It started with a succession of choirs—first the children, then the young people,

then a women's choir, followed by virtually the entire congregation—that filled the small building with a new sense of energy. Singing in their native Luo, accompanied by tambourines, drums and keyboard, the congregation took on a new character. The sermon—delivered with great vigor by a young Baptist guest—lasted nearly three hours.

In conversation with church members following the service, new themes emerged that are shaping the congregation today. Church members worry, for example, about the rising influence of Islam, the grinding poverty of their region, the economic strains imposed by refugees, and the future of their young people, who seem to be less committed to evangelism and the well-being of the church. They asked many questions about current politics in the United States, recalling their own contested political elections in late 2007, which triggered a spasm of ethnic violence that left deep scars in the KMC. How do other churches in Mennonite World Conference (MWC), they wondered, respond to these challenges?

**It was fitting that my visit** to the Obwollo Mennonite church ended with a mile-long pilgrimage up a small path to Angira Hill, where I visited 95-year-old Musa Adonga in his simple tin-roofed home. Born in 1921, when Kenya was still a British colony, Adonga's life has spanned the entire history of the KMC. He first encountered Mennonites in Tanzania when his father migrated to the Musoma District and joined the Mugango Mennonite Church. But in 1956, transformed by the East Africa Revival, Adonga returned to Kenya and embarked on a remarkable career of church planting and leadership. As a leading bishop he worked alongside EMM missionaries as well as the leadership of the Tanzanian Mennonite Church, who claimed spiritual oversight over the young church in Kenya. He was directly involved in a series of painful conflicts that led to the emergence of the KMC as an independent body; but he also was part of several memorable services of reconciliation and forgiveness.

Though nearly blind, his legacy lives on—Adongo's daughter, Rebecca Osiro, the first woman to be ordained in the KMC, was elected vice president of MWC last year, and numerous grandchildren are active members of the KMC.

In the presence of Musa Adonga and the Obwollo Mennonite Church, Faulkner's words ring true: "The past is never dead; it's not even the past." **TM**



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