

## **Thriving under Persecution: Meserete Kristos Church Leadership during the Ethiopian Revolution (1974-1991)**

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*Abstract:* Under persecution during the Ethiopian Revolution (1974-1991), highly committed men and women led the Meserete Kristos Church (MKC) through remarkable transformation and growth. Although persecution has been an enduring reality in the global church, leadership in that context has received scant research attention. Drawing on interviews and other first-person accounts of faithful MKC leaders in the Derg era, this essay explores the dynamics of their experience using the leadership theory of Robert E. Quinn as a conceptual lens. Persecution forced MKC leaders to clarify the priority of their commitment to Jesus and the mission of the church. Prepared to die for the sake of the gospel, they demonstrated leadership marked by a highly effective pursuit of purpose, compelling integrity under pressure, attractive love, and remarkable creativity—leading to extraordinary results.

Between 1974 and 1991 the Meserete Kristos Church (MKC)—an Anabaptist Christian renewal movement in Ethiopia—experienced a profound transformation. Under pressure from a Marxist regime bent on eradicating evangelical Christianity from the country, the MKC grew from 800 to 34,000 baptized members, greatly expanded its geographic reach, dramatically increased the pool of people in active ministry, became financially self-supporting, adopted a radically new ministry structure, and nurtured a contagious spiritual vitality among its members. A remarkable group of leaders—both men and women—played an essential role in this transformation, leading the MKC with courageous purpose, integrity, love, and creativity.

This essay, based largely on extensive interviews with twenty-four MKC leaders, explores the dynamics of leadership that enabled the MKC not only to survive but also to flourish under circumstances of persecution and extreme hardship. Research participants were selected based on the recommendations of various people with personal knowledge of MKC

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leaders who were active and effective in ministry during Ethiopia's revolutionary period.<sup>1</sup> The interviewees included nineteen men and five women who held a wide variety of leadership roles in the Addis Ababa, Nazareth, Wonji, and Middle Awash regions between 1974 and 1991, including cell group leaders, deacons, elders, full-time evangelists, teachers and administrators of church schools, choir leaders, congregational board members, youth leaders, employees of Christian non-governmental organizations, members of the denominational executive committee, and a leader of a national interdenominational evangelical church association. Some were established as leaders prior to 1974; others stepped into leadership during the revolutionary era.<sup>2</sup> The particular stories, reports, reflections, and insights shared by research participants and others provide a "thick description" of MKC leadership

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1. This essay follows Irving Seidman, *Interviewing as Qualitative Research: A Guide for Researchers in Education and the Social Sciences*, 4th ed. (New York: Teachers College Press, 2013), 13, describing those interviewed as *participants* to highlight their active role in reconstructing their experience rather than as *subjects or respondents*, which imply passivity. They are also referred to as *interviewees*. With the exception of four interviewees who asked that their real names be used, research participants are represented by pseudonyms, signaled by an asterisk following the interviewee's name.

2. Interviews were conducted March-May 2014. Translation from Amharic to English. provided by Alemu Checole, was required for fourteen participants. During the years of the Derg, nine interviewees were based in Addis Ababa, fourteen in Nazareth, four in Wonji and one in Middle Awash; a few moved or commuted between two communities in that time. Most carried multiple leadership roles in the church between 1974 and 1991: 1) seven led cell groups; 2) three were choir leaders; three others were choir members involved in evangelism, prayer, and spiritual care; 3) two served on a congregational board; 4) one as congregational treasurer; 5) six served in administration and/or taught at one or more church schools; 6) two were part of a team that developed Christian education and apologetics resources for MKC and other Ethiopian evangelical churches; 7) two worked for Christian nongovernmental organizations; 8) four served as deacons in their local church; 9) sixteen as elders; 10) six were part of MKC's Executive Committee prior to the closure of the church in 1982; 11) four served on MKC's Evangelism Committee, which oversaw the denomination during the underground years after Executive Committee members were imprisoned; 12) five were full-time evangelists, leading local congregations and pioneering itinerant ministry; 13) two women were married to full-time evangelists, actively sharing in their ministries; 14) one was a gate watcher, a role in Addis Ababa which involved visiting scattered church members and organizing them into cell groups; 15) one led a national interdenominational association of evangelical churches; 16) three served with their congregation's pastoral care committee; 17) two were children's Sunday school teachers; and 18) four were youth leaders; 19) eleven were also employed in small business or government-owned health, food-processing, or manufacturing enterprises; 20) eight had been part of another evangelical group before joining MKC; and 21) sixteen came from the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church. Of these, four were involved with the *yäsämay bärhan* (Heavenly Sunshine) movement in Nazareth prior to joining MKC. Seventeen joined MKC before the 1974 revolution; seven became members during the Derg years.

experience. At the same time, the diverse narratives reveal several significant themes.

Because national identity in Ethiopia had historically been closely connected with allegiance to the emperor and the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, MKC members were on the religious periphery of their society. The distinctive patterns of leadership that emerged within the MKC church contrasted with many traditional assumptions in the broader Ethiopian context. Studies of leadership in Ethiopian culture highlight an emphasis on hierarchical authority and unquestioning obedience to leaders, usually male, who regard power as a scarce commodity to be defended. Loyalty to the leader has been prized above organizational effectiveness, and tradition above innovation.<sup>3</sup> Meserete Kristos Church leaders would challenge many of these leadership assumptions and norms—particularly while persecuted under the revolutionary government known as the Derg.

One helpful model for conceptualizing the distinctive qualities of MKC leadership during the Derg comes from Robert E. Quinn, a professor of business administration, management, and organizations at the University of Michigan. Although Quinn's theory of "The Fundamental State of Leadership" emerged in an American context quite different from that experienced by persecuted church leaders in Ethiopia, his exploration of effective leadership in crisis offers a compelling model applicable beyond corporate boardrooms. Quinn argues that leaders tend to act in predictable ways:

1. Comfort-centered: they are preoccupied with problem-solving, in a state of reactivity toward circumstances.
2. Externally directed: they define themselves by how they think others see them and how well they are able to obtain external resources.
3. Self-focused: they put their own interests ahead of the collective good.
4. Internally closed: they ignore information and external feedback signaling the need for change.<sup>4</sup>

Crisis, however, forces leaders (and potential leaders) to make a fundamental decision: Will they withdraw from the challenge at hand or

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3. Alemayehu Mekonnen, "Culture Change in Ethiopia: An Evangelical Perspective," (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock, 2013), 33-58, 63-65; Christopher Clapham, *Transformation and Continuity in Revolutionary Ethiopia* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 21-23; Hassan Yemer, "Applicability of Transformational Leadership Models in the Ethiopian Context" (Ph.D. diss., Walden University, 2009); Wondaferahu Adnew Ersulo, "Bridging the Gap: Towards Developing Appropriate Leadership Approach for the Ethiopian Kale Heywet Church" (Ph.D. diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 2009), 54-56, 62-72, 116-117.

4. Robert E. Quinn, *Building the Bridge as You Walk on It: A Guide for Leading Change* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004), 14-26.

fully commit to a purpose greater than their own survival? The moral authority to lead, according to Quinn, is grounded in one's readiness to "go forth and die," which in turn invites others to make a similar commitment.<sup>5</sup> Such unreserved personal commitment spurs "deep change" in leaders, who shift into a transformational mode of leadership. Transformational leaders, argues Quinn, become more:

1. Purpose-centered: as leaders clarify the result they want to create, they become engaged, full of energy, holding an unwavering standard while pursuing a meaningful task.
2. Internally directed: leaders examine their own hypocrisy and close gaps between their values and behavior, reaching higher levels of personal security and confidence.
3. Other-focused: leaders place the common good and the welfare of others above their own, increasing in authenticity and transparency, nurturing trust, and enriching the levels of connectivity in their relational networks.
4. Externally open: leaders begin to experiment, seek honest feedback, and adapt, functioning with increasing awareness, competence, vision, and creativity.

These four dimensions of transformational leadership—purpose, integrity, love, and creativity—offer a useful theoretical lens for describing and interpreting the MKC leadership experience under persecution.

### THE MENNONITE MISSION IN ETHIOPIA

Mennonite missionaries arrived in Ethiopia in 1945, initially under the auspices of the Mennonite Relief Committee (Elkhart, Indiana) and Mennonite Central Committee (Akron, Pennsylvania), with a focus on bringing clothing, food, and medicine to the country following the Italian occupation during World War II. In 1946, the missionaries negotiated a five-year contract with the government, enabling them to open a hospital in Nazareth, a strategic town of 12,000 inhabitants east of the capital city of Addis Ababa. Short-term mission workers served as doctors, nurses, and administrators who treated patients and trained health assistants (known as dressers) to work in hospitals and rural clinics. In 1948, Mennonite missionaries also began teaching in government schools. In 1951, after responsibility for the Mennonite mission in Ethiopia had been

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5. Robert E. Quinn, *Change the World: How Ordinary People can Accomplish Extraordinary Results* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 19, 179, 242.

transferred to the Eastern Mennonite Board of Missions (EMM), the government authorized the mission to expand its work to areas designated “open” by its 1944 Missions Decree. EMM established clinics, elementary schools, and a hospital in the towns of Deder, Bedeno, and Dire Dawa in Eastern Ethiopia, and a School for the Blind in Addis Ababa. It later oversaw the operation of Christian bookstores in the Addis Ababa, Nazareth, and Dire Dawa.<sup>6</sup>

Early in the 1950s, a small number of Ethiopians—many of them hospital employees, guards, kitchen workers, or assistants—began meeting with missionaries in their Sunday worship services in Nazareth. As Ethiopians made professions of faith in Jesus Christ, however, questions emerged regarding baptism. To baptize someone of Ethiopian Orthodox background in the “closed” area of Nazareth would violate the 1944 Missions Decree. Reasoning that it would be legal to baptize in the “open” area of Addis Ababa, nine baptismal candidates traveled there on June 16, 1951, where they were joined by a tenth new believer. They were the first converts baptized by Mennonite missionaries in Ethiopia. The Meserete Kristos Church marks this event as its beginning.

Within a few days, however, a report of the baptisms reached the governor of Nazareth, and then the emperor, who expressed his personal disappointment. The missionaries pledged never to do this again. In the future, Ethiopian lay leaders would secretly baptize new believers in the presence of a few trusted witnesses meeting in a home at night. Although missionaries initially helped with instruction for baptism, they did not attend the events themselves. Thus, from the time of the church’s beginning, Ethiopian believers were empowered to baptize.

In 1952 the Mennonite mission opened a Dresser Bible School in Nazareth with permission to teach the Bible alongside medical courses. In response to biblical teaching, many students embraced the gospel and began to share their testimonies and to engage in evangelistic outreach in various neighborhoods. Their training made it easy to gain good work positions as dressers at the Wonji sugar plantation, where they distributed biblical literature, taught and organized small home fellowships among migrant laborers, and played a significant role in spreading evangelical Christian faith in that community. By 1958, the Nazareth congregation had

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6. Significant accounts of the early MKC history are found in Alemu Checole, assisted by Samuel Asefa, “Mennonite Churches in Eastern Africa,” in *Anabaptist Songs in African Hearts*, ed. John A. Lapp and C. Arnold Snyder (Intercourse, Pa.: Good Books, 2006), 207-210; Gemechu Gebre Telila, “History of the Meserete Kristos Church at Wonji Gefersa, Ethiopia during the Derg, 1974-1991: ‘God Works for Good,’” (MA thesis, Eastern Mennonite Seminary, 2002), 14-20; Nathan Hege, *Beyond Our Prayers: Anabaptist Church Growth in Ethiopia, 1948-1998* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1998), 38-146; Tibebe Eshete, *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia: Resistance and Resilience* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2009), 106-119.

grown to about 150 members, and small congregations of believers had also emerged at four other Mennonite mission locations.

### *Leadership Formation in an Emergent Church*

In 1959, building on their experience with the dresser school, the Mennonite Mission established a top-tier secondary school, Nazareth Bible Academy, under the leadership of Chester Wenger. Convinced that “when you are educating, you are training leaders,” Wenger cast a vision for education that would expand students’ potential and provide a foundation for their future development that would not only benefit the church but also Ethiopian society as a whole. In addition, he wanted to impart skills to future church leaders that would enable them to make a living without depending on a salary from the church. The school quickly gained a reputation for “one of the best-quality educational programs in the country,” and attracted students from a broad constituency. Many came to a personal faith in Jesus.<sup>7</sup>

Around the same time, missionaries and Ethiopian believers began planning for a national church structure and the transfer of church leadership to indigenous believers. In January 1959, Ethiopian and North American representatives from EMM gathered in Nazareth to formulate the principles and basic structure for organizing the church. Over the following years leadership of the newly-established Meserete Kristos Church (meaning “Christ is the foundation”) gradually shifted to a General Church Council composed entirely of Ethiopians. By 1965, Ethiopians who had previously been serving as assistants became the officers of the Executive Committee—with Million Belete serving as chairperson and Beyene Mulat as secretary—and missionaries became their assistants. In 1969, EMM discontinued electing members to the MKC Executive Committee. A similar process of leadership transfer unfolded in local congregations and mission institutions.<sup>8</sup>

Despite the mission’s priority on leadership training and transfer, no Ethiopian believers were formally ordained for ministry until Million Belete in 1965. Wenger cited two reasons for relying on lay leadership: 1)

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7. Wenger, phone interview, June 29, 2008; Hege, *Beyond Our Prayers*, 78; Tibebe Eshete, *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia*, 111-112.

8. Alemu Checole, “Mennonite Churches in Eastern Africa,” 209-210, 218; Hege, *Beyond Our Prayers*, 134-137; Tibebe Eshete, *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia*, 116-117; Yeshitela Mengistu, “The Story of the Meserete Kristos Church,” student paper (Mekane Yesus Seminary, 1983), 13-14.

an organized church with ordained leaders (particularly bishops) would likely have been more threatening to Ethiopian Orthodox leaders; and 2) in other EMM mission contexts positional leadership offices had become status markers provoking conflict and distracting from ministry. Nathan Hege, a missionary and pastor in the MKC, later identified a third rationale: missionaries feared that ordained leaders would convey the image of a typical Ethiopian Orthodox priest focused on religious ritual. Emphasizing the priesthood of all believers, MKC wanted to avoid creating a clerical hierarchy. Adopting a functional approach to leadership the church provided people with jobs but not titles. Wenger argued that this relatively “loose” leadership structure of the MKC would free it for continuing expansion. Thus, prior to the socialist revolution of 1974, only six MKC members were formally ordained. Many lay members, however, served as evangelists, deacons, elders, and pastors. Designated lay people performed baptisms. Evangelists, or church planters, were paid by the churches, but pastors—who concentrated on training leaders and administration—supported themselves financially with some assistance from freewill offerings.<sup>9</sup>

In 1965, with Ethiopians filling all roles as officers of the MKC Executive Committee, the church applied for legal registration with the government, but was refused. Even so, MKC began printing its own letterhead, opened bank accounts, and functioned as though it were registered.<sup>10</sup>

### *Revival Conferences and Holy Spirit Renewal*

In the late 1950s, under the leadership of young Ethiopian Christians with varying degrees of connection to the MKC, Nazareth was becoming a significant hub for spiritual renewal, particularly as one of several fountainheads for a charismatic/Pentecostal movement that would transform many churches in Ethiopia. Beginning in 1955, the MKC church in Nazareth hosted annual revival conferences on the mission hospital compound led by gifted youth leaders. Hundreds of people from all over Ethiopia came to “sing, study the Bible, and hear sermons of salvation and revival.”<sup>11</sup> During the three-day conferences, participants shared meals, slept in the same hall, and developed lifelong friendships. Historian Tibebe Eshete has argued that these gatherings “created a new associational space needed by Ethiopian youth” who were navigating disorienting cultural changes in their society. Whereas traditional social

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9. Hege, *Beyond Our Prayers*, 146; Wenger, phone interview.

10. The Mennonite Mission in Ethiopia remained the legal entity and held title to property and vehicles. —Hege, *Beyond Our Prayers*, 137-138, 144-146; Wenger, phone interview.

11. Hege, *Beyond Our Prayers*, 139-140.

groups were adult-oriented, the revival conferences offered opportunities for youth to develop leadership skills. They also provided an early forum for nurturing Ethiopian hymnody, particularly through a new style of singing introduced by the choir from the Addis Ababa School for the Blind and advanced during the Pentecostal movement of the 1960s.<sup>12</sup>

In 1962 six students from Atse Gelawdeos High School in Nazareth approached an EMM missionary doctor, Rohrer Eshleman for help in learning English. Eshleman agreed, using the Gospel of John as a textbook. Understanding their reluctance to identify too closely with the mission due to the stigma of embracing a foreign faith, Eshleman assured them that they did not have to leave the Orthodox church to become a born-again Christian. The central issue was trusting in Jesus rather than rituals for their salvation. Encouraged, the students began holding prayer meetings at school and eagerly studied the Bible whenever they could meet. As their numbers grew, group members were increasingly the target of ridicule and hostility, and were no longer allowed to meet at the school. In response, Mennonite missionaries rented a house for them to host group meetings. In the relative freedom of this space, students gathered for regular prayer, Bible study, and fellowship. They adopted the name *yäsämay bərhan*—"Heavenly Sunshine"—from the title of a favorite song. By the end of 1964 the group began to fast and fervently pray for the Spirit of God to baptize them, impart spiritual gifts, and enable them with "divine power to reach out to others with the message of salvation."<sup>13</sup> As they prayed together for a more direct, personal, and powerful experience of God, some felt the "touch of the power of God," leading them to speak in languages they did not understand, accompanied by ecstatic joy.<sup>14</sup>

*Yäsämay bərhan* members became more fervent in faith and courageous in their witness. Their worship was marked by new freedom, accompanied by shouting, loud prayers, singing, prophecy, deliverance

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12. Ibid.; Tibebe Eshete, *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia*, 118-119, 278-283. Lila W. Balisky, "Songs of Ethiopia's Tesfaye Gabbiso: Singing with Understanding in Babylon, the Meantime and Zion" (D.Miss. diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 2015), 68-70, notes that before the 1960s, songs in urban evangelical churches usually used Western tunes and hymn texts translated into Amharic. Musical experimentation at the MKC School for the Blind contributed toward the development of indigenous hymnody that was neither Western or in Ethiopian Orthodox Church chant style. Often accompanied by guitars and accordions, new songs expressed the heart and faith of believers, typically using pentatonic tunes and couplet rhyming in the style of traditional Ethiopian poetry.

13. Tibebe Eshete, *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia*, 119-120.

14. Ibid. Notable treatments of *yäsämay bərhan* history and its relation to MKC include Alemu Checole, "Mennonite Churches in Eastern Africa," 220-221; Hege, *Beyond Our Prayers*, 147-155; Tibebe Eshete, *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia*, 119-121.



from evil spirits, and healing from sickness. Many in the surrounding community were offended by the demonstrative faith of *yäsämay bərhan* and pressured them to stop. Nevertheless, the movement continued to attract students from Orthodox background.

Although Mennonite missionaries and MKC leaders found some of their charismatic expressions strange, they were convinced that these young Christians were sincere in their faith and tried to support them. Thus, when *yäsämay bərhan* youth were arrested for “unorthodox” gatherings, MKC members advocated for their release at the prison and served as their guarantors. In 1965, the group held a spiritual life conference in a tent on the Nazareth hospital grounds. The following year they rented a theater for the conference, but police broke up the meeting at the request of Orthodox leaders. *Yäsämay bərhan* finished the conference in the hospital chapel, with permission from the MKC elders. One MKC leader and youth mentor, Gebre Sellassie Habtamu, occasionally taught the Bible in *yäsämay bərhan* meetings. One evening when the youth prayed for him, he too fell to the floor and began praying in tongues.

Historian Jörg Haustein identifies *yäsämay bərhan* as one of five distinct revival streams that emerged in the early 1960s which would profoundly shape Ethiopian evangelicalism. Although many members of these movements joined together to form the Full Gospel Believers’ Church—or Mulu Wengel Church—in 1967, the Nazareth *yäsämay bərhan* group maintained its own identity.<sup>15</sup>

All Ethiopian Pentecostal groups faced significant resistance from government and local religious leaders. Like other Pentecostal meetings, gatherings of the *yäsämay bərhan* members in Nazareth were declared illegal, and their members suffered arrests and beatings. Nevertheless, the movement persisted by moving underground.<sup>16</sup> One reason for its success, according to church historian Alemayehu Mekonnen, was that the Pentecostal movement expanded opportunities for participation in church leadership, particularly for women. Encouraged to share their spiritual gifts, women were active in evangelism, teaching, singing, and leading group discussions.<sup>17</sup> MKC members supported *yäsämay bərhan*

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15. Haustein, *Writing Religious History: The Historiography of Ethiopian Pentecostalism* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2011), explores explanations for the independence of *yäsämay bərhan* from Mulu Wengel, and the persecution of Ethiopian Pentecostals from 1967-1972.

16. *Ibid.*, 130-131, 137-187; Tibebe Eshete, *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia*, 169-189.

17. Alemayehu Mekonnen, *Culture Change in Ethiopia: An Evangelical Perspective* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock, 2012), 102.

young people with prison visits, food, and other material and spiritual support.

By 1973, the MKC consisted of eight congregations with 800 members. It operated eleven elementary schools, two junior high schools, one boarding high school, two hospitals, two clinics, two guest houses, a bookstore with several branches, and a literature program.<sup>18</sup> That year, on the eve of the socialist revolution, *yäsämay bərhan* leader Solomon Kebede became a member of the MKC church in Addis Ababa and encouraged other group members to do the same. Although grateful for the sympathy and solidarity of the missionaries and MKC, some *yäsämay bərhan* students balked at the idea, fearing that union would lead to a loss of spiritual vitality. By the following year, however, the whole group followed Solomon's lead and joined the MKC. According to Tibebe Eshete, after *yäsämay bərhan* united with MKC, more youth in Nazareth were attracted to the church, youth-related church activities expanded, and charismatic renewal began to permeate the church. MKC students going to Addis Ababa for higher education carried their evangelistic fervor with them and became conduits for spreading the Pentecostal experience. Many members of *yäsämay bərhan* went on to serve not only as leaders of MKC but of the national evangelical movement as well, providing strategic guidance to churches amid the stresses of the Derg regime.<sup>19</sup>

The formation and growth of MKC marked a new dynamic in the Ethiopian evangelical movement. Whereas earlier Protestant missions had focused largely on rural areas, the Mennonite mission concentrated on urban contexts with a strong emphasis on education and a vision for equipping young people to serve as disciples of Jesus Christ, leaders in the church, and contributing members of society. The young men and women of the MKC were part of an emerging evangelical "elite . . . highly assertive and enthusiastic about their faith," with expertise and creativity "to organize, network and move across different areas to impact diverse sectors of Ethiopian society."<sup>20</sup> As with others in the Pentecostal movement, the testing they received in the latter days of imperial Ethiopia would help prepare them for harsher conditions under the Derg regime.

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18. Nathan Hege and Richard D. Thiessen, "Meserete Kristos Church," *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, [http://www.gameo.org/encyclopedia/contents/meserete\\_kristos\\_church](http://www.gameo.org/encyclopedia/contents/meserete_kristos_church) (accessed Nov. 2014).

19. Hege, *Beyond Our Prayers*, 154-157; Tibebe Eshete, *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia*, 122-123, 188.

20. Tibebe Eshete, *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia*, 123-124.

## THE ETHIOPIAN REVOLUTION

On September 12, 1974, following years of escalating tensions over corruption, rising prices, the land tenure system, and famine, the Armed Forces Co-ordinating Committee—popularly known as the Derg (Amharic for “committee”)—deposed Haile Selassie as emperor of Ethiopia, marking the end of the Solomonic dynasty.<sup>21</sup>

A diverse group comprised of various military factions, the revolutionaries who formed the Derg initially pursued an ideologically vague philosophy under the slogan: “Ethiopia First, without any bloodshed.” By November, however, more radical elements led by Mengistu Haile Mariam assumed control of the government under the revolutionary banner of “Ethiopian Socialism.” On December 20, 1974, they clarified their position as “scientific socialism,” established through a one-party state, public ownership of the whole economy, and collective agriculture. They also called for national unity and equality for all ethnic, religious, and cultural groups.

Between 1974 and 1991 Ethiopia was profoundly transformed. The revolutionary government nationalized banks and insurance companies along with major commercial and industrial enterprises, and, eventually, all property. The government recruited and mobilized young people to teach literacy, improve hygiene, and build latrines, wells, clinics, and schools in rural Ethiopia. Students became essential agents of the new political order, charged with organizing farmers into peasant organizations and town dwellers into urban administrative neighborhood councils known as *kebeles*. The *kebeles*, each with elected leaders, formed the basic units of a bureaucratic hierarchy extending from local communities to the national level.

Following a Russian-style Marxist-Leninist ideology and adopting the rhetoric of class struggle, Mengistu’s program identified enemies of the revolution—including landed aristocrats, factory owners, and wealthy business leaders—and made plans to eliminate them. In 1976, Mengistu consolidated his power with a program of unprecedented brutality and bloodshed known as the Red Terror, in which thousands of people were arrested, tortured, and killed, often by local *kebele* defense squads.

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21. Accounts and analysis of the Ethiopian revolution are found in Andargachew Tiruneh, *The Ethiopian Revolution, 1974-1987: A Transformation from an Aristocratic to a Totalitarian Autocracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Christopher Clapham, *Transformation and Continuity in Revolutionary Ethiopia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); Donald L. Donham, *Marxist Modern: An Ethnographic History of the Ethiopian Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Gebru Tareke, *The Ethiopian Revolution: War in the Horn of Africa* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009); Teferra Haile-Selassie, *The Ethiopian Revolution, 1974-1991: From a Monarchical Autocracy to a Military Oligarchy* (London: Kegan Paul International, 1997).

Estimates of those killed by the Derg during the Red Terror of 1977-1978 range from 150,000 to 500,000.<sup>22</sup>

The trauma of the Red Terror virtually eliminated open civilian opposition to the Derg, but regional resistance continued. In the first decade of the regime, the government faced numerous armed insurgents, including Eritrean secessionists and Tigrayan guerrilla fighters. Externally, Mengistu successfully resisted a Somali invasion in the Ogaden region in 1977-1978. That effort, bolstered by military assistance from the USSR and Cuba, rallied significant nationalist support for the revolutionary government.

### THE EXPERIENCE OF CHURCHES AND LEADERS UNDER THE DERG

Many Pentecostal and evangelical Christians in Ethiopia greeted the revolution as a new era of social justice and religious freedom. Very quickly, however, the government's consolidation of political power around Mengistu, its embrace of Marxist ideology, and its ability to exploit traditional religious prejudice led to widespread persecution of evangelical Christians. The responses of individual church leaders to the Communist challenge ranged from fear and paralysis, to accommodation and compromise, as well as critical engagement and courageous witness.

#### *Freedom of Religion: Rhetoric and Reality*

Amid the unrest of early 1974, 100,000 Muslims—with some Christian support—called for the separation of church and state, and religious equality for all Ethiopians in a public demonstration in Addis Ababa on April 20. By granting these requests in the draft constitution of August, the Derg won significant goodwill from those who were marginalized because of their faith under Haile Selassie's regime. Thus, Islam gained formal legal status;<sup>23</sup> the Ethiopian Orthodox Church lost its privileged

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22. For a recent assessment of scholarship on the Ethiopian Red Terror, see *Documenting the Red Terror: Bearing Witness to Ethiopia's Lost Generation*, ed. Anne Louis Mahoney (Ottawa: Ethiopian Red Terror Documentation and Research Center, 2012). From a political science perspective, Edward Kissi, *Revolution and Genocide in Ethiopia and Cambodia* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2006), describes the Ethiopian experience as *political massacre* rather than *genocide*, arguing that the Derg targeted perceived political opponents across religious and ethnic lines.

23. Øyvind M. Eide, *Revolution and Religion in Ethiopia: The Growth and Persecution of the Mekane Yesus Church, 1974-1985* (Oxford: James Currey, 2000), 112-114; Calvin E. Shenk, "Church and State in Ethiopia: From Monarchy to Marxism," *Mission Studies* 11:2 (1994), 203-226. Three Muslim ceremonial days were declared national holidays, with promises to end

relationship to the state;<sup>24</sup> and the Full Gospel Believers' Church, which had spent the final two years of the imperial government underground, convened a meeting that month to re-establish their national church network.<sup>25</sup>

Derg leaders initially stressed the compatibility between Christianity and socialism through popular music, slogans, public statements, and newspaper commentary. In September 1975, however, the government prohibited religious education and church-run private schools, and launched an aggressive campaign to promote atheism, supported by cadres who had received ideological training abroad, primarily in the Soviet Union. In 1976 the Derg instituted mandatory Marxist-Leninist "discussion forums" for indoctrinating employees and established a political school for cadres and government officials—later supplemented by regional training centers to spread communist philosophy and atheism.

As local government administrative units, kebeles became strategic centers for propagating Marxism. Tibebe Eshete observed that

*Kebele*-based obligatory indoctrination sessions were deliberately scheduled on Sunday mornings to compete with Christian religious observances. The battle for winning souls, especially of the youth, was conducted on all fronts, through distractive activities like youth festivals and rallies called *Kinet* [literally, revolutionary art and music

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discrimination against Muslims in the civil service and armed forces. Still, many would be disappointed to learn that less than 1 percent of the restructured civil service would be Muslim, and the Derg would blame Muslim traders for inflation on commodities and violently pressure Muslim religious leaders to comply with government demands.

24. The land reforms of 1975 greatly reduced its holdings, and the government's token compensation—a small annual allowance to the church—left nearly 200,000 priests and church workers without financial support. In February 1976, when patriarch Abune Tewoflos objected to the policy and refused to collaborate with the Derg, he was deposed, arrested, and eventually executed in July 1979. His replacement, Tekle Heymanot II, was more compliant. Still, between 1977 and 1982, numerous Orthodox leaders were jailed, forced to retire, or executed for speaking against the regime. Jörg Haustein, "Navigating Political Revolutions: Ethiopia's Churches During and After the Mengistu Regime," in *Falling Walls: The Year 1989/90 as a Turning Point in the History of World Christianity*, ed. Klaus Koschorke (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2009), 117-136; Shenk, "Church and State in Ethiopia," 207-217; Eide, *Revolution and Religion in Ethiopia*, 111-112, 166-168, observes that with the consecration of thirteen new bishops in January 1979, conflict between the government and the Orthodox Church not only waned, but the church became "a vehicle of the regime."

25. Shenk, "Church and State in Ethiopia," 209; Tibebe Eshete, *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia*, 264-265, 418, n. 2; Haustein, "Navigating Political Revolutions," 130-134. Religious freedom was affirmed in the April 1976 National Democratic Revolution Programme of Ethiopia. The "Revised Constitution," adopted January 1987, reaffirmed the legal separation of church and state, and guaranteed freedom of conscience and religion, with the caveat that "religion was not to be exercised in a manner contrary to the interests of the state and revolution, public morality or freedom of other citizens." This gave legal room for the repression of evangelical Christians, deemed to be enemies of the revolution.

shows] where the youth were forced to participate in songs and dramas that glamorized the revolution.<sup>26</sup>

In the early years of the revolution, many evangelical Christians adopted a stance of constructive, critical engagement. In his study of the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus, for example, Øyvind Eide describes its initial search for common ground with the revolutionaries. Long passionate about justice, Gudina Tumsa, the church's general secretary, convened a series of seminars on Christianity and socialism involving leaders from Mekane Yesus, Ethiopian Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Meserete Kristos, and Qale Heywet churches. While clarifying that Christianity and socialism were divergent paths, the seminars (February 1975-October 1976) emphasized the church's social responsibility and expressed support for political and economic change. In a March 1975 pastoral letter, Mekane Yesus leaders affirmed the church's identification with the poor, its desire to share the pursuit of a more just society, and its readiness for the government to take over institutions of education, medicine, and development. Even so, it cautioned, "Ideologies cannot be considered as absolute. Complete allegiance is due to God and God alone."<sup>27</sup>

The uncertainties of the time brought evangelical Christians together. In September 1976, about 1,300 church leaders, pastors, and evangelists from a dozen denominations gathered at the Nazareth Bible Academy "to discover their unity and affirm the lordship of Christ." The conference led to the formation of the Council for Evangelical Christians in Ethiopia, with leadership from Mekane Yesus, Meserete Kristos, and Mulu Wengel churches. The annual Pastor's Conference, supported by World Vision Ethiopia and interested Christians at Nazareth Bible Academy, became a significant setting for interdenominational encouragement and relationship-building in the Derg era and beyond.<sup>28</sup>

A month later, nine Christian groups formed the Council for the Cooperation of Churches in Ethiopia, a broader alliance that included the Catholic and Orthodox churches, to serve as "a corporate voice for the faith groups in the evolving political and social reality of Ethiopia." The goals of the initiative included: 1) countering the perception that the

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26. Tibebe Eshete, *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia*, 211-219.

27. Eide, *Revolution and Religion in Ethiopia*, 58-61, 115-118; Tibebe Eshete, *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia*, 224-225, 232-235; Hausteim, *Writing Religious History*, 214-219, explores the ambiguity of Pentecostal responses to Ethiopian socialism in the early Derg years.

28. Hege, *Beyond Our Prayers*, 166; Tesfatsion Dalellew, Tibebe Eshete, *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia*, 228-229.

church was socially uninvolved; 2) outlining parameters for responsible participation in the new political reality; and 3) guarding the church against being swallowed up or marginalized by the state. Gudina Tumsa, elected as the group's first chairman, worked to build bridges among the evangelical, Orthodox, and Catholic churches, and to help Christian leaders critically engage Marxism with firm grounding in "Scriptures and not socialist ideology."<sup>29</sup>

*Cultural Revolution: Escalating Persecution*

On September 12, 1978, with open civilian opposition eliminated through the Red Terror, Mengistu announced the beginning of an Ethiopian cultural revolution. Modeled on the Chinese experience, the initiative intensified the persecution of evangelical Christians. Government-controlled media called "for the eradication of 'backward practices' and the rooting out of alien values associated with foreign influences"—an allusion to evangelical Christianity, to which he applied the label *Mete* (newcomer/foreigner).<sup>30</sup> Although Pentecostalism was overtly apolitical, Derg officials perceived it to be a threat against the revolution, not only because of its bold witness to Christian faith but also because it drew from the same broad constituency that Marxists counted on for intellectual leadership—urban, educated young people. Indeed, the derogatory label *Pente*, initially applied only to Pentecostal Christians, was soon being used against all evangelical Christians to suggest imperialist and counterrevolutionary allegiances. Some kebele cadres declared, "We shall build our revolution on the graveyard of the Pentecostals."<sup>31</sup>

In May 1976, the government evicted the Mulu Wengel Church in Addis Ababa from their facilities. From October 1978 until the fall of the Derg in 1991, the Mulu Wengel Church reorganized into house fellowships and remained underground. Other smaller Pentecostal groups faced similar repression.<sup>32</sup> Although Mekane Yesus and Qale Heywet church members in south and southwestern Ethiopia had welcomed the revolution with enthusiasm, the new regime now marginalized these groups, branding them Pentes, imprisoning leaders and evangelists, closing churches, burning buildings, and publicly

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29. Tibebe Eshete, *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia*, 225-227.

30. Ibid., 207, 217, 237-238, 420, n. 28, notes the media began using the term *Mete* as earlier as 1975 to refer to evangelicals, branding them "a product of foreign religion, a brainchild of imperialism preaching otherworldliness and a slovenly attitude detrimental to the progress of the country."

31. Ibid., 263-272.

32. Hausteine, *Writing Religious History*, 197-211.

destroying Bibles.<sup>33</sup> In the face of this persecution, Gudina Tumsa offered an inspiring model of faithfulness and integrity that led to his arrest, imprisonment, and, ultimately, his execution on July 28, 1979.<sup>34</sup>

### THE MESERETE KRISTOS CHURCH: PUBLIC AND UNDERGROUND MINISTRY

The Meserete Kristos Church had been in a process of creative transformation even before the socialist revolution. As a relatively new Christian community, embracing and integrating influences from the Mennonite mission and an energetic charismatic movement, the church sought to establish a common identity, practices, and mission as Ethiopian evangelical Christians. Life under the Derg regime became a crucible that profoundly shaped the MKC and its leaders.

The experience of the Meserete Kristos Church under the Derg can be roughly divided into two parts: a period of cautious, open ministry during the first seven-and-a-half years of the revolution until the closure of the church on January 24, 1982; and the underground years from January 1982 to the fall of Mengistu Haile Mariam's regime in 1991.

Like many other Ethiopian evangelicals, Meserete Kristos Church members initially greeted the revolution with the hope that it would lead the country to greater justice and democracy. Consistent with both Pentecostal and historic Anabaptist-Mennonite understandings of government, MKC leaders wanted to avoid direct political association with the state. Quickly, however, MKC gained a reputation for its biblically-based teaching that equipped Christians for the challenges of the revolution and its philosophy. Already in 1975 MKC church leaders appointed a committee to examine scientific socialism and to prepare study resources for the broader church. The team spent the 1975 and 1976 summer vacations at Nazareth Bible Academy, writing material on Marxism, science and faith, creation and evolution, persecution and

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33. Donham, *Marxist Modern*, 152-165; Eide, *Revolution and Religion in Ethiopia*, 168-170, 183-199; Hausteim, *Writing Religious History*, 16, 229-247; Tibebe Eshete, *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia*, 231-251. While the charismatic movement spread through all Ethiopian evangelical churches during the years of the Derg with varying degrees of acceptance and resistance, the accusation of being *Pente* was politically rather than theologically driven. According to Tibebe, the word was closely associated with being a *Semetawi* (sentimentalist), *Hasabawi* (idealist), and *Isere Abyotegna* (anti-revolutionary).

34. Eide, *Revolution and Religion in Ethiopia*, 175-179; Johannes Launhardt, *Evangelicals in Addis Ababa (1919-1991), with Special Reference to the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus and the Addis Ababa Synod* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 2004), 248-250.



faithfulness. The eventual curriculum included such titles as: *Let Creation Speak; Following Jesus; When Faith is Tested; Christian Youth and Science; and What Does the Bible Say?* The resources were used at seminars and pastors conferences from 1975-1978 with the goal of “training trainers” from various denominations who would share their learning in local ministry contexts. Participants were instructed to keep the study material from the authorities.<sup>35</sup>

Despite ongoing intimidation, arrests, and restrictions, the church continued its public ministry, even securing favorable rulings from local officials to limit persecution. Over time, however, Derg officials became alarmed at the growth of the MKC, particularly in Addis Ababa, where conspicuously large crowds attended worship events of the Bole congregation. The government increased surveillance when the church added Saturday services to accommodate interest. By 1982, an average of 5,000 people, mostly youth, gathered in three services every weekend. Healing ministries—described by MKC evangelist Daniel Mekonnen as “love healings”—saw many people freed of cancer, paralysis, blindness, and asthma. Meetings drew both those who had been involved in political opposition movements as well as Derg administrators and army officers who were healed of disabilities and injuries suffered in battle. Derg agents also attended, observing what was happening and noting who was present. Kebele officials were especially angered that so many young people were being drawn to evangelical Christian faith even as attendance at socialist youth meetings was waning. Aware of this, church leaders tried to avoid criticizing the Derg and to demonstrate that they had nothing to hide.<sup>36</sup>

In the early 1980s, many were optimistic that MKC had already survived the worst persecution it would face. By 1982, the church numbered 5,000 baptized members in fourteen congregations, with thousands more attending weekly worship services. That year, however, on January 24, kebele officials closed the Bole MKC congregation and expropriated its buildings for use as a primary school. Soon thereafter, the vice chairman of the Derg Council of Ministers ordered kebele

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35. Alemu Checole, “Mennonite Churches in Eastern Africa,” 231-232; Hege, *Beyond Our Prayers*, 161-168, 176-177; Tibebe Eshete, *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia*, 253-256. In one case kebele officials found copies of documents refuting Marxist ideology in the possession of a young church leader. Although he was imprisoned for four years, he refused to reveal the source of the material.

36. Alemu Checole, “Mennonite Churches in Eastern Africa,” 230-232; Hege, *Beyond Our Prayers*, 17, 169-171, 203; Tibebe Eshete, *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia*, 257-259. Although Tibebe claims an average Sunday worship attendance of 5,000 for the Bole church, Hege indicates that a total of 1,500 people had worshipped there in three services on January 24, 1982, the day the church was closed; he also describes it as “a congregation of two thousand people”—perhaps referring to membership rather than worship attendance.

administrations to close all MKC congregations, freeze its bank accounts, seize its property, and nationalize all institutions still under its control. The Derg arrested six key MKC leaders, intending to execute them quickly. Providentially, delays with the arrests and police distraction with other responsibilities prevented the execution order from being carried out. The process was also complicated by a change in government policy requiring all executions to be authorized by a highly-placed official. One MKC leader was released after a year; but the others spent four-and-a-half years in prison. One younger leader, Kelifa Ali, died soon after his release due to health complications from ill treatment and torture in prison.<sup>37</sup>

The closure of the MKC and the arrest of key leaders made it clear that a commitment to evangelical Christianity would be costly. In response, some abandoned their faith or withdrew from church involvement. Others renewed their resolve to follow Christ whatever the cost and earnestly asked God for a fresh vision for their church.<sup>38</sup>

### *The Collapse of the Derg*

The most intense period of persecution for MKC—1982 to 1991—was also a time when Mengistu's power was in slow decline. In the early 1980s preoccupation with political opposition diverted resources from social and economic priorities. Despite encouraging economic results in the first years of a centrally controlled development program, a famine from 1983-1985 threatened one-sixth of the Ethiopian population with starvation and called global attention to the government's failure to respond to the crisis. A Derg resettlement campaign to relocate hundreds of thousands of famine victims to other parts of the country added to the humanitarian disaster.<sup>39</sup>

In the late 1980s, Mengistu's army suffered a series of demoralizing military defeats. This, combined with economic hardship, led to bitter discontent in the ranks. In May 1989, senior officers attempted a coup d'état, but failed and were arrested. Although this discouraged future mutinies, the army fought against advancing rebels with reduced conviction, and desertion rates among conscripted soldiers increased.

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37. Hege, *Beyond Our Prayers*, 17-29, 182-187; Tibebe Eshete, *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia*, 259.

38. Hege, *Beyond Our Prayers*, 188.

39. Andargachew Tiruneh, *The Ethiopian Revolution*, 347-351; Mulatu Wubneh and Yohannis Abate, *Ethiopia: Transition and Development in the Horn of Africa* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1988), 107-125; Teferra Haile-Selassie, *The Ethiopian Revolution*, 218-221.

Desperate to shore up domestic support, Mengistu announced extensive reforms to the Ethiopian parliament in March 1990, promising the introduction of a mixed economy, greater personal freedom, and the replacement of the Workers' Party of Ethiopia with a more democratic representative body. Although the public welcomed the reforms, optimism eroded two weeks later when the country learned that twelve generals involved in the previous year's coup attempt had already been shot at Mengistu's order.<sup>40</sup>

Armed opposition to the Derg gained strength as insurgent factions united to form the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPDRF) in 1989. The combined forces launched a campaign to free the northern Amhara regions in early 1991, and then advanced south toward Addis Ababa. On May 21, 1991, Mengistu Haile Mariam and his family fled the country, leaving Tesfaye Gebre Kidan as the acting president. Two days later, when the nearly 200,000-strong Derg army in the north surrendered in Asmara, government military positions in the east and south also collapsed. On May 28, EPDRF forces entered Addis Ababa with minimal resistance. By June 3, 1991, they controlled the whole country, except for Eritrea.

The era of Ethiopian communism had ended.<sup>41</sup>

### QUALITIES OF MKC LEADERSHIP

Remarkably, the church was able to thrive, in multiple ways, under persecution. By the fall of Mengistu Haile Mariam's government in 1991, MKC had grown to 34,000 baptized members in fifty-three congregations and twenty-seven church planting centers.<sup>42</sup>

Tibebe Eshete has argued that both the Mulu Wengel Pentecostal Church and the Meserete Kristos Church responded to persecution by reconfiguring their ministries into an underground "free space."<sup>43</sup> Unable to meet publicly, MKC leaders led the church through a radical reorganization into home-based cell groups of five to seven members. Their weekly gatherings became the primary context for worship, mutual support, discipleship, and leadership formation through the remainder of the Derg era. Focused on personal faithfulness to Jesus Christ, evangelism, strengthening the church, and equipping members for ministry, the MKC continued to grow. Church members credit the Holy Spirit for

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40. Andargachew Tiruneh, *The Ethiopian Revolution*, 344-361; Teferra Haile-Selassie, *The Ethiopian Revolution*, 284-300.

41. Paul B. Henze, *Layers of Time: a History of Ethiopia* (New York: Palgrave, 2000), 313, 320-330; Teferra Haile-Selassie, *The Ethiopian Revolution*, 305-328.

42. Hege and Thiessen, "Meserete Kristos Church."

43. Tibebe Eshete, *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia*, 253-272.

empowering them to act with transformational faith rather than succumb to the pressures of a hostile environment. The MKC also benefited from the hospitality of Mekane Yesus, Qale Heywet, and Roman Catholic Christians who often opened their homes and church facilities for leadership meetings, choir practices, weddings, and funerals.<sup>44</sup>

Committed, courageous leadership was a key factor in its flourishing. The MKC leadership team included women and men with varied personalities, gifts, social, educational, and religious backgrounds. In their response to the challenges of the Derg era they modeled the four dimensions of transformational leadership identified by Robert Quinn: purpose, integrity, love, and creativity.

#### PURPOSE: BOLDNESS AMID SUFFERING

In a normal state of functioning, argues Quinn, organizational effectiveness tends to wane as leaders gravitate toward comfort, focusing their energy on preserving equilibrium rather than pursuing a compelling purpose. Transformational leaders, by contrast, are fully committed to creating exceptional results, persevering toward their goal without regard to personal cost. During the Ethiopian Revolution, evangelical church leadership required considerable sacrifice. Persecution forced men and women to either fully commit to purposeful leadership in the church or to avoid active Christian service.

Interviews and first-person testimony from other sources make clear that MKC leaders regularly prioritized their pursuit of God's purposes over personal safety or comfort. Elder and evangelist Gemechu Gebre Telila, for example, identified a pivotal moment of commitment made by the elders of Wonji Gefersa MKC on the evening of Sunday, January 24, 1982. The previous day government authorities arrived at the church compound to close the congregation and seize its property. Earlier in the week, the Derg took control of the denominational head office and guest house in Addis Ababa, closed other MKC congregations, and arrested six members of the MKC Executive Committee. To avoid attention from authorities, five members of the Wonji Gefersa leadership team met in an

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44. Alemu Checole, "Mennonite Churches in Eastern Africa," 246-247; Hege, *Beyond Our Prayers*, 189, 232; Gemechu Gebre Telila, "History of the Meserete Kristos Church at Wonji Gefersa, Ethiopia, during the Derg, 1974-1991: 'God Works for Good'" (MA thesis, Eastern Mennonite Seminary, 2002), 18; Girma Haile, "The Brief History of Dire Dawa Meserete Kristos Church," 16. For example, in Wonji Gefersa, the MKC and Catholic cemeteries were side by side. When the Derg closed the MKC, the Catholic Church fenced and maintained the entire cemetery at their own expense—and gave MKC leaders a key to the gate.

elder's car. For three hours, shielded by the darkness of night and the sugar cane fields, they drove around a plantation pondering their future. "How were they to be salt and light in these ominous circumstances?" As leaders, Gemechu recalled, they were conscious that they needed to live exemplary lives in order to encourage the faith of others. "If one of them were to weaken, other Christians . . . would be more sorely tempted to yield to pressure. As the hours passed, so did the resolve that if necessary they not only would be thrown into prison but also would die for Jesus at any time." The leaders agreed to support each other and together to care for the congregation, including imprisoned believers and their families. Although unable to legally meet and worship in public, "they would adapt to operating the church in secret and, relying on the power of the Holy Spirit, would commit themselves to the possibility of prison or even death."<sup>45</sup>

As persecution intensified, some former leaders opted out. Alemu Checole recalled that a fellow elder team member resigned in fear in response to a rumor that MKC leaders would be arrested, explaining, "I have a wife. I have children, too." Kelile\* described the "sifting" effect of Derg opposition to the church:

before the revolution Christianity was kind of smooth and nothing really troublesome. We couldn't really tell who was a genuine Christian. . . . So the coming of the socialist revolution helped to sift the wheat and the tare. Some left because they wanted a better position in government work. . . . Some left because they were really frightened of the suffering that might follow. Some left because they didn't really have the true, solid faith that was needed to face the challenges of persecution.<sup>46</sup>

Those who persevered in leadership clearly understood the potential cost. Solomon Kebede remembered saying to himself as he left his bedroom in the morning, "I may not come back and sleep on this bed."

I was anticipating that martyrdom could come my way. I was preparing myself for that. By temperament, I am a fearful person. But if it was God's plan, I knew that I would not escape it. . . . During the Red Terror time, they used to kill and throw people on the streets. I was expecting to be killed at one point. . . . I used to go around and see the dead bodies and prepare myself psychologically. . . . I imagined myself killed and thrown on the street. But it didn't happen.

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45. Gemechu Gebre Telila, "Meserete Kristos Church at Wonji Gefersa," 41-45.

46. Unless another source is cited, content is drawn from one or more interviews with the author.

A number of MKC leaders who were outside Ethiopia during the Marxist era returned to the country, sensing that they were being called by God. Hakim\*, for example, had spent four years in the United States, working with Eastern Mennonite Missions and pursuing graduate studies. After completing course work for a doctorate in education, he received an invitation from MKC to become director of Nazareth Bible Academy. Returning to Ethiopia in 1979, he served in a variety of leadership roles until his 1982 arrest and a subsequent four-and-a-half year imprisonment. "Persecution is scary," Hakim\* recalled:

You care for your personal safety . . . but then you also have another resource: of faith experience, commitment, my philosophy of life. [Everybody] has those tendencies to escape, to save your skin. . . . But life is to meet these things. It is not only a response of the moment; it is what you have stored in your life that sustains you . . . The ups and downs help you and make you strong. [Persecution] affected me like any other person, but reliance on the Lord: that was the resource that I had.

Others had opportunity to leave, but refused to abandon their ministries. After her husband was released from three months in jail and received threats against his life, Desta\* told him, "Many of your friends have gone abroad. Why don't you go abroad? . . . I don't want to live without having a husband and my children without a father." But her husband refused, saying, "No, I won't leave my people. I won't go away because of fear. I will die with the people, if I die. And if we survive, we survive. We are together. I am not going anywhere." After MKC went underground, Berihun\* had an opportunity to study theology in the United States. An invitation to remain and serve the church full-time, however, drew his attention to Hebrews 11:23-27, which describes Moses rejecting the luxury of Pharaoh's court in order to identify with the oppressed people of God. Berihun\* chose to stay in Ethiopia.

MKC evangelists showed particular courage and fortitude. Avoiding Derg checkpoints throughout the country, evangelists often traveled long distances on foot. Kifle\* described his loneliness working in a remote region, the difficulty of finding a place to spend the night, and the challenge of sleeping quarters infested with bedbugs and fleas. Getaneh Ayele's extensive walking permanently injured his legs.<sup>47</sup> Lema\*, who once spent the night in a tree while Derg officers searched for him, remembered: "We didn't have a comfortable place." Even so, he added,

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47. Hege, *Beyond Our Prayers*, 205.

“God is able to sustain our lives. It was not easy, but God is good.” In isolated areas, Berihun\* recalled, “there was no comfort zone . . . no food . . . and no sleeping place; we just slept on the dust, sometimes on the top of a tree for days to escape detection.”

### *Leadership Objectives*

MKC leaders identified several shared goals that motivated their work during the era of persecution. One primary objective was personal faithfulness to Jesus. Accounts by MKC leaders are permeated with a foundational love for Jesus Christ.<sup>48</sup> Every leader interviewed highlighted the importance of dependence on God, sustained through spiritual disciplines—especially Bible study, prayer, and fasting—and animated by the presence and power of the Holy Spirit.<sup>49</sup> Solomon, for example, described how dissatisfaction with normal human ambition paved the way for his new birth in Christ and a transformed understanding of his life purpose prior to the socialist revolution:

Like all people, I had ambitions. Three of the main ambitions I had were: 1) to be a well-known scholar; 2) to be prosperous; 3) to have a pretty wife and a family. But at one time, I said to myself, “Okay, [when] I have achieved all this, so what? What then?” I was looking for purpose and meaning in life. I said, “Is this all? Is this the purpose of life? . . . becoming prosperous or a well-known scholar or having pretty wife and a family? Is that all?” I was perplexed. I came to a kind of despair.

Although he tried to suppress his questions, they nagged at him until a friend invited him to join a Bible study group. When Solomon “heard that Jesus is the truth and the light,” his questions were answered. He says, “I became a follower,” adding, “When I came to Christ, it was a radical change. I started witnessing to everyone I knew.”

A second focus of MKC leaders was a passion for evangelism. Virtually all church members shared a conviction that “spiritual maturity always leads to concern for the lost souls,”<sup>50</sup> a theme reflected consistently in

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48. Eighteen leaders described their initial commitment to Christ at some point during the interview; of the remaining six research participants, three described another transforming event in their relationship with God.

49. While the experience of leadership was not comfortable, interviewees depended on God for comfort. One expressed gratitude for “the Lord’s protection in those difficult years.” Another observed that despite hardship “the Lord really gave me strength and comfort.” Many highlighted Scriptures reflecting the theme of God’s comfort toward his people, including Gen. 15:1; Josh. 1:7, 24:15; Job 36:11; Ps. 23, 46, 90, 91, 121, 124; Isa. 25:1-5, 40:21-31, 41:8-10, 43:1-3, 46:3-4, 49:15, 50:10; Jer. 17:7-8; Dan. 6; Mic. 7:7-8; Mt. 10:30, 16:18; Lk. 2:25-38; Jn. 12:23-26, 16:33; Acts 12, 16:16-40; Rom. 8:28; 2 Cor. 6:3-10; Phil. 1:29-30; 1 Pet. 1:24-25, 4:13.

50. Gemechu Gebre Telila, “Meserete Kristos Church at Wonji Gefersa,” 61.

preaching and teaching. Lema\*, for example, noted that “our primary goal was bringing people to Christ in order to glorify him.” Aster Debossie described how her desire to tell others about Jesus flowed from her own relationship with God: “I am very glad to be a daughter of God and serve God. . . . Because of this, I love sharing the gospel.”<sup>51</sup> Zere\* said, “We knew that most people were in the dark . . . following the world. We wanted to bring them to the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. That was the one big result we wanted to accomplish, so that many would know the Lord and follow him.”<sup>52</sup>

MKC leaders pursued a wide range of strategies for evangelism:

- Cell groups nurtured a passion for evangelism among members. In one community, MKC members spent three days fasting and praying for the salvation of nonbelievers and then laid hands on members, commissioning them to give witness to Jesus among friends, at their workplace, school, in transit, and anywhere they had opportunity.<sup>53</sup>
- In Wonji Gefersa, every MKC member was expected to share their faith with at least one person every year, confident that the Holy Spirit would empower them for the task.<sup>54</sup> A leader from Addis Ababa noted that “all who became Christians were active soul-winners.”
- In Nazareth, Christian high school students were encouraged to reach out to one fellow student during break time, or before or after class.<sup>55</sup>
- MKC members invited non-believing neighbors and friends into their homes for lunch or tea.

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51. Aaron Lehman, “Aster Debossie: Meserete Kristos Churchwoman in Lay Leadership in Ethiopia 1974-1991” (BA senior paper, Goshen College, 2003), 12-14.

52. Desta\* and Nyala\* shared how they and their husbands expressed the importance of evangelism by naming their daughters “Gospel” and “Testimony.”

53. Gemechu Gebre Telila, “Meserete Kristos Church at Wonji Gefersa,” 61; and interviews.

54. Gemechu Gebre Telila, “Meserete Kristos Church at Wonji Gefersa,” 61-62.

55. Abera Ertiro, “History of the Meserete Kristos Church at Nazareth from 1951-2003” (BA senior paper, Meserete Kristos College, 2003), 36.



- A group of high school students regularly divided into two sub-groups. One would pray while the other went out to evangelize, later returning to report their experience to the praying group.<sup>56</sup>
- Children brought friends to secret Sunday school classes.<sup>57</sup>
- The church took advantage of public occasions like birthday parties, Christmas, New Year's and Easter feasts, weddings, and funerals to proclaim faith in Jesus Christ.<sup>58</sup>
- When a believer died, leaders openly preached the gospel message at the burial ceremony. The next evening, when people gathered in the home of the bereaved family, sermon cards with scripture verses were distributed to Christian guests who would speak on the selection they received. Later, church members had follow-up conversations about these messages with other guests.<sup>59</sup>
- In the marketplace and over afternoon coffee, women used traditional Ethiopian female group gatherings to talk about Jesus with neighbors.<sup>60</sup>
- Imprisoned church leaders shared the gospel with fellow inmates; one mass arrest of evangelical believers led to an outbreak of revival in Addis Ababa prisons that continued long after their release. When not in detention, many leaders made regular visits to local jails to encourage believers and witness to others.<sup>61</sup>
- Believers invited neighbors who might be receptive to the gospel to their homes for drama presentations accompanied by sharing from the Word of God.

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56. Ibid; and interview.

57. Gemechu Gebre Telila, "Meserete Kristos Church at Wonji Gefersa," 62.

58. Ibid; and interview.

59. Abera Ertiro, "Meserete Kristos Church at Nazareth," 36; Hege, *Beyond Our Prayers*, 205; Michael Hostetler, *Against Great Odds*, 29 minutes (Worcester, Pa.: Gateway Films/Vision Video, 1992); and interviews.

60. Lehman, "Aster Debossie," 25-26; and interview.

61. Gemechu Gebre Telila, "Meserete Kristos Church at Wonji Gefersa," 62; Lehman, "Aster Debossie," 29; and interviews. Berihun\* describes an incident in which 250 Christians at a young adult renewal meeting in Addis Ababa were arrested and placed in five different police stations among 3,000 prisoners:

We started to witness to prisoners. Some notorious prisoners came to know the Lord. Revival started in the prison. After three months . . . we were released. The revival in the prison continued. Some of the prisoners, after they [were] released, became evangelists. I knew later on that God wanted us to go to prison in order to witness to . . . [those] who did not have any hope to hear the gospel.

- Leaders testified to their faith in public settings hostile to evangelical Christianity, such as political indoctrination sessions or to crowds trying to intimidate them.

Abebech Wache, who was heavily involved in pastoral care, choir ministry, and leadership discipleship groups for new believers, described how she and other women integrated testimony to Jesus in their daily lives:

We were witnessing one-to-one to people. When we went to the grinding mill to have our teff or wheat ground, we would tell the good news to people who sat beside us, or on the road, like when we were going by horse cart. We would witness to them. We felt that it was our responsibility to tell the good news to people who hadn't heard. Many responded positively, so that was one thing that I really enjoyed doing.

Because of the risks involved, MKC leaders encouraged evangelists to balance boldness with wisdom, discerning their audience's receptivity to the gospel. One elder who worked for a government-owned corporation, for example, had a personal policy of discussing his faith with individuals but not with groups of non-believers. Other MKC leaders, however, testified to their faith in public settings that were explicitly hostile to evangelical Christianity, such as political indoctrination sessions. Teru remembered an indoctrination session in Nazareth, when the evangelist Kedir "could not contain himself." He stood up and said, "All these things that you have said are not going to solve the problems of Ethiopia. It is only God who can do it." Menoro, an MKC member employed at the mission hospital in Nazareth, recalled an incident that came to symbolize the enduring witness of the church:

When the Marxist regime took over, the officials told me they wanted the cross in the hospital chapel removed and destroyed. Of course, the cross was built into the wall, so it was quite difficult for them to destroy it completely. But they wanted to paint over it, and they asked me as a maintenance person to do this. We painted it and the cross came out even more distinctly. Then we tried another paint, and it still came out distinctly. We tried five times, but it remained visible.<sup>62</sup>

Evangelists often traveled great distances to encourage scattered church members and engage in pioneering evangelistic work. Kifle\*, for

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62. Hostetler, *Against Great Odds*.

example, described the commitment and influence of his colleague Tadesse Negewo, who left his job as a government teacher to spread the gospel in new territory, particularly among the Oromo of Wollega:

He had really hard, hard times travelling on foot for hundreds of miles, with his feet bleeding and in the kind of wild places where there were lions. . . . But he dared to spread the gospel and that has resulted in bringing thousands of believers to the kingdom. And that commitment encouraged me to do the same work, telling the good news, too, wherever I went.<sup>63</sup>

Prior to the Derg, Dawit\* observed, the MKC was like a single rail line from Addis to Dire Dawa:

But now God spread it all over Ethiopia, from Eritrea, from top to bottom; from east to west to all four corners. . . . God taught us: if you respect people and serve with good intentions, God will go with you. We [do not] neglect a single person. When we go to reach that person, we plant a church there. That's how the church was planted.

A third priority of MKC leaders was to strengthen the church to face the ideological and coercive pressure of the Derg regime. They worked hard to ensure the church would be anchored on a solid biblical foundation and energized by active, persistent prayer. According to Dawit\*: "Prayer became our culture. Without ceasing, we prayed. Everywhere we prayed, prayed, prayed, prayed, prayed." Zere\* stressed:

We wanted to . . . keep the body of Christ together to keep the unity of the church, to strengthen them through the Word of God and through prayer. And the Lord really helped us to be together to the end. Not many of them left the church.

Jazarah\* noted how important these practices were for enabling believers to persevere in their faith:

All our efforts . . . as leaders were to keep believers in the faith so that they would not stray away . . . We wanted the church to be a strong church, so that members would not be deceived and taken away from the Lord.

As the socialist revolution jeopardized the financial health of the church, MKC leaders also began to emphasize biblical stewardship in their discipleship training, especially the role of tithing. "In 1975," explained Bedru Hussein,

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63. Kifle\* also remembered the inspirational influence of Kedir Delchume, especially "his desire to see the church grow and expand—to the east, to the south, everywhere," explaining that Kedir "sent workers to these places and gave them encouragement, which also strengthened my desire to spread the good news and to work for the kingdom of God."

MKC was in crisis. The Marxist-Leninist government of Ethiopia was threatening to expel all missionaries and to refuse any foreign money from the West. The MKC-affiliated mission, which had been supporting the church since 1948, had been gradually cutting back its funding. But there was no corresponding increase in giving from the churches.<sup>64</sup>

In addition to teaching, leaders modeled generous giving and established a system of accountability for handling church finances. As MKC members began to take their tithing commitments seriously, the church was able to give financial support to families of imprisoned church members, as well as to assist evangelists with some expenses.<sup>65</sup>

Throughout the years of the Derg, leaders also worked to strengthen the church through preaching and teaching, study materials, discipleship programs for new believers, personal mentoring, and regular visits to homes and workplaces. Working at night and through school vacations, they produced studies for new believers such as "Following Jesus." With assistance from friends with access to duplicating equipment and a clandestine distribution network, teaching materials arrived in the hands of evangelists, cell groups, and new believers.

After the closure of the church, leaders developed a new model of church life based on household cell groups. Despite the considerable risks involved, these fellowship groups became essential for discipleship, ministry, and leadership formation in the MKC. To minimize risk, leadership of cell groups was assigned, when possible, to local people, who were supported by periodic visits from elders and evangelists for encouragement, teaching, prayer, and equipping. Hosts of cell gatherings faced the danger of betrayal from neighbors, searches or ransacking of their homes by cadres, and arrest. Even so, many MKC members accepted the risk and opened their doors.<sup>66</sup> These groups became potent settings for

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64. Bedru Hussein, *Stewardship in the Self-Supporting Church* (Mulwanza, Tanzania: Inland Publishers, 1998), 20, cited by Alemu Checole, "Mennonite Churches in Eastern Africa," 249.

65. Alemu Checole, "Mennonite Churches in Eastern Africa," 249; Hege, *Beyond Our Prayers*, 202-203; Gemechu Gebre Telila, "Meserete Kristos Church at Wonji Gefersa," 53-54, 73-74, observed that when the church was closed, only sixteen members of the Wonji Gefersa church had been giving regular tithes; twenty-five others contributed three to five times a year. Influenced by teaching within cell groups, almost all wage earners began tithing their income to the church; also interviews.

66. Bekele\*, for example, explained that he and his wife opened their home for nine different weekly programs, including children's Sunday school, women's fellowship, elder team meetings, prayer group, and Bible study. Their neighbors knew they were evangelical Christians, but did not cause problems for them.

strengthening the church through worship, discipleship, mutual encouragement, and challenge.

In addition to cell group ministry, leaders emphasized the importance of personal visitation for the discipleship, pastoral care, and support of believers. "If you care for part of your body," Bekele\* explained, "that means you are caring for the whole body." Elders, evangelists, and pastoral care committee members were especially active in home visitation, stopping to see five or six families each evening to "find out how they were doing," and to teach, counsel, and pray with them.<sup>67</sup> They also would visit the sick, comfort the bereaved, and give food or other practical assistance to families in need. After the church was closed, for example, Teru regularly visited believers in the villages surrounding her city, especially those who were under surveillance by the authorities and unable to travel. She said:

We tried to send women to women and men to men. Also, for the educated, we sent educated people. And for those who were impatient we tried to send a person who was patient, and would listen to them and bear with them.

Fikru Zeleke taught converts while walking with them, giving them Bible verses written on slips of paper. Sometimes he met them in a hotel dining room, praying with eyes open and sharing handwritten Scripture passages with them in the presence of town officials. In 1985, assisted by an itinerant evangelist, Fikru baptized eighteen believers in a government hotel as Derg officials drank on the porch. The new members came and left in pairs at twenty-minute intervals.<sup>68</sup> Strengthened in their faith and encouraged to share the gospel with neighbors and work colleagues, these scattered members often formed the nucleus of new congregations that grew out of their witness.

To minimize the risk of spies infiltrating the cell church network, new converts participated in an intensive discipleship program outside the church cell structure. After an initial profession of faith, converts would meet regularly with an MKC believer or teacher to be mentored in the Christian faith. For at least six months, they experienced church life within "a shadow underground structure" to facilitate spiritual growth while

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67. Girma Haile, "Dire Dawa Meserete Kristos Church," 12-13, described a unique situation in which an evangelist was allowed to live on church property for ten months after the Derg had seized it. While there he taught new believers, baptized some, and gave pastoral care to those who visited him as guards stood at the entrance to the church compound.

68. Hege, *Beyond Our Prayers*, 199-201. The practice of baptism was risky. Berihun\* remembers an occasion in Gojjam on which he and two other leaders were baptizing a group of converts in a pond. The sound of water splashes attracted the attention of the authorities; the group scattered but the newly-immersed believers were caught and imprisoned.

safeguarding the integrity of the church as a whole.<sup>69</sup> Only after a period of faith formation and screening—lasting six months to two years—would a new convert be baptized and introduced to a cell group.<sup>70</sup> Even former church leaders who returned to the church after a period of inactivity needed to take part in the discipleship process before entering a cell group.

The underground cell structure that emerged after the closure of the church in 1982 greatly increased the need and opportunity for MKC members to share in the leadership of the church. The MKC congregation in Addis Ababa, for example, had seven elders when the church closed; with the transition to small groups, the church divided into six congregations, each of which had seven elders, for a total of forty-two in the city. The number of deacons and preachers grew by the same proportion.<sup>71</sup> According to Berihun\*, an elder in Addis Ababa, the pressing need for calling and equipping new leaders weighed heavily after the church was forced underground. He was greatly relieved after he and others were able to train more than forty new leaders for service in different regions of the city.

Before that, we were in fear. What will happen if we are arrested? What would happen to the church? Who would lead? [After the

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69. Tibebe Eshete, *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia*, 262. Speaking of party members who had come to faith in Christ, Louam\* admitted, "We were a bit frightened by them" and "nobody was willing to teach" them; however, when Kedir asked "What shall we do with so and so and so?" Louam\* was willing to lead a Bible study group for them. In Addis Ababa, Lema\* was invited to pray with a Derg official suffering from a chronic digestive illness. When he and a co-leader did so in the man's home, "something happened." Their host said, "I am feeling well." He ate the Ethiopian staple *injera* for the first time in six years and was content. When the healed man expressed interest in Bible study, his family asked Lema\* to teach him. "He is willing to learn the Word of God," they insisted. Lema\* agreed, but was shaken when the official insisted on going to Lema\*'s house for study. Driving in the man's car, Lema\* noticed that police and military officers greeted his student with a particularly respectful salute. After three months of Bible study, Lema\* saw him on television; he was a general assigned to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The evangelist explained his fear: "He was big person, you know. After a week, when I saw him, I was not able to teach him, and he asked me, 'What happened to you?'" Lema\* admitted, "I didn't know who you are, but when I saw a TV last week I was shocked." The general responded, "Don't worry, brother. I am a disciple of Christ." Because of the man's position in the Derg, he was imprisoned when the government fell, but shared his faith in Christ with many in prison. Lema\* concluded, "God is able to win such people. God knows how to win them."

70. Alemu Checole, "Mennonite Churches in Eastern Africa," 234; Hege, *Beyond Our Prayers*, 197, 205-208, mentioned that a few agents managed to slip past MKC's screening system, saying and doing the "right" things to gather information about the church. Sometimes during prayer meetings, however, as believers prayed for Satan's defeat, those who came insincerely cried out and experienced a genuine conversion.

71. Alemu Checole, "Mennonite Churches in Eastern Africa," 235.

arrests of other key MKC leaders] we were three elders and three evangelists left. . . . Then, after God gave us that victory, we praised God. We felt, now hereafter, we don't mind.

The calling and training of leaders—identified by interviewees as a fourth priority—was rooted in a conviction that all believers had gifts for some type of ministry. Within cell groups, leaders “not only ministered to believers, but also equipped them to minister to each other,” helping each member discover and use their spiritual gifts “to build up God’s people” and express “God’s love to others.”<sup>72</sup>

In the early stages of the revolution, several MKC leaders recognized that Ethiopian socialism was moving toward a militant communism. In response, they began to plan regular leadership conferences and teaching sessions on the campus of Nazareth Bible Academy, attracting up to a thousand participants from their own church and other Ethiopian evangelical churches. The goal was to equip leaders with biblically based teaching on evangelism, socialism, theology, and Christian living. The *One Month for Christ* program trained high school graduates and sent them to visit believers who were part of the church before its closure, to invite them to join an underground fellowship group. In the late 1970s, other programs known as *Summer for Christ* and *Three Months for Christ* provided students with a week of discipleship and ministry training and sent them out to preach and teach.<sup>73</sup>

To further support and equip leaders the church formed a Christian Education Committee. The group prepared and distributed educational material for cell groups and established clandestine training centers for leaders in Addis Ababa, Nazareth, Metehara, and Dire Dawa. Monthly sessions at these centers equipped leaders to form cell groups, train local leaders, and address challenges in ministry as they arose. Over time the Christian Education Committee developed a five-year curriculum to train leaders. In addition to formal instruction, the gatherings were also opportunities for mutual encouragement as leaders from different congregations learned from the experiences of others and prayed together. Leaders trained at one of the regional centers and then returned to their congregations to equip other church members for cell group leadership.<sup>74</sup>

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72. Gemechu Gebre Telila, “History of the Meserete Kristos Church at Wonji Gefersa,” 55, 70.

73. Alemu Checole, “Mennonite Churches in Eastern Africa,” 231-235.

74. Gemechu Gebre Telila, “Meserete Kristos Church at Wonji Gefersa,” 57-60, 65-66, 70, described a typical week at a regional training center, preparing leaders to equip others for cell group leadership. Participants received training eight hours per day, based on subjects outlined in booklets, including ten sessions on “Following Jesus,” two on “How to lead cell groups,” three on “How to lead Bible study,” five on “Faithful Servant,” an inductive Bible study of the epistle of 2 Timothy, and ten on “The Epistle to the Ephesians.” Training offered highly practical instruction for individual and corporate living, with emphasis on living a

As part of their training, elders and evangelists often served an apprenticeship alongside experienced leaders, gaining first-hand experience of group discussions, decision-making and the manner of giving assignments to team members.

The MKC Evangelism Committee also led training seminars for recent university graduates to equip them for evangelism, discipleship, and church planting before they moved to work assignments in different parts of the country. To prepare evangelists for full-time ministry, the church created a program—called *One Year for Christ*—that offered a series of courses interspersed with ministry assignments. In addition, every two or three months youth leaders, elders, teachers, and evangelists took part in *Key Teacher's Training* program sessions focused on developing leadership and management skills, including effective team work and group decision-making processes. Evangelism Committee members would sometimes spend a full day traveling, and then meet with leaders at night in homes, hotels, or wooded areas, to support and equip them.

Although Ethiopian cultures traditionally viewed leadership as a male domain, MKC came to recognize and rely on the leadership gifts of women in the Derg years. Women led about two-thirds of cell groups and several served as elders. Many shared their gifts as prayer group leaders, Sunday school teachers, and as pastoral caregivers who were active in preaching, teaching, evangelism, and discipleship. Gemechu observed that:

During the time that the church was under duress the roles that women filled expanded significantly. Their loyalty and courage elevated them as role models, and the need for persons to care for others opened many situations to their ministry. The church maintained that in Christ a perfect spiritual equality exists between men and women as heirs of God's grace. There was little attention to

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new life of purity and separation from the world, worthy of the Christians' calling. After a week of classroom instruction, the focus shifted to field education, in which trainees were sent back to their congregations and home communities to organize and lead cell groups. Gemechu explained that, following this training, he and a co-leader chose sixteen local cell leaders, mostly laborers or students, for Wonji Gefersa MKC and led them in eight hours of training per day for a full week. Each newly-trained leader gave direction to some of the eighty cell groups formed for the congregation. Hundreds of group leaders across MKC were trained in inductive Bible study and teaching methods. Berihun\*, a member of the MKC Evangelism Committee, summed up their leadership training strategy as "we trained the trainers and the trainers would train other trainers."



the question of authority defined by gender. Rather, the focus was upon designating those who could minister.<sup>75</sup>

Underlying each of the goals that shaped their leadership in the revolutionary era—personal faithfulness to Jesus Christ, evangelism, strengthening the church, and multiplying leaders—research participants highlighted their desire for the kingdom of God to expand and for God to receive glory. Alemu, one of the movement's key leaders, expressed gratitude for his blindness. "The tradition here," he recalled,

is that people are sorry for "blind guy," so they wouldn't arrest me and put me in prison. So I was always officiating at weddings and at funerals . . . I was the one to preach. . . . So I think in a way I am thankful to God, even though I am blind, I was able to give service in difficult times and I think God used my handicap for his glory.

Berihun\* summarizes the motivation of many MKC leaders: "Each of us was ready to do anything, any time for the glory of God."

In all of these ways, MKC leaders demonstrated remarkable clarity of purpose and boldness, often at great personal risk, as they helped the church find its way in the face of persecution and hardship.

#### INTEGRITY: STANDING FIRM UNDER PRESSURE

Quinn has further observed that those in leadership positions tend to define themselves by how they believe others perceive them, conforming to the expectations of others in order to gain valued resources. This naturally leads to compromises in personal integrity. Transformational leadership, by contrast, is characterized by a willingness to examine one's own hypocrisy and to pursue higher levels of personal and collective integrity by closing the gap between stated values and actual behavior. MKC leaders were asked about the pressures they experienced under persecution and how they resisted temptations to compromise their faith and vocation.

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75. Gemechu Gebre Telila, "Meserete Kristos Church at Wonji Gefersa," 77; Hege, *Beyond Our Prayers*, 190, 233; Hostetter, *Against Great Odds*; Tibebe Eshete, *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia*, 261-262. Lehman, "Aster Debossie," explores the leadership contributions of MKC women in the context of traditional Ethiopian culture, the sixteenth-century Anabaptist movement, missionary praxis and the challenges of the Derg era. Selassie\* and Mekonnen also expressed admiration for the leadership contributions of MKC women. Even so, there were differing views in MKC about what leadership roles were appropriate for women. Whereas one female interviewee, Jazarah\*, served as an elder, Teru\* declined her own election to eldership based on her understanding of biblical teaching. She did, however, actively exercise leadership gifts in other ways.

*Forms of Pressure Experienced by MKC Leaders during the Derg*

All Meserete Kristos Church leaders experienced a wide range of external pressures to compromise or abandon their faith during Ethiopia's revolutionary years. One constant pressure resulted from the pervasive promotion of Marxist ideology to all sectors of society. Radio and television programs were filled with propaganda. Several times a week everyone between the ages of 13 and 30 was required to attend indoctrination sessions at school or kebele headquarters.<sup>76</sup> Derg officials used social pressure to coerce citizens into public expressions of support for Ethiopian socialism, particularly through repetitious public shouting—with left arms raised—of revolutionary slogans such as: "Ethiopia first!" "Down with imperialism!" "Religion is drugging the masses!" and "Long live socialism!"<sup>77</sup> Resisting these pressures meant ridicule, harassment, and social ostracism. MKC leaders described being "despised," "ridiculed," suffering "insult and humiliation," and being "counted like a second-class citizens" because of their faith.<sup>78</sup>

This could escalate to sustained harassment and overt efforts to intimidate church members into renouncing or compromising their faith and ministry. Cadres made armed visits to MKC church property, schools, and leaders' homes or workplaces where they would verbally abuse leaders and threaten to confiscate their property, beat, imprison, or execute them.<sup>79</sup> Sometimes these threats came from neighbors, co-

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76. Hege, *Beyond Our Prayers*, 177-178; Lehman, "Aster Debossie," 29-30; and interviews. Workers were required to attend a monthly three-hour ideological "awakening" program during work hours. Dawit\* observed that community organizations tended to define group interests over against others: women against men, young against old. Indoctrination groups for children and youth caused considerable stress for Christian parents. Although children spent most of their time around home or in school before the revolution, these sessions could require their presence from the end of the school day until late in the evening. Parents feared that these classes would teach "children to despise religion as anti-Communist and not to trust their own parents." If a child's behavior did not satisfy kebele officials, he or she could be placed in an indoctrination camp for a week or more.

77. Jazarah\* remembered: "The greatest challenge in those days was the atheism that God doesn't exist. That was what was preached everywhere, at every meeting. They said, 'Its foolishness [what] Christianity teaches. It's the opiate of the people.'" Dawit\* mentioned that Derg officials in Addis Ababa tried to co-opt MKC choirs by unsuccessfully pressuring them to add communist songs to their repertoire.

78. Gemechu Gebre Telila, "Meserete Kristos Church at Wonji Gefersa," observed that MKC members were scorned as "haters of civilization" because they refused to take part in communist festivals that included drinking alcohol and dancing. Nyala\* remembered that while working at a garment factory, coworkers ridiculed her for her faith, saying, "You are foolish. How do you know that God exists? This is really not scientific."

79. Zere\* described a warning he received during the Red Terror, when a revolutionary guard, a former friend, told him, "It has been decided to arrest you and . . . to execute you

workers, and fellow students.<sup>80</sup> Tengene\* described a confrontation with a mob in a community cemetery where 800 people gathered to oppose the burial of an MKC child, forcing grieving believers to exhume the body. Other MKC leaders faced false accusations—that they were working for the American Central Intelligence Agency or sheltering Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Party members.

In the political and economic climate of the Derg regime, pay raises and promotions went to those who were clearly committed to the government and its program. Derg representatives sometimes offered Christians a coveted position, benefits, gifts, or money to persuade them to join the party. The home of one evangelist was “always under surveillance.” Government security forces could monitor the mail of MKC leaders or have them followed. On the road their vehicles could be stopped and searched at checkpoints or by officers on patrol. Later, Derg spies attempted to infiltrate the church’s cell structure.<sup>81</sup>

MKC leaders also faced pressure from Derg restrictions that interfered with their ministry. Beginning in 1977, no more than five unrelated people could legally gather without permission from local officials. Believers could not carry a Bible in public. Anyone younger than 30 was prohibited from attending church meetings, including worship. The legal parameters for MKC work and witness became even more constrained in 1982 when

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because you are like the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Party. . . . You are polluting the minds of people. You are working against the ideology we are proclaiming. Stop your activities. Otherwise you will be in deep trouble.” Zere\* added, “They were trying to scare us. They were threatening, but we never stopped God’s work. . . . We continued and the Lord’s protection was with us.” Other leaders also described being threatened with death if they did not join the Derg political party.

80. Christian parents were especially disturbed when their children were bullied by teachers and fellow students because of their faith. Dawit\* recalled that “most of the Christian children suffered more than their parents. It was painful having to see that.” Gemechu Gebre Telila, “Meserete Kristos Church at Wonji Gefersa,” 25-28, tells the story of two evangelical university students (including Tasisa Esthetu from MKC) at a *zemecha* campaign camp in Bale province. At a meeting one evening, the camp leader announced that there were anti-revolutionary elements present and reminded the group of their obligation to eliminate enemies. After his speech, *zemecha* participants encircled the two young believers. Chanting slogans and raising their left fists, they shouted, “Let Ethiopia be the greatest!” “Long live socialism!” “Down with our enemies!” Picking up stones and long sharp poles, the mob ran toward them, acting like “they would stone and crush the two Christians to the dust.” The *zemecha* leader quieted the group, urging them to give the believers one more chance to renounce their faith: “Let them think the matter over during the night.” When the plot to kill the Christians was uncovered, they were taken overnight to Addis Ababa, and then to prison.

81. Melaku\* described the challenge and stress of keeping knowledge about church leadership and ministry locations from government informants in order to protect the integrity of the cell structure and its participants.

the church itself was outlawed and banned from any public ministry.<sup>82</sup> Additional pressure came from military recruiters who came to their homes to force young men to join the army's fight against Eritrean, Tigrean, and other Derg opponents.

Finally, numerous research participants spoke about their personal experiences with arrests and imprisonment. In some cases detention lasted only a few hours, overnight, or several days; others were incarcerated for several months or a year. One leader was in prison for four-and-a-half years. Even those who did not spend time in custody often faced extended interrogation in which they were questioned about their beliefs, and their commitment to the revolution, and were pressured to abandon their faith. In some cases, they were also pressed for information about other leaders, the church, and its activities. Seven of the twenty-four interviewees were beaten for their faith; eleven mentioned that they or a loved one had received death threats.

#### *The Impact of External Pressures on Leaders*

Not surprisingly, these pressures had an emotional impact on MKC leaders. Berihun\* said that when the MKC was closed in 1982, the church was "gripped in fear." When the rest of their congregational leadership team either relocated to other communities or abandoned their ministries, Gemechu and a co-elder "questioned whether they were capable or significant enough to stand up to the challenges facing the church." They asked themselves how they could lead successfully if they could not gather the people they meant to influence. "Where were they to find the resources in finances and personnel to administer an effective program?"<sup>83</sup> Other leaders described their anxiety and worry, especially for the provision and safety of family members. Parents were troubled by the potential impacts of propaganda and ridicule on their children. Imprisoned leaders and their families were anxious about each other's well-being. Spouses worried that their partner would suffer while on a ministry assignment.

Leaders also experienced sadness and grief. They missed the large group worship gatherings and the close fellowship with missionaries with whom they "felt like one family." They mourned former Christians who

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82. Alemu Checole, "Mennonite Churches in Eastern Africa," 230-234; Gemechu Gebre Telila, "Meserete Kristos Church at Wonji Gefersa," 37, 41-43, 53-55; Hege, *Beyond Our Prayers*, 27, 168, 171-177, 193; and interviews.

83. Gemechu Gebre Telila, "Meserete Kristos Church at Wonji Gefersa," 56.

abandoned their faith, felt the absence of a gifted leader who moved to the United States, and grieved over the closure of the church. Some lamented the lack of opportunity for further education or the injustice of being denied well-paying jobs or promotions.

At times persecution left leaders feeling angry, hurt, betrayed, uncertain, confused, insecure, lonely, frustrated, discouraged, overwhelmed, and even embarrassed. "It seemed like hell on earth," evangelist Temesgen Doche reflected, "this long dark period when the Communists and those in the Youth Association considered us to be enemies of the country. It was a time when we were called foolish and weak people who were a burden to the country. We were discouraged and embarrassed. We despaired because of the poison in their accusations."<sup>84</sup>

### *Faithfulness to Christ*

Yet, remarkably, most MKC leaders endured these challenges with integrity and resolve. As they reflected on the experience, leaders linked their personal integrity with their commitment to Jesus Christ. Teru\*, for example, said that she began to be persecuted as soon as she became a Christian:

I have always considered Christianity as a way of suffering. Persecution is the normal thing for a Christian. That's what I believe, because from the start I was ridiculed, I was segregated or discriminated against. So I think that persecution is really normal.

Dawit\* pointed to the intimate connection between Jesus and those who suffer for his sake: "It was painful, but the one who suffered it before them on the cross knows the pain. [Of] everyone who was in prison . . . I never heard that anybody denied Christ."<sup>85</sup> For him, a key strategy for staying faithful to Jesus was to let others know about his spiritual allegiance:

when you are surrounded with the politics . . . sometimes there is temptation [to compromise one's faith]. I can't say I was not tempted. That would mean I am not a human being. That is false. But I never said, "I don't know Jesus." I just always referred to my faith wherever I went: at weddings or at their meetings, they knew that I was a

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84. *Ibid.* 38.

85. Kifle\* recalled ministry in a difficult location where he had nothing to eat: I came to the house where I was staying with an empty stomach. I was tired, very exhausted, and I was trying to pray, but I couldn't. I was so hungry inside, my stomach gnawing. And I almost despaired, but then I saw—kind of like a revelation—I saw how Christ hung on the cross naked, and I also saw how he was beaten and was bleeding. This was all for me. And seeing this strengthened me. So I got up and I went and started doing my work, strengthened by what I saw and understood what Christ had gone through for me. So what's this little kind of hunger and thirst and exhaustion?

Christian. At a wedding, if I was alone, I bowed down my head and prayed for the food that they were serving me. . . . They knew that I was praying. I want to be consistent with my living.<sup>86</sup>

Selassie\* discussed the challenge of living wisely within a difficult political environment, trying to avoid unnecessary offense, while at the same time being transparent about his loyalty to Jesus Christ. He did so by distinguishing between primary and secondary matters: "If somebody came and said, 'Are you a Christian?' Definitely: 'Yes!' The core is no problem . . . that is very easy to answer." In the cultural application of one's faith, however, Selassie\* saw much more latitude.

Sometimes we waste our energy on non-issues. For me persecution is when somebody . . . tells me, "Jesus Christ is not Lord." That is an issue for me. I am ready to sacrifice anything, including my life for that. But if somebody says, "Oh, you are not wearing the right clothes" . . . or, "Shall we do our service on Friday in a Muslim country or on Sunday?" I wouldn't argue on that one.

Other MKC leaders made sure that their Christian identity was a public reality. Jazarah\*, for example, posted the message "Live the whole day fearing God" on a wall in her hotel. When cadres ordered her to remove it she said, "It will stay. It will stay hanging until you go." As a teacher in a government-run school, Gemechu regularly wore a belt that said "Jesus saves," and a cross pinned on his shirt pocket.<sup>87</sup> When kebele officials

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86. Nyala\* also described her refusal to keep her faith a private matter, despite pressure and ridicule. Speaking of Jesus, she said: "I would tell them, 'I know I have experienced him, his guidance, his protection. I feel his presence every day. You can't make me forsake my faith.'" She added, "So it made me strong. It made me come out with faith, to speak about it openly, and that has really made my relationship with God very strong." Yacob\* said that when cadres wanted MKC leaders "to speak out and say that God doesn't exist . . . we firmly said, 'God is present. God exists. We can't accept what you say.'"

87. Gemechu Gebre Telila, "Meserete Kristos Church at Wonji Gefersa," 89-93. As a result of his witness, Gemechu and two other Christian teachers were accused of being CIA agents, "imperialist dogs" and "of injecting theism into the minds of the growing children." At a monthly workplace indoctrination session, they were presented with a statement summarizing the accusations against them signed by all other teachers present. The assembly passed a resolution ordering the accused to appear at the regional communist party office for questioning. Gemechu said that when he appeared before the regional official the following week:

He told me that he also had once been a Christian but the truth of Marxism and Scientific Socialism changed him. He argued against me with many strong words and warnings. At that time I was empowered by the Holy Spirit, and I gave answers boldly in [an] unexpected way. After he warned me with so many words, he said, "be careful you may be imprisoned or even you may [lose] your job. Think of your wife and your children and how you will miss them if you continue like this." Then he let me go with threatening words. The next morning, the friend of the communist officer came to me

wanted Nazareth Bible Academy students to take an oath denying their faith, school administrator Alemayehu Assefa told them, "You can't force our minds. We will obey what does not go against our religion. But if you go against our religion, we will not obey you. We obey God. Our minds are God's property." When the cadres said, "What we cannot settle around the table, we will settle with our guns," Alemayehu answered, "Your guns are to protect us, not to kill us. But we are ready and happy to die for our faith."<sup>88</sup>

Aware of their human inability to be faithful to Christ on their own strength, MKC leaders enthusiastically practiced the disciplines of Bible study, prayer, and fasting. With gratitude they remembered times when the Holy Spirit fortified them to act with courage in the face of external pressure. In an interview shortly after the fall of the Derg, a church leader testified: "A great change came upon us after we began to fast and pray together. One day as we prayed the Holy Spirit came upon each one of us, like in the Book of Acts."<sup>89</sup> Gemechu observed that through the Spirit, MKC members and leaders experienced "deep intimacy with God" and "living union and fellowship with Christ." "Repeatedly," he recalled,

the experience of persecution forced us to seek the power of the Holy Spirit. Christians were organized in groups to pray without ceasing, and they prayed specifically for the power of the Holy Spirit. It is their conviction that the God who promised to give his power for those who seek day and night poured his Spirit on his people.<sup>90</sup>

Dawit\* said, "The power of the Holy Spirit led us. We don't know how we were led, but sometimes it was in a unique way . . . it was not our work. It was God's work."<sup>91</sup>

An essential challenge for persecuted leaders was overcoming fear—or at least refusing to be immobilized by it. Selassie\*, who had been imprisoned for a year because of his leadership role in MKC, reflected on the potential of fear to weaken the church:

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and asked me whether I have connections with any higher official in the party who might be looking out for me. I asked him why he asked this question. He replied that he had heard that I had spoken to the officer as if I trusted a higher officer. I replied "Yes I have the highest officer who has power over all the worldly authorities. [His] name is Jesus Christ the Savior of the world. He is the one who made me bold and powerful."

88. Hege, *Beyond Our Prayers*, 172-174.

89. Hostetler, *Against Great Odds*.

90. Gemechu Gebre Telila, "Meserete Kristos Church at Wonji Gefersa," 67.

91. Melaku\* remembered: "The pressure was of course very, very stiff, very tough, but we felt God's presence was with us . . . the Lord was giving us the strength we needed. We didn't really feel the pain of suffering too much. Early Sunday morning, we would get up and go to 19 houses and do a communion service, give the Lord's Supper to many people, and we felt like this was really God's presence and God's strength that held us up."

In every situation you realize the other side wants you to compromise, water-down this movement by weakening you, by weakening the whole group. Yes, there were pressures. . . . In retrospect, you see a lot of things clearly, but at that time, you couldn't see whether you would live or not live. We could have very easily have been killed, too. . . . In fact that was the plan. [When] you are in that situation, for me it's like the kind of prayer Jesus prayed, "Let this cup pass from me; yet not my will but yours." Like most people, I did not want to die. I had a very young family. . . . I was never put to that test. But the part that is subtle is an eroding away of your faith, of your stand, to kind of walk in fear. That is a big temptation.<sup>92</sup>

Some identified moments when God equipped them to face their fears through particular Scriptures. Berihun\* described a fifteen-day period after the closure of the church and the arrest of other leaders when he stayed with relatives. Without going home or to work, he tried to get his affairs in order in case he was also imprisoned. At the end of that time, he said:

God spoke to me. It was Matthew 16:18: "You are Peter, a rock; and upon this rock I will build my church and all the powers of hell shall not prevail against it." I felt strengthened. God was at work. He was building his church. Nothing could prevail against it. I decided to go back home. I was ready to face whatever came my way.

Other leaders described how their fears were assuaged through visions, dreams, or direct words from God. When Zere\* and his family began hosting cell and leadership meetings in their home in 1978, he had a vision in which his neighborhood was covered by darkness. But surrounding his home, just outside the walled perimeter of his yard, was a powerful light. "I realized that God's presence, God's glory, was really surrounding us and that we should not be afraid of any coming danger."<sup>93</sup>

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92. Selassie\* later added that despite temptations to compromise, "I think God doesn't give you more challenges than you can bear. . . . The Lord knew our strength and weaknesses and his grace was abundant."

93. Tengene\* described a prophetic dream just before 1982 in which he said, "The Lord spoke to me, telling me that the church was going to be closed." In his dream, a procession of people came out of the MKC building in Addis Ababa, each with a stick representing the Word of God—a symbol of protection and help from God through difficulty. "A stick was given to me and I walked with them a long distance." Later, when the church was "really frightened" and "about to scatter" Tengene\* heard a voice saying, "Don't be afraid."



The threat of persecution regularly forced leaders to discern the extent to which they could comply with the demands of the Derg or contribute to its program without compromising their loyalty to Jesus Christ. The chanting of revolutionary slogans in support of the new political order, for example, became a litmus test for revealing the allegiance of Ethiopian citizens. MKC members universally recognized some slogans as direct challenges to their devotion to Jesus. Thus, they avoided saying, "Ethiopia first!" which elevated the nation to the position of an idol, insisting that the proper order of loyalty was "Jesus first; then country." They expressed varying views, however, about the acceptability of other revolutionary slogans. Yacob\*, for example, refused to say, "Down with imperialism!" while Solomon did not have a problem with it, though he refused to say, "The revolution above everything else." Jazarah\* tried to deflect the attention of the authorities from her refusal to shout revolutionary slogans by keeping a purse in her left hand and an umbrella in her right during kebele meetings, so that she had an understandable reason for not complying when the crowd was ordered to, "Raise your left arm and say, 'Down with imperialism.'" She says, "I went through all those years without saying a slogan."<sup>94</sup>

Meserete Kristos Church and its leaders also wrestled with determining the degree to which they could participate in Derg social reforms without compromising their allegiance to Jesus and the kingdom of God. As the revolution unfolded, MKC leaders wanted to support genuine efforts to strengthen the nation and enhance the lives of fellow citizens. They therefore encouraged young people to take part in literacy and development campaigns. They also wanted churches to participate in local projects that benefited the community. When authorities at the kebele office accused Zere\* of not supporting the revolution, he held his ground, praying, "In Jesus' name I don't want to really be involved in any atheistic or anti-Christian activities." But when they said, "You will be in the development committee"—working on the literacy campaign and helping the poor—Zere\* rejoiced. "It was like a Christian duty!" he explained. "So I praised the Lord that I was put in that area of service."

Unlike some other mission-based churches, MKC complied with a government order to teach a course on Marxism at the Bible Academy in Nazareth. Leaders reasoned that Christians presenting the material could help students critically engage communist philosophy and counter its influence. In general, church leaders encouraged believers to attend indoctrination sessions without accepting Marxist ideology. Yacob\* remembers, "They used to gather people and try to teach their Marxist-

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94. Jazarah\* noted, with a smile, that as a business owner it would have been particularly odd for her to shout, "Down with the bourgeois!"

Leninist ideology. We attended the classes but did not really accept what they said." At times they publicly challenged Derg ideology, presenting a biblical perspective on issues at hand or an explicit witness to Jesus Christ.<sup>95</sup>

While the church generally supported government development goals like literacy training, MKC leaders resisted the use of church property for Derg programs, recognizing that such programs could easily morph into Marxist indoctrination sessions. Alemu noted that elders of the congregation in Nazareth said, "This is a sanctuary to worship the Lord. But we are willing to build classrooms for you on the kebele compound, if you want to." So the church built four classrooms for literacy teaching on local government property.<sup>96</sup>

Similar tensions emerged when kebele leaders would call community meetings to coincide with Sunday morning worship. Selassie\* recalled:

You had to make a choice. Where do you go? And then it wasn't like the decision was only yours, but there were community police who were standing on the road and challenging you . . . You had to make a decision and take steps, wise steps, to decide what to do under those circumstances. Sometimes it would be announced over the media that there would be such and such a meeting and everybody was expected to go. Now as leaders, do you decide today we don't have Sunday church or do you stand your ground? It was a time when really you had to walk very carefully.

One place where MKC leaders consistently drew the line was political affiliation and party membership. Gemechu remembered a visit from a former Christian who tried to persuade him to join the Communist party by enumerating the benefits party members enjoyed: free medical care, life insurance, and scholarships to universities in other communist countries for themselves and their children. When his visitor pressed him, Gemechu replied,

No. Thank you very much for invitation, but I am a Christian. As you know, Christianity is not compatible with communism. Do you know

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95. Hege, *Beyond Our Prayers*, 167-168; Tibebe Eshete, *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia*, 254-256.

96. Also Hege, *Beyond Our Prayers*, 166, 176-177. In contrast to the ability of Nazareth MKC leaders to limit government use of church property in the 1970s, Gemechu Gebre Telila noted that in 1977 kebele officials in Wonji Gersera used local MKC facilities without permission, scheduling socialist gatherings at the site when the church would normally have worship.— "History of the Meserete Kristos Church at Wonji Gefersa," 37.

my brother, that I am already insured and secured by Jesus my Lord, the almighty God? Sorry, brother, but I cannot grant any place for your invitation.<sup>97</sup>

Likewise, Teru\* explained her rejection of “opportunities to have very nice paying jobs or to be advanced in the political sphere”:

After receiving Christ I have never had this worldly desire to advance my selfish interest. That has never been my interest. It was always for the cause of Christ and his kingdom that I live. People want to get higher in their position, and so they compromise or they give up their Christian values, but I have always enjoyed working for Christ, even though I haven't had advantages as such. . . . I don't have anything to boast or brag about. It's God's grace and strength that has enabled me to follow his way and do his bidding, so it has never been too hard for me. Because of God's help, God's presence, I have kept the faith and I have gone this far with the Lord.<sup>98</sup>

Meserete Kristos Church leaders responded with some ambivalence to the conscription of young people to fight Eritrean, Tigrean, and other Derg opponents. Some accepted conscription while others helped young people evade military service and risked punishment for their refusal to bear arms.<sup>99</sup> During an interrogation session in prison, authorities challenged Hakim\* to save himself by agreeing to fight for his country:

Three majors of the police force were sitting there. . . . They knew the Mennonite church did not believe in war, so they said, “You are a young man. You are fit. We would like to send you to the north, where they struggle about fighting for your country.”

The temptation at that time was to just to say, “I will fight for my country,” but I never answered. I kept quiet. . . . He said, “Speak!”

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97. Gemechu Gebre Telila, “Meserete Kristos Church at Wonji Gefersa,” 39-40. MKC leaders consistently explain their rationale for refusing party membership in light of their commitment to Jesus. Kelile\* said, “I made a decision to follow the Lord, even unto death. Of course, there were possibilities where I could choose to leave the Christian faith and join the political life and activities of the Derg, but I made the decision to stand firm on Christ, being with Christ, and being with the church.”

98. In Hege, *Beyond Our Prayers*, 206, Kassa Agafari reflected on how persecution refined the motivations of evangelical believers and leaders: “When we were dispossessed of material things, we began to reach for spiritual realities. We used to go to church in the hope of gaining material things. Now there is none of that.”

99. Hege, *Beyond Our Prayers*, 137, 161-166, 176-177, and Tibebe Eshete, *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia*, 253-254, discuss MKC acquiescence to military service contra Anabaptist Mennonite pacifist traditions. This stance should be understood in light of the historical absence of conscientious objection in Ethiopia, nationalist pressures, and relative lack of time for the church to wrestle with the relationship between nonviolence, Christian faith, and citizenship obligations in its context. In 1965, Hege notes, the MKC executive committee adapted the Mennonite Confession of Faith article on nonresistance to read that the church believes in the principle of love for all peoples.

No answer. So one of the majors said, "I am going to ask you this question: You have somebody in front of you. You are standing with a gun that has a bayonet. And this guy intends to hurt your wife, kill your children. Would you stab him or not, and take out his inner parts?" And of course in Amharic it was so descriptive, so disgusting. I don't know where I got the response, but I heard myself saying, "Sir. I don't have that kind of enemy. As human beings you won't do such a cruel thing and I won't do it."

Recognizing Hakim\* was an intellectual leader in the prison, the major sent someone to persuade him to "just say what they want you to say" even if it was at odds with his actual beliefs. "It was almost a temptation to compromise," Hakim\* recalled. "But I had to take courage and say, 'No. Whatever I have said, I have said. That's it.'"<sup>100</sup>

When Yacob\* was elected to a two-year term as a kebele leader in the early years of the revolution, Derg authorities gave him an AK-47 Kalashnikov rifle to defend himself. "I took the gun," Yacob\* said, "and hid it in the closet in the house. I just went out in the evening to town without any gun, even though they told me to carry it around and threaten people with it." The officials confronted him: "We gave you a gun. Why don't you use it? Why don't you carry it with you?" Yacob\* responded, "What's the use of carrying a gun? If I carry one, they can come from behind and kill me, and shoot me. It's God who protects me." He added, "I also told them, 'I don't want to kill anyone.'" He retrieved the gun and

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100. Because of Hakim's refusal to allow a gap between his personal and public commitments, a letter was written, accusing him of being "against the revolution," and marking him for execution. A similar order was given against another MKC leader at the same time. They were spared when a government informant in the prison verified that they had no connections to the American Central Intelligence Agency. Hakim reflected on temptations to compromise one's faith and the grace of God: "the temptation for compromise was always there. Somehow by the grace of the Lord, we didn't do it. . . . Also, you know, the Lord understands our weakness, if you compromise. Peter compromised. He became the greatest leader. So I am not that proud for not compromising, but the grace of the Lord did it." Another example of an MKC leader refusing military service is found in Hege, *Beyond Our Prayers*, 179-180. After describing a series of short imprisonments because of his Christian faith, Ijigu Woldegebriel said:

The final time I was detained, they asked me to carry a gun and serve as a military guard in the area. When I got wind of this, I left home. So they put my father in prison and told him that unless I return, they would not release him. My sister sent word to me that my father was in prison. So I went and surrendered myself, and they released him. They wanted me to swear allegiance to the revolution. I told them I didn't have time for it along with my responsibilities. Finally, they asked for my identity card. They took off the photo and gave it to me, tore up the card, threw it in the wastebasket, and said, "From now on you are not a resident of this kebele. We don't know you; get out of here." God took care of me.

returned it to them, saying, "It's not the gun you gave me that protects me. It's God who protects me, so I don't need it."

Keenly aware of the risks, MKC leaders sometimes chose to disregard directives from the authorities. Before the closure of MKC in 1982, for example, everyone under the age of 30 was prohibited from attending church programs. A bit younger than the required age, Zere\* successfully altered his identification card so that he appeared to be 32 years old, enabling him to take part in worship and to serve as a choir member. In their late teens and early 20s, Abebech and Teru\* disguised themselves in clothing borrowed from elderly women in the hope of fooling onlookers into thinking they were old enough to enter the church premises. Teru\* says that she and her friends tried this strategy three times, but each time were discovered and severely beaten.

When leaders of the Wonji Women's Association organized women into groups for drama and revolutionary dancing, evangelical Christians refused to take part, saying that they were called to sing only for "our Lord Jesus who is our Lord and master of all." When Belynesht Tesbome challenged the association leader, she and other MKC women were incarcerated. After ten days, they were again interrogated and received Marxist instruction. When they continued to hold firm to their faith, cadres shouted at them and sent the group back to prison. The women sang hymns on the way.<sup>101</sup>

When Fikru Zeleke was summoned to appear at a regional security office in November 1985, an officer placed a pistol on a table trying to intimidate him during the interrogation. "From the time I entered the man's presence," Fikru recalled, "a special power came upon me which was not of my own—something I had not experienced before. So I began to dispute with him. I told him I'm preaching a permitted gospel and that I have permission to do so." Citing a government order for the closing of MKC, the officer pronounced him a criminal; but Fikru answered, "I have permission from the King of kings." When asked for evidence, he pulled a small Bible from his pocket and read from Matthew 28:18-19: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations." Angry, the guard slapped Fikru on the face. After ten hours of debate, Fikru was released on the condition that he

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101. Gemechu Gebre Telila, "Meserete Kristos Church at Wonji Gefersa," 30-33. For Belynesht and the other women, the Marxist indoctrination continued for fifteen days. Despite the emotional and physical pressures of a small, crowded prison cell with temperatures exceeding 100°F, Belynesht testified that the women remained happy and confident. She said, "We had [a] good time with our Lord in prayer, and we had plenty of opportunity to discuss our faith and to get to know each other. God changed the cell itself into a suitable and comfortable place for us. Astonishingly, all of us were in good health. We had overflowing joy and immeasurable peace."

would not invite anyone to his home for teaching. He continued to insist, however, that he would welcome and teach anyone who came to his house on their own initiative. "It is the power of the Spirit that sends people forth with the gospel," Fikru testified. "This I have learned."<sup>102</sup>

*Persecution as a Crucible for Spiritual Formation*

Meserete Kristos Church leaders identified positive impacts of persecution on their relationship with God, their character development and spiritual formation. They recognized that their effectiveness as leaders rested on the integrity of their own example. Selassie\* pointed out that "Leaders are [at the] forefront. They are visible. . . . They need to exhibit those qualities that the flock needs to see." Desta\* expressed her admiration for leaders who "tried hard to keep God's people together with the example of their lives," adding that "a leader has to be resolute, a good example in life and conduct." Abebech described how Bible reading and prayer gave her "the courage to stand through those testing, withering moments," coupled with her desire to be "an exemplary servant to the Lord" who "didn't want to be running in vain." She added, "I wanted to stand to the end and be a good example to others. So that helped me not to compromise. And also the fact that I was going around and visiting homes and serving them gave me the life that I should show to others." Tengene\* spoke similarly about persecution as a crucible for spiritual refining in his own life and in the church:

As iron is tested or tried through fire and when it is refined it becomes stronger, all that persecution strengthened us instead of weakened us. I came to really know the Lord personally and cling to him. So I praise the Lord that he helped me go through those difficult times. As Paul says in Romans 8:28: to those who love the Lord and are called by him, everything goes well together for them. And as it is also explained in there, the purpose is to be like the Son, like Christ. So it has really made us like Christ.<sup>103</sup>

Berihun\* emphasized the spiritual formation of the church as it participated in the suffering of Jesus Christ. Being "dispossessed" led to being "filled," and being "cornered" led to the church to "look up":

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102. Hege, *Beyond Our Prayers*, 199-201.

103. Kelile\* acknowledged both the emotional heaviness of the persecution era and the provision of God, saying, "After the closure of the church, there was not really a time when I could really have a belly laugh, you know . . . but I really noticed that the Lord delivers us, is with us and never forsakes us, so my relationship with God has been strengthened despite the difficulties."

Persecution is a means by which God reveals himself to the ones who are persecuted and the ones who need his salvation. He guides his children in a way that they would glorify him. Sometimes he works in mysterious ways. When God dispossesses his children of their belongings, he would fill them with his love and strength: dispossess, fill with love and strength. So God dispossessed MKC and he filled us with love and strength to do the ministry that he has called us to do. That's what God did. He put us to zero level: nothing that we can glory in. Our bank account was frozen. All buildings were taken and possessions confiscated. We were cornered, like Pharaoh following the Israelites and they were facing the Red Sea. They didn't have any choice but to run away. And they couldn't do that because the Egyptians had chariots and warriors. So they had only one choice: look up.

Gemechu echoed those words, concluding:

Christians developed the conviction that the greater the pressure imposed by the Communists, the more appealing their holy living appeared to their neighbors. They believed that their boldness in witnessing penetrated the fallacies of Communist atheism. They interpreted identification with a church experiencing persecution as a form of deliverance. To them, persecution had become a powerful tool for bringing the lost into the community of God's kingdom.<sup>104</sup>

### LOVE: ATTRACTIVE, GRACIOUS RELATIONSHIPS

In addition to purpose and integrity, a third quality of transformational leadership, according to Quinn, especially in times of crisis, is the ability to put the welfare of others ahead of one's own interests in pursuit of the common good. Interview questions with MKC leaders explored how they prioritized the needs of others and how they practiced love in the midst of persecution.

Expressions of these qualities took many different forms, beginning with a posture of humility and a commitment to treat others with compassion, patience, and respect. "Life in the church is about servanthood," said Solomon Kebede, "not self-seeking leadership." Referring to "great leaders" like Kedir and Tadesse, Tewodros\* recalled:

They were unselfish. They really were humble leaders. They came down to the little places, the huts, without any feeling of being degraded or of being humiliated. . . . So this willingness to sacrifice

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104. Gemechu Gebre Telila, "Meserete Kristos Church at Wonji Gefersa," 65.

their physical comfort, to go out of their comfort zone and serve the people humbly . . . really being a servant leader: that's what I admire.

MKC leaders worked together in a variety of team configurations: ministry pairs, choirs, visitation and evangelism groups, cell leader, pastoral care and elder teams, program committees, writing teams, and oversight bodies for local churches and the denomination. Even in the face of stressful situations and personal differences members of these teams cultivated patterns of support and accountability. Interviewees consistently testified that during the Derg years these relationships among leadership team members were marked by love, mutual acceptance, understanding, grace, and unity.<sup>105</sup> Alemu's comments were typical:

I appreciated our togetherness as leadership teams. We would do our regular jobs during the day. We would teach or work in the hospital or wherever, and then at night we would meet together. We would be, of course, physically exhausted, but we were willing to sacrifice our sleep and work for the benefit of our members.<sup>106</sup>

Berihun\* recalled a "transparency of speech and understanding," adding that:

The leaders considered themselves as servants. This is what made the whole difference in those days and years. It was also customary for all committee members to come together for days in every month for prayer and fasting and admonishing. So, we were knit together. Really, that's the work of God. We had one aim, one purpose, and we had a focused goal. We built ourselves by the Word of God, praying

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105. Dawit\* argued that leaders who have integrity always seek the best for others. Problems come when leaders seek personal gain, focusing on "What's for me?" Reflecting back, he said: "During that time we didn't have any [people asking] 'What's for me's.' We were always for the others. So most of the "One Year for Christ" guys served the church without any penny because they were for Christ." Solomon noted that "when people are in the church for power, for gain," they "sow discord." "Unless they get what they want, they will cause problems in the church." During the persecution era, however "The people with those ambitions ran away from the church." In a sifting process, "only those who made business with the Lord, who were ready to pay the price stayed. So it was excellent, and it was full of love. When you see a friend somewhere, you get energized, a Christian brother—even when you see him pass by while crossing the road, just by seeing him. At that time it was excellent." Mamo recalled no ethnic tension in the church during the Derg years; instead he said, "The Holy Spirit kept us together."

106. Contrasting the situation under persecution with the contemporary situation in which leaders are tempted to claim titles like "pastor" or "prophet" as status markers, Solomon said, "During that time, you hid. You don't run for [leadership positions]. If it comes, you say, 'I cannot escape it.'"



one for another, [for] the leaders and potential leaders and church members, to equip them for the ministry to which they are called.<sup>107</sup>

Each bi-monthly meeting of the MKC Evangelism Committee started with a significant time of prayer, followed by reports on the church's ministry from various regions, noting differences among industrial, rural, and urban ministry contexts. After that, the group "discussed how to lead the church as a whole," including vision, finances, church policy, leadership strategy and development, support for imprisoned leaders, and guidelines to protect cell groups from being discovered by the authorities.

Remembering how evangelists and elders worked together in ministry pairs, Semer\* said:

We worked together in unity. And we went and visited the different cell groups in different homes. If people were sick we would go and pray for them, and encourage them. When we realized that there was a bereaved family we would go and comfort them. So there was this teamwork, two by two. We went even far away from our homes, like three, four kilometres away, at night, mostly in the dark. We went and visited. . . . We trusted each other. We weren't afraid of being betrayed; there was love and acceptance, working together in trust and in good faith.

Nyala\* and Teru\* highlighted the collegial and respectful example set by leaders like evangelist Kedir. He worked "with other leaders in love and complete understanding," recalled Nyala\*. In return, he enjoyed "grace and acceptance from other leaders" who "listened to him." Teru\* observed:

Brother Kedir always initiated ideas but he would never implement them without full discussion with other leaders. Most of the time his idea would be implemented . . . but he always brought it to the team of leaders. He didn't do it like a dictator: "Just do this or do that." He wanted people to think about it, express their opinions on it, and finally the resolution would be the team resolution.

Kedir also welcomed initiative in others:

he was open to listen to people's views and ideas, and never rejected people's ideas when they suggested or recommended something. He would listen and then finally express it in his own way in the team.

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107. Tewodros\* also stressed open communication among team members: "one quality necessary for leaders [is] to really have unity—to come together as Christian leaders and discuss things in love and perseverance. . . . So with open hearts to each other, able to communicate freely as leaders in those difficult times, those are some of the qualities that are needed."

People who suggested or recommended the ideas would understand it was their idea that he had framed so that people would accept it or understand. So there was give and take.<sup>108</sup>

In addition to the warmth of personal friendship, MKC leaders created a culture of mutual care in their team relationships and in the church through structures of accountability that identified clear responsibilities, set high expectations, and counted on team members to give and receive correction. As persecution intensified, MKC leaders developed more intentional patterns of accountability for themselves and the church. The MKC teaching that every believer, as part of the body of Christ, “has at least one spiritual gift” and “could fill a ministry position suited for their gifting” led members to feel responsible for the church and accountable for their lives.<sup>109</sup> The intimacy of cell groups meant that members could not remain distant from other believers or inactive in ministry. Participants were expected to be growing disciples of Jesus Christ—earnestly practicing spiritual disciplines, engaging in church life, and sharing the gospel with nonbelievers.

Leaders established reporting procedures to track attendance in cell groups, prayer meetings, and other church programs. They distributed and collected sheets for members to record weekly personal Bible reading and short reflections on what they had learned. Each family was to record the dates on which they had family worship. Cell leaders gathered these monthly reports, shared them in their leadership team updates, and passed them on to the Pastoral Care Committee. Leaders also kept lists of pastoral care visits. They came to meetings prepared to report on these and other ministry activities.<sup>110</sup> This reporting facilitated follow-up with

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108. Berihun\* emphasized that as chairperson of the MKC Evangelism Committee he “did not do things according to my own decision” but “we decided in a committee.” He remembered “we were of one mind, one soul, one spirit, one goal.”

109. Gemechu Gebre Telila, “Meserete Kristos Church at Wonji Gefersa,” 55.

110. Abera Ertiro, “History of the Meserete Kristos Church at Nazareth,” 36-39, reprints copies of report forms. He noted that “everybody who was able to read” was expected “to read his/her Bible at least once in a year. A believer who read more than once would be rewarded. This system encouraged many members to read their Bible.” It “helped believers grow with the knowledge of [the] word of God. In their weekly report they would share what God had taught them in their reading.” In addition, they memorized a verse to share at their weekly cell meeting.” Alemu said: “I am really, in a way, grateful to God for bringing the Derg to power . . . it helped the church to devise strategies of working to help the members keep together.” Commenting on the expectation for MKC members to read the Bible, he added “we tried to keep track who was behind, lagging behind or who had stopped. And so people really read the Bible voraciously, avidly, over and over again. And that helped people to be knowledgeable of the Word of God.” Alemu Checole, “Mennonite Churches in Eastern Africa,” 232-233, described similar patterns of accountability and support for

church members in need of support. If anyone seemed to be withdrawing from church involvement, leaders would seek them out—sometimes traveling long distances to find out if they were sick, experiencing financial problems, or struggling spiritually.<sup>111</sup>

Leaders also often gave honest feedback to each other, and received the same. Louam\* credits senior leaders for being “very careful in how they handled us,” explaining that: “There was a lot of trust and friendship, love among us leaders. We worked together in love and in humility. When our senior leaders would rebuke us or tell us when we went wrong we listened to them.” This correction could also apply to a respected leader. Bekele\* described a circumstance where leaders who “sacrificed themselves for the church became very dictatorial.” It did not continue long, though, because “the top leadership, when they saw that kind of issue began to deal with these individuals.”

With diverse ethnic, religious, social, economic, regional, and educational backgrounds and personalities, MKC leaders naturally brought different perspectives to the challenges they faced under persecution. Some identified primarily with the influence of the Mennonite mission; others with the Pentecostal movement. Some drew professional salaries at their workplace and served the church in their “spare” time; others, such as evangelists, worked for the church full-time and received varying degrees of financial support. Nevertheless, according to Dawit\*, MKC leaders were able to exercise their diverse gifts effectively because “we respected each other, we heard each other, and then we submitted to each other.” Solomon recalled that he and Kedir “complemented one another.” Whereas Kedir was experienced as “powerful,” “blunt,” “aggressive,” and “straightforward,” unafraid to rebuke anyone who needed correction, Solomon took a softer approach

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ministry assignments at the national church level as the Evangelism Committee was being established. The team wanted to make sure that nine key ministries were being implemented in each local church. Each Committee member “began to report their progress and confer with the rest of the unimprisoned church leaders.”

111. Nyala\* identified Kedir’s passion for accountability on leadership teams: “Kedir wanted to keep the body of Christ strong. . . . He always was very active in follow-up work, that people did not slacken in their activities. Those that were carrying out the responsibilities under him . . . did it faithfully to the glory of God.” Semer\* recalled leaders like Kedir working with ministry teams to give assignments, checking to see whether particular team members “would go to so-and-so’s house. How many can they do in a month? Can they visit two people, three people, four people?” Communication within the team was essential to ensure believers’ needs were not neglected. He explained:

We visited people in their homes, tried to counsel them on their Christian living, how to read the Bible, how to pray and attend prayer meetings or Bible study meetings and also if they had physical needs, if they really lacked food or whatever we would try to provide for their needs. And also we would ask the evangelists to follow-up on the condition of believers who had problems. We tried to really find and help those in need.

toward others, in order “to win their hearts.” “God helped us,” Dawit\* concluded. “He tuned us together like a guitar that has different strings. Like strings on the guitar, the one is very thin, the other is bold. The sound is different but when you play they give good sound.”

### *Relationships in the Church*

MKC leaders expressed their love for the church not only in teaching, discipleship ministries, visitation, creating cell groups, and calling and equipping new leaders, but also in risky, sometimes sacrificial, ways. Some, for example, became advocates for believers who were suffering injustice. Nyala\* remembered Kedir as “a man of justice” who “always spoke out when people were unjustly treated.” Kedir frequently accompanied believers to court to ensure that they had good legal advice. When kebele officials arrested Nazareth Bible Academy students, teachers from the school lobbied Derg officials for three days until they ruled that the students’ imprisonment had been an error. When Nazareth MKC members were jailed and beaten in 1977, church leaders appealed to town officials and wrote letters to twenty different kebeles, seeking their freedom. When a delegation of five leaders met with the governor of Nazareth, they boldly asked, “What is the problem? What have we done to hurt our country? Is there any evidence [against us]?” After a lengthy conversation, the governor promised to end the harassment.<sup>112</sup> Alemu, a delegation member, noted that the willingness of leaders to take such risks—and the favorable result—“helped people to have more courage, more faith.”

Whenever possible, church leaders tried to protect others from persecution. Dawit\* described the challenge of finding a safe home for a high school student whose father decided to kill her because she converted to Christianity. “She tried to hide for a period of time,” but her family discovered her whereabouts. “As a church leader, what can I do?” Dawit\* asked himself. He found an MKC family in another town who was willing to take her in. On other occasions, MKC leaders tried to prevent the arrest of fellow leaders. When Derg officials arrived at Nazareth Bible Academy to arrest director Negash Kebede, academic dean Bedru

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112. Hege, *Beyond Our Prayers*, 172-174.

Hussein managed to warn him and distract the officers, allowing him to escape.<sup>113</sup>

All along the way, MKC leaders stressed the need for persecuted believers to remain connected with each other, especially with those who were sick or struggling in some way. As a deacon and member of the pastoral care committee, Abebech and her ministry team made home visits to celebrate a baby's birth, taking gifts, sharing from the Word of God, and eating together. They also visited bereaved families and shared in their grief. Nyala\* remembers how Kedir "cried with Christians who were suffering; he wept with them."

In a context of widespread poverty—compounded by persecution—MKC leaders also mobilized the resources of the church to meet the needs of believers in financial difficulty, trying to ensure that impoverished members retained their dignity in the process. Abebech recalled that some cell group members could not afford to bring food to share at meetings. Others would prepare food for two, three, or four others, who were told "not to feel embarrassed" for not contributing. House fellowships hosted wedding ceremonies and provided food for couples unable to cover the cost of their celebration. Some believers needed help with transportation. Others, who were rejected by their families because of their faith in Jesus, needed a home. Abebech describes a group of compassionate women who helped orphans, widows, and others in poverty by sharing food and spices with them. Young people would help repair "old, dilapidated houses," a practice that still continues. She observed that under persecution church members began to offer more practical assistance to each other than previously. "Before the Derg," Abebech recalled, "we just came to church and went away. We didn't do anything during the week for anybody. We weren't involved. Now, during the Derg we were helping each other."

One strategy for helping unemployed church members was to provide microloans to help them start their own businesses. Berihun\* said: "We created a revolving fund. Many were able to [benefit] from this scheme in the underground." Financed by member tithes, the fund allowed a potential entrepreneur to buy equipment, such as stoves to bake injera, which they could then sell in the market. The church also provided financial support to students in need.

Care for imprisoned MKC members and their families was a special priority of church leaders, who prayed for prisoners, visited them, and ensured that they received food to supplement inadequate prison rations. They also gave emotional, spiritual, and financial support to families who

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113. *Ibid.*, 25-26; Ten days later, after conferring with other MKC leaders, Negash presented himself to Addis Ababa authorities; he was arrested and spent four-and-a-half years in prison.

were struggling without their imprisoned members. Selassie\* remembered that while he was in prison even people he did not know visited his family, brought gifts for them, and prayed for them—"all over, not only within Ethiopia, but internationally."<sup>114</sup>

MKC leaders' conviction that the love of God extended to their non-believing neighbors led them to seek the well-being of their communities and nation. In addition to supporting believers, Selassie\* said, "we made sure that we also helped the community. Financially and materially we helped the poor." Leaders visited the sick in their community, prayed for them, offered emotional support, and shared their faith.<sup>115</sup> Imprisoned MKC leaders shared their food with fellow inmates and assisted them in other practical ways.<sup>116</sup> Alemu noted that MKC members took part in community events and projects. "We tried to participate in weddings, funerals, whatever they had—and in giving. The kebele would ask us to contribute towards some cause. We did that as much as we could and I think that showed them that we were not anti-social, not against the society as such."

#### *Learning to Love Persecutors*

Despite the risks involved, many MKC leaders spoke boldly about their faith in their relations with authorities. In some situations they complied with orders to limit ministry activities; on other occasions they quietly defied or verbally challenged them; and sometimes they openly confronted officials about the unjust treatment of Christians. Several leaders acknowledged the challenge of overcoming their anger toward persecutors. "Observing all the injustice," said Kelile\*, "the suffering that people were going through, the killing and the beating . . . sometimes really made me so angry inside." Gebresalassie confessed: "I was angry with the government, of course. They took our church buildings and used them for other purposes. In fact, at one point I wished the Lord would

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114. Selassie\* highlighted the support MKC women provided to prisoners: "The women would send meals to us as a group . . . once a week they would send tons of food to all of us."

115. Jazarah\* described regular visits to a non-believing family, praying for their daughter who had a heart problem, and the healing that resulted when she invited an evangelist to come to the home to pray for the young woman.

116. Hakim\* described how his cellmates were blessed by the generosity of evangelical Christians: "We had much food coming in our name. . . . So the cell where I was assigned (these were political young people) and I would take 20 meals for those people who were there were—most of them for five years, seven years, with nobody to visit them. Our cell prospered as a result of my being there."

curse the earth and make the earth open up and swallow the church building.”<sup>117</sup> In the early stages of persecution, Gemechu remembered that his anger blocked his ability to love his persecutors: “My prayer was full of hatred and full of cursing. I prayed for a long time for the destruction of those who were persecuting us.”

Nevertheless, MKC leaders were committed to loving their persecutors. Gemechu testified that his heart was transformed when

One midnight God woke me in my bed and made me to kneel down and pray. The power of the Holy Spirit changed the direction of my prayer. My hatred changed into love, my curse was changed into blessing, I began calling the names of those who were persecuting us, and suddenly began blessing them. From that day onward my direction of praying was completely changed. The Holy Spirit brought to my memory Romans 12:14: “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.” The change that I experienced that night brought a change in my attitude toward those who persecuted us.<sup>118</sup>

Melaku\* explained that he and other leaders “had a heart of compassion” toward persecutors “because Jesus has taught us to love our enemies.” He remembered a visiting American teaching from Matthew 5. “The lessons we received helped us love,” he said, and helped “vaccinate” the church against bitterness toward those who opposed it.<sup>119</sup>

Understanding persecution in the context of spiritual warfare, MKC leaders believed that they and their persecutors shared a common enemy who had already been defeated by Jesus. Love for persecutors was an expression of this conviction. Instead of fighting against people, said Dawit\*, “I was battling with the spirit that works behind them. That was helping me a lot to not take people as my enemy.” “Who is our enemy?” asked Gemechu:

You may say the enemy is those who are killing, imprisoning, and persecuting Christians and their leaders. The call of God cuts directly across our comfort, our plans and our security. As the evangelical Christians went underground, they recognized that their enemy was not so much the people who opposed them as it was opposition to Christianity at a spiritual level. They referred to what the Scriptures call the spirit of Antichrist (1 John 4:3).

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117. Hostetler, *Against Great Odds*.

118. Gemechu Gebre Telila, “Meserete Kristos Church at Wonji Gefersa,” 70.

119. Tengene\* said, “The love that we received from Christ . . . was what kept us from hating the persecutors.” Louam\* stressed the importance of “showing love to your enemies,” citing persecuted Romanian Christian Richard Wurmbrand as an example. He added that “love is really a powerful weapon to the leader.”

To love our enemies as Christ commanded and to not damage the church as the Body, we must first love them—yet we do not participate in their evil. When we are wronged, we are not to react in a spirit of hatred but in a way that shows we have values that are centered in Christ and his kingdom. Our action toward those who are unkind to us should be such that it might lead them to accept Christ as their Savior. Our uncontested tolerance may mean that they can kill us. Loving them means that by prayer and example they see Jesus in us.<sup>120</sup>

For MKC leaders, praying for their persecutors was an essential act of love. While the church showed kindness in various ways to those who opposed it, Kifle\* insisted that “praying for them was the most important thing that we did.” Zere\* noted, “We asked for mercy for them, that God would be merciful and bring them back to him.” Kedir kept a notebook in which he wrote down the names of sixty-four persecutors so that he could pray for each one.” “Of course we didn’t like the way they were treating us,” said Louam\*, “but we didn’t hate them as people. We tried to pray for them [and] to sympathize with them when they ran into trouble.” Kelile\* said, “Most of them were in that position for their own selfish motives, not because they really believed in socialism. . . . And we knew that they were doing the persecuting not because they really hated us. They were obeying the orders from the higher authorities, and so we were really sorry for them. We sympathized with them.”<sup>121</sup> Berihun\* noted that some Derg officials were secret “sympathizers of Christians,” and sometimes informed church leaders of government plans to harm believers, enabling them to escape. Abebech said:

We began to accept those that were persecuting us—with love. They wouldn’t, of course, come to our funerals or whatever. They wouldn’t participate in our burial rites, but we went to their funerals, and that showed them that we were sympathetic to them and loved them and wouldn’t really look on them as enemies.<sup>122</sup>

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120. Gemechu Gebre Telila, “Meserete Kristos Church at Wonji Gefersa,” 88.

121. Mamo remembers a co-worker who admitted, “I am a Marxist because of my bread.” At a workplace indoctrination session, a leader was teaching on religion, idealism, class conflict and historical materialism. When Mamo asked a question (“You said Marxism is dynamic. What will happen after communism?”), the leader said he would get counsel from his boss before giving his answer. After the session, he met Mamo and asked, “Why do you ask that question? Do you think I believe it?”

122. Kelile\* likewise said that when a persecutor “had a car accident or if they lost someone that they loved, we would sympathize with them. We went and comforted them.” Zere\* described the zeal of the chairman of the kebele youth group who would round up



Many persecutors made commitments to Jesus Christ in response to love shown by MKC members and leaders. In Wonji Gefersa alone about fifty members of the Communist party joined the church while the Derg was still in power. One of them, Getachew, recalled that he was attracted to Christianity by the love that Christians showed to each other and to their enemies. "No one had told me about Jesus and the saving gospel, yet the love of Christians drew me to God. Before I knew God, I was attracted by the love of Christians."<sup>123</sup>

In a context of great pressure to respond selfishly, MKC leaders consistently demonstrated the transformative power of love in their relationships with each other, with church members, and with government authorities who were persecuting them.

### CREATIVITY: LEARNING ON THE GO

The final quality that Quinn associates with transformational leadership is a learning posture that results in creativity and wisdom. Those in leadership roles tend to assume that they already have the knowledge and expertise necessary for success. Transformational leaders, by contrast, experiment, seek honest feedback, adapt to new realities, and seek greater discovery, awareness, competence, and vision. Evidence of these characteristics can be seen in the examples above. But MKC leaders exhibited "external openness," as Quinn describes it, in other ways as well.

MKC leaders were keenly attentive to the new and changing culture of the socialist revolution. For some, earlier encounters with Marxism provided an interpretive lens for understanding the claims and actions of the revolutionary context. The uncertainties of the Derg regime spurred leaders to more passionate study of Marxist literature alongside the Bible. During the late 1960s and early 1970s Alemu noted that "many naïve Christians had viewed socialism as a benign system that would turn Ethiopia into the 'bread basket of Africa.'"<sup>124</sup> Selassie\* observed that some presented socialism as though it were "Christianity in another form." Initially, he continued, "we were kind of groping in the dark." Eventually, however, "things started to be clearer" as differences between Marxism and Christianity became more obvious.

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young men and women "and put them in prison and beat them up." Zere\* said, "One day after being so cruel and taking severe measures against Christians, he was on his way to [Sodere hot mineral springs]. . . . He was going in his car and the car overturned and he died immediately. And we were really sorry for him that he died in this way. We went to their house and mourned with them, comforted them."

123. Gemechu Gebre Telila, "Meserete Kristos Church at Wonji Gefersa," 61-65.

124. Alemu Checole, "Mennonite Churches in Eastern Africa," 231.

To equip themselves and the church for Christian witness in a revolutionary context, these and several other MKC leaders studied Marxist philosophy as well as literature arising from the experience of persecuted Christian in other settings. At annual multi-denominational leadership conferences hosted by Nazareth Bible Academy, Solomon and others offered seminars on the philosophy of dialectical materialism to help participants better understand their political and social milieu.<sup>125</sup> Some leaders found encouragement and inspiration in accounts of Christian faithfulness under persecution, such as *Tortured for Christ* by Richard Wurmbrand. Youth leader Teku Kebede remembers that reading accounts of believers who “suffered for the glory of the Lord” in *Foxe’s Book of Martyrs* strengthened his spirit. Alemu, who was part of the team that created teaching materials for the church in the mid-1970s, recalled that MKC leaders “tried to prepare all kinds of material for the coming years of suffering, persecution,” drawing especially on the experience of Christians in China, Romania, and the Soviet Union.

MKC leaders also took advantage of opportunities to interact more directly with the persecuted church in other communist settings. At the 1978 Mennonite World Conference in Wichita, Kansas, several Russian believers invited Ethiopian church leaders to visit their country. Thus, in early 1979 a delegation of six MKC leaders traveled to the Soviet Union for a three-week learning tour, gaining insight into the dynamics of underground churches, evangelism in a communist context, and strategies for helping leaders and evangelists adapt to the challenges of atheism. To build on this learning, MKC asked Eastern Mennonite Missions to send Harley Wagler, a missionary with experience under communism in Romania and Yugoslavia, to offer teaching on Christianity and Marxism in Ethiopia. In meetings and seminars in Nazareth and Addis Ababa, Wagler discussed ways in which churches could reorganize themselves and their ministries for effective Christian witness under communism, based on the experience of believers in Russia and Eastern Europe.<sup>126</sup>

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125. *Ibid.*, 231-232.

126. Alemu recalled, “That really was a big help for all of us.” — Hege, *Beyond Our Prayers*, 167-168; Hostetler, *Against Great Odds*; Tibebe Eshete, *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia*, 256-257. Given the rootedness of both Amharic and Russian cultures in long histories with Christendom, one insight from Soviet church leaders was to use wedding and funerals as opportunities for the public preaching of the gospel, because religious discourse was expected in these settings.

The external openness and creativity of MKC leaders was also obvious in the innovations they introduced to their ministries during the Derg years. Probably most significant and transformational was the transition to a cell-based church structure. While small Bible study and prayer groups were already part of church experience in the 1970s, following the closure of MKC these gatherings became indispensable building blocks for church life. In 1979 and 1980, evangelist Ijigu Woldegebriel sensed the Holy Spirit telling him that he needed to help MKC prepare for a time when the church would be closed. With the blessing of the elders at the Addis Ababa Kebena congregation, Ijigu organized a three-day seminar on cell group ministry for seventy-nine people at Mekane Yesus Seminary. The group formed a committee—chaired by Meseret Endeshow, a strong advocate for an inductive Bible study method she had learned at Hesston College in Kansas—to launch a network of cell groups in the city. At an early meeting to organize leaders for house fellowships, police came and arrested many of the participants, imprisoning some for six months. The remaining leaders, however, went on to form home groups. By the time the church was closed in 1982, about twenty groups were meeting in Addis Ababa. Amid the initial shock and confusion following the arrest of Executive Committee members and the outlawing of the church, small groups of MKC members met to pray and encourage each other. Within a few months the church had regrouped around a cohesive plan for effective ministry out of public view.<sup>127</sup>

A key event in this process occurred soon after the church was closed when members of an MKC women's fellowship in Addis Ababa gathered for an all-night prayer meeting. Through a prophetic word, they heard the Spirit telling them to continue their work and to trust God for protection. After organizing themselves into groups of ten, they initially planned for evangelists to teach them. But as the shortage of evangelists became clear, the church encouraged women to serve as leaders. When kebele officials began threatening them, church leaders asked the women to suspend the meetings. They persisted, however, expressing confidence that God had led them into this ministry. Church leaders conceded, asking them to limit groups to six participants. Working with the women's committee, the elders soon began assigning men to the groups, with both men and women serving in leadership roles.<sup>128</sup>

At the initiative of Nazareth MKC evangelist Kedir Delchume, representatives from ten congregations gathered to create new leadership

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127. Hege, *Beyond Our Prayers*, 193-195, 203-204.

128. *Ibid.*, 190-191; Gemechu Gebre Telila, "Meserete Kristos Church at Wonji Gefersa," 56-57, described the Wonji Gefersa leaders' use of focus groups in the congregation as part of the process of developing a plan for cell group ministry in that community.

and ministry structures for the underground church. With Executive Committee members in prison, the group appointed a seven-member Evangelism Committee to give strategic direction to the church. Its organizational foundation would be cell groups of five to seven members meeting for two or three hours a week to study the Bible, pray, equip, and encourage each other as disciples of Jesus. Two to four cell groups would gather monthly as house fellowships at sites chosen to avoid attention. These became occasions for celebrating baptisms, the Lord's Supper, receiving ministry training, and seeking revival. A coordinator oversaw house fellowships in a particular kebele. Groups in several kebeles within the *kefetegna*, the largest municipal residential area under the Derg, were shepherded by a regional leader. Any local church with more than 500 members would be divided into two in order to better facilitate pastoral care. The Derg's closure of fourteen public church meeting places in 1982 thus paved the way for the emergence of hundreds of new gathering centers in MKC homes.<sup>129</sup>

Evangelism Committee members put considerable energy into seeking out scattered MKC members and organizing them into cell groups. Some members simply needed to be made aware of the church's plans for reorganization; others were afraid to be publicly identified as evangelical Christians. Alemu explained that leaders would bring members together in small groups to renew fellowship and strengthen unity, sometimes eating together after sharing the Word of God to "bring a sense of togetherness."

Cell groups became transformative settings for individual believers and the church as a whole. Gemechu used biological imagery to describe the vision of MKC leaders:

Connections between small nuclei of people bound them closely together in spiritual cells, nurturing the moral and spiritual level of

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129. Alemu Checole, "Mennonite Churches in Eastern Africa," 232-233; Gemechu Gebre Telila, "Meserete Kristos Church at Wonji Gefersa," 47-48, 54, 65-66, said that groups were expected to meet twice a week, once focused on biblical teaching and once for prayer. In Wonji Gefersa, cell groups were organized according to age and educational background, with one group for children 4 to 6 years old, another for those ages 7 to 9, and another for 10- to 12-year-olds; 13- and 14-year-olds studied Christian faith in more depth and prepared for baptism. Among adults, there were cell gatherings for group leaders, elders and deacons, new believers, youth, evangelists, and worship and prayer leaders.—Hege, *Beyond Our Prayers*, 188-189, 197-198; Hostetler, *Against Great Odds*; Tibebe Eshete, *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia*, 260-261; the "Evangelism Committee" was transformed into an "Executive Committee" in 1987. Semi-annually, beginning on February 21, 1983, the Evangelism Committee gathered with representatives from every MKC congregation in a General Church Council.

the people who belonged to them. The cells were also seen as essential to lifting the moral and spiritual level of the church as a whole. Christian character was understood to be dependent upon Christian relationships, so connections with a spiritual cell group provided a first step out of spiritual loneliness and individualism.

These gatherings also enabled greater attention to the discipleship of church members than had been common in earlier MKC experience. One prayer group leader remembered that before the church was closed, some members “did not even know to say grace at mealtimes.” Although they participated in Sunday worship, they may not have understood the significance of baptism, the Lord’s Supper, or basic Christian doctrine. Within the cell groups, however, practical biblical teaching, Bible study, and prayer became integral to each cell group’s routine. They would often spend a day every month fasting and praying. Many were also involved in additional all-night prayer meetings in which participants might sleep for only an hour or two before going to work the next morning. In the context of this underground cell structure, the Evangelism Committee nurtured the development and support of several related ministries, particularly visitation, Bible study, women, prayer, worship services, new believers, pastoral care, and counseling.<sup>130</sup>

Bedru Hussein noted that the shift to a home-based church experience involved a significant change in thinking for MKC members, who traditionally associated “church” with corporate worship in a publicly designated building and understood their homes to be the private domain of family rather than worship.<sup>131</sup> Before the Derg years, Beyene Mulatu recalled that “believers were few, and it was hard work to get people to accept the gospel and to keep them following on with the Lord. Now it seems that things just happened.” Persecution had disrupted normal patterns of church management. In retrospect, Beyene explained,

I realize we tried to shape our church by writing a constitution, so our church would appear proper, having a clear administrative structure that we could show to anybody and say, “This is what we

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130. Alemu Checole, “Mennonite Churches in Eastern Africa,” 232-233; Gemechu Gebre Telila, “Meserete Kristos Church at Wonji Gefersa,” 53-55, 65-66, 73-74; Hege, *Beyond Our Prayers*, 190, 233; Hostetler, *Against Great Odds*.

131. Hostetler, *Against Great Odds*; Gemechu Gebre Telila, “Meserete Kristos Church at Wonji Gefersa,” 56, noted, however, that the Wonji Gefersa MKC had a long tradition of having services within the homes of church members.—Kassa Agafari, “A Story of Perseverance in Ethiopia,” *Canadian Mennonite*, 3, no. 1 (Oct. 25, 1999), 17-19. The church in Addis Ababa created a special leadership position—*Gubegna* (watchers)—men and women who made home visits to believers in one of six different areas of the city, and organized them into cell groups.

have.' But God didn't want it that way . . . , and we are thankful for that. We had to forget all our paperwork.<sup>132</sup>

The Marxist era was also a time of exceptional musical creativity in the Meserete Kristos Church. A new generation of songwriters in the church gave voice to biblical truth in fresh, relevant forms that engaged the heart. Choirs had functioned openly in the early years of the revolution, but by the late 1970s they could not legally include singers younger than 30 years old. Yet the choirs refused to go away.

Significantly, choir members not only sang, but also took an active role in pastoral care, evangelism, and prayer ministry.<sup>133</sup> Abebech explained that during the underground period, the Nazareth choir (known as "Lidet" choir) divided itself into various groups, each with four to six members who would visit different house fellowships and lead music. To avoid attention from the authorities, they would cover their instrument—a guitar or accordion—with a cloth and take it by horse cart to the host home. Then, traveling three or four kilometers on foot, they would visit four or five houses, leading worship at each one, singing softly to stay out of trouble. Several cell groups, totaling no more than thirty people, might be gathered in each location. Kelemuw Abebe described the deep appreciation that many church members had for this ministry. "Some gave thanks to God with their tears, when they saw the cloth and musical instruments of the choir." "God used music in a special way," Tamarat testified. "Several of us were called to this ministry. Believers did not know each other outside their cell groups," but "music helped bring us together."<sup>134</sup>

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132. Hege, *Beyond Our Prayers*, 197. Solomon described how MKC leaders in the Derg era "changed the structure of the church several times to fit the situation," amending its constitution to allow more flexibility in the size of local elders' councils, changing the frequency of denominational gatherings, and adding regional leadership councils as the church grew.

133. Abera Ertiro, "Meserete Kristos Church at Nazareth," 49-50. Alemu Checole, "Mennonite Churches in Eastern Africa," 231, noted that the Jimma, Nazareth, and Addis Ababa MKC choirs were well-known among Christians of southern Ethiopia. A number of solo singers "attained great popularity and their singing is still held in high regard among evangelical Christians." Bekele mentions the difficulty of singing Amharic songs using four-part Western harmonies introduced by missionaries. In the early years of the Derg, he began composing Amharic songs using indigenous rhythms and original melodies. He believed he was the first MKC member to do so. He explained that "just when we were close to the persecution, God gave us different songs," which enabled people "to pass through all these situations." He adds, "Those songs were really written from the Scripture, but practical for the time we had . . . we used to get inspiration."

134. Abera Ertiro, "Meserete Kristos Church at Nazareth," 49-50; Hostetler, *Against Great Odds*. In one interview, Lema\* and Melaku\* described the encouragement they received from

In Addis Ababa, music director Bekele\* was discouraged by the dispersal of his choir after the church closed, especially when he learned that some members had weakened in their Christian faith to the point of joining the Communist party. With the approval of congregational leaders, Bekele\* and his small team contacted all the choir members confidentially and convened a meeting at a Qale Heywet church building in the city. Many members, who had felt isolated in communities with no other evangelical Christians, shed tears of joy to be reunited with the choir. Some who had been regressing in their faith asked why they were invited to return. "We are not as we used to be," they said. Bekele\* and his team responded, "No, we still believe you are our brothers and sisters." The choir resolved to continue to meet. It sang together for the remaining seven years of the Derg regime. When the government of Mengistu fell, the choir sang at MKC's first public worship service. With joy, Bekele recalled, "In all those years, they were kept safe in the church until finally they came out from the persecution together, with the church."<sup>135</sup>

Zere\* expressed thanks for the gift of worship music amid persecution. In particular, he remembered a monthly gathering in 1983 at the home of Tadesse and Feleku in Nazareth. A group of five choir members led worship, followed by a guest solo singer from Addis Ababa. Although crammed together in a tiny room and perspiring "profusely," he says, "Our hearts were filled with joy. The message from the song was so powerful. We were also crying. Our tears streamed down our cheeks . . . We weren't frightened by anything. The joy of the Lord filled us."

Yet another expression of creative, adaptive leadership was evident in the strategies that emerged to protect church members and conceal their ministries from the authorities. Tengene\* described the care that leaders exercised as persecution intensified and the church took its ministry underground:

We were witnessing on a one-to-one basis. We were nurturing disciples underground. We were baptizing secretly underground. We were carrying out all the different Christian rites: baptism, Holy Communion, and dedicating children to the Lord. We did that underground. We did visitation work and counselling. We

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songs composed during the persecution period, and with Alemu sang a song "about paying the great sacrifice for my Christian life, for my Christianity. It is the life like the apostles and like the prophets; they suffered. I'll have to sacrifice like them."

135. Hege, *Beyond Our Prayers*, 232, reported that a choir of twenty-five members in Dire Dawa survived the Derg years by meeting for practice at a Catholic church and then singing in homes and at funerals. Choir leader Johni Teklu said, "We were considered 'harmless children.'"

conducted secret leadership meetings. All these activities needed care because if we were caught there would be serious consequences.

During leadership meetings and other church gatherings, scouts were sometimes appointed to watch the street or ride their bicycles through the neighborhood in order to report noteworthy information to leaders. Sympathetic informants within the Derg party sometimes shared intelligence about government plans with MKC leaders and informed them when they were under increased surveillance.

When training believers to share their faith with those outside the church, leaders coached them to use certain questions to ascertain if their listeners were government party members. Because some party members were "Marxist" only for the sake of personal advancement rather than conviction, Mamo would readily share the gospel with individuals at work, but never with two nonbelievers together. In the latter situation "each one is afraid of the other" and later "to save themselves, they may report, 'This is a dangerous person.'"

Church leaders also coached members to follow certain protocols to keep church activities from the attention of the authorities, particularly after the closure of MKC in 1982. This included limiting public interactions with other church members. Leaders instructed members to avoid using traditional Christian greetings or to carry a Bible in public, and to ensure that no more than two or three were seen together. Participants in church gatherings arrived and departed individually or in pairs, at two or three minute intervals, using different travel routes when possible. At times, two leaders on bicycles might make plans as they rode together.<sup>136</sup> Leaders also chose meeting places and times carefully—ideally a home surrounded by friendly neighbors, one with two gates for entering and leaving the yard, or where one could easily come and go without being noticed. Sometimes they met in a home on the outskirts of town, in servants' quarters, in a car, in a hotel, in the woods, or at a regional hot springs resort. They routinely changed locations, especially if a site seemed to attract attention from authorities.

MKC leaders and members also used various strategies to hide the presence and purpose of meetings. Monthly worship services were timed to coincide with Orthodox Sunday morning Mass; MKC members

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136. Alemu Checole, "Mennonite Churches in Eastern Africa," 234; Hege, *Beyond Our Prayers*, 203-204, 207; Hostetler, *Against Great Odds*; Tibebe Eshete, *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia*, 263. Mamo noted with a smile that women could sometimes get away with carrying a Bible, because "nobody checks their purses."



sometimes dressed like Orthodox believers and mingled with them on the street. Birthdays, holiday celebrations, and funerals offered culturally-accepted opportunities to gather in larger numbers. And they often traveled on foot rather than taxi or horse cart to mitigate the threat of a driver reporting the address to authorities. Aster Debossie described how she covered windows with curtains and shutters, and used a heavy curtain to separate the cell group's worship from activities in the rest of the house. Like most other cell groups, she always had food and cups ready, so that if visitors arrived unexpectedly, members could hide the Bibles and appear to be having an Ethiopian coffee ceremony or a party with friends. Participants naturally needed to keep their voices low when talking or singing at church gatherings—no clapping of hands or shouting hallelujah.<sup>137</sup>

When talking by phone, church leaders might describe a baptism as a "burial service" or convey plans for communion by saying, "We should take glasses and bread to that house." "So and so is getting married at such and such a place" would indicate plans for a worship gathering. They identified particular homes, church committees, and geographical regions with acronyms, abbreviations, or other codes. If leaders suspected that a government spy was present, they would use the term *Weran Dese*, the local name of a cattle disease. If a new believer had been well-grounded in Christian faith, leaders might describe him or her as *Ketebat* (vaccinated) to indicate their dependability.<sup>138</sup>

Leaders found it important to safeguard knowledge about cell group participants, meeting places, and leaders. Only a few church leaders knew the extent of the MKC cell structure so that ordinary members could honestly plead ignorance if questioned by the authorities. Within each group there was significant personal sharing, but participants were committed to keep what they heard strictly confidential. When cell leaders met, they might share concerns or testimonies from their group with each other, with the understanding that it would go no further. Leaders refrained from mentioning names of other church members when at a cell meeting or on a pastoral visit. "During the persecution you didn't even know who your leader was," explained Melaku\*. In the cell group "we

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137. Hostetler, *Against Great Odds*; Lehman, "Aster Debossie," 25. Yacob\* said believers needed to change their worship style, even when praying privately: "We had to teach our members to go into bedrooms or into quiet places and lower their voices. Even if they wanted to sing, they should sing it very, very softly." Kifle\* described the need to command demons to be silent when involved in deliverance ministry: "When we had new believers, sometimes we had to exorcise demons. We had to rebuke demons and demons would cry out. We would order them to be quiet in the name of Jesus: 'Be silent,' because if neighbors heard this, they would come."

138. Hostetler, *Against Great Odds*; Tibebe Eshete, *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia*, 262.

just saw somebody leading the Bible study, and we were not even sure if he was the leader." Because of his history with MKC prior to its closure, Bekele\* knew some senior leaders, but he did not have much connection with these people in the underground era, "because they were supposed to be protected." It was important to restrain one's curiosity. Bekele\* added: "We were not supposed to ask, 'Who is the chairperson of MKC?' or 'Who is the general secretary for MKC?'" Leaders instead focused on those with whom they had face-to-face relationships and responsibilities.<sup>139</sup>

In some settings, MKC leaders adapted to local cultural norms in order to remove barriers to effective ministry or to avoid the attention of the authorities. For example, when Kedir was doing evangelism and church planting in a predominantly Orthodox region, he used his Orthodox cultural name Hail Meskel rather than Kedir, a Muslim name. He also sometimes wore the signature clothing of a sheep trader—an overcoat, cape, hat, and stick—making it easier to travel incognito; others referred to him as "the shepherd" or "sheep trader." When the Evangelism Committee needed someone to serve in the Awash Valley region, they intentionally chose a man who physically resembled the people of the area. As a merchant, the treasurer for the church in Addis Ababa was able to count money and deposit it into the bank without raising suspicions because onlookers assumed he was handling his own business.<sup>140</sup> At other times, MKC leaders found creative ways to evade government agents by avoiding checkpoints. Three days after the church was closed, revolutionary guards came to Lema\*'s neighborhood. He recounted the conversation:

"At the road, they asked me, 'Do you know Lema\*'s house?'"

"Oh yes."

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139. Berihun\* said that, as much as possible, leaders kept sensitive information in their heads rather than writing it down. Hege, *Beyond Our Prayers*, 196-202, notes that while MKC leaders did their utmost to keep vital information from authorities, they recognized that their success ultimately depended on God. When Kedir was asked whether he was afraid that his records (as general coordinator for MKC and evangelist in Nazareth) might fall into authorities' hands, he replied, "You have to trust the Lord; there is no other way." Admitting that it would have been simple for the security people to investigate his activities, he emphasized that, "no one was allowed by the Lord to contact me. It was the protection of the Lord, and we thank him for it. It was not safe to serve the Lord at that time unless you trusted him fully."

140. Abera Ertiro, "Meserete Kristus Church at Nazareth," 40; Alemu Checole, "Mennonite Churches in Eastern Africa," 233; Hege, *Beyond Our Prayers*, 202-203.

"Where is it?"

"Across the road."

"Is he there?"

"Maybe. Why don't you check?"

Lema\* says, "They went home. I went to Wonji Shoa and I hid for three months."<sup>141</sup>

Aware of shifting dynamics in their political and cultural milieu, MKC leaders also related to authorities with wisdom and creativity. Early in the Derg era, when the church was able to function legally, MKC leaders tried to assure authorities that the church had nothing to hide and was not a political threat. When government agents began to infiltrate Addis Ababa MKC worship events, "church leaders were careful to do everything openly and refrained from criticizing the government."<sup>142</sup> Tewodros\* remembers the Wonji MKC elders council clarifying that even in cell groups, "we should be very careful not to talk about politics or other issues," but "just concentrate on Bible teaching and prayer." According to Selassie\*, leaders did not want authorities to see them as "political agitators" and so they "needed to be very careful" about what they said in public. Even so, some found it challenging to remain publicly silent about government injustice. Upset by what was happening around him—the suffering, beatings, and killing—Kelile\* recalled, "sometimes I even thought of standing in some public square and saying, 'This is not right. This is wrong. You should stop doing this,' but the Holy Spirit kept me quiet. I was really tempted to shout and oppose what they were doing."

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141. Lema\* gave other examples of "God's provision and protection," enabling him to evade the authorities. On a ministry trip to Bahir Dar neither he nor Tadesse had a valid identification card. When their vehicle needed to stop at a government check point, they prayed, "God, what are we going to do? These people are watching us." Lema\* said, "All of a sudden, the driver came to us: 'You two guys: move away. Go with these people,'" motioning to a group of local people. Blending in with the group, the two leaders bypassed the checkpoint with them. Berihun\* recalled a time when he and Kedir flew to Jimma in western Ethiopia to give training to the local church. There was only one taxi company there, owned by "a secret agent of the communists," whom Kedir knew well. Because it would have been burdensome to walk from the airport to downtown Jimma, they took a taxi to a certain spot. As they got out of the car, Kedir recognized the owner of the taxi company approaching them, and was certain that the man wanted to know why they were in town. The two MKC leaders found a place to order soft drinks and began to drink. When the agent passed them, they hired a buggy and traveled in a different direction.

142. Hege, *Beyond Our Prayers*, 170-171, 178-179. MKC's message, while "non-political," was perceived as politically threatening. Hege noted, "Evangelists and pastors focused their preaching on the uniqueness of Jesus, the power of the Holy Spirit as greater than any other forces, and the assurance of God's presence in difficult times. They did not refer to the political situation; but the people understood."

At other times MKC leaders openly presented themselves to the authorities. After successfully avoiding arrest at Nazareth Bible Academy, director Negash Kebede consulted with church leaders and others in Addis Ababa. Some suggested that he escape to Sudan, Kenya, or Djibouti, but he was concerned that the government and media would report he had run away, using his actions for their propaganda. "I didn't want to put the church in such risk," he said, "so I stayed." Ten days after the initial attempt to arrest him he visited a police station and asked whether they were looking for him. They were. An official spoke roughly to him: "So you have been trying to hide from us. You think you can get away and escape?" Negash answered, "Am I acting like someone trying to escape by coming here and turning myself in?" The official did not know how to reply. Negash was taken into custody.<sup>143</sup>

On several occasions, MKC leaders even proactively invited authorities to send a representative to their events. When planning an overnight Easter service in Addis Ababa, they informed the kebele community organization, asking them to send someone to come, sit, and watch. Selassie\* recalled:

I can even picture the way he stood with his gun right there in the church, and at the same time was hearing the gospel the whole night. We did everything. We would worship. We would have the Word and a message and then testimonies after testimonies, feet washing, communion, everything! So, you see, we wanted to be up front.

Kelile\* remembered the challenge of planning a conference at Nazareth Bible Academy at a time when the Derg had outlawed any assembly of more than three people without government permission. Anticipating more than a thousand participants from across the country, it was his responsibility to secure the authorities' support for the event. He recalled:

God gave me him the wisdom how to go about this. I did not ask for permission to have the meeting on the compound. Instead, I said, "We want security. We want protection from the government for this meeting." So they sent soldiers to stand at that gate and keep peace

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143. Hege, *Beyond Our Prayers*, 25-27, 179-180, 184. When MKC was closed, officials visited the house of Tesfatsion Delellew. His family said he was away on a trip, but authorities posted armed guards at his house, ready to arrest him on return. When he learned this, he contacted the Ministry of National Security and offered to appear for an interview. Over three hours of interrogation, Tesfa was relaxed, but matched his interrogator's forceful approach. The officer could not find a reason to arrest him, but told him "to go home, do his job, and not be angry."

and security. I didn't say, "We want your permission." I said, "We want your protection."

When kebele indoctrination sessions were planned to interfere with Sunday morning worship, MKC members generally attended them and rescheduled worship services to the afternoon. Hakim\* recalled challenging some believers to change their charismatic worship style out of sensitivity to community concerns:

You make changes. If they say, "You are screaming when you worship," we recommended, "Worship quietly." Some Pentecostal leaders said, "This is stifling the Spirit." So we had to make those changes and convince others. Of course, Paul himself says, "If strangers come, wouldn't they think you are crazy when you shout and create a commotion?" So we made those kinds of changes . . . as long as they did not affect our faith and principles.

MKC leaders ultimately attributed their creative and flexible responses to the challenges of the Derg to guidance from God rather than to their own wisdom. MKC leaders described several times when the Holy Spirit gave supernatural insight about threats to believers' safety. Lema\*, for example, received a vision while preparing to teach new believers. When he asked God about it, he said, "A small voice came to me saying, 'Today you are not teaching this lesson. Watch out. Dismiss the program.' I tried to clear my eyes, but I still saw that vision." When Lema\* entered the house where he was to teach he understood that one person present was "in charge of the security guards for the Derg." He dismissed the group, saying they would reconvene another time. Two years later he met the man who had been revealed to be a government agent. The man acknowledged that he had been sent to spy on the group. But when he saw how God protected them, he became a believer.

"When the church was closed and the missionaries left," Kassa Agafari recalled,

we felt like the Israelites when the ark was captured by the Philistines. We wondered if MKC would die. Yet when the church was closed, only those who had "died to self" came to us. They didn't fear for their lives. They were like grains of wheat in the ground. . . . Just as the early missionaries taught us about Jesus Christ, we too will be a missionary church, working for the glory of God throughout the earth.<sup>144</sup>

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144. Jewel Showalter, "'Like Grains of Wheat in the Ground': Ethiopian Mennonites Have Faced Trials and Triumphs in their 50 Years," *The Mennonite*, 5, no. 4 (Feb. 19, 2002), 22-23.

## CONCLUSION

Themes of persecution and leadership are integral to the overarching narrative of Scripture, most centrally in the life and salvific work of Jesus, and in the vocation of his disciples. The Christian church was born amid persecution; its history is filled with stories of its martyrs. And some two hundred million followers of Jesus around the world today continue to face significant harassment, persecution, and the possibility of martyrdom because of their faith.

During the Ethiopian socialist revolution of 1974-1991, men and women in the Meserete Kristos Church exercised authentic transformational leadership in the midst of substantial persecution. Already on the religious periphery in a setting where national identity was closely tied to allegiance to the emperor and the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, evangelical Christians in Ethiopia were further marginalized as the state embraced Marxist-Leninist atheism. Yet even in the face of upheaval, uncertainty, and danger many MKC leaders chose to pursue the mission of Jesus Christ, willing to suffer for the sake of the kingdom of God rather than acquiesce to political, social, and cultural forces intent on eliminating evangelical Christianity from the country.

Persecution from the Derg regime forced MKC leaders to clarify the priority of their commitment to Jesus and their engagement in the mission of the church. In the midst of these pressures, MKC drew deeply on the resources of two historical streams—the Christian witness and leadership models of the Mennonite mission and an indigenous ecumenical revival movement—to establish new patterns of leadership. While honest about their own weaknesses and shortcomings, MKC leaders during the Ethiopian revolution exemplified the qualities of authentic transformational leadership theory: a highly effective pursuit of purpose; a compelling integrity; attractive expressions of love; and remarkable creativity.

Research into leadership has traditionally focused on relatively affluent, entrepreneurial contexts. Given the dearth of attention given to leadership in settings of persecution (as well as in non-Western cultures), this essay offers insight and encouragement for leaders in other settings, even though conditions of persecution, culture, economics, and politics vary dramatically across the global church. Drawing on interviews with twenty-four men and women identified as key MKC leaders amid the persecution of the Derg regime, this study offers a “thick” description of leadership experience in a context that has received little attention. Although the results of this qualitative research are not statistically

generalizable, they testify to the power of faithful, mission-oriented leadership in one network of evangelical churches under the persecution of a Marxist regime.

What can the global church, situated in contexts of persecution as well as in relative freedom and security, learn from the leadership experience of the Meserete Kristos Church that could strengthen its faithfulness and witness? Clearly, some features of the MKC testimony were more bound to their Ethiopian cultural context than others. Nevertheless, the broad contours of transformational leadership witnessed in the Ethiopian MKC are relevant for the church in every time and place. And for Christians experiencing severe persecution, some MKC strategies—particularly regarding evangelism, church structures, leadership development, navigating the demands of persecutors, or managing relations with authorities—might be quite appropriate and applicable.

The key elements of MKC leadership under persecution, viewed through the lens of biblical theology, can be summarized as follows:

1. Responding to the initiative of a God who suffers—particularly in Jesus Christ—in his ministry of reconciliation, they pursued their mission with purpose, integrity, love, and creativity, prioritizing their primary call as disciples.
2. Persecuted because of their allegiance and witness to Jesus, they saw the Gospel transform lives and the kingdom of God grow exponentially.
3. According to their testimony, God used persecution to produce Christ-like character in them and to advance God’s agenda in the world. Faithful leadership during the Derg era required a radical reliance on God for vision, moral strength, love, and wisdom.
4. The historic marginalization of evangelical Christians in Ethiopia and exposure to biblical teaching helped leaders to understand that some degree of persecution is normative for disciples of Jesus—although some also described their struggle to accept that God would allow them to suffer.
5. In the context of persecution, no one seeking personal comfort—or driven by external pressure or self-focus—would choose to be active in church leadership. As servants and followers of Jesus, MKC leaders were motivated by a passion for God’s agenda and glory; they pursued the well-being of others, depending on God for provision, protection, and guidance, and reinforcing the message of Jesus through the integrity of their example.
6. As martyriological leaders, they prioritized witness to Jesus, seeking the salvation of others—including their persecutors, even when it entailed personal risk and suffering.

7. Their leadership under persecution required unreserved commitment, courage, and reliance on the Holy Spirit, whose power is revealed in human weakness. Research participants testified that when they failed, God invited them to repent, leading to experiences of forgiveness and restoration.

Clearly, the global church in all settings needs leaders who demonstrate transformational commitment and who, empowered by the Holy Spirit, function with purpose, integrity, love, and creativity under pressure, whether from persecution or other sources.

What about the church in democratic societies which guarantee freedom of religion? Janet Epp Buckingham has argued that although the modern secular state delivers many benefits, "Secularism has become a religion unto itself."<sup>145</sup> Two Ethiopian research participants expressed special concern for churches in Canada, the United States, and Europe. The challenge of churches in these settings, Selassie\* observed, does not involve physical suffering—it is largely spiritual. Hakim\* likewise noted that Western churches are in a spiritual battle. "There is no church that does not get attacked," he says. "This way or another, there is persecution." Whereas the persecution of the Ethiopian church was physically visible, persecution can also be subtle, such as "materialism creeping into the church." Churches and leaders living and working in comparatively secure environments would do well to ask to what extent they have accommodated themselves to the "normal" conditions of life and leadership of a transactional world—primarily seeking comfort for themselves and their families, driven by external pressures and influences, focused on the self, and closed to learning that would require deep, Holy Spirit-led, change.

The breadth and diversity of experience and leadership in the global church begs for further sustained study. As a theoretical lens, Robert Quinn's authentic transformational paradigm has proved to be fruitful, eliciting rich reflection from research participants about diverse aspects of leadership under persecution. Yet more research remains to be done. Quinn's model focuses on the psychological orientation of effective leaders; but how do structural issues affect leadership under persecution? How do assumptions about ecclesiology affect the ability of persecuted

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145. Janet Epp Buckingham, "The Modern Secular West: Making Room for God," in *Sorrow and Blood: Christian Mission in Contexts of Suffering, Persecution and Martyrdom*, ed. William D. Taylor, Antonia van der Meer, and Reg Reimer (Pasadena, Calif.: William Carey Library, 2012), 221-228.



leaders to adapt to restrictions placed on them? What could be learned from the experience of persecuted leaders who are less successful in their efforts—whether for contextual or personal reasons? How do leaders who carry significant emotional or spiritual wounds from persecution—such as post-traumatic stress disorder—find healing and fresh empowering for ministry? How do leaders in secure, prosperous democracies navigate opposition to the Gospel in post-Christendom contexts? What are common ways in which leaders adjust their behavior in response to cultural or relational pressures, to avoid disapproval or other kinds of discomfort? How might increasing awareness of faithful leadership under persecution equip leaders and their churches to live and to lead with purpose, integrity, love, and creativity, undergirded by a radical commitment to Jesus Christ and the kingdom of God?

There is surely much to gain from a deeper understanding of the dynamics of leadership in times of persecution. Given the biblical expectation that persecution is normative for disciples of Jesus, and the continuing realities of global persecution, it is incumbent upon the church to learn as much as possible about how to nurture robust, faithful leadership under opposition. In the midst of human frailty, failure, and suffering, the Holy Spirit empowers purposeful, internally driven, loving, creative leaders to bear witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

