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# The Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus and the ELCA in Dispute: A Time for Humble Listening

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# The Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus and the ELCA in Dispute: A Time for Elevated Discourse

SAMUEL Y. DERESSA

**T**he Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus (EECMY) is one of the fastest growing Lutheran churches in Africa. The EECMY was established as a national church in 1959 with a membership of 20,000 believers. However, the history of this church began already 110 years earlier when the first missionaries from Sweden arrived at Amkulu, the present state of Eretria, with the purpose of proclaiming the good news to so-called “pagans”—the Oromo of Ethiopia. Historians like Gustav Arén point back to seventeenth-century missionary martyr Peter Heyling as the pioneer of evangelical Christianity in Ethiopia.<sup>1</sup>

At present, church membership is growing at a breathtaking pace. According to the 2013 statistical data of the EECMY, the membership has grown to 6.2 million (which makes it the largest Lutheran church in Africa). According to the five-year strategic plan adopted by the EECMY Council in July 2013, there is an enthusiastic hope of having about thirty million members by 2018.

Some have argued, however, that as the EECMY’s membership has increased its local as well as global impact has diminished. This critique is related to the EECMY’s withdrawal of membership in the Evangelical Churches Fellowship of Ethiopia (ECFE), despite its leading role in the ECFE’s establishment in 1976, and its current decision to dissolve its partnership with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), the Church of Sweden (CoS), and “those churches who have openly accepted same-sex marriage.” According to this critique, the EECMY has narrowed its focus to numerical growth, which has created a scenario in which the church has placed little or no value on its responsibility as a church located in the new center of global Christianity and its own history in world Lutheranism. This move on the part of the current leadership of the EECMY is a surprise to its critics, because the former leadership of the EECMY (1970s) was well aware that the “phenomenal expansion” of the Christian church across Africa

<sup>1</sup>Gustav Arén, *Evangelical Pioneers in Ethiopia: The Origins of the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus* (Stockholm: EFS Forlaget, 1978).

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## The Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus and the ELCA in Dispute: A Time for Humble Listening

KATHRYN SCHIFFERDECKER

**T**he recent decision of the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus (EECMY) to sever all ties with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is a decision that saddens all who pray and work for the unity of the global body of Christ. Of course, it is likely that Mekane Yesus members and most other African Lutherans would say the same thing of the ELCA Churchwide Assembly decisions of 2009 concerning matters of sexuality, decisions that precipitated the action of the EECMY.<sup>1</sup>

I write merely in an attempt to shed some light on the EECMY action from my perspective as an ELCA missionary in Ethiopia last year, when I taught at the Mekane Yesus Seminary in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. On sabbatical from Luther Seminary, I was in Ethiopia because I wanted to learn from fellow Christians in one of the fastest-growing Lutheran church bodies in the world. One thing I learned is that the Holy Spirit is moving in the EECMY. I do not mean to idealize this church; it has just as many problems and internal conflicts as other church bodies. Nevertheless, the Spirit is moving powerfully in the EECMY, especially at the level of local congregations. I heard many stories of conversions and healings, of hope in the midst of crushing poverty, and of faithfulness in the face of persecution. I met seminary students, evangelists, and pastors who loved to laugh at themselves but who took with utmost seriousness the call to “Go and make disciples.”

And the church has grown exponentially because of it. Established in 1959 from missionary roots, the EECMY now has more than six million members. It emphasizes “serving the whole person,” and with the help of its international partners, the church runs many development projects around the country. Some of these development projects are now threatened by the decision of the EECMY to

<sup>1</sup>The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania, in response to the ELCA vote, wrote the Dodoma Statement, in which it expressed its dismay at the turn of events (April 29, 2010): “The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania considers any one-sided decisions oblivious to generally accepted and recognized norms in marriage as flouting, and dreadfully detrimental to the Church as a Body of Christ.” (Dodoma Statement 3.2, at <http://www.elct.org/news/2010.04.004.html> [accessed January 17, 2014]).

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would establish the “‘center of gravity’ in the Christian world” firmly on the African continent—placing immense theological and ecumenical responsibility on the “historically young churches” like the EECMY.<sup>2</sup>

In fact, it would be a mistake to conclude that the EECMY chose to dissociate itself from local (ECFE) as well as global partners (ELCA and CoS) solely because of a narrow focus on numerical growth. While the local dissociation was due to a conflict in the bylaws of the EECMY and the ECFE, respectively, the reason for severance with the ELCA and the CoS was theological, based on the issue of scriptural authority. Still, was there something else this church could have done when faced with contradictions from partner churches on what it considers to be the two key sources upon which its identity is constructed?

From my perspective, the EECMY could still opt to continue in partnership with openness and flexibility toward both the local churches and the global partners. Some probably assume that such openness and flexibility will lead to a compromise on the EECMY’s side with regard to its theological position. However, it is only where openness and flexibility take precedence that true dialogue and mutual learning occur, a stance that could also help the EECMY to assist its partners in coming to what it considers to be the right understanding about the authority of Scripture.

Furthermore, the history that the EECMY shares with local as well as global partners has been one of mutual fellowship demonstrating the very reason for the church’s existence. The EECMY, along with other church bodies throughout the world, exists to proclaim the kingdom of God on earth and to serve the gospel of Jesus Christ. This is the unalterable mission that this church shares with all Christian churches globally.

Unlike the colonial legacy of Western missionaries to some other African countries, the history of the EECMY cannot be described without positive remembrance of the narratives of those missionaries who sacrificed their lives for the sake of the gospel. The EECMY’s partnership was based on mutual Christian love and respect, long years of journeying in companionship, and a faith-based commitment to witness to the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. In this joint venture, numerous Ethiopians have been freed from dehumanizing poverty, chronic illness, and other situations that challenged their livelihood, including persecutions, droughts, and famine. This partnership has been a means for the advancement of the kingdom of God in the eastern part of Africa.

Now would be the time for the EECMY to recognize its opportunity and responsibility to stand with its partners and face the challenges of this postmodern time. The EECMY should be responsible enough to recognize the inevitability of differences and use every opportunity to maintain a continuous dialogue with

<sup>2</sup>Ezekiel Gebissa, “Between Indigeneity and Globalism: Mission and Leadership in the EECMY in the Twenty-First Century,” in *Emerging Theological Praxis*, vol. 2 (Minneapolis: Lutheran University Press, 2012) 75–107.

local and global churches while remaining faithful to its own identity. Now, above all, we must yearn for an elevation of the discourse within the EECMY to allow it to maintain its predicted impact within the Lutheran family. ☩

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sever ties not only with the ELCA but also with the Church of Sweden, which has had a presence in Ethiopia for more than 150 years.

Why did the EECMY make this decision? Most fundamentally, the EECMY disagrees with the ELCA position on homosexuality and the understanding of biblical authority that underlies that position.<sup>2</sup> This disagreement is not confined to the EECMY and the ELCA or even to Lutheranism, of course. Philip Jenkins illustrates this divide within global Christianity with the story of an African Anglican bishop and a US Episcopalian bishop participating in a Bible study together. As the conversation degenerates into frustration, the African bishop finally asks, “If you don’t *believe* the scripture, why did you bring it to us in the first place?”<sup>3</sup>

The division over matters of sexuality between churches in the Global North and churches in the Global South does not inevitably lead to formal separation, of course.<sup>4</sup> For example, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania, while sharply disagreeing with the ELCA decisions of 2009, chose not to break ties with the ELCA. There are many factors that contributed to this difference between the actions of the ELCT and the EECMY, not the least of which, I suspect, are the unique history and culture of Ethiopia.

Ethiopia is the only African nation never to have been colonized, and the only African nation that ever defeated a European invading army (Italy, at the Battle of Adwa in 1896). Ethiopians are rightfully proud of this history and they continue to be fiercely independent. They have their own calendar (it is 2006 in Ethiopia now), their own way of telling time (the day begins at six o’clock in the morning), and their own alphabet. Ethiopia is also home to one of the oldest Christian churches in the world (the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, dating from the fourth century). This deep history and culture contribute to a strong sense of Ethiopian independence and pride.

This is not to say that everyone in the EECMY agrees with the decision of the General Assembly (any more than everyone in the ELCA agrees with the decision of the Churchwide Assembly). Many of my students and my Ethiopian teaching colleagues at the Mekane Yesus Seminary expressed regret and disappointment at the decision to end the partnership with the ELCA. One of these students, who leads a parish of 14,000 people, said to me, “Our parish disagrees with this decision. What? Are we perfect? Are we not sinners, too?”

Unfortunately for those who disagreed with the decision of the EECMY, it proved difficult to speak at the General Assembly. From the reports I heard, those who dissented were accused of supporting homosexuality or of dissenting simply

<sup>2</sup>I know that there is disagreement within the ELCA about the Churchwide Assembly votes of 2009, but I am using the term “the ELCA position” for the sake of simplicity.

<sup>3</sup>Philip Jenkins, *The New Faces of Christianity: Believing the Bible in the Global South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006) 1.

<sup>4</sup>The term “Global North” commonly refers to North America, Europe, Australia, Japan, and New Zealand. “Global South” refers to all the other countries and regions of the world, including, of course, many that are not in the Southern Hemisphere.

because they wanted the money that the ELCA and the Church of Sweden donate to EECMY projects. In such polarizing discourse, nuance is lost.

So, what is the way forward? I am no expert on the matter, but I do have two hunches. First, we in the West need to exhibit genuine humility towards and deep respect for the church in the Global South. I have too often heard a patronizing tone in discussions about this issue from otherwise well-meaning people in this country. The thinking goes something like this: We used to be where they are in our understanding of sexuality, but now we know better. We just need to be patient and they'll come around to see the truth.

Such an attitude does not serve the unity of the body of Christ. We in the West cannot implicitly or explicitly claim to have superior knowledge of the will of God. We must exhibit genuine humility and the willingness to admit that we do not have a corner on truth.<sup>5</sup> That humility should grow out of the realization that we have much to learn from Christians in the Global South, where the church is growing even as the mainline churches in the United States (including the ELCA) are shrinking. Two-thirds of all the world's Christians today live in the Global South, and that number will undoubtedly continue to grow.<sup>6</sup>

The other hunch I have is that the way forward will be found through relationships. At that same EECMY General Assembly where the vote for separation was taken, my husband and I and Rosanne Swanson, the only other ELCA missionary in Ethiopia, were treated as honored guests. Even after the vote was taken, we were still invited to preach, teach, and share communion at EECMY churches. We were seen not only as ELCA representatives but also as individuals that had earned the trust of our brothers and sisters in Christ.

And that, in the end, is what we are: brothers and sisters in Christ. We may disagree about very important matters, even fundamental matters of biblical authority and interpretation. But we are still brothers and sisters in Christ. The relationships built between ELCA and EECMY members (through companion synod relationships, through EECMY students who have studied or are studying even now at ELCA seminaries, through immigrant Ethiopian congregations in the ELCA) will, I hope, through the power of the Holy Spirit, eventually bear fruit in the form of reconciliation between our two church bodies. That is my prayer and my deep hope, even as I grieve our current division. ☩

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<sup>5</sup>I appreciate, in this context, the ELCA Global Mission model of “accompaniment,” which emphasizes mutuality of relationship. See <http://www.elca.org/en/Resources/Global-Mission> (accessed January 17, 2014).

<sup>6</sup>Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life, *Global Christianity—A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World's Christian Population*, December 2011, at <http://www.pewforum.org/2011/12/19/global-christianity-exec/> (accessed January 17, 2014).