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REPORT ON CHURCH GROWTH
IN ETHIOPIA
by
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Speaking about Church Growth in Ethiopia one has to say something on the Ethiopian situation to which the Protestant Missions went during the second half of the last Century. This is to say that any discussion on Church Growth in Ethiopia has to touch upon the situation of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church without which the situation of the Country as a whole cannot be described properly. I therefore wish to state in a few lines the position of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church at the time when the Protestant Missions entered Ethiopia. This in my opinion, is necessary for an understanding of the reasons for the existence of Protestant Churches in Ethiopia, a Country in which Christianity was preached in the early years of the Christian Era. Ethiopia has a history which sets her apart from the rest of African Countries not only in her political life but also in her religious history. That Christianity was preached in Ethiopia in the first years of the Christian Era is evident from what is recorded in the Book of Acts. During the Fourth Century, a group of people organized themselves in the Northern part of the Country as a Church which has continued to this day. Until the last Century, the Western and the South-Western parts of the present day Ethiopia were not known as integral parts of the Country although some areas paid tribute to the Emperors periodically.

During the second half of the 19th Century, the Christian Kingdom of the North extended its rule to the Western and South-Western parts of the Country and by the end of the Century these were considered as integral parts of the modern Ethiopia. Since the 13th Century the Ethiopian Government and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church have not been considered as separate entities. They were considered to be one and the same, and there is a slogan to the effect that "there is no Church without the State and no State without the Church"; a slogan which is still heard in daily conversation. When governors were appointed to rule the new areas annexed to the Kingdom they took Orthodox priests with them and Orthodox Churches were established in the centres of administration. It therefore should be clear that there was no real effort to evangelize or Christianize the Southern and South-Western parts of the Country until the arrival of Protestant Missions about the beginning of this Century. Orthodox Churches were built in the various districts to show the faithfulness of those appointed to important positions in the Government rather than to proclaim Christ to the people in those areas.

The argument of this brief report on Church Growth in Ethiopia is supported by Regulations issued in 1944 on the establishment of Mission by the Imperial Ethiopian Government. The Regulations on the establishment of foreign Missions in the Country defined areas in which Missions might operate and from which they were debarred as "Open Areas" and "Ethiopian Church Areas":

- (a) "Ethiopian Church areas consist of those areas in which the inhabitants adhere predominantly to the Ethiopian Church Faith",
- (b) "Open areas consist of those areas of Ethiopia in which the inhabitants are predominantly non-Christians."

The Regulations of 1944 issued on the establishment of foreign Missions may be seen as a recognition on the part of the Imperial Ethiopian Government of the existence of about half of the population who were non-Christians. Furthermore, it indicates the positive policy that the Government had maintained as regards the social services provided by the foreign Missions.

There was no intention of establishing a Lutheran Church in Ethiopia when the Protestant Missions (especially the Evangeliska Fosterland Stiftelsen) arrived in Ethiopia during the second half of last Century. The goal was rather to co-operate with the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in order to spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the Pagan Oromos (commonly called Galla) many of whom had embraced Islam. However, the situation at that time was not such as to allow co-operation, and Protestant Congregations were therefore established in the Southern and South-Western parts of the Country before World War II.

In the preceding paragraphs I have made an attempt to describe the general situation in Ethiopia at the time when Protestant Missions entered the Country. It will be impossible to give a fair picture of the situation in Ethiopia into which Protestant Missions came in an introductory remark of a short report on Church Growth in a Country like Ethiopia with her particular characteristics in the Continent of Africa. Please note that I have used as title for this paper, "Short Report on Church Growth in Ethiopia" This is to imply what this paper is not a research paper on Church Growth in Ethiopia which requires a considerable length of time to expound. Due to lack of publications on Church growth in Ethiopia and too shortage of time and some other reasons, I find it impossible to present a research paper on Church growth in a Country often called "an island of Christianity in a sea of Paganism."

The following factors are assumed in my opinion to contribute to Church Growth (Mass Movement Evangelism) in Ethiopia.

(1) The departure of foreign Missions due to World War II may be considered one of the contributing factors to the spreading of the Gospel in the Country. The insignificant number of believers in the Western and South-Western parts of the Country took upon themselves the responsibility of witnessing for the Gospel of the risen Christ. There was thus a revival during the five-year period of occupation by Italy among the Christians left behind around the Mission Stations. Many Christian groups which had nowhere to look for guidance decided to depend on the reading of the Scriptures. The Missionaries to whom they used to look to draw advice, counselling and assistance were, so to speak, replaced by the Bible. The only authority to appeal to on ethical questions in the absence of Missionaries was the Bible. The Bible being the only source to turn to, Bible study and reading played a vital role in bringing about a revival among the groups of believers. It is to be noted that these groups of believers had a minimal knowledge of Christian doctrines. One may ^{even} say that in many respects their knowledge in the basic Christian teaching was almost nil. The reading of the Scriptures combined with prayer was the main cause to the revival movement which sent deep roots in the life of the groups of believers left by the Missions.

(2) If a revival movement is described as requiring a certain knowledge of Christian teaching for its dynamism then it should be said that this had taken place and should be seen as one of the contributory causes for the rapid growth of the Evangelical Churches in Ethiopia. The revival among the groups was directed by or took as its motto the Great Commission of the living Saviour, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations.... lo, I am with you always." The revival preachers were unaware of what was geographically implied by the term 'nations'. Nations meant to them their neighbours next door and the Theological impact of the words of Jesus, lo, I am with you always", perhaps, did not play a greater role than the psychological comfort they drew from these words in the absence of the Missionaries in whom they had confidence prior to their departure due to World War II.

(3) In the process of their activity during this period when the Missions were out of the Country because of the War, it is significant to note that the revival movements developed some type of indigenous pattern. The Missions used to teach Western melodies. Now that was seen as a matter of the past and the revival movements started making use of primitive indigenous melodies whereby the believers were helped to feel at home with the message proclaimed to them - forms of service, music and songs were made indigenous without working out such a plan. It should be added that the ethical line developed in some cases was somewhat different from the main stream of Christianity, due to lack of Theological education and very literal understanding of the Bible. In some cases this created difficulties when the movements at a later stage were forced into a more usual Church pattern. This was not the case in the South Western part of the Country where the leaders, had relatively well trained people.

In the Southern Provinces, Sidamo and Gamu Gofa, Mass Movement towards Christianity was related to independent movements in Wallamo and Kambata. However, the movements coincided with the arrival of the Norwegian Lutheran Mission in 1948 in Sidamo and Gamu Gofa Provinces.

(4) The Second World War period may be considered as "bitter days" when viewed from one point, but it served to produce faithful labourers in the vineyard of the Master. Furthermore, it created an atmosphere for ecumenical movement of Evangelical groups which was weakened after the return of the Missions.

(5) Independent movements were channeled into Church patterns through the assistance of Bible Schools established by the Missions upon their return to the Country after World War II. The South Ethiopia Synod may be cited as an example. The Norwegian Lutheran Mission undertook extensive Bible Training Programs, thus the movements in Sidamo and Gamu Gofa Provinces did not show the typical signs of independent Churches. The South Ethiopia Synod has twelve Bible Schools with the enrollment running from 10 to 75 students in each school. In most cases the schools give courses on a yearly basis. Very few of the students are employed as evangelists. Mostly they are trained with a view that at least one in every group will have basic Bible knowledge, in order that he or she may be a leader locally. In some cases these become living witnesses

for the Gospel of the Saviour in their neighbourhood or in their family. I have several times witnessed the influence these young students from Bible Schools exerted upon their communities preventing the neophytes from the danger of returning to Paganism due to lack of Biblical knowledge. Funds granted by the Missions enabled evangelists employed full time to move at will to reach new areas, and the danger of considering the preaching of the Gospel of the living Christ as the sole responsibility the Missions has been kept to the minimum in view of the experience of World War II.

(6) Another factor to be seen as contributory to the fast growth of the Evangelical Churches in Ethiopia is the right understanding of the laymen (the people of God) of their responsibility as Christians in their Congregations. The revival movements during the War were started by laymen and still continue to have their roots in laymen. Evangelical Congregations do not allow professional pastors and evangelists to monopolize the ministry of preaching, lay preachers and pastors have equal access to the pulpit and there is not too much of a difference between preaching in Churches and personal witness in ordinary life. It may be said that the professional ministry is playing its role in nurture, but the fact of the rapid growth of the Evangelical Churches at a high rate is through the normal witness of the lay Christians in common daily life. It's true that the Biblical knowledge of the lay Christians is very minimum even today. In spite of that there is a general feeling of urgency to reach those who have not had the opportunity of hearing the Gospel of the risen Christ.

(7) In describing a mass movement, its complex social factors its religious sociological anthropological and political characters have to be dealt with in a satisfactory manner. In order to give a vivid picture of the situation, however, this brief report on mass movements in Ethiopia, as was indicated earlier, does not attempt to do this, due to various reasons. As indicated in the previous paragraphs, central to the proclamation and witness of the believers the idea that Jesus saves. This is repeated very often and one can never miss it in one form or another. There is no distinction between curing from malaria, pneumonia or saving from sin. "Jesus Christ saves" means that He literally cures from physical diseases as well as from the burden of sin. The simple preaching of the Gospel was very often accompanied by healing, exorcism or by some other signs which were interpreted to be the new God demonstrating His power. The following striking example indicates what the religious factor plays in the mass movements as they have been seen in Ethiopia. In a certain area of Gamu Gofa (a Southern Province) a big tree played an important role in the primitive cult. At a certain time of the year the people would come together there from a wide area to make sacrifices to the spirit in the tree. Just before one of the annual festivals two school boys who had accepted the Gospel of Christ went to the village and started to witness to the people. The people laughed at the boys and scorned them saying that the spirit residing in the tree was the most powerful God and that they believed in it. The boys said that they would pray to their God that He would reveal His power. On the day of the festival while several hundred people were gathered for the sacrifice, the tree suddenly fell down. The whole crowd said that this was the hand of the new God. From that day on they said

they would believe in the new God. Similar things have happened in many other places. A sick person was healed, a demon possessed person was made free, etc., and the crowds took these as Divine signs and decided to become Christians.

(8) Socially, to have a religion gave a kind of prestige. It is usual to divide people into two categories in daily conversation, those who have religion and those who have not. I once heard a truck driver who was a Muslim himself talking about people in a certain area who were partly Christians, partly Muslim and partly animists. In this classification, Christians and Muslims were considered as those who have religion and the animistic sector of the society as those who have no religion. This is one of the factors to be considered seriously. An ethnic group or a clan in an area can today add something important to their social prestige by becoming Christians. From this point of view, becoming a Christian means acceptance by society at large.

(9) Looking at the mass movements from a political angle, it cannot be denied that people who have been under land owners have found strength in turning to Christianity. They understand their true humanity in a new way. Of course, they are limited, but they are strong enough to make the best of what can be done under the present system, in fighting for their rights. It made a great impression on the people of the Konso area in Gamu Gofa when the Evangelical Christians united and through one of their leaders filed a case against a certain official who had taken a large portion of their land. They fought to the high-court and won the case, politically this is but the beginning (Matt. 24.8). It is no wonder that their revival songs are hymns of praise to God Who made it possible for them to get back their land.

(10) Anthropologically, their general dissatisfaction is noticeable with the existing conditions of life. The ethnic groups and clans want change. They are not quite sure as to what they want, but a desire for something new and better is discernible. In such a situation, our duty is to sell our goods. The people themselves have started to change, looking for better ways of life, for something new to satisfy their inner longings. Leaders of a group of people recently came to one of our evangelists and asked him to go with them to teach them a new way of life. When asked why they wanted to be taught, they said they were not satisfied with their living conditions. Old forms of social life are disintegrating and something has to replace it.

(11) Even if the social and political factors cannot be overlooked, one would misunderstand the mass movements if one does not put the main emphasis on the religious aspect as indicated in point 7 of this report. People are tormented with fear of spirits and they want to accept the new religion of love and justice. Although a mass movement will not automatically lead the masses to the Church, it will create fertile soil for tremendous possibilities to sow the seed of the Gospel, to proclaim the risen Christ Who makes man free from fear. Where the Church understands the mass movement it becomes a tremendous opening, but still it is a stream which must be led in the right direction and if led in the right direction, it is a tremendous factor in the harvest of the Heavenly Father. This is to say that the Evangelical Churches have been working in a situation which mass movements have created and

and the importance of the teaching ministry cannot be overlooked in Ethiopia where this has been successfully tried, in particular in the Southern part of the Country.

(12) It would be unfair not to mention the role the vernaculars have played in contributing to Church growth in Ethiopia where about seventy languages and dialects are spoken. Portions of the Bible had been translated into the Kambata, Wallamo and Sidamo language before the Protestant Missions had to leave the Country because of the Second World War. Although it is somewhat difficult to estimate how much influence the use of vernaculars have had in paving the way for the mass movements in the South Western part of the Country, the use of the Galla Bible published in 1899 has had a considerable impact upon the people who have not other literature in the language they understand.

(13) In concluding this brief report on Church Growth in Ethiopia, it would not be out of place to mention how the Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus visualizes herself to be as outlined in the First Five-Year Plan from 1971 to 1975.

alarmed at the high growth rate, the General Assembly decided in 1969 that a plan whereby the Church could be able to know where she stands be worked out. During the two year period from 1969 to 1970, the necessary data were collected for assessment. In the process of working out the Plan it became clear that in the past three years from 1968 to 1970 the average growth was calculated to be about 15 percent, membership growth for 1970 was 27 per cent. However, if we stick to the more moderate growth rate of 15 per cent, the membership will be about doubled by the end of the First Five-Year Plan, which means that the ECMY will have a membership of about 285,000 by the end of 1975.

To make proper use of this expansion, according to the Plan, about 137 pastors must be trained during this period as well as about 1000 evangelists. By January 1970 our statistics show that 420 evangelists and 82 pastors are serving full time the 143 000 members of the ECMY with 831 Congregations and 258 preaching places. There are also about 159 working Missionaries at present in the ECMY, and it is our earnest and sincere hope that there will be more expatriate personnel during the period of the Plan to assist the Church in starting 300 new places indicated in the Plan. In view of the present general trends in the world, it may seem out of place to call for more Missionary personnel, but our Church needs increased resources in personnel and finances to meet her manifold tasks in Ethiopia.

Realizing the urgency of making use of the present opportunity in Ethiopia, our Seventh General Assembly passed a resolution requesting the LWF to approach the Donor Agencies in Europe and the USA with a view to reconsidering their criteria for aid and include direct support for Congregational work, leadership training so that the ECMY may be able to cope with the rapid growth taking place at present. The earnest wish of the ECMY is that this request be passed on the member Churches of the LWF to be communicated to the Congregations in order that they may know our problems and desires, and it is our sincere and

earnest hope that the LWF will do its utmost, in the first place, in passing and making known our concern to the Churches and secondly that the LWF may influence the present Donor Agencies to review their criteria for allocation of assistance thereby giving due consideration to our evangelistic outreach plan. Our hope is that our Sister Churches do not judge our needs solely on their own criteria and on the conditions that they have stipulated. We want to proclaim Christ, because we believe it is our responsibility. We want to proclaim Christ because our people are hungering for Him and want us to introduce Him to them.

Connected with this rapid growth is the question of self-support. Church growth has to be commensurate with economic growth; in our case this is far from being realized as yet. It is a well known fact that the economic life of any Church is tied up with the economic life of a country where the Church is placed. As national product per capita income is considered to be one of the lowest in the world, the matter of self-support does not appear to be an easy one; it requires a careful and nationalized study to be attacked from a realistic standpoint. What one can say at the moment is that this subject will be thoroughly studied during the Five Year Plan period. On the basis of the studies to be undertaken it will, we hope, be possible to predict the time when the ECMY will be able to stand on her own.

The ECMY was organized in her present form in 1958. This is to say that she is a teenager, and needs all the care that tender age demands so that her mind and spirit may be moulded by sound teaching which will determine her future. The role Bible studies play in her life will determine whether this young Church will fall into the danger of being some sort of social club under the guise of Christ, the danger this age characterized by uncertainty is running. For us this is not the question of being a conservative Church or something else one may call it, it is a matter of life and death. This is so because, as far as I understand, nothing can bring a man to a living faith in the risen Christ except proclamation and teaching of the living Word as "delivered to us 'us', namely that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures and that He was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures."