

Gudina Tumsa: A Biographical Sketch

Rev. Gudina Tumsa, General Secretary of the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus (EECMY), was executed by order of the country's Marxist dictatorship on July 28, 1979. He was one of several church leaders who were killed for refusing to endorse state policies, in particular the state's policies against religious freedom.

Gudina was born in 1929 into a poor farming family in the town of Bodji, in the Province of Wollega in the western part of Ethiopia. At the age of ten Gudina was admitted to an evangelical school in Bodji but later transferred to a school of the Swedish Evangelical Mission in the town of Nedjo where he studied Bible and theology, and where he also became proficient in English.

With his people Gudina chafed under the oppressive nature of Ethiopia's feudal system and experienced the particular discrimination suffered by his own Oromo people. Influenced by the holistic ministry of the missionaries, he spent weekends traveling throughout the region telling the story of Jesus and listening to the needs of the people. When he received training as a nurse in the hospital at Nekemte, he gained a lively sense of the gospel as the power of salvation for what he would later call "the whole human person." During this period he married Tsehay Tolessa who would be Gudina's longtime partner and mother of their five children.

Gudina's passion was the preaching of the gospel and carrying out ministry in the congregation. He received theological training at Nedjo and was ordained as a pastor in 1958, serving congregations in Kambata. Recognizing his leadership gifts, the EECMY sent Gudina to the United States in 1963 to study theology at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota. There he became acquainted with the life and thought of German theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and the theology and social thought of Reinhold Niebuhr. He also became caught up in the movement to attain civil rights for African Americans led by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He was impressed with the movement's non-violent nature as well as with its deep roots in the Christian faith. At this time Gudina became convinced that racial, economic and political oppression was incompatible with the gospel.

He returned to Ethiopia in 1966 to become the General Secretary of the EECMY, a position he held until his abduction and murder in 1979. During this period the EECMY experienced a phenomenal growth in membership. Gudina soon became a well-known leader in the ecumenical movement, in Ethiopia where he helped form the Council for Cooperation among Churches, and also in the Lutheran World Federation and the World Council of Churches. The 1972 letter from the EECMY to the LWF, "On the Interrelation between Proclamation of the Gospel and Human Development," initiated a discussion that would alter the way churches cooperated in mission. The letter was a major expression of Gudina's vision of forging a biblically-based synthesis between witness and service, proclamation and development, personal piety and social responsibility, self-reliance and interdependence.

Gudina led his church through the difficult transition from feudalism to socialism in which initial hopes for justice and equality were ruthlessly dashed by the Marxist-Leninist government. His legacy is carried on through the ministry of the EECMY and the Gudina Tumsa Foundation, an agency for holistic development among the Oromo people, led by the daughters of Gudina and Tsehay, Lensa and Asti Gudina.

1980 Gespräch mit Gudina. Radius-Verlag, Stuttgart.

3 Gudina means: He will grow. - Tumsa, Gudina's father worshipped occasionally at the orthodox church but may not have known the evangelical-lutheran faith. When his son Gudina was thirteen years old, Tumsa died from poison given to him down in the Shanqilla valley. He died repeating "Gudina, Gudina."

1 At the Swedish Mission school Gudina studied the Bible, which helped him to make difficult decisions with a clear conscience and assume great responsibility.

12 In the boarding we read the Bible and prayed before going to bed. I cannot forget when one of my friends prayed: "Dear God, take your Holy Spirit from me. I will not preach any more, I will not stand in your service. Let me become a pharmacist and earn money... The Holy Spirit may find other people." - My friend is now running a pharmacy and earns good money. I have not dared to oppose the Holy Spirit.

14 On reaching Bako those unsettled early days of the revolution in October 1974, Gudina was threatened by the joiners who demanded employment and higher payment though the Mekane Yesus Church had no possibility to fulfill their demands. The very last moment the Landrover managed to pass through the gate and reach the hotel where Tsehai and Gudina's sister Rahel were sitting and take them into the car before the angry workers reached the car. A stone crushed the windshield, but the driver managed to escape. The stone barely missed Gudina's head, but he remained unharmed.

23 In Haile Selassie's Ethiopia there were 12,500 prisons with no fewer than 175,000 inmates at any time. After the revolution there are more than 25,500 peasant associations with a prison each. Each of the over 660 woredas have at least two prisons. The 102 awrajas have their own prisons. In Addis Ababa alone there are 289 lower and 25 higher gebeles with their own prisons.

24 During the "Red Terror" the prisons held some 125,000 inmates and altogether some two million prisoners were found in the 31,500 different prisons.

28 It happened very often that the watchmen did not know why a particular prisoner was kept in jail. He might be forgotten for several months.

29 In the Central Revolutionary Investigation Department (CRID), the Third Police Station, 85 people were held in Cell Nr 7, which measured 4 x 4 meters, at the height of the Red Terror. In November 1978 'only' 50 people were kept in that cell.

42 On 29 January 1978 (p.36) when people on their way to church found dead bodies, murdered during the night, in several streets, and Gudina preached a moving sermon to comfort the bereaved and the fearful, saying afterwards to the author: I know that I cannot be killed unless God permits and wants it. I have

seen so many dead lying on the street. I have often been thoroughly threatened and blackmailed (expressat). I have ceased to care about it. I may be shot any time. I have settled my life. Death lies behind me. Every day we live by God's word, his love and his mercy. From then come our life and our strength. Since death lies behind us and life before us, we can proceed quietly and confidently and help and strengthen our churches and congregations.

43 The Ninth General Assembly at Nedjo, Western Wollaga, in April 1976, gathered some 500 delegates from several provinces in the country. It is likely that the observation is correct which states that the Mekane Yesus Church is the only democratic organization that has ever existed on Ethiopian soil. This general assembly was the first one after or during the revolution. One of the most important lectures during the assembly had for its theme "The new political ideologies and the church".

A member of the politbureau tried to explain how an atheistic ideology which was based on materialism could co-exist with the church in a peaceful manner. After a while Gudina took the floor and stated twice: In brief, it must be understood, that there can be no reconciliation and no compromise between what the church believes and teaches and materialism. Marxism-Leninism and the church can never be friends. Materialism thinks and lives from below, from matter, but the church lives from the Spirit of God, who comes from above.

Both the police and the spies listened. We all kept our breath. It was necessary to make a clear statement. The faith of the 500 delegates must be strengthened. They must all be given a clear guidance. Many of Gudina's friends asked him afterwards what he meant by his statement. Do you really mean that marxism and christian faith, materialism and church must be unreconcilable enemies? He answered: Does not Marx himself say that there can be no reconciliation between church and religion and the one hand and materialism and atheism on the other? I have not said anything different.

47 In February 1974 we flew together to Amba Dolo to visit the Bethel Church and study the theological, juridical and administrative questions connected with the request of the Bethel church to join the Mekane Yesus church. The people maintained that they did not recognize the borderline drawn by the mission at the Hatto River as a confessional demarcation. We celebrate Holy Communion on whatever side of the Hatto we happen to meet, and when the missionaries did not be here in the Italian time, we help each other mutually with preaching, baptism, communion and visits to the imprisoned.

48 There was no doubt that the dogmatic distinctions made by the missionaries were never honoured by the people to the extent the missionaries believed. The believers had their own Christian identity. This fact highly impressed me. I realized that it was here that Gudina had his roots and was accepted as an authority.