

# The Importance of Gudina Tumsa to his Family, Church & Society

*...even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,  
I will fear no evil, for you are with me... Ps. 23:4*

On Saturday, July 28, 1979, my father was home in his reading room preparing his sermon on "The Cost of Discipleship." He called me in and asked me, "Do you think you will go to jail again?" I thought the question was unusual and wondered why he had asked me. It came just three weeks after our release from jail. My father and I had been arrested and placed in one of the great many detention centers the Marxist Military Government of Ethiopia had established in the Ethiopian capital, Addis Ababa. My father had been labeled a counter-revolutionary and political agent. I was held as a pawn: my captors threatened to torture me in front of father unless he gave in and joined hands with them. The Military wanted him to go on a fund-raising tour of Europe, confirming over the media that there was no religious persecution in Ethiopia. His response shocked them. Torturing his wife and child would make no difference. He could only tell the truth. The military interrogated and bullied him, they led him to the wall to be shot, but he remained faithful to speaking only Truth. I often wondered how he had managed to remain bold in the face of death. Several months earlier he had retreated for two weeks to gain clearness about how to lead the church in such difficult times. A paper came out of that retreat, a piece that one of his colleagues, the Reverend Paul Hoffman, called "his last will and testament". It was a confession of faith for his church and for all Christians living in Ethiopia under the dictatorship of the atheist government. My father

didn't live long enough to present his paper to the General Assembly of the EECMY (Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus). The paper was titled, "The Role of a Christian in a Given Society."

Today I find clues about his courage in this paper written at that life-threatening time. It reads: "The most death can do is to be a stepping stone for the Christian to be transferred to fullness of life".<sup>1</sup>

My father loved life, he loved our family, he loved ministry, he loved serving the Lord on this earth, but clearly he did not fear death.

Recalling the ideas of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian and martyr, killed by the Nazis, he wrote, "...when a person is called to follow Christ, that person is called to die. ... death to one's own wishes and personal desires and finding the greatest satisfaction in living for and serving the one who died for us ..."<sup>2</sup>

My father prayed always. Through prayer he practiced death-of-self and experienced God's presence and guidance. He loved to serve the Lord—you couldn't stop him! I feel a great sense of comfort remembering that he knew the Lord so well when he had to endure those terrible trials.

Quoting the Bible he wrote, "The life the believer leads is a life of faith, and the risen Lord lives in him. (Galatians 2, 19)" He added this: "The life of faith is a life set free from the power of sin, and it is beyond the capacity of death to destroy it. Because it has its source

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<sup>1</sup> Witness and Discipleship: Essential Writings of Gudina Tumsa

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

in the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ, that resurrection life is at work in the life of the believer.”

But on that Saturday night in 1979, I was only a teenager with very little understanding of theological issues. I knew from family prayers, conversations with friends, and church sermons that living and dying for Christ was one of his favorite themes. But still I was puzzled why he had called me to his room asking me such a disturbing question. I responded by saying, "Never again will I be put in jail". Then I asked him, "What about you? Do you think you will be put in jail again?" Deep inside I was hoping he would say "No! Never again!" But to my disappointment he answered "I don't know, I am not sure."

When he said this, I remembered the dream I'd had the previous night. In my dream I was standing in a big forest where some of the trees were cut and the logs piled in the middle of the forest. I wanted to sit on one of the logs but as I intently looked at the log it turned into a big python. I shared my dream with my father. He smiled at me and said, "You don't believe in dreams, do you?" He said that to comfort me, but later he told my mother that the dream meant that there was a great danger ahead for our family. For a long time he had worked on preparing his family and church for the tribulations ahead. Now I realize he was aware of his own fate.

My father was abducted that Saturday night, July 28, 1979, as he and my mother were heading out of our church after he preached the sermon he had prepared on "The Cost of Discipleship." His whereabouts remained unknown for thirteen years. No one even dared ask where he was for fear of military reprisal. Even his own

church not only kept silent about the disappearance of her General Secretary but went to the extent of urging partner churches not to publicize the issue, which caused division between churches in different parts of Germany. But what made this person so controversial?

My mother's response to such a question was "his unique personality". Even his childhood in the rural village of Boji was full of events. He was very gifted in playing field hockey that every team wanted him on their side. At the age of ten he heard about Jesus Christ and converted to Christianity. Putting faith into action he proceeded to cut down the tree his family used for worship purposes. This caused persecution and drove him away from his family to Nekemte town where he met my mother and the two got married in 1951. After completing his training at the Nursing school run by the Swedish missionaries he found employment at the Hospital. It did not escape the notice of his employers, the medical missionaries, that my father was a very gifted young man. They were eager to send him to medical school and offered to pay him more money, which was very tempting to a man starting a family. However, my mother felt that the ministry had been laid upon him for the sake of Christ. She urged him to join the training for ministry, rather than for medicine. He agreed and upon completing his training he became the first Ethiopian pastor of the Nekemte town congregation.

As a pastor my father was dynamic. He didn't limit himself to serving his congregation, he traveled to remote areas on foot preaching the gospel and planting new churches. On market days he went to the market carrying his trumpet which he blew standing on a nearby hill.

Astounded by the unfamiliar sound of the trumpet the crowd would run towards him to look. After obtaining their permission he preached the Good News to them. Every market day he could be found among the crowd preaching the gospel.

His broad understanding of the gospel was a challenge for many other Christians, including missionaries. He felt that the Gospel should address all aspects of human life. In one of his papers he stated, "... the Gospel is the power that saves from eternal damnation, from economic exploitation, from political oppression, etc." His ministry in the remote areas, in addition to preaching the gospel, embraced medical service, training evangelists in literacy education, and training professional teachers in preaching the Gospel. He harbored a deep concern for the poor. As one of his colleagues described him "Gudina Tumsa was a man of the people and an inexhaustible defender of the poor and the needy."

Recognizing his academic ability and potential for leadership an American missionary by the name of Dr. Shaeffer recommended him to Luther Seminary, in St. Paul, Minnesota. Lack of the required academic qualifications to join the Seminary and insufficient knowledge of the English language did not keep him down for long. He struggled for one semester, and then distinguished himself in the second semester as one of the best students. His studies in the USA coincided with the civil rights movement led by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., This exposure expanded his awareness of cultural, social and political issues and enriched his thinking about the role of church in society.

Returning to Ethiopia he became heavily engaged in matters affecting the spiritual, social, economic and political life of his people. Under the Imperial government of king Haile Selassie, who had ruled Ethiopia for half a century, people were subjected to harsh expropriation of resources for the benefit of landlords and central authorities. My father challenged the Imperial government on matters involving human rights, justice, feudalism and land reform.

He also confronted Western churches who worked in partnership with his own church. He challenged them on the basis that their view of human needs were one sided, laying more emphasis on material development, without giving due attention to spiritual needs. One of his papers, addressed to the Lutheran World Federation, which stirred a controversy among the Western churches stated:

"... an integral human development, where spiritual and material needs are seen together, is the only right approach to the development question in our society... the division between witness and service or between proclamation and development is harmful to the church and will ultimately result in a distorted Christianity. ... the development of the inner person is a prerequisite for a healthy and lasting development of society".

He also challenged his own church to fellowship with other denominations of Christian churches. He took the initiative and succeeded in bringing all Christian churches in Ethiopia together and established the Council for Cooperation of Churches in Ethiopia (the CCCE) and was elected the first

chairman. Using the prayer of our Lord in John 17, where he prayed for the oneness of the believers, as his point of departure he urged the churches to join hands in proclaiming the Gospel in the face of atheist ideology which was spreading rapidly in Ethiopia.

In reflection what was so amazing about my father, however, was how he managed to strike a balance between his work and family life despite a number of critical and time demanding incidents surrounding his life. His assignment as the General Secretary of his Church took place at a rather precarious historical setting. The EECMY was emerging as a unified national church while an half a century of monarchial rule of king Hiale Selassie was approaching its culmination, and a new political ideology of socialism spreading and winning popularity among the youth and elites of the country. All these developments not only caught my father's interest but also demanded his time. He read books on Marxism extensively and engaged in dialogs and debates with Marxist groups. He was not afraid of mixing with people of different religions, ideological or racial backgrounds. He was open to listen and learn from others but yet he felt engaging in such dialogs would pave the way to sharing the love of Christ with unbelievers.

Simultaneously, he worked on preparing his church on ways of coping with the emerging atheist ideology. He invited experts from overseas to conduct seminars on the topic for church leaders and theological students, while he traveled to the rural parts of the country addressing pastors and evangelists of

congregations. He strongly felt that the Church should fulfill its mandate of being 'the light of the world' by assuming her rightful place in society. He urged and challenged the General Assembly, the highest decision making body of the Church, to be 'voice for the voiceless', to speak on behalf of the poor farmers by appealing to the imperial government on the issue of land reform. He was well aware that raising such issues might endanger his safety, nevertheless, nothing could stop him from doing what he felt was the right thing to do.

My father was always at the forefront of developments around his church, be it on national or international level. He liked to challenge and be challenged by others. He had no fear of confronting partner churches in Europe and North America on moral and theological issues. In one of his papers, entitled 'Proclamation & Development' he challenges the Western Churches saying:

*"Looking at the so-called developed societies we realize that in the midst of their affluence man is still suffering from all kinds of evil. ...The present ecological or environmental crisis in the form of physical and moral pollution indicates the danger of this one-dimensional development."*

He was equally bold in challenging the dictatorial regime for the injustices they were committing against the people in Ethiopia. Once my mother was asked what her response would be if she were asked to say only a sentence about her husband. Her response was, "Gudina was not afraid of anything."

His trip to South Africa in the early 70s is a great testimony to her statement. Being the only black person to arrive at Johannesburg with a Lutheran delegation, he resisted moving to the “Blacks Only” section and remained with the rest of the delegation in the area designated for whites. As one of his travel mates later on testified, seeing his towering stature (he was almost two meters tall) and unflinching determination none of the Apartheid police dared to speak to him to move. Upon his return from S. Africa he was received as a hero. He appeared on the cover pages of the country’s leading news papers. He toured around sharing his experiences, exposing the evils of Apartheid and speaking against all forms of injustice. As he was a great orator his words captivated the minds of many and stirred the hearts of the youth to yearn for justice. I remember a woman who remarked, “...this man’s speech can make stones melt.”

Being in a leading position of his church, making frequent international travels and continuous engagements in high-level political and theological discussions couldn’t stop him from fulfilling his pastoral duties. He was a pastor at heart. Out of his busy schedule he took time to conduct confirmation classes for groups of young people. Once a week during the evening radio program of Radio Voice of the Gospel he made himself available to counsel listeners over the phone. During the Sunday service in our church he made a point of interpreting the sermon for Oromo elders who could not understand the

Amharic language. His heart was with the outcast and the downtrodden.

His passion for the youth was unprecedented. University students flocked to his office on daily basis. He always made a point of speaking to them, responding to their questions or discussing issues. He paid as much attention to rural youth who had no opportunity to go to school. Though he valued and promoted education he never looked down on the uneducated. He had a way of communicating with all.

He urged his Church not to neglect the issues of the youth. The issue of the charismatic movement was rocking the Church in the early 70s when a considerable percentage of the youth were about to break away from the Church. He became the leading mediator between the “conservatives” who, on one side, felt the Church should always remain as traditional as it was handed down to them from the Lutheran missionaries and, on the other hand, the youth who wanted the power of the Holy Spirit manifested in the Church as in the days of the apostles. He managed to make his Church accept this new movement thereby keeping the Church from splitting.

The hassle and bustle around the Church and country on the verge of immersing in communist ideology couldn't keep him from making time for his family. His relationship with mother was beyond the traditional marriage relationship. She was his partner as well. Everywhere he had to go, within the city or rural areas, they drove together. Every morning she drove him to

work and picked him up afterwards. Her lack of academic education seemed no barrier as he always shared with her deep theological and political matters he was engaged in. Unreservedly she supported all his ideas and encouraged him to press forward. Her unwavering position in standing on his side in all situations was proved true when he proposed a salary cut on the high earning personnel of the Church in order to be able to give salary increments for the low-income employees of the Church.

He viewed taking such a measure as paying the high cost of discipleship for the sake of the gospel. The issue, of course, became a grave one. Some in the leadership deserted the Church while others threatened to kill him. My mother knew that this meant cuts in our family budget, raising five children with his salary and supporting many more extended family members. she too was ready to make that sacrifice and pay her share of the cost of discipleship.

On another occasion my father was offered a position in the head quarters of the Lutheran World Federation. The package seemed very attractive: higher salary, better living conditions, good educational opportunities for us children and many more benefits. My father didn't turn away the offer instantly. He shared the idea with the whole family. As children we felt moving to Geneva would be the best thing that could ever happen in someone's life. We urged our parents not to miss the opportunity. However, my father felt that his presence in his

Church was crucial to the survival and continued growth in the Church and declined the offer.

Prior to taking issues to the public he made a point of bringing them up within our family discussions. The issues ranged from simple and humorous ones to very serious and complex ones. Upon his return from Tanzania (at the time I was eight years old) he shared with us the concept of African socialism and Ujama. He compared it with other social systems in many other countries he visited. He seemed to favor most what he experienced in Sweden, social democracy. He always gave each of us an opportunity to express our impressions and air our views. He enjoyed laughing at the jokes we told and playing traditional games with us children. He taught us reading the Bible and singing hymns in our native tongue—the Oromo language. We all felt special and comforted listening to him praying for us children. He always concluded his prayers saying, "...help us to live for your glory and for the wellbeing of humanity."

He valued good education very much though his meager income didn't allow him to send us to a good school. He advised us that we could excel in knowledge if we read extensively as he himself always did. He instilled in us the love for our people and encouraged us to study academic fields which we would use to benefit the poor and the disadvantaged. He encouraged and supported, as much as he could, everyone he came across—from unschooled village children to high school and university students—to get education. He wrote in

one of his papers that the purpose of going for higher education was "...not to earn higher salaries, but to render better service to the people of God."

The Military Government followed him everywhere he went. Seeing his exceptional ability in bringing together all churches in Ethiopia, which represented millions of Christians in the country, and as a chairman and leading personality of the Council of Churches in Ethiopia, the Military Government asked him to work for them. However, he felt cooperating with such a brutal government would prevent him from speaking the truth and, as he phrased it, stop him from being the "voice of the voiceless". He refused to become a tool of an unjust government.

The role he played in establishing the Council of Churches in Ethiopia was made the main issue of his interrogation during his arrests. Though he was released from prison twice there was no doubt that he would be arrested again and probably killed. He had opportunities to escape to overseas, on his second arrest Bishop Kibira of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Tanzania and Bishop Christian Krasue met with President Nyerere and asked him to interfere in securing my father's release and exile with his family. President Nyerere, who was in good terms with Mengistu, responded positively, negotiated with Mengistu and managed to have him released. Arrangements were made for my father and his family to leave Ethiopia on the night of his release. Here is what Christian Krause wrote on my father's reaction to his offer to escape to

Tanzania: “on the night of his release Gudina came to the house where I was staying, accompanied by his daughter and his wife. I urged him to go right away to Tanzania. Time was pressing. His response was a shocking one. There he was, this tall man; he still had this white gabi around him, coming straight from prison. ...when I made him the offer to leave the county immediately for the sake of his safety, he got up and took me violently by the lapels and said: "Don't tempt me!"...how can I leave my country, my church, being a leader of the flock? I have to stay....”

Knowing that another round of imprisonment, torture and death was imminent couldn't stop him from drinking the cup set before him, he accepted to drink it. Through prayerful discernment he learned that it was God's Will for him to stay in his country and pay the cost of discipleship. Again quoting from his final writing in "The Role of a Christian in a Given Society":

*“A responsible Christian does not aggravate any situation and thereby court martyrdom. It is the duty of the Christian to pray for the peace of the country where he is placed by the Creator, and work for the well-being of the society of which he is a part...to be a Christian is not to be a hero to make a history for oneself. A Christian goes as a lamb to be slaughtered only when he/she knows that this is in complete accord with the will of God who has called him to his service.”*

As one of his missionary friends put it "... his death will remain an eternal reminder of the costs of discipleship".

Amidst our agony and affliction emerged an idea to establish a foundation in our father's memory to carry on the vision he had for the church and for the poor. Gudina Tumsa Foundation (GTF) was established and registered in December of 1992 to serve the marginalized and the downtrodden. His life inspires our lives and our work with GTF. His life, work, and witness planted seeds here, and bore fruit there, that are beyond measure.

Lensa Gudina

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