

This is a reflection paper on the "Ethnicity, diversity and the unity of the Church" to the Gudina Tumsa Memorial Year Consultation, at Lutherstadt Wittenberg, Germany, September 17-20, 2004.

I am baptized at my childhood in the EECMY church and grew up with dedicated Mekane Yesus Environment. The Mekane Yesus church members, parents brought up me with strong dogma, confession of Lutheran. Additional, they told me some of the EECMY Church leaders work and their visions. So I have information about Rev. Gudina Tumsa from my parents about his work and vision in the south Central Synod. He contributed a lot in the SCS foundation and development. Apart as a person grew up in the EECMY I now that Rev. Gudina Tumsa played a wonderful role in the EECMY history and vision. I am very grateful for having chance to participate in such an event.

One of the great things that I appreciate from his work is to proclaim the Gospel from his area to other areas; such as helping the south part of Ethiopian Evangelical Churches in their development was one of the examples to mention as his vision and strong work. To me he is a good model on spreading the gospel from one Ethnicity group to others. The second, he is also a good model to EECMY to blossom the unity in the diversity. He contributed as a church leader on the making of Unity of Christina from many different/diversity culture, race, sex, age and languages. His and his time church leaders' effort kept a church to be a strong structured church and pass on to the next generation. Evangelical Ecumenical Fellowship is one of his fruits, that many denominations are having fellowship and unity. Thirdly, EECMY had a great theological idea of serving the 'whole person'. It is also that the EECMY has to check, the church is real in the direction of serving the whole person or serving development to one person and serving evangelism to another person. These are some of the ideas that impressed me from Rev. Gudina Tumsa's many works. Within his vision I would like to share my understanding in the given topic.

1: Ethnicity:

According to my understanding "Ethnicity" is the fact of belonging to a particular race in one national or society. As a Christianity differences of ethnicity can be controlled in the Unity of Christianity. Ethnicity is one of the greatest gifts from God which we can enjoy by sharing with others. It is like different kinds of flowers in one glass. Each ethnic group has its own practices. One ethnic group's culture, language and different practices are wonderful to its own group but it might not give sense to the other group. Therefore, there is no one best kind of culture, language and practice than others except for its own group; also there is no lower practice for itself.

As Christians what we have to do is we have to accept and appreciate each other's difference as God's gift. We can not also advertise our only, rather we have to look at others as God's gift and respect others. Some of the past history makes us reed of others and makes us self-centered. However as a Christian we are responsible for others and we have to respect and accept others even if it is not good for others, otherwise we can not build the Christian community. If the past history hurts, the only solution for a Christian is forgiveness, but if we start revenge we will do more mistakes than the previous mistakes. According to my understanding Ethnicity centered mind can destroy the church if its work is self-centered. But if there is valuing, accepting and respecting other ethnic groups there will be a wonderful founding of eschatological society or community. Rev. Gudina Tumsa's was one of the early church leaders who attempted such eschatological society or community in his time.

2: Understanding the diversity:

The beauty of Christian fellowship and unity is built on the wide diversity of human culture and experiences. Diversity in unity and unity in diversity of faith, denominations, languages, cultures, history etc. with diverse experiences and practices create community, which binds Christians together towards a common aim and future. The aim and purposes of universal and local Churches are to make fellowship flourish, unity and Christian community through Baptism, other Sacraments, the word of God and the Spirit. This Christian fellowship and unity transcend linguistic, cultural socio-political and economic differences.

As Paul said in Gal.3: 28, mutual submission and the love of God can swallow all the differences and develop eschatological fellowship and unity among all Christian.⁷

There are several diverse characteristics in Ethiopian society, from one group to the other. For instance, the terrain of the land, from one area to another, indicates the specific people's manner, behavior and experiences. The three main divisions according to the climate are called 'Dega' (the highlands zone), 'wayna Dega' (the intermediate of the two zones) and 'Qolla' (the low lying and hot area). The people of these three areas manifest cultural, behavioral and some physical differences. The weather, languages, cultural variation, poor communication, etc, are some of the barriers among them. Diversity due to historical and traditional backgrounds has yielded a multi-style of spirituality among EECMY Christians.

The diversity of Ethiopian society is very controversial and significant. Ethiopia has more than 90 linguistic family groups, while, according to the 1992 population statistics, there are 56 ethnic groups i.e., those whose population exceeds 20,000 people (Lapiso D, 1999, p.55-57). However, all human needs like communication, relationship, security, faith or religion, and basic necessities are common to all. At the same time, Ethiopian people gain rich and diverse experiences from different religious.

From the African practices, Ethiopians experienced *traditional religion*. The majority of the first Christians were converted either from traditional beliefs or from the EOC. Even after they were converted to evangelical Churches, they adapted and transferred many rituals like spirit-possession, magical practices, etc. from their first experiences. Farther says the following about the relation between the three main religions. "In Kambata, Sidoma, and Wolayeta it was the influence of the EOC, which was stronger. The church teaching had a positive influence in preparing the people for further religious change. This change was also encouraged by the political changes..."

The *Catholic missionaries* and the wide range of Protestant missionaries also brought a variety of confessional/dogma experiences with their culture. One of the main purposes of all missionaries to come to Ethiopia was to renew the EOC spirituality, (Fargher B L, 1996 p.61). Somehow, all of them failed in their aim and resorted to promoting their own backgrounds. On the one hand such diversity may have encouraged some Christians to be strong in faith and spirituality by overcoming problems. On the other hand, the Christian fellowship and an interest in building unity waned and individual groups were more practiced. So the failure of the plan to renew the EOC was a significant cause for the establishment of independent Churches in Ethiopia.

More than any others, the *Protestant missionaries* brought several dogmatic, spiritual, ecclesiastical and political differences. At the present time, there are many denominations in Ethiopia with small differences. It is the same Christian Spirituality that is expressed and practiced in different styles. Such divers styles of Spirituality led the people to misunderstand and excommunicate each another.

3: Acknowledging diversity and developing unity:

Christian diversity can be assumed as a very natural characteristic of humanity, such as race, colour, sex, age, language and there differences. However, the significance of Christian diversity is to acknowledge and to respect and develop Christian unity, as Paul teaches in Gal.3: 28 Christian unity does not mean uniformity; it acknowledges diversity and develops unity in various ways. It is one of the challenges to the EECMY to develop her unity by creating a/ Dialogue, b/ Mutual Submission, and c/ Reconciliation in the Church.

A: Dialogue

Everyone who belongs to these new communities in Christ has to feel at home through Christian unity. He or she is not an alien or foreigner but a member of one family. Therefore, all geographical, political, racial, ethnic or economic boundaries have been transcended. That is not a denial of our humanity, but an acceptance of our humanity, through Christ's love. For example, in John 4:7 Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman broke through all-sexual, racial, social class and cultural differences and created mutual understanding. Therefore, chauvinism, narrow nationalism and the narrow denominationalism can be overcome through continuous conversation and dialogue which may help to understand and accept each other's diversity. Narrow denominationalism and narrow nationalism, look only for their own benefit and regard them as more important than another. By accepting each other, we can learn to complement each other and grow together into the unity of the body of Christ. In the EECMY, the contemporary situation seems that our faith is falling back into narrow pietism or shallow liberalism. Walls of separation will automatically be raised and hostility will be revived, and we will dishonor the worldwide love of God. In the EECMY, ethnic partiality with groups dominating and excommunicating each other severely damages Church Spirituality and Growth. It also hinders the main aim of the church "spreading the Gospel to the world". Unity become valueless and diversity become hinders to develop Unity in different groups.

In my country case it seems that interfaith dialogue is more common than that inside the Church. Nevertheless, there is an urgent need for dialogue for resolving conflicts, for overcoming violence and inequality and for learning peace making inside the Church (King, 1997,103). Ursula King suggested the necessity of dialogue, and proceeds, like this;

"..., acceptance of difference and diversity, attentive listening to others, sharing and healing differences and mutually enriching growth. Dialogue is about voices of differences, about different moods and experiences, about different life worlds, about different ways of living and experiencing, different way of knowing, thinking feeling and acting. The human being is inborn intentionally for communication and relationships, but the range for realizing this potential has grown exponentially in today's world. True dialogue is an art which must be learned."

Thus, dialogue is absolutely essential to understand and accept our diversity and to create mutual love, and spiritual unity. Therefore, in a Church like the EECMY, it is necessary to practice and use dialogue at different levels.

"We all need to learn, and we need to teach our children and youth, to appreciate otherness and that includes the otherness of spiritual paths, practices and goals," (King, 1997,105).

B: Mutual submissions

The second way of acknowledging, diversity and developing unity can be through 'mutual submission'. As Paul teaches in Eph.5: 21, there is 'mutual submission', which Christians owe one another, condescending to bear one another, not dominating one another. According to the RSV, this 'mutual submission' or "be subject to one another" is 'out of reverence for Christ'. Paul's mutual submission can be assumed to be 'self giving love', it is voluntary submission to one another therefore, it does not make one superior and the other inferior. Rather it develops unity and thinking of one another as one thinks of him/her self, therefore 'Self-giving love demands self-sacrifice. Consequently, race, politics, language, sex, social class, colour, age, position, culture and all other social differences become secondary things to Christians. Spiritual unity becomes the priority for Christians, and all secondary diversity can be used as a gift of God, to build the unity of God's Children by voluntary submission.

Paul also emphasized the eschatological future, freedom and the equality of all the natural and social diversity of human beings. Paul used both equality and submission, the opposite words to show the oneness and unity of Christianity, which can build Spiritual unity. According to his teaching, all natural diversities are the gifts of God and all social diversities have to submit to develop unity in the diversity. That does not mean to ignore or to give up diversity and to create uniformity, but rather, to appreciate, respect and to learn from the differences (to learn the richness of God's gifts). To the EECMY, all-Ethiopian racial/tribal,

linguistic, political, sex, age and geographical area differences should be the gift of God, which can be an instrument to develop unity. At the present time, all our differences become the cause of conflicts, because mutual submission, out of reverence for Christ is forgotten. Without self-giving, self-sacrifice and mutual submission, it is impossible to build love, peace, unity and spirituality. Therefore, true spirituality will lead all Christians to mutual submission.

On the other hand, from the very outset, the Christian churches have been concerned with the faithful 'transmission', that is the handing on of the teaching and practices of the gospel, (1Cor.11:23; 15:1-3). This transmission needs mutual submission of individuals, the members of one Church and ecumenical Church. One denomination can spread the gospel according to its dogma without the others, but lack of other Christian's fellowship, support, appreciation and love makes the transmission incomplete or partial. The submission of different denominations to each other, could be a model of mutual submission for the different ethnic groups.

C/ Reconciliation

The different traditions brought a variety of spiritual experiences, which caused many splits and conflicts in congregations and churches. Jesus Himself came into this world to reconcile human beings with God and with each other (2Cor5: 18,19; Ro5: 11; 11:15). It is assumed that the main conflicts and misunderstanding are due to the lack of theological or Christian education. Particularly the literal interpretations of the Bible and implementing the Bible teaching in twentieth century culture have to be reconciled by theological education. The spirituality of EECMY believers has to be reconciled through theological teaching or training, rather than attempting to impose/control by using the authority of the leadership. The EECMY has to bring about reconciliation within and outside the Church in the.

4. Conclusions

Sometimes we forget to listen to what our body tells us, such as to get rest, sleep, eat, drink, silence etc and we do some thing which does not meet our body's needs. For Example drinking coffee instead of sleeping, entreating or forcing ourselves instead of rest. Similarly the EECMY has to listen properly to all her body needs and concerns to achieve healthy growth. Therefore, it is time for the Church to listen to the individuals' and groups' starvation and searching.

The EECMY Christians have to recognize, accept, appreciate, respect and love all the different gifts and develop unity in diversity, not uniformity, not rejecting differences, but, through theological education build mutuality and reconciliation. Also Christians may be able to become aware of their differences and to respect one another through continuous dialogue. Respect promotes mutual understanding and this builds unity, which seems our previous church leaders idea.

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