

The Responsibility of the ECMY towards Ecumenical Harmony

by Rev. Gudina Tumsa

Introductory Note: This paper was presented to the 10th General Assembly of the ECMY which met January 24-31, 1978, on the campus of Mekane Yesus Seminary in Makanissa, Addis Ababa. Gudina Tumsa here puts forth reasons for the ECMY fostering what he calls "**ecumenical harmony**" and for participating in the creation of the "Council of the Churches' Cooperation in Ethiopia" (involving the Orthodox and Catholics, but also other Evangelicals). This was an idea first put forward at the Second "Christianity and Socialism Seminar" conducted by the ECMY (together with participants from other churches), with the cooperation of the Lutheran World Federation's Department of Studies, at Mekane Yesus Seminary (April 25-29, 1975). The matter had not come up for discussion at the previous 9th General Assembly in Nedjo (April 1976). In his Paper Gudina also anticipates a positive decision by the General Assembly to join the World Council of Churches, but the focus of his paper is on ecumenical harmony **in Ethiopia.** (PEH)

I.

1.1. When we speak about ecumenical relationships I believe that we need a definition of the term so that what we are talking about will be clearly understood by all concerned. The term "ecumenical" is not what our Lord prayed for in the Gospel of John, chapter 17. The prayer of our Lord was and still is for the oneness of His church.

1.2. The word "ecumenical" describes the common strategy of the churches in working together for the furtherance of causes of

common interest. The word describes two or more churches engaged in common responsibilities. Practically this may mean churches of the same confessional family, or various denominations with different confessional backgrounds.

1.3. The Amharic word "andnet" is misleading when we discuss ecumenical affairs. This became quite clear to me in the course of the discussions we have had with our sister churches during the last two years. The Amharic word "andnet" describes the "oneness" of the church spoken of in John, chapter 17, particularly verses 11, 21, and 23. To avoid confusion another word "hibret", which may be translated "association", is preferable in describing ecumenical relationships.

1.4. For the sake of clarity one may distinguish different stages as we march forward in working together for the unity of the people of God, the Church of Jesus Christ.

- a) The first stage is the ecumenical stage where the churches have a readiness to come together for discussions, prayers, and reading of the Scriptures, thereby doing away with their historical hatred and paving the way for joint activities.
- b) The second stage is "that they may be one" (John 17:11,21). ~~TH~~ we may call the complete stage. The priestly prayer of our Lord ~~is~~ not only for the ecumenical affairs of the churches, but primarily ~~is~~ the oneness of His church.

1.5. The ECMY has an inescapable responsibility to make ~~in~~ efforts that the prayer of our Redeemer for the oneness of His ~~ch~~ may be fulfilled. Specific areas for actions to be taken ~~wi~~ mentioned later in this paper.

II.

2.1. In discussions on the unity of the Church of Jesus Christ we come across opposing views or theological positions.

a) One school of thought spiritualizes everything to the extent that tangible, visible things are denied proper consideration. This group condemns all forms of structure and fails to see the place of structure or organization in carrying out the mandate of Christ's Church.

b) The second group is what we may call the secularizers. This view contends that the church is an organization like any other worldly organization and refuses to recognize the Church of Christ as an assembly called by God for a purpose, redeemed by Jesus Christ, and enlightened by the Third Person of the Holy Trinity.

2.2. The spiritualisers and the secularisers are diametrically opposed to each other. Whereas the spiritualisers try to transfer everything to the other world and refuse to accept responsibility for the pressing social problems of our planet, the secularizers are blind to see other than the material, and see their responsibility only as contributing to the improvement of the living conditions of human society.

2.3. In my opinion neither what we call the spiritualisers nor the secularisers are true to the Biblical understanding of reality. Whereas secularizing is a denial of the Creator of the universe, the God who has revealed himself through Jesus Christ, spiritualising is interpreting the Scriptures in such a way that all social problems find their solutions in the hereafter, thereby denying the reality of the Incarnation and leaving the world to atheism.

2.4. The third school of thought is what I would call the wholistic position. In wholistic theology both the spiritual and the physical are taken seriously in an inseparable manner. This theological position

contends that the right Biblical understanding takes seriously both dimensions of human existence, the spiritual and the physical, thereby opposing compartmentalization or fragmentation of human life. The God of the Bible is the source of life both in its spiritual and physical dimensions. He has the proper claim on human life both on this planet and in the world to come. There is no portion of human existence which can be free from God.

2.5. Since the purpose of this short paper is not to present the basic theological positions of churches represented in the ecumenical movement in our country, but to define specific responsibilities of the ECMY towards ecumenical harmony, it would be out of place to deal with the various presuppositions of the different views towards ecumenical matters.

2.6. Prior to proceeding to the third part of this paper, let me recite the classical Lutheran definition of the Church as "the communion of saints where the word of God is proclaimed rightly and the Sacraments are administered rightly". This is to say that the Church is located where grace is offered, the bitterness of sin is taken away, the blessings of God appropriated, and the joy of the Lord's forgiveness is experienced. This is meant to remind ourselves that when we are clear about the primary purpose of the Church and our ecumenical responsibilities for the unity of the Church of the Saviour, then whatever structure is chosen is of lesser significance.

III.

3.1. Comments are heard that the ECMY does not interest herself in ecumenical affairs, thereby placing herself in isolation. Such comments are due to lack of information on the active participation of the ECMY in ecumenical endeavours, even before she was organized into her present structure in 1958. Lutheran groups were playing active roles in the annual meetings of evangelical believers,

who came together to discuss the common problems they faced as new groups left behind by the missions who left the country during the Italian occupation during the Second World War. That our congregations received delegations from various Christian denominations, and in turn sent representatives to annual evangelical meetings, is evidence of the long-standing interest of the ECMY in ecumenical affairs.

3.2. Documents from the meetings of those days were kept by the late Pastor Bodima Yalew of the Addis Ababa Mekane Yesus Church and are available for reference. It is very interesting to note how the evangelical believers were trying to find solutions to the problems confronting them in an ecumenical manner when they were neophytes with minimal experience.

3.3. One may wonder why the ecumenical movement begun during the difficult days of the Second World War ceased to exist about the end of the nineteen-fifties. The main factor for the dissolution of the evangelical ecumenical movements was the ready answers which the believers received from their respective missions to the burning issues facing them in their daily work, such as polygamy, relationship to the state, etc. Thus they didn't need to consult and work with each other.

3.4. By way of criticism let me say, the evangelicals formed an ecumenical movement out of practical needs, without defining the Biblical or theological basis for the unity of the Church. Lack of precise definition of objectives beyond the practical needs led to the dissolution of the ecumenical movement when their immediate needs were met.

3.5. To bring about desirable results an ecumenical movement should set a clear goal for itself. In my opinion this clear goal is a

united witness to the saving power of Christ as we unequivocally work for the unity of the Church of God.

3.6. Those who contend that there is no possibility for the unity of the Church of Jesus Christ, except in the hereafter, should be refuted on theological grounds. The point I want to make is that we do not need to define the limits of what God can do, including in our prayer only that which we think is possible for Him and leaving out of the agenda the impossible, or what we imagine He cannot do.

3.7. In case there is a god for whom man has to think and put limits to what he can do, such is not the God we have known in the Scriptures, or rather by whom we are known. Such a finite god is not the God of the Bible, the Father of Jesus of Nazareth, but the god of human creation, the projection of human imagination (the god of Feuerbach).

3.8. Ours is the God who orders light out of darkness, brings order out of chaos, life out of death, peace out of anarchy. This might process is beyond the human mind and refuses to be manipulated by men. What He can do in His church and with His church should be seen only in eschatological perspective in terms of the future, but also in the context of today. He is the God who performs miracles today as he did in the past, saving His people from slavery, liberating them from oppression, providing them with the necessities of life on their journey to the Promised Land, judging them when they are disobedient and forgiving them when they have confessed their sins.

3.9. A question may arise: Is it necessary to refer to the omnipotence of God when we discuss the unity of the Church? God? It seems to be necessary to remind ourselves of the might power of the Bible's God, because there are Christians who believe that there cannot be a unity among the churches. Biblical fact

based on the impossible, on miracles. In the Old Testament the deliverance of the people of Israel from Egypt and the dividing of the Sea; in the New Testament our Lord's birth from the Virgin Mary and His resurrection from the dead are central to what the Church of Christ confesses as a faith by which she lives. These are impossible miracles, and miracles are contrary to the laws of nature. Ours is still the God of miracles, and one of the miracles he may perform today is to bring about unity among His churches. Let us then talk about His Church rather than our churches.

IV.

4.1. Presently the ECMY is contributing to the strengthening of ecumenical endeavour in our country. These contributions are in various ways. As indicated in preceding paragraphs, the history of the ECMY is partly the history of the evangelical ecumenical movement. During the nineteen-sixties the involvement of the ECMY was limited almost entirely to negotiations with the Evangelical Church Bethel, with occasional invitations to other churches to attend our General Assemblies. The negotiations with the Bethel Church resulted in the merger of the two sister churches in 1974. This in itself is a big step forward in setting an example for Christian denominations in our country, and it can be said to be one of the results of the ecumenical movement started during the Second World War.

4.2. Ecumenical relations among the evangelical churches are looked at very naturally, at least on an informal level, even to the extent that pulpit fellowship has been in practice since the founding of the evangelical churches. What does irritate many evangelical leaders is when we begin talking about the possibility of initiating discussions on ecumenical affairs with the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Although evangelicals are irritated when the question of relationship with the Orthodox Church is taken up, foreigners are

confused as to the actual position of the evangelical churches, especially the attitude of the ECMY, since among the evangelical churches in this country the ECMY is more widely known in broader ecumenical circles.

4.3. In the circumstances of today it is not necessary to discuss problems of an historical nature which are seen as hindrances to real ecumenical dialogue with the Orthodox Church. When the discussions were under way for the formation of a council of cooperation of the churches in Ethiopia, naturally the possible membership of the Orthodox Church was discussed. At that point one of the evangelicals related the bitter experience of his church at the hands of the Orthodox Church. However, all were willing to participate in a council for cooperation of churches with the Orthodox Church.

4.4. Some of us in the ECMY leadership are maintaining personal contacts with some in the leadership of the Orthodox Church in order to pave a way for ecumenical leadership to be established between the two churches. It gives me pleasure to say that some of the personal contacts I have had with some of the leaders of the Orthodox Church have been refreshing experiences. I feel that these informal contacts should be broadened to include as many as possible of the leaders of the Orthodox Church and the ECMY. (For additional information see the paper I presented to the [Lutheran World Federation's] Commission on Church Cooperation in Tokyo, Japan, 1971 [see Document 11, "Report on Church Growth in Ethiopia", below].)

4.5. In case this 10th General Assembly of the ECMY decides in favour of membership in the World Council of Churches, this may accelerate the time when the two churches, the ECMY and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, may start discussions on how to discharge their responsibilities for the Ethiopian people.

point of view it appears to be easier, in case real efforts are made, to work for a meeting among the three churches, Orthodox, Catholic, and ECMY. There are theological and historical reasons for maintaining this view. As a matter of fact, in some areas of concern there have been real contacts and discussion with the Orthodox Church in a semi-official manner. One instance is the seminar on Urban Industrial Mission conducted last year which was more or less sponsored by the Orthodox Church, but jointly planned with the ECMY and the Catholic Church. We should remind our congregations that they may make as an object of their prayer the good relationship among the churches of Ethiopia, especially between the Orthodox Church and the ECMY.

4.6. A Council for Cooperation of Churches in Ethiopia was formed in 1976. The occasion was brought about by a series of seminars on Christianity and Socialism in Makanissa sponsored by the ECMY. The majority of the Evangelical churches, the Catholic Church and a small section of the Orthodox Church (one Orthodox mission headquartered in the Trinity Cathedral) are represented in the Council for Cooperation of Churches in Ethiopia.

4.7 It is essential to increase the participation of the ECMY for the strengthening of the Council, whatever form such participation may take. The Council has not found it possible to rent a room for an office, a place to keep its documents, and where the secretary could coordinate the activities of the Council. This is a specific responsibility for the ECMY. Ato Tesfatsion Delelew, rector to this paper, has contributed in many ways to the formation of the Council for Cooperation of Churches in Ethiopia, and is still making strong efforts, inviting others to be members of the Council. I hope he will enlighten us on the specific needs of the Council for Cooperation of Churches at this initial stage in its history, and for the long future.

4.8 As stated in the preceding paragraphs, involvement in ecumenical affairs with the evangelical churches of Ethiopia is part of the history of the ECMY from her beginning. Earlier I mentioned that during the nineteen-sixties the main involvement of the ECMY was with the Bethel Church. The evangelical churches have shown a strong interest in ecumenical involvement for about the last three years. This interest is being promoted through a very active committee set up to make the necessary preparations for evangelical church leadership conferences held two times in Nazareth, September 1976 and September 1977, with a wide representation from all evangelical churches. Speakers are invited from abroad as well as from within the country for revival preaching. Revival meetings and movements should be encouraged and guided in such a way that the various gifts within the different churches can be shared for the enrichment and edification of the Church of our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 12 & 14).

4.9 The importance of work among the youth cannot be overemphasized in the present situation within our country. It is quite clear that the young people in this country, perhaps as elsewhere, are not interested in denominational doctrines, but rather attracted by Bible studies, prayers, and discussions with any Christian from any Christian denomination. The ECMY contributed in the formation of associations for high school and university students. A young man, Ato Tekste Teklu, who was employed for this responsibility did a tremendous job in achieving the objectives set for him. For me it was inspiring to listen to five of the representatives of the students tell of their activities among the youth. There is much more awaiting the ECMY in this area of ecumenical endeavour.

4.10 A study on ecumenical movements to do away with prejudice and misunderstandings may be one way of discharging the

Document 2:

Ecumenical Harmony (1978)

ecumenical responsibility of our church. Lack of information, and personal prejudices are contributing causes in hindering participation in ecumenical movements.

4.11 In obedience of the Lord of the Church and in order that the prayer of our Saviour may be fulfilled, the ECMY should continue its efforts and strengthen its work in areas of ecumenical cooperation.

Source: ECMY 10th GA, 1978, Minutes GA-10-62-70, Doc. 33



. to.r.) Aba Wolde Tensaye, Gudina Tumsa in Woliso at the Establishment
of the Council for Cooperation of Churches in Ethiopia (1976)