

## The Moratorium Debate and the ECMY

by Gudina Tumsa

and

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**Introductory Note:** The ECMY had requested the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) to be included in the "Self-Studies" program of the LWF's Department of Studies on "Church Economy" (the Study on the Identity and Resources of the Church), initiated in the case of Ethiopia under the LWF's earlier Department of World Mission. The coordinator of the "self-study" in Ethiopia was Mr. Terfassa Yadessa, the international consultant was Mr. Olof Joelsson of the Geneva staff. An advisory committee for the local study was set up, including, at Gudina Tumsa's request, Rev. Paul E. Hoffman, formerly of the Department of Theology and then of Studies of the LWF in Geneva, at the time (from September 1973-1978) a teacher at Mekane Yesus Seminary sent by the Hermannsburg Mission. In the meantime, the idea of a "Moratorium" on resources and foreign personnel had been launched by Rev. John Gato of the Presbyterian Church in Kenya, an idea endorsed at the international conference of the World Council of Churches' Commission on World Mission and Evangelism (CWME) held in Bangkok (1973) and by the All-Africa Conference of Churches' meeting in Lusaka (1974). As there were two perspectives on the issues under debate – Gudina's, deriving from his strong theological conviction concerning the interdependence and world-wide character of the Church of Jesus Christ, Hoffman's, from the input and give-and-take in the advisory committee on the Ethiopian study - it was agreed that a joint paper be presented to the Special Executive Committee Meeting in Addis Ababa (the 35<sup>th</sup> Ex. Com. Meeting), August 19-23, 1975 (Ex. Com. Agenda, 8 ; Ex. Com Minutes, CO-75-133). (See for historical context also Gudina Tumsa's "Memorandum to Emmanuel Abraham", Document 6, below.)(PEH)

## I. Background

"Moratorium" became a world-wide slogan at the Bangkok meeting of the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism of the World Council of Churches in 1973. It became a matter for debate all over Africa because of the call issued by the Lusaka Assembly of the All Africa Conference of Churches in 1974. Since then, despite older, clear statements of representatives of the ECMY concerning the continuing need both for personnel from abroad and for support from overseas for the development and the evangelistic tasks of the ECMY, other voices have been raised by various persons who might be seen as speaking for the ECMY. There has been talk of a partial or a full moratorium, a moratorium on both funds and personnel from abroad, or merely on personnel from abroad. The [ECMY/LWF] Study on Identity and Resources of the Church has fostered debate of the moratorium issue in order to focus on the ECMY's "identity problem".

The debate, though certainly not being carried on at all levels or in all areas of the ECMY, has been sufficiently widespread to cause foreign co-workers within the ECMY to ask themselves: Are we still welcome within the church? Is our service still needed? In fact, at an orientation course for new missionaries just finishing language school, the Finance Director of the church indicated that missionaries – at least new missionaries – were not needed in the ECMY, though foreign subsidy was still necessary. The legitimate question raised in the minds of those being oriented concerning the work of the ECMY was: If we are not wanted or needed, why were we called by the ECMY in the first place?

The debate within the ECMY has also been carried overseas. It would be foolish for us to imagine that a debate here in Ethiopia would not have repercussions among our donor agencies. Mission societies and other overseas partners must be asking themselves:

What is the stand of the ECMY? or, who actually speaks for the church? Personnel of the ECMY, speaking overseas, have spoken favourably of moratorium, or positively responded to questions concerning it, while others have rejected it. That the diverse opinions expressed have the effect of confusing donor agencies and persons who support our work should be obvious. For the sake of clearing up the confusion within the ECMY as well as overseas, it is essential that the ECMY express its own mind clearly. Above all, the ECMY should not give the impression of being double-tongued, or not knowing what it is doing by talking moratorium, while at the same time requesting new personnel and even increased funds!

To re-establish the credibility of the ECMY, it is essential that the Executive Committee debate fully the issues at this time and – even if only provisionally, since the next [9<sup>th</sup>] General Assembly [at Nedjo, April 1976] should finally decide matters – define the position of the ECMY amid current issues. It is to help in the debate on these issues within the Executive Committee that the two of us have been asked by the Church Officers to present the issues to the Executive Committee. We are not fully agreed, as will be seen from the following. But we have agreed to present the matter in a common paper, in such a way that Gudina Tumsa presents the arguments against moratorium and Paul Hoffman presents a number of reasons which have led to proposals for moratorium. We agreed, in the final part, to make concrete proposals.

## **II. Fundamental Objections to Moratorium**

What “moratorium” is, is the temporary stopping of funds and personnel from abroad. It is proposed so that mission churches may find their own identity and ways of working without interference from foreign personnel within the church and from overseas mission agencies. The usual period for moratorium is mentioned as five years. The assumption behind the proposal is that a church can only find its true identity and only decide its own projects and

programmes if there is a radical break with the overseas personnel and funds. Only the complete break can lay the foundation for a truly independent, indigenous church.

- a. The first thing that must be said against the moratorium proposal is to point out that it is based on a false assumption: Whatever may be the situation in other churches around the world, this church surely cannot be said to be hiding its identity for the sake of getting personnel and subsidies from abroad. To assume that a moratorium is necessary is to assume that a church is not free enough to determine its own policies. The ECMY can assert its freedom from any and every kind of foreign dominance, even with the continued presence of foreign personnel and funds. This is a firm conviction.
- b. But issues as important as the proposal to stop all personnel and financial assistance should never be decided on grounds of self-pride or national feeling. We must think and argue theologically. And moratorium must be rejected in principle on theological grounds. The Church of Jesus Christ on earth is universal. A national church is part of the universal church. This is not to deny that the church in each nation does take on and should take on national characteristics. The church is always subject to the influences of national cultures, laws, ideologies. But this aspect of the church belongs to the Law, not the Gospel. The Gospel and the Sacraments are locally proclaimed and administered, but at the same time are signs and evidences of the universal church. A national church's constitution is not the final law. A national president or bishop is not the Head of the Church – Jesus Christ is. Let me explain this by citing two concrete experiences which I have had: 1) In the USA in 1965, in a place called Jamestown, North Dakota, I was asked to distribute Holy Communion, as the pastor of the congregation was on a consultation. 2) In the Federal Republic of Germany, in October 1972, I participated in baptizing children of the congregation where I was visiting. These experiences are unforgettable. I was not acting as an Ethiopian, but as a minister of Jesus Christ. Because of the

Gospel of Christ, the Church is one, whether it is found in Russia, Sweden, Germany, China or Ethiopia. The various parts of the universal church are and should be interdependent. Independence is a legitimate national political aim; it can never be an acceptable theological aim for a church.

c. In rejecting moratorium in principle, the ECMY would not be alone. Even the way in which some within the AACC [All-Africa Conference of Churches] after Lusaka are talking about moratorium shows that a complete break is not the only option, as the first impression was. In any case, by rejecting moratorium in principle the ECMY would find itself in company with sister Lutheran churches in Africa: Liberia, Madagascar and Tanzania, which, according to reports through the Lutheran World Federation, have all come out in opposition to moratorium.

d. The most convincing argument, however, is that the ECMY needs the continuing assistance of sister churches around the world, both in funds and personnel, because of the development and evangelistic tasks which the church must continue to tackle and which it cannot suspend for any period, much less for a period of five years. The opportunities and needs for outreach and service are so great that the ECMY cannot possibly tackle them alone. As long as government permits receipt of personnel and funds from abroad, the ECMY should not make a break simply to assert its own identity. Its identity consists of service of others – not self-assertion. In fact, the ECMY should in the new Ethiopia seek to find as many ways as possible to foster the well-being and development of the people. And an important way for doing this is to secure the assistance of foreign personnel to aid in the development tasks of the country.

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### **III. Reasons – Nevertheless – for Consideration of Moratorium**

Despite the objections to moratorium, reasons can be advanced for consideration of moratorium in the particular situation of the ECMY:

- a. Identity questions are all interrelated. What is the economic identity of the ECMY? its political identity? its cultural identity? What is its theological identity? Is the ECMY in its worship life, for example, Ethiopian, indigenous? To the extent that the ECMY is not truly indigenous, does not have an identity of its own, and has difficulty defining its identity apart from its heritage from the respective missions, the cause can be traced – at least in part – to the continuing presence of the missionaries and their influence within the ECMY and the on-going subsidy of the ECMY in all aspects of its work. How shall the ECMY attain an identity of its own? If moratorium, which was proposed to achieve the true identity of mission churches, is to be rejected on grounds of principle, then more concrete answers must be given to such pertinent questions, and concrete steps taken to work toward an ECMY identity that takes the various facets of the identity question seriously.
- b. The extent of the missionary presence within the ECMY and the availability of seemingly unlimited funding from abroad leads to projects or programmes which are either conceived in overseas patterns, can be financed solely from abroad, and/or can be staffed initially only by foreigners. How can the ECMY ever develop truly indigenous programmes so long as the missionary influence is as strong as it is, or so long as the first question in any financing scheme is how to raise the funds from overseas donor agents? That moratorium is not just raised in the interest of academic debate can be understood when one takes note of the problems into which the ECMY hostels were put when the availability for funds from abroad changed the very purpose for which the hostels were built, or when

missionaries promise funding for this or that scheme if it only finds at least the reluctant approval of the decision-making bodies of the ECMY. Has not much of the difficulty in which the ECMY has come over the past years developed precisely because the ECMY has been pressured, in one form or another, into adopting a scheme or programme that in its focus or extent was not really indigenous?

c. It might be argued that all the recent problems relate not to evangelistic work but to development projects, and that at least for evangelistic work – especially new evangelistic work – it is essential that the ECMY continue to request new missionaries from overseas. But it should be pointed out that – in part because of foreign staffing and financing – the training of evangelistic workers (pastors and evangelists) has never found financial support from the ECMY congregations, and would therefore collapse immediately if foreign funds and personnel were withdrawn. Equally, foreign missions have often been willing to engage in work in new areas, the ECMY congregations and indigenous staff have never been challenged to take on responsibility for new mission work within Ethiopia.

d. Missionaries and missionary financing are real, not imaginary problems. When missions cannot promise the funding of an Ethiopian replacement if a missionary is withdrawn – When continued financial support from overseas seems to be dependent upon the ECMY's continued willingness to host foreign missionaries – When missionaries set patterns of housing and payment that cannot be met by the ECMY for the personnel it hires – When missionaries are elected to posts, in part as insurance that overseas donor agents will look favourably upon projects or requests: Then the ECMY is deeply enmeshed in problems which “unity of the body of Christ” and “interdependence” can not solve and only hide.

**IV. Concrete Proposals for Action**

Despite our differences, we are agreed in proposing concrete steps which should be taken. Whatever the merits of a moratorium might be, the ECMY's answer on the moratorium issue could consist of a No in principle – plus concrete steps to become less dependent on foreign sources for 1) theological identity and worship patterns, 2) the planning of its work, 3) its cultural identity, 4) its economic identity, 5) personnel, 6) structure, 7) local Bible schools, 8) finances, 9) missionary outreach, and 10) theological education and training.

1. The identity of the ECMY as a church in Ethiopia – in particular its theological identity – should be fostered at all levels and in all facets of the life of the ECMY. Concretely, the liturgy and hymnody of the ECMY, in Amharic and in the other Ethiopian languages, should be fostered by a renewed Theological Commission of the Church, as well as by the Synods, which should also be asked to look into the issue of the "theological identity" of the ECMY.
2. All planning for new projects or programmes should from now on be done within the framework of socialist Ethiopia and be consistent with the goal of self-reliance. That means that in all the work of the church that can never be given up, programmes should be ultimately financed by congregational giving, not overseas subsidy.
3. Cultural and linguistic studies of the peoples of Ethiopia should be fostered (for example, by Mekane Yesus Seminary). Proposals for such cultural and linguistic studies should be brought to the next meeting of the Executive Committee.
4. In a socialist Ethiopia, the patterns of housing and living set by foreigners should not be the patterns adopted by the ECMY. The adoption of a reduced salary scale will be a major step in decreasing

financial dependence upon overseas donors, and place the ECMY in the forefront of adapting positively to the new Ethiopian society, thus identifying with the social and economic direction in which Ethiopia is moving.

5. At all levels there should be a review of just what missionary personnel are needed in the new situation of Ethiopia. No missionary should be retained in a post simply because the finances for finding an Ethiopian replacement are lacking. In such instances, funds should be available once the salary scale has been scaled down. It is no service to a missionary to retain him when he is no longer needed, or does not fit the present Ethiopian situation. In instances where missions cannot promise funds to finance replacements for their personnel that are withdrawn, funds should be sought from other sources. Furthermore, personnel from such missions should not be concentrated in limited geographical areas, but be scattered throughout the ECMY, so that the ECMY in those geographical areas should not be bound to continued receipt of missionaries solely for the sake of the "cheap labour" they seem to represent. Furthermore, before a new missionary is requested, or an older missionary is recalled, every effort should be made to find an Ethiopian to take on his particular task or responsibility. And where new tasks or new work is to be undertaken by a missionary, the church, the synod or the institution concerned should indicate how someone is to be recruited and trained to take over for the missionary concerned.

6. It should become an essential principle not only in theology, but for the structure and organization of the ECMY, for its administration and strategy, that the congregation is the fundamental unit and the main centre of the church. Pastors and evangelists should not be employed by the synods, but by congregations.

7. Congregations should normally be understood to be self-supporting, and not eligible for subsidy from overseas. Local Bible

Schools should become part of the congregational structure, not any longer to be considered institutions of the synods. Teachers in such local Bible Schools should be the neighbouring pastors, salaried by the congregations, who are so convinced of the value of their Bible School to the mission of their congregations that they are willing to see their pastors engaged part-time as teachers in the Bible School.

8. To foster less dependence on foreign subsidy, the giving from congregations should, in the financial reports of the synods and the ECMY, clearly be distinguished from the subsidies received from overseas.

9. The Executive Committee should charge the Evangelism Department of the ECMY to lay plans for an ECMY Home Mission, to be staffed by Ethiopians and financed by special appeals to all congregations of the ECMY. The ECMY, in other words, must begin a strategy of self-propagation and mission.

10. The synods should agree with Mekane Yesus Seminary and the synodical Bible Schools on a method of informing the congregations of their work and on appealing to them for annual support. Every effort must thus be made to engage the congregations in increasing support for essential functions of the synods and the ECMY.

The No in principle, and these steps would be the ECMY's answer -- at this time -- to the call for moratorium.

Source: EECMY, 35<sup>th</sup> Executive Committee, August 1975, Minutes EC-35-11