

Report at the Ethiopia Consultation

Hannover, Germany, November 22-23, 1973

by Rev. Gudina Tumsa

Introductory Note: An Ethiopia Consultation was called to meet in Hannover, Germany, to discuss the issue of the disagreement between the administration of the Hermannsburg Mission (die Missionsanstalt Hermannsburg/MAH) and the Central Office of the Mekane Yesus Church over the nature of the ECMY and the relation of the missions/overseas donors to the ECMY and/or the respective ECMY synods. Gudina Tumsa as General Secretary was asked by the Church Officers to present the position of the ECMY to the Consultation, his presentation being in the form of this oral Report (subsequently transcribed from tape, and edited now for publication). The MAH had signed a General Agreement with the Western Synod (under the expiring presidency of the late Rev. Daffa Jammo) regulating the relationships between the Mission and the Synod, and the General Manager of the Mission (Mr. Welge) had defended the right of the Mission to do so by appealing to the "federal" character of the ECMY. In doing so, he called forth resistance from the Church Officers and the vigorous rebuttal of the General Secretary, and Gudina's defence of the unity and integrity of the ECMY as a National Church. At issue was also the interpretation of the Integration of Church and Mission which was officially completed in 1971.

This Report is reproduced here, not to resurrect a past controversy, but to bring out the thinking of Rev. Gudina Tumsa, who puts forth his understanding of the nature and structure of the ECMY in that particular historical setting. He also used the opportunity to put before this forum the official position of the ECMY as set forth in the ECMY Letter, "On Proclamation of the Gospel and Human Development" (1972; see Document 8, above), criticising the attitudes of Western missions and donors. It echoes, in part, what GT had also previously stated in his "Report on Church Growth in Ethiopia" (Tokyo, 1971; see Document 11, below). (PEH)

Mr. Chairman, Christian Friends:

I have been very much delighted to see many familiar faces, so that I can relax among friends and express my views on the present situation in Ethiopia, for which we are all here. I am very grateful for this invitation.

When the invitation letter by Mr. J. Gotthardt [of the Evangelisches Missionswerk in Hamburg] reached our office, I did not quite know what it was that we were expected to come together to discuss. After serious consideration, I came to realise that we have come to a stage where we have to face realities, which historical development of our time has placed before us. Although this Consultation is dealing with the Ethiopian situation, problems of the nature that we will be discussing are not peculiar to the Ethiopian situation; they are somewhat international or world-wide, if we think in terms of the Third World. What we may talk about here, I hope, will not only lay a foundation for future better relationships between the Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus and the organisations here in Germany, but also may give some hints for finding solutions to problems of relationships with others as well. Because of the nature of the problem we are dealing with, and since the questions we were supposed to find solutions for during this Consultation were not clearly indicated, I am not going to present a written lecture, but simply take up some points which I consider to be relevant for consideration by this Consultation. To these points, which I will raise from the viewpoint of the ECMY, I would like to invite questions so that a monologue may be avoided, and an atmosphere for real dialogue prevail, where we may exchange views and ideas in our common interest.

In case interest is expressed in getting in written form what I am now presenting orally, I would be ready to make it available to you.

Let me just try, then, [to describe] how the situation stands in Ethiopia today. The ECMY is one of the national churches emerging in the Third World. This has not come about suddenly, but it is the natural growth of the activities of Lutheran Missions in Ethiopia. The Lutheran Missions have been labouring in Ethiopia beginning about the start of the present century and groups of Christians were formed in almost all parts of our country. For their past labour, I must say, we give full credit to the Missionary Societies who worked in Ethiopia, regardless of where they came from. They served, and their ministry was blessed with the establishment of the Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus, one of the fast growing national churches in the Third World.

After making such statements, when I now come with some critical points, I hope that nobody may take this as an attack against a particular mission organization, thereby misinterpreting the interest of the ECMY in the task of proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ in our country. The interest of the ECMY, let me say, stands as it is. We are interested in using whatever resources we may find to preach the Gospel and to serve those who are around us in that particular society where we believe we have been placed by God and been given responsibility to carry it out, as we understand it from our point of view.

The Swedish Evangelical Mission and the German Hermannsburg Mission started preaching the Gospel in the Western part of Ethiopia before World War II, or roughly put, about the beginning of this century. Because of World War II the Lutheran Missions were forced out of the country. The Ethiopians who had nowhere to go took upon themselves the responsibility of spreading the Gospel in the areas where they lived. This is the beginning for the spreading of the Gospel by indigenous groups of believers in our country, in spite of those bitter days. This is to say that indigenous groups of believers formed themselves during World War II. After the war, other Lutheran Missions started working in various areas in Ethiopia. For the first time, in 1957, indigenous groups of believers came together

from different parts of Ethiopia to form the Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus. At the second meeting, in 1958, the Constitution of the ECMY was signed. The Constitution of the ECMY was registered by the Imperial Ethiopian Government and the ECMY was recognised as a National Church [1959]. At this point the task which the Lutheran Missions were carrying out in the various parts of the country was shared by the ECMY, and the two, the Lutheran Missions, on the one hand, and the ECMY on the other, continued alongside each other. Since it was understood that the Lutheran Missions and the ECMY work for identical purpose, the Church and the Lutheran Missions signed an Integration Policy in 1969, the ECMY thereby taking over the various activities of the Lutheran Missions in Ethiopia. In April 1969, when the Integration Policy was signed and registered at the Imperial Ethiopian High Court, the Lutheran Missions ceased to exist as foreign organisations in our country.

Now comes the crucial point: In our opinion, integration means that foreign organisations on Ethiopian soil have ceased to exist, and that the Church is responsible for any type of activity in the country. Whatever assistance we may get, we thought, would be assistance on a temporary basis, because we are in need of resources in personnel and finances to discharge our responsibility. Our understanding is that the responsibility of preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ and serving the Ethiopian people rests with the Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus, and any assistance, in whatever form it may be, is assistance given to the Church to help her to discharge her responsibility in the country. Now the Integration Policy became some sort of a test case in our situation. The way we understood it is different from the way Cooperating Missions understood it.

I think this is one of the points to be discussed here. Being a national Church is neither for the sake of prestige, nor for having institutions to impress the society at large. National character, identity and integrity are a must for a Church in a given society if she is to fulfil the commission of her Lord.

The ECMY has to realise her selfhood and identity, which we feel is very important if this Church is to exist in the future on Ethiopian soil. This is to say that the ECMY can never be an agent for rich Mission Organisations, Donor Agencies and Churches.

What has caused the present discussion is what is called by the Missionsanstalt Hermannsburg the "General Agreement" signed with the Western Synod. Neither the so-called General Agreement, nor the letter of Mr. Welge has created any new situation. Both these documents have accelerated a process which was bound to come about any time. Unfortunately, I am very much limited as to information, as far as the letter of Mr. Welge goes. The letter is a reply to a report which was given by Mr. J. Gotthardt on his visit to Ethiopia.

I really dislike seeing the two Germans fighting, but now that seems to be the situation. As the report was not made available to me in English, any statement I make in reply to some of the points raised in Mr. Welge's letter should be understood on that limited background information, since an official translation of his letter is lacking. Mr. Gotthardt's report, with which I am not familiar, Mr. Welge's letter and the so called General Agreement, these unfortunate documents, let me say again, have not created any new situation, but have accelerated the development of problems which were bound to come about any time in the course of historical development of this Church. The so called General Agreement, signed between the Missionsanstalt Hermannsburg and the Western Synod, was submitted to our office, and it has been expressed in writing to the Synod, with copies to the Missionsanstalt Hermannsburg in Germany and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Hannover, that the document was illegal. The reasons for considering the document to be illegal, I should indicate in the following lines:

1. As I have just stated, when groups of believers came together from various parts of Ethiopia to form the Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus in 1958, her Constitution was accepted by the

Imperial Ethiopian Government, and the law of the country recognises the ECMY as one legal entity in Ethiopia. The Synods are understood by her Constitution as integral parts of the ECMY. Since in the Constitution, the law of the Country recognises one national Church, the ECMY, as a legal entity, the so-called General Agreement concluded between the MAH and the Western Synod is illegal before the law of Ethiopia. This is to say that according to the law of the country, one can never deal with an organization which the government has not accepted and registered as a national organization in the country. Unless one represents an organization recognised by the law, one has nothing to represent, but himself. Before the law of the country there is no organization called the Western Synod. What the law of the Country recognises is a legal entity called "The Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus" with her Synods. Whether the Synods of the ECMY are five or six or ten, or whether they are big or small, is a different matter, but the law recognises one National Church. Therefore, if this illegal document called the General Agreement comes to light, it may implicate the ECMY in matters of an illegal nature, contrary to the law of the country, when one of her Synods concludes an Agreement with an organization which does not exist in the country.

2. The MAH did not act only against the law of the Country, the MAH acted contrary to the letter and the spirit of the Constitution of the ECMY. We are criticising the MAH for making all efforts to divide the Church by applying "the Machiavelian philosophy of divide and rule", influencing one section of the Church to maintain her own interest – domination.

3. There are universal trends in ecumenical movements towards Church Unity in today's world. Desire for unity is strong everywhere, regardless of denominational loyalties. In spite of this, the MAH is working for a division of a National Church, which is legally one, constitutionally one. This is morally wrong in our opinion. This is our reply to the General Agreement, and the General Agreement is, in our opinion illegal, unconstitutional and immoral.

I should say something about the letter that Mr. Welge has written:

First: Mr. Welge argues that the Western Synod is “related to the ECMY”, he doesn’t say the Western Synod of the ECMY, but “related”. (That is the phrase he is using. If I am misquoting him, then it is due to the translation and let him defend himself. At least this is the way we understand him.) In the course of his argument Mr. Welge states that the ECMY has some kind of federalistic structure, which he sees as loopholes to strengthen his contention. In another place in his letter he speaks about a federation of churches. To say that the ECMY is a federation of churches is not true. This is because, according to the law of Ethiopia, to form a federation there must be legal entities to come together. One can never form a federation unless there are legal entities to come together and form another organization. This is impossible. The Mekane Yesus Church is not a federation of churches, but one Church, established on democratic principles. But the ECMY is not trying to dictate what her synods are doing. The task of the ECMY is divided in such a way that international relationships and ecumenical affairs, which have been clearly stated in our Constitution, as well as policy matters with regard to the Imperial Ethiopian Government, are taken care of by the Central Office of the Church. Now, this is completely misunderstood. Rather than taking the democratic principles on which the Church was established, stating that our Synods are free and have the freedom to act in their own areas, to develop their work, to preach the Gospel, to establish hospitals, to establish Bible Schools, to undertake community development projects, as provided in the Constitution, our Church is defined by Mr. Welge as a federation of Lutheran Churches, which does not exist in the country.

Mr. Welge disregards Article IV of the Constitution, where it is stated clearly that international relationships, ecumenical affairs and governmental questions are taken care of by the Church. This Article of the Constitution has no place in the argument of Mr. Welge. Mr. Welge finds in Article V of the Constitution of the Church

statements which declare that the synods of the ECMY can run hospitals and schools and institutions. From this Article V, he contends that the WS can act as if there is nothing in the Constitution. This I consider to be unfair. It is not only unfair, but also unchristian to find loopholes – where there are clear-cut statements – to divide the ECMY.

Second: The second argument for Mr. Welge is found in the Integration Document which he sees as replacement for the Constitution of the Church. He maintains that the relationships between the synods of the ECMY and the former mission organisations in Ethiopia were provided for in this Document of legal character.

Let me tell you briefly how we understand the Integration Document. The Integration Document was drafted and signed in April 1969. Article III in the Integration Document deals with the interim period of time from the date of signature of the Document until all programs are taken over by the various Synods of the church from their respective supporting Lutheran Missions, from Mission Organisations in Ethiopia. This is how we understand the Document. Since the last Institutions and Programs have been integrated about the beginning of this year, the programs having been taken over by our Synods, we consider the Integration Document as having fulfilled its purpose. It has no bearing any longer; it has served its purpose. From a legal point of view, as far as we are concerned, relationships between the Church and international organisations are taken care of by the Central Office of the Church.

Even if I am not a lawyer, but a theologian, this is so clear as far as the law of our country is concerned. Before the law of the country, if there is a document contrary to a document by which an organization is guided, the second document, in this case the Integration Document, contradicting the Constitution of the Church, must be adjusted. This is to say, any document of legal character must be changed to be in conformity with the Constitution of the Church,

otherwise it would not be valid. I hope you understand the points of my argument in this case.

Third: The ECMY has a Constitution which is recognised by the Imperial Ethiopian Government as a legal Document, not for a certain period if time, but (we believe) as long as the Church is interested in the present structures, or as long as the present law in the country exists. Looked at from this point of view, the contention of Mr. Welge has no basis, is invalid.

Fourth: Mr. Welge refers to what he calls "Minutes from the Board Committee". Let me just blindly say that we are not aware of what he called a Board Committee. The ECMY does not recognise any Board Committee formed by Missions anywhere. A letter was addressed to us some time ago by the LWF Department of Church Cooperation, suggesting to us to set up some kind of an organization similar to that of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania, the Joint Board Committee etc. You are all familiar with that structure. We replied to the LWF stating that we have already enough problems with the existing organisations. It is not in our best interest to set up another structure in Geneva, in Sweden, in Norway or in Germany. We want to deal with the organisations who are interested in working in Ethiopia individually. This, I think, is not very important, but I am trying to show that some kind of Board Committee, or whatever it may be, has no place in our opinion. We are not even aware of what it is, the document to which Mr. Welge refers. I think one can contend a full day on the logic that Mr. Welge has followed in his argument.

Fifth: Mr., Welge states in one paragraph of his letter that the Missionsanstalt Hermannsburg would not want to interfere into the internal matters of the ECMY. He sees the position of MAH as neutral, in what he calls a "struggle for power" between the Western Synod and the Central Office of the Church. Having stated that the MAH is neutral in what he alleges is a "conflict for centralisation", he contradicts himself by trying to justify the involvement of the

MAH in an illegal way in the affairs of the ECMY. He argues that since about 50% of the constituency of the ECMY is from the WS, what the WS says should have more weight. As you see then, he departs, as far as I understand, from the strictly legal point, wishing to put us under pressure so that he can argue from a strong position. This is how an Ethiopian understands the argument of the letter. But now to say that the MAH is neutral, is not involved in the internal affairs of the Church, is, I think, not true. The MAH is not only involved in the present problem, but has laid the foundation for it. As I have stated earlier, the MAH is interested in dividing the ECMY, thereby strengthening her domination. Mr. Welge alleges that there is a tension or conflict for centralisation or decentralisation. Our interest is in implementing our Constitution. Anyone who has taken a look at the Constitution of the ECMY may see that there is no indication for centralisation. We have no interest for it. I would not like to state this here. We are tired of centralisation, we are not interested in it, we have enough experience of what centralisation means. My contention is that there is no indication or justification for what Mr. Welge has written, as far as our dealings with our synods or with international organisations go.

What we are trying to do, Gentlemen, is to implement our Constitution, which Mr. Welge is striving to avoid. This is the way we understand it. We are contending that the Integration Document has placed the MAH on the international level, as far as we are concerned. The MAH is here in Germany, the Swedish Evangelical Mission is in Stockholm. What we are saying is that these Missions are international organisations, and the Constitution of the Church applies. To avoid the main issue, Mr. Welge concentrates on the relationships between the Western Synod and the Central Office of the ECMY. From his argument you get the impression that the ECMY has been formed by someone else other than the Congregations of the Church. The present structure of the ECMY has been established by the General Assembly of the Church, which meets bi-annually, where all the Congregations of the Church are represented, in accordance with the Constitution, by which we are

bound to be guided. In the Constitution, areas of responsibility have been defined as regard the present set up.

Sixth: In light of this, the way we are understood from abroad is mistaken. This mistaken view is maintained not only by MAH, but by others. What Mr. Welge is interested in is a Federation of Lutheran Churches in Ethiopia. I wouldn't like to dwell on this point, but Mr. Welge's argument falls to pieces when he wants to create a neutral position for MAH, while quoting all these documents to justify the involvement of the MAH in the affairs of the ECMY in an unconstitutional manner. This is to say that his argument that the Synods are reacting against centralisation is neither convincing nor justifiable. Not at all.

We have come to this point in the historical development of the ECMY. What is the crucial point here? What is at stake in the life of the ECMY? At present, what is at stake in the life of the ECMY is the identity of a National Church. As I have stated already, we would not like to be, we can never be, an agent for rich mission organisations, donor agencies and churches. Let it be clear to all that the ECMY is not an agent to carry out policies and decisions taken in Europe or America, nor is the ECMY willing to fulfil the purpose of international organisations, which appears to be contrary to what she holds to be right. We want to be ourselves. We have come to this stage in our historical development, where as a national Church we have to maintain integrity and assert maturity. The ECMY has come of age; we are not children to be told how to behave. We are not ready to accept a statement that we are immature to understand the Constitution by which we are guided, that somebody in Germany interprets our Constitution for us, and says to us: Now you are mistaken, boy, go and behave yourself well. This kind of paternalistic, colonial attitude can never be tolerated, can never be accepted. This is to be understood clearly, that the ECMY, as I have just stated, is not an agent for the organisations you are representing, there is no doubt about that.

The ECMY is a National Church. Whether we get assistance from you or not, we are determined to sacrifice in serving our people. We are ready to discuss, argue and exchange views and ideas as mature people, on an equal level with you. If our interests happen to coincide, we would be ready to work together, to serve the Ethiopian people as we understand it. But never as an agent, like some people who work for German or American companies in Ethiopia. The Church of Jesus Christ can never be used as an agent by anyone, except for the One who has died for her. Using the Church as an agent is not in agreement with our theological understanding. What makes the Church is not the funds she has. No, what makes the Church is the faith that she has, the Gospel of Jesus Christ, her confession of Jesus as her Lord and Saviour, which liberates man. This is what we believe. In spite of this, we are told that we cannot understand our Constitution by which we are being guided, and warned to behave ourselves. We are told that whatever Agreements are signed with non-existent organisations are valid for us. We are told that we cannot manage our affairs on the international level. We are told that we cannot take care of our own activities on the international level. We are told that we cannot take care of our own activities in our country, and therefore, need advice from abroad, specially from MAH.

Seventh: The MAH claims to represent the interest of the ECMY before German organisations. This is an attack upon our maturity, integrity and identity. We are mature enough not only to take care of our own business, but also mature enough to contribute to international efforts in finding solutions to the problems of our day. The Paper which we have sent out [the ECMY Letter to the LWF "On the Proclamation of the Gospel and Human Development"; see Document 8, above] is calling you to take a fresh look at what you are practising, your structures. The division that you have made between what you call body and soul is unfair to man. Now, we are telling you that there is a contradiction in your thinking. I am sorry to say this, but I think it is just when I make such a statement that you take the matter seriously. Criticism is healthy when taken in a

right way. I hope you will understand me. On Sundays you confess that you believe in the resurrection of the body; during the rest of the week you tell the world that the body is of secondary importance; what matters is the soul. Therefore, preach the Gospel, the most important thing in the world! For us it is very difficult to dissect human life into various parts, ministering to one aspect while neglecting the other. Man is created by God as a totality. What we confess on Sundays as the resurrection of the body should be practised during the week and must be in conformity with the Biblical understanding of man. What we confess and what we believe in our daily life must be in conformity.

We must be considered as mature people. To consider the ECMY as an immature Church, which cannot handle her own affairs, cannot be justified at all. I would be happy to listen to anyone here, whether from MAH or the Swedish Evangelical Mission, or all of you here, address any sort of criticism that you may have as far as my Church is concerned. As I have just stated, taking criticism, arguing, establishing reasoned policy are signs of maturity, and my Church is mature enough for such reasoning. The statement I have made on behalf of my Church will be justified on this basis. To say that people from the Third World will be offended if criticism is addressed to them is, in my opinion, an unfounded emotional expression – contrary to maturity based on reasonable discussions. We are mature enough to accept criticism in case it is justifiable, we are mature enough to stand criticism, to correct our mistakes, and ready to reach an agreement with anyone who is interested in cooperating with our Church. Let me say it again, no one can embarrass or offend us as far as our Church is concerned, even if strong criticism is addressed to us. This should be considered to be a sign of maturity. I must emphasize this, again and again: We would not like to be considered children. Paul said to the Corinthians, now I have to feed you strong food, not only milk. Now let me assure you we have passed that stage of being fed with milk, what we need now is strong food. I would not like to take more time on this.

The ECMY has come of age. I have touched on the Document of the ECMY [Document 8, above], which is being studied by various groups in this country as well as in others. I wanted to accentuate the points raised in the document. According to the information received from the Lutheran World Federation, there are groups who interpret the document according to their own taste - to strengthen their own positions. Reaction papers and letters to the ECMY Document forwarded to us by the LWF show that some of the groups say, now come back to the saving of the souls which you have forgotten! The Mekane Yesus Church is calling your attention to this important task. Others say: Now you have to serve; development is the most important thing under heaven; what Africans need is development. We are interpreted in four or five ways, and perhaps in many more ways, because the Western mind is good at interpreting documents, including the Mekane Yesus Paper. Of course this is good, not bad at all. What we are calling your attention to, Ladies and Gentlemen, is to reconsider your criteria, your views, and we are asking you to reconsider your whole assumptions. One of the points in the questionnaire of the LWF circulated to the member churches of the Federation defines "Proclamation" as spiritual activity. When I read this I said, this is ridiculous, I should have been consulted by Geneva people before the questionnaires were sent out. "Proclamation", as we understand it, is based on Luke 4, where it states the blind receive sight, the poor hear good news, the oppressed given liberty, prisoners set free. You know that text. Now to us proclamation is not some kind of spiritual activity as understood by the Western mind. But it is a saving power to release man from whatever conditions he finds himself in. It involves the total human personality. To this I assume we will have the chance of replying, making our position clear at the forthcoming [LWF] Consultation. Although I am not informed of the month, the Consultation may be called in the course of the coming summer [for Gudina's contribution to that Consultation, see Document 10, below].

At this time I wish to point out something as far as development programs go. I know that we are just exchanging views, ideas, and a

lot of questions are going to be raised in the course of this Consultation. As I stated already before we went for lunch, the ECMY is receiving a substantial amount of funds from the Western churches and organisations to serve the Ethiopian people. These have been tremendous contributions, certainly, in improving the living conditions of our people, and to lay a foundation for a higher future development we have to think in terms of a longer period of time. Of this I have to remind you. During the last LWF Assembly in 1970, the President of the ECMY presented a very short paper in which he indicated that development projects for the Third World, and particularly, let us say, for Ethiopia, must be planned from the grass-roots level. The second point raised in the President's paper is that development cannot take place over night. It needs a longer period of time. It is a painful undertaking. In many cases you have to change the attitude of many people. You need a certain period of time to talk to people, that poverty is not a natural phenomenon, but an historical condition which can be changed, if the people concerned are willing. There was someone in the Assembly who paid serious attention to the point raised by the President of the ECMY, and as a result now we are running what we call a "Rural Development Project" – the Henna pilot project. Of course, this does not mean from our side bigger projects, which will require bigger amounts of grants for development projects. What I am saying is this, that the time element involved is very important. Let us say that terms of three or four years for projects may not achieve the desired result. Let us say half a million DM planned for a period of ten years may achieve a better result than the one planned for five years. When we know that we deal with people in Ethiopia, not with advanced people in Germany, but people who cannot read and write in many cases, who are not informed, who have no background, the time element deserves our serious attention.

Mr. Chairman, we all have a common interest in Ethiopia, as a Church body we want to contribute to the cause of the promotion of the Gospel of Jesus Christ in my country, which means, from our point of view, liberating the Ethiopian society from their living

conditions. It is through such a total service to the total man that a just society may evolve in Ethiopia.

I would invite questions. Any questions will not embarrass or offend me. I will try to justify the statements I have made here. If I cannot justify them I would admit that I am mistaken. In the course of this Consultation my statements will be justified by argument. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.



(l. to r.) Dr. Rudolf Weeber, Dr. Carl Mau, Mr. Joel Ngeiyamo, Rev. Gudina Tumsa;
Consultation on Proclamation and Human Development (1974)
Radio Voice of the Gospel (RVOG)