

The Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus

Seventh General Assembly

Report from the Western Synod

Debre-Zeit
Jan.13-19, 1971.

Two years ago we gathered for the 6th General Assembly and discussed the progress of our work. We thank the Living God who kept us safely and made us gather for the 7th General Assembly.

1. The Organization of the Synod

It was reported to the 6th General Assembly that the Central Office for the Western Synod was being built at Bodji. Having completed the construction the Officers of the Synod moved to Bodji from April 1970, and have been serving since then. With the construction of the Central Office, the Synod Board had divided the Synod into six districts and each district into four parishes. Except the parish in the Illubabor Province, which has a few Congregations, each of the other parishes has 5-9 congregations. One of the parishes, having earned up to 18 Congregations, was divided into two parishes. This increased the number of the total parishes of the Synod up to 25.

2. Members

In the 25 parishes there are 166 Congregations in which 71,559 are members. Out of these 14,526 are confirmed and 3252 are in confirmation classes.

3. Personnel

The Western Synod is divided into districts and parishes so that each personnel assigned should realize his job and feel responsible. Each district has one pastor as a superintendent and for its different parishes one parish-pastor. Each parish-pastor serves from 6-10 congregations, 2-3 evangelists are assigned to a parish to help the pastor. The number of the personnel as reported in the Church statistics of the Synod may appear high, but looking at their work assignment, one can see them under pressure. Two parishes are still without pastors.

The superintendents of their respective districts visit and help these two parishes. But as these are additional to their work, they cannot help these parishes that much. Besides these 166 congregations, there are 40 preaching places and even a lot of other places calling for evangelists. To most of these demands in evangelists and pastoral services, the Synod could not respond. Thus the fact that shortage of personnel troubles this Synod most, should not be counted as a worn-out habitual expression of a report. The statistics compared with the growth of work can show the actual fact.

Since the 6th General Assembly two missionaries and one native young man have been ordained and assigned to the service. But what is the addition of three people in comparison with the progress of the field.

"Church and Mission Relationships"

A Paper Presented to the General Assembly of the Evangelical Church
Mekane Yesus, Yrgalem, Ethiopia, January 1973. By Prof. James A. Scherer.

1. The importance of the topic of church and mission relationships can be seen from the attention which has been given to it recently at regional and world gatherings and also at special consultations of church and mission leaders. In September 1971 at a meeting held at Green Lake (USA) leaders of "conservative evangelical" missions from the USA discussed the topic at great length in the presence of church leaders from overseas. It was apparent that these groups had reached a point of crisis in their church-mission relationships and were now being compelled to recognize the centrality of the indigenous church in the mission of God in each. Along with this went the recognition that mission agencies must now move quickly to merge and integrate their support into the programs of indigenous churches. The rapid growth and development of sister churches in the third world compelled this recognition.
2. At the recent W.C.C. Commission on World Mission and Evangelism Conference on "Salvation Today" held at Bangkok from Dec. 29 to Jan. 8 (1972-73) major attention was given to church and mission relationships, particularly in the report of Section III, "Churches Renewed in Mission", sub-section C, "Churches in Relationship". (Sub-sections A & B dealt with "The Local Mission of Each Church" and with "Growing Churches and Renewal".) The report on "Churches in Relationship", noting that the issues dealt with are not new, pointed out that "much has been said but too little has been done... Our basic problem is how to break free from the frustrating cycle of repeated statements which are received, filed and not acted upon." Thus partnership in mission remains an empty slogan, even where autonomy and equal partnership have been achieved in a formal sense, because the actual dynamics in the relationship appear to perpetuate relationships of domination and dependence. This is due to the continuing disparity of economic power between churches in the third world and western mission agencies.
3. The Bangkok statement recognized that mere transfer of power - conceived as the authority to administer funds and deploy personnel - from one church to another is not the answer. The emergence of "power elites" in either the sending agencies or receiving churches does not represent a biblical understanding of partnership, but rather distorts the life of the church and hinders its mission. "What we must seek rather is a mature relationship between churches" based on a mutual commitment to participate in Christ's mission in and to the world. A precondition for this is that each church involved in the relationship should have a "clear realization of its own identity". This cannot be found in isolation, for it is "only in relationship with others that we discover ourselves". Churches discover their identity by expressing their unity as the people of God with other churches in the same area and developing their common mission together. In this way churches are able to realize a more mature relationships with churches in other countries.
4. Our koinonia in Jesus Christ, and our common participation in his gospel, his ministry, his gifts and his mission represents the starting point for determining our relationships to one another and allows us to deal with tensions created by differences of economic power, culture, geography or organizational approach. "No particular church can claim full autonomy", said Bangkok, "for we must all acknowledge our interdependence within the Christian world fellowship. But each church must be free to be itself"

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within its own national or cultural milieu and to respond fully to the movement of the Holy Spirit within that milieu". Therefore a fundamental need is for the church to be liberated from all that hinders its true self-expression or robs it of its true sense of its own responsibility. "Salvation Today in this context means the liberation of churches to be their authentic selves in mission in their own milieu. It is not only the traditionally receiving churches that need this liberation. Sending churches are equally in need of it. Each church has a responsibility to help the other towards a full realization of liberty in Christ". It is against this background that Bangkok sought to identify some of the existing structures and patterns of relationship which hinder the self-realization of the people of God in mission.

22 An important step toward removing relationships which hinder self-realization and frustrate mission was taken by the Executive Committee of the ECMY in October 1972 when the church entered into a new agreement with the Swedish partner mission agencies. Under the new agreement there is multi-lateral rather than bilateral consultation, as in the past, between individual synods and individual mission agencies, with reference to funding and personnel. There is also to be full sharing of information with regard to budget and planning both in Sweden and in Ethiopia. In my view this new agreement will allow both the ECMY and the Swedish partner agencies to deal wisely and comprehensively with their available resources and to achieve greater stewardship and more concerted joint planning. It is not clear how the Norwegian, German and American partner agencies are affected by this agreement; to be fully affected, all partners cooperating with the ECMY would have to be included.

There are also structures of theological understanding and divergent viewpoint which may hinder the development of selfhood by local churches and frustrate the fulfilment of God's mission among a particular people. Let me refer here to the resolution of the 7th General Assembly of the ECMY (January 1971) addressed to the officers of the Lutheran World Federation and to the subsequent study paper on "The Interrelation Between Proclamation of the Gospel and Human Development" which is now receiving careful attention by LWF member churches and from various units and commissions of the LWF. The ECMY is to be congratulated for pressing this very urgent issue which is of vital concern for the future direction of the church and its mission, not only in Ethiopia but literally everywhere. This resolution has been taken up by the LWF Commission on Church Cooperation at its 1971 and 1972 meetings, and more recently also by the Executive Committee of the LWF in July 1972 and by the Governing Committee of LWF Community Development Service in December 1972. The result is that the LWF plans a major consultation on the subject involving all three commissions of the LWF and interested member churches, based on careful preliminary research and documentation, to be held late in 1973 or early in 1974.

Already several important issues of principle have been identified in the ECMY resolution and study paper, and these are closely related to the structures and relationships which, if not carefully adapted to local needs, can hinder and frustrate the church in its mission. Let me mention three major principles set forth in the paper: (1) the comprehensive nature of evangelism, aimed at change not only in man's spiritual understanding but also in his total social life, and fostering "integral human development", both material and spiritual; (2) the false dichotomy between "mission" and "development" activities created by current policies of donor agencies, and the consequent in-balance in aid and resources; (3) the principle of local responsibility for decision making, and priority setting, always of course in consultation with outside partners.

Christian church will be and remain forever." But no individual local church, and no church in a particular country may claim this promise absolutely for herself. As Jesus Christ said, "Every branch of mine that bears no fruit, he takes away", "They are gathered, thrown into the fire and burned" (John 15, 2. 6). Only the vine, with the fruit-bearing branches, remains forever.

Such judgments went out over vast parts of the church. Many of the places where once the Seven churches were are in ruins today: Where are the churches of Palestine, of Syria, Asia Minor, Armenia, North Africa, Nubia, once so flourishing? What is left of the mission work of the Eastern churches, which once extended as far as China? Nothing more than poor remains. What did the once powerful church of Russia become? It looks as if the churches in Europe will soon be only small minorities. Yet most of these congregations and churches have not suffered from too heavy persecutions.

Whenever God "removes the lampstand" from its place" (Revelation 2, 5), those whom he uses as tools of punishment need only to nudge it a little. There is not only the history of the victories of the church but as well a history of her defeats and losses by God's judgment.

What cause does God show those churches for his threats? Outwardly it doesn't look so bad with them. Partly they were well organized and busy, and they were quite self-content. God knows it, but he looks down into it more strictly: "You have abandoned the love you had at first" (Revelation 2, 4); "You have the name of being alive, and you are dead" (3, 1); "You are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot" (3, 16)

With his warnings and menaces God means us, too. Let us examine ourselves seriously whether he couldn't reproach us for the same things. Wouldn't God by these words call even us to repent, to return to the love and to the faith we had at first, and to ask him for it again. These are the symptoms of a deadly disease: indifference to God's actual gifts; abuse of his goodness for our own, selfish, worldly purposes; accommodation to the world far away from God; aversion to sufferings; unwillingness for sacrifice. God in his fatherly goodness is warning; but if we ignore these warnings he may quickly take us to task.

ment policy or the Church's own decision. It is this determination to pursue selfhood and autonomy without reservation, while at the same time adhering unswervingly to the Great Commission, that makes the present position of the ECOMY unique among Third World Churches. It is as though the Church, having carefully calculated the risks associated with either course of action (to seek selfhood and to evangelize the Empire) decided that the risks must be undertaken and that both objectives must be energetically pursued, no matter what the outcome. To describe this as a bold strategy would be a weak understatement. The fact is that SELFHOOD and EVANGELISTIC COMMITMENT are not really in conflict with each other - though they have often appeared to be so - and the ECOMY has recognized this fact. This is an important insight of Christian faith, as well as a mark of bold strategy. What it means is that a church's true selfhood is given to it in the act of being faithful to its mission. True selfhood is the Lord's own gift to his church, not the product of man's striving.

To say that this is a correct evangelical decision taken in faith and in the confidence of the Holy Spirit is not to imply that it will be easy to implement the decision. On the contrary, maintaining a wholesome balance between the Church's selfhood (identity) and her evangelistic effectiveness will demand the utmost in terms of wise leadership and consistent direction. In the remaining minutes I would like to refer to areas of Church-Mission relationship calling for special attention. Allow me to enunciate three general principles.

- I While gratefully accepting outside resources, the ECOMY should strive mightily to increase its own strength and resources for mission, so as to avoid an unhealthy condition of dependence.
 - A. Stewardship efforts at the level of the local congregation should be sharply increased.
 - B. Pastors, evangelists and voluntary lay workers should be trained in growing numbers to meet the expanding need for ministry and pastoral care.
 - C. ECOMY's own contribution to the evangelism effort must not be less than that of the assisting mission agencies.
- II The ECOMY through its General Assembly and Executive Council should be the body to direct, coordinate and review the total strategy of the Church. Therefore the ECOMY should also take the initiative in arranging for the fullest possible consultation on multilateral basis with regard to the deployment of men, money and resources.
- III The general policy of the ECOMY and its strategy for evangelistic outreach should not be dependent on responses from foreign mission and donor agencies but should arise out of the Church's own sense of its calling and its selfhood in Jesus Christ. Thus foreign aid will be used to strengthen and supplement ECOMY development but not become an indispensable part or condition of it.

In addition to the above, it would also be good if the ECOMY could participate in missionary-sending and the ecumenical sharing of personnel outside Ethiopia. Such participation would demonstrate the spiritual equality and maturity of the ECOMY, and its commitment to the world-wide task of witness and service in the name of Jesus Christ.

"So be zealous and repent." The sufferings of the church are also God's judgment of her sin. Sometimes it happens that Christians are forgetting it in their boasting of their sufferings. Sometimes they really take delight in the thought of suffering. (Of course, at that time suffering has not really fallen upon them, for the most.) Such a Christian attitude is quite unhealthy. We should not overlook the fact that God is the Lord and Judge even of his church. We must not take this power from him. Whenever he punishes us for our evil deeds he does not permit us to interpret our suffering as a sign for our belonging to Christ. This is what St. Peter tells his churches, he who otherwise so well knows how to comfort them in their troubles, e.g. "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal which comes upon you to prove you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice in so far as you share Christ's sufferings, etc." (1 Peter 4, 12-13). Persecution may strike us for our belonging to a certain class of society or to a certain nation which is guilty of social injustice and oppression. Then it is the punishment of God's judgment. Maybe the Christians did not even by actions participate in injustice; they only have not taken notice of it and with closed eyes they have benefitted from it: If then with their nation, or with their compères they have to pay the bill, then it is surely God's judgment, and not only suffering for the sake of Christ.

Let us take God's warning very seriously as he warns his church of God's judgment over the church. We know the Seven Letters to the seven churches in Asia Minor, which represent the universal church. They are written in John's Revelation, chapters two and three. They are full of stern warnings; they call to repentance and return. "If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent" (Revelation 2, 5). "If you will not awake, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come upon you" (3, 3). "I will spew you out of my mouth" (3, 16). This clearly means that he will separate from these churches and deliver them to destruction, unless they return.

It is true as a whole the church of God has the promise that "the powers of death shall not prevail against it" (Matthew 16, 18). Therefore our Augsburg Confession says (Article VII) "That one holy

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In conclusion, I would like to observe that the Lord of the Church has laid upon the ECOMY a heavy obligation but at the same time conferred on her a high privilege. It is the obligation and privilege of sharing the Good News and manifesting the Kingdom especially in Ethiopia but also in the whole world. The ECOMY is passing through a crucial stage in her own development. She has both received and given contributions which are important for the whole church of Christ. She has taken her place among the local branches of Christ's church as a worthy servant and as a partner in obedience. It is my hope and prayer that God may magnify her gifts and make her equal to the challenge.

"Apart from him we can do nothing" (John 15,5). Together with him, we shall be independent of all those external things.

During a persecution we shall even see that our mind is far from the mind of our Lord: In the face of his enemies he forgave them and prayed for them. I am afraid that we will be bitter against them and wish to take revenge.

Seeing all this, and particularly the experience of our weakness and helplessness, should lead us to prayer, and to the word of God. For these will be the only things left for us. As Martin Luther translated Isaiah 28, 19: "Temptation teaches us to heed the word" I think it is really true. At such a time we shall learn the comfort, the power and the guidance of the word. At that time, we shall also listen very carefully what the real meaning of God's word is. When Asaph was afflicted, by entering the sanctuary of God (Psalm 73, 17) he was enabled to confess: "My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength (or rock) of my heart and my portion for ever" (Psalm 73, 26). For him who heeds the word, the way through affliction leads him through endurance to passing the test, and to a hope which never disappoints (Romans 5, 3-4). On this way we even "rejoice in our sufferings" (Romans 5, 3) and are glad for them as those who walk on the same road as our Lord did.

This being so, our sufferings may help to make understood the message of the saviour who redeemed the world by his suffering, and to make it believed. Probably this is the meaning of Paul's word to the Colossians (1, 14) "Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church."

IV The time has come for judgment to begin with the household of God. 1 Peter 4, 17, 18.

In her sufferings the church realizes her having God as her Father who is leading her to himself more and more. In revelation 3, 19 the Lord says to his church: "Those whom I love, I reprove and chasten." And he continues:

Part II

Two things characterize the present situation of ECMY as far as Church-Mission relations are concerned:

- a) On one hand, a strong desire on the part of the ECMY to express her unity, integrity and identity as an African evangelical Church. This is evident in the new initiatives with regard to structure and also in the issuance of the statement on the "Interrelationship of Proclamation and Development". This growth toward selfhood is, ecclesiastically speaking a matter for great rejoicing as it marks the emergence of Church which is truly evangelical and truly Ethiopian out of the Missionary components of the past.
- b) On the other hand, there is an equally strong commitment to obey the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18) and to take advantage of the openness toward the gospel which exists in numerous unevangelized areas by bold and coordinated evangelistic thrusts drawing upon the financial, personnel, and spiritual resources of the ECMY as a whole. In consequence of this, three new mission agencies have joined the original five in serving the Church, and three others are in process of weighing their decisions to lend aid. What is commendable here is that a young church has sought inter-church aid on an international and multilateral basis not to support its internal structure and program (as has occurred in so many cases) but primarily for the sake of taking advantage of the present evangelistic opportunity. This is, one could say a rare case of "joint action for mission" come to actual fruition.

Now these two drives which I have mentioned - growth toward selfhood and identity, on the one hand, and commitment to evangelistic outreach on the other - have often proved to be in conflict with one another. This conflict is not a matter of principle but rather of practice, and it can be seen in the life and growth of many Third World Churches, for these churches often are in the position of having to choose between selfhood without evangelistic fervor, or evangelistic fervor without genuine selfhood. The reason for this is that full commitment to the evangelistic goal in a situation of unique growth and opportunity would require that a local church issue a "Macedonian call" to sister churches to "come over and help us". A positive response to such a Macedonian call could then lead to such a tremendous influx of outside personnel and resources that it might well undermine a small growing church and deprive it of its cherished selfhood and identity as the church of a particular culture and region. The church, fearing to lose its coveted selfhood and autonomy, would refuse to accept the outside aid, thus preserving its independence but at the same time deeply compromising its evangelistic commitment. An example of this is the proposal made by some churches in Kenya for a moratorium on the sending and receiving of outside funds and personnel for an agreed period. Such a moratorium, mutually agreed to by the church and its supporting mission agencies, would provide for a withdrawal of outside resources in order to permit the young church to realize its selfhood and identity as a church of a given place and culture.

The ECMY has decisively rejected this negative approach to selfhood by opting for a full-out evangelism program in unevangelized areas and issuing a Macedonian call to a large number of outside mission agencies. The President of the ECMY has stated that more and more expatriate missionaries will be needed in the next 15-20 years, and that ten times as many could be assigned if they were available! This extremely positive stance toward the expatriate missionary contribution flies in the face of much contemporary counsel and makes the situation of the ECMY a singularly happy exception to the trend prevailing in many African and Asian churches, whether resulting from govern-

It is especially when we are persecuted, when they take our honour, freedom, goods or even our life, that we learn to know ourselves. Then we see whether we really believe in Christ. With our minds we know that he is our greatest and our true life. But then we shall see whether he is so in reality. We have learnt that we should fear, love and trust God above all things. Then we shall find out our real God. In ourselves we shall then experience whether we really long for God's righteousness, whether in it we have life, and have it abundantly" (John 10,10), or whether we serve God only like the heathen in order to be secured in this life and insured for life after death. Then we shall see that our conversion is incomplete.

We shall also learn that our efforts are in vain to be on good terms with the world. When I was a young pastor, we members of the so-called "Confessing Church" were passed for "Bolsheviki" and traitors. To be sure, we tried hard to be faithful to our country. But we were opposed to racism and race hatred; we refused to honour our nation and its leader with the honour which belongs to God alone. Also today, as we do not believe in the paradise that human beings in one way or the other will create for themselves on earth, we are considered as reactionaries, as people who are against progress. All churches will go through this somehow.

Being persecuted, the church will also learn what she really needs. In times of rest she often thinks she needs influence, and the support of the authorities of the world. She insists of the democratic right of religious liberty. She trusts in the power of her money. I am indeed terrified by the role of money in church and mission today: Is there anything we can do without money? And the church believes in her good organization, be it authoritarian or democratic. In a persecution, much, or even all of it, will be taken away from her. It has already happened that a government told the younger church in its country to accept no more financial or other aid from abroad. Does this mean that at that moment the whole church is bound to collapse? In a persecution we are bound to learn that Christ is the Lord of his church, and that he cares for her.