

Ethiopia 2008

In the early morning light the desert was barely visible from the plane window. Through the haze, a dusty brown..... and then, abruptly, the ground was closer, and, yes, there were mountains and we were descending over the high plateau but coming in going around a big mountain in a smooth arc to land on the edge of what was obviously a big city. Outside the air was cool, the sun bright – and I was walking on the ground at an elevation higher than I had ever been in my life (but once, when crossing the Rockies) – 8,000 feet? 10,000 feet? We had landed on the roof of Africa.

Addis Ababa is the third largest city in Africa, after Cairo and Johannesburg. It is a new city in very ancient land. Tradition links the dynasty of the last Emperor, Haile Selassie -- who was killed in 1975 by the Communist *Dirge* (the last communist regime to come to power and one of the shortest to stay in power)..... Tradition links the last “Lion of Judah” with King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba and their son, Menelik I. Menelik II (fast-forwarding 2,750 years), in the 1880s, established Addis Ababa, “spring or new flower,” as the capital of a renewed Ethiopia that, unlike the rest of Africa, from the heights of the Abyssinian Plateau, would successfully resist European colonization. The Italians occupied Addis for only a short time during WWII, while Haile Selassie was in exile.

Imagine the Ethiopians for centuries looking down from their heights on the rest of Africa, proud of their traditions, proud of their race (a Hamitic/Semitic combination, for those in the north, especially), proud of their independence.

Ancient Ethiopian kingdoms and empires reached into Sudan and upper Egypt, Somalia and across the Red Sea to Aden and Yemen on the Arabian peninsula -- from whence the Queen of Sheba may have come to Israel. A delegation of one such kingdom later may have brought the abandoned Ark of the Covenant back to Ethiopia during the reign of King Manasseh of Judah. For sure, the worship of Yaweh is documented archaeologically by a ‘temple’ in upper Egypt and there is a tradition of the Ark’s being taken safely up into the highlands where it is said to be kept in a place made so holy by its presence that no one can see it -- in a monastery, on an island, in northern Ethiopia.

Israelite religion remained a force into this century when the last Ethiopians to claim to be Jews were given passage to Israel. Ethiopians who accepted Christianity in the early 4th century have been the strongest religious force over the centuries, this era. Coptic Christianity related to Egypt but strongly influenced by African and Old Testament ways has been arguably the strongest element in Ethiopian cultural identity. Today Muslims and Ethiopian Coptic Christians are about equal in number, while Evangelical/Protestant Christianity has established itself from about the time Addis itself was founded and now numbers about 5% or more of the total Ethiopian population of about 75,000,000.

The Ethiopian Evangelical Church *Mekane Yesus* (EECMY) is a union church which brought together churches started by Lutherans and Presbyterians. It is also one of the fastest growing churches in the world. In 1970 when the crisis of the coming to power of the *Dirge* was taking place, while famine threatened many parts of Ethiopia and the missionaries were leaving, the Holy Spirit came down in power and began a revival movement in the little provincial town of Gore in what was then Illubabor Province in the

west, southwest of Ethiopia, on the edge of the plateau, 350 rock-strewn road miles from Addis.

One of those who had been there at the very start of the revival, told us the story of those beginnings when we visited that place: the student hostel and church near the government school, in Gore. He had been a student himself at the time and had himself been moved by the Spirit, as had been the current President of the whole denomination. We saw the old mud and wattle chapel and dorm room off of it, gently decaying with time, but still attached to the new church building. Inside the new church building sat a drum, the main instrument of worship during the last century. Also inside was an L-shaped electronic keyboard with a variety of drumbeats and chord progressions programmed in – the instrument of the church of the 21st century. Has the Spirit moved to the keyboard? Certainly the Spirit has moved in the hearts and minds and souls of many – in Ilubabor Bethel Synod (IBS) itself the church has grown from 30,000 to 350,000 and more and the EECMY to more than 4,000,000.

Time is moving fast in Ethiopia – where it has seemingly stood still for such a long time. The main roads are being paved, but the cattle still rule them, along with goats and sheep and donkeys and pedestrians. The traditional round thatch house crowned with a coffee pot to keep the rain from trickling down the pole sits next to a four-square mud and wattle house with a galvanized tin roof. Women and donkeys are the beasts of burden; yet the buses and minibuses carry more and more. The market economy rules; yet subsistence is also a way of life, especially for those who tend the coffee ‘plantations.’ Coffee originated in Ethiopia (the neighboring province, traditionally, was called Kaffee). Serving it ‘properly’ is quite a ritual, involving roasting, grinding, brewing and pouring, accompanied with incense. The narrow necked pot with the long spout is large; the cups are very small; the coffee is very good. Tea is also very popular; we saw a huge plantation just outside of Gore owned by an Arabian sheik married to an Ethiopian woman. The sheik is an absentee mega-millionaire. His ‘neighbor,’ who manages the Gore coffee ‘plantation,’ supplements his subsistence income with traditional beehives of rolled mats suspended from a tree, while also tending modern ones that along with the coffee make a little money for the Gore church and home.

But the fastest movement is into the urban areas and especially Addis. The city is spread out over a huge bowl between the ridge where Menelik II built his palace of mud and wattle and thatch over stone just below the first church, dedicated to Mary, built in Addis. Now the church is a Coptic Cathedral, but even newer and more modern churches are being built or have just been completed. Mosques also are being built apace. The EECMY churches are not as visible – the most important one, in which we worshipped one Sunday – is a big, beautiful stone church on an inner courtyard behind the street where the city’s biggest university is situated, along with the national museum. Addis has numerous long, wide avenues radiating out from the center and around the city at intervals, with narrow, often unpaved ‘streets’ (alleys, we would say) inside and interior courtyards and compounds containing homes and various institutions, like the Addis Ababa EECMY central church. In a city with few highrise buildings, the EECMY has a very impressive church headquarters, with a huge church sign and cross which the *Dirge* had once cast into the dump now recovered, restored and hung high on its outer wall.

In this city the Presbyterian pioneer mission acquired property up on the side of a ridge overlooking much of the city, where the breeze usually blows pleasantly, and the

view would be terrific if one could get up high enough to see over the neighbors and the air pollution was not so bad. Dr. Lambe, who had been active in the town of Dembi Dolo where the Presbyterians gained their first foothold in the west, came to Addis in the 1930s at the behest of the Emperor to practice medicine. The result of that work is the Pasteur Institute across the road from the Bethel Synods Coordinating Office (BSCO) compound which also contains the Bethel Mekane Yesus School for girls where Bruce and Lora Whearty, newly appointed PCUSA missionaries supported by many Shenandoah Presbytery churches, are going this summer. The Rev. Reed Hopkins and myself, delegates to the IBS Convention along with Shenandoah Ethiopian Partnership Committee co-chair Cliff Gilchrest, were shown the new apartment being built atop the girls' school for the Whearties.

Cliff and his wife, Betty, spent a long time in Addis and Ethiopia, visiting their son and his wife and step-daughter – and their new grandson ☺. Cliff and son Brian met us at the airport, from whence we were taken to the BSCO compound and its guest house. Reed and I learned there was good coffee (and tea) at the Lambe café just outside the compound across from the Pasteur Institute. We also met with and ate with another missionary, Dorothy Hanson, retired nurse, daughter of a pioneering Presbyterian family, who is working in HIV/Aids prevention. And we met Michael Weller, the missionary who is the regional liaison in that part of Africa for the PCUSA, who traveled with us to Mettu near Gore in Illbabor where the compound headquarters of IBS is located.

Cliff had scored a Toyota Landcruiser and a driver, Woreka, who was a genius at avoiding the animals and persons cluttering so much of the road. We bounced for a total of 6 days in that vehicle, going and coming the 350 some miles from Addis to Mettu and back and visiting sites in the area near Mettu and Gore where Shenandoah Presbytery and individual churches work in partnership in mission with IBS (churches, medical clinics, shops as part of the HEART program for helping aids orphans, 'plantations,' the Gore hostel via iCare etc.). Much of that has been very successful, including the money, \$6000 a year, designated by us "for evangelism," which in actuality helps fund the IBS structure that makes the evangelism and other aspects of the church's mission possible. Our hosts in Mettu gladly showed us these projects including the coffee plantation from which they hope they can make money to supplement the meager amounts the local presbyteries are able to forward to the synod.

The most effective work of the synod is in education, educating leaders at different levels, from evangelistic team leaders to Bible school certified leaders to pastors! At the close of the Convention 30 new pastors were ordained including 3 from a new people group, the Mejangir, who just now have had the 4 Gospels translated into their language. The first woman pastor in IBS, Bekelech Buli, was also ordained. Yours truly had the honor of being one of those involved in the "laying on of hands" in that ordination. Reed and I had brought white robes for the occasion, which we left behind – white robes on the ordained are a special mark of the EECMY. I remember well my first encounter with a minister of the *Mekane Yesus* church who danced in his white robe at a conference at Montreat in the 1980s! The dancing seems to have died down, but the joy after the ordination church service, in the preaching and music, showed at the celebration under a tent constructed to protect the huge crowd from the sun. Part of that celebration was the handing over of a large cross to a new generation of Christians. This was also a

nod to the Ethiopian year of celebrating its new millennium. (They use the old Julian calendar and so are about 8 years 'behind' us).

In Mettu, Reed and I stayed in one of two "round house" rooms adjacent to the eating area, rooms for special guests. The President of the entire denomination, Kes (Rev.) Iteffa Gobena, had the other "round house" room. We were privileged to have meals with Kes Iteffa and leaders of the Synod, and other guests, including Kes Yonas Yigezu, the former president of the Synod and present director of Theology and Mission for the whole denomination. He spoke of the coming foray of the EECMY into mission outside Ethiopia, with the help of a support network, into specially chosen areas in four countries: a people group on the Cameroon/Central African Republic border, Somalia, Djibouti and Pakistan. This reflects concern for our Muslim brothers and sisters, but also the desire to engage in mission as a mission of "accompaniment." The model is that of the resurrected Jesus on the road to Emmaus with two disciples whose hearts burned as He opened the Scriptures to them but who recognized Him only in the breaking of bread.

I was privileged to have good translators. For example I was able to hear and be inspired by Kes Iteffa's preaching on the Convention theme taken from Hebrews 10:24, "Let us consider how to provoke one another (stir one another up, like stirring up a fire ☺) to love and good deeds." And I was able to follow Yonas as he traveled through the entire Bible from Genesis to Revelation talking about mission! Yonas himself translated for me at the Celebration where Kes Iteffa again spoke -- relating toleration, the millennium, handing over the cross to a new generation of Christians, evangelism and social justice. Mission is (w)holistic mission, as is evangelism, as is discipleship generally. The divisions we have here are not apparent there. That is, one supports genuine dialogue and peaceful cooperation with those of another religion, in all kinds of ways, without ever ceasing to be open to sharing the good news of personally relating to God in Jesus! Kes Tariku Tolossa, who was re-elected Synod vice-president, translated for me as I led Bible Study on the Sermon on the Mount with evangelism team leaders and others in the Mettu church. I know the communication worked well -- by the body language of the translator and the response of those gathered. It was a high point for me.

It was very special the way we were included, foreigners that we were, in the conversations in Mettu and in the fellowship in Addis, including the breakfasts day after day that Reed and I enjoyed with the leaders of IBS: Kes Yadeta Kirita, Kes Tariku Tolossa, Kes (?) Wondimu Legesse and Mulaku Tesagey. Kes Mersha Seyoum not only had us to breakfast once at the Illu Green Pension in Mettu, he also had us to a meal at his home away from home at the girls' school in Addis (his daughter teaches there ?). Yonas had us at his home in Addis our last night with his family. And Yedeta not only was "one of the guys" with us as well as the well-respected president of the Synod, he had us eat in his home in Mettu with his wife and youngest son and he had us eat at a famous restaurant in Addis where he and his older children who live in Addis introduced us to the Ethiopian specialty of raw meat carved off a 'hunk' of beef with a special curved knife and dipped in mustard sauce. In Gore, Kes Ayana Hedu had us in his home for a meal -- that was when Kes Mersha told us about the revival in 1970. How well all these and many others speak our language! At the same time they can speak Amharic and their own Oromigna language. How I wish I had that skill..... The Gilchrests were also great hosts ☺ -- and are at least half ex-pat and Ethiopian, Cliff and Betty as well as Brian! We

especially were favored by the skill and care of our hostesses in Mettu, cooking for all of us but in doing so especially for us as foreigners, and doing laundry, cleaning up.....

We saw first-hand how the “Give a Pastor a Cow” idea works, and it seems like at every church in the country we visited there were cows; we were very impressed with the shade-grown coffee, though Cliff did not succeed in making Yadeta favor trying to market it internationally (Yadeta is high on the local market); we saw how some HEART projects worked and others did not work depending on entrepreneurial skills etc.; we were disheartened that the library Opequon helped build is empty but Cliff is gung-ho on getting books in there by hook or crook (getting Wondimu connected with people that can help and getting books locally – not at all giving up on a container from here); I was able to meet with “our” Bethany Church-sponsored iCare student, and her friends, at Gore; we saw the new library at Gore; we saw the new clinic being built at Leka although, alas, work had been in abeyance for some time before we visited (prices of materials are skyrocketing there as well as elsewhere on this globe, but there may be other issues involving oversight etc.); we saw church buildings built or being extended in part by a number of churches in our presbytery and from elsewhere. We saw the process of growth from preaching point to congregation to congregation with a church building that will last more than 40 years. We need to provide more monetary support for the training of evangelists – we need to look into this more closely, give it as much attention as we gave ‘micro-finance.’

Many thanks to Michael Weller who gave good leadership at the retreat where we worked on renewing our partnership. It was significant to me that we met at a center dedicated to (w)holistic sharing of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It is significant to me that there is great desire for the teaching of English as a second language as there is for more support for evangelistic training as there is for recognition that IBS is trying hard to come up with ways and means to provide more self-support for their work and staffing (like the coffee). I think we tried hard to listen to each other and be supportive of goals and intentions and concerns that were varied and of varied importance to different individuals. It was interesting to see the PCUSA priorities and staff ideas included in that mix e.g. that some of the proceeds of the coffee sold in Mettu from the ‘plantation’ there be sent to a food pantry in Shenandoah Presbytery to underscore mutuality in mission. (There is a better chance, at least an earlier possibility of that, if we were thinking of the coffee at the Gore farm being used for that ☺)

It was good to take some time to see some more of Ethiopia than Illubabor – the trip back and forth crossing the Ghibe River valley where it cuts through the Shewa Plateau was especially worth it in that regard. Stopping in Jimma (which is slated to become a separate synod) and Bedele were good but visiting Wenchi nearer Addis was especially good – to get a sense for the Orthodox presence (as well as the spectacular scenery: the lip of the volcanic crater at ca. 12,500 feet with the monastery on an island in the lake below and all the vertical fields and thatch homes clinging to the steep sides). One positive effect of the presence of the EECMY has to be stimulus to the Orthodox to “get with it” – although the competition with Islam is probably a more urgent stimulus. Our driver in Addis, Alemu, took us to the Museum where we saw our ancestor “Lucy” and other things and then he was the one who on his own took us up to see the palace of Menelik II thus making all the history really come alive. Mersha experienced that for the first time! So we were helped, educated, inspired by so many -- from all walks.....

When we flew away the last morning we passed over the place where the Blue Nile meets the White Nile near Khartoum, Sudan.... I imagined the Blue Nile cascading down from the escarpment of the Abyssinian Plateau, and the tributaries of the Nile like the Baro, including streams near Gore, eventually flowing through tropical Gambella (where Michael's wife Rachael was most of the time we were in Ethiopia, trying to rescue a 'mission group' that had gotten into trouble because of lack of preparation and contact with the right people) and where Michael would cross over into southern Sudan for lengthy overland travels as regional liaison. I thought a lot about 'our' IBS in relation to the mission of the church in that volatile region, the tremendous work of PCUSA mission service workers there as well as how proud we should feel of our part in helping Yonas who is now providing such fine denominational leadership – and in cross-cultural and international mission! I pray we will have more of a sense of being part of that 'flow' and be more prayerfully and actively engaged both in IBS and more broadly in Ethiopia, with the EECMY and in relation to the IBS and EECMY's neighbors in the region.

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