

Transmission Ethiopia 2020

Study guide



How a church grew against oppression

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Contents

- Introduction
- Discussion topics
- Historical context for Ethiopia
- Some numbers
- Profiles
- The Transmission video series
- Supporters and Sponsors

Introduction

Transmission is a series of five, 10-minute video productions leading up to 2025, the 500-year celebration of the Anabaptist movement. Ethiopia 2020 is the first in that series. Each of the productions gives voice to young adults from a different continent. In each case, they grapple with issues they face as Anabaptists.

In this video, Salomé from France visits members of the Meserete Kristos Church in Ethiopia. She is impressed by the resilience of these members who went through hard times during the Communist DERG regime. During this period, the clandestine church grew enormously and today it is the biggest Mennonite congregation in the world. Salomé also discovers the enthusiasm and the devotion to continue spreading the gospel, including young adults in this process.

In the video the struggles of the first Anabaptists in Switzerland in 1527 are mentioned, where the first martyrs were killed. Also the Russian Mennonites are mentioned who were persecuted in Ukraine and formed an inspiration for the Meserete Kristos Church in the period they went underground.

This study guide is designed to provide added perspective and depth to these faith journeys. Canadians and Europeans, worked together to bring this unique production to life.

The video “Transmission Ethiopia 2020” and this study guide can be found on:

<https://mwc-cmm.org/en/resources/transmission/> and on the site Affox.ch

Discussion topics

The idea is to view the video in a group setting, maybe even watching the video twice followed by a discussion. As discussion leader, you can guide the conversation with your own questions and input, but the questions below can also help you in this discussion. Of course, you can pick the questions you think are interesting for your group. The situation you are in may differ from the issues addressed in this video and in these questions. If you come up with new insights or questions, please feel free to share them with the production group by contacting hajo.hajonides@ziggo.nl

1. What was your first impression of this film? Was it positive? What inspired you in this film?
2. What did you find objectionable?
3. The Meserete Kristos Church (MKC) was persecuted by the Derg regime. What elements are given that can help to explain the growth of the Church during times of persecutions? How can we be inspired? What are your thoughts about our often-timid witnessing especially since we are not under threat of imprisonment or execution? How far would our commitment/fervour go in times of stress?
4. Mekonnen speaks of very brave people during the persecutions. They drew their strength from their faith. What do you think of that? Have you experienced any advantages or disadvantages in your everyday life because of your faith?
5. Mekonnen tells us: some of our leaders, I think four or five people, went to Russia. Shimeles adds: They were searching for Mennonites in Russia to ask how they resisted in the underground movement. What does the decision to send leaders to Russia reveal? Do we view other churches as communities from which we have something to learn?
6. Apart from the inspiration provided by the Christians of Russia, in what other ways is inspiration approached in this film? What role do the lessons learned from the past play in your church for helping youth prepare for the future?
7. Aster Debose shows tremendous faith in difficult times: We were sitting in the prayer room surrounded by 200 people with guns, they said: we will kill you and I said no - you cannot kill me because Jesus is Lord. What are your thoughts about this.
8. Birru Robele says: According to Colossians we teach and preach and also rebuke so that our members become **mature** and come to the likeness of His Son - Christ. These values MKC leaders consider important in the life of the church for the growth and the maturity of its members. Which values are of upmost importance to your community and how are they proclaimed/ affirmed/professed? Do you think faith can become mature and if so, when is a personal faith mature?
9. Salomé discovers the strength of the Ethiopian community. How do you value the strength of your own community? What does that strength consist of and how is it used? Tedi states: A mature Christian is a person who prays regularly and MKC has been encouraging its members to have a prayer life. To help believers to grow in maturity as Christians they just put the accent on community and learning from each other, teaching each other, and encouraging each other. Creating prayer time is important in the process. How are the people in your church accompanied in their faith, encouraged and challenged?





- 10.** What is the power of praying together or alone? Which type of prayer is more important to you?
- 11.** Kelbessa addresses the youth: Church population is the young population. They are the ones taking responsibilities to do so many kinds of tasks; in worship, in music and they are very active in church many ministries. The MKC church is very open to the musical influence of young people. How is your church dealing with young people and does music play a role in that?
- 12.** What do you think of the comparison Salomé makes at the end between the process of making coffee and the process of becoming a Christian? “I think that as Christians we often remain at the stage of those green (coffee) beans that have no flavor, that have no smell or aroma. But actually, we can go further. We can go further by being ground in order to bear more fruit and to be useful in serving God. And for that, you need many beans and I think that the beautiful thing about church is that we get to do it together, if (like coffee beans), we have the desire to let ourselves “being ground”. To be ground is to allow oneself to be transformed by the Holy Spirit. This transformation produces flavorful fruit to the glory of God”.
What can we do to ensure that our community also produces “good coffee”?

Historical context for Ethiopia



In 1945, before Meserete Kristos Church even existed, Mennonite missionaries entered Ethiopia in association with Mennonite Central Committee and Mennonite Relief Committee looking to bring relief to the country a few years after the Italian occupation of 1936-1941. Since the missionaries weren't granted missionary status by the Ethiopian government, the early Mennonites in Ethiopia focused all of their energy and resources into relief work. By 1950 mission work could expand into education and the first of their many schools in Deder was build.

On June 16, 1951 a group of ten Ethiopian nationals planned to be the first group of believers baptized by Mennonite missionaries in the country. These ten men and women lived in the “closed” area of Nazareth where missionaries were banned from proselytizing. Therefore, the missionaries brought them to Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia, which was an “open” area where missionaries could operate. When the ten baptized Ethiopians returned to Nazareth, the missionaries were made to promise never to baptize people from any “closed” area ever again. The Meserete Kristos Church today marks June 16, 1951 as the day when the church officially began.

From 1959 on, The Ethiopian lay leaders gradually took over the missions entirely from Mennonite Central Committee and Eastern Mennonite Mission including the schools and hospitals. This process was concluded in 1962. In meantime the title “Meserete Kristos Church” was proposed (meaning “Christ is the foundation Church”, based on 1 Corinthians 3:11). The term “Mennonite” was not included within the name of the church because it was decided that the term “Mennonite” had no significant local meaning and might connote a cult following since it was named after a man.

From 1974 on many members from the former Mulu Wengel church joined the Meserete Kristos church. As a result, the present-day Meserete Kristos church is more Pentecostal than many of its sister Mennonite churches.

On the day of September 12, 1974, Haile Selassie I, emperor of Ethiopia since 1930, saw his power instantly disappear as the military managed to successfully take over the government. In 1977 Mengistu became chairman of the DERG Regime, launching the Red Terror (Qey Shibir) political repression campaign to eliminate political opponents, with tens of thousands imprisoned and executed without trial. In that time the Marxist government also started to enact physical barriers against religious organizations around the country. These acts from the DERG government included arresting church leaders, forbidding meetings and encouraging thugs to beat up MKC members.

In January 1982 all Meserete Kristos’ properties were confiscated by the DERG Regime and a law was passed that meetings with more than five people were forbidden. The MKC went underground and many small cells were initiated and many people started to attend these cells. Although MKC officially ceased to exist, attendance grew exponentially. There was a real danger of Police raids, in spite of that membership numbers rose from 5000 to 34.000 during the communist regime.

In 1987 the military government formally “civilianized” and ended in 1991. In the meantime, a Meserete Kristos College was set up to train new church leadership. In 2006 the MKC general assembly voted for women to be able to hold leadership positions like evangelist, teacher, pastor, deacon and elder.

The Meserete church kept on growing rapidly in the twenty first century. In 2018, there were 1,067 congregations in Ethiopia. The total faith community numbered 615 400 people with 345 000 baptized members. MKC is the largest Anabaptist conference in the world. By comparison, the largest Anabaptist body in the USA is Mennonite Church USA, with 110,000 members.

Some Numbers

Religion in Ethiopia

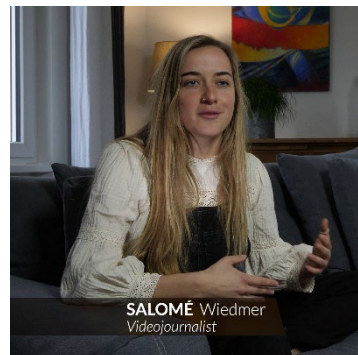
Total population 2020: 115 million

- Ethiopian Christian Orthodox (43.5%)
- Islam (33.9 %)
- Protestants (18.6%); About 345 000 baptized MKC members
- Traditional faiths (2.6%)
- Catholics (0.7%)
- Other (0.7%)

Profiles



Mekonnen Dessalen, former relief worker MCC



Salomé Wiedmer, videojournalist



Shimeles Retta, mission manager, Germany/Ethiopia



Kelbessa Mulata, MKC vice president



Birru Robele, MKC chair



Desalegn Abebe Ejo, MKC president



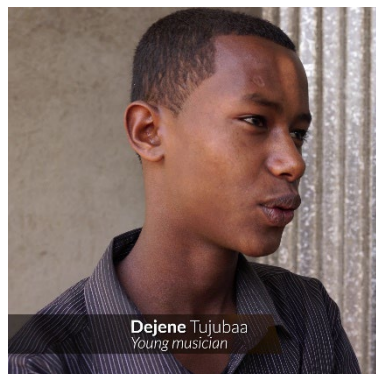
Solomon Demissie, choir leader



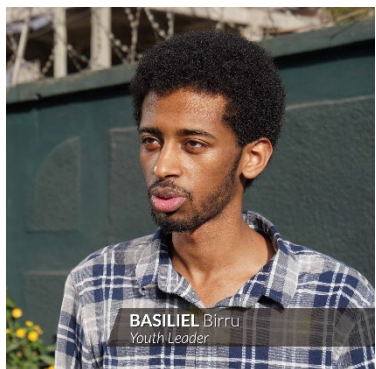
Aster Debose, former health assistant



Tewodros Beyene, MKC former president



Dejene Tjubaa, young musician



Basiliel Birru, youth leader

The Transmission video series

Producer Max Wiedmer, a Swiss Mennonite from Affox (a video, film, and multimedia company), together with Hajo Hajonides, a Dutch Mennonite, from the International Menno Simons Center, developed a video project to commemorate the first Anabaptist baptism in Zurich, in 1525. Alongside other festivities being organized in Europe in 2025, the two partners are producing five short videos each year between 2020 and 2024. Each video covers a topic that is close to the hearts of the Mennonites around the world. To emphasize the global dimension, the videos are being filmed in different countries.

These videos are intended to be used in workshops, discussion groups, Sunday schools, and so on. The videos are narrated or subtitled in several languages, making them widely applicable. Each title has a study guide which provides background information about the country where the recordings were made and about the subject itself. The guides include questions that can serve as a basis for discussion.

In 2020 the first video was produced, on the subject “freedom of belief.” This film was shot in Ethiopia and is about the Meserete Kristos Church in Ethiopia, which was heavily oppressed during the country’s totalitarian communist regime. In spite of that oppression, the church grew – an impressive development.

The Transmission video series can be found on the Mennonite World Conference (MWC) website: <https://mwc-cmm.org/> Search for “Transmission” on: <https://www.affox.ch/en/current-project/>

Project supporters

The production group offers thanks to these contributors and the many others who helped make this video possible.

Partners

AFHAM, Association Française d’Histoire Anabaptiste-Mennonite: <https://histoire-menno.net/>

AMBD, Arbeitsgemeinschaft Mennonitischer Brüdergemeinden in Deutschland e.V.; <https://ambd.de/>

Anabaptist Mennonite Network: <https://amnetwork.uk/>

IMSC, International Menno Simons Centrum: www.mennosimonscentrum.nl/lmsc_English_site

Mennonite Church Canada International Witness: <https://www.mennonitechurch.ca/international-witness>

Mennonite World Conference, a community of Anabaptist-related churches celebrating 500 years in 2025.

Sponsors

Affox AG, Switzerland

Anabaptist Mennonite Network, Great Britain

Horsch-Stiftung, Germany

International Menno Simons Centrum, Netherlands