

# Christians in Marxist Ethiopia

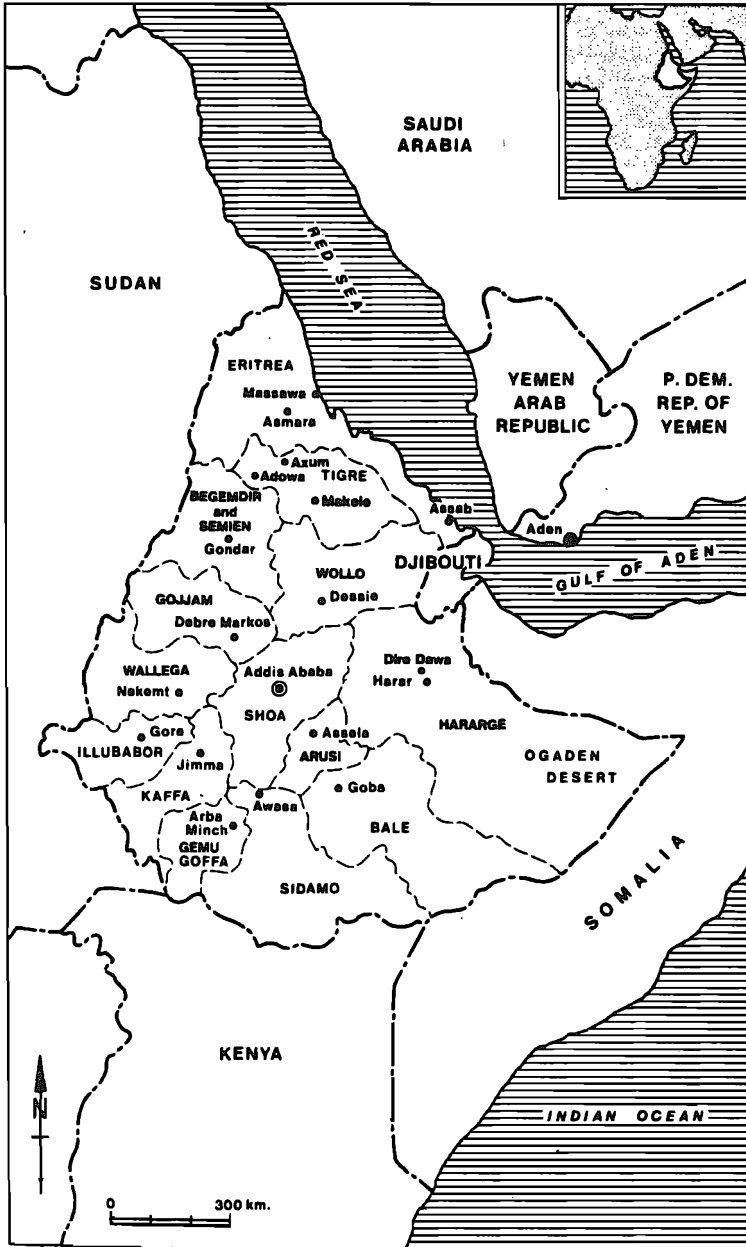
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In the aftermath of colonialism in Africa, when newly independent states were struggling to establish themselves, and political coups and even civil wars were not unusual, the Ethiopia of the 1960s and 1970s appeared to be a haven of stability. This exceptional position was based on the proud history of an ancient monarchy with a strong religious culture, while its old feudal system seemed to be responding to modernisation and making slow progress towards democracy. Not surprisingly, the Organisation for African Unity (OAU) and the Economic Commission for Africa chose Addis Ababa for their headquarters. Most countries regarded their Ethiopian embassies as the most important in Africa, and much foreign aid was forthcoming to develop the country. The United States selected Ethiopia for the site of its satellite tracking station for the region.

In 1974 the illusion of stability was to be shattered as Ethiopia's monarchy crumbled under revolution. It is not the purpose of this article to analyse in depth the factors which led to the creeping revolution of 1974-75. This has been done elsewhere by several authors.<sup>1</sup> The aim here is to trace the effects of the Marxist revolution on religious believers and their churches. All the same, it is necessary to sketch in the political and religious background in order to understand the nature of the clash between atheistic Marxism and a traditional Christian monarchy.

Ethiopia occupies a unique position as the only African country with a still dominant indigenous Christianity, rooted in the early centuries of the faith. (Egypt is the only other African country where early Christianity survives, but Islam has, of course, been dominant there for many centuries.) Christianity took root in northern Ethiopia in the fourth century. The conversion of King Ezana when the Axumite kingdom was at its strongest ensured a permanent and fruitful home for the Christian faith, which remained the religion of the Ethiopian state for 16 centuries.<sup>2</sup>

Judaism, which is still practised by the Falashas of the Gondar region and parts of the Tigre and Begemdir regions, probably came to Ethiopia with settlers from Arabia long before Christ. It had considerable influence in pre-Christian times, and has left its mark on the practices of the Ethiopian church in a number of ways.



Ethiopia—Regions and Major Towns

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Islam was also to play a major part in the country's history. With Mecca lying a mere five hundred miles north of the ancient capital of Axum it was inevitable that the young and militant Islamic faith would sooner or later confront Ethiopian Christianity. From the eighth to the 16th centuries Islamic tribes isolated the Christian kingdom from the rest of Christendom and made inroads into its territories. An alliance with Portugal in the early 16th century brought Ethiopia military help, which continued for a hundred years and resulted in the temporary decline of Islamic ascendancy. At the same time the Portuguese introduced the Roman tradition of Christianity, and dialogue (not always friendly) made the Ethiopian Orthodox Church think through its "monophysite" theology\* and its Hebraistic traditions more thoroughly. One Emperor espoused Roman Catholicism but brought upon himself a backlash from the faithful Orthodox Christians, which historically may account for the spiritual isolationism which characterises the national church.

Protestant missionaries arrived in the 19th century and were encouraged by the emperors to become involved in development projects alongside their evangelism. They were also pioneers of literature in Amharic, the spoken language of the kingdom, in contrast to the traditional literature which was written in the archaic Ge'ez language. Protestant missions increased in number and influence from 1930 onwards and gave rise to indigenous evangelical churches, as well as taking modern medicine and education to many parts of the country.

When the 1974 Revolution began, it started in Addis Ababa, the capital city of a deeply religious people, most of whom were still loyal to their ageing Christian emperor.

Emperor Haile Selassie was a reformer, but his reforms were resisted by feudal landlords and a suspicious church, as well as being retarded by corrupt government officials. His long reign from 1917 to 1974 (including 12 years as regent) was characterised by a genuine desire to bring modern education and development to his country. In the 1920s he began to train an educated élite to modernise the nation. This plan was set back by the invasion of the Italian Fascist armies in 1934 and their brutal colonisation of Ethiopia, which lasted until the allied victory in 1941. On the emperor's return from exile schools were started in the major towns, and later a university, but in 1974 it was estimated that eighty per cent of the population were still illiterate. Much development took place with foreign help, but basic inequalities and injustices remained to fester and

\*The doctrine that Christ had only a single nature as against the orthodox teaching, defined at the Council of Chalcedon, of a double nature, divine and human. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church was not represented at the Fourth Ecumenical Council at Chalcedon in 451 AD when the monophysite heresy was condemned, and it rejects this description of its doctrine. It accepts that Christ had both divine and human natures but describes them as *Tewahido* (fused or united).

to produce discontent among those who now knew something of the backwardness of their own country compared with the world outside.

As the emperor grew senile and unable to control avaricious officials and widespread injustice and corruption, many younger people became impatient with the slowness of change. The tight control of press and radio with the denial of freedom of speech all served to increase the pressure for radical change. At the same time there was a measure of disillusionment with the state church. The ultra-conservative, semi-literate priesthood was seen by the educated youth not as a champion of the people, but rather as the reactionary religious arm of an oppressive feudal state. The church, with a few notable exceptions, had refused to move with the times and had lost the sympathy of many of its members, who had become politically aware through secular education. At the same time its position as a major land owner also made the Orthodox Church the focal point of discontent.

In the build-up to the revolution the question of agrarian reform was central. Most of the country's farmers, who made up ninety per cent of the population, paid exorbitant rents to feudal landlords. These landlords owned most of Ethiopia's fertile land, and many of them lived in comfort in the cities while their peasant tenants eked out a precarious living on what was left after paying rents and a number of taxes to the church, the landlords and the government. Addis Ababa's student population voiced this perceived injustice in their slogan "The Land for the Tiller". Meanwhile the church, probably the largest landowner of all, and recipient of tithes, supported the *status quo*.

As discontent and agitation grew, change had to come from somewhere, and in the first few months of the "Creeping Revolution" it looked as though the popular movement might be democratic. Many Ethiopians, including Christians from all denominations, hoped for this but there was a small number of dedicated Marxists, including a group of junior officers in the army, who gradually came into the ascendancy and in 1977 took over the revolution with an internal coup, gaining unlimited control. The popular revolution was over, and with troops from Cuba and "advisers" from the USSR and East Germany, Ethiopia was now to become a rigid Marxist-Leninist state of the most repressive kind.

### *The religious map at the revolution*

As already mentioned, the traditional religions of Ethiopia are four in number: Eastern Orthodox Christianity,\* Islam, Judaism of an early kind

\*As noted above, the Ethiopian Church is one of the Eastern Orthodox or "non-Chalcedonian" Churches. It is in communion with the similar churches of Egypt, Syria, Armenia and South India, but not with the Orthodox Churches of Greece, Russia and other European countries — *Ed.*

and Animism, or traditional African religion. In addition to these long-standing faiths, Protestant and Roman Catholic Churches have had a growing influence in the twentieth century.

Population censuses have met with limited success and there are no entirely accurate statistics for this rugged and inaccessible country. The population in 1974, according to one estimate, was in the region of 28 million. This would be divided in terms of religion as:

Christians (all denominations)	12.5 millions
Muslims	12.5 millions
Others	3.0 millions

A more recent analysis was attempted by Manfred Lundgren from various sources between 1980 and 1983.<sup>3</sup> He estimates the total population nine years after the revolution at about 32 million,\* consisting of:

Christians (all denominations)	14.5 millions
Muslims	14.5 millions
Traditional African (animists)	3.2 millions
Jewish Tradition (Falashas)	0.03 millions

The figure for Christians is broken down more precisely in the following table (all figures approximate):

Ethiopian Orthodox	13,000,000
Kale Hiwot (Baptist)	800,000
Evangelical Mekane Yesus (Lutheran) with Bethel (Presbyterian)	532,000
Other Lutherans	16,000
Roman Catholic	150,000
Meserete Christos (Mennonite)	unknown
Pentecostals	unknown

The various religious traditions co-existed in reasonable harmony during the reign of the late emperor, but attempts to bring the churches closer together through ecumenical contact were generally unsuccessful. Denominational mergers took place between two groups of Baptists, and also between the main Lutheran Church and the Presbyterian Church. Protestant groups in some areas were subject to a measure of persecution inspired by citizens and officials of Orthodox allegiance. Muslims and Falashas tended to see themselves as second-class citizens, in spite of the fact that a number of them held positions in government even at a high level. Christians and Muslims, however, lived at peace.

\* An Ethiopian government census towards the end of 1984 gave a figure slightly in excess of 42 million, which may indicate that the two previous estimates were too low — *Ed.*

*Religion under Marxism*

On 28 December 1974 the Provisional Military Administrative Council (PMAC) published a small booklet entitled *Guidelines for Ethiopian Socialism*. This was followed in February 1975 by *A Declaration of Economic Policy for Socialist Ethiopia*. These publications indicated a large measure of personal freedom, including freedom of religion and religious practice. At the same time, notice was given that all education would be taken over by the state as soon as was practicable, and although overseas voluntary organisations would be needed in the health services for a long time to come, the eventual aim must be for an entirely state-run health service. These quite mild words were to become the basis for disruption of Christian educational and medical work. In the following months unrest was fostered by agitation among the Ethiopian staff of mission hospitals and the pupils of Christian schools. Many church institutions like the fine leprosy hospitals in Shashamene and Dessie became impossible to run, and so were taken over by the state. Addis Ababa's only missionary hospital, owned by the Seventh-Day Adventists, was among the best in the capital. Its Board of Management was forced to hand it over to the PMAC. The secondary school and Bible Academy of the Mennonite Church and many other Christian educational establishments were brought under government control, without compensation.

A fundamental policy adopted by the military government was nationalisation of the land. Churches and mosques could retain the land on which their places of worship stood, but nothing else. This was a major blow to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church which depended for most of its income on tithes and dues from agricultural land and rents from urban property. A temporary provision of government money was allowed to the church until it worked out its own means of financial support without property income.

The nationalisation edict was used by the regime to confiscate any private building or property they desired. Radio Voice of the Gospel's multi-million dollar short-wave radio station was expropriated by force and without compensation. This station, which broadcast in 15 languages to many parts of Asia and Africa, is now used for Marxist propaganda both inside and outside Ethiopia. The Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus (ECMY) had its recently completed seven-storey office block including its media centre confiscated in the same way.

The four-storey block built by public subscription for the Bible Society of Ethiopia as its national headquarters was expropriated to become headquarters of COPWE, the Ethiopian Communist Party. Many other modern buildings have been taken from the churches over a period of ten years, and the guarantee that the land on which churches stand would be

exempt from nationalisation has not been fully respected.

These were some of the outward attacks carried out by the PMAC regime to weaken the churches, but the campaign to destroy religious faith went much deeper than confiscation of buildings. Archbishop Mathias, formerly in charge of Ethiopian monasteries in the Holy Land, described the vicious anti-Christian programme in a paper given in Washington, D.C. on 1 February 1985:<sup>4</sup>

From the very beginning the Marxist-Leninist military Junta and its Soviet mentors saw the Christian churches (and most particularly the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and its mass following) as the main bulwarks against an atheistic, Marxist-Leninist ideology they had set out to impose from above on the nation.

The archbishop records the "concentrated ideological campaigns of hate propaganda against the churches" and the confiscation of church property. He says that these measures were ineffective and served only to rally Christians to the defence of their faith and to support their churches by individual contributions. It was because of the failure of their overt attacks on the cross, he says, that:

The Communist regime undertook to mount a much more sinister covert operation against Christianity in Ethiopia. In a "Top Secret" anti-religious directive issued in the month of September 1982 to its political cadres, the Communist regime succinctly outlined measures it intended to take to eradicate Christianity and Islam from Ethiopia.

The measures recommended in the directive, many of which have already been put into practice, are summarised below.

#### *Summary of action against Christian Churches*

1. Large and famous Orthodox churches to be made into exhibition halls "as a historical emblem for the oppressed people".
2. Traditional Ethiopian books, "used as a tool of exploitation in feudal hands", to be taken away from the churches.
3. "All liturgical objects, except a few, should be gathered up and deposited in a friendly country or, if necessary, burnt . . ."
4. The present patriarch (appointed by the regime) is from the "oppressed people" and has no depth of learning. He and others like him should be used to further "re-education" and made to preach that "the message of Christ is socialism."
5. The Orthodox Church to be hindered by removing from the market things used in liturgy, such as beeswax candles, and raisins (used for

- making sacramental wine).
6. Christians and Muslims to be set against each other. Spy cells to be formed by bribing people. Those who attend church festivals to be discouraged by sacking some from their jobs or reducing their pensions.
  7. Press and media to repeat frequently that the church and its system hinders the freedom of the people; that the world is one of work and not of the spirit or morals. Young people should be discouraged from ordination and secularised.
  8. Those who practise religion in church or at home to be made a target for special harassment.
  9. Monks to be sexually seduced by female cadres posing as nuns. The church can then be humiliated by public exposure of these monks.
  10. Comrades from other communist countries can pose as bishops on friendly visits and indoctrinate the priests, and also present them with specially prepared books (to subvert them).
  11. To avoid counter-productive results, the process of awakening to be conducted with subtlety, because Ethiopian priests are notoriously suspicious.
  12. Intensified efforts to be made to create divisions among monks of the Ethiopian monastery in Jerusalem. To increase the number of *agents-provocateurs* in the annual pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

A second section of the document deals with steps to be taken against Islam, with the cautionary note that these should be postponed to a later date for fear of antagonising radical Arab countries.

### *The course of the anti-Christian campaign*

The plan of campaign seems on the whole to have followed logical lines. The first step was to eliminate small groups, especially those with no foreign backing, for instance the Pentecostals. The next was to brand non-Orthodox churches as foreign interlopers, agents of imperialism, etc., and then to accuse national Protestant pastors of being spies and supporters of tribal secessionist movements. This was followed by the confiscation of property and closure of churches belonging to the larger Protestant and Roman Catholic denominations, while at the same time instituting covert attacks against the Orthodox Church, though pretending to tolerate it.

We shall now see how individual denominations have suffered under Marxism.

#### *Meserete Christos (Mennonite Church)*

This small but highly literate church had come into being through the



philanthropic, and later the evangelistic efforts of American missionaries. It had been prominent in the fields of rural health and education. Its pacifist beliefs were anathema to the state and it soon became the target for ruthless elimination. Its buildings were expropriated, its bank accounts frozen and its leaders imprisoned.

#### *Pentecostal Church*

In ten years this church had grown from nothing to a community of several thousand members. It appealed especially to students and young people generally. With practically no backing from any expatriate mission it was an easy target for suppression. Proscribed by the junta, its places of worship closed and its leaders hunted, the membership melted away into other churches or went into exile.

#### *Baptist Bible Fellowship*

This was a small group led by American missionaries and working mainly among young people in the capital. Its modern headquarters and chapel were expropriated and all missionaries left the country.

#### *Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus*

The EECMY had been an indigenous church with strong leadership for a very long time. Its member churches were to be found in most provinces of Ethiopia. The membership embraced people of all kinds and different language groups. Several national leaders were to be found among its members. The church grew from the work of Lutheran missionaries in the 19th century and, being a member of the WCC and the Lutheran World Federation, it is known in the wider world. Mention has already been made of the confiscation of its headquarters and other buildings. In 1982 its school and church building in the Urael district of Addis Ababa was taken over by the government, and later the large seminary and Bible school of the Southern Synod, at Awasa, suffered the same fate. Nearly all the six hundred churches of the Western Synod in Wallega were closed and the buildings used as ideological offices, grain stores and dance halls. At the same time, many pastors, teachers and other leaders were imprisoned.

The attention of the world was drawn to the plight of the EECMY as early as July 1979 when the Revd Gudina Tumsa, General Secretary of the church, was abducted. He has not been seen since; the PMAC has always denied any knowledge of his whereabouts. His wife was imprisoned twice.\*

\*The most recent information about Mr Tumsa suggests that he is now dead. Although there must have been reports that his wife was released after her second period of imprisonment, she is believed to be still, or again, in prison at present — *Ed.*

All this and more has been suffered by a church which has been notable for its work on behalf of all the peoples of Ethiopia. Its national literacy campaign, which began in 1962, is estimated to have benefited one and a half million people. Substantial medical and educational services were provided in the provinces.

During the famine the EECMY has collected and distributed many millions of dollars in relief work. It has also offered to co-operate with the revolutionary government in development projects, and has done so wherever possible, but this has not prevented unjust and illegal actions being taken against the church and its leaders.

#### *Kale Hiwot (Baptist Church)*

This is the largest of the Protestant churches and is notable for its evangelism in tribal areas and its schools and clinics. Most of the work is rural and is especially strong in the south of the country. The church originated in the missionary work of the Sudan Interior Mission (now the Society of International Missionaries) and the Baptist General Conference of America.

The churches in Gemu Goffa Province were severely persecuted by Marxist extremists at the head of the provincial government. In the Wollamo district of Sidamo Province all seven hundred churches were closed at the stroke of a pen, without explanation. In other parts of the country church members have been persecuted by the authorities in various ways, and many pastors and evangelists have been imprisoned. Two leprosy hospitals referred to earlier were run by this denomination until taken over by the state. In spite of all this, the church continues to co-operate with the government in development projects, and has initiated agricultural and well-drilling projects, with help from certain overseas aid organisations.

#### *Roman Catholic Church*

It has been more difficult to find information on how this church has fared under Marxism, but it is known that their extensive institutions and property in Asmara have suffered the common fate of nationalisation or closure.

#### *Ethiopian Orthodox Church*

As the largest and most firmly entrenched church, the EOC has been treated by the junta in a singular way. Any direct attack on such an influential church could have led to a counter-revolution. The regime well understood this, and chose to use methods of infiltration and subversion rather than confrontation. However, arrests and murders have not been entirely eschewed. The following can be listed as concrete examples of persecution of the church:<sup>5</sup>

1. Patriarch Thewophilos and three other archbishops were arrested in 1976. The three served between six and eight years in prison and the patriarch's fate has not been revealed. He is assumed to be dead.
2. Archbishop Samuel was murdered by agents of the regime.
3. Archbishop Lucas of Arussi was abducted and imprisoned for three years. A number of priests and monks were gaoled for speaking out against oppression by the regime.
4. Fourteen archbishops were dismissed from their posts on orders from the junta.
5. The governing Synod of the church was dissolved and a new Synod replaced it. Mr Abebaw Yigzaw, a radical prepared to accept the revolutionary government's policies, was appointed in 1984 to head the church administration.
6. The flourishing new Sunday School movement and the growing youth groups were forced to disband (though some have since re-started quietly).
7. Young people wishing to attend church have been forced to attend political meetings instead, and parents have been told by the Marxist cadres to prevent their children from attending religious meetings.
8. The Orthodox theological college in Addis Ababa was closed and its buildings incorporated into the university.
9. Most recently, in 1985, an attempt was made to remove the sacred objects from Raguel Church in the market area of Addis Ababa. The plan was leaked, and when the demolition operation began under cover of night, the church members, supported by Muslim neighbours, rallied to defend their church. In the confrontation which followed one or two clergy were shot and a number of people wounded. Reports are conflicting and it is not clear who was behind the attack, but it must have had official support of some kind.

These actions, for which the military government is fully responsible, demonstrate its determination to weaken leadership, undermine church teaching and deprive the church of the support of its younger members.

### *Bible Society of Ethiopia*

This is an indigenous organisation affiliated to the United Bible Societies. It is supported by and serves all the churches. Following the nationalisation of its modern headquarters, it was given certain older buildings in compensation. However, its activities have been steadily eroded by government edicts. First, mobile distribution of the Scriptures was forbidden, and the Society's agents were not allowed to travel outside the capital without a permit. Then importation of the Scriptures was banned and a large consignment was impounded in customs.

The Society and the churches have made remarkable progress in scripture translation before and since the revolution. Translations into 15

Ethiopian languages are in progress. These would be printed in Ethiopia, but censorship and printing restrictions have resulted in no Scriptures being printed for over a year. The demand for Bibles is very great, especially from Orthodox churches and monasteries, but the Bible Society has small reserves from which to supply the many requests.

### *Gains and losses*

After a decade of Marxist-Leninism how do the churches of Ethiopia stand today? It is evident that the material losses from expropriation of church property have been very great, but the loss is not purely financial. Disruption of many aspects of the churches' witness and administration has been inevitable. Besides the loss of places of worship, nationalised assets include schools, hospitals, clinics, radio and publishing establishments, orphanages, administrative buildings and vehicles. Not only the churches, but the whole country has suffered incalculable damage from these anti-Christian actions of the PMAC.

The imprisonment and even murder of bishops, priests, monks and pastors, together with the intimidation of religious believers, has taken its toll. The indoctrination of children against the faith, and the efforts to minimise the influence of believing parents, have undoubtedly weakened the churches, even though much of this action has been counter-productive for the aims of the PMAC, and has embittered even non-worshipping people against the regime.

It would be very misleading, though, to suggest that there have been no positive gains for the churches. Once again it has been proved that "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church." The attempts of the regime to promote atheism have been remarkably unsuccessful and church attendance has increased enormously. Several of the churches in the capital hold as many as three services one after the other, in order to accommodate all the worshippers. Admittedly, in some Orthodox churches the unusually large number of youths attending may be partly a gesture of defiance against an unpopular government.

There are reports of spiritual renewal within the Orthodox Church, as well as a deeper concern to provide for the elderly and disadvantaged members of society. The church has developed basic training programmes and refresher courses for priests. The aim is to train them not only in liturgy and doctrine, but also in agriculture, health care and other subjects which will help them to play a more useful part in their local communities. There is also a project to develop parish councils to mobilise the laity to support their churches financially and to initiate development and welfare projects. A "Miniprojects" Fund has also been established to set up development projects for the benefit of local

communities, such as low-cost housing, literacy, forestry, handicrafts and horticulture. These programmes for training, parish councils and miniprojects are assisted with funding by the WCC and related agencies.

These developments may owe something to the prevailing winds of socialism, in so far as the government encourages mass involvement in local affairs and a spirit of self-help. However, the regime does not encourage the establishment of societies and action groups outside its own socialist structures for "the masses", and church initiatives have to be taken with great care.

The Protestant and Catholic Churches have also been very active in self-help and development schemes, usually with a degree of co-operation from local authorities. Evangelism has not been neglected and several Protestant churches have continued to grow rapidly in different parts of the country. Few foreign missionaries remain in Ethiopia, but those who are there have continued to help the churches in training, organisation and development.

Co-operation between the different churches is probably greater now than it has ever been before. In 1976 a Christian Council was formed for the first time. This body attempted to speak to the government on behalf of all the churches, but when it became clear that the Council intended to follow an independent line and not bow to all government demands, the regime lost interest in its existence.

Consultation and united action by the churches for relief and development work has been achieved through the Christian Relief and Development Association. This organisation has brought all denominations together and enabled them to relate to both government and international agencies for the effective use of overseas aid. It has played an important role in famine relief, and in steps to prevent a repetition of such a disaster.

### *The future*

The churches of Ethiopia have come through more than ten years of trauma, in which they have been subjected to a torrent of anti-religious propaganda and harassment. They have been tried and tested, but are probably intrinsically stronger than they were, in spite of a great loss of property and leadership. They are also more united, and in some cases their social conscience has been strengthened. Evangelism has not been extinguished.

There are signs of a growing strength of leadership at grass-roots level. Persecution has made self-reliance and initiative essential for the survival of local churches and fellowships. With many churches closed, there is a tendency for small groups to meet privately for prayer and Bible study. They find mutual support in these groups and leadership develops

naturally.

Within the Orthodox Church, lay involvement is beginning to replace dependence on clericalism. At the same time illiterate priests are reported to have found new energy and enthusiasm for their ministry as they have received basic education and have been given wider horizons for service. Where they are allowed to do so, the churches seem more ready to play a wider role in society.

These positive developments suggest that the Christian Church in Ethiopia will continue to grow and, by the grace of God, will outlive those systems which desire to see its death.

Note. This article is indebted to many sources of information and unpublished papers, the authors of which would not wish to be identified.

<sup>1</sup> Blair Thomson: *Ethiopia, The Country That Cut Off Its Head* (Robson Books, 1975).

<sup>2</sup> Ullendorff: *The Ethiopians* (Oxford, 1960).

<sup>3</sup> Manfred Lundgren: *Witness and Service — The Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus* (LWF: Geneva, 1984).

<sup>4</sup> Archbishop Mathias: *The Ethiopian Government's Anti-religious Program*. Washington, D.C.: Ethics and Public Policy Centre, 1985.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*