

example, scheduling meetings and services so that they do not clash with political gatherings. House groups meet quietly in Addis Ababa so as not to draw attention to themselves. The government is still restricting the church through the censorship of most of its publications, and a shipment of 45,000 Bibles which has been waiting in customs for over two years has still not been permitted to enter the country.

Several members of the Meserete Christos Church, a smaller Protestant denomination which is a member of the Mennonite World Conference, were released towards the end of April 1986. They included Negash Kebede, the General Secretary of the church and Director of its Bible Academy in Nazareth (south-east of the capital), and other leading lay members of the church. They had all been detained without trial in the Central Prison in Addis Ababa since 1981.

At the beginning of June, 26 members of the smaller Mullu Wongel (Full Gospel) Church were released from prison in Yirgalem, a town south of the capital in Sidamo region. This group of young people was arrested in the town in April 1979 after they refused on religious grounds to shout slogans calling for the death of anti-revolutionaries. Among them was Tesfaye Gabiso, an evangelist and singer, who was kept in leg irons in his cell for at least part of his imprisonment.

The Ethiopian Orthodox ("Coptic") Church, the largest church in the country (with, at least nominally, a membership comprising about forty per cent of the population), and the church with probably the greatest degree of government control, is reported to be experiencing greater freedom. Small youth groups and Bible groups have restarted in the capital, although they still keep a low profile. In 1976 the Orthodox Patriarch Abuna Thewophilos was arrested and deposed from his position as head of the church, although he was never charged or brought

to trial. In July 1979, in a case similar to that of Pastor Tumsa, he disappeared from detention in Menelik Palace, the headquarters of the ruling Provisional Military Administrative Council. Nothing has been heard of him since, and the government has refused to answer questions about his fate. It is believed that he too was killed shortly after his abduction. Other bishops who were detained after the 1974 communist takeover were all released in 1982.

Is the situation in Ethiopia improving for the churches? Recent reports indicate some hope, but the situation varies widely from one part of the country to another. There are continuing reports of Christians in prison, recent arrests of clergy and lay church members, and allegations of torture in prisons. Some churches have been allowed to reopen, though reports continue of closures, attacks on churches and confiscation of church property.

A new constitution for the country is currently in preparation. Among other things, this will set out the legal framework for the churches to operate in under a "normalised" civilian government. During the twelve years of communist rule, the country has been run by the military authorities. The draft constitution was published at the beginning of June 1986, but so far, no indication has been given of when the final text will appear. Article 47, which deals with the question of religion, is in line with the constitutions of most communist countries. "Freedom of conscience is ensured," it states, but a cautionary rider adds that "... the exercise of religious freedom shall not adversely affect the security of another citizen." Paragraph three states: "The government and religion are separate. The legal basis of religious organisations shall be directed by the law." Control over the churches by the government and restrictions on their activity will exist *de jure* as well as *de facto*.

*Compiled by members of  
Keston College staff.*