

WHAT CAUSED THE RAPID GROWTH OF THE MESRETE KRISTOS CHURCH?

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Introduction

The Meserete Kristos Church (MKC) is one of the fastest growing churches in Ethiopia. **It has grown from 14 congregations to 265 congregations in a span of only 19 years (1982-2001).** This is a special phenomenon and the obvious question it would raise in anybody's mind is "What really accounts for this tremendous growth in such an era?" Many people might have been tempted to answer this question by crediting the success to the leadership, or even to the efforts of a very few select individuals. But it is the Lord, who did it, and the credit has to be given only to Him. In Acts 3:12, Peter said, "*... men of Israel, why does this surprise you? Why do you stare at us as if by our own power or godliness we had made this man walk?*"

MKC growth is not a new happening; it is one among many periods of church growth which began already in the time of the apostles, as it is recorded in the Book of Acts, and which is still going on around the globe.

Persecution

In 1974, the Marxist government officially started to oppose the Evangelical Churches, especially their revival and youth activities. As a result, believers were harassed, humiliated and jailed. The Communist Regime nationalized church schools; confiscated church buildings, properties and even church bank accounts, and the church presses were subjected to censorship. The Communist Regime used to defame tradition and religion. They called believers by many names, such as "CIA agents," "Anti-progress or reactionary elements," and "dogs." They attempted to eradicate traditional values and beliefs. God clearly directed the evangelical leaders to establish a strong, underground, secret movement that contributed a lot to the tremendous growth of the church under such a time of pressure.

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By the continuing, persistent, prayer and fasting of all the saints, especially after the fall of the Soviet Union, the Marxist government of Ethiopia was also overthrown by the combined efforts of the Ethiopian rebel forces (the joint liberation movement) in 1991. As a result the coalition of rebel troops led the transitional government, and constitutional “freedom” of religion was granted all over the country.

Under so many restrictions, persecution, and sufferings, by the gracious guidance and unfailing providence of Almighty God, the churches continued to flourish and triumph. Praise be to the Lord!

Church Growth Principles

According to Act 6, the early church was not mission focused but the believers were forced to spread out. Before the persecution of the early church, they might have preferred to stay in Jerusalem, which was their comfort zone, but after Steven’s martyrdom, persecution pushed them to go out beyond Jerusalem.

MKC’s experience is similar. We were enjoying the healing power of the Holy Spirit, especially in Addis Abba’s local church. But after the communists took our prayer houses and used them for their own purposes, we then started to practice an underground ministry which led us to the church growth principles that we practiced. We did not practice these principles in order to grow the church, but we practiced them in obedience to and love for the Lord, and to reach the unreached.

The church growth principles are essential in implementing the Great Commission. MKC discovered these seven deliberate practices that led to its church growth:

1. Prayer accompanied with fasting: Church growth can not be effective without a strong prayer emphasis and openness to the leading of the Holy Spirit. Members were organized and scheduled in small groups for prayer every morning, during the day, in the evening, and some for the whole night. They usually prayed with expectancy for the government, for the well being of the people, and for the ministry. Many of these times of prayer were accompanied by fasting. So prayer is one of the key elements for church growth.

2. Small Group Bible Study: The small group Bible study system encouraged and gave opportunity to all believers to practice their gifts in such a way as to

build each other up and to win souls to the Lord. It is one way of multiplying disciples for the harvest, which is the secret of growth.

3. Pastoral care for the believers: The church leaders emphasized pastoral care, even for an individual believer. In the Marxist Ethiopian context, *when the government hired and sent out a believer to one place, the leaders continued to visit that believer and encouraged them to witness for Christ to others, to establish a fellowship of believers and to plant the church in a new area in such a way that they grow to local church level.* Especially during that time, the graduates from higher education were hired by the government who were then sent to different areas. We used that as an opportunity to use every member as a mission agent. For example, we organize ourselves into regions, currently 25 regions. One of the regions was Weliso. David, a recent university graduate was sent to teach in the Weliso high school and the church sent me to visit him. I went to visit him again and again, simply to encourage him. After six months there was no change, no result, simply David was there and I visited him. In prayer together, I became convinced to continue to visit him and after a year some people came to the Lord. After three or four years the local church was established. Weliso is now one of our regions, with 16 local churches. This came about through pastoral care for one person.

4. Training for evangelism: The church leadership committed itself to train and send out young adults to the unreached people groups. The church gave emphasis to evangelism and mission, and *established an underground training named "One Month for Christ" training* in which voluntary believers gave one month to share their faith with nonbelievers. This training has grown to "One Year for Christ" in which the church trained and sent out young adults for one year to share their faith with others and plant a church. In my own case as young man during the persecution, "We said that we do not need money, we do need to reach the unreached and we need your supervision." Then what happened? Many people came to the Lord and the church leaders became convinced to ordain us as full time evangelist.

5. Commitment to reach the unreached: Equipping and sending out persons with a focus to reach the unreached with the gospel is an essential element for church growth. Why was this possible for us? Basically it is related to our conversion experience. *How can we keep silent?* We were motivated by a deep

conviction of the reality and power of the good news of Jesus Christ the Savior. And of course we saw that it works, we experienced what Jesus announced in Luke 4 -- freedom for the oppressed, peace with God and with one another, reconciliation among the people.

6. Emphasis on the believers' unity and strong fellowship: *The fellowship of believers is where many were encouraged in discerning and using their gifts for the benefit of the church.* The unity beyond the local conference lines is what makes the church grow fast. Where there is spiritual unity, there is growth. If we missed the corporate effort to reach unreached group and to help each other, we can not achieve what happened without such corporate effort.

7. Decentralize the ministry and put it in the hands of many: The church leadership structure was also flexible for the sake of the ongoing evangelism work that led many small groups to give birth to many congregations and they in turn multiplied in a variety of ways.

Challenges

During the time of persecution the church experienced phenomenal growth. That growth continues till today. One of the reasons for this growth is, that the church is young, and does not yet have well-established structures to hinder her growth. Also there was no time to plan ahead, because of so many people coming to the Lord one after the other. So there was no time to think of structures except for the sake of discipling the new people who joined the church. Literally, we acted like ushers serving the new converts and passed them on to serve others in turn. It has demanded of us to have mature and spiritually rooted leaders. That practically takes a lot of time, much energy, and all the strategy that brings success.

At the same time MKC has tried to have one Bible College in the capital city and one Bible School in the North-Western part of the country. They were opened for the purpose of providing relevant and contextualized Biblical training for pastors, evangelists, and teachers. They have contributed a lot toward building up the church, and we expect that they will continue in the same way. The equipped full-time workers are however, just like a drop in a barrel when compared to the need of the newly established and growing churches. So, most of the congregations are in need of adequately trained leaders in addition to the

lay leaders in the church. The colleges were and will continue to be a great support for congregations to be multiplied. But that still has not removed the shadow that is coming on the existing sustainable church growth.

For example, in a region where there are currently about 840 organized worship centers (congregations and church planting centers), there are less than 260 full time ministers, which signifies less than one full time minister for three centers. It is clear that no one can manage such kind of growth without the lay members' active involvement in ministry. The following table shows the number of Christian communities (baptized, under instruction for baptism, and Sunday class children) and congregations in the respective years.

Table 1: Meserete Kristos Church growth chart

Year	1982	1992	1997	2001-2	2007
Number of Congregations	14	53	180	231	265
Number of Nurtured people	5,000	34,000	140,000	151,870	177,141

In the past, MKC has tried to keep a balance between quality of life and quantity. Growth in both quality and quantity were clearly seen in the church for many years, ever since the church experienced the underground movement. But the current growth is not in a balanced position because of the challenges that the church is facing today. From my observation, the major challenges are the following:

- 1. The loss of leadership development:** Unless we develop Christ-like servant leaders who have a passion for mission, the growth will stop and we will start to follow in the footsteps of the Western churches.
- 2. The loss of passion for mission:** At this time many of the congregations and planting centers are focused on building their own worship centers and furnishing them with usical instruments, rather than focusing on mission. So the need to train the 375 congregations and the 750 church planting centers to become missional churches is very crucial. This training will help the churches to free themselves from being self-centered and self-serving, and help them to refocus on mission.

3. Poverty in Ethiopia: Ethiopia is one of the poorest countries in the world. More than 75% of the people, including our church members, live below the poverty level. A struggle for survival hinders the people of God to focus on mission, and it has given an open door to Islamic countries to expand their belief through charity work, which affects the growth of the church seriously. So we need to think of creative ways for developing the country's economy, such as improving farmers' old fashioned farming style, encouraging small business, and other creative ways of approach that can change a community's economic life. But the challenge is how we can maintain the balance between reaching the unreached, and disciplining the believers, and dealing with the economic situation? A holistic approach is the only remedy to solve the Ethiopian church's problem.

4. The financial problem of MKC: The work of the harvest is presently beyond the capacity of the church. So we need to think of creative ways of generating income for the mission of the church locally and beyond.

5. Lack of church buildings: Church building is one of the challenges that hindered church growth in our generation. Lack of church buildings hindered the public worship which was essential in winning the existing generation to Christ. In fact, the challenge and need for church buildings is real and sensitive. Compared to other religious groups, I can say that MKC is the church without buildings. For example, during the last year, 100 Mosques were built in Addis Abba, but except for one local church building, most congregations gather in rented compounds and shelters.

6. Conflict among the existing churches: There have been conflicts among the denominations, among the local church leaders, and between the regions. Where there is no spiritual unity, I don't think the Holy Spirit will move in a mighty way. So the conflict among existing churches, because of leadership style and personality, also contributed a lot to churches not growing as fast as our expectations. Disunity is a time, money and energy killer.

7. Missing the mighty move of the Lord in the church: One of the major sources for growth is the work of the Lord through miraculous manifestations of the power of the Holy Spirit, as happened in the early apostolic church. The misuse of the work of the Holy Spirit, and neglecting to seek the Holy Spirit to move in the midst of His people is the greatest cause of hindrance for growth.

8. Persecution by Muslims: The most recent challenges for us are attacks from the Muslims on Christians. For example, some local churches have been burned down and believers were killed.

Even though we have these challenges, still, God is working and the church is growing. I went to visit the local congregation where the church had been burned, in order to encourage them. Their question to me was why did God allow the Muslims to hurt the church? Their second question was why are Christians from other churches elsewhere not responding in a very practical way to support us in such a difficult time, while Muslims are helping each other to destroy the church? Nevertheless, the church has grown rapidly between 2001 and today as seen in the chart below. In that time period, about 27 local churches were added per year.

The church continues to grow. I visited the town of Segeda, 100 km from Addis Ababa. A sick man came from a distant village and members of the church surrounded him and prayed for his healing. Miraculously, the man was healed. Both the man and his family were Muslim, but he said to them, you must come with me to my village and tell about Jesus Christ to my relatives. So they walked back with him about eight hours, and witnessed to his relatives gathered at his compound. They heard the gospel preaching, realized that the man who had been so sick was now healed, and they decided to follow Jesus Christ, the healed man offering some of his land for a church building.

Year	1982	1992	1997	1999	2001-02	2007
Congregations	14	53	180	231	265	429 +795 ¹
Membership	5,000	34,000	140,000	151,870	177,141	318,481 ²

At the same time, we need to develop ways to measure the quality as well as the quantity of the growth. What matters here is not only a large worship attendance, but the real issue must be whether Christians are qualitatively

¹There are 795 preaching (church planting center) of 200 of which are directed by the evangelism and mission department of the national office.

²This number includes 157,647 baptized members, plus 111,299 children under 14 years of age (as Mennonite affiliated church that is crucial to making disciples).

grounded in a biblical foundation or not. I think it is highly important to aim for balanced biblical growth. To keep this balance, in a place where there is rapid church growth, a basic consultant training program is highly recommended. The consultative visits of church growth consultants can help a church confirm that it is on the right track, or can help it make growth-oriented decisions. It is advisable that MKC should pay more attention to these areas too.

V. Conclusion

Church growth cannot be sustained unless the laity is equipped and mobilized to fulfill its distinctive ministries, both in the church and in the world. Church growth and active participation of lay people in the ministry can not be separated. Hence, in any church growth activities, it should be considered that each member or person is important in the church. If one church needs to pass through the church growth process, the members' involvement in the ministry should be encouraged. Therefore, an effective leader accomplishes the work by equipping and mobilizing others (Eph.4:12-16). The task is too great for one person to carry on. The more important issue, no matter what the outward approach looks like, is the multiplication of ministry through groups and teams. It should be noted that church growth development doesn't happen by focusing on "the few equipped professionals leaders" rather than mobilizing the whole members for ministry.

I need to emphasize the ministry of small groups, which was one of our best tools of church growth during the persecution time of the communist era. Nowadays, because of the challenges listed above, this ministry is in question. This is the area of my concern; that a shadow over sustainable church growth is at the door. It is true that churches that have broken growth barriers are those churches, which have stressed small groups (cell groups). By definition a cell ministry oriented church means a church that has placed spiritual development and evangelistic small groups at the core of its discipleship ministry. Therefore, the process of small groups' multiplication passes through the stages of learning, loving, linking, launching, and leaving. In those days the MKC small groups' ministry followed a goal-oriented mentality, with fasting and prayer, Bible study, and visitation. As a result, the church was flexible, which put the church in a

position to restructure the ministry and put ministry in the hands of the entire congregation.

Finally, let me quote MKC general secretary Mulugeta Zewdies's expression concerning our church, when he said that "MKC is interested in a healthy, balanced, sustained growth and to meet this need a continued development of small groups is essential. To make this development into practice MKC has only one choice, and that is a commitment to train many small group leaders at every level. In turn, committed leaders are expected to spend their time training others, so a vast majority of their hours should go to leadership development. They are expected to multiply leadership, involve potential leaders, test faithfulness, consult with others, turn ministry over to new leaders, develop emerging leaders, and allow them to fail and learn from it. Therefore, to meet all these requirements and to keep the MKC growth sustainable, implementation of basic Bible study tools for groups and leaders are very essential. It is time to equip the people of God in a way that enables the entire membership to discover and deploy their gift for ministry."