



The 2004–2005 Word & World Lecture

The Cost of Discipleship: The Story of Gudina Tumsa (Guddinaa Tumsaa)¹

TASGARA HIRPO

Gudina Tumsa, general secretary of the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus (EECMY) from 1966 to 1979, was a recent martyr in the history of the Christian church. He believed in the liberating power of the gospel, preached it from the pulpit, witnessed to it in the assemblies of the churches, and challenged the international community to respond to the need of his church. He opposed the inhuman sociopolitical system of Emperor Haile Selassie's feudal regime and the atheistic military regime of Mengistu Haile Mariam, and for this he paid with his life. Gudina was abducted on July 28, 1979, and subsequently killed. Born seventy-five years ago, Gudina was extrajudicially executed twenty-five years ago at the hands of the then Marxist military dictatorship.

A Gudina Tumsa Memorial Year Consultation was held in Wittenberg, Germany, from September 17 to 24, 2004, under the topic, "The Life of a Christian Is a

¹Oromo names are usually written today in Latin letters according to what is called *qubee* spelling.

The two 2004–2005 Word & World lectures were part of Luther Seminary's commemoration of the life and work of Gudina Tumsa, marking the twenty-fifth anniversary of his martyrdom in Ethiopia. Gudina Tumsa, a Luther Seminary graduate, was influenced by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Tumsa's faithful witness to Christ in the face of oppression has frequently been compared to that of Bonhoeffer. In this first lecture, delivered on November 15, 2004, Tasgara Hirpo describes Gudina's legacy. The second lecture, by Andrew Walls, will appear in a forthcoming issue.

Life of Witness to the Risen Lord.” Several theologians from partner churches and mission agencies in Europe participated in that event. Today we are gathered at Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota, where Gudina studied theology and deepened his biblical knowledge. His theology, which grew out of the practical life of his people, was fruitful and relevant for his church and Ethiopian society. It remains relevant even today, not only for his church but also for the global churches. Gudina saw the truth and spoke it boldly. He believed in the unlimited power of the gospel, which transcends ideologies and all social and political systems. Now, after many years of silence, his church and its partners have started to study his life and theology—a theology that offers a great challenge to his church, its partners, and other worldwide churches.

Who was Gudina Tumsa? I will endeavor first to describe his family background and then go on to shed some light on his theology, concluding with a brief account of the international encounter.

FAMILY BACKGROUND AND GUDINA’S FIRST ENCOUNTER WITH THE GOSPEL

Gudina Tumsa was born May 5, 1929, at Boojjii-Karkaroo, Wallaggaa.² His father, Tumsaa Silgaa, and his mother, Naasisee Cirrachoo, earned their living by farming. Evangelical belief had been introduced at Boojjii when two indigenous missionaries, Gebre-Ewostateows Ze-Mikael and Daaniel Dabalaa, the latter a former slave, arrived in 1898. They founded a school and began to preach the gospel in the Oromo language. Young people were attracted and attended the school, where they were able to read the Bible in their own language. After the early death of the two pioneer missionaries, the work of the school and the witness to Christ was continued by those who understood the message. Gudina went to this school as a young boy. He was fascinated by the good news of Jesus Christ the savior and started to tell others about it. The thirst for more education and religious knowledge led him to the Najjoo Swedish School where he could learn more about Jesus Christ from missionaries. Further training gave him the background to combine both a preaching and a healing ministry.

I met Gudina in 1955 when he joined the pastoral training course at Najjoo, which I joined as well. He was the tallest and brightest of us all and was one of the seven candidates who were ordained in 1958 at Naqamtee, where he later became pastor.

In 1951, Gudina married a young Christian woman, Tsehay Tolesa, who in her childhood had barely escaped being kidnapped and sold into slavery. Mrs. Tsehay is a very strong woman and dedicated Christian who served her church and community at the side of her husband. She is still actively involved in planting new congregations, first in her own area, but in other places as well. When Gudina came to America for further studies, she remained at home, caring for their five children.

²Today the regional state of Western Oromia.

Gudina gained further insight into Western theology while studying at Luther Seminary, and after he returned to Ethiopia the seed of the gospel, which had been sown in fertile soil in his youth, had more solid ground in which to grow.

THE EECMY: A CHURCH FROM BELOW AND A CHURCH FROM THE PERIPHERY

The members of the EECMY

Gudina was born in the Oromo society,³ a people that had been deprived of its religious, social, cultural, and political rights and reduced to second-class status within the Ethiopian empire. Gudina was among the first generation of evangelical Christians, those who experienced true liberation when they received evangelical faith.

“For the hearers—people who were politically oppressed and socially degraded to second-class citizenship—the new religion meant a new life, a life of freedom and dignity. That is what Gudina meant when he called the new faith a ‘religion of love and justice.’”

The first converts to evangelical faith were liberated Oromo slaves, who became pioneer missionaries in the area where Gudina was born. The most prominent of them was Onesimus Nesib, the translator of the Bible into the Oromo language. Onesimus was born free, captured and sold several times, and at last brought to the Red Sea coast to be carried off to Arabia. But he was liberated and given to the Swedish Mission at Massawa to be educated. His baptism in 1872 opened a new chapter for the Oromo people.⁴ From then on, the door was open for all who were yearning for freedom and human dignity. The good news that was proclaimed by liberated people reached farmers, serfs, and tenants. The pioneers gained confidence to witness to Christ as savior and liberator. For the hearers—people who were politically oppressed and socially degraded to second-class citizenship—the new religion meant a new life, a life of freedom and dignity. That is what Gudina meant when he called the new faith a “religion of love and justice.” The pioneers labored twenty years before the foreign missionaries were allowed to come to that area.

The formation of the EECMY makes clear what this new “religion of love and justice” meant for the downtrodden people of the south. A year after the 1958 ordination of the seven pastors, one of whom was Gudina, the EECMY was founded. A

³Oromo is a large nation, comprising about 40% of the Ethiopian population of seventy million. For numerous reasons, the Oromo nation is far less known in the world than other peoples of Ethiopia.

⁴His Oromo name was Hiiikaa Awaji; Onesimus Nesib was the name he received when baptized. He was the first to receive modern education abroad, to learn to read and write in several languages, and to translate the Bible into the Oromo language. Onesimus Nesib is included among the “Lesser Festivals and Commemorations” (21 June 1931), in *The Lutheran Book of Worship* (1978) 11.

new national church with a new organization was created, and this organization embraced various nations from various parts of the empire. Those who became members of this new church had a common experience: they found their identity and human dignity; they were freed by the new message. The personal evangelism that began among the southern peoples has been called “mass movement evangelism.” Everyone who received the message told others. Already at its formation, the EECMY counted 20,000 members. Today, after forty-five years, the membership has reached 4.4 million. This exhibits what the new religion of love and justice has meant for those who embraced it. Gudina was a leader of such a church. He chose to give his precious life for the cause of this new religion. He knew that, prior to the formation of the EECMY, pioneers had also been persecuted, jailed, scattered, and threatened. The formation of the EECMY was the result of their selfless ministry and the assistance of the Western missions that contributed to the structure that fits the needs of this church.

The structure of the EECMY

The structure of the newly created church reflected its life and service and is in many ways different from that of the feudal system and its church, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. The Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus grew out of a movement of lay men and women. For the first time in the history of the Ethiopian empire a purely democratic structure was introduced. Power sharing became a reality. In the new church, elders of local congregations are elected by the members for a designated period, congregations are organized as parishes or districts, districts make up a synod, and synods make up the EECMY. The highest authority is the general assembly, and the assembly elects the president, vice-president, and other church officers. The first two presidents were laymen.

“for the first time in the history of the Ethiopian empire a purely democratic structure was introduced”

Contrary to the power structure in Ethiopian society, power in the EECMY is not hierarchical and monolithic. The election system is more representative of the southern and southwestern parts of the country, a system that had been practiced there prior to the colonization of those areas by the Abyssinian emperors.⁵

The Bible became for the believers their only authority.⁶ They were encouraged by the Great Commission of the risen Lord, who said to his disciples, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations....And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matt 28:19–20). The unity of the believers was based on the

⁵See *The Southern Marches of Imperial Ethiopia*, ed. Donald Donham and Wendy Jones (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

⁶According to Abyssinian church tradition, laypeople were not allowed to read the Bible. But evangelical Christians, especially in the absence of the foreign missions during the Ethio-Italian war, depended only on the authority of the Bible.

biblical message: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28). The religion of love and justice was multiethnic: it embraced all, regardless of their ethnic group.

Because of all this, the newly introduced evangelical Christianity was accepted and attractive. The steady growth of the EECMY is a continuing witness to this fact. For Gudina, to be general secretary of such a growing and dynamic church was both a privilege and a challenge.

HOLISTIC THEOLOGY

The EECMY, as a church from below and from the periphery, had to define its theology, a theology that attempted to meet the needs of its members in relation to the sociopolitical and religious situation of the Ethiopian people under the feudal and then Marxist regimes. The church had to develop an indigenous theology on the basis of the biblical message to the poor and exploited people (Luke 4:18–19; Matt 11:4–5). Jesus was put before the suffering people as liberator. Gudina’s memorandum of July 1975, addressed to the president of the EECMY, Emmanuel Abraham, shows clearly his interpretation of the good news for the Ethiopian people and particularly the members of the EECMY:

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is God’s power to save everyone who believes it. It is the power to save from eternal damnation, from exploitation, from political oppression, etc. Because of its eternal dimension the Gospel of Christ could never be replaced by any of the ideologies invented by men throughout the centuries. It is the only voice telling about a loving Father who gave His Son as a ransom for many. It tells about the forgiveness of sins and the resurrection of the body. It is the Good News to sinful man, the only power to save mankind from its sinfulness. It is too powerful to be compromised by any social system. It is too dear a treasure to be given up (Matthew 13,44). Nationalism has its own place, but it can never replace the Gospel of Jesus Christ. I hope and pray that the EECMY will be able to make the right decision at this critical moment in her history.⁷

The members of the EECMY experienced the gospel of Jesus Christ as the power of God, more powerful than all other powers, ideologies, and political systems in the world. This is an indigenous theology in which Jesus Christ is incarnated, a theology of liberation in the Ethiopian context. It is good news for the poor, oppressed, and dehumanized people who expect from God everything for their total life. It is an interpretation of the biblical message into the daily life of the believers. The social, political, economic, and religious situation in which Christians were living was unbearable. They were praying for drastic social and political change.

⁷Gudina Tumsa, “Some Issues Requiring Discussions and Decisions” (memorandum to Ato Emmanuel Abraham, President, EECMY, July 1975), in *Witness and Discipleship: Leadership of the Church in Multi-Ethnic Ethiopia in a Time of Revolution: The Essential Writings of Gudina Tumsa* (Addis Ababa: Gudina Tumsa Foundation, 2003) 76.

Holistic theology and the totalitarian state

In the 1970s, it became obvious that a clash between holistic theology and state ideology was unavoidable. At the general assembly of the EECMY held in Yiralem in 1973, the question of land reform was raised by some of the members from the south. This became a major issue, and a resolution was put forward, asking the emperor to request parliament to change the prevailing land ownership system for the benefit of the poor. Since the majority of the members of the EECMY and of the participants in the assembly were peasants, this resolution was adopted. For the first time since its formation, the general assembly of the EECMY officially raised a social issue, passing a resolution about political and social change.

A year after this resolution and prior to the change brought about by the Ethiopian revolution, Gudina omitted the name of Emperor Haile Selassie from the intercessions that had always been a part of the Sunday liturgy of the EECMY. When asked why he had omitted this part of the general prayer, Gudina replied that he would not pray for prolonging the feudal system.⁸ He knew that the members of his church were suffering in an inhuman situation, therefore he openly demonstrated his solidarity with them at the risk of his life. The emperor, as an absolute monarch, had absolute power to eliminate anyone who opposed him. For Gudina, no person was more powerful than the gospel of Jesus Christ. Therefore, there was an unavoidable confrontation with a state ideology that claimed the place of God and misused its power to oppress its citizens rather than to serve them. At this point, open confession of Christ was called for, even when it demanded one's life. That is what Gudina did; he spoke the right word at the right time and did the right thing at the right time.

When the long-awaited change took place in 1974, it seemed as if the vision for freedom was starting to become a reality. The revolution promised the poor peasants equality, land reform, equality of religions, better education, and health programs. All ethnic groups were to be given the chance to participate in the communal politics of their areas. The EECMY in general and General Secretary Gudina Tumsa in particular used this opportunity to encourage the synods to increase the social and spiritual services rendered to Ethiopian society. An "Oxen Fund" for landless farmers was provided to enable poor peasants to own oxen to work the land they were given, and marketing cooperatives were envisaged to protect them. But the revolution that deposed the emperor and brought such drastic change soon took two different directions.

The first phase of the revolution

The first phase of the revolution, which was bloodless, was accepted by all who had been suffering under the feudal regime, including the EECMY with its members; only a few of the well-to-do and the landowners opposed it. Its slogan

⁸In those days, in every school and on every official national day, people sang, "Long live Haile Selassie."

was very attractive: “Yale Minim dem Itiopia Tekidem” (“Ethiopian first without bloodshed”).

Even at this stage, there was clear indication that the regime was going to replace the old feudal system with socialism. The EECMY was careful not to believe all that was promised. Therefore, seminars and workshops were conducted to study what it meant to be Christian in such a situation. Several of the most important seminars centered around “Christianity and Socialism.” Experts were invited from the Lutheran World Federation to lecture on this topic. Participants from all EECMY synods, various organizations, and members of other churches also attended.

“in the midst of the revolution, when animosity and differences are growing among different groups, the church is to pray and work for peace and reconciliation”

The EECMY’s pastoral letter at the beginning of the revolution, written by Emmanuel Abraham and Gudina Tumsa, summarized the church’s understanding of its calling and identity: The EECMY is, first, a part of the body of Christ in the world, a church that proclaims the gospel of Christ in its full sense and is sustained by the sacraments. The church has been called to be an instrument of the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ and for service. It is a society for witness to the gospel and for service to fellow human beings, not a company set up for profit. The church encourages participation of its members at all levels in decision making. Its organization is designed to help people understand the new situation and make use of their civil rights. The EECMY stands for justice, respect for human rights, and the rule of law. Since ideologies cannot be considered absolute, complete allegiance is due to God and God alone. In the midst of the revolution, when animosity and differences are growing among different groups, the church is to pray and work for peace and reconciliation. It must overcome differences by dialogue, suspicion by trust, and hatred by love. In this situation the church is challenged to find itself by giving itself for the true liberation of the whole person. This pastoral letter of 1975 made clear that the church was conscious of what was to come and determined to influence it positively.⁹

The second phase of the revolution

The second phase of the revolution started in 1977 when Mengistu Haile Mariam eliminated his opponents and claimed absolute power. From then on, bloody revolution was practiced, and anyone who dared to question Mengistu’s power risked his life. At this time, several institutions of the EECMY and Radio Voice of the Gospel (the Lutheran World Federation radio station) were confis-

⁹Emmanuel Abraham and Gudina Tumsa, “Pastoral Letter: The Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus in the Ethiopian Revolution” (February 1975), in *Witness and Discipleship*, 77–81.

cated, and the closing of churches began. Gudina was requested to work with the regime and make a fund-raising trip abroad in support of the new state ideology. When he refused to cooperate, he was put on the blacklist and spied upon. He was arrested twice before he was finally abducted by the state security force of the military regime on July 28, 1979, and executed.¹⁰ His whereabouts were not known for more than a decade. This was a hard blow, aimed at silencing the EECMY. His family and friends found it difficult to accept this bitter reality. The fact of his murder was confirmed in 1992 when his corpse was discovered and a reburial ceremony made possible. Gudina had become a victim of the Marxist regime. After his abduction and murder, his wife, Tsehaye Tolesa, was arrested and tortured, and was kept in jail for almost ten years. All their children left the country, three of them before his execution and the youngest after that. Humanly speaking, Gudina Tumsa's family was destroyed. While his wife was in prison, the headquarters of the EECMY, where Gudina resided, was confiscated. In the absence of any family member, his books, clothes, and all they had had were put in a storehouse of the Mekane Yesus Seminary.

*“Gudina was the bravest witness of our generation, the
Dietrich Bonhoeffer of Africa”*

After Gudina was arrested the second time and then released, I visited him in his residence and asked him whether he knew what would happen if he were to be arrested again. He responded, “Yes, I know.” Then I told him that many friends in the country and abroad were concerned about his life and that there was a possibility to leave the country. He said to me, “I cannot leave my country and my church.” Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian, similarly resisted the Nazi ideology. When asked to escape, Bonhoeffer refused. He decided to risk his life and return to Germany, rather than staying in the United States where he had been a guest lecturer. In doing so, he became one of the bravest witnesses against idolatry. Gudina was the bravest witness of our generation, the Dietrich Bonhoeffer of Africa.

Gudina knew what he was doing and also knew that his life was at risk. In his 1975 memorandum, he stated: “Let not anyone deceive himself in taking Christianity as one of the social systems or ideologies. To be a Christian is to be a follower of the risen Christ, confessing him as the Lord of history.”¹¹ At this point, too, the clash between the ideology of the totalitarian state and the confession of the Lord of history was unavoidable.

¹⁰The first arrest was on October 11, 1978; the second in June 1979.

¹¹Tumsa, “Some Issues,” 73.

THE EECMY AS A MEMBER OF THE GLOBAL CHURCH

Gudina Tumsa, as general secretary of the EECMY, referred to the background of his church and its dynamism when he lectured on Ethiopian church growth in Tokyo in 1971. In the 1970s the integration of the new church and the earlier mission had taken place, and the identity of the young church had to be defined. At this meeting Gudina took the opportunity to explain the situation of his church. He emphasized the religious aspects of life in general and the need to be liberated from all dehumanizing evil spirits and from all social and political powers. In a situation where people were looking for salvation, this fuller definition had to be made clear. For his church, this was priority number one.¹² Clarifying this in a letter to the Lutheran World Federation, the officers of the EECMY stated that

an *integral human development*, where the spiritual and material needs are seen together, is the only right approach to the development question in our society....The division between witness and service, or between proclamation and development, which has been imposed on us, is, in our view, harmful to the Church and will ultimately result in a distorted Christianity.¹³

“We therefore see the development of the inner person,” they explained, “as a prerequisite for a healthy and lasting development of our society.”¹⁴ This letter was debated extensively in the Lutheran World Federation and found worldwide acceptance in the churches. The theology of the EECMY derived from the life experience of its members. Western theology has often lost the this-worldly dimension of human existence and become no longer a holistic theology. The effort of the EECMY to recover total human life is not only a challenge but also a contribution; it seeks to share with its sister churches and missions its experiences in poverty-stricken Ethiopia.

In 1973, at the Bangkok meeting of the Commission of World Mission and Evangelism of the World Council of Churches, “moratorium” became a very big issue.¹⁵ In the following year at the Lusaka Assembly of the All Africa Council of Churches, the debate continued. Since some people in the EECMY tended to endorse the idea of moratorium, uncertainty was created among the missionaries working with that church. Gudina and Paul Hoffman¹⁶ were asked to present a joint paper on the moratorium debate to the EECMY Executive Committee in

¹²Gudina Tumsa, “Report on Church Growth in Ethiopia” (report to the Consultation on Church Cooperation of the Lutheran World Federation, Tokyo, Japan, 29 April–4 May 1971), in *Witness and Discipleship*, 125–135.

¹³Church Officers of the EECMY, “On the Interrelation between Proclamation of the Gospel and Human Development” (letter to the Lutheran World Federation, May 1972), in *Witness and Discipleship*, 85, 91.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 85.

¹⁵The idea that there should be a moratorium on sending foreign resources and personnel to developing churches was launched by John Gato of the Presbyterian Church in Kenya. See the “Introductory Note” to “The Moratorium Debate and the EECMY,” by Gudina Tumsa and Paul E. Hoffman, in *Witness and Discipleship*, 45.

¹⁶Paul Hoffman, formerly of the department of theology and then of studies of the LWF in Geneva, was, at the time, a teacher at Mekane Yesus Seminary, sent by the Hermannsburg Mission. In the paper, Gudina presented the arguments against moratorium, while Hoffman presented some reasons that had led to the moratorium proposal.

August 1975. At this meeting, the main theological argument against moratorium was made in three points:

1. The demand for moratorium was based on a false assumption, namely, that indigenous churches had to hide their identities for the sake of receiving personnel and subsidies from abroad. Gudina noted: “To assume that a moratorium is necessary is to assume that a church is not free enough to determine its own policies.” This assumption was wrong, according to Gudina. His position is supported by the ability of Ethiopian Christians to carry on in the absence of foreign missionaries during the Ethio-Italian war. Moreover, the activities of the foreign missions have been experienced in Ethiopia as liberating work among the believers. Therefore, to stop these activities would have meant to betray the cause of the gospel. It would have been like an amputation—cutting off a part of the body, only to attempt, after some years, to reattach it to the body after it had decomposed.
2. Gudina argued that the moratorium should never be decided on the ground of self-pride or national feeling. It involved much more than that. It was a matter of life and death. Gudina found no theological basis for the moratorium and therefore urged its rejection.

“Independence, said Gudina, is a legitimate national political aim; it can never be an acceptable theological aim for the church.”

3. The church of Christ, said Gudina, is a universal church everywhere in the world. Therefore, wherever the church exists there should be *interdependence*. For him, the church of Christ is one, all believers belong to it, and the Lord Jesus Christ is the head of the church. *Independence*, said Gudina, “is a legitimate national political aim; it can never be an acceptable theological aim for the church.”¹⁷

Paul Hoffman argued that the EECMY’s answer to the moratorium issue should be no, but that concrete steps to become less dependent should be considered. Based on these arguments, the EECMY decided in 1977 to become financially self-supporting within twenty years. Unfortunately, that plan had to be given up during the time of the persecution of the church. Soon after the resolution, the military regime began closing church buildings and confiscating church properties. During the latter part of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s, three thousand evangelical churches in Ethiopia were closed and many church leaders arrested throughout the country. This was a time of great temptation for the church and its partners. After Gudina’s abduction, some people thought that this was the end of the official church, because the places of worship were turned into

¹⁷Tumsa and Hoffman, “The Moratorium Debate,” 47–49.

places of political indoctrination. But many Christians, young and old, men and women, continued to worship wherever they were, witnessing—even in prison—to others and comforting those who were discouraged and had lost hope.

Gudina made a report on the identity and integrity of the EECMY to the Ethiopia Consultation in Hannover, Germany, in 1973. The main purpose of this report was to explain the way the EECMY understood the “Integration Policy” that had been signed by the cooperating missions and churches. He argued that the national character of the EECMY had to be respected if the church were “to fulfil the commission of her Lord.” The EECMY, he stressed, was not an agent of any rich mission organization or of donor agencies or other churches. The colonial mentality of the Western missions and donor agencies was sharply criticized, and the maturity of the national church to decide and run its own business was clearly stated.¹⁸

The moratorium debate and the disputation in Hannover make clear that the EECMY is a self-conscious and responsible national evangelical church in Ethiopia, which has taken full responsibility to proclaim to all people the liberating gospel of the risen Lord in its fullness. Since it attempts to fulfill the commission of the Lord of the church, its national character, identity, and integrity must be respected. Its relation to partner churches, mission agencies, and global churches is defined in terms of interdependence and cooperation. Its needs are to be met on the basis of the fulfillment of common Christian responsibility, rather than out of the self-pride of the national church or of the donors.

GUDINA’S WITNESS

As General Secretary of the EECMY, Gudina had to boldly face three different fronts:

1. the ideology of the old feudal regime of Emperor Haile Selassie and the Marxist ideology of Mengistu Haile Mariam, both of which oppressed the Ethiopian citizens and claimed the total life of the society;
2. the mistaken understanding of the doctrine of “two kingdom,” which labeled the civic life of Ethiopian society as something in which Christians should not get involved;
3. the colonial mentality of the Western partners.

Under Gudina’s leadership, these challenges and the response of the EECMY initiated worldwide discussion.

The EECMY has understood and practiced evangelical Christianity as a multiethnic and universal faith. Its holistic theology is a challenge to all its partners and global churches. The good news, as experienced in the EECMY, is multidimensional. Gudina’s holistic theology and his sociopolitical engagement raised questions among many Christians. He was a man of diverse qualities, a pastor who

¹⁸Gudina Tumsa, “Report at the Ethiopia Consultation” (Hannover, Germany, 22–23 November 1973), in *Witness and Discipleship*, 95–110.

could preach the gospel and identify himself with what he preached. His sermons were short but to the point. His congregation appreciated his humility, his honest and straightforward attitude. He was a charismatic man who could accommodate diverse gifts in his church and create an atmosphere of unity in diversity.

Gudina was farsighted, a prophet who could warn his church ahead of time. Non-Christians and even some Christians think that he was a politician and an Oromo nationalist. His thoughts and actions did not fit the normal pattern of people's thought. That is why every group understood him differently. As an Oromo, he demonstrated his national identity; as a leader of his church, he accommodated all members of the EECMY from the various parts of the empire; as a citizen, he felt responsible to address the political and social issues of his country. He wrote: "Apolitical life is not worthy of existence, uninvolvement is a denial of the goodness of creation and of the reality of incarnation."¹⁹

"a Christian goes as a lamb to be slaughtered only when he/she knows that this is in complete accord with the will of God who has called him to his service"

In the testimony written for the Eleventh General Assembly of the EECMY a week before his abduction on July 28, 1979, Gudina showed how determined he was to follow Jesus and to fulfill only his will. "To be a Christian," he wrote, "is not to be a hero to make history for oneself. A Christian goes as a lamb to be slaughtered only when he/she knows that this is in complete accord with the will of God who has called him to his service."²⁰ In this document, Gudina analyzed the present situation of Christians in Ethiopia under the threat of an atheistic regime and made clear their responsibilities. Though he was not present and his whereabouts were unknown, the testimony was read to the assembly half a year later.

After more than two decades, his church and its partners have started now to work on the legacy of Gudina Tumsa. That legacy and the continued growth of the EECMY, along with the sociopolitical situation in Ethiopia, remain great challenges for our time. Since the present government, the EPRDF,²¹ which developed the strategy of "one-party centralism," abuses human rights and keeps the citizenry under its control, the EECMY and its partners need to continue the kind of advocacy initiated by Gudina.

I conclude with the "Litany of the Kingdom" used at the 1980 Melbourne Conference on Mission and Evangelism:

¹⁹Tumsa, "Some Issues," 69.

²⁰Gudina Tumsa, "The Role of a Christian in a Given Society" (paper read posthumously to the Eleventh General Assembly of the EECMY, Mekane Yesus Seminary in Makanissa, Addis Ababa, 23–31 January 1980), in *Witness and Discipleship*, 9.

²¹Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (which is dominated by the PLF, the Tigrean People's Liberation Front).

The prayer for a coming kingdom is a prayer of responsibility. It challenges us to give ourselves in service to the God for whose kingdom we pray, not counting the cost but pledging all. Our mission is to proclaim the Word of God, to name the Name of Jesus Christ, that all humanity may respond to the call our Lord presents, and turn to him. Our mission is also to offer good news to the poor, to heal the sick, to proclaim liberty to the captives, to provide sight to the blind, to announce the acceptable time of the Lord.²² ☩

TASGARA HIRPO was president of the Western Synod of the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus (1971–1982) and professor at the Mekane Yesus Seminary in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia (1978–1982), where he worked closely with Gudina Tumsa. Tasgara Hirpo lives now in Hermannsburg, where he most recently served as pastor to Oromo-speaking Evangelical Christians in the Federal Republic of Germany.

²²*Witnessing to the Kingdom: Melbourne and Beyond*, ed. Gerald H. Anderson (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1982) iii.