ONE IN CHRIST: THE EVER-DEVELOPING RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MEKANE YESUS AND THE LUTHERAN CHURCH OF THE GOOD SHEPHERD

Karen Walhof
(Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd, Minneapolis)

Abstract: This article details the 18-year global and local partnership between the Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd and the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus (EECMY), alongside local Oromo congregations. Beginning in 2005 as a three-year "Momentum for Mission" initiative, the relationship expanded significantly through mutual accompaniment, financial support, and regular delegation visits. Key collaborative efforts include supporting orphaned children in Nekemte, funding the Yubdo Integrated Rural Development environmental and clean-water project, providing educational scholarships for female students through REAL, and supplying medical equipment and administrative consultation to Aira Hospital. Despite organizational and political challenges—including the EECMY severing formal ties with the ELCA in 2013—Good Shepherd and its Ethiopian partners maintained deep interpersonal and spiritual bonds. Ultimately, the article frames this enduring cross-cultural relationship not merely as a charitable endeavor, but as a profound, Spirit-led manifestation of unity in Christ.

MOMENTUM FOR MISSION

In 2004, the Congregational Council of the Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd decided to embark on a new mission journey – a global relationship. Council President Renee Raether told the congregation that it might be difficult, and it certainly was a new endeavor for Good Shepherd, but she quoted John A. Shedd, saying, “The ship is safest when it’s in port, but that’s not what ships were built for.” Although our senior pastor had retired and another senior pastor had not yet been called, the Council wanted to proceed without delay to get this started. Responsibility was designated to the Board of Mission and others whom it might choose.

LISTENING FOR MISSION

A process of listening, holding individual conversations and group meetings, was set in motion, with a set of carefully crafted questions to gauge people’s interests and allow them to say what interested them in a global relationship. It was a significant and successful process that clearly revealed where people’s hearts were regarding the global church. It was also successful in getting the entire congregation thinking about global relationships and talking about the future. A unified response quickly developed during this process: People at Good Shepherd were interested in children and youth, education, and health care. And they wanted a clear time frame: three years. That indicated where to start.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR MISSION

Based upon the information gathered by the Listening for Mission Task Force and some key insights from people in the congregation, the Opportunities for Mission Task Force identified seven criteria in choosing the ministries included in what was dubbed the Momentum for Mission initiative:

1. Partnership with ongoing, established organizations so that the work could continue after our involvement was completed.
2. Local and global in scope.
3. Clear time horizon.
4. Intergenerational opportunities.

5. Involve financial and hands-on involvement.
6. Clear need for help.
7. Accountability and communication between the ministries and Good Shepherd.

The task force was in conversation with personnel from the Division for Global Mission of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), who provided several ministry opportunities across several countries. In addition, some members of the congregation came with suggestions for other partnerships they had been involved in—World Vision, for example.

Finally, the time came to decide where to focus this ministry. The task force considered all the possibilities before them and then prayed together for the Lord's guidance. Where was God leading us? When that question was put on the table, one task force member pointed to the ELCA Global Mission opportunity of the Victimized Orphan Children Rehabilitation Program in Nekemte, Ethiopia. This ministry included children and youth, health care, and education. It seemed like a perfect match with Good Shepherd's interests. The task force immediately united in that decision.

With that, newly-arrived Senior Pastor Jon Buuck suggested we talk with the Oromo Evangelical Lutheran Church in Minneapolis, adding a local dimension.

One of the Minneapolis Area Synod Hunger Committee's projects was an environmental initiative called the Yubdo Integrated Rural Development Program, designed to help farmers keep topsoil in place, make farmland more arable, and prevent erosion of forest land. Girma Daka, at the Oromo congregation, was involved in the synod hunger committee and was promoting this project, so we spoke with him.

Finally, an Ethiopian woman living in Minneapolis, Tsehai Wodajo, had started a scholarship program for girls in Ethiopia called Resources for the Enrichment of African Lives (REAL), which worked through the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus. We would support a specific number of girls in this program.

Components of Momentum for Mission

Based on these conversations, this task force recommended to the Council that the components of Momentum for Mission include a three-year initiative with the following components:

- Partner with the Oromo Evangelical Lutheran Church, Minneapolis, helping it develop congregational ministries and provide a setting for those ministries in a building of its own.
- Support three projects in Ethiopia among the Oromo people there through the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus: the Victimized Orphan Children Rehabilitation Program, the Yubdo Integrated Rural Development Program, and scholarships for female students through REAL (Resources for the Enrichment of African Lives).
- Identify a Latin American ministry site that offered hands-on involvement through mission work trips.
- Support these ministries and enable members to engage in them locally and globally by employing a part-time staff person for mission as well as offering partial global travel scholarships for members making mission trips.

The budget was identified as follows:

- Local: $325,000 (Our Redeemer Oromo Evangelical Congregation building improvement; program, staff, facilities development
- Global: $129,000 (Victimized Orphan Rehabilitation Program, Yubdo Project, REAL scholarships, Latin American relationship)
- Other: $146,000 (staff salary, travel scholarship, education, communication)

On the Day of Pentecost 2005, the congregation of the Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd met to consider this new ministry development. When President Rich Sykora asked for a vote in support of the proposal, there was a loud "aye"; when he called for those opposing the measure, there was only silence. He said, "Then I guess it's unanimous!" A three-year initiative with the components listed above

was enthusiastically approved. In addition, the congregation committed to a mission appeal with a goal of $600,000.

IMPLEMENTATION OF MOMENTUM FOR MISSION AT GOOD SHEPHERD

Immediately, Senior Pastor Jon Buuck hired a part-time staff person for Momentum for Mission—Sue Lyke, who was a masterful planner and booster for the ministries involved. Serving as the Momentum for the Mission director from September 2005 through September 2008, Sue provided spirited and passionate leadership that engaged the congregation in many ways with these ministries. She also began linking us with people in various sites in Ethiopia.

Sue recommended Good Shepherd shape its mission outreach around the ELCA's missional approach of "accompaniment." Accompaniment replaced the traditional sense of unidirectional mission – top-down, expert-novice, wealthy-needy, us-them. Accompaniment was defined as working together in solidarity, practicing interdependence and mutuality, in relationship with global companions, striving to share God's love and to participate in God's mission together. That concept powerfully influenced the developing Good Shepherd mission ethos.

OUR REDEEMER OROMO EVANGELICAL CHURCH – MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA.

Oromo Evangelical Lutheran Church, a local worshiping community composed of Ethiopian immigrants from the Oromo ethnic group, was sharing a building with another congregation. At the same time, Our Redeemer Lutheran Church in Minneapolis had dwindled to a small number of members, most of whom were elderly. They could no longer maintain their building and were looking for an alternative. The proposal from the Minneapolis Area Synod office was for the Oromo congregation to purchase the building from Our Redeemer Lutheran Church. In the middle of that conversation, Our Redeemer decided they would gift the building to the Oromo congregation. In August 2005, a worship service was held at the church, during which the keys and ownership of the building were handed over to the Oromo congregation. The Oromo congregation changed its name to Our Redeemer Oromo Evangelical Church, as a way of recognizing Our Redeemer's gift.

VICTIMIZED ORPHAN CHILDREN REHABILITATION PROGRAM – NEKEMTE, ETHIOPIA

The ELCA Division for Global Mission supported a program of the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus (EECMY) designed to help children orphaned because of HIV/AIDS. It was located in Nekemte. The program provided one child in a family with housing, food, clothing, and an education, thereby supporting the whole family. Good Shepherd's involvement was financial, funneled through the ELCA Global Mission Division. It was a three-year financial commitment.

YUBDO INTEGRATED RURAL DEVELOPMENT PROJECT – AIRA, ETHIOPIA

A program of the hunger committee of the Minneapolis Area Synod, this three-year project was designed to assist farmers in the Yubdo area of the Birbir Dilla Synod, near Aira, Ethiopia, in making farmland viable, reforesting eroded areas, and supplying clean water. Good Shepherd's involvement was financial, working through the Minneapolis Area Synod. Again, it was a three-year financial commitment.

SCHOLARSHIPS THROUGH REAL – BURAYU KATTA, NEKEMTE, AND AIRA-GULISO, ETHIOPIA

This program was supported by Resources for the Enrichment of African Lives, a nonprofit organization based in Minneapolis. For $360 a year, a girl would be supported by a scholarship that allowed her to continue her secondary education, rather than being put to manual labor or married at a very young age. Momentum for Mission funding provided scholarships for four girls through REAL. This program drew

such interest from the congregation that individuals were invited to participate. Eventually, 28 girls were supported. Good Shepherd's involvement was financial, but sponsors began writing the girls they supported, creating wonderful interpersonal relationships.

NUESTRO SALVADOR CONGREGATION – MONTEVIDEO, URUGUAY

A planning group surveyed options for a relationship with Latin America and chose to work through Lutheran Partners in Global Ministry, in partnership with the United Evangelical Lutheran Church of Argentina and Uruguay. A companion congregation relationship with Nuestro Salvador, Montevideo, Uruguay, was established. This program was intended to offer travel opportunities and global engagement at a lower cost than traveling to Ethiopia, with a shorter travel schedule.

GOOD SHEPHERD'S RESPONSE TO THE GLOBAL RELATIONSHIP

One way of gauging Good Shepherd's interest in this new global ministry was that the proposed $600,000 mission appeal was oversubscribed to $655,000. And the money was not only pledged, but it also came in! In addition, Good Shepherd members traveled to Ethiopia on two mission trips in the first two years. Other trips followed.

Although Good Shepherd was involved in local service ministries and, of course, through the work of the ELCA, a global relationship was a new experience for the congregation. It was a beginning – heartfelt and with the Spirit's leading – but only the very beginning! We were called to listen, learn, and deepen our understanding of one another. God had called us into the world – together.

BEGINNING THE RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD'S PEOPLE IN ETHIOPIA

Sue Lyke began by initiating the relationships laid out. Initially, Sue spent most of her time working closely with staff and volunteers at Our Redeemer Oromo Evangelical Congregation. There were serious structural issues with the building they had received. Good Shepherd staff met together with Our Redeemer Oromo Evangelical Church staff and volunteers to train Sunday school teachers and other congregational leaders. Shared meals and table fellowship, along with worship at one another's congregations, extended the bonds and strengthened our ties.

Next, Sue looked ahead to leading Good Shepherd travelers to Ethiopia, to meet church leaders and members there. If we thought the commitments already made were groundbreaking, we had no idea what lay ahead for us.

GOOD SHEPHERD'S FIRST JOURNEY TO MEKANE YESUS – 2006

The travelers went to evaluate the mission projects in which Good Shepherd was involved and to bring those experiences back to the congregation. They hoped to meet the leaders of the ministries we were supporting and hear their stories.

ADDIS ABABA

Worship with the Gulale Congregation

We worshiped with the Gulale Mekane Yesus Congregation, which was meeting in a temporary metal building while their new church space was being built. The service took place in the Afan-Oromo language, so we understood nothing of what was said. We could, however, recognize the rhythm of the service, and we felt the deep piety of the people gathered there. The service included baptism, sermon, prayers, and liturgy. After worship, we joined the elders of the congregation at the Jerusalem Hotel for lunch. We enjoyed the food; we reveled in the fellowship.

The Blieses

We had dinner with Dr. Loren Bliese, a longtime missionary, professor, and Bible translator who had lived in Ethiopia for some 40 years until his retirement five years earlier, along with his wife Edith. When the Blieses began to tell us about their experiences during the socialist military government in the 1970s and 1980s (the Derg), we were stunned by those incredible stories. The Blieses told us about Emmanuel Abraham, the longtime president of the church, who called the expatriate missionaries together and told them they were free to leave and that there would be no anger or resentment from the Ethiopians if they did. Still, they were “welcome to stay and suffer with us,” which the Blieses did. We left that night, honored to have met the Blieses and wondering at their courage and faith, as well as the faithful determination of Mekane Yesus members as they continued to serve and preach in Christ’s name in the face of government interruption and opposition.

Lutheran World Federation staff

We met with staff at the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) offices. They talked about how LWF and EECMY worked together, determining projects and then carrying them out. It was an eye-opening session on the many areas of Ethiopian society in which Mekane Yesus was involved.

Burayu Katta and the REAL girls

We drove to the school to learn more about the scholarship program and meet the girls who benefited from it. We saw clearly how important scholarships were to these girls, giving them a full education. Ammanuel Musse, headmaster of the school, and his wife, Elfinish Namara, gave us a wonderfully clear picture of the REAL scholarship program.

NEKEMTE

This was the ministry that had first piqued our interest in Ethiopia, and we were eager to see it firsthand. The president of the Central Synod, Pastor Asfaw Terfassa, and Mr. Chali Wakjira, director of the Central Synod’s Victimized Orphaned Children Rehabilitation Program, gave us a quick overview of the program. Then they took us to the seminary auditorium, where we met the children served, waiting with bright eyes and eager smiles. A carefully prepared program followed, which opened to us the depth of the program. Afterward, we walked back to the synod office, with children swarming all around us. It was striking that although these children had lost everything that provided them with security in life – parents, home, provisions, medical care, education – they were laughing and joking because of this synod’s program to support them. They had hope!

It was a surprise to us that the children supported by this program largely lived in houses built by the Central Synod. At the program’s beginning, it was intended that children would live with extended family. However, fear of HIV/AIDS made families unwilling to take in the orphaned children, so the synod had constructed homes in which these parentless families could live. For example, one home we visited was occupied by a 14-year-old girl and her 11-year-old brother; another by a 16-year-old girl and her two brothers. The Central Synod had given them the hope of a future beyond their current situation.

AIRA

Meeting with synod staff

At an evening dinner hosted by synod staff, Birbir Dilla Synod President Mulatu Gadisa told us about the synod's many ministries. It was a unique synod because it included so many institutions, including the

only hospital now owned by the EECMY, Aira Hospital, along with several clinics in outlying areas; a School of Nursing; Onesimus Nesib Seminary; a secondary school run by the church; as well as development projects like the Yubdo Project. Those, along with many congregations and preaching posts, made it a complicated organization!

The Yubdo Project

We drove a significant distance into farmland and forest. The issue for the Yubdo Project was clear: due to environmental degradation, there was real erosion, with farmland topsoil blowing away and huge swaths of forest being deforested. When that land was deforested, the termites began eating the crops and grass, depleting the soil of life. The development office of Birbir Dilla Synod worked closely with farmers to determine where to plant trees so the forests could be rebuilt. Then grass was planted on the open land, with the idea that it would grow, die, compost, and improve the quality of the topsoil. What a visionary and patient approach to this environmental issue!

Another facet of the Yubdo Project was the use of mud-brick buildings. Mud brick technology used a form into which mud was packed to create a brick. A house built with mud bricks would save scores of small trees, helping to minimize deforestation. In addition, mud-brick technology was not affected by termites, unlike houses made from hardwoods or small trees.

We saw another facet of the Yubdo Project – capped springs that provide clean water to area families. As we had driven into Aira, we had seen the chain of events: cattle were standing in the river, drinking water and relieving themselves; then, downstream, children were swimming naked in the water; then, even farther downstream, women were gathering water for cooking and drinking. The water certainly wasn't clean or healthy at that point. By capping springs in the rivers, the water stayed clean. As we inspected a capped spring, a young boy walked up with a large jug. He filled the jug from the capped spring and then set off home with clean water for his family to drink and wash with.

Lalo Aira Congregation

The Lalo Aira Congregation church building was of considerable size, yet next to it stood a lean-to where a large number of people could also sit during worship. We were told that, in addition, the windows were opened each Sunday and people gathered around each window to hear the Word proclaimed. This was a booming congregation!

The elders of the congregation had just concluded their weekly meeting in the worship space and welcomed us in for greetings and prayer. Then the travelers were invited to kneel around the altar at the front of the worship space. As the woman leading the prayer spoke, elders laid their hands on us with strength and power – "kneading" (like bread) the prayers into us. The prayer rose and fell and then rose again, pressing on to its conclusion with an urgent pace and a confident tone. Again, we did not know the words, but we knew the power of God through God's people in this place. It was an experience none of us will ever forget. We felt clearly the truth of the fact that we were indeed one in Christ, God's people, whatever our culture or language or ethnic background or hometown. It was holy ground. We knew that God was in this place! There was no fire, no burning bush, but the Spirit brought us together in an undeniable way. There was a sense that the Spirit was guiding us to new involvements that day. The Spirit was speaking, nudging, and pushing us.

Aira Hospital

It was not on our agenda, but we found some time to visit Aira Hospital. We had learned that Aira Hospital was the only fully operating hospital between Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia, and Khartoum, the capital of Sudan, and some people walked for days to be treated there. Development Director Markos Aboma revealed that beginning next year, funding from the German church, which had

supported Aira Hospital since its inception, would end. The hospital's continuation was crucial not only for the EECMY but also for many people in western Ethiopia. We felt the Spirit’s nudge again.

Goodbye to Aira

As we packed our suitcases in the vans, they were marked with the red dust and mud of Aira; our hearts were marked with the love and hope of the people of God in Aira. We might wash the red stains off our luggage; we would never rid ourselves of the impact God’s people had made on our hearts. Somehow, we knew we would never be the same after Aira.

Bodji and the Western Synod

In Bodji, we were greeted by the Western Synod president, Pastor Taressa. On Sunday, we worshiped with the Bodji congregation on the synod compound. Again, jam-packed with people and others staring in through the windows, we were moved by their Spirited worship. After worship, we headed toward Bapo Chonge. Again, the building was filled to overflowing, with people standing all around the building, listening in. At Bapo Chonge, we were privileged to be invited for coffee to the home of Pastor Namara Challa, a legendary evangelist in the EECMY. Then, in his 80s, Pastor Namara had started 23 congregations in the Bodji area. Our next stop was the Bila Congregation.

Afterward, we were invited to an elder’s home for dinner. As was true of most of the houses in the area, there was no electricity, so the host brought out a kerosene lamp and several candles. We dined on a feast of budena, bread, doro wot, and many kinds of cooked vegetables. We ate and talked together in the near-darkness – a lovely, intimate setting of God’s people, gathered around food, learning more about each other and our ministries. It reminded me of the biblical story of the road to Emmaus, where the travelers did not recognize Jesus at first, and then he was known to them “in the breaking of the bread.” Jesus was there – in our interaction, in our new Ethiopian friends.

Home Again

The two weeks at Mekane Yesus affected us deeply. I wrote in my journal:

> When I close my eyes, I see the smile of Markos, who supervises the Yubdo Project, working with the community to enable them to improve their lives. I hear the laughter of the children of Nekemte, orphaned and wondering about the future, but hopeful because of the work of the Central Synod. I smell the smoke from wood fires that waft through the air throughout Oromia, around which families gather every day. I tasted the spicy wot, which was served to us with gracious hospitality in so many places throughout Ethiopia. I remember the look of promise on the girls' faces at Burayu Katta. I feel the hands of the elders at Lalo Aira Congregation praying with us and sharing the power of the Spirit.
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> In the midst of desperate living conditions, of overwhelming unemployment, of unsettled relationships between ethnic groups and religious communities, of uncertain government, the people of Mekane Yesus live in hope, in the joy of Christ, in a deep spirituality which binds them closely to the love of God.

The travelers went to Ethiopia to investigate the ministries to which Good Shepherd members had committed themselves, and what they found surpassed expectations. They determined that all the ministries we were supporting were well managed and had appropriate financial parameters. They met people who truly were genuine witnesses of the gospel in their place. They were amazed at the holistic faith and Spirit-led evangelism in the EECMY. They encountered new ministries in Ethiopia that were enticing and wondered if God was nudging Good Shepherd in new and different ways.

MAKING CONNECTIONS BACK HOME

The travelers presented their trip experiences and findings to God’s people at Good Shepherd immediately upon their return. There was great interest and scores of questions. The Victimized Orphan Children Rehabilitation Program in Nekemte captured their hearts. The environmental work in the Yubdo Project seemed visionary and piqued the interest of some others. And even more people became interested in supporting REAL scholarships after sharing the story of the girls at Burayu Katta. Other people expressed interest in traveling there, and we soon began planning another visit to the land of Mekane Yesus.

Then, informal conversations sprang up. A couple of people at Good Shepherd were aware of the work of Global Health Ministries, which collected working medical equipment that U.S. hospitals and clinics no longer used and then shipped it to mission hospitals. They were intrigued about how that organization might help Aira Hospital, and the dreaming commenced.

After discussions with the first-trip travelers, the Good Shepherd Congregational Council authorized a Companion Congregation relationship with the Lalo Aira Congregation in Aira and suggested that it be discussed with them to gauge their interest.

ADDITIONAL JOURNEYS TO MEKANE YESUS

Over the next fifteen years, Good Shepherd travelers visited Ethiopia six times, marking an evolution of leaders both in Mekane Yesus and at Good Shepherd – now including three EECMY presidents, three Birbir Dilla Synod presidents, two Onesimus Nesib Seminary presidents, three Good Shepherd senior pastors, and 52 travelers. When people asked at Good Shepherd what we were going to “do” in Ethiopia, our response was always the same: We’re going to be the church with the people of God in Ethiopia. And so it was.

ADDIS ABABA

Meeting with EECMY leaders

Each time we visited Addis Ababa, we connected with EECMY leaders and institutions. We most often met the president of the church as well as other executives working with programs in which we were involved. One year, we planned a thank-you dinner for DASSC personnel who had helped us get the container of equipment and supplies to Aira Hospital the previous year. Each of these gatherings gave us a better understanding of their vision, ideas for the future, and piety – very helpful as we shared with our congregation back home and discussed plans.

Worshipping with EECMY congregations

We worshiped in various EECMY congregations, enjoying their worship styles and their deep spirituality.

Mekane Yesus Seminary

Each time we visited Mekane Yesus Seminary, where we met with the president, faculty members, and some students, we heard about the great needs for pastoral leadership in this burgeoning church.

In 2019, Good Shepherd’s director of worship and music, Ralph Johnson, introduced American four-part choral singing to the seminary students at the request of the dean of the School of Music and Media. Also that year, Senior Pastor Karl Jacobson met with Dr. Bruk, the president of Mekane Yesus Seminary, to discuss his vision for the seminary's future. He talked about the challenges the seminary faced. With nearly nine million members, about 18,000 congregations and preaching places, and only 10,000 pastors, the need was great.

REAL girls

Each time in Addis Ababa included a visit with the REAL girls at Burayu Katta**.** Not only were we able to visit the school where some of our REAL scholarship recipients studied, but in 2007, we were also invited into four of their homes to see where and how they lived. We came to know the girls as they grew and matured.

Other events

At times, there were special events we could participate in – the Oromo Leadership Gathering at the Millennium Center, for example. And we were tourists – visiting museums, shops, and significant historical sites in the city.

NEKEMTE

Each time we visited Nekemte, we spent time with the children involved in the Victimized Orphan Children Rehabilitation Program. So many beautiful children, laughing and curious! What a desperate situation they faced, but the Central Synod offered hope and help.

AIRA

In 2007, during our second visit, Markos Aboma, Birbir Dilla Synod DASSC director, greeted us as we drove onto the hospital compound. “It is good that you are here, because then we know we are not alone,” he said. And there it was – one of the reasons we have global relationships: so we know we are not alone! It echoes in my ears each time we travel to Ethiopia!

Meeting with synod staff

During each visit, we met with the synod president and his staff, often dining together. Breaking bread together was precious – opening us to the dreams and needs of our family in Aira. The tone and topic of the meetings changed, depending on the synod president, his style, and the immediate needs seen by synod staff, but it was always a respectful exchange.

Aira Hospital

Each time in Aira, we spent time at the Aira Hospital, learning more about their work, needs, and hopes for the future. In 2007, Dr. Erichsen showed us the equipment they were using, which was worn out and broken. It spurred us to explore ways to help the hospital staff through supplemental equipment, supplies, and administrative expertise. In 2010, Good Shepherd worked with Global Health Ministries to ship a sea container of equipment to the hospital, a move that was revolutionary for patient treatment there.

Clinics

We learned that Aira Hospital supported several local clinics, spread throughout the west. On our 2015 trip, we learned that improving the outlying clinics in western Ethiopia could greatly improve the quality of life for people in these communities. With additional equipment in the clinics, more people could receive basic medical and maternity care in their communities, freeing up hospital resources to focus on higher levels of care and surgeries. Also, quicker care close to home sometimes meant less severe illness, so hospital care was not warranted.

A class of graduates from the School of Nursing had been trained as midwives, in line with a recent government requirement. Additional supplies would allow the midwives to provide safe maternity care in their communities.

One-time missionary to Ethiopia and traveler from Good Shepherd, Phil Jacobson, recently died, and the memorials given in his memory were designated for this project. Global Health Ministries also assisted in providing funding. With this money, Aira Hospital was able to purchase the necessary equipment in Ethiopia in 2018, thereby greatly improving the health care provided at its clinics.

School of Nursing

Each visit to Aira included time at the School of Nursing. That institution has provided an ever-changing curriculum that responds to students' needs and meets governmental requirements. Although the curriculum was geared toward nursing students early on, government requirements later changed it into a midwifery program.

Onesimus Nesib Seminary

We spent time at the seminary during each visit, especially with its president from the beginning of our involvement there through 2018, Pastor Tadesse Dissassa. Pastor Tadesse had been a great friend to Good Shepherd as we were finding our way with the people of God in Aira; he was instrumental in establishing and sustaining the relationship between the Birbir Dilla Synod and Good Shepherd.

The seminary library offered relatively few books for student use. Sending books to supplement the library’s holdings became an ongoing mission for Good Shepherd. For example, when the American missionaries who had served in Ethiopia met for a reunion, several donated books for the library, including a whole set of Luther’s Works. We also collected classic Lutheran texts from the libraries of American theology professors as they were downsizing. In each case, the Good Shepherd Foundation financed the shipping costs to Aira.

When we began communicating with Seminary President Zewditu as we prepared for our 2019 visit, she asked if Senior Pastor Karl Jacobson – a former professor at Augsburg University and Luther Seminary – would lecture at Onesimus Nesib Seminary while we were there. Pastor Jacobson presented three lectures at the seminary on the doctrine of justification and Christology.

Meeting with the faculty at Onesimus Nesib Seminary each time was fascinating. The presidents, Pastors Tadesse and Zewditu, always scheduled a meal for faculty and travelers. It was a lovely, warm time to learn more about each other and the aims, goals, and hopes of faculty members.

Lalo Aira Congregation

On Sundays in Aira, we worshiped with God’s people at Lalo Aira Congregation. Each time we were there, we were invited to kneel at the altar as the elders joined us. The entire congregation stood and extended their hands to us in blessing as an elder prayed in a passionate, pious tone. In contrast, the elders laid hands on us, always an emotional and powerful experience.

In 2007, after the service, we joined the elders for lunch. With then-Synod President Mulatu translating, we pledged to be companion congregations, praying for each other and continuing in communication together, coming to know and love each other.

In 2011, we came bearing gifts. The Altar Guild at Good Shepherd had replaced linens on the altar, and a beautiful altar cloth remained. An Altar Guild member had embroidered a greeting on the altar cloth: “Good Shepherd, Lalo Aira. One Body in Christ.” Truly, we were joined together in Word, sacrament, and ministry.

The Yubdo Project

Each visit to Aira included time at the Yubdo Project, to see the growing trees, ground cover, and capped wells. In 2007, farmers came out of the bush to use the well. One of them told us, "Now the children have stopped getting sick." It was a powerful reminder of the purpose of this project.

Through the years, visiting the Yubdo Project was a delightful reminder of time passing. We were amazed at the tree plantings – plantations, they called them – as they grew to great heights. At our last visit, in 2019, the trees were full-grown, and there were fields of them. Who knew, back at the beginning in 2006, that a relatively small number of seedlings would develop into expansive forests!

TRAVEL TO AND FROM THE WEST

Each trip, traveling from Addis Ababa to Wollega or returning, involved one or two long days filled with the glories of God's creation and the grace of God's people. We spent many hours just looking out the windows of our vehicles, viewing the amazing countryside – the deep gullies, the lofty hills, the fields like a patchwork quilt of various shades of green and yellow and gold, the footpaths cutting through groves of trees or grassland – and the people – the men sauntering down the road, the women stooped over with bundles of sticks or grain, the little boys darting here and there as they chased goats and sheep, the little girls walking with such dignity and grace, women and children standing together in front of grass huts watching us speed by.

In 2019, the cloud hanging over our journey to the west was this: Would we be able to travel from Addis Ababa to the west, given the political struggles inside the country? Girma Daka had been an honest and forthright travel partner, warning us it might not be possible and just too dangerous. He cautioned that there were military checkpoints all along our route in the west. We would need to stop at each and be approved to travel farther west. Before traveling to Ethiopia, we went to the Ethiopian consulate in St. Paul and asked their counsel. They were encouraging. We asked them for a letter we could use at military checkpoints to show we were a reliable, safe group. We had that in hand.

That year, our backup plan, if we could not go west, had been discussed with Birbir Dilla Synod President Melkamu Itefa in Aira – that then leaders from our partners in Aira would travel to Addis Ababa to meet with us there. But my dearest hope was that our travelers could experience life in Aira among God's people there. Once you had experienced that wonderful interplay between God's striving-to-be-faithful people and a faithful God, between God's creation and the almighty Creator, between God's people who trusted deeply and told the story freely and the God who lived among and within them; once you came to know these people living in circumstances so different from ours, with want and uncertainty all around, who continued to anticipate and expect God's blessings; once you had experienced what it was to be the church in its global dimensions, where our differences dissolved as Almighty God wrapped all of us in a loving embrace – then you wanted these newcomers to Ethiopia to have the full experience.

And in 2019, we did indeed drive west. The drivers were the most persuasive in making the decision. They were ready to drive us there. When we began encountering the military checkpoints, there was an anxious silence in the vans. Unlike what we had feared, they were a quick stop, with our drivers exchanging friendly conversation with the military stationed at each stop. We were grateful for the drivers' easy way with the soldiers. With each stop, our anxiety lessened until it became merely perfunctory.

As we pulled into the Aira Hospital compound, President Melkamu and some of his staff were there to welcome us. He said simply, "Karen, you came!" I said, "Of course. We said we would be coming." He replied, "Ah, but many have promised that, and they have not come here to be with us. You came." It was a moving, emotional welcome that underscored the importance of our time together – for them and for us.

Through the years and our many visits to Aira, our relationship with the people of God there has deepened and become rich in ever-increasing ways. Though we could list the ways we have assisted the institutions of the church in Aira, our ministry there has developed into something else. It is not just about

doing; it is about relationship and identity. We had discovered family in Aira – God’s family. Each time we travel to Aira, it is a family reunion.

A SHIPMENT OF EQUIPMENT FOR AIRA HOSPITAL – 2010

After the 2007 trip, when we saw the desperate needs at Aira Hospital, we got busy. The medical professionals who had been on that trip recruited some others and established a health ministries task force focused on Aira Hospital. They started talking with Global Health Ministries (GHM) about both an administrative consultant to work with the management at Aira Hospital and sending a sea container of equipment to Aira Hospital.

The need was clear: Owned and operated by the EECMY, Aira Hospital was the only full-service hospital between Khartoum and Addis Ababa at that time, serving an area of 600,000 people. A dedicated staff served 60,000 to 70,000 patients per year, with approximately 150 outpatient visits per day and 80 inpatient beds. The surgeons on staff did about 3000 surgeries per year. They did all this with dated equipment that sometimes functioned only with careful jerry-rigging and prayers.

Two of the medical professionals who had traveled to Aira worked with GHM and Aira Hospital to determine what equipment was most needed at the hospital. GHM had a long list of equipment that was often available. Aira Hospital staff picked and chose from that list, then added additional items that they thought were necessary. They asked for an operating room suite – table, lights, all of it. The travelers had seen what they had been using – an operating room table that was rusted through and no longer adjusted in height, and lights taped together. New equipment was necessary. Plus, many of the beds at Aira Hospital were old and no longer adjustable.

Although much of the required equipment was available from Global Health Ministries, other equipment had to be purchased ($30,000), and shipping costs ($13,000) brought the total to $43,000 to get the container to Aira. First, we asked for donations from the people at Good Shepherd and Our Redeemer Oromo Evangelical Congregation. And they were generous. For example, one family at Good Shepherd donated the money to provide a total operating suite. But it wasn’t enough. The missionaries who had served in Ethiopia held a reunion and collected money to help pay for the shipment. And they were generous. It still wasn’t enough. Then, miracles happened. A doctor in South Dakota who knew about GHM’s work and had served in the Peace Corps in Ethiopia came forward with the remaining funds needed to ship a 40-foot sea container of medical equipment to Ethiopia!

After some difficulties with Ethiopian customs, the equipment arrived in Aira. When we returned to Aira the next year, Dr. Erichsen showed us the operating room suites set up at the hospital, the beds, and other equipment that had been shipped in the sea container a year earlier. He told us what a difference this made to the hospital's work.

CONSULTATION WITH AIRA HOSPITAL – 2012 AND 2015

In 2012, a consultant from Global Health Administrative Partners (GHAP) began working with the Aira Hospital administration. GHAP was a division of GHM (Global Health Ministries). The consultant had been a hospital administrator in Colorado and had recently retired. He was a lifelong Lutheran, deeply involved in his current congregation.

In other countries, GHAP had worked at the invitation of leaders in mission hospitals to help strengthen governance, financing, and local health leadership capacity, with an emphasis on community-engaged care. This consultant met with the administration, doctors, and staff at Aira Hospital to review the services provided, the hospital's financial situation, and leadership's vision and dreams. Based on those conversations, he made recommendations to improve Aira Hospital’s situation. They were shared with Aira Hospital, the Birbir Dilla Synod, and DASCC. It is important to note that Aira Hospital took issue with some of the recommendations, leading to some back-and-forth between the hospital and GHAP. Both partners respected that difference of opinion and noted that any suggestions made were advisory.

EECMY SEVERS RELATIONSHIP WITH ELCA, AND WE PATIENTLY WAIT

We received word in February 2013 that the EECMY had decided to sever its relationship with the ELCA because of the decisions made at the 2009 ELCA Churchwide Assembly and subsequent actions regarding homosexual leaders in the church.

Senior Pastor Debra Samuelson and I talked about the situation. What should we do? Would this be the end of our seven-year relationship with the ministries of the EECMY? It was too painful to consider. We decided to wait and see, not pressuring our friends in Aira to choose in any way, but giving them time to think about what this meant for our partner ministries. We waited, but in time I wrote to Pastor Tadesse, our primary contact in Aira, that we were aware of the decision made by the EECMY, that we were grieved that this precious relationship was broken, but that "as far as we are concerned, nothing has changed. In Christ, you are our family." We made clear that we would understand and accept their decision, whatever it was, but we were bound together in God's love. And we would not turn our backs on our partners.

And so we waited, wondering how our dear friends in Aira would respond. Finally, a couple of weeks later, we had a response from Pastor Tadesse: "We are joined together in the spirit of Christ, and nothing can change that." There was more, of course, but those words clutched at our hearts and gave us immense joy.

Our relationships would continue! We would walk carefully in the future, never wanting to embarrass our friends in Aira or to force them to choose between our partnership and their relationships within the EECMY. We would be alert to their signals and concerns. We would be flexible. And beyond Aira, we would need to test the waters before we made any moves or requests. But we would continue to be in ministry together! The years of working together had built trust and appreciation – and love.

Not long after this, Luther Seminary graduate student Samuel Yonas Deressa traveled to Ethiopia to complete his Ph.D. dissertation research. Cognizant of the stresses in place due to the severed relationship, but also looking ahead to another visit to Mekane Yesus, I asked Samuel to ask the General Secretary of the EECMY whether we would be welcome for a visit to Aira. We hoped to visit the seminary, our companion congregation, and other church institutions in Aira; we didn't want to be presumptuous and overstep. We didn't want to alienate leaders within the larger church. Samuel returned with a cryptic response from the General Secretary: "We would welcome Good Shepherd." We embraced that response and began serious planning for another trip to Aira.

Our prayer at Good Shepherd continues to be for full reconciliation. Until then, we wait – and work together – in hope.

THE GUDINA TUMSA THEOLOGICAL FORUM – 2016

Founded by Ethiopian students at Luther Seminary, the Gudina Tumsa Theological Forum was established as a conference featuring the theology of southern-hemisphere theologians, especially those from Ethiopia.

For the 2016 conference, the planners asked Good Shepherd to make a presentation on their relationship with the church in Ethiopia. I described ministry situations with God's people in Aira, then Senior Pastor Samuelson mused about their pastoral and theological implications. It was good to share our experiences and rejoice in God's goodness.

In 2019, we hosted the Gudina Tumsa Theological Forum at Good Shepherd. What a joy to welcome theologians from Mekane Yesus and hear their insights about the global church!

PASTOR TADESSE AND DR. TARIKU VISIT US – 2017

On the drive back from Aira to Addis Ababa during our 2015 visit to Ethiopia, we invited Dr. Tariku Wakuma, chief of staff at Aira Hospital, to visit Good Shepherd in Minneapolis, especially as we

discussed Global Health Ministries and the resources it offered. Pastor Tadesse Dissassa was another obvious choice to come and visit, since he had become our primary contact in Ethiopia.

Dr. Tariku was heavily scheduled in the U.S., as he met with people at Global Health Ministries, the Children’s Heart Fund for Ethiopia, and the Blood Bank, then also shadowed surgeons at Regions Hospital, Fairview Ridges Hospital, the University of Minnesota Hospitals, as well as touring clinics at Harbor Lights, People Serving People, and Cedar Health Commons.

Pastor Tadese met with the president of Luther Seminary and its International Office staff to discuss their courses of study and the possibility of Onesimus Nesib Seminary faculty members pursuing advanced degrees. He also met with faculty at Gustavus Adolphus College, where one of the theological faculty was interested in future relationships with Ethiopia. One evening, he and Dr. Tariku met with seminary students at Luther Seminary over dinner, hearing their stories and concerns.

We scheduled a luncheon with former American missionaries to Ethiopia who were very interested in hearing about the church's growth. Although it had been 50 years since many of them had been in Ethiopia, their love for the church in Ethiopia was evident, as was their excitement and joy at its unbridled growth.

Then, Girma Daka and I took Pastor Tadesse and Dr. Tariku to Chicago for a few days. Our first goal was to meet with ELCA leaders. We met with Dr. Rafael Malpica Padilla, executive director of ELCA Global Mission, and Pastor Benyam Kassahun, ELCA area secretary for Eastern Africa, including Ethiopia. It was an honest, open exchange that recognized the reality of the EECMY’s decision to sever its relationship with the ELCA, yet was also filled with heartfelt expressions of hope to continue working together.

In addition, one evening in Chicago, both Dr. Tariku and Pastor Tadesse spoke at a reception for people who had been giving scholarships at Onesimus Nesib Seminary, hosted by Dr. Toren of the Reformed Church in America. Dr. Toren, a medical doctor, had worked at Aira Hospital some years earlier, and his heart was still in Aira, at the hospital and the seminary. One of the surprises for all of us was that the retired doctor, Dr. Harvey Doornbos, who had built up Aira Hospital and was lovingly remembered by so many from Aira, attended the meeting with his wife, Margaret, who had been a well-loved teacher at the Aira Secondary School. It was exciting for all of us to meet these legendary folks.

COVID-19 AND THE AIRA HOSPITAL – 2020

In June 2020, Good Shepherd received a request from Aira Hospital for funding for personal protective equipment related to the Covid-19 epidemic.

The Ethiopian government had assigned specific duties to hospitals in Wollega related to the Covid-19 virus. Aira Hospital was assigned responsibility for evaluating patients with symptoms consistent with COVID-19. Aira Hospital was to test them, and those who had contracted Covid-19 were then to be transferred to the Gimbi Hospital for treatment. Aira Hospital would treat those patients who needed care but did not have Covid-19.

Although the Ethiopian government had assigned this responsibility to Aira Hospital, it had not provided them with any funding for equipment to protect staff as they interacted with patients. Aira Hospital was asking for money to purchase masks, gloves, and gowns.

In addition, because little information had been shared in western Ethiopia about COVID-19, the hospital requested additional funding for education through Aira Hospital’s regional clinics. Most people there did not know about COVID-19, nor did they understand why schools and churches were shutting down.

The Good Shepherd Foundation was generous in granting $10,000 to Aira Hospital for this purpose. We also petitioned Global Health Ministries for additional funding, which they granted.

As it turned out, the incidence of Covid-19 was rare in Wollega, although Aira Hospital was certainly prepared to deal with it. However, the educational materials and staff training that reached people in their clinics were invaluable. They were able to communicate why this virus was such a threat and why their schools and congregations were no longer gathering.

RELATIONSHIPS CONTINUE, AND NEW ONES DEVELOP

One of the joys of our relationship with Mekane Yesus was contact with Ethiopian students studying at Luther Seminary. Many of them were there to earn a doctoral degree, then go back to Ethiopia to teach at the seminary or provide leadership in the church. They became our good friends and kept us aware of what was going on back home.

VISIT OF REV. YONAS YIGEZU

In 2016, when the executive director of the church unit responsible for mission and educational institutions, Pastor Yonas Yigezu, was in town, Pastor Samuelson and I hosted him for lunch and a conversation. It was a gift to us to get to know one of the key leaders of the EECMY a bit better.

VISIT OF DEAN AMARE TEKLU

In February 2019, Amare Teklu, dean of the School of Music and Media at Mekane Yesus Seminary, was at Concordia University St. Paul to meet with administrators there. Amare and I spent one day talking about his hopes for the seminary. We visited Luther Seminary, where their convocation was going on. Then it was on to Good Shepherd. Amare said he wished he could introduce his students to American choral singing. “Why?” I asked, realizing that worship in Mekane Yesus churches did not include anything close to four-part choral harmony. “Because we are a global church,” Amare said, “and we should be aware of what is prevalent in other Lutheran churches.” He caught my attention and admiration at that point.

I told him about Ralph Johnson, our director of worship and music at Good Shepherd, his skill in teaching choral music, his contacts in choral music singing in the church, and his composition skills. I also told Amare that we hoped to visit Mekane Yesus in the Fall. That got Amare’s creativity rolling. He suggested that Ralph could introduce choral singing to the seminary students, then – if he would come along!

When I talked to Ralph in the next few days, he was startled, but not opposed to this idea. He, too, was intrigued by Amare's desire to expose his students to four-part choral singing because they were a “global” church. The more Ralph thought about it, the more he warmed to the idea. By the time we called for people who wanted to travel to Ethiopia in 2019, Ralph was on board – already selecting music to bring along and planning how he would introduce the idea of four-part harmony to people who had perhaps never experienced it. And that experience was wonderful!

In June 2021, Amare was back in the United States, studying at Concordia University Wisconsin, working on his doctorate. We invited him to come to Minneapolis and spend time with Ralph and others at Good Shepherd. We found him housing, arranged transportation, and introduced him to numerous people in the choral world.

FLOOD AT MEKANE YESUS SEMINARY

On August 17, 2021, Mekane Yesus Seminary in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, was devastated by a sudden flood that swept through the campus. The greatest heartache was that eight people were killed in the flood, including Evan, the two-year-old son of Amare Teklu. We mourned with Amare and his wife. The Good Shepherd Foundation awarded a $5,000 grant to assist the seminary in its recovery.

PRESIDENT YONAS YGEZU’S DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

In January 2022, I received an email from EECMY President Yonas Ygezu. He asked if I would serve as an English editor for his doctoral dissertation. Oh, my! I was so honored! I had edited doctoral

dissertations for a few Ethiopian Ph.D. students at Luther Seminary. It seemed helpful to have a native English-speaking editor read through and modify the language (but never the ideas presented there). I received the following message on April 11, 2022: "Just wanted to share the joy that I successfully defended my dissertation last Friday, with minor corrections. Blessings. Rev. Yonas Yigezu Dibisa."

What an experience! What an honor! And I learned so much, reading his dissertation.

VISIT OF GEMACHIS DIDI, YEMISRACH DIMTS

When a group from Good Shepherd was in Ethiopia in 2019, we were confronted with the challenge the EECMY was facing: so many members were joining so rapidly that the church struggled to teach them the faith. President Melkamu, at the Birbir Dilla Synod, had talked to us about his great concern for teaching the faith to new members. President Yonas Yegezu also earnestly and passionately talked about this issue. As a result, the EECMY tasked the Yemisrach Dimts communication unit of the church with beginning to publish books in Amharic and Afan-Oromo. They began by translating some classic Luther texts into Amharic and Afan-Oromo from the original languages.

On Sunday, July 17, 2022, Gemachis Didi, director of Yemisrach Dimts, was in Minneapolis and greeted the Good Shepherd congregation. A subsequent proposal asked Good Shepherd to fund the translation and publishing of one book already in process. The Good Shepherd Foundation awarded a $ 4,000 grant to Yemisrach Dimts. We are partners in publishing!

VISIT OF DR. BRUK, MEKANE YESUS SEMINARY

Dr. Bruk Ayele, president of Mekane Yesus Seminary, was in Minneapolis in August 2022. On Saturday, we dined together and heard about EECMY developments. On Sunday, he brought greetings at worship:

> It is such a tremendous honor for me to be here today to worship with you and celebrate our long-time partnership. On behalf of the EECMY and Mekane Yesus Seminary, I extend my heartfelt gratitude to the Good Shepherd congregation for this outstanding joint venture.
>
> With this partnership, the lives of our people in Ethiopia have been transformed tremendously.... Today, we're looking at a success story of a long-term collaborative effort. It's safe to say that this partnership has brought about numerous innovations and groundbreaking methods of ministry that have had a substantial effect on the lives of many individuals. We're grateful to have you as partners in making a difference in our world.

Each time someone from the EECMY is present at worship and brings greetings, it reaffirms our congregation's commitment to our global relationship with Mekane Yesus. When we have time for conversation about our shared ministries, our ties grow stronger, our trust deeper, and our future brighter.

LOOKING AHEAD

At this point, it has been an 18-year journey – this relationship between the Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd and the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus. It seemed important that we record what has happened, both for historical documentation and to inspire future leaders, as the Spirit blows through our relationships. This is a glance back, not in any way an ending point.

KNOWING EACH OTHER

Martin Luther wrote that one way God's grace is revealed is through the "mutual conversation and consolation of the saints." It perfectly describes something we have done together in our visits and communications with God's people in Mekane Yesus.

Facts are important. So, knowing how programs are developed and how ministries are carried out is crucial. Books, briefing papers, and proposal sheets are great ways of sharing that information. However, we have learned that person-to-person interaction builds relationships. Talking together, taking time to sit down at meals together – that's how we learn to know and appreciate each other's ministries and to celebrate the faith we share. With our Ethiopian brothers and sisters, we have found hope, assurance, and trust in sharing what we do in ministry, the challenges that frustrate us, the ambitions we have for the church, and the holy joy of being God's beloved people.

IT CLEARLY IS GOD'S WORK.

The other part of this relationship is beyond our control; it is God's work. God has drawn us together and given us work to do. Sometimes we had been moving on one path, and God redirected us. Other times, God had opened our eyes to new opportunities. Seeing God's hand in our relationships has further strengthened them, as we have trusted God to lead us and direct us.

> As Pastor Samuelson noted at the Gudina Tumsa Theological Forum:
>
> Initially, we thought the relationship with the church in Ethiopia might be a three-year experiment. But God had other ideas. We have been bound together with God's people in Ethiopia in a way that surpasses our intellect, our emotions, and our will. We didn't do it! God did! We were assisting with agricultural projects, girls' education, and the care of orphaned children, and then God surprised us with brothers and sisters to love.

Pastor Tadesse told us those years ago, when our relationships seemed threatened, "We are joined together in the Spirit of Christ, and nothing can change that." That certainly refers not only to the solidity of our relationships, but also to our firm confidence that God will lead in the future as God has led in the past.

We are eager to see how both the EECMY and Good Shepherd continue to be strong, faithful witnesses in our world. We are zealous to see how God may use us to enliven and reform the church and, as in apostolic days, to "turn the world upside down."

And when disagreements arise, we trust in God's promise that we are one in Christ. Again, Pastor Samuelson:

> The unity of the church is a reflection of God's gift of reconciliation in Christ. It's not that all distinctions cease, but that we grow together as the body of Christ. Jesus prays with his disciples "that all may be one." . . . We are one in Christ, whether we agree with each other or not. We are one in Christ, whether we like each other or not. To become a part of Christ is to become a part of the community of faith – with all its challenges, all its flaws, all its missed opportunities – and all of its great joy.

May we continue to seek that unity, and may we increasingly find it. One in Christ.