

## **Report on the 2015 Ethiopia Mission Network Conference**

April 16-18 at the Trinity United Presbyterian Church of Santa Ana, CA

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The Ethiopia Mission Network held its Twelfth Annual Conference in Santa Ana, in Orange County, California. The focus of our conference was on working with the poor and working in partnership.

We kicked off the conference with Bryant Myers, a professor of Transformational Development at Fuller Theological Seminary. He encouraged us – before we go out – to try to figure out our assumptions about the poor. This is important for people about to launch on a short-term trip. We have traditionally thought of poverty as a deficit – something missing (like things, knowledge, access, etc.). If that is our view, then we hope to supply the lack. This implies that we are superior. If the poor are alive, they have figured lots of things out and are not as clueless as we might think. Myers said the underlying nature of poverty is a marred identity (they feel less than human and god-forsaken) and a forgotten vocation (their responsibility to steward the Earth). He told a story of an eagle who had been raised with chickens. He thought he was a chicken and those who watched his behavior thought he was a chicken and someone realized that he was an eagle and freed him to soar. He asked, "When you see a poor person, do you see a chicken or an eagle?" After lunch we had a round table to discuss these things further.

Rachel Weller shared her experiences with Community Health Evangelism (CHE) in Gambella. In CHE, neighbors talk with each other and identify issues and how to take action on them. We are talking about physical, mental, and spiritual health. Rachel has been working with both Gambella Synods, drinking lots of coffee as she has met and talked with many people, trying to find her CHE champions. She has been successful. They will be doing Vision Seminars with leaders in both Synods. After that, they will select leaders to be part of Training of Trainers. Those trained will start groups and do some introductory project together, followed by another Training of Trainers event to train more leaders.

Qes Debela Birri, formerly the Director of the Ethiopian Graduate School of Theology, shared about the history of the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Bethel from his book, [Divine Plan Unfolding](#). It all began when, because of a flu pandemic, Dr. Thomas Lambe was asked to come to Ethiopia from Sudan in 1919. Because of the work of the missionaries, western Ethiopia was ahead of the rest of the country in education. When the Italians arrived, the missionaries were forced to leave. At first they were bereft, thinking "The missionaries have left us." But a woman of faith asked, "Has Christ left us also?" The work had been in concert with the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, but now the Orthodox refused them burial and they were forced to form a separate church, the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Bethel. We then had another discussion of evangelism then and today. After dinner we all had a chance to share what we are doing in Ethiopia and then a time of prayer for Ethiopia.

On Friday, we began with a presentation by Del and Debbie Braaksma on culture and power dynamics. We had taken the Basic Cultural Value questionnaire and we plotted our results along with the others at our table. They also talked about the invisible backpack we carry in with us – the invisible privileges. We don't see them, but they are totally obvious to our partners. We did a little exercise to prove that we are people of privilege. They talked about low and high context cultures. In the low context culture the main value is authenticity and being true to yourself (that is ours). In the high context culture, the main values are community, honor and hierarchy. Communication is often round about, rather than direct.

Then Tom Theriault, Missions Pastor at Solana Beach, shared about their partnership to reach the Afar people. He started with the need to reach out to the unreached, resulting in their adoption of the Afar people. After Tom has met with the EECMY man there and prepared the way, he took a fairly large team out to meet the Afar. Along the way one van went off the road and flipped three times. No one died and someone who turned out to be Afar came along and helped them and then went on ahead (without their knowledge) and gathered all the leaders to meet with them. So what they have thought was a disaster provided the entrée into the Afar community. They worked to start (or support) a school, feeling that “a village without a school is like a room without a window.” They also have provided support to help keep girls going to school. So far they have helped 270 girls.

After lunch John and Gwen Haspels shared about their shooting and what has happened since and the current situation of the Suri people. John told about how the shooting happened while driving a Suri to Dimma while they were on the way back to Moga to nail the roof on the house they were building there. One bullet went through Gwen's mouth and pieces of her teeth hit John and even went into his eye. God provided all the people who could arrange for their evacuation and many people came to pray for them along the way. As soon as he could, John went back to show the Suri that he was indeed alive and tell them that Gwen was, too. He also wanted to tell the Suri people that he did not blame any of the Suri – even the man who had shot them – and that he had forgiven that man. The Suri learned from that example and are moving away from revenge killing. At the end, Gwen encouraged us to forgive. She said it takes practice with little things, so that when there is a big problem, you are ready to forgive. It was powerful!

We then had a talk about how the Ethiopia Mission Network might consider changing. We talked about including all kinds of Presbyterians on this end and perhaps including more Ethiopian partners than just the EECMY. We might form a committee and also need to make some goals to help determine our direction.

Then staff people shared about some of the needs they see. Debbie spoke of the concerns of women. 71% of women in Ethiopia experience violence. Roughly half of them marry before they are 16 and 74% experience female genital mutilation. Michael spoke of the need for scholarships. Then they spoke of the relations between PC(USA) and EECMY. Since we are not requiring pastors to perform same-sex marriages or ordain practicing

homosexual people, we are in the same category as some European denominations with whom they have maintained relations. So there is hope for our partnership. That night we had our traditional Ethiopian dinner and heard from Lydia Aseffa-Dawson. Her 15-year-old mother had a seizure and dropped her into the fire. She lost almost half of each leg and was forced to stay in the mission hospital in Dembi Dollo for five years. A missionary family “adopted” her and wrote back to the US about her needs. Someone arranged for her to receive artificial legs and then she could finally walk. Later she also received scholarship help to come to the US for her college education. She now works as a social worker and is very proud of her sons who have worked for those less fortunate.

On Saturday, we received the official report on the Bethel Synods Coordination Office (BSCO) from Qes Worati. There are 1.7 million members of the Bethel Synods – almost a fourth of the membership of EECMY. He told us about the budget of BSCO and the challenges – one of which is that the government has increased the salaries of workers, which means the churches must increase salaries. Their vision is to become self-supporting – using their land to generate income. They hope that the multi-functional building they are planning will bring in quite a bit each year. They are also planning improvements to the guesthouses. There is now WiFi and they are hoping to add meals.

He also reminded us that in 2019 they will be celebrating 100 years of Presbyterian mission work in Ethiopia. He invited us to come and to share ideas. Even though the celebration will be in Dembi Dollo, it is a celebration for all of the Bethel Synods who all came from that beginning.

Frank Dimmock shared about the various education needs and initiatives. 47% of Ethiopians are under 15 years old and 27% of children are engaged in child labor. 54% of Ethiopians have access to clean water, 8% have their own toilet, and 23 % have electricity. Adult literacy is 49%, but youth literacy (15-24) is 69%. The expected years in school is four.

Michael Weller shared PC(USA)’s search for three long-term volunteers (one-year minimum). These would be teachers at the schools, etc. He also mentioned the Baale positions being open. Mattheos from Switzerland would like to come, but does not want to come alone. Michael said that the Synods are committed to sending missionaries, so we would like to send in a team to the Baale (Westerners and Ethiopians). He mentioned that Jimma and West Gambella still need partners.

We then had worship and prayer together – special prayer for the Haspels, prayer for the Balinjera, and prayer for our Ethiopian (and Eritrean) guests.