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# HISTORY OF REDEEMER INTERNATIONAL CONGREGATION OF THE EECMY: THEN AND NOW

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**MAY 1, 2024**

**REDEEMER INTERNATIONAL CONGREGATION**  
Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

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## History of Redeemer International Congregation of the EECMY

In April 2021, the members of the International Lutheran Church (ILC) formally voted to change the name of their church to the Redeemer International Congregation of the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus (EECMY). As a formally recognized member of the Addis Ababa Synod of the EECMY this name change was also in line with the identifies of all other member congregations in Ethiopia.

In March 2024, the membership of the Redeemer voted to move from the current location in the Lidetta Mekane Yesus Compound, to the Norwegian Lutheran Mission compound in Kazanchis.

This history is about the establishment and life of ILC/Redeemer and its vision for the Lidetta Mekane Yesus Congregation. It mentions just some of the many people involved in this history and very little about the many people who have been impacted by its ministry in Ethiopia during the past 66 years.

### Introduction – by Rev. Philip Johnson

ILC (now Redeemer Church) was a gift to the Johnson family. It was a privilege for Rene', Simon, Neal, and me to be part of this wonderfully diverse and accepting community.

When asked by Johnny Bakke to step in and serve as ILC's pastor it was, in his own words (or was it Marit's?) "a hijack." What appeared to be an innocent invitation to afternoon tea was, in fact, a calculated plan to persuade the Johnson's to agree to lead ILC's ministry. I don't recall it taking much persuasion at all! We will forever be grateful for that afternoon hijacking with tea and biscuits! Rene' and I thoroughly enjoyed serving and growing with the people of ILC.

Each Sunday we would stuff our Toyota Prado with kids from MYTS compound and head off to Lidetta. I so enjoyed leading worship, preaching, singing, and teaching confirmation. Rene' made everything else work. It seemed most Sunday's we would be battling with the sound system for one reason or the other. I smile when I think of such things now. One highlight I recall was leading a men's retreat at Langano. That was lot's of fun.

Bringing up specific events and experiences after so many years seems more difficult than I expected. That's OK. What will stick with me to the end is the lasting impression of love and joy given and received by those who made ILC their faith family. ILC changed our lives in so many ways. We were touched deeply by the friendships made there and live to this day with deep gratitude for our years at MYTS and ILC.

We are delighted to hear that Redeemer is relocating. What a great and grand idea! As Rene and I gather for morning coffee and meditation, we will remember Redeemer, its rich legacy of ministry, and its mark on our lives.

"I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.... And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ to the glory and praise of God." Philippians 1:6, 9-11

## **The Establishment of ILC**

ILC was officially established in May 1958 by eleven adult members from the international community in Addis Ababa, under the leadership of Dr. Herbert Schaefer. ILC joined the Wollo-Tigre Synod of the EECMY as one of the synod's founding members.

Dr. Schaefer arrived in Ethiopia in September 1957 as director of the American Lutheran Mission (ALM). He began holding English services on Sunday afternoons at the Mekane Yesus mother church in Addis Ababa beginning December 1, 1957. The use of the English language by ILC was an attraction for non-Amharic speakers from embassies, non-government organizations and business personnel, though many members were from other mission organizations working throughout the Ethiopia. ALM missionaries Lowell Hesterman and Richard Jensen served as assistant pastors while teaching at Mekane Yesus Seminary during the first years. Sunday school classes begin in 1959.

A decision was made to acquire land and construct a church building. The congregation raised money and received a loan from the ALM and purchased land in the Lidetta Subcity of Addis Ababa, in 1961, from Ato Woldetsadiq. Rev Leonard Flachman, also a missionary with the ALM, chaired the building committee and designed the furniture. The building was completed and dedicated in 1963. This church building would remain the home of ILC/Redeemer until 2024.

## **Planting and Development of Lidetta Mekane Yesus Congregation**

While ILC primarily catered to foreigners, the leadership had a strong vision to support the planting of an Amharic congregation and they actively begin to invest in outreach once the congregation had settled into their church building in Lidetta. An Ethiopian evangelist, Fitaw, was employed to begin services in Amharic and invite Lidetta residents. The pastors of ILC mentored him in this work and provided financial support. At Christmas in 1963, the leadership supported the first outreach into the local community, actively inviting locals to church events, leading to significant conversions. Through simple yet powerful gospel preaching, many young people accepted Christ on that day. This led to the formation of a core group of believers marking the beginning of the Lidetta Congregation. Robert Avers, from the United States, served both congregations as pastor from 1969 to 1972. Following his departure, Rev Paul Volz, the director of RVOG served ILC in a part-time capacity until RVOG was closed in 1977. The ILC pastors initiated confirmation classes for new Amharci believers, laying the groundwork for their involvement in ministry and church planting. These young converts became pivotal in spreading the gospel within their communities and the growth of the Lidetta Congregation. They also served communion until Qes Asfaw was called to serve as the pastor of the Amharic Congregation.

## **ILC Leadership Through the Years**

During the Derg regime (1974 through 1991) it became difficult for American pastors to get visas to life and work in Ethiopia, so the congregation asked the European Lutheran missions to assist them in filling the leadership gaps. From that request, Rev Torgny Erling from the Swedish Evangelical Mission (SEM) came to serve as pastor of ILC. He worked closely with Qes Asfaw to encourage the Lidetta Congregation in their outreach. A joint ILC-Lidetta coordinating committee was established during this time and met monthly to facilitate smooth cooperation. Pastor Erling was also responsible for the building of bell tower on the church compound in Lidetta, during his stay in Ethiopia. Many activities for the Lidetta community were started at this time, including a day-care center, and the Lidetta leadership slow began to take over the coordination of worship and activities for the Amharic congregation.

At this time the ILC membership included many embassy and Africa Union personnel and their families, especially from Tanzania, Cameroon, and India. A Tanzanian choir sang several times a year, blessing the congregation with their special harmony. Sunday school for the children was led by the mothers of the congregation, and confirmation classes were organized by the pastors, to provide a strong Christian foundation for the youth of ILC. Christmas Eve programs by the Sunday School were greatly appreciated.

New Year's Eve personal witness programs were led by Harris Sukanandam from India who was serving as a teacher at the Mekane Yesus Seminary, which were a great blessing for the congregation. At this time there were also a group of refugees from Somalia that regularly worshiped and shared meals with the ILC community. A close fellowship developed between the various members, especially as they faced the challenges of life during the Derg. This fellowship continued after the Derg for as long as these members were in Ethiopia, and these strong foundations of community and fellowship remain in place today.

After Rev. Erling left Ethiopia in the late 1970s, Dr. Loren Bliese served as part-time pastor for a several years while working in Bible translation for the Bible Society of Ethiopia. Rev Pekka Harne from the Finnish Evangelical Mission (FEM) served as ILC pastor for several years and when he returned to Finland, Dr. Bliese served as the ILC pastor again until 1985, when Rev. Johnny Bakke arrived from Norway with the Norwegian Lutheran Mission (NLM) to teach at the Mekane Yesus Seminary. Rev. Bakke took on the role of part-time pastor at ILC, while his wife Marit organized much of the fellowship for the members. In 2000, when Rev. Johnny Bakke became principal of the seminary, Dr. Philip Johnson became the ILC pastor, though Rev. Bakke remained actively involved in the leadership of the church until his return to Norway in the late 2000s. (Rev. Bakke passed away in 2023 in Norway). The Rev. Dr. Philip and Rene Johnson arrived in Ethiopia in 1995 as missionaries with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), also assigned to Mekane Yesus Seminary. He served both MYS and ILC. Preaching, worship leading, and various aspects of church life were shared by other members of the congregation, including Rene Johnson and Inge Rydland (connected with the Norwegian Embassy).

Throughout these years, ILC was active in many ways: weekly worship services; a Sunday School for many children; a Youth Group; confirmation classes as needed, frequent fellowship activities; women's retreats; father-son and pre-teen camp-outs; etc. The congregation added a new Fellowship Hall to the church building to accommodate the Sunday activities, and this building included new office spaces for the Lidetta congregation. During 2002-2003, ILC hosted a seminary intern, Kelly Faulstich, from the ELCA mission, who (among other activities) put together a worship and liturgy booklet entitled "On This Mountain", which was consistently used for the next 20 years.

Rev. Dr. Peter Ford was elected to the Church Council in 2005, shortly before the departure of the Johnsons. He and his wife Patty were missionaries from the Reformed Church of America (RCA), and he came to work at the Mekane Yesus Seminary from 2002 until 2009. From 2005-2009, a period when ILC did not have a regular pastor, Rev. Peter coordinated the weekly worship services while Patty contributed behind the scenes, especially with Sunday School and Youth Group. Various members led worship and preached in addition to Peter, especially Rev. Michael Weller, Dr. Johnny Bakke, Rev. Art Leichnitz, Dr. Ivar Vegge, Jorn Lemvik, and Revs. John and Anne Wheeler-Waddell. Most of the activities that had been going on under the leadership of the Johnsons continued to some extent. The Fords also initiated regular visits by church members to AHOpe Orphanage in Mekanisa.

The constantly changing leadership and membership of ILC was a normal part of the community, due to its very transient nature. As an international community, people came from around the world to Ethiopia for work, and moved on depending on the season of life. The average length of stay for members in the congregation from 1958 into the next 50 years was about 12 years. The diplomatic community members moved on more quickly than the missionary partners of the EECMY, many of whom spent much of their mission career living and working in this country, leaving as retirement drew near.

### **The Continued Growth of the Lidetta Congregation**

While ILC congregation continued to be very transient, the Lidetta Congregation was growing. Some of the initial believers were provided with funding to pursue theological training at the Mekane Yesus Seminary, while they continued to actively participated in local ministry and evangelism. They used a variety of methods to attract community members to church events, effectively communicating the

gospel message. Their mission strategies included drama and music programs, literacy campaigns, women handicraft work projects, sports ministry and strong children's ministry, all of which took place on the church compound. Despite considerable successes, Lidetta's children's ministry encountered its share of challenges and opposition, but the church grew.

The Lidetta leadership took the inspiration of the ILC founders and also founded their own congregations in the coming years. Four congregations were established in Addis Ababa by the Lidetta congregation, all becoming members of the Addis Ababa Synod. These include the Kirkos Mekane Yesus congregation (which initially met in the chapel on the Norwegian Lutheran mission), the Keraniyo Mekane Yesus congregation, the Ayer Tena Mekane Yesus Congregation and the Gerji Meberate Haile Mekane Yesus Congregation. Lidetta also established two additional congregations, one in Nazareth, the Adama Mekane Yesus Congregation and the other in Asela.

### **The Last Fifteen Years (2009-2024)**

During these years of growth and stability for Lidetta, the ILC congregation faced continuous change. The changing nature of missions greatly impacted the ILC congregation, as it had been a largely missionary church. At the same time as the work of the EECMY grew to include more local responsibilities and programs, the mission partners were facing more difficulties in finding missionaries interested to commit to long-term positions overseas. With the departure of Dr. Peter Ford in 2009, ILC had its last long-term pastor. Members of the foreign community were no longer coming to stay in Ethiopia for more than 12 years, as had happened in the past, and ILC saw the average length of membership drop to around 6 years, and recruiting a new pastor was very difficult. As a fully volunteer led congregation this meant that programs and services changed more regularly as people joined and then left to return to their home countries. The shared history of partnership between Lidetta and ILC also became lost over the years with the changing of members in ILC and the growth of the younger generation at Lidetta.

Throughout the constant changes relating to the spiritual leadership the church, the ILC council, without any employed staff, guided most of the activities and programs of the congregation, under the leadership of long-term members, Andeas Joswig, Sam VanderEnde and later Gail Gorfe. There were other council members in those years who had also stayed in Ethiopia for many years, including Raimo, Mika Letinen and David Ford (who is still on the council today). As well as focusing on supporting pastoral leadership, the council addressed issues of membership, benevolence requests, and communication with the Lidetta Congregation. Time constraints had become a regular concern as the growing Amharic congregation had difficulty finishing their service on time, pushing the smaller English-speaking service to later and later start time. This, together with the frequent changes of pastoral leadership was a hinderance to the relationship between the two congregations.

Yet, God always provided spiritual leadership for the congregation, often through pastors already in Ethiopia, and at any given time, there are often as many as 5 ordained members within the membership. In 2011, Pastor Ann Staal from the United States was ordained at ILC. She arrived in Ethiopia in 2010 with her husband Tom, head of USAID, and they were active members of ILC. Ann served unofficially in the congregation and brought forward the request to the council for ordination, which was approved by the Head Office of the EECMY. Once ordained, she served as Pastor until her return to the United States in the summer of 2012. In 2013, ILC had two Finnish volunteers, Rev. Tuomas Meurman and Rev. Helena Turja, who both served the congregation for three months, as it was not possible for them to stay longer than 3 months. This was followed by Rev. Doug Steinke (of the ELCA), who served for 9 months while his wife was working at the Mekane Yesus Seminary. As ILC was again without a long-term Pastor, at the Annual General Meeting in February 2014 the congregation voted to use the model of a Pastoral Team to provide spiritual leadership for the church. The original Pastoral Team included Jonas Nordén (Sweden), Andrew Mead (US), and Anders Møberg (Denmark). The pastoral team continued to serve the congregation until Andreas Thornell from SEM expressed interest

to serve as dedicated part-time pastor. He was officially accepted as Pastor in February 2018 and served for four years, in anticipation of his departure from Ethiopia to serve in Somalia. Together with his wife Frida, they supported the transition from regular worship to small group worship during the COVID-19 pandemic, and were actively involved in the process of rebranding of the congregation. Rev. Andreas also officiated for two funeral services during his time as Pastor. The first was for Catherine Hamlin (Fistula Hospital founder) and was held at the Fistula hospital chapel on March 23, 2020. The second was held on April 18, 2021, for Ato Abebe, a long-standing Ethiopian member of the congregation, at his home. From 2021 until the writing of this history, the congregation has again been led by the Pastoral Team, with the current members being Rev. Rebecca Mosley, Rev. Bob Glahn, Andreas Bruun and Rev. Rebecka Folkensten, with much support from Than Veltman and Rev. Kai Ojana until his departure to Finland in May 2024.

The COVID pandemic brought the first of several big changes for ILC. In March 2020, as the world was beginning to respond to the news of the pandemic, many of the regular members of ILC congregation left Ethiopia. A six-month state of emergency was put into place by the government, which included a ban on gatherings. The members who remained worshipped in small groups around the city due, provided with readings and a liturgy to follow by the church leadership. When churches were permitted to reopen some months later, the Redeemer and Lidetta councils discussed to have the English service meet first in the sanctuary so assist in the cleaning that needed to be done between services. From that time until April 2024, the ILC congregation began their service at 8:45 and the Lidetta service moved to 10:30am. In 2019 the ILC council began discussions with the EECMY Addis Ababa Synod to request membership into the synod. Until this point ILC had been under the direction of the EECMY Head Office for at least 15 years, the only congregation not part of a synod. As part of the request, ILC was asked to change its name, replacing Church with Congregation and removing Lutheran, instead formally identifying with synod membership and aligning the name with all other EECMY congregations. Due to the pandemic, this process did not begin until after services resumed and the members started to return to Ethiopia. Thus, in early 2021 the council initiated the process of a name change, through several strategy meetings with all of the leadership. After several brainstorming sessions and a special congregational meeting in April 2021, the name Redeemer International Congregation of the EECMY was approved. As part of this rebranding process, the council also prepared a vision statement for the congregation, something that reflected the current life of Redeemer. On May 5, 2022, Redeemer was officially welcomed as a member of the AA Synod. As foreigners returned to Ethiopia following the pandemic, Redeemer experienced renewed growth, and congregational fellowship and support continued to be a factor for new membership. It was due to the strong community aspects within the congregation that in August 2022, Redeemer organized financial and counselling support for the families impacted by the devastating flood on the Mekane Yesus Seminary compound.

Despite the growth of Redeemer, the average length of stay for the foreign members in Ethiopia dropped even lower and turnover affected the ability of the leadership to maintain strong relationships while managing the day-to-day activities of the congregation. For the first time in its long history, Redeemer employed parttime staff, in the positions of administrative assistant and accountant, allowing the council to focus on the future of the congregation. In 2023, Rev. Johnny Bakke passed away, and council chair, Gail Gorfe was asked to speak at his memorial service at the Mekane Yesus Seminary. To prepare for this, Dr. Loren Bliese was contacted to provide information about the impact of Dr. Bakke on the congregation, as the longest serving pastor to date. It opened the door to deeper discussion about the long history of ILC/Redeemer and a new awareness of the initial vision of the founders of ILC for the establishment and growth of an Amharic congregation. This opened the doors to a look at what it meant to follow through on that original vision, especially in light of the continued growth of Lidetta and the long struggles related to sharing the sanctuary together, and the impact that had on both services, as well as the additional Sunday programs, such as weddings, that were so common on the compound. In February 2024, following conversations with former ILC leadership, the Redeemer congregation voted with a majority of 80% to follow the recommendation of the council, pending the blessing of the Lidetta

council, to leave this compound in Lidetta, and allow the Lidetta congregation to continue to grow and expand. In two subsequent meetings between the two councils, this proposal was shared and the impacts discussed together. The Lidetta Council accepted the offer of full use and ownership of the compound, while Redeemer signed an agreement with the Norwegian Lutheran Mission for use of its chapel for their services. Discussions followed regarding a joint service in May, to celebrate this momentous occasion together.

### **From Then to Now; May 2024**

In May 1958, ILC was formally established, and now 66 years later, the congregation was moving to a new location. May 1<sup>st</sup> is a national holiday in Ethiopia, International Labor Day. On this day, Redeemer congregation members gathered together and loaded all of the church property into their cars and rented truck, for the move to the NLM compound. Whole families came out and even the youngest helped to carry boxes, books, tables and chairs onto the church driveway. Together the cars and truck were loaded up empty Redeemer office, fellowship hall and youth room were swept clean. In just four hours, the church had been moved from its historical location in Lidetta, to its new space in Kazanchis.

The 1<sup>st</sup> formal service for Redeemer in the chapel at NLM took place on Sunday, May 5<sup>th</sup>. Three previous services had been held at NLM since the beginning of 2024, two in the chapel. These services were not initially planned to take place at NLM, but due to conflicts in the country, and a concern for the safety, even in Debre Zeit, the annual Redeemer retreat in February, at which the move had been discussed, actually took place at the NLM compound. This was very much felt to have been part of God's timing. The second service took place 5 weeks later, in March, in order for the congregation to have its second meeting to vote regarding the recommendation to make this momentous move, which took place following a communion service. A third service was held outside on the field at 6am on Easter Sunday morning in April. Yet this service on May 5<sup>th</sup> was different. The Chapel had been repaired and painted by the NLM maintenance team, and set up according to the needs of Redeemer. It was now the Redeemer Chapel. The Lidetta Council attended this service.

On May 12<sup>th</sup>, the Redeemer members returned one last time to the sanctuary on the Lidetta compound, for a joint service with the Lidetta congregation. It was the first joint service to take place in over 40 years. The service had been planned in partnership between the Lidetta pastors and the Redeemer Pastoral Team. The service was led by Qes Endishaw. Music was provided by a worship team from Lidetta, and then followed by a worship team from Redeemer, that included Ashley Matto, Helena Tedder, Andrew Haverly, Hana Alemu and Lukas. Rev. Rebecca Mosley led the prayer and Rev. Samuel Tedder gave the sermon, with translation provided by one of the Lidetta council members. Holy Communion was served by Qes Endishaw from Lidetta, Rev. Bob Glahn and Rev. Samuel Folkensten from Redeemer and Qes Tsige, the President of the Addis Ababa Synod. Redeemer council chair, Gail Gorfe, gave a brief history of the Redeemer Congregation and Lidetta council president Ato Moges, spoke on behalf of the Lidetta Congregation. Together with the Lidetta administrator, Woinshet, the presented Redeemer with a beautiful painting. Syond President Qes Tsige, also provided both congregations with words of encouragement for growth and prosperity. The service was well attended by both congregations and lasted for 3 hours and was followed by fellowship outside the church building.

On Monday May 13<sup>th</sup>, the Lidetta Council hosted the Redeemer Council and Pastoral Team for a dinner in Bole. Qes Endishaw gave a brief message and two other Lidetta council members shared a few words. Rev. Samuel Tedder and Andreas Bruun both provided words of thanks and encouragement. The dinner was a beautiful evening of fellowship and community, and was enjoyed by all. It highlighted a new beginning in this long partnership, which was also reflected in the closing words of Rebecca Mosley, Tanja Bruun and Gail Gorfe, that the moving of Redeemer to a new location has opened the door to new opportunities for both congregations, and a positive relationship going forward, focused on mutual respect and growth. A suggestion was made to worship together again one year from now, to celebrate the anniversary of this new chapter in the life of both congregations.