

# Tough Changes in South Central Ethiopia Synod

by Jørn Lemvik and Ato Paulos Shone

Change in churches is not for the faint-hearted. With God all things are possible, but it requires of us hard choices and on-going effort. What happened in the South Central Ethiopia Synod shows how leadership earned their right to lead the church through listening, through service and through communication. A deep spiritual repentance was at the core of organisational change.

## **‘The place where Jesus is dwelling’**

The South Central Ethiopia Synod (SCES) is part of the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus (EECMY). This church was established in 1959, with 20,000 members. Mekane Yesus literally means “The place where Jesus is dwelling”. The work of the church has developed tremendously over almost 60 years. Today the membership is more than 4 million, with 19 dioceses and congregations across the whole country, making it one of the fastest growing churches in the world.

The South Central Ethiopia Synod (SCES) is in the south of Ethiopia, in the area around Awassa town (270 km south of Addis Abeba). This synod used to be *the* Southern synod, but over the years it divided into five synods. Today SCES has eight Districts, two special Districts, 59 Parishes and around 1100 Congregations. There are more than 400,000 members in the Synod.

## **Ethnic Division and Financial Crisis**

The revolutionary government that took over in 1991, gained political support with the message that ‘each tribe and ethnic group to govern themselves’. But it encouraged factionalism. The church was not immune. In Awassa, it led to the latest division of the synod into two synods and an area work. This conflictive process left deep wounds and resentments within the church.

A new synod leadership was elected in SCES in 1997. They inherited a looming financial crisis (in part due to the division of the synod), but did not have the management skills to address it. They continued to operate without a plan nor budget. As funds declined, tensions mounted. In 2001, the crisis erupted. There was no cash left in the Synod office. Salaries were not paid, let alone pensions and taxes. There were complaints of corruption as money given for specific development projects was diverted elsewhere.

## **A remnant for change?**

At this time, six people with a passion for the future of the church got together to pray and plan. They were concerned that the present leadership did not take any action on the matter. They said to each other: “*We cannot let this go down the drain. We have a responsibility to the people and to God. We must pray. We must set aside all private agendas and ambitions, and concentrate on building God’s kingdom*”. Ato Paulos Shone was one of the six.

This group began to listen to church members in the local congregations, to leaders at Central Office level, and with international partners. All the people they spoke to echoed their concerns.

## **Leadership chaos**

The General Assembly of 2002 was intended to elect a new leadership with the old leadership stepping down. But the incumbent leadership did not want to leave office. They managed to manipulate the assembly to get re-elected. The Central Office of the EECMY in Addis did not accept the election result, and demanded a new General Assembly to be organised. This new assembly elected a new leadership with Ato Paulos Shone as the President. He clearly indicated he had no desire of taking the position and did not see himself fit for the task. His wife was totally against the idea of him accepting the Synod President office. After considerable persuasion from the EECMY leadership, however, they agreed to accept the election result for one term.

### **Financial Crisis**

It was a depressing beginning. Ato Paulos and his new team started by establishing the financial situation. The Synod was technically bankrupt with

- a debt of 1.8 million Birr (\$225,000)
- a debt to the government of Birr 69 000 (tax not paid)
- no salary for workers
- no operating budget for the work

Ato Paulos says: *“The question that came to our mind was: How can we balance our income and our expenditure? ... We committed ourselves to change!”*

### **Springs of Hope**

The synod leadership started to negotiate with one of its major partners, the Norwegian Lutheran Mission (NLM) for financial support. The first issue on the agenda was the income tax. Unless this tax was paid to the Government, the Synod would be closed down. Support was promised. The leadership then started negotiating the salary issues with the workers. Again NLM promised to help, but indicated clearly that their means for future support was very limited.

### **Earning Trust**

Because of the long-standing distrust between the old Synod leadership and the Districts and congregations, there was a crisis of leadership credibility as well as of finances. There was no trust between the Synod, District, Parish and Congregation. Ato Paulos continues: *“We had to start working on establishing trust between the different levels of the structure. We met with the District leaders. Their message to us was crystal clear: “The Synod is not ours!”* We asked where their Synod leadership was to be found, and we were told that the District leadership was their leadership. There were long discussions, and finally they challenged us: *“If you serve us, you will be our Synod!”* We promised to serve them. They replied that they had heard such promises before, but leaders did not keep promises. They had little faith in change.

### **Listening leadership**

The Synod leadership continued to visit the districts, parishes and congregations. They stayed with the members, ate with them, listened to them and thought them. Little by little trust was starting to develop. One district leader prayed *“Dear Lord! Thank you for making the Synod poor, so that they could come and be with us!”* In earlier days the Synod leadership was associated with nice cars, good offices, computers and other equipment. If the old leadership came to visit – they said: “hello, nice to see you” – and left. Now the members were experiencing a different leadership.

Through the visits, the leadership started to understand the situation of their members. In addition, the leadership decided to share information openly on the actual financial situation of the synod. The members started to pray for the leadership and the work, and little by little they also started to take financial responsibility.

## **Outside Help**

At this time the SCES was asked if it wanted to take part in the Organisational Development (OD) programme – organised by the umbrella organisation Norwegian Missions in Development<sup>1</sup> (BN). The leadership accepted to join this programme. Each participating organisation was given a one week a year free consultancy work paid by the OD programme. The consultant came to work with the Synod leadership. This consultant was not new to the Synod work, he had been working with the leaders before.

Ato Paulos says: *“The consultant asked about our situation. We informed on all that we knew. The consultant actually only asked for one number - the difference between income and expenditure. We did not know this. It took us a week to find out. By scrutinising books we realised we were using more each month than we were making!”*

## **Tough Financial Decisions**

The monthly income at the time was 20,000 Birr, while the salary expenses only were 74,000 Birr per month. They obviously had to reduce personnel costs, but how? Should the focus be on early retirement? Should the Synod hand over the primary schools to the government? Should they start to lay off staff? The answer was that they had to pursue all three options.

### Early retirement:

The leadership explained to the workers who were above 55 (pension age is 60), that there was no money to pay them. After long negotiations, with financial support from NLM, 12 workers took early retirement.

### Handing over schools to Government:

The leadership negotiated with the government about taking over responsibility for the primary schools. Ato Paulos relates: *“The government refused. We prayed, and we continued to challenge the Government. Suddenly some of the Government staff was transferred - and we could continue negotiations”*. After more than a year of protracted discussions, the Government agreed to take over the schools. Staff were transferred to the Government payroll.

### Cars – and per diem

The Synod had several cars, but no budget to run them. So the leaders agreed to stop using them. The leaders also set an example by stopping taking per diems and using public transport whenever possible.

## **Relentless Communication**

The leadership had decided to be transparent, and they agreed to continue to share information and keep the workers. Whatever was done was shared with the Synod

---

<sup>1</sup> The programme is described in detail in Jørn Lemvik (2006) ‘Enabling organisations: Stories and tools’. BN.

workers. Districts and congregations were constantly updated on the plans and the actual moves they were doing.

### **Repentance - From Sin to Blessing**

But the challenges were not only financial. Ato Paulos relates what happened: *“After one and a half year in the office, we still were fighting a very difficult situation. We asked ourselves: ‘What is wrong with this synod. Could there be a hidden sin in our midst?’ The 1997 division of the Synod along ethnic lines had created a lot of wounds. Because of these and similar issues, we felt that there could be no blessing. We agreed that repentance was needed. We agreed to have a Sunday of repentance, fasting and praying. We also agreed to send our leaders to the other synods to publicly kneel and ask forgiveness for the sins and wrongdoings we had made. People started crying in all places, saying: ‘We have forgiven you! Let God forgive you! Let God bless you!’ The healing started”.*

After some time, the leadership experienced that blessings started to come their way. They found that God listened to the prayers of repentance and He blessed the Synod. Hope returned. Change was taking place.

### **On-going Effort**

It was hard work – and it was not over. Little by little improvements were made. By the end of 2005 they had balanced their books, paid off all their debts and even managed to pay a salary increment. As Ato Paulos says: *“This is the work of God. It was impossible for us, but God helped us”.*

The leadership continued to meet regularly with districts, parishes and congregations – and to keep them informed on the situation. The districts said to them: *“We thank God that we the Synod has become poor, because that was how God changed the hearts of our leaders towards us.”* The leaders challenged the members to take responsibility by giving money to the Synod work. The people responded. For example, when there was no money for the Evangelism Office the districts gave Birr 17,000 to save this office.