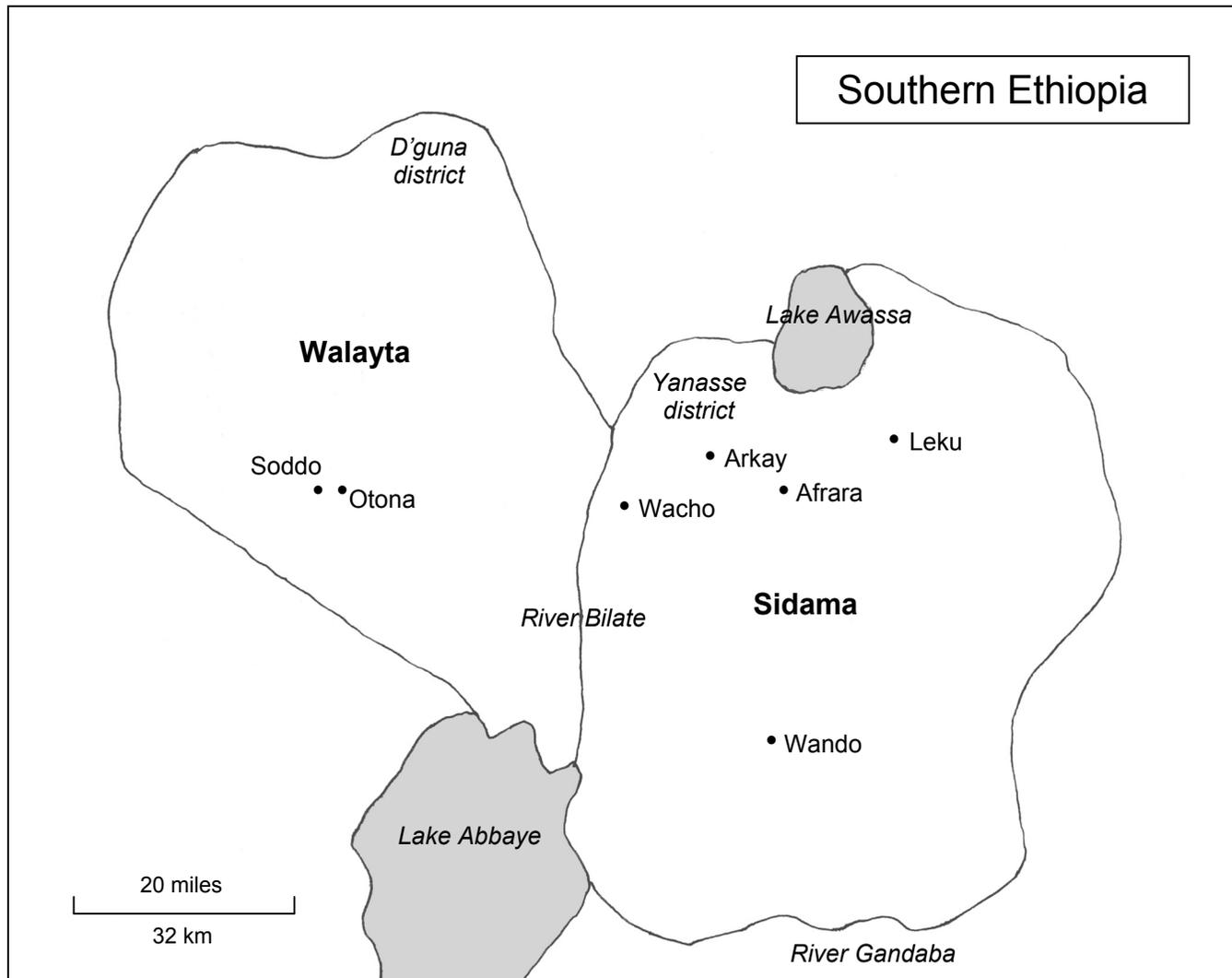


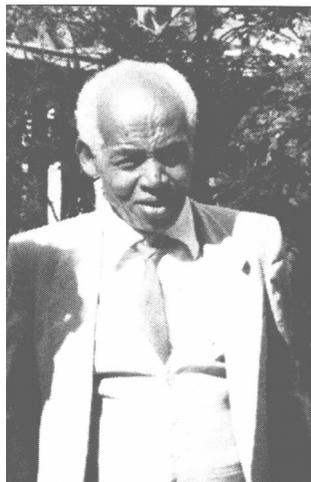
Sorsa Sumamo: An Ethiopian Evangelist



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The testimony of Sorsa Sumamo
in his own words,
translated by Brian Fargher

Edited extracts from the book *Evangelizing
Individuals who Plant Churches* by Brian Fargher
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web: www.opaltrust.org
email: tamariskbooks@yahoo.co.uk



Approximate Dates

1925¹ born in D'guna district of Walayta region in southern Ethiopia
1936 (aged 11) conversion to Christ
1936-1941 *Italian occupation*
1947-50 (aged 22-25) attends Otona Bible school and preaches in D'guna district
1950 (aged 25) marries Gobena Gota
1951 (aged 26) assigned as evangelist to Yanasse area of northern Sidama
1951-5 (aged 26-30) makes first base in Arkay village
1955 (aged 30) makes second base in Wacho area
1956-7 (aged 31-32) moves south with family to Bible school in Wando and
continues to preach in Wacho
1957-76 (aged 31-51) returns north to make permanent base in Afrara town,
1969-71 returns to Wando Bible school, preaching around Jimma
1974-91 *Cultural Revolution of the Derg Regime (Marxist)*
1989-90 (aged 64) preaching over a wide area from base in town of Leku

Introduction

This is an account of the life of Sorsa Sumamo, a twentieth century evangelist from the Walayta tribe of southern Ethiopia. He is described as a short man, unimpressive in stature, but a giant in vision, conviction and commitment for more than fifty years.

He was called by God to leave his own Walayta people and take the gospel to the northern part of the Sidama region (Yanasse district). Here the inhabitants spoke a different language and followed different customs from those familiar to him. In 1950 the Sidamo people numbered about 100,000.

Sorsa was certainly not unique. In fact, there were at least ten other evangelists who worked as he did in the Sidama region alone, and each of them would also be worthy of a biography.¹ In addition to these, many other evangelists worked in different regions of Ethiopia during the same period.

We have the benefit of Sorsa's testimony because it was carefully recorded and translated by Dr Brian Fargher, and most of his story will be told in his own words.

The purpose of this book is not to glorify one person but to demonstrate a mission strategy. Like the other evangelists of his generation, Sorsa Sumamo never tried to gain glory for himself. His desire in telling his story was not so that people would know about him but so they would know how God is pleased to bless the ministry of the gospel when it is done in the way he did it.

Sorsa was not a theologian, a lecturer, an administrator or a pastor. He was a preacher of the Good News. He was interested above all in people who had never heard the Gospel.

He always described himself as an itinerant evangelist. Such a person is always on the move. He shares the Good News about Christ and then moves on. Sorsa was not like so many today who speak from a platform in a building to a congregation that has heard the same thing many times before. He preferred to be out among strangers who have never heard the message at all.

Such a man is always interested in individuals, the ones and twos, and it is these individuals who respond to the message and invite the preacher to tell them more. Sorsa tells us clearly that he did not start churches. He did not erect buildings. He simply proclaimed the Gospel message and then taught those who accepted his message and prayed with them in their homes or on their land. To start a church was their responsibility, not his. This meant he never wasted time trying to maintain a church for people who were not very interested.

Brian Fargher describes Sorsa Sumamo as bi-vocational, that is, he had two jobs. Six days a week he was a farmer; seven days a week he was a preacher. Only one of the jobs provided an income but it was the unpaid job that was most important to him. He also received occasional support from church associations and individuals.

Mark's Gospel was first translated into the Sidama language in 1933 but Sorsa appears not to have used it. Wherever he went he read from a Walayta tract *God has Spoken* and later from the Amharic Bible. As he spoke he translated what he read into the local language. The Sidama New Testament was not completed until 1985.

In Sidama one of Sorsa's favourite words was "Macheeshay, macheeshay!" "Listen, listen!" He was always inviting people to listen to the

¹ All dates follow the global (Gregorian) calendar.

¹ Balisky, 242

message that God had given him to pass on to them. Here then is the testimony of Sorsa Sumamo in his own words.

Sorsa's Early Years

Traditional Religion

My mother died while I was still a child. Her death made a tremendous impact on my life. She was a very young woman. I just remember what she looked like. When I discovered that she was dead I was very sad. She died without hearing the gospel. But her death prepared me to hear the Good News. After her death my heart would not stop asking: "Is there anything more to life than this? What is life all about?" I listened to older people as they talked together. Whenever possible I asked questions. Death was a topic about which no one could give me any satisfying answers.

When I was born my family were ethno-religionists, i.e. they followed the traditional religion of the Walayta people...

The ethno-religionists, who followed the so-called traditional religion, did not think of themselves as "worshiping Satan" because they had no idea who Satan was. *Shaytan* was a word Christian priests from the Ethiopian Orthodox Church had introduced to the languages of southern Ethiopia centuries earlier.¹

Ethno-religionists in both Walayta and Sidamo highly respected and feared the "guardian of our father" (*wuqabe*). Asking them, "But who is this guardian?" would be like asking a person who has no knowledge of science, "What is water?" The most important thing they knew about this "guardian" was that it possessed tremendous negative or destructive power.

There was one question that never left the minds of the traditional religion followers: "Is the guardian of our fathers angry or not-angry?" This question generated an environment of fear. The question was a very practical one. Because it was important to know the answer to this question there were two groups of people, or functionaries, who claimed to be able to answer it—for a price! One group attempted to answer questions, and the other group specialized in trying to punish those who put curses on people, by putting curses on them! More often than not both groups played upon people's fear and became rich in the process.

Whenever people came to these functionaries for information their answer would invariably be: "Unless you make this and that sort of an offering, something bad will happen to you." In order to get a good answer from the functionaries they too needed gifts. This gift giving created an aura of power using threats of death, sickness, poverty and harm. The people made

offerings of whatever they had. This religion created fear and poverty as people senselessly slaughtered animals, or gave them to the functionaries.

My Step-Mother

Shortly after my mother died my father married another lady. My stepmother sometimes acted as a functionary or go-between so I saw first hand the sort of things she did. She would dance and sing and become like a different person. Later we Believers would call this activity being "possessed by Satan." After she danced and sang for some hours she would claim to have visions and dreams. She would speak in a weird high-pitched voice. Then people would ask her questions and she would give them directives. She was not one of the people who did this full-time; she claimed that this "spirit of prophecy" only possessed or overcame her at special times of the year.

She told people that her directives had to be obeyed immediately; there was no time for people to investigate the truth of her claims. People were always threatened with death if they did not obey.

She would tell people that they had to prepare special food and drink for the occasion. One or two people would beat drums and then she would dance around. My father refused to allow her to do this in our house. She claimed that she had no choice; she said the spirits told her when to do this and made her do it.

I clearly recall one occasion when she told my father that he had to slaughter seven oxen. What I don't recall is whether my father did this or worked out some sort of a deal. There were many others in the countryside who attempted to read stones and animals' intestines to answer people's questions about the anger or pleasure level of the ancestral spirits.

I was frustrated and deeply disturbed by what I saw my family suffering. Everyone had questions; no one seemed to have any answers. But God had something very special in mind for my stepmother.

Paul Balisky comments: [Sorsa's father's] clan honoured the *Kitosa* spirit, and his mother and three other wives of his father worshipped Mariam and the clan spirits *Awlijano*, *Awlachaw*, *Hazulo* and *Bajo*. Sorsa's stepmother functioned as a *tanqway* [a soothsayer who foretells the future through signs or omens, usually by reading the entrails of a goat, sheep or chicken]. Her clan spirit was *Awlachaw*, through whom she made demands upon Sorsa's father, neighbours and clients, saying, "Unless you bring me a certain number of heifers to feed *Awlachaw*, I will cause your death." In this manner she caused fear in the home and throughout the neighbourhood and district. Sorsa's family worshipped the spirit of his father's clan, *Kitosa*,

¹ Traditional religion was commonly called "Satan-worship".

whom they believed was the powerful sky god. At the annual *Masqal* celebration, the family would offer *Kitosa* special offerings.¹

The Good News

On one occasion my stepmother got very sick; she had a huge tropical ulcer on her leg. The local people tried all the usual medicines but it kept spreading and deepening. As a last resort my father decided to make the long trip, a day's walk for a well person, to the SIM hospital in Otona. There she heard someone preaching.

"You don't have to live in fear. You can be set free. The Creator loved us so much that he sent his Son to die for our sins. When we believe in Jesus Christ we can be set free from fear and from the coming judgment," said the preacher in the hospital waiting room. During the days my stepmother received treatment for her tropical ulcer she heard the same preaching many times. In fact she heard it so often that she memorized it!

My stepmother was not among those who believed in the hospital waiting room. But the preaching made an indelible impression on her. What she heard was so important to her that she virtually had the outline of the preaching memorized. She had it so firmly fixed in her mind that when she got back home she was able to tell the neighbours exactly what she had heard. Amazing as it may seem I heard the Good News for the very first time from my unconverted stepmother! This is how it happened.

Early one morning I was squatting by the open fire in my home. My stepmother was outside talking in an animated voice. She didn't know I was listening to every word she said. She had not the faintest idea that she was preaching to me! A group of women from the neighbourhood had gathered around and she was telling them what she had heard at the Soddo Hospital.

"This person who was reading from a big book told us that God loved us so much that he sent his Son into the world to die for us. He died because of all the things that we have done wrong. He was buried and he came alive again. He's the only one who can save us from judgment. If we believe in him we will be able to live a new life. We will not be judged," she told them.

Of course she had nothing in writing. She had memorized everything she heard and was repeating word for word what the preacher in the waiting room at the hospital had told her.

My mind was in a whirl. "The God who created the world knows about me, and he loves me? Why would his Son die for my sin? He came alive again after he had been dead for three days? So there is life after death? And I can have a new life of freedom from fear by believing in him?"

¹ Balisky, 237

I ran outside and went off on my own to think about all the things my stepmother had been saying. This was the very first time I had ever heard anything like this. I didn't ask her any questions. I didn't say a word to her or to anyone else in the family. I needed to be alone, and try and process these things my stepmother had heard from the Book.

Believing in Jesus

It was two weeks or so later that I heard that two itinerant preachers, Ato Tadessa and another one named Sorsa had arrived at a place close by and they were preaching.

"Maleko has believed in Jesus," one of the neighbours told me. Maleko, who lived about ten minutes walk from our place, had gone to listen to the two itinerant preachers and had believed. "People are saying that the two itinerant preachers have come to Maleko's house," this same neighbour told me. I raced off to Maleko's house as fast as my short legs could carry me. Sure enough! There they were. By the time I got there lots of people had gathered outside the house.

Ato Tadessa and Sorsa each had the Book. They preached the same thing I had heard from my stepmother. At the end of their preaching they asked: "Who wants to believe in Jesus?"

Not many people did at that time, but I stood up. One of the preachers asked me: "Do you want to believe in Jesus?" "I'm afraid. If Jesus can free me from fear and give me life after death I want to believe in him," I replied as I stood to my feet.

"That's great. God bless you. We'll pray for you," he said. Then he told me to sit down. That was all they said to me! As I look back I am amazed at what happened. I didn't hold up both hands and repeat anything after them. No one came and talked to me afterwards.

In the following days lots of people believed; the D'guna Offa church grew out of those evangelistic meetings. That was my first visit to what would soon become a local church in the area, and this was the congregation that I would attend for some time.

As soon as I returned home I told my stepmother and my father that I had believed in Jesus. They weren't glad, sad or mad. "That's your choice," they said to me. Then I told them that they ought to do the same. I gave them a synopsis of what I had heard an hour or two earlier. Over a period of weeks all of them believed. Looking back I guess that was my first preaching experience.

Both my father and my stepmother went to listen to the itinerant preachers. Then the itinerant preachers came to our house and preached to our neighbours.

Paul Balisky comments: When [Sorsa's stepmother] returned home, the neighbour ladies came over for news about the [foreigners] at Otona and to see if her ulcer was on the mend...

It was a cold morning so Sorsa, a lad of about eleven, was warming himself beside the fire. He heard his stepmother relate the story of Jesus. She told of how Jesus had been born of the virgin Mary and after he had reached manhood died on a cross for the sins of all people of the world... This story penetrated the mind of young Sorsa. In his desire to hear more he searched out an evangelist who had recently come to the D'guna district.

Several months later Sorsa believed and invited the evangelist to his home to explain this wonderful news of Jesus to his family. His entire family eventually believed in Jesus. Around 1938 or 1939 Sorsa was taught to read and write by the son of the same evangelist.¹

My Family become Believers

My mother bore four children but the eldest died in infancy. My stepmother had four children and my father's other wife also had four children, so now there were eleven children in the family. My one sister, who was born before me, had died in infancy, so I was the eldest of the group. Being the oldest male child gave me a special position in the family.

Within a very short time my father, my stepmother, my father's other wife, and all my siblings accepted Jesus as their Saviour. Many members of our extended family also became Believers. I thank God for this. Uncle Somano, the one who worked for an Amhara,² didn't believe, but he never did anything to oppose us. But his older brother believed. Lots of people in that family became Believers. Some years later many members of Somano's family became Believers. All of them attended the D'guna Offa Church.

When my stepmother believed we emptied the house of every vestige of stuff that was connected in any way with the things she had been doing in the past. The visiting preachers always insisted that people do this. God enabled her to make a clean break and commit her life totally to Jesus. She was happy to accept Christ. She denied Satan. In place of fear, our home was filled with singing and happiness.

My stepmother never had any reservations about separating from her previous way of life. She was quite agreeable to taking all the stuff out of the house that she had previously used for making predictions. We threw it all away.

¹ Balisky, 237-8

² The Amhara were the dominant tribe in the administration of Ethiopia and this man was an important landowner.

Church Fellowship

The D'guna Offa church was only a short distance from my home, so for some time it became a home away from home for me. I went there just about every evening. It was there that I learned to read Amharic and we had singing and prayer services. People read from the Bible almost seven evenings a week and talked about the passages they read. The only Bible we had was in Amharic, a second language to all of us. Perhaps because one of our relatives worked for an Amhara landlord we did not think of Amharic as something that was imposed upon us. We wanted to be able to speak it, and after we became Believers, we wanted to read the Amharic Bible.

Because D'guna Offa was a brand new church everyone was enthusiastic. Every Believer was a preacher. Not a day would pass without people believing in Jesus. Everyone was excited about the new life they had found in Christ.

Sunday became a special day for us but no one considered only having preaching and prayers on Sunday. Every day was for preaching and praying. Thursday morning became a special time among Believers in Walayta. As many Believers as possible came to the church on Thursday morning for a couple of hours to sing and pray. Sundays and Thursdays were like a wedding celebration. There were also special women's meetings on Thursday.

When the D'guna Offa church was first established we had a lot of visiting preachers. Some came from as far away as Otona to preach and teach. One of these was Evangelist Sorsa's brother. Groups of women also came from Soddo to sing in the churches. These visiting preachers and choirs always attracted a lot of local visitors; many of those who came to see the visitors stayed to believe in Jesus.

In spite of its wonderful beginning the D'guna Offa church did not send out a lot of itinerant preachers or missionaries. The elders there did not have a real vision for outreach. When I responded to God's call to go to Sidama as an itinerant preacher they did very little to help me. Not one of them ever came to Sidama to visit me. On one occasion when I returned for a visit, the church elders gave me one *birr* (dollar) as "help for my food". It was so pathetic; but instead of being angry I just thanked them.

First Baptisms

The first baptism in the D'guna area probably took place about two months after people began to believe. Initially there was quite a bit of opposition to the preaching and establishing of new churches. For this

reason many of our meetings took place at night. Often we got very little sleep. Many times we would bring some food for supper and a blanket; we ate and slept at the church.

Prayer was an integral part of the life of the congregation right from the beginning. We prayed especially for those who were in prison. We prayed for church leaders and for itinerant preachers. We prayed about anything and everything, especially for the sick and families that didn't have any children.

Ato (Mr) Biru was the president of the churches and sometimes he came to visit us. Ato Godato, who later became one of the main leaders, was an itinerant preacher; he visited us too. Some of the itinerant preachers who came to visit stayed for weeks and during that time they would travel around the area preaching and helping new Believers to plant churches. They themselves never stayed in one place for very long.

The first baptism I remember was conducted at night at a river about four hours walk from my home.¹ There was no river in our area; that's why we had to go to a place so far away. I don't recall the name of the river but it was in the direction of Damota mountain. At the first baptism in the D'guna area a lot of people were baptized. I have no idea how many. In Walayta it was not the tradition for itinerant preachers to baptize people but in this case I think the itinerant preachers did the baptizing. Baptism was viewed as part of the congregation-building process, not as a private event.

After the initial baptism my father wanted to be baptized. The thing that prevented him from being baptized was that he had two wives. He knew that the itinerant preachers would not baptize him as long as he had two wives. He was puzzled and confused. My deceased mother bore three children. Each of his two wives had four children. So my father had three adults and eleven children to feed!

Because I was his eldest son my father would often ask my opinion. One day he said to me: "Sorsa, what shall I do? I want to be baptized. How can I ask my second wife to leave? It is impossible for my first wife to look after eleven children." "God is in control," I reminded him. "When we are willing to do what he wants us to do, then he will work out all the details. If he has told us to do something, then he must know how it is all going to work out." My father thought about that for some time. He agreed that it made sense. My advice helped him make up his mind to do what he knew God wanted him to do.

Both wives had become Believers and they wanted my father to do what was right. Both of them also wanted to be baptized. When my father talked

¹ Baptisms were conducted at night because of Italian surveillance of what appeared to them as political activity.

to his second wife she said she was willing to go back to her family. My father was amazed at her attitude. He had anticipated that she would be angry and demanding. Almost as soon as she had made the decision another man came along and asked for her. She took one of the children with her and got married. Her other three children stayed with my father.

After he was baptized my father was an elder for a while. But he did not live long. He got sick and died. Had my parents lived I would have been responsible for looking after them in their old age, as is customary in the Walayta culture, but now God had released me from this responsibility.

Reading the Bible

Many people, especially young men, wanted to learn to read as soon as they became Believers. In Walayta at that time many people who could speak Amharic fluently could not read and write, so being able to read Amharic was a respected status symbol.

There was a girl who lived at Maleko's house, ten minutes from my home, who could read Amharic. I respected her very much because she was able to read. I got her to help me and soon I was able to sound out the syllables and learned to read. Because the first four letters of the "mixed-up alphabet" that we used were pronounced Ahh Bu Gee Dah, we often referred to the whole process of learning to read by that name.

From the moment I saw the Book in the hands of the preachers I wanted one. I knew I had to have one. I wanted to learn the Amharic alphabet in order to read the Bible. Later, teaching people to read Amharic would become an important part of my work. I wanted people to have access to God's word and at that time there was only one way: the Amharic Bible.

"I absolutely must have one," was the thought that seized my heart the very first time I saw Ato Tadessa preaching from a huge Bible. But I had to wait more than a year before I could save enough money to buy one. I was the oldest son in the family so my father gave me lots of things. When one of our cows had a calf he gave the calf to me. It was the only thing in the world I had at that time that I could sell. When I was young no one in the rural areas worked for wages so I couldn't work and get money. I sold my heifer for five *birr*¹ and bought a Bible. For years that was the one and only book I possessed. Whenever one of the Believers from D'guna Offa went to Soddo they would buy a few Bibles and then sell them when they got back.

My father was very proud of me when I had a big book to carry around with me. He wanted me to have it. He was also very happy that I could read. A few Believers bought just the New Testament but that was never

¹ The cost was about the equivalent of ten days wages for a rural person doing day jobs in town.

anyone's first choice. Everyone wanted to have the complete Bible, the sixty six books. Some priests and deacons in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church had Bibles but they didn't like the ones we had. The ones we bought came to us through the Ethiopian Bible Society.¹

At that time no one in the D'guna Offa church had been to Bible School so we had no one to give us any structured teaching from the Bible. When we were able to read we taught ourselves. We talked about what we read and shared what we learned. The amazing thing is, as we later discovered, that we didn't misunderstand any of the main doctrines of the Christian faith.

We learned a lot of our Amharic conversation from the Bible. There were a number of people around who spoke Amharic fluently and when we came across expressions or words in the Bible that we didn't understand we would ask them.

Possessing a Bible was a tremendous incentive to go preaching. Very few people my age in Walayta owned such a big book. I was gratified by the fact that I could read it and translate passages into the Walayta language when I preached. The message of the Bible had changed my life and I wanted to tell others the Good News so that their lives would be changed.

Sorsa Begins To Preach

I was just a teenager when I began to preach. I never stood up at a meeting and said I wanted to be an itinerant preacher. I never heard God call me by name. I made the choice, or God made it for me, before I ever attended any of the Annual Bible Conferences in Walayta. The fact that I was a teenager and that many of the people to whom I preached were much older than I was, did not worry me at all. This message was from God, so it was for everyone. As soon as I believed in Jesus I began to tell people about him. I told my parents. I told my brothers and sisters. I told the neighbours. I told anyone who would listen to me.

In Walayta there was never any question in people's minds about after-death judgment. Perhaps it was part of the legacy that the Ethiopian Orthodox Church contributed to Walayta. At a subliminal level the Ethiopian Orthodox Church had been in Walayta for centuries, ever since the time of St. Takla Haymanot in the thirteenth century. No one in Walayta ever denied that after death there was judgment. This awareness of judgment after death, a feeling of accountability, made it easy for us to preach about heaven and hell.

¹ The Ethiopian Orthodox Church printed and distributed its own Amharic translation of the Bible based mainly on Ge'ez manuscripts.

When I invited people to "believe" I did not ask them to accept a certain amount of information. "Believing" meant accepting or saying Yes to Jesus' invitation to be rescued from judgment. But people were not scared into believing in Jesus. They were reminded of what they already knew: there are two ways to live and die. The fear-way leads to judgment. The freedom-way leads to heaven. Jesus is the one who can rescue you from judgment.

"Who was the first person to believe because of your preaching?" you might ask. I can't remember. When I preached to my family, my father listened very attentively, and so did my stepmother. All of my brothers and sisters listened and wanted to know what this new teaching was all about. We just asked them to agree with what God said in the Bible, to say *Ishi* (I agree). When they did that I simply said to them what the itinerant preachers had said to me when I believed, "God bless you. God will help you. I will pray for you." They grew spiritually from the nourishment they received by going to church and meeting with other Believers a number of times each week. They taught one another; they exhorted each other and prayed about everything.

Very shortly after I believed I got hold of a small booklet in the Walayta language entitled *God Has Spoken*. It was a collection of Bible verses encapsulating the Gospel message published by the Scripture Gift Mission in London. People asked me to read the word of God, and then I preached to them and invited them to believe in (accept) Jesus.

Spiritual and Financial Independence

While I was still in my early twenties I developed a pattern of living that I followed for the rest of my life. Each day I would ask my father what work needed to be done, and after the work was completed I would take off and preach.

From that day until now, two things about preaching have never been of any interest to me: money and recognition. I did not begin preaching because someone paid me. Never at any time in my career did I ask for a salary in order to preach. Neither have I ever asked for recognition. Whether the church administrators (elders, deacons, pastors) acknowledge me as a preacher, itinerant preacher or missionary has never bothered me. I did not need any recognition when I began, and I still don't need any. *I would rather die than have anyone deprive me of this boast. Yet when I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, for I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel* (1 Cor 9:16).

Because I had an urge to preach I was never too concerned about having someone accompany me. Many times I went on my own. Often others

wanted to come with me but having them along was not particularly important to me. I knew what God wanted me to do, so I went and did it. In all of my time travelling around Walayta preaching I never had a permanent preaching partner.

But there was one thing I always had with me: something that contained God's Word. To begin with I had the little booklet *God Has Spoken*, written in the Walayta language, and then later I would take my Bible with me. I knew that it was not my preaching that touched people's lives, but the Word of God. Whenever I preached I read verses from the Word of God and then explained them.

My introduction was always the same: "The Bible says ... " Did the people have any idea what this book was? None at all. But that didn't matter. Their hearts confirmed that what the Book said was true. The preaching from the Bible was like the echo of the Holy Spirit's preaching in their hearts.

Early Outreach Trips

In Walayta we divide the country into the lowlands and the hills; I travelled around in both areas preaching. I travelled as far west as the Gumay river which is close to the province of Kullo Konta. There were some Walayta itinerant preachers in Kullo Konta but I never went there. This area was about two days walk from my home.

Judging from the stories those itinerant preachers told me it seemed that there was a lot more "Satan worship" [i.e. traditional religion] in Kullo Konta than where I lived. It was my impression that in Kullo and Konta the people also lived in fear of things that were going to happen to them.

Whenever I went to places far from my home I usually went with other people. I recall one occasion when I went with an itinerant preacher named Kolah to preach in Koisha. There were already a number of congregations in that area so we visited the congregations and helped new Believers. Then during the day we walked many miles preaching to anyone who would listen. We also preached in some of the churches on Sundays.

We slept in churches at night and Believers would provide us with food so it did not cost us anything. In this way they shared in the work we were doing. Sometimes we stayed in one place for as long as three weeks or even a month. I went on these sort of preaching trips two or three times while I was still in my early twenties.

One of the things that made these longer trips memorable to me was that by this time I had a big Bible to carry around with me. I enjoyed carrying the Bible around and reading passages to people. Whenever I was moving

around preaching I wished I understood more about the Bible so that I could teach and preach more comprehensively.

In every area of the country there were a few people who were like professional prophets. They didn't have to work themselves into a state of being possessed through singing and dancing. We called them *kalichas*. They were usually highly respected and often became quite wealthy from the "gifts" people gave them.

As soon as we arrived in a new area we would ask the people where the local *kalicha* lived. Then we would go to his or her house and ask for an appointment. We would tell them, "We have something very important that we need to talk with you about." We never took any "gifts" with us, so everyone knew that we were not going to ask for advice about placating the spirits of our ancestors. In this way we often created opportunities to preach to these people. Some of them believed in Jesus.

Contact with SIM Missionaries

When I first became a Believer the word "Mission" meant Sudan Interior Mission... Our family's first contact with the Mission was when my stepmother went to the Mission hospital in Otona, near Soddo...

SIM missionaries first came to Walayta in the early months of 1929. They learned the Walayta language and then for eight years preached the Good News. They also built a hospital at a place called Otona, close to Soddo town.

There was little awareness of foreign missionaries in the D'guna area where Sorsa grew up, as they were not preaching widely in that district. Sorsa tells us that they did not pay the itinerant preachers; nor did they provide Believers with buildings or have any part in the administration of the local congregations.

The Italians forced the SIM to leave Walayta in August 1937, and until May 1945 the Believers in Walayta had no contact with expatriate missionaries. But during these years many new congregations were established in Walayta.

Walter and Marcella Ohman had been among the first SIM missionaries to come to Walayta in 1929... After the end of the Italian occupation they and Miss Selma Bergsten arrived back in the town of Soddo in May 1945.

Otona Bible School

From what I heard and saw, everything expatriate missionaries did revolved around the Bible. They wanted people to understand the Bible and that is why they provided Bible training.

Mr Ohman sent out a notice to each of the church districts inviting a few people from each place to come to their house in Soddo town for some

Bible teaching. The D'guna elders selected me to go. I was ecstatic. Soddo was a long day's walk from my home but I was used to walking. Soon the track would become very familiar to me. That was my first contact with Mr. Ohman and the Mission (SIM).

Once SIM signed an agreement with the Ministry of Health the expatriate missionaries moved to their former houses in Otona, half an hour's walk north of Soddo town. As soon as they were settled, Mr. Ohman advertised that he was opening a full-time Bible school. For two years Otona became like my second home. Mr. Ohman, the missionary in charge of the Mission's work in Walayta at that time, was like my father. It was easy to talk and joke with him and his wife; they both spoke the Walayta language fluently.

In 1945 Sorsa was offered a position with good pay as a medical assistant at the mission hospital at Otona. After a period of training he would also help with basic health care in the surrounding villages. For two weeks he prayed about this invitation and asked for advice.

It was an attractive offer and a good way to help people in need, but his heart was set on preaching the Gospel far and wide. His greatest desire was to go to Bible school and prepare himself to be effective as an evangelist. He later said, "More than fifty years have passed since I made that decision. Knowing what I now know, if the same opportunity were offered me again, I would make the same choice."

I wanted to be a preacher and I knew that in order to do that I had to go to Bible School. It took seven or eight hours to walk from my home to Otona. I started off Sunday evening, spent the night at a friend's home and then arrived at school on Monday morning. At the end of the week we left school on Friday afternoon, again spent the night at my friend's house, and got home Saturday morning. When the Bible School began at Otona the students all studied a full week.

Many of those who came to the Bible School were church elders, (pastors) others were itinerant preachers, and some were simply people who wanted to learn more about the Bible.

The Mission provided us with a straw mattress on some boards for a bed, as well as an exercise book or two and a pencil. We had to have our own Bibles. It also provided some cooking pots but we had to collect or buy our own wood. We also had to provide all our own food. I carried my food from home each week. I took corn to roast or boil, and I took some flour to make flat bread. Sometimes some of the students bought food from the local market, but mostly we carried all we needed from our homes.

As people became less enthusiastic about attending Bible School they came up with all sorts of excuses for having school only three and a half days a week. But in the beginning it wasn't like that at all. When the Bible School was first opened on the SIM compound at Otona between 100 and 150 men came. In those days there were no women in Bible School. There must have been a number of different people who shared the teaching...

Very few, if any, of us had been to academic school so we got a chance to learn a little about some things other than just Bible. We had arithmetic, writing, reading, and Amharic grammar. All of these subjects helped us in one way or another to understand the Bible.

Mr. Ohman was the only teacher who taught using the Walayta language. He didn't read or speak Amharic so he couldn't use the Amharic Bible. His teaching was a trilingual process: he used his English Bible, taught in the Walayta language and our only text book was the Amharic Bible. But somehow or other, between the mix of the three languages we did learn something. All of the other teachers taught in Amharic. I'm not sure if there were Ethiopian teachers, but I think there were; I can't recall any names.

Experiences in Arsee

During my time in Bible School I made two or three trips to Arsee. This was during the Rainy Season between school years. I was probably sent there by the elders. At that time the expatriate missionaries had nothing to do with sending itinerant preachers into other parts of Ethiopia. Most of us went where we wanted to. Sometimes the local church provided us with some money, but most of us went without any.

The first time, I went to Arsee for a short time, maybe two or three weeks. We went to visit an itinerant preacher named Hadiro; another one named Manna was also there; he had been in Arsee for a long time. Some of the other Walayta itinerant preachers who were in Arsee at that time were named Malah, Aday and Kariga. We had no money so we had to walk both ways. I don't think any vehicles went into the part of Arsee to which we went... Four of us went from the Otona Bible School.

The second time I visited Arsee I went with a group who planned to help the itinerant preacher and Believers build a church in a place called Oropay. We cut trees from the forest and then carried them to the place where the Believers had decided to build a church.

I also made a third trip to Arsee, but it was just a brief visit. In the places I visited there were very few from the Arsee people who had believed in Jesus. Most of the Believers in the church were people who had come from other areas such as Kambatta and Walayta and were farming in Arsee.

Preaching to Muslims was new to me. I knew very little about Islam. We took turns preaching to any groups of people that we met. We preached the same things in Arsee as we preached in Walayta. None of the local people understood Amharic so we had to use interpreters. At that time we did not experience any opposition from the Muslims who lived there.

Arsee was the right place for some of the itinerant preachers, but not for me. I just knew that God did not want me to stay in Arsee and preach. I prayed about it a lot but I knew in my heart that Arsee was not my place of ministry. I knew that God wanted me to be an itinerant preacher, but I still didn't know where. Perhaps it was Sidama.

Call to northern Sidama

I knew next to nothing about the Sidamo people when I sensed that God wanted me to go to them as an itinerant preacher. I had already made three trips to Arsee and knew in my heart that Arsee was not God's place for me. I had also made some efforts to go to Gamo Gofa as an itinerant preacher but that didn't work out either. What about Sidama? Sidama is the area of Ethiopia, east of Walayta, where the Sidamo people live. It is bordered on the northeast and east by Arsee and Bale provinces, and on the south by Gedeo.

One of the very few things I knew about the Sidamo people was that they had killed many people from Walayta. Walayta and Sidamo people were never at war, so it was not the sort of killing that takes place when two groups of people take sides and fight.

At the Wednesday market at Dento [the town is now called Tena Bilate]. Walayta and Sidamo people traded together. There were the usual drunken brawls but there was never any ethnic conflict at the market place. But during the other six days of the week the Sidamos despised people from Walayta. This hatred helped to generate the emotion they needed to kill an innocent person in cold blood. The person killed was totally unknown to the killer so the killing was not a result of family animosity. Nor was it ever a retaliatory killing.

A steady trade went on between the two groups of people since we lived on either side of the Bilate river. Geographically and economically we were neighbours and it was because of the Sidamo traders that traders from Walayta were able to travel back and forth to Sidama without being killed.

Let me fill you in a little on the cultural killing that was still a part of the Sidamo culture in the 1950s. Thankfully it is one of the cultural characteristics that has now disappeared, hopefully forever.

Cultural Killing

In the Sidamo culture a young man could gain a position of high respect in the community by proving that he had tracked and killed another man; the same honour was given to a person who killed a lion. Killing someone is never good news so this type of ritual killing was strictly circumscribed by a large number of cultural rules and regulations.

By the 1950s the Ethiopian government no longer accepted cultural killing as a legitimate expression of Sidamo culture. It was classified as murder and the government administrators made some feeble attempts to stop it. This made it all the more exciting for the people who were doing it. Now they not only had to kill someone, but they had to make sure the police or soldiers didn't arrest them.

The warriors always operated as a group when they set out to track and kill. They could not risk failing in their attempt to kill someone so they had to be very sure that when they attacked they would be successful. Of course, they could not kill one of their own people, nor did they ever kill women or children. And if the "foreigner" had a guard, e.g. was with a group of Sidamo traders, he was in no danger of being attacked.

The killings could never take place on the Walayta side of the river so the warriors never crossed the Bilate river to kill people. Nor were they allowed to kill people in areas where their own people were farming; that would pollute the land. The killing had to take place in the forested area of the lowlands.

It goes without saying that potential victims simply didn't wander around the lowlands so that someone could kill them. It often took a long time, and sometimes repeated expeditions, before the warriors spotted, tracked and killed their victims. Often the young men, and usually two or three of them worked together, would spend weeks wandering around the lowlands looking for potential victims. They would carry food and water with them and live in the lowlands for as long as it took to locate a victim.

Once the warriors had killed and mutilated their victims they would sing and dance all the way back to their home area. This was to let the whole countryside know that some young men had achieved the status of warriors. Everyone would congratulate them.

The Walayta people had no similar cultural customs so they did not create situations in which they might be able to kill the Sidamos. The Sidamo people were more stay-at-home traders, whereas the Walayta people were wandering traders. Because of the cultural nature of the killing the Walayta people did not interpret these deaths as murders to be avenged, so the families never tried to retaliate.

The victims were nearly always people who made a mistake. For all of them, it was simply a matter of being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

It took about three hours to walk from the eastern bank of the Bilate river to the first place in Sidama where people were farming. It was during this time that the killings took place. Once travellers reached the cultivated areas they were safe. North to south the lowlands covered about 50 kilometres.

This cultural or ritual killing was not going on all the time; nor did every Sidamo youth feel compelled to go and kill someone.

Many times potential victims from Walayta did not get caught. They crossed through the Sidama lowlands without a guide or a guard. They made it.

The Sidamos killed lots of people from Walayta, especially when these men went to the Fango market in Sidamo. Instead of depending on sales at the Dento market some Walayta traders would take blankets to markets in Sidama and then buy coffee beans to trade in Walayta. A few too many drinks might cause them to be careless and they were murdered.

Sidamo warriors only needed enough of the body to prove to their peers and family that they had successfully tracked and killed another Walayta male. The rest of the body was left on the track to be buried by Walayta traders, hopefully before vultures (during the day) or hyenas (at night) discovered it.

The next people who came along, usually without any sort of hoes or shovels, had the unpleasant job of digging a grave in the sandy and rocky soil, burying the body and piling a heap of stones on top of the grave to prevent vultures and hyenas from eating it.

These roadside grave markers were a reminder to every “foreigner” making the journey, that others had not made it, and that crossing the Sidama lowlands was a risky journey.

When the young men returned from the lowlands with proof of having killed someone, their peers and family held a great feast and the killer or killers were recognized as warriors. This entitled them to special recognition at feasts and other cultural celebrations. The warriors were also treated with greater respect whenever a group of people got together to eat. For murdering someone in cold blood in the lowlands they were treated as heroes.

Evangelists Killed

A number of Walayta itinerant preachers were killed by these warriors, one of whom was Tadessa Witango. Tadessa had been invited by the expatriate missionaries Albert and Evelyn Brant in Dilla to go to Gedeo as

an itinerant preacher. He had travelled from Walayta to Dilla a number of times, walking through the Sidama lowlands with two or three other people. Perhaps those successful crossings caused him to be overconfident. I don't know. He was also a large man and very strong. He always felt that he could fend off any attackers.

One day in 1950 he decided to cut through the lowlands from Dilla to Walayta. Two other men, Take and Shano, were with him. Some Sidamo warriors spying for victims, probably nestled in the top branches of a large acacia tree, caught sight of them and followed them until they were in the middle of the lowlands. They attacked them and tied their hands behind their backs and then cut their throats; they murdered all three of them, so there were probably at least four or five attackers.

I was working in Arkay [in the Sidama region] at that time so I didn't hear about their deaths until many weeks later. Tadessa was from D'guna, so I made the journey back to Walayta to hear the details about their deaths. [They told me:] “He was Goliath compared to you. If the Sidamos killed Goliath what chance do you think you have of surviving? Please don't go back. Some people in Sidama have already become Believers. Let them preach to their own people. Why do you want to risk your life going back to Sidama?” people asked me. They tried in lots of ways to prevent me from returning to Sidama.

Tadessa was not the only Walayta itinerant preacher that died in the Sidama lowlands. Omochay Ukulo was an itinerant preacher in Gamo Gofa. As often happens he took a boy from Gamo Gofa with him when he returned to Walayta. The agreement, as he understood it, was: this boy would stay in Walayta and attend school. When he returned to Gamo Gofa after his holiday the boy's parents were angry beyond reason: “Where is our son? You have killed him! If you don't bring him back immediately to prove to us that he is alive, we will kill you.”

He had no choice but to travel back to Walayta and bring the boy back to his parents in Gamo Gofa. But when Omochay got to Walayta he discovered that he had an even greater problem! One of his friends, Markina Maja, was a student in Yerga Alem, in northern Sidama. Markina had taken the lad with him to Yerga Alem! Now Omochay had to travel to Yerga Alem and take the boy back to Gamo Gofa.

On his way back through the lowlands at the southern end of Sidama some Sidamo warriors spotted them, tracked them until they were in an isolated part of the lowlands, and then killed them both. That was in 1955.

Sorsa Enters Northern Sidama

The Need for a Jala

But getting to Sidama was much easier said than done. It was the going and coming that was dangerous, rather than living there. The Walayta people told and retold stories of people who had lost their lives on the roads. It wasn't that there was a war going on all the time, or anything like that. At the right place and time, the Walayta and Sidamo people lived in peace. What made it dangerous was that part of Sidama culture that had claimed the lives of many Walayta people over the years, including the lives of at least two itinerant preachers. Many languages in Ethiopia use the word *jala*. *Jala* means a friend upon whom you can rely. He or she is more than just a friend; a *jala* is a special friend that is trustworthy, and is usually a person who can provide some degree of protection.

The relationship was always a reciprocal one; the Walayta trader would provide hospitality to the Sidamo traders when they came to trade at the Dento market.

Cross-border trade between Walayta and Sidamo was common. There were a lot of things the Walayta people needed from Sidama, and the Sidamo people needed from Walayta. In order for Walayta traders to travel into Sidama territory they needed to have a *jala*, or companion who was a Sidamo. This person was like a bosom friend from the other group who became his protector. The Sidamo braves would never perform a ritual killing if one of their own people was travelling with the people from Walayta. I was praying that God would provide me with a *jala* so that I could travel into Sidama without running the risk of being killed.

The Felt-needs of the Sidamo People

Traders, both Sidamo and Walayta, had told us that in Sidama the people were in great bondage to the those who practiced black and white magic (shaman). They said there were many more *kalichas* in Sidama than in Walayta.

This prepared me to expect to meet people who lived in even greater fear than did the people in Walayta. I knew from experience that none of the mediums could do anything to alleviate people's fears.

Funerals, and the rites that go with them, are a reflection of people's fears and their expectations of life after death. In Walayta we had heard lots of stories about Sidamo funerals. They were quite different from traditional Walayta funerals.

We had heard that in Sidama the people almost always had two funerals. They said that the first one was short, perhaps three days. This was like a family ceremony to dispose of the body and allow the family to grieve. But

it wasn't considered to be a farewell ceremony for the departed ancestor. The family needed time to find out how best to prepare the "send-off" so that the departed ancestor would be happy with the ceremony provided.

Then they would wait for a month or even two. The *kalicha* had to specify a propitious time to have the major celebration. And then they would have the second funeral. It was called *kayisano weila*. This second funeral or wake would last anywhere from five days to a month. This was the main one because the spirit of the deceased was honoured and provided with everything that was appropriate to make it happy. Often this wake had all the appearance of a huge market. The more important the person, the larger the celebration. Warriors' funerals were always the longest and most impressive.

During the wake the celebrants used a number of different types of drums to call the whole countryside together. The drums were also used to facilitate the weeping and wailing. Everything I heard about the Sidamo people impressed upon me the spiritual needs of the people.

Preparation for Sidama

My own father died while I was in the process of preparing to go to Sidama. So it was maybe two or three years after his death that I left for Sidama. In the meantime I continued to work on the family farm and spend as much time as possible preaching. During those years many new churches were established in Walayta. There were still lots of places where the majority of the population were Unbelievers so it didn't matter where we went – we could preach the Good News.

I enjoyed preaching in my own language to the Walayta people, but I knew in my heart that God wanted me to move on.

"If this message is as important as these preachers say it is, then I have to tell as many people as possible," I thought when I heard the Good News for the first time. The moment I believed I somehow knew in my heart that I had to be part of telling this Good News to other people. The actual geographical location was not as important as the fact that I had to tell the Good News to those who needed to hear it. God certainly directed me to go to Sidama. I'm not sure exactly when this happened. It didn't happen all at one time. The inner urge to go to Sidama was part of what God had been doing in my life for some time. I just knew that I had to go and tell people in Sidama the Good News about Jesus the Saviour.

Deciding to move to another part of Ethiopia in order to tell the Good News to people who hadn't heard it was something I didn't need to talk to anyone about. I don't think it ever occurred to me that I should ask someone's permission to preach anywhere. Never once in my fifty-plus

years of ministry did I ask anyone, “May I go here and preach? Do you approve of me going to such and such a place?”

In much the same way, it never occurred to me to wait until someone was willing to provide financial support before going out to preach. I never asked anyone for financial help when I went out to preach. People from many different places have been helpful; but they helped because God moved them to help, not because I asked them. God gave me the conviction that if I put him first, everything else would fall into place. Other preachers, itinerant preachers and missionaries carried on their ministry in different ways. Where they went, and how they financed their ministry was never any concern of mine. We were never in competition. Whatever others did, I knew that I had to go to people who had not heard the Good News. I also knew that God would supply all my financial needs. For more than fifty years he has done that.

The Holy Spirit has never told me that I should no longer be a preacher, and for much of the time an itinerant preacher. And as I will repeat many times throughout my story: it is the love of God that keeps forcing me to go and preach the Good News to people who have not heard it. I say with the Apostle Paul: *For Christ’s love compels us, . . . We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us* (2 Cor 5:14, 20).

When I decided to go to Sidama I knew that it was a long-term commitment. I knew that many itinerant preachers from Walayta had gone out preaching and then returned to Walayta. But for me it was not going to be like that. Once I got to where I was going I would find some way to pay the bills and I would spend the rest of my life there.

I had heard about another Walayta itinerant preacher named Shonga Sadaybo (who worked in Sidama from 1947 to 1965). He was from a different part of Walayta, from the Koysya district. I had heard that he was working in the lowlands in an area called Shelo. That was about an hour and a half from where I eventually settled. Never having been to Sidama before I had no plan about where I would settle. I just wanted to be in some place where there were no Believers.

Sidamo traders in Walayta market

Dento was the large market on the Walayta side of the Bilate river where people from Sidamo and Walayta traded. It was not too far from where I lived and I knew many people from Sidama regularly came to this market. They would bring the big silver Maria Theresa coins and buy heifers and thick cotton blankets, called *buloko*, for which the Walayta weavers were famous. The highlands of Sidama are coffee country; the people obtained

their coins from the sale of coffee, and they brought coffee beans to sell in the market. They would then take the blankets back to Sidama and sell them.

Many of the Sidamo traders who came to the Dento market would stay with some of their Walayta friends overnight before they made the return journey back to Sidama. For many of them from the highlands the round trip took four or five days.

For a long time I had been praying and preparing to go to Sidama, not to trade but to preach the Good News to the people. I knew that I needed someone to take me across, but I did not know anyone who traded between Sidama and Walayta.

As I was praying about this I noticed that a group of four Sidamo traders often stayed at a friend’s place. “Perhaps this is my opportunity. If I could persuade them to allow me to travel with them I could find a place to stay and establish a base in Sidama,” I thought to myself. I began to pursue the possibilities. Working through the “official” channels of the church and applying to be sent as an itinerant preacher was something I never thought about.

Although I could have met many people from Sidama at the Dento market, markets were not places for preaching. During market time people were always too preoccupied with other things to listen to preaching. Although I could perhaps have talked to a lot of people, I would not have been able to preach. More importantly, I would not have had any contact with their homes and families. Market evangelism has never been a culturally effective way to preach the Good News either in Walayta or Sidama.

Outreach with Doda

Doda and I had been friends for a long time; we shared a desire to preach the Good News. He and I had travelled around Walayta for a number of years preaching the Good News. We were not relatives and we actually attended two different churches in the same area of D’guna: mine was Offa and his was Wariza. But because we both had a desire to preach we would go out together and preach. That’s how we became good friends.

When Doda and I walked for countless hours around Walayta preaching, other Believers thought nothing of it. Neither of our local congregations thought of us as itinerant preachers. Looking for groups of Unbelievers and preaching to them was something we enjoyed doing. We didn’t ask anyone for permission, or tell anyone where we were going or had been. We just went and preached. We both shared a sense of being *sent* by God. *Jesus*

said, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, I am sending you” (Jn 20:21).

When we took our Bibles and went out to preach we rarely thought of going to a local congregation. All of our evangelistic preaching took place in the community, not in the church building. So there was never any competition between our preaching and what was being done in the local congregations; we only preached to people who had not yet believed. We didn’t need permission from anyone to do that!

Whenever we went out to preach we asked people in our churches to *pray* for us. When we returned we would tell them what God had done through the preaching. To begin with we did not travel any great distance so the church members knew the areas as well as many of the people. We would tell them whom we met, how we *preached* to them, and what their responses were. Then we invited them to *praise* God for the work of the Holy Spirit in people’s lives.

When I was in my teens itinerant preaching was something lots of people did. Both men and women would take their Bibles and go in twos and threes, or sometimes alone, and find people to whom they would preach. No one thought anything much of it. It was part of the lifestyle of many new Believers.

Definite Plans for Sidama

One day I said to Doda, “I’m going to Sidama to preach to the people. I notice that some of the Sidamo traders stay in your friends’ house. Right? Next time these traders come I would like you to introduce me to them. I will ask them if I can travel across the Bilate river to Sidama with them. I am going to preach the Good News to the Sidamo people.”

I wasn’t sure how Doda would respond to my plan. I did not think for a moment that he would want to come with me. So my first pleasant surprise came when Doda said: “That’s a great idea. I want to come with you. Let’s go together.” I was happy that he wanted to go with me. I knew that he didn’t have the same burning conviction about missionary preaching that I had, but for the moment that didn’t matter. For him it was a preaching trip. For me it was something that would totally change my life.

On the 3rd Tir 1944 (January 1951) I left Walayta on my first missionary journey to Sidama.¹ I knew that I was going to a place where, if I got caught alone in the bush by “killers”, I would be murdered. I knew I was going to a place where the language was totally unknown to me. I knew I was going to

¹ The Ethiopian calendar follows an early calculation of the date of the conception and birth of Jesus, placing it about eight years later than the date underlying the more universal Gregorian calendar.

a place where I knew no one, had no land, no job and no cows. I knew that I would go to a place where there were no Believers. I had no intention of working with other Walayta itinerant preachers who might be there, or of finding some Sidamo Believers and “training them to evangelize.” My intention was to go to places where no one had ever preached the Good News. But those were not the only things I knew.

I knew that God loved the Sidamo people. I knew that God had called me to be an itinerant preacher. I knew that God could use me to preach the Good News. I knew that through the preaching of the Good News people’s lives would be changed. I knew that people whose lives were changed would plant new churches.

People have asked me: “Did you tell the elders of the church that you were going? Were you a recognized missionary? Did the church help you in any way?” The answer to all three questions is “No.” I just went. God told me to go.

If anyone had asked me those questions when I was preparing to go to Sidama I would probably have replied, “Why do I need to talk with the church elders about it? Why do I need to ask their permission? Why do I need to have some title in order to go and preach the Good News? Why should I ask for financial support from the local congregation?”

I think I was about 26 years old when I left Walayta for the first time; in those days age was something no one thought much about. I had just got married so I had to leave my brave bride in Walayta while I made this exploratory trip into northern Sidama.

Doda and I were not able to carry much in the way of food with us, so we knew that we would have to buy what we needed when we got to Sidama. We counted on buying some of our food and receiving some from families that accepted us as guests.

I had saved up about ten Maria Theresa dollars for this special occasion. I calculated that this would be more than enough for my first stay in Sidama. My plan was to stay about four weeks the first time and then return and take my wife to Sidama. These ten silver coins were all my own money. I did not ask any of the Believers in Walayta to help me when I made my first trip to Sidama. God had told me to go. He had given me everything I had. I knew that he would supply everything I needed while I was there.

I owned one or two cows which I had inherited from my father when he died. When I first thought of going to Sidama my idea was: I will sell one of the cows and that will give us enough money to live on for a while. After that, who knows? But in actual fact I was able to find some money without having to sell the cows.

In both Walayta and Sidama milk cows are very important to us. We love drinking milk, so cows are very precious. It would have been a big sacrifice to have had to sell my cows.

A Month in Sidama

The Sidamo traders who stayed in Doda's friend's home agreed to take us along with them. Although it was Tir (January) the Bilate river was full and running fast so it was dangerous to cross it. And then came the most dangerous part of the trip.

The walk from the Sidama side of the river to the first settlement called Chelo took about three hours very vigorous walking. The track from the river to Chelo is hot, dry and dangerous. For three hours there is no water, no houses, no cultivated land, no people except those who might be lurking around to attack and kill the careless traveller.

The huge acacia trees provided some shade from the hot sun but they also provided lookout spots and places to hide for those who were looking for careless travellers. I also saw for myself many piles of stones along the roadside, stark reminders of those who had been murdered because of the ritual killings. Everyone travelling into Sidama from Walayta was always happy to get through this part of the journey. We stayed the night at Chelo: my first night in Sidama; a "foreign country" for me, and where I would spend the rest of my life.

On the second day we travelled from Chelo to Arkay. As we walked uphill through the acacia-filled lowlands the land gradually became more fertile and more cultivated and we met people working in their fields...

The traders with whom we were travelling headed for the home of one of their relatives, a man named Boko. We were invited to stay overnight with the traders at Boko's house. This was the first time in our lives that we had met Boko and his family. But God had gone before us. This was a divine appointment. I was not surprised. I expected God to arrange meetings like this.

We did not know it then of course, but Boko was to become one of our best friends in Sidama. God had brought us to just the right place at just the right time. God had prepared this whole family to listen to the Good News and immediately accept it without any reservations. From a human point of view such things are impossible. But with God, nothing is impossible.

Language

One of the things I heard the least about before I went to northern Sidamo would bother me the most: language. The Sidamo language was something we had to live with every day. Linguists say there is some similarity

between the Sidamo and Walayta languages but that was no comfort to me or my wife. The unknown language was one of the things about Sidama that I had to come to terms with after I arrived.

When we first arrived we couldn't understand anything people said. When the local people were carrying on a conversation we could only guess at what they were talking about. It was very difficult to begin with.

My companion Doda had a friend in Shelo. We went there and he helped us put quotations from the Bible into the Sidamo language. In the early days these helped us communicate the Good News to people...

When we arrived [in Sidama], Doda and I had three languages to struggle with. He and I spoke the Walayta language. In northern Sidama everyone spoke the Sidamo language. Many people, especially those who travelled around at all, could speak and understand some Amharic.

Thank God, in the beginning we did have a third language. The fact that we were able to use Amharic made it possible for us to connect with some people and gradually learn the Sidamo language. God was able to use that third language to help people understand the Good News. It was not the ideal strategy, but then God often uses less than ideal strategies!

Traditional Beliefs in Sidama

In northern Sidama the people had two religions: for the sake of simplicity we'll call one of them traditional and the other populist. In one way or another everyone was looking for peace with God.

The first or "traditional" religion was really their search for a right relationship with the Creator. We did not have to tell people that their sin separated them from God. They knew that. But because of the wickedness of the human heart their search always went off in the wrong direction. They looked to people to direct them in their search and those people, being misdirected themselves, took them further in the wrong direction. In our preaching we simplified all this misdirected searching by saying that people "worshipped Satan".

The populist religion was a veneer of Christianity that had been imposed upon the Sidamo people by the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and the government. I was told that in 1945 or 1946 everyone in the area was ordered to be baptized by priests of the Ethiopian Orthodox church and to become "Christians." This was part of the Amhara government's effort to civilize people by calling them "Christian." There was nothing intrinsically wrong about that, but being sprinkled with water did not change their hearts; it did not free them from fear; it did not give them new power to live better lives.

In our preaching the word we used most was “believe”, which was synonymous with the words “choose” or “accept”. Whenever we preached we invited people to believe in Jesus because he would save them from judgment. It is not surprising that those who accepted the Good News called themselves Believers. What else could people call us? The word “Christian” had already been taken. In Sidama and Walayta the word “Christian” meant a member of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Because we used the same Bible that expatriate missionaries used, many people used to call us “mission”. When people with the government administration talked about us, that is the word they used.¹

Preaching in Sidama

For the rest of our month in northern Sidama Doda and I travelled around the area and preached. Sometimes Boko came with us and then we were three. God in his goodness had brought us in contact with a man who spoke Amharic. When Boko came with us, we would speak in Amharic and he would translate for us into the Sidamo language. When there were just the two of us we would try to find someone in the group of listeners who knew a little Amharic and ask them to interpret for us. It was not the ideal way to go around preaching, but for the moment that was all we could do.

Both Doda and I were convinced that if we sowed the seed (preached the Good News) one day the Holy Spirit would cause it to germinate. We did not go around looking for people who would accept it, or spend our time just with Boko. We preached to people as they were ploughing or harvesting, on the road to market, at funerals or wherever. But the most popular and profitable place was their homes.

Outreach at Funerals

Perhaps some of our best opportunities were at funerals and the funeral wakes. The Sidamo people used to have the initial funeral which lasted for about three days. After that they would set a date for the major wake; this was usually a number of weeks after the original funeral. This was always a major event in the life of the community.

The extended family that was responsible for the wake would beat drums so everyone knew they were expected to turn up. The sound of the drums was music to our ears. We knew we had a captive audience. At that time the people would cut down a huge *zigba* tree and put it in the centre of an open space. People would come from all over the place. The wake usually lasted for at least four days. It was just like a huge market. At these times

¹ In the early 1970s the local congregations with historic links to the SIM were united as the Ethiopian *Kale Heywet Church* (KHC) and represented to the government under this title.

we were able to preach to hundreds and hundreds of people. We didn't stay around and preach repeatedly. We stood on the outskirts of the gathering and began to preach and people gathered around to listen.

Both the message we preached, as well as the way we did it, were new to the people; none of the Orthodox, Muslims nor ethno-religionists (local-religion leaders) did anything similar. None of them went from home to home announcing they had Good News. There was a sense in which we were doing something that was very strange. But people needed to hear the Good News and we wanted to preach it, so this was a golden opportunity.

It was culturally invasive, but people were not offended by our unusual strategy of preaching. People listened, but during that first month none (other than Boko and his wife) gave any indication that they believed. Did this discourage us? Not at all. We knew that the timing of the germination was in God's hands.

You're probably wondering why people listened to our preaching. At no time did we have to wonder with whom we were going to talk; everyone everywhere was willing to listen to us. And we didn't really experience any opposition. Wherever we wanted to preach, people were willing to listen. They listened to us because, on the basis of God's word, we promised them *freedom* from their *fears*.

Usually their reaction was: this sounds too good to be true. Even though we were on the road every day from dawn to dark during that month, only one family accepted Christ. We must have preached to hundreds of people. But their immediate lack of response did not worry us. We were absolutely confident that the seed we sowed during that month, we or others would reap in the years ahead. Fifty years later there are almost 400 local congregations affiliated with the Kale Heywet Church in northern Sidama, plus many more congregations affiliated with other denominations.

Each day Doda and I set off in a different direction to look for different groups of people. We wanted to talk to as many people as possible.

Cultural Change

The functionaries of the traditional religion, i.e. the people who acted as the priests and prophets, promoted *fear* by using threats. Their preaching was: “If you don't do this and that, one of your animals will die, or you will get sick.”...

Everyone who became a Believer had to challenge the functionaries and thus run the risk of their threats and curses. Many of these functionaries (*kalicha*, *tankway*) were very influential people in the community, especially those who were credited with having powers to curse, bless, prophesy and heal.

Regardless of their claims we never ever felt afraid. God took away all fear of them from our hearts. We would go to their homes and preach to the people who had gathered to ask advice from them. We even asked for appointments to talk with the functionaries. Sometimes they gave us appointments. We would tell them about the Two Ways: the broad one that goes to destruction, and the narrow one that provides peace with God. They opposed what we were doing but never did anything to harm us.

One of the most well-known functionaries in that area of northern Sidama at that time was a middle-aged man named Birado. Everyone in the area knew him. Many of the government officials looked upon him as a sort of representative of the people, like the local “king”. In northern Sidama the land was divided into broad strips running from the highlands right down into the desert. The strip we later lived on in Afrara was called Bada; it was like a community name. This man Birado was reputed to own a strip of land that had a large number of houses on it. It was a very wealthy part of the country. Ras Deferiso, the representative of the Amhara government in Yerga Alem, often used to call Birado for consultation.

One day Doda and I arrived at one of his compounds, which was surrounded by three high wooden fences, just as he was getting ready to go to the provincial centre of Yerga Alem. That day there seemed to be hundreds of people milling around; horses and mules were all over the place. It was just like a huge market. We asked permission to enter the compound and then into his huge house! When the guards asked us who we were and why we had come we told them: “The Lord Jesus Christ came down from heaven. He was born of the Virgin Mary. He died for our sins. He was buried. He rose from the dead on the third day. Everyone who believes in him will be saved. Those who don’t believe will be damned.” Guess what? Birado’s right hand man was one of the few in the group who knew Amharic. He interpreted our preaching into Sidamo so that everyone could hear what we wanted to say. We liked him because he dressed and talked just like an Amhara. Then we told him that we wanted to talk to Birado himself. The official told us that this was like a “holy” day for him and he couldn’t talk to visitors. But he promised to tell Birado what we had said.

Often officials like this had two personas: one of them was polite and friendly, the other was vicious and vindictive. They would say one thing to our faces and the very opposite behind our backs. We knew that they behaved in this way but we were not afraid of their evil side.

As we left the compound Birado’s right hand man said to the people: “You know what these Walayta preachers deserve, don’t you? Go for it! I’ll take responsibility for whatever happens to them. Don’t worry about getting

into trouble. I will protect you. Just go ahead and do whatever you think is appropriate.” In an oblique way he was telling the people to beat us up with their walking sticks. We told him that we were not afraid. God had sent us and we knew that God would protect us. On this occasion nothing happened to us.

Spiritual Conflict

Daily there was a running battle between what we preached and the traditional (ethnic) religion. Whenever we prayed and preached we were involved in spiritual warfare. People were always asking us questions about Satan: What is Satan going to do? Is Satan going to pass away? Will Satan kill these people that are preaching against him? Our reply was always the same: Satan is a liar. He only wants to hurt you and deceive you. He offers you nothing but bondage. Believe in Jesus and he will set you free.

There was also quite a large mosque in the area. Many of the Sidamo people said they wanted to become Muslims. This was just another part of their search for peace and freedom. Their traditional (ethnic) religion did not give them freedom so they tried to find it in Islam. A number of times Doda and I went to the mosque and preached to the people gathered there.

Close to us was a small town called Dinbara Kelah. There was an Ethiopian Orthodox church in the town, but very few Sidamo people had anything to do with it. The Church’s liturgy was in Ge’ez, and no one understood this ancient language. There was one priest who lived there, but he did not do anything against us. Later priests from other places did lots of things against us.

Trying to preach through interpreters for a month was a frustrating experience. Frankly I was amazed that it worked as well as it did. After I returned from Walayta I realized that I had to free myself from interpreters. It was important to learn the Sidamo language and preach in it.

After our first few days we realized we needed something like *God Has Spoken* in the Sidamo language. Doda had a friend who lived in Chelo. This man knew all three languages, so we made a brief trip to Chelo. We copied key quotations from the Amharic Bible. Then we wrote out translations in the Sidamo language, plus a bit of an explanation. When we went back to Arkay I would read these notes to people until I had memorized them and could “preach without notes”!

Preparing to Settle in Arkay

After a month in Arkay it was time for Doda and me to go our separate ways. My mind was made up. God had told me to preach in northern

Sidama. I had no doubt about that so I needed to go back to Walayta and prepare my brave bride, Paul's mother, to come to Sidama.¹

I knew that life in Sidama would be much more difficult for her than for me but she had made up her mind that she was willing to go with me. Her commitment to missionary work exceeded mine. She has never complained, and never wanted me to do anything else.

Doda was an only child and he had elderly relatives to look after so felt obliged to return to Walayta. God had not given him the same conviction about missionary work, so I made no effort to detain him in Sidama.

During my month in Arkay I had built a tiny house that was to be our home for the next few years. The wall was made of split logs dug into the ground, saplings made up the roof and then the whole thing was thatched in grass, as were all the Sidamo houses. Very inexpensive; cool in the summer and warm during the cooler nights.

Boko had also given me a small piece of land and I had planted some corn and *teff* so that at least we would have something to eat. My house and farm were also an assurance to Boko that I would return. I did not expect to receive anything in the way of salary from the churches in Walayta. At that time there were no churches or Believers in northern Sidama so I could not expect any money from them. Some years later, after I was "listed" as an itinerant preacher, my home church paid me four dollars a month for a few years and then they dropped me from their paid itinerant preachers. But in the early years I expected nothing; I received nothing. That did not worry me at all. I was looking to God to supply everything I needed and he always did.

Throughout the whole of my ministry literacy has been a high priority. I'm sure you're wondering why, seeing we had no written materials in the Sidamo language and very little in the Walayta language. That really *was* the reason. The only Bible we had was in Amharic, so in order to read God's word for ourselves we had to learn to read Amharic. Many new Believers wanted to read God's word for themselves. We even taught some of the women to read, although they did not preach in the church. Lots of times the men did not want the women to learn to read.

During my time with Doda I taught Boko and his wife to read Amharic so they could read the Bible in their second language. For all of us this was the only Bible we had and we used it all the time. Maybe the meaning wasn't always crystal clear, but we certainly got the main points and that was lots.

¹ Her name is Gobena Gota, but following Walayta and Sidamo custom Sorsa never called her anything but "Paul's mother".

Sorsa settles in Arkay

Return to Sidama

Boko and his family were happy to see me when I returned after a month in Walayta. They were also glad to hear that my wife would be coming in a month. I told them how the people in Walayta had tried hard to discourage me from returning to Sidama. Many of them had cried as they tried to persuade me to stay in Walayta and preach the Good News there.

I told Boko that I used the story of the apostle Paul deciding to go to Jerusalem. Paul had said to those who loved him, but didn't want him to go to Jerusalem: *Why are you weeping and breaking my heart? I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus* (Acts 21:13).

I told them I was going back to Sidama regardless of what might happen to us. I was glad to be back with Boko and his family because I knew that this was the place God had for me.

God called me to northern Sidama to preach the Good News. That was why I had returned, and I wanted to spend as much time as possible preaching. In my experience, preaching and praying are inseparable. When I preached I told people what God had said. When we prayed we talked with God about what he was doing in people's lives. We prayed about everything; we preached the Good News to everyone.

Wherever we went, and with whoever we talked, we knew there was one common felt need: fear. Whether we preached or prayed we had one message: we promised people, on the basis of God's promises, freedom from fear.

Signs and wonders, similar to those we read about often in the book of Acts, were commonplace in Sidama. As we preached and prayed God demonstrated his power by setting people free from spiritual, physical and mental bondage. They were also released from so many other types of bondage: economic, cultural, religious and social, just to mention a few of them. Transformed individuals created transformed families; transformed families created transformed communities.

When I moved around preaching, John 3:14-16 was one of my favourite passages: *Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.*

I spent as much time as possible travelling around preaching. It was always preaching first; house and farm came second. During the second month no one believed. But I was sowing seed and I knew that if I kept on sowing, one day I would reap.

The Conversion of Boko

Boko and his family's decision to move on from their parents' religion and follow Christ was clear-cut right from the beginning; they had no reservations or fears about becoming Believers. His close relatives and neighbours made fun of him: "Why are you allowing these preachers to stay in your home? We've seen these sort of people before. These Walayta preachers have come to eat up your *inset*.¹ When they're full, they will go back to Walayta and you will be left alone."

But most of Boko's relatives and friends did not say much; they took the "wait and watch" attitude. They said to one another, "If this teaching is good, then Boko will stay healthy. His animals will not get sick. He will make money when he trades. But if something bad happens to him, we will know that "believing in Jesus" is not good."

There was no overt opposition from the community to Boko and his family's decision to become Believers. The neighbours did not feel that Boko's choice would have an adverse effect on them. The Sidamo people viewed religion as a family matter rather than a community responsibility. So Boko's choice was not considered something that might adversely affect the community.

Marriage

God knew better than I did that I needed a partner who was as committed to being an itinerant preacher as I was. I thought I made the choice, but as I look back, I know that it was really God who made the choice for me.

God prepared her for missionary work. In many situations over the past fifty years she has done better than I have. Many times she has encouraged me. When I was disappointed by people she would tell me to look to God for help. When I got depressed she would cheer me up. She was always a help. She never complained about clothes, nor wanted to dress like others.

Many times she said, "God really loves us." "Why?" I used to ask her. "Because both of our parents died before he called us to go to Sidama. If my parents were alive I would have had to stay somewhere nearby and look after them," she said. My wife always interpreted this as God's gift to us, freeing us from our responsibilities to parents.

My wife was an only child and her father was not a Believer. He was also abusive and often beat his wife. On one occasion he threw her on the ground and pummelled her with his elbow. She was badly hurt and never really recovered from this attack. Some time later, before we were married,

she died. But my wife's father died even before that. He got sick and died very suddenly.

I had expressed some interest in my future wife before her mother died. Her mother knew I was an itinerant preacher. Even though she was a Believer she discouraged her daughter from responding to my interest in her. "He doesn't work on his father's farm. He wanders around from one place to the other. You will always be poor. I don't want you to have anything to do with him," she would tell her daughter.

But my future wife loved God and she knew that my only desire in life was to preach the Good News. She approved of that. From the moment she believed she wanted to serve God. For women in Ethiopia that has never been easy to do. She spent a lot of her spare time working in the church. She sang in the choir and she was always one of the first to welcome visitors to the church, wash their feet and get them something to drink and eat.

When her mother realized that she was very sick and likely to die soon, her attitude to life changed. She told her daughter, "After I die I do not want you to go anywhere but to my sister's house and to stay with them. Don't get mixed up with the Unbelievers, but stay with the Believers and marry a Believer." When her mother died a number of the relatives insisted that my wife-to-be come and live with them: one more person to work on the farm! But she refused and went to live with her uncle Adday.

For better or worse, the little bit of Amharic we knew was a tremendous help to us. The first people who became Believers spoke Amharic. Often when we preached to groups of people we would find one or two in the group who would translate for us, even though we had no idea whether they were accurately translating our words.

But Paul's mother (my wife) felt so frustrated by the language that she often avoided the local markets because the women made fun of her. When she went to the Yirba market near Leku she could use Amharic. She also walked all the way to Shelo where she could use the Walayta language to buy and sell in the market.

But on other days she still had to be in contact with neighbours; and even they made fun of her. Sometimes she would need a few cabbage leaves and she would go to one of the neighbours and point to the leaves. "Look! Look! She's begging for some cabbage leaves. Take some! Take some!" they would say to her. But eventually we learned the culture and the language and northern Sidama became home to us.

¹ *Inset* is a staple food derived from a plant that looks like a banana plant. A flour is obtained from the thick stem of each leaf.

Starting a Church

One of the first things I needed to do when I returned from Walayta was to build a better house for our family to live in. After that, Boko and I decided to erect another small house close to our houses that would be our first church building. Arkay was different from other places because there was no nearby congregation for Boko and his family to go to meet with on Sundays.

For many months just the four of us gathered on Thursdays and Sundays, but we had a special place where we could gather to pray, sing and preach. We called the church Alabo Arkay; in both Sidama and Walayta we always named our church buildings by their geographical location rather than giving them some other name.

Alabo Arkay was one of the first churches to be planted in northern Sidama. Scattered around the area, particularly on the east side of the north-south road, there may well have been one or two other small groups of Believers; I am not sure...

During the first few months in Arkay we didn't have a separate building we called a "prayer house" (church). We taught Boko and his wife what "church" was like. Coffee time in the morning and meal time in the evening were worship times.

For some time just the four of us worshipped together; but we did everything just like "church". I taught them stories from the Bible; we taught them how to pray. We didn't know the Sidamo language so we couldn't lead the antiphonal singing in the local language – we had to use that third language (Amharic) for our singing. We had learned some Amharic songs in Walayta so we taught the new Believers in Sidama to sing in Amharic. These were all translations of European hymns done by missionaries from Scandinavian. Some of our favourites were: "I have come to the Cross," "Close to the heart of God," "Narrow is the Way," "The Great Physician". Boko and his wife learned to sing these songs in Amharic.

Self-support

The families in each neighbourhood would help one another with building a house or cultivating land, so that each family in turn would have its needs met. A difficulty would naturally arise if an outsider happened to move into the village. The newcomer would need help to build a house and start cultivation but had never yet offered help to anyone else. Sorsa himself faced this difficulty:

A lot of manual labour was required to settle down in a new part of the country. When we first arrived it was hard for me to get land cultivated

because I hadn't worked for others so that made it difficult for me to ask them to come and help me with my work. In addition, the fact that Believers did not provide beer for these working parties made unbelievers reluctant to help. But little by little I was able to plant a garden and sow some corn.

Financially, we needed daily spending money to buy small household items, e.g. salt, tea, etc. Paul's mother has always contributed tremendously to our daily living expenses. She would buy raw cotton and spin it with a spindle and sell it to the weavers for making blankets, shawls and dresses. She also prepared and sold food in the small daily markets that are found in every community. She made *injera*¹ and sold it at the market.

Inset is a staple food in Sidama. It takes a number of years before the *inset* plant can be used for food. So for the first few years we needed cash to buy *inset* plants from the Sidamo people.

During the first year or two everything Paul's mother did in the community was very difficult for her. She was an excellent cook and her food was always in demand, so some of the other women who wanted to sell food would try to prevent her from selling at the market. They would stop her from setting up her stall until they had sold what they had brought to the market. This usually meant she had to spend a longer time at the market-place in order to sell the food.

One of the first things we needed to buy when we got to Sidama was a milking cow. In Walayta milk had always been a big part of our diet so we had to have cows. God watched over our cows so that over the years the sale of cows and calves provided us with considerable income.

Even though we moved to another place after five years, we did not lose all the benefits of the work we had done at Arkay. We were close enough to continue to look after our crops and harvest some of the *inset* we had planted when we first arrived.

For the first two years we were in Arkay I don't think I received anything much in the way of financial help from the Walayta Association or my home church in D'guna. During the third year I began to receive some money from the Walayta Church Board. For a few years my name was added to the list of preachers working outside the boundaries of Walayta.

At that time I received four or five *birr* a month. This was the equivalent of about eight to ten days wages for a labourer working ten hours a day. In the 1950s it was always difficult to move money from one location to another. Sometimes the expatriate missionaries in Soddo would send the money to the SIM missionaries in Wando via their headquarters in Addis

¹ *Injera* is a large grey pancake made from fermented flour derived from the seeds of the *teff* plant.

Ababa, and I would collect it from them whenever I went to Wando. Sometimes the church elders would send the money with someone travelling to Sidama from Soddo. I never knew when or if I would get money from the church in Walayta. Sometimes they would send three or five months' salary at one time. We would use these funds for special things we needed to buy; we couldn't rely upon them for our day-to-day living expenses.

I left for Walayta one Thursday and returned alone the following Thursday; of course, I travelled back with the Sidamo traders. While I was in Walayta I went to the elders of my church, "God has called me to be an itinerant preacher in northern Sidama. Doda and I have been there one month. One family has believed. I am going to go back to northern Sidama and preach."

"That's good news. Keep it up," was all they said to me. It was just like I had told them I was going to school. They didn't offer to pay me anything, nor did they count me as one of their missionaries. "Have a safe trip," was all they said. I asked them to help Paul's mother get to the Dento market one month to the day after I left. They agreed to do that. I told them I would come to Dento to meet them and take Paul's mother into Sidama

A self-supporting evangelist would need to have a home in one place where he could grow coffee and *inset*. From this base he could make trips to places further away when the agricultural cycle did not require him to be at home or when others could take care of the fields for him. Sorsa chose to rent farmland within the Sidama region itself so he could establish his base there.

Many of the itinerant preachers working outside Walayta looked upon their work differently from what I did. Many of these itinerant preachers who had come to Sidama were anchored in Walayta and worked in Sidama. They still had their farms and families in Walayta so they spent a lot of time in Walayta looking after their land and caring for their family. For many of them their farms in Walayta were their major source of income. Their commitment to ministry was often a few years work outside Walayta and then they intended to return and live in Walayta. That was not my plan.

The fact that I was from Walayta never bothered the Sidamo people among whom I lived for over fifty years. Everyone in Sidama knew that I was from Walayta but I never sensed that it was a hindrance to my preaching.

I was confident that once I settled in northern Sidama I would be safe. And, on hindsight, I can say that was true. The only time the local people spread rumours about harming me was when they talked about abducting

my wife. Sometimes they would try to frighten me by saying to one another: "She's a beautiful woman and she has no family here to protect her. Let's just kill that guy and then we can take his wife and no one will ask us any questions." I was never frightened when I heard these rumours because I knew that unless someone caught me in the wrong place at the wrong time they would not kill me just to abduct my wife. Much of the highlands in northern Sidama is covered with trees so it would not have been difficult for someone to do what they were talking about.

Spiritual Leadership

I preached in Alabo Arkay for about five years (1951-1955). During the first five years the church congregation increased quite slowly. This was never a big concern to me; I was confident that if I sowed, either I or others would reap. After a year or two we rebuilt our church building so that it was large enough for 40 people. As the first Believer and landowner, Boko always held a special place of responsibility. I also appointed one or two men to assume some responsibilities until such time as pastors/elders could be ordained.

It has been my experience that the first Believers in an area are almost always very special people. I will tell you more about them later. Ataro was the next Believer. Then Tesfay, Wayesa, and Bateeso became Believers. Their wives also became Believers. Soon there were six families meeting in the church. Sickness is often something which causes people to seek after God but none of these families accepted Christ because of sickness; they heard the preaching and responded.

The unbelievers could see that we were a new community and that we lived different lives, but it was the gospel that did this, and it was the gospel that we offered to others, not our community or our lifestyle. *For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith"* (Rom 1:17). We were a faith community, a community that accepted and applied the word of God, a community that preached this same word to others.

The Gospel Message

You may find it easier to understand how and why people like Boko made decisions if you think of two words: *fear* and *freedom*. The people in northern Sidama lived in fear, the sort of fear that puts people's lives in bondage. On the basis of God's word we promised everyone freedom from fear. Fear and freedom were things which ordinary people were experiencing in their lives.

We simply told people they could be delivered from their fears by accepting the freedom Christ offers them. We told them that the Creator was not far away. He had provided a way for them to have peace, and a life of happiness.

We placed the choices of accepting and rejecting side by side: we invited people to accept Christ and told them that in order to do this they had to reject Satan. Because of our language problem we had to keep our preaching simple. But the simple Good News was used by the Holy Spirit to change people's lives.

It was not as though we had to ask people to exchange one component of information for another component, or to swap one religion for another. Nothing could be further from the truth. No one wanted to live in fear. They were searching for freedom and that was what we could promise them.

Perhaps you might want to call this type of preaching a *power encounter*. If you do, that's OK. There was no major emotional response to this power encounter either from those who believed or from those who rejected it.

In Sidama, as in Walayta, those of us who believed in Jesus called ourselves Believers rather than Christians; we did the same for the new Believers. This was because Christianity was not a new religion to the area. The word "Christian" already had another meaning; it meant people associated in some way or other with the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, with the Amhara people.

The Sidamo people's readiness to listen to the Good News we preached, but not necessarily to respond right away, was due in some measure to the fact that they had heard much of the teaching about Christ before. But it had been presented to them in such a way that it did not impact their lives. In the minds of the Sidamo people "being a Christian" meant accepting the ethnic religion of the Amharas.

We were thankful for the substrata of Christianity that existed in Sidama but our struggle with the Sidamo language was our major concern for a long time.

One of the major annual events for those of us working outside the boundaries of Walayta was the annual Bible conference. This was a fellowship time as much as a time of spiritual refreshment. Most of the itinerant preachers and missionaries made an effort to return to Walayta for the annual conference held around Christmas time. This was also a time when itinerant preachers could count on receiving some money from the Conference offerings.

During the five years I worked at Arkay I went to the Walayta Conference two or three times. It was not only a long way to walk but I did not have the same need to attend that some of the others had. I had become a resident

missionary in Sidama and did not have the same ties with Walayta many of the others had.

Early Believers

Paul's mother and I were happy to get settled in Arkay. We knew this was where God wanted us to be. We had no dreams of achieving great things in a short time. We simply wanted to preach the Good News to people who had not yet heard it. We knew that when we did that God would be faithful and do his part.

I never had any doubt that God called me to be an itinerant preacher. I also knew with absolute certainty that God directed me to move to northern Sidama to preach the Good News.

But I constantly needed confirmations from God of his call and his blessing. As I looked back, and as I looked forward, I needed to know I was on the right track.

One of the confirmations God repeatedly gave me was the first Believers in new areas. Very often they were unique people who became leaders in the churches they planted. I always looked upon those people as God's gifts to me. They were his seal on the preaching of the Good News. They were the people who would continue the work that I began.

That's why I want to tell you about the families God raised up to be the leaders and planters of one of the first churches in northern Sidama in the early 1950s.

Everything we accomplished at Arkay depended upon those whom God called as the first members of his church there. It has been my experience that in each place God calls special people to be the founding members of a new congregation. If those special people are not there to plant a church no church will be planted, no matter how hard the preacher works.

The first Believers are people who will be role models. They are also the people who must have a passion to share the Good News with other people. Unless these people have that passion to preach, the new congregation will not grow. God raised up at least five very unique individuals who were the planters and pillars of the Arkay church.

When I recognized that God had chosen someone to be a founding member of a new congregation I could proceed with confidence knowing that God had prepared someone to assume spiritual leadership and to do God's work there. Each one of these individuals multiplied the preaching potential of the congregation.

For those who were married, a great deal of their strength came from their families. Their wives were behind everything they did and contributed a great deal of time and energy to building up the local congregation. Let me

tell you a little about each one of the five. These are just five from among scores of people whom God gave me as confirmations of my ministry.

Boko and his wife were not only the first Believers in the first local congregation I established at Arkay, but they were our host and hostess welcoming us to Sidama. We were next door neighbours for five years. He was just like a brother to me.

Boko

You'll recall that we stayed at Boko's place when we first arrived in northern Sidama. In all my years of ministry I've never seen anyone quite like him. He gave his whole life to the Lord right at the beginning. He was one of those people who says: "It's all or nothing," and he gave his all.

He went out of his way to serve God and one of the expressions of that was the way he helped us. It was almost as though we became part of his faith commitment. He was willing to do anything at any time to assist us and to see we had everything we needed to serve the Lord. Whenever possible he went out preaching with me. Of course there were times when other responsibilities made it impossible for him to drop everything and go with me, but whenever possible he wanted to travel around with me and preach. He shared in everything. He considered everything he owned as belonging to us as well.

Later I will tell you about the first baptism in northern Sidama. Boko was one of those baptized with the first group. "When can I be baptized?" he asked the very first time I taught about baptism. "When there are a number of people who want to be baptized then we will arrange a baptismal service," I told him.

It was never our custom to baptize people immediately they professed to accept Christ. When the time came his wife was also baptized. In everything to do with the faith she was one with him. She was totally committed to the Lord.

Boko and his wife had about six children, counting the girls. At that time in Ethiopia many babies died in the first few months after they were born so "about" is not a careless expression. Six of his children survived infancy and together they were a great family.

Boko was also one of the first elders at the Arkay church. He was both a temporary elder and a permanent one. The temporary elders were those whom I appointed before the first baptisms took place. They learned the role of elders but were not elected by the congregation nor ordained to the position. We followed the traditions of the Walayta churches and had four male pastors/elders in each local congregation. In the early days of the Walayta church once a person became an elder he remained one for a long

time. Later, elections were held and the congregation elected the people they wanted.

The Arkay church was built on Boko's land. He marked out a piece of land and set it apart as the place to be used for the church building. The Arkay church remained on his land for many years. Much later the congregation decided to move to another place.

Boko had no formal education at either academic or Bible school. He had learned to speak Amharic before I arrived but I taught him to read, and he read a great deal from his Amharic Bible, in spite of the fact that Amharic was not his first language. After he had learned from me and also read a lot for himself, he began to take turns preaching at the Thursday morning meetings, and then later at the Sunday services. He was a good preacher. He was a good preacher because he was role modelling what he talked about. People knew what he preached was not just information. I always felt very satisfied when I heard one of my students preaching.

He worked very hard for the Association. He always went out of his way to do more than was expected. One of the obligations a congregation accepted when it became part of the Association was to take a turn hosting the other congregations when it was our turn to be the host. That meant providing everyone who came to the meeting with four meals: a snack in the early evening, a meal later in the evening, breakfast the next morning and then a meal before they left for home. For a small congregation like Arkay this meant a huge amount of work and it cost a lot of money if the congregation had to buy food supplies.

Many months before it was our turn to host the Association gathering, Boko rented some land about four hours walk north of where he lived. It was a better place to grow corn. In those days the people in Sidama did not plough with oxen, as oxen were expensive and people did not have money to buy them. They used a pole with two spikes to turn over huge pieces of turf. Boko prepared the land and sowed the corn. After he harvested the corn he carried it on his shoulders to Yerga Alem, as that was the only place in the area where there was a flour mill, and had it ground so that we could prepare *injera* for the Association.

It didn't matter what had to be done he was there to do it. As the Association expanded, a group of men were chosen as Association elders but Boko never worked in this capacity. He was happy to put all his time and energy into the work of the local congregation.

He served the Lord in this way as long as he lived. He got sick and died before he was an old man. He was a real friend to me and a great worker in the church. I missed him greatly when he died.

Koreeto

Koreeto was another of the first Believers in Arkay. When he believed he was only a teenager but that did not make any difference to the seriousness of his commitment. He understood the commitment he was making and he did it seriously. It was always my conviction that God knew what he was doing when he changed people's lives. It was never my business to decide whether people were too young or too old.

Even though he was just a teenager he was the first one in the family to become a Believer. The reaction of the family was predictable: they were afraid he would die. They did not persecute or ostracize him; they just waited and watched. But he didn't die. Over a period of many months everyone in the family became Believers.

He and his brother Wayesa became Believers about the same time. Like everyone else in Sidama, Koreeto and his family had lived in fear of what Satan was going to do to them. Many times he listened to me preach. One day he was ready to raise both hands high in the air, deny Satan and invite Christ into his life. Being a teenager he was not immediately involved in the work of the local congregation in the way Boko was. Unmarried males were in a different social class from married men, regardless of their age. Koreeto had to wait until he was married to be involved in the administrative work of the church.

But like many new Believers he bought an Amharic Bible and learned to read it. This helped him to grow in his understanding of the Christian faith and he faithfully attended the meetings on Thursday and Sunday. These meetings and the Bible reading that he did on his own, soon enabled him to have a firm grasp of the basics of the Christian faith.

He was not considered mature enough to be baptized when the first group of people from the Arkay congregation were baptized. But he was baptized later and became a faithful member of the congregation.

He worked with the local congregation at Arkay for many years. He became an elder and was one of the four teaching elders when my family and I left Arkay four years later to preach in the Wacho area.

A few years later Koreeto decided that he wanted to join another denomination. After that I did not have as much contact with him.

Biteeso

Biteeso's family was wealthier than many in that area; his father owned a large number of cattle. As a teenager Biteeso used to take the herds down to the lowlands and look after them. It was while he was looking after the cattle in the lowlands that he first heard the Good News.

Shango, another Walayta itinerant preacher had established a congregation in one of the villages in the lowlands. He was able to preach to a lot of people from the plateau who herded their cattle down there.

Biteeso heard the Good News while he was in the lowlands but he did not actually become a Believer then. He became a Believer in Arkay as he came along to the church meetings.

After he became a Believer Biteeso talked to his family, and his father in particular, about the freedom from fear and oppression that he experienced. He demonstrated to them by his new lifestyle that he was a different person. But his father was not impressed and actually gave his son a hard time. His reactions arose from fear. Fear controlled so much of unbelievers' lives in Sidama.

His father was afraid that his cattle and children would get sick and die if he did not keep on offering sacrifices demanded by the ethno-religionist functionaries. So Biteeso's father never became a Believer.

Biteeso was one of the first boys from northern Sidama to attend the academic school in Wando; his family had money to pay for the school and living expenses away from home.

He was baptized with a group that were baptized later. I don't recall exactly when. Although he helped out in the congregation he never became an elder.

He wanted to continue his education and the Seventh Day Adventist church promised people scholarships if students joined their church so Biteeso eventually joined that church. After that I lost touch with him.

Ataro

Ataro was one of the first Believers who was an older person when he believed. From the way we look at it an "older" person means one who was married.

Like Boko he was totally committed when he believed; his commitment was also one of those "all or nothing" ones. Initially this came about because he was set free from the bondage of fear. Later, he understood how his experience fitted into the gospel message.

Like all the others who believed in those early days, Ataro learned to read Amharic and bought an Amharic Bible. He loved to read the Bible. He was also good at preaching, both to Believers and those who were seeking. Even at the end of his life when he was really sick he read the Bible and preached to others. After a long illness he passed away in 2000.

For many years he and his wife did not have any children. This was often a particular challenge that God put in the path of new Believers. We prayed for them. Later they had two children: a boy and a girl. His son did not

follow his father's faith and lifestyle but went off in his own direction. While still a young man he got sick and died. His daughter is still alive.

Ataro was another one of those people who did not count his time, energy and possessions as things to be hoarded. He worked with us in everything. He was willing to share everything with us. Any time he thought we needed something he would give it to us; we never felt reluctant to accept his gifts of grain because he was always blessed as he gave.

Ataro spent a lot of time working on behalf of the local congregation. Whenever anything needed to be done he was always available: he was the first to volunteer and always did more than was expected of him.

Wayesa

When Wayesa believed he was still a teenager, but his decision was a mature one. He knew that Jesus had set him free from the fear and bondage he had been living under. Wayesa not only wanted to escape but he wanted to tell others how they could escape too. He was a preacher from the moment he believed in Jesus.

I was glad he was able to get married quite soon after he became a Believer. For us this meant another married couple in the congregation. It also gave Wayesa the opportunity to be involved in the leadership of the congregation.

But because he was still young he was not baptized with the first group from Arkay to be baptized. We always tried to be careful that only those who had proved their profession by their transformed lives were baptized.

For me there is absolutely nothing more exciting than seeing a person changed. When I see new converts singing for Christ my heart bursts for joy. Believers singing is one thing. But I want to see the Unbelievers changed and singing. Knowing that when new converts believe in Jesus the Holy Spirit spins their lives around 180 degrees excites me more than I can put into words. Seeing people authentically transformed by God's power is heaven on earth. Just knowing that people who were victimized by Satan and on their way to hell are now shouting "Praise the Lord" on the highway to heaven almost makes my heart stop with joy.

Whenever there was someone who needed to learn to read Amharic we had literacy classes in the church. So I taught him to read, and like other new Believers he bought an Amharic Bible and loved to read it for himself. Soon he was preaching the Good News to people in the neighbourhood, and he took his turn teaching at the Thursday and Sunday meetings.

Wayesa was one of the first Believers from northern Sidama to attend the SIM Bible School in Wando. His only academic qualification for attending was that he had an Amharic Bible, could read it and clearly understand the

instruction that was given in Amharic. But his major qualification was a burning desire to understand the Bible so he could preach the Good News more accurately to others.

He soon became an elder in the congregation and was one of the four elders in Arkay when I left to go to Wacho. His time and energy were never his own; he gave because he loved the Lord.

For a number of years he worked as an itinerant preacher in various parts of Sidama. The Lord used him to preach the Good News to those who needed to hear it, as well as to encourage new Believers.

Wayesa was a rock in his faith. I could always count on him; he was one of those people who was always willing to do more than his share of everything.

First Baptisms

In a new area the first baptismal service is always a major event. It means that a group of people have come to the place in their faith journey where they become recognized members of the local congregation. One of the traditions we brought with us from Walayta was "closed communion". This means that only baptized members are allowed to participate in the Lord's Supper. In our practice baptism was the difference between a group of worshiping people and a recognized "church". So a baptismal service was always an important event.

I arrived in Arkay in 1950 but the first baptism in the area did not take place until 1952. Another one of the traditions we brought with us from Walayta was the importance of the Association (*mahibar*). A local congregation was important but only as part of the larger Association. In Walayta we did not practice local congregation baptism so there was no thought that just a few people from Arkay could be baptized. A baptism always took place in the context of the Association. Private baptism was something totally foreign to our understanding of the meaning of baptism.

In 1952 the congregations in northern Sidama decided to have a baptismal service. I was happy about this because there were a number of people from the Arkay congregation that I had been teaching and they were ready to be baptized. It is so long ago now that I don't remember exactly how many from Arkay were baptized.

After people believed we taught them from the Bible that they should be baptized. Baptism was to be a sign for themselves and for the community around about that they were now part of God's family. It was a sign that their first priority was the fellowship of Believers and not the other groups to which they belonged before they believed.

In 1952 there were at least three small congregations in northern Sidama: Heeda, Arkay and Havayla. There may have been another one; I'm just not sure.

Another tradition we brought with us from Walayta was that itinerant preachers did not baptize. Even though there is nothing in the Bible about who should baptize, the purpose of the tradition was to strengthen the oneness of the congregations and the Associations. It also emphasized the work of the itinerant preachers, which was to preach the Gospel. As the apostle Paul said: *I am thankful that I did not baptize any of you except Crispus and Gaius, . . . for Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the Gospel* (1 Cor 1: 14-17).

In my early days in northern Sidama I was linked to three different groups of people: the Walayta Association, the Sidamo Association and the SIM; in those days SIM was still called "Sudan Interior Mission". Because the three groups had no common organizational structure there were sometimes communication problems. Two of the three groups were involved in the first baptism in northern Sidama; perhaps there were representatives from southern Sidama, I'm not sure.

The Walayta Association was involved because I was an itinerant preacher from Walayta, as were the preachers at the other three congregations. SIM was involved because of educational links we had with it through the Bible School. But I'm not sure that the leaders from southern Sidama were involved. At that time I don't think they were involved with the work of the Walayta preachers in northern Sidama. There were three or four congregations in the Aleta District, but I don't recall that they were involved in the baptism, but Delmar Stevens, the SIM missionary at Aleta Wando, was. If representatives from southern Sidama had been there I don't think Mr. Stevens would have baptized people.

So the Walayta elders and Delmar Stevens did the baptizing.¹ One of the Walayta elders was Ato Feranj; I don't recall the names of the others. The elders from the Walayta Association only came to Sidama once to baptize. After the first baptism the elders in northern Sidama did the baptizing.

Baptism was a very structured event. The itinerant preachers put forward the names of those they considered ready for baptism. "Ready" means: a clear change of heart had taken place and this was confirmed by a new lifestyle; the person was a faithful and loyal attendee at the local congregation. The itinerant preachers also listened to opinions of members of the congregation so there was a large amount of peer approval, or disapproval.

¹ It was against SIM policy for missionaries to baptize, but Delmar Stevens may not have been aware of this, or chose to ignore it.

Later most of the baptismal services were held on Sundays but at this time it really didn't make any difference to us. I'm not sure on which day of the week the baptism was held.

Then the evening before the baptism all the candidates spent the night in one of the nearby churches. They were questioned about their beliefs by the elders who would baptize them. They were cross-examined about their lifestyle. If there were some things they didn't understand these were clarified. If perchance some secret sins were revealed which would prevent them from being baptized, their baptism was delayed.

The parade from the church building to the baptismal site was a very important part of the whole proceeding. Every Believer who had any association with the area was expected to be part of the parade. Everyone wore their best clothes; it was a festive occasion. The singing started as soon as they left the church building and continued right to the river. This had two purposes: to express the Believers' joy, and to attract the attention of the local people. Once the singing started we attracted many local people who followed us down to the river to see what was going on.

Horses often added to the festive atmosphere of the occasion. Anyone who owned or could borrow a horse would bring it along and they would gallop back and forth. The galloping horses made everyone excited. This was another little bit of tradition we brought with us from Walayta. Because of the large number of people around it was easy for people to be injured by the galloping horses so this part of the festivities was later discouraged. Later still, explicitly forbidden.

Before the actual baptismal service took place we held a service on the river bank. On this occasion the expatriate missionary Delmar Stevens preached and some of the others said some things. He explained what baptism was all about and then preached the Good News. No one believed that day but a lot of people heard the Gospel. Because the baptismal service was a public and unusual happening it attracted every youngster for miles around; all of them heard the Good News. We found that many teenagers were interested in hearing the Gospel whenever we preached.

On the occasion of the first baptismal service in northern Sidama about twenty people were baptized. That means that there were four or five from each of the local congregations, about half men and half women.

After the preaching came the baptismal service. The elders from Walayta and Delmar Stevens baptized all the candidates in the Gidabo river. All the while everyone was singing and happy. It was probably the month of July because the river was flowing swiftly and there was a lot of water in it.

A year or two later Wayesa and I almost drowned attempting to cross the Gidabo river. We were on our way to an Association meeting and the

current in the river swept both of us off our feet and many hundreds of meters downstream. Fortunately both of us were able to cling to some vines from the river bank and pull ourselves out of the water. It was a close call.

The local people who had gathered around to watch the baptism did not express any opposition to what was going on. They were familiar with what baptism was, and did not consider it a threat in any way. Some of the people who were baptized faced opposition from their families, but nothing serious.

Committed members of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church were always unhappy with events like this baptism. That is understandable. In their minds the only people who were allowed to baptize were the priests, and usually they baptized infants. If they did baptize adults they sprinkled water on them. Although they grumbled and complained there was nothing much they could do about what we were doing.

On this occasion we did not have a Communion service following the baptism. It was decided that this would be held in the local churches after the baptism. For all of the baptismal candidates this was the first time they were allowed to participate in the Communion service. This post-baptismal event had a special significance for me also because it was the last time that I officiated at a Communion service in that congregation. After some elders had been baptized then it was their responsibility to serve the Communion.

After the first baptism the Believers were more enthusiastic than ever to preach, and it seemed like a lot of people began to believe about that time. Some more itinerant preachers arrived from Walayta and also some Sidamo itinerant preachers came from the Aleta Association to preach in northern Sidama.

The first baptismal service was always a huge step forward. New churches moved into another gear. They could appoint and ordain their own pastors/elders who in turn could celebrate the Lord's Supper.

This enthusiasm always generated a lot of new preaching which also resulted in new Believers. There was also a new sense of regional unity.

Sorsa moves to Wacho

Reasons for Moving

I worked as an itinerant preacher in Arkay until sometime in 1955 and then moved to Wacho to preach the Good News there. There were three major reasons why I knew I needed to move. The first one was for the benefit of the new Believers [in Arkay]. I knew they would mature more quickly if I left them on their own, although I didn't desert them. I visited them often but had no part in the ongoing administration of the Arkay congregation.

I needed to move in order to be more effective in my preaching. God had called me to be an itinerant preacher so I constantly needed to be preaching to those who had not heard. At the time it seemed that the best way to do this was to move from one place to another. Later I chose a central location [Afrara and then Leku] and worked out from there.

I also needed to move so I would not become a pastor or a teaching elder. I knew that if I became too attached to one congregation I would be assuming roles that would distract me from what God had called me to do.

When I moved from Arkay the congregation was left in the hands of four pastors/elders who also functioned as teachers: Boko, Koreeto, Wayesa, and Ataro. In those days we did not use the word "pastor" so none of the local congregations had one person who was called a pastor. In actual fact, all four of the teaching elders were pastors; they did the administration, teaching and encouragement that pastors traditionally do.

Making a Start

When I planned to go to Wacho there were no Believers there. I had visited the area many times when I moved around preaching and I knew these people needed to hear the Good News. I felt an urge to go and preach to them.

No one told me to go there. I did not have a vision that led me there. I just sensed that it was the right place to go and so made plans to move. As I shared my plans with the Believers at Arkay they were very supportive. When we moved they did everything possible to make the move as smooth as possible.

One of the Believers at Arkay who was familiar with Wacho was Hordofa. He was part of God's plan to get me interested in moving to Wacho. He knew some people there and helped me make the necessary arrangements. I had to find someone who would give me some land on which I could build a house. I also needed some farm land. Renting farm land usually amounted to making an agreement to give the land owner a percentage of the harvest. In those days we did not pay cash for the use of the land.

Hordofa also accompanied me in the early days at Wacho as I travelled around preaching. In Wacho people were much more ready to believe than they had been when I first arrived in Arkay. Now, of course, I was able to preach in the Sidamo language and I understood the Sidamo culture. As far as my work was concerned, nothing changed. I was still an itinerant preacher.

If there was a funeral we went there. If people were digging their land or harvesting we stopped there. We listened for people singing; that told us

that a group of men were working together. We would find them and preach to them. At every house we came to that had the door open, we would call out, “Anyone home?” If the door was open we knew someone was there: a woman preparing food, an old man resting or perhaps someone was sick. We would preach to them and pray for them.

One of the first men we met as we walked around preaching was a man named Oromo. He was a successful farmer and also owned quite a number of cattle. In Sidamo a person’s wealth was measured by the number of cattle he owned, not by the amount of cash he possessed. The first time we met he was building a new house. It was culturally appropriate for us to stay a few hours and help with the work. That also helped us to get to know one another.

In Sidamo, as in every other part of rural Ethiopia, building a new house is a communal activity. The men of the community work together in every aspect of the work. House building was an ideal opportunity for me to preach the Good News. At times like this there would always be a lot of men together, perhaps as many as twenty. They were never in a hurry and so took regular, long drinking breaks. That was my opportunity to preach to them.

This was how I first preached to Oromo. When the people heard the Good News they perceived it as a pardon, not as a crutch. Everyone listening was incarcerated in the prison of fear. “If you believe in Jesus, and deny Satan, you will receive a pardon and be set free from the prison of fear,” I told them.

Everyone wanted to get out of that prison. It was always a matter of who was going to run the risk, and face the possible consequences. The options, as many of them perceived them, were: now I’m in the prison of fear and I’m reasonably comfortable; I’m not in any immediate danger of being killed. But, if I believe in Jesus and it turns out that Satan is stronger, then an angry ancestor might kill me or destroy my family or animals.

Either that day or soon thereafter, I don’t remember exactly when, Oromo was willing to run the risk. He believed in Jesus. His family also believed. Like many of the first Believers in a new place, Oromo was immovable from the day he believed.

His wife was also a strong Believer. It seemed that it wasn’t very long after she believed that she got sick and died. His children all became Believers. The family had a lot of money and this enabled the boys to start a variety of businesses. Some of them didn’t continue to attend church.

Self-support

Oromo offered me some land on which to build a house and plant corn. I was still able to get my crops from the land I had been farming in Arkay, so we had grain even when we moved from one place to another.

In every community the people herd their cows together. We put our cows out with theirs and took our turn looking after them. On the land Oromo allowed me to use I planted cabbage and sweet potatoes. It was not usual to plant coffee trees on this sort of land because they have to grow for a number of years before they flower, but Oromo agreed to let me plant trees from which I picked coffee for many years after I left Wacho. We had also planted *inset* in Arkay and we were able to harvest that so we didn’t have to depend on cash income in order to live and work.

Our main income was from the land, from our crops and animals. While I was at Wacho the Sidamo Association sometimes gave me a small amount of money, but I did not receive any money from Walayta. It was around about that time, if I remember correctly, that a lot of the itinerant preachers from Walayta decided to return to their homes in Walayta. I think it was because I decided to stay in northern Sidama that the Sidamo Association paid me a small stipend each month.

As I walked around day after day preaching the Good News others believed. I got the greatest satisfaction out of preaching to people; I rejoiced with the angels in heaven when someone believed in Jesus. ... *there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent* (Luke 15:7).

The Association of congregations in northern Sidama was in its infancy. Leaders, preachers and congregational representatives met monthly. I took Oromo and other Believers to this monthly meeting as soon as they believed in Jesus. They became part of the Association even before the first church service was held. Believing and belonging were inextricably linked together. Baptism wasn’t the beginning of belonging; it just meant you belonged even more!

Oromo had a large Sidamo-style house and to begin with we met for prayers in his house on Thursday mornings. Until a few more people believed he and I went to Arkay for Sunday services. But each week more and more people believed and came along on Thursday mornings. Soon it became obvious that we had to build a Prayer House (church).

Within a year we built the first church in Wacho. By now there were many preachers in the area! All the new Believers were preaching to their neighbours and friends. As more people preached, more people believed. Soon Wacho became quite a large church.

Starting a Church

The members of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church called their place of worship “a house of Christians”. The Believers in Sidama, as in many parts of Ethiopia, called theirs “a house of prayer”. Believers never used the word “worship” in reference to the Thursday and Sunday meetings; it was always prayer time. This was *prayer* in the widest meaning of the word, i.e. hearing from and communicating with God. The singing was prayer; the intercession was prayer; the preaching was prayer.

Because the Orthodox Christians had a separate building for their church services, Believers insisted on having a special church building as soon as possible.

Oromo’s home, however convenient and comfortable, was never called “a house of prayer”. In comparison with some other parts of Ethiopia many Sidamo people built large houses that would have been adequate for Sunday services. But the Believers in Walayta and Sidama had no interest in “house churches”; they needed a set-aside (holy) place that was uniquely a place where they met God.

Oromo and his family were among the first to be baptized a year after we began the work in Wacho. By now baptisms were happening regularly in both northern and southern Sidama. Whenever and wherever a baptism was announced those who wanted to be baptized would go and, after appropriate examination, be baptized. I can’t remember where this particular baptism took place. I think there was a small river somewhere near Shalo. That’s probably where this baptism was conducted.

Almost everyone in northern Sidama that I had contact with became a Believer through preaching. I don’t recall hearing of anyone who believed through a dream or vision. Their *experience* of God’s power came *after* they had believed in Jesus. They believed in Jesus because they *heard* the Gospel preached to them. Perhaps it was because in Sidama the religious issues were clearer than in many places that people had no trouble understanding the content of what we were preaching.

We told them that it was God, not primarily the ancestors, who was angry with them because of the way they chose to live. It was not their ancestors that they should fear, but God the Creator. We told them that as long as they refused to accept Jesus they would be slaves of Satan. Guilt and grace were themes they had no problem comprehending. We preached Jesus as the Saviour. We told them that Jesus had defeated Satan through his death and resurrection. We told them Jesus wanted to forgive their sins. People believed in Jesus to escape from Satan and from judgment. They believed in

Jesus because he was the only one who could rescue them, and give them new life.

Felt-needs

Life in Sidama was not easy. The spiritual climate, with its uncertainty and unceasing demands, was hard on everyone. Constantly making offerings to ancestors and the departed was a tough grind. People wanted to be freed from all of this. Our preaching was Good News to them.

Ethno-religionists are people whose religion is mainly determined by their ethnic background. Before they believed in Jesus all the people in the Wacho area were ethno-religionists, i.e. they accepted the interpretation of life, death and the afterlife that had been passed down from generation to generation among the Sidamo people. Some of them were in the process of trying other options.

Some were nominal Orthodox Christians; they had been baptized and wore a *mateb* (baptismal cord) around their necks. But they still lived lives filled with fear. The dead dominated their lives, victimized them.

A few had tried Islam. But again it was just an attempt to find freedom. One family who professed to be Muslims believed and became strong members of the Wacho church for many years.

In Sidama, people were much more concerned about being set free from fear than they were about their physical sicknesses. The Believers handled physical sicknesses in two main ways: Firstly, if sickness was due to fear of ancestors then they were often healed when they believed in Jesus. This was a very common occurrence.

Secondly, when they believed, they were introduced to the privilege of prayer. This revolutionized their lives. They discovered that the God to whom they could pray in Jesus’ name was in control of everything, and that he loved them. They learned too that they could pray for all of their needs, which included their physical concerns.

Not many people believed in Jesus in order to be healed from physical sickness. I did not include this in my preaching. I do not recall that other preachers did either. We often took the initiative and prayed for Unbelievers who were sick, whether they were ready to believe or not. Often their physical healing was a first step towards their conversion.

Church Leadership

The new Believers in Wacho did not experience much in the way of opposition. Some of the immediate and extended family were angry at new Believers; they were afraid that the ancestors would punish them because someone in the immediate family had believed in Jesus and refused to obey

functionaries and offer gifts to ancestral spirits. The community as a whole did not usually oppose my preaching, the preaching of the new Believers, nor our various gatherings.

At the beginning I functioned as the person who cared for the new Believers, i.e. the pastor. The way I spent my time, i.e. itinerating, made it plain to everyone that I had no intention of staying in that role.

The next step in the growth of the local congregation was the designation of a number of men to assume temporary responsibility for various congregational activities. Being the temporary leader I selected men for these jobs.

The third step was the election by the congregation of lay pastors, although we did not use that word. At the time of the selection one or two of the Association's leading men came from other churches to talk with the congregation about pastors' qualifications. The congregation put forward a number of names and then the members affirmed those whom they had chosen. It might look like an election, but in the early days it didn't follow that format. The life style of men who were chosen was emphasized, rather than their education or status in the community.

There were four things that were an integral part of every Sunday gathering, no matter how few we were: preaching, praying, singing and giving. We considered giving to be as important as preaching and praying. From the moment new Believers began attending Sunday services they were encouraged to give, and eventually to tithe. They were encouraged to tithe grain, coffee, animals and cash. Remember: all of their lives they had been giving for religious reasons; the idea of giving was not new to them; even the concept of tithing was not strange.

Usually one of the pastor-elders was appointed as treasurer and often another person was supposed to keep a written account of the money. This was usually easier said than done. One of the first things the congregation did with its money was hire a part-time itinerant preacher. He received a small monthly stipend. They also gave a certain amount to the Association and then the remainder was used for the work of the local congregation. Occasionally gifts were given to needy people, but often help we gave them was in the form of labour and food rather than cash.

I never received a regular amount of money from this congregation. It would have been against my principles to accept it, even if they had offered it to me. I'm not sure when this particular tradition started but on the Sundays that we had the Lord's Supper, the pastors sometimes gave me most of that Sunday's offering.

I am not sure where this way of dividing up our money came from. Perhaps it was a combination of traditions we brought from Walayta and adaptations of Sidama Believers.

During our ministry years in northern Sidama God gave us eight children. Our first daughter Rahael died in infancy. Then Paul and his sister Sara were born. Our next daughter Asther got sick and died when she was about four years old. Our next four children are: Samuel, Tadelich, Hailyesus and Emmanuel.

While I was preaching at Wacho Mr. Stevens decided to open a Bible School in Aleta Wando. He wanted me to come. That was probably in 1954, about a year after I began the work in Wacho...I think I stayed in Aleta Wando part of two school years. So it must have been 1955 when we returned to northern Sidama. While studying in Wando I went to Wacho most weekends to preach; sometimes I also went to Shalo.

Sorsa settles in Afrara

First Steps in Afrara

While I was in Wando I began to get more involved in preaching in the Afrara area. If I recall correctly, there were not many Believers in the Afrara area at that time. Afrara was not totally new for me; I had preached in the area while I was living in Arkay so I knew some of the people.

Other people preached in Wacho too. The work there grew much more quickly than in Arkay. People believed more quickly; baptisms took place sooner and pastor-elders were elected earlier. I maintained friendly contact with the congregation in Wacho even after I began preaching in Afrara.

Afrara was different from the two previous places in which I had worked. It became our place of residence for about the next twenty years. It was more central and from there I walked all over northern Sidama preaching the Good News.

When Mr. Stevens took me into Bible School our family moved to the SIM Mission station at Aleta Wando. But when we left Wando we went to live in Afrara rather than returning to our house in Wacho.

In northern Sidama farming means cows, *inset* and coffee trees. We can move cows around from one place to another but it takes years to cultivate *inset* and coffee trees. After my experience in Wacho I realized that farming in Sidama meant that I needed to have a permanent place to live in order to grow *inset* and coffee. That was another reason why I chose to settle in Afrara.

One of the first places I went to preach after settling in Afrara was a small community called Midra Genet. It was on the east side of the main north-south highway a few kilometres south of Afrara. No one suggested I go

there or took me there. One day as I left my home I decided that I would visit that community and see whom I could find to preach to. On my very first visit one or two people professed to believe.

We began to meet occasionally in a small house. There were a number of people who could read so they gathered and read the Bible and prayed together. As the Holy Spirit helped them understand the significance of what they were reading they taught one another. I also encouraged them to attend Sunday services at Afrara.

Some of the new Believers were not able to read Amharic. Owning a Bible and reading it was a top priority so I spent some time teaching people to read Amharic or arranging for someone else to teach them.

In subsequent weeks I returned many times to visit them and then we established a regular Thursday morning prayer time. The Thursday morning prayer meeting always had to be functioning successfully before a Sunday service could begin.

During these months the new Believers and I continued to preach in the community. On their part this was a demonstration of the fact that they were committed to planting a church in their community. On one occasion sixteen people believed.

After they got used to the idea of a regular Thursday morning prayer meeting and were introduced to other Believers in the Association, they began a regular Sunday morning service. By that time I could not visit them on a regular basis as I had moved on to other places.

Another denomination felt that this was its town and offered to build a small school for the Believers if they would affiliate with them. Their decision was none of my business but I was a little sad when the Believers decided to affiliate with the other denomination. But, that had to be their choice, not mine.

Outreach in Public Places

Invariably people believed because they heard God's word preached. Preaching was top priority, not just with me, but with all the Believers. Preaching to those who had not yet believed was always done out in the community, not in church. Unbelievers were not invited to church services to hear preaching; the Believers went *out* of the church into the community and preached to the Unbelievers. It was customary for new Believers to come to church on Sunday and publicly announce that they had believed, but in most cases they had already made their decision to believe in Jesus out in the community.

Distance did not play a great part in deciding where to preach. Sometimes I walked a long way; sometimes it was short distances. Usually I went on

my own. I was always doubly happy when Torba or Alemu was able to come with me. Barasa from Afrara was also an enthusiastic and earnest preacher who preached in many different places.

Most new churches in northern Sidama had the tradition of using their very first offerings to "employ" a part-time itinerant preacher. They would pay one of their own number a small amount of money weekly to give more time to preaching rather than trading. In doing this their thought was not, "We will pay you so that we don't have to preach." Rather it was, "We will preach in our immediate vicinity, but there are many other communities around us where there are no Believers. We want you to go and preach in those places."

Afrara is about five hours walk east of Wacho and about seven hours walk north from Aleta Wando. But I did not have to walk to Wando very often; in the 1950s we could usually get a bus. During the second time I was in Bible School in Aleta Wando Mr. Middleton would drive us to Afrara in his truck on Friday afternoons and then pick us up on Sunday afternoons.

Earliest Believers

One of the first Believers in the Afrara area was a man named Bala. He was from Walayta but was never very successful in his work in Sidama. He moved from Afrara to live close to us in Arkay and then moved with us to Wacho. That was where he got sick and died. Although he was one of the first Believers from the area he was not one of the people God had in mind to establish churches in Afrara.

One of my first significant experiences in Afrara occurred soon after I settled there. It was at the funeral of a very old man. This was a huge funeral simply because the deceased was known by everyone far and wide; everyone from the area had gathered for the mourning which lasted several days.

The man who died was not a Believer but some of his children had become Believers. During the mourning I had opportunity to preach a number of times to the people sitting around.

At this point in my work in Afrara the people were still at the listening rather than at the responding stage, so not many people were willing to indicate that they wanted to believe in Jesus. They listened; they talked together about what the Bible said, but they were not ready to make decisions.

But an old man named Tomocho¹ stood up, and after a typically long rambling Sidamo introduction, said he wanted to believe. He made a profession of faith. But for some reason I was not able to talk with him personally at that time so I didn't find out where he lived. Some weeks passed before I was able to find him; but eventually I did. I stayed some days in his home and that was the beginning of a new church.

Tomocho's confession of faith seemed to provide credibility to the preaching because after that a number of younger people came to believe in Jesus. Barasa, who later became an itinerant preacher in the area, believed. Then Torba and K'malo. I think it must have been in about 1958 that K'malo believed.

From the base that I set up in Afrara God allowed me to have a part in the process that resulted in establishing more than 100 KHC congregations in the surrounding countryside. I need to keep on reminding myself, and perhaps you my readers, that it is the Believers who are the church planters, not the preachers, evangelists, pastors or elders. God has chosen and appointed various workers but new churches invariably come about through the commitment and hard work of a group of local people.

K'malo turned out to be the father of the KHC in northern Sidama. Right from the moment he believed we were great friends. He was just like a brother to me. The local Afrara congregation met in K'malo's home until it needed to build its first building. No sooner was it erected than many more people believed so they needed a bigger church. Recently they have put up a tin-roofed building ten meters wide and forty meters long.

One of the reasons for its growth was the work of Torba, who was also like a brother to me. He was the itinerant preacher supported by that congregation, a tireless preacher through whose itineration many people believed in Jesus.

Alemu Debowe was another one of the first Believers in Afrara. He made a total commitment when he first believed in 1961 and is one of those people whom God chose to be a pillar in the local church.

As soon as he believed he began preaching and he has been preaching ever since, for more than 40 years. He preaches in churches on Sundays, at Association meetings and to other people wherever he meets them.

He is a very diligent student: he went to academic school and then took all the Bible School he was able to get at Aleta Wando. When the northern Sidama Association decided to build a Bible School in Afrara (about 1977) he became one of the first teachers, and he has been teaching ever since. His commitment and diplomacy enabled us to retain ownership of the Bible

¹ He was K'malo's father.

School through the years of the Cultural Revolution and reopen it for Bible training in the late 1980s.

When I reflect on how God has used Alemu over the past forty years I feel a deep sense of satisfaction; the seed of God's word was sown in his life as a result of itinerant preaching. He may have been the only person I preached to on that particular day; I don't remember.

During my time at Arkay, Wacho and as a student in Wando I had been able to increase the number of cows I owned so now I could sell one or two to buy some land in Afrara. With the 300 *birr* I got from the sale of my cows I bought a piece of land. It became my permanent residence in Sidama and I still own that property with its *inset* and coffee trees.

It is impossible for me to tell you times and places I preached during my twenty years in Afrara. I did not keep records, nor did anyone else. Many times it was not possible to measure progress until years after the events; many activities are intertwined; it is impossible to separate them.

Sorsa's later life

Sorsa settled for about a year (1970-1) in the large town of Jimma, an administrative centre for the region. He later recalled:

People from many different parts of Ethiopia lived in Jimma. Even though the people in the area spoke the Oromo language I did not have any trouble with language because everyone in the city could speak Amharic. Many times in Jimma I thanked God for making me look inconspicuous. As I moved around the city preaching, almost always on my own, no one objected. During the whole year no one ever tried to stop me preaching.

Muslims talked about having their own religion. When they wanted to talk to me about Islam I would listen to them. I did not understand what their religion is all about, so I preached the same message in Jimma as I had in Sidama. I tried to make every presentation as brief as possible. People usually did not give me opportunities to preach long sermons. But I could tell them in a few minutes the essentials of the Good News. . . . *that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to . . .* (1 Cor 15:3-8). *Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved* (Acts 4:12).

The Mission had lots of gospel tracts and I sometimes gave these to people but I felt that it was more important to talk to people. Nor did I sell any literature, like gospels. I don't remember why; perhaps I would have

needed a licence to do that in the city. I often went into homes, and talked to people that I met, individually or groups.

During that year hundreds, and maybe thousands, of people heard the Good News. I stayed in and around the city because I could preach in Amharic. Sometimes I went into the country to visit one of the congregations, but that did not take up a lot of my time. No new churches were established while I was there. I heard that later many people believed and that they established a number of new churches.

The period 1974-91 marked the so-called Cultural Revolution in which Ethiopia was governed by a Marxist regime known as the Derg. In 1989 at the age of 64, when other Walayta evangelists were redeployed to areas outside Sidama, Sorsa felt led to remain in the region.

In his early years the evangelists had tended to avoid the larger towns, where government officials and Ethiopian Orthodox functionaries were an intimidating presence for the rural people and where a cash economy was driven by the Amharic language. The evangelical movement in which Sorsa played an important part was at that time a rural movement.

It was only with the formation of the Kale Heywet Church at a national level that the rural Believers acquired the confidence and the legal representation to open churches in the towns. It was then that Sorsa himself felt led to settle as an evangelist in the town of Leku. This he made his base for preaching throughout the town itself and the surrounding area until 2001 when he went to visit his son in Canada.

Sorsa's Principles and Methods

The Work of an Evangelist

Sorsa would never accept that preaching the gospel was only a task for specialist individuals like himself. It was for everyone. He insisted, "No one thought of the salaried itinerant preachers, or itinerant preachers from Walayta, as replacing the evangelistic work of the individual Believers. In the first-generation church every Believer was a preacher."

It was a labour of love.

Love is the word that initiated my ministry and it is the word that keeps me going. In my heart I feel that I love people as God loves them. I think to myself, "If God loves these people then I must love them." If this was missing or taken out of my life I would stop preaching. It is the one thing that I could not do without. With the Apostle Paul I can say, *For Christ's love compels us* (2 Cor 5:14).

It is this love that makes me want to talk to people about Jesus. I know there is judgment. I warn people about judgment. But the reason I want to talk to them is because I love them. Love is like the mountain top from which I see everything else. I know that God loves me. When I keep on thinking about his love everything else falls into place.

There were a few people in Sidama who owned mules which they used for travelling long distances. Most people, including me, walked everywhere we went. Because everyone walked I never thought too much about walking long distances.

It required humility.

Sorsa Sumamo did not have any ambition for power or wealth or fame. He did not seek to become an important or influential man in an Association or even a congregation.

His leadership in a local fellowship of believers was always temporary. He came and went quite freely and left the believers in each place to organize their own church fellowships. Planting a new church was not his responsibility.

Because he had no title he was never in competition with any level of church administration. There were times when he had to confront the administration but he never tried to take it over.

As an evangelist Sorsa never felt a need to co-ordinate his work with other evangelists. He simply went wherever he thought the Lord wanted him to go and left them to do the same.

It meant setting a good example.

Although he never wished to lead a local church, he set an example of church commitment to his converts by meeting with them for prayer on Thursday mornings in their homes and then for services on Sunday if there was a church nearby or they were ready to start one of their own.

Wherever he established his home, it was a place of hospitality. He gives honour to his wife in this regard: "Paul's mother was like a cook for the Sidama church. Her hospitality was known far and wide. Every day we seemed to have visitors eating at our house. But we always had lots of food for everyone. She was always working hard to make extra money for our daily expenses. She used to go to the Yiriba market where she bought corn which she ground by hand. From the flour she made bread for the family and visitors, and then she sold some of it. She also worked with cotton and made money for the expenses of our family.

It is surprising that Sorsa says very little about his children. We might expect that they would learn much by accompanying him as he preached.

He tells us that they did not go out preaching with him but he does not explain this.

Sorsa Sumamo identified eight important principles in his work as an evangelist:

1. Itinerant Preaching

A new work began in one of two ways: Either I walked to some place and talked to people, or someone invited me to come and preach to them. The new contact was some person, either a Believer or someone who had not yet believed, who wanted the people in his community to hear the Good News. I never went to a place saying to myself, “Perhaps I will establish a church here.” Such a thought never entered my mind. My only interest was to preach the Good News so that people would believe in Jesus. I knew that if I preached and people believed in Jesus they would establish a church. For more than fifty years it has always worked that way.

This meant that often I was involved in a number of different places at any one time. I remember one occasion when I was preaching in Leku, Ambosa, Arvelah, Dadeecho, and Shosho. But it wasn’t like I was juggling four or five places where congregations were in the process of being established. Right from day one the local Believers assumed responsibility for promoting the work.

2. Personal Belief

In northern Sidama no new churches were established through clinics, schools, water development or literacy classes; those things came later. All the communities needed those things and very often they came about at the initiative of new Believers. I think I can say that without any exceptions all of the new churches established in northern Sidama during those years were established through preaching.

As I have said repeatedly, in the beginning all Believers were preachers. Those who felt unskilled at explaining the Good News would find others to take with them, but they would have a part in it. No one had to think up a sermon that would catch people’s attention. God confirmed the preaching: lives were transformed and gradually people knew that believing in Jesus resulted in a new life, demonstrated especially by freedom from the bondage of ancestral spirits. For the people in northern Sidama freedom from fear was the most convincing sign and wonder.

3. Changed Lives

The fact that some people who made professions of believing in Jesus did not experience a Holy Spirit transformation did not bother me at all. It did

not worry me because changing people’s lives is God’s work, not mine. I knew on the basis of God’s promises that if they believed in Jesus they would be changed. If they were not changed then they had not really believed, no matter what they told me, how eloquently they prayed, or what they did.

Nor did I have to worry about finding a name for people who made these sorts of professions. I didn’t have to call them “insincere professions”, or something like that. In most cases these incomplete commitments were part of people’s search for freedom. The Holy Spirit did not change their lives because they were still holding onto something which prevented them from really believing in Jesus.

Quotations like 2 Corinthians 5:17 are so clear to me: *If any man is in Christ he is a new creation, old things are passed away and everything has become new.* Professions are only external and human indications of a person’s desires. Whether that profession is the work of the Holy Spirit or a human inclination I could never know right away.

For me the important thing was the confession: the verbal and behavioural declaration which said, “Yes! My life has been changed! I’m a new person.” When I saw and heard about these transformations I knew that the Holy Spirit had been at work. Then I was really happy.

The people whose lives were changed by the power of the Holy Spirit became church planters. My job was simply to preach the Good News and leave the changing of lives to the Holy Spirit.

4. Teaching and Encouraging

Encouraging the new Believers in a community where no congregation had yet been established was as important to me as actually preaching the Good News. I would walk many hours just to sit with one changed person and teach him or her from the Bible. Each one needed a lot of encouragement.

If they were not able to read Amharic I would do my best to see that they learned as quickly as possible. Some of the older men and women who didn’t speak any Amharic didn’t want to learn and that was alright with me. But in every community there were always some who did.

I would sit with the others and we would read the Bible together and I would explain what the passages meant. We had no structured lessons, no “discipleship” books. As we read the Bible with an obedient heart the Holy Spirit taught us. This was why unhindered access to the Bible was so important to us. The most important lesson they needed to learn was the basics of the Good News. I wanted all of them to be able to preach that message to others.

Preaching to Unbelievers, especially in the community in which they lived, is effective only if the person is living an authentically transformed life, so we talked about that a great deal. There were many things new Believers needed to straighten out and they were nearly always willing to do that. The Holy Spirit was their teacher and strengthener.

5. Church Commitment

If the Believers did not have a link with a Sunday service I would see that they attended. There was never any thought of a person being a Believer and not going to church on Sunday. Setting aside Sunday for prayers was one confirmation of authentic transformation. In many ways it was easy for new Believers to gather with other Believers because when they “denied Satan” they broke with the community who did this. Becoming a Believer had very clear social implications; Sunday in particular became a different day. For many years new Believers were encouraged to stay away from Sunday markets.

If it was within my prerogative I would also take the person along to an Association meeting. If the new Believers had become part of a congregation then they would go whenever the congregation delegated them to go. I rarely experienced administrative problems with local congregations because I had no private agenda. We had a common goal. My part was to help whenever and wherever I could.

6. Baptism

For Believers in Walayta and Sidama, baptism was an entry rite into the Community of Believers. It was the outward and visible sign of the change of community that had taken place when the person believed in Jesus. Baptism was never an individual activity; it belonged to the community and the whole community had a say in who could be baptized.

If the new Believers were part of a congregation the leaders of the congregation would look after baptism and it would not concern me. But it was always something that I strongly encouraged because the congregation could not grow without baptized Believers.

One of the Walayta traditions that we carried with us to Sidama was “closed communion,” i.e. unbaptized Believers do not participate in the Lord’s Supper. No unbaptized Believer could take part in the ministry of the church, i.e. they could not lead the singing, lead in prayer, preach or be a pastor/elder.

If a Believer refused to be baptized it was usually an indication that he or she was living a double life. In the early days *every* Believer was baptized and became a functioning part of the new community. Later, when

hundreds of people from many different places were believing in Jesus, the picture became somewhat less clear.

7. Pastors/Elders

One of my first responsibilities was to encourage the new Believers to shepherd one another and to administer the affairs of the new community. My involvement in this would depend upon how closely the new congregation was tied into an already existing one.

If I had some responsibility for being part of establishing a new congregation I would initially appoint men to function as pastors and elders. This would be like a trial period for them. After the first baptism, the congregation would elect four men to be the pastors/elders of the group.

I never assumed the role of pastor or elder no matter how new or how small the group was. I knew what my role was, and that enabled others to acknowledge my unique place in the process of establishing a new congregation. My part in the administration was like the apostle Paul’s in Corinth: I taught from the Scriptures and asked the people to make their own decisions and to implement them.

Nor did I ever have anything to do with the congregation’s finances. From the very first offering, which took place at the very first gathering, one of the men would take care of the money. I taught them from the Bible about giving, honesty and trustworthiness. Looking after money was never an easy part of the congregation’s life.

8. Disengagement

Disengagement was something that happened slowly and naturally because I had so much to do. It was never so much a matter of not being with the new congregation, but a case of having to be somewhere else. Time and again I discovered that if the previous steps had gone well the congregation did not need me; they did not miss me; they did not want me.

There were so many places that I wanted to go that I was always glad to have a place to which I did not have to go. It was not hard to be absent because I knew that all the needs were being met. I never had to worry about things falling apart because it was their responsibility, not mine, to nurture growth.

These eight ministry components enabled me to play a unique part in the church planting process and at the same time to be free to go wherever the Holy Spirit directed me.

I only had a small part in each one of the components so I rarely received any recognition for what I had done. But receiving “well done” from the

local congregations or Association leaders was not important to me. I knew I had done what God wanted me to do, and that was enough. “*Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful*” (1 Cor 4:2). And Jesus said, “*So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, ‘We are unworthy servants, we have only done our duty’*” (Lk 17:10).

It was never my intention to stay with any one group of Believers for a long time. I was convinced that *God would provide* for them everyone they needed in order to minister and multiply. I believe this reflects what the Apostle Paul says: “*It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God’s people for works of service . . .*” (Eph 4:11-12).

My other basic conviction... is that the Good News is *for everyone everywhere*. I never thought that there would be a time when the work the Lord had given me would be completed. I knew that there would always be places where people had not yet heard the Good News. Like the Apostle Paul, “*It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known, so that I would not be building on someone else’s foundation*” (Rom 15:20).

Perhaps my most fundamental conviction is that the word of God has a supernatural quality to it. *For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart* (Heb 4:12). When we preach God’s word it has a staying power, people can’t forget it. It also has a transforming power; the Holy Spirit uses it to transform lives.

Facing Opposition

In northern Sidama [in the 1950s] the government administration only took up complaints that were registered and duly processed. Their policy was to interfere as little as possible in the affairs of rural people. So even during the Cultural Revolution (1974-1991), we didn’t experience any concerted opposition from the government administration.

The Sidamo community did not have much reason to oppose the preaching of the Good News. Religion was a family affair and each extended family looked after their own religious welfare. Believers were never viewed as a threat to the stability of the Sidamo cultural community.

However our preaching always made the officials unhappy. Believing in Jesus might sound like a very individualistic and personal decision, but it was much more than that. By becoming a follower of Jesus, a Believer was

actually calling into question the authority of all other religious functionaries, e.g. priests, deacons, sheikhs, greebs, kalichas, tankwis, etc.

Once new Believers had the courage to question the authority of religious functionaries by refusing to accept their directives, it was just another small step for them to question many of the things local government officials did. “Why should I?” was a question none of the officials wanted to hear from them. They certainly did not want new Believers to take their appeals to court.

Religious functionaries and local officials often worked hand in glove. The former knew everything that was going on in the community, and the latter gave them preferential treatment in exchange for that information.

One of the few successful ways religious and political officials could vent their anger was through individual violence. Even this was not as easy to create with Believers as with other people because they could never get into drunken brawls with Believers. But they found other ways to attack Believers physically.

One morning after an association meeting I became the object of such violence. On this occasion I left the association meeting very early Sunday morning to return to the church for the morning service. On this particular Sunday I felt that I needed to be at the church.

In northern Sidama each district had a person whom we called a *koro*. This was a word we borrowed from the Oromo language to indicate a local person who was chief administrator. He was also the go-between for the Amhara administration and the local people. The Amhara government had its officials, but the *koro* was a local person who understood the language and culture.

I was aware that the son of the *koro* was angry at me. He thought that I was telling people to challenge his authority. I also knew that some of the new Believers were aggravating him with the *why* question. He had previously threatened and insulted me but never tried to attack me.

This particular morning he caught me alone on the road. He created an argument and then began to beat me with the heavy stick he was carrying. By the time he had vented his anger I was bleeding and covered in bruises. “Next time I’ll kill you,” he said as he walked away cursing me.

I lay in the dust flexing my arms and legs. Eventually I decided that at least I had no broken bones. I was unable to continue my walk home so I made my way back to the association meeting. They prayed for me and encouraged me.

It was another one of those incidents I could do nothing about. I had no witnesses so I could not lay any charges.

Ethiopian Orthodox Church

Back in the 1950s the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC) was both the state church (the one which received financial and administrative support from the government), and the church of the Amharas and Tigres who ruled the country. Any non-Amharas who joined the EOC usually did so for one reason: social mobility. They knew that being a member of the EOC would help them get better jobs and gain many advantages in society.

Each EOC parish had a number of priests and deacons appointed to it. Usually these people were from outside Sidama. Naturally they saw themselves as guardians of the Christian faith and could not understand why another group of people would come along with a similar but different gospel. In the beginning the priests and deacons did not make much trouble for us. Later in this chapter I will tell you about what happened in 1952.

Because leaders of the EOC could not understand what we were doing they interpreted our presence and work in political terms. Many times they accused us of plotting a political rebellion and said that we wanted to establish a “mission” government. In light of what Catholic missionaries were guilty of before the Italian invasion in 1936, their fears had some basis.

Our preaching about judgment was often interpreted as a threat to government stability. They knew perfectly well what the Bible said about judgment, but their political interpretation was one way for them to get at us.

The one thing priests and deacons could do to harass us was work through government officials. This was not hard because all these officials were members of the EOC. Although we never ever made any trouble for the officials they gained favour with priests and deacons by opposing what we were doing.

One bone of contention between the Believers and the EOC, one that never went away, was the *tabot* or Ark. This is a very special slab of wood that had been consecrated by the Archbishop. It is placed in the central room of the church building and gives it the right to function as an authoritative Ethiopian Orthodox Church. But in the minds of ordinary people the *tabot* carried with it all the symbolism of the Ark of the Covenant in the Old Testament, although the only similarity between the two was its name.

Members of the EOC used to ask us constantly what we taught about the Ark just to get us into trouble. Because of their lack of Bible teaching and their newfound feelings of importance many Believers said negative things about the Ark and caused unnecessary problems. They called it a stone.

They said that members of the EOC worshipped a stone, and things like this.

In 1963 some serious conflicts arose between us and the EOC. I will tell you about those later. That was when I was in prison for seven months and nine days. But in prison they gave us a room in which we could hold services and we established a prison congregation; when they transferred us to the provincial prison in Awasa we were able to do the same thing.

When I first arrived in northern Sidama I think there was only one EOC place of worship at Dimbara Kelah. I think it was called St. George’s. Because many of the people in that area have now become Believers the building has been neglected. There was also another church in the lowlands close to Shalo, between where the Sidamos and Gujees lived. I’ve forgotten the name of it. The largest church close to us was St. George’s at Leku.

Theologically, there was always constant friction between Believers and EOC Christians. For them and for us the official teaching of the Church was never the issue: the issue was what the ordinary people said and did. Most of them believed that the Virgin Mary and angels could act as mediators. I taught them from the Bible that it was through Jesus alone that people can approach God; He is the only way that people can be saved.

Members of the EOC don’t eat meat, eggs or butter on Fridays and a number of other special occasions throughout the year. There were constant arguments between us about fasts and fasting. We would ask them for proof from the Bible. But their fasting was based on tradition, not on the Bible, so we simply argued in circles. These arguments generated more heat than light.

We also tried to show them that many things in the Old Testament were specially given to one group of people for a limited time, i.e. until Christ came. We had different ideas about the Bible so we never made a lot of progress when it came to discussing interpretations.

Later a large EOC church was built close to Afrara. It was called Gebre Christos. On one occasion the government officials ordered us to bring food for one of the gatherings at the Church. When we refused they caused a lot of trouble.

As you can perhaps see, there are many reasons why our relationships with the EOC were never very peaceful. We had very little in common. We did not agree with what they taught and how they lived, and they did not like anything we did. It was the proverbial cat and mouse situation.

Islam

In 1951 when I arrived in northern Sidama many Sidamo people said they were Muslims. They did not speak Arabic and praying five times a day was not a high priority. But they wanted to free themselves from the bondage of “Satan”, and Islam promised them this. For Sidamo people Islam was a religious option; they were not attracted to Islam by trade or intermarriage.

There were a number of mosques built on the hillsides and they all had their special days. In the early days they allowed us to come to these gatherings and preach the Good News. People were attentive and in this way many people heard the Gospel. They asked us a lot of questions about what we were teaching. Later they were not quite so willing to let us speak at these gatherings.

There were some sheikhs in the area. Most of them came from the town of Alaba. But generally in Sidama the people’s practical Islam was a populist brand that they concocted for themselves. In the mid-fifties there were some *greebs* around but not as many as later; *greebs* are men who have made pilgrimages to sacred Islamic sites in Bali province. As the Gospel spread in Sidama many people believed. By then Muslims lived mainly in larger centres. Most of them were Gurages who had come from other areas to trade coffee.

Muslims in Sidama had no political power. They were not government officials and had less influence with government officials than the priests and deacons did. When they wanted to oppose us there was nothing much that they could do, unless they got the government officials on their side.

One of the strategies we often used when we talked with Muslims was asking them, “Tell us what the Koran says about sin and salvation.” After they had told us we would tell them what the Bible says. Whenever Believers followed this strategy they were able to hold profitable discussions with Muslims; they didn’t get into destructive arguments.

Ethno-religionists

Ethno-religionists were the people in Sidama (and lots of other places) who follow the religion that has been passed on to them for generations. In many cases they were seeking a relationship with the Creator God but were prevented from finding it by the very people who claimed they were helping them.

It was a religion that majored on threats. The people were always being threatened with death and sickness if they refused to follow every order of the functionaries, the *kalichas* (mediums) and *tankways* (prophets). It took a brave person to resist the cultural pressures. But, when people believed and

refused to obey these orders, nothing happened to them or their possessions! Increasingly others saw that the functionaries’ threats had no power, then they too wanted to be free.

Over a period of time many of the functionaries believed in Jesus. In the early 1950s there was a powerful man named Sheefo whom people referred to as a god. He constantly threatened people with death if they did not do exactly as he told them. People danced in his honour and paid money to him on a regular basis, like a tax. When we preached to him he had us arrested and detained for a few days. Not too long after this he suddenly got sick and died. Many of his extended family are now Believers.

Another powerful man was named Biraydo who controlled people over a large area. He was constantly telling people to kill their animals for this and that reason. He was another one of the functionaries who suddenly got sick and died.

One of the things that made these functionaries so powerful was the fear the Sidamo people had of their dead fathers’ spirits. They believed that these spirits were very powerful and dangerous, and that they had to be kept happy at all costs. In order to increase their own control over the people, the functionaries would constantly tell people to offer sacrifices to these spirits.

Many Sidamo people wanted to be free from this fear. This part of Sidamo culture has now almost completely disappeared. This is one of the results of preaching of the Gospel that frees people from bondage to evil. As you can imagine, these religious practices damaged the economy of Sidama and kept the people poor because the animals they needed for milk and ploughing were senselessly slaughtered.

When any of the functionaries, such as the *kalicha*, wanted to do anything to oppose us they had to work through government officials. These people, and some of the most powerful ones were women, had no independent political power.

Their threats of violence did not frighten me. I never took any notice of them and I was never harmed. Opposing them was one way to prove to Unbelievers that their threats were powerless.

Another group of people who tried to prevent the preaching of the Good News were those who controlled the land.

Land Owners

Land ownership was controlled by a group of people that we called *yemireechoch*. These were Sidamo people, official representatives of the absentee landowners, and this made them *de facto* rulers in the rural areas. They were people who related to official government administration.

Because *yemireechoch* controlled the rural people the government officials did not want to mess with them. The *yemireechoch* were in fact accountable to no one; they did exactly what they pleased.

In theory there was no such thing as slavery in Sidama in the early 1950s. But in actual fact many people lived like slaves to the *yemireechoch*. They had no life of their own. They had to hand over grain and animals whenever the *yemireechoch* demanded them; they had to work for them whenever they were called. The people were not called slaves, but they were treated like slaves, and this made many of them think and behave like slaves.

Yemireechoch had representatives whom we called *koroch* (singular: *koro*) and they perpetuated the administration of the *yemireechoch*. These two groups received no money from those above them, so they had to extract what they wanted from the farmers which often meant that people weren't left with much. Hardly an incentive to be a productive farmer!

Why did they oppose me, and other preachers? What did we say and do that impacted the pockets of these officials?

According to the law, *yemireechoch* and *koroch* should not have been taking huge amounts of grain, animals and money from farmers. Farmers had the law of Ethiopia on their side, but they knew nothing about it.

First, people gained spiritual freedom. Then they often learned to read and write and began to demand their rights. New Believers then began to challenge what the local administration was doing. And the local administration often didn't like this.

When Believers began to submit their legitimate grievances to the government administration, then according to law, the government administration had to take the Believers' side. The local administration did not like this at all. This often created a lot of friction between Believers and local administration. But over a period of decades people were set free from their economic slavery.

It was a totally new thing for *yemireechoch* and *koroch* to be taken to court. This had never happened in the history of Sidama. These officials didn't want to argue their rights with judges because they knew they were in the wrong. But Believers knew they had the law on their side and so they would take the local administration to court.

Even during the Cultural Revolution (1974-1991) the hegemony of *yemireechoch* did not change a great deal. The government tried to redistribute land but the local administration still managed to stay in control of rural people who could not read and write.

First Imprisonment

In 1953, when a small group of believers was beginning to form, rumours and lies were spread concerning what they taught. Sorsa tells us:

When they arrested us at the church service they allowed us to take our Amharic Bibles with us; all six of us had Amharic Bibles. They knew that the Bible was a holy book so they never did or said anything against the Bible.

We were also told to bring along the gramophone and records that we used to preach in the area. This was equipment donated by Gospel Recordings that we had obtained from the SIM Mission Station in Aleta Wando. All of the records we had were in Amharic. Some preaching records had also been made in the Sidamo language but government officials had strictly prohibited SIM from allowing anyone to use them.

But back to the Leku prison: That night at about six o'clock the guards let the local thugs loose on us; they beat all six of us within an inch of our lives. When the thugs began to beat us, the guards pretended that we were trying to escape and joined the melee in order to beat us up. One of the policemen stabbed me in the arm with his bayonet; I still have the scar on my left arm.

Boko and Ataro were badly hurt in the fracas. In fact at one point we thought they had killed Ataro. In the midst of the shouting, and whacks with the sticks, Wayesa escaped. When the guards realized that Wayesa had escaped that only made it worse for those of us who were left. The guards screamed and yelled, "A dangerous prisoner has escaped! A dangerous prisoner has escaped! Help! Help! Help!" They had the whole town in an uproar for about three hours...

After covering our bodies in bruises they put us all in shackles. They chained my right leg to the left leg of one of the others, and so on. The five of us were chained in twos or threes. They kept us in leg irons for the six days we spent at Leku. Use of shackles for people like us was illegal, but "illegal" was a term that had no meaning in rural areas in those days.

In order to prevent any of us from trying to escape they took almost all our clothes from us. I was left with a thin shirt that I wrapped around my waist for a covering. In those days many people we didn't have shoes so they couldn't take those from us. They knew that at some future date they would have to return our clothes so they were careful to put them in a safe place!

Paul's mother and Boko's wife brought food to us every day. In those sorts of prisons the prison budget made no provision for food for the prisoners.

Because the local officials didn't know what to do with us, and they didn't want to release us, they decided to send us to Yerga Alem the provincial capital.

Being in prison at Leku was a great time to preach the Good News. People who had not heard about us came to see who these "dangerous" people were that were reportedly causing so much trouble. The people at the Police Post did not prevent us from preaching and playing the gospel records. Every time a group of people came along we would preach to them. Many heard the Good News while we were in Leku prison but none believed at that time.

Next day the provincial governor called us in and asked us why we had been arrested. This provided us with an opportunity to preach the Good News. Our accusers again said that we were "mission" and causing trouble. When he saw us almost naked, but holding our Bibles, the provincial governor was very angry: "These are our own people, Ethiopians. They are not expatriates. Why are you calling them 'mission'? Have they broken the law? Are they criminals?"

Then he gave us another opportunity to explain what we were teaching. They were touched by the fact that we each had our own Amharic Bible. In those days every new Believer did his or her very best to obtain a copy of the Amharic Bible, even if he could not read it. We played one of the records for them. It was the one about the Crucifixion. All of the men were silent and deeply moved.

When I read various passages from the Bible to them they wanted to know where I had been to school. I told them I had been to the Mission Bible School in Aleta Wando.

They wanted to know where we had acquired the gramophone and records. Whether our connection with the SIM in Aleta Wando was a help or a hindrance I don't know.

"You are not criminals. You are going to be sent home," they told us. Then the provincial governor said to me, "You think you know what the Bible teaches; you don't know anything. We have teachers who have wings like angels and who have been to heaven and come back. Go and live in Aleta Wando and preach there, or in Yerga Alem, or in Dilla. You are not allowed to preach in rural areas. If we ever catch you preaching again in rural areas you will be whipped." I was not frightened by his threats so I just smiled and nodded my head. He made no effort to force me to agree to his orders...

After we got our clothes back they sent us home. They did not make us sign any papers. We were dismissed with the usual threats, but we took no notice of them. As soon as I got back to Arkay I began preaching again.

Second Imprisonment

The second time I was arrested and imprisoned was during the 1960 uprising led by Brigadier General Mengistu Neway. This time I was in prison for seven months and nine days. This *coup* was the first time for many decades that there had been a public challenge to the leadership of Emperor Haile Selassie. Most people were uncertain about the political turmoil and attempted to stay neutral.

Just at that time there was an *awichachin* in progress in our area. This is a process that happens when a crime has been committed and the officials gather together all the people in the community to try and find out who is responsible. It was often an opportunity for officials to take money from people, and provided an opportunity for people to settle old scores.

Some of the officials got people to say: It is because of the Believers that so many things have been going wrong in the community. The officials arrested six of us, three from my area and three from the lowlands, and took us to prison in Yerga Alem. The officials had collected up a variety of accusations against us. None of them were new. The two that we heard repeatedly were: "They preach that the Mission is going to establish another government." "The *tabot* is just a stone, so Orthodox Christians don't worship God but a stone in their church." They forced people to witness against us. Everyone knew that this was all a show; no one took it seriously.

This opposition highlighted a problem that we had experienced for a long time. Because Believers were freed from fear they questioned what the officials did. This was something the officials could not understand. Until the Believers questioned them, they thought everything they said was divine revelation.

While we were in prison a strong wind blew over some of the large prison buildings. This unique accident, which resulted in the deaths of four prisoners, three of whom were Believers from Walayta, caused us to be treated with much greater respect. We were not hurt, but many were less fortunate. Almost invariably people interpret such happenings as punishment for something they have been doing wrong.

I was arrested and put in prison because of my preaching, but the prison authorities had no objection to my preaching in prison. They even gave me a room in which I could conduct literacy classes and preach. We had regular times of singing, praying and preaching every day. Many Unbelievers came and a lot of them began to believe in Jesus. We also took up offerings at our Sunday services and helped some of the other prisoners,

especially the twenty-one Believers from Walayta. They were much further from their homes than we were so did not get as many extras.

No serious charges were laid against us. Everyone knew that accusations in the files were false but getting out of prison was a complicated procedure. Every official was looking for a promotion and had to make sure that he did not give those below him even the slightest reason to make accusations.

We denied all accusations. We called witnesses to prove that we had never said the things we were accused of saying. Every court appearance was a preaching opportunity. I always had my Bible with me, and I tried to answer every question with a quotation from the Bible. The judges did not always appreciate this but they had to allow me to give an answer. Like many such cases, this one slowly wound down until they sent us home.

The Cultural Revolution

During the Cultural Revolution (1974-1991) many Believers were arrested [by the Marxist authorities] for a whole variety of trumped-up charges. Some of them were detained for days and even weeks at various revolutionary offices in Leku. We took food to them and preached to others who were detained and to families that came to visit them.

Not surprisingly, none of the Believers was ever found guilty of any anti-revolutionary activities. God enabled us not to compromise the truth of his word and still be loyal to the government.

I never stayed at home, but no one stopped me going around preaching. The teaching of Jesus in Matthew 10:16 was constantly in my mind: *I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves*

Financial Support

When Sorsa decided to settle in a new place he looked for a field to rent and then built a simple house, planted crops and bought a few cows. In this way he joined the farming community of that village. This gave him credibility as a man and also provided a small but very visible income. He maintained these fields and houses in various places and moved from one to another on his preaching trips. After a few years in Arkay and then Wacho, he settled in Afrara which became his main base and his family home for twenty years.

As an evangelist Sorsa never put himself under obligation to anyone for the sake of money. His freedom to follow the leading of the Holy Spirit was more important to him than a large or steady income. When offered

hospitality or money he accepted it with thanks but never asked for anything he could not immediately pay for.

Early in his ministry he received some support from the Association of Walayta churches, and later from the Sidamo Association, along with occasional gifts from individuals, but he always needed to supplement this with the produce of his farming.

In his old age he could look back thankfully and see how the Lord always provided for him and for his family:

God has always supplied more than we need. We always had as much as we needed; our children have never been hungry. We have always had good clothes. I have never been below the people in the community. We've had our share of sickness, but no more than others. God has blessed us. I was never a trader; nor did I ever spend all of my time farming. We proved over and over the truth of God's promise as expressed in Philippians 4: 19, 20: *And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus. To our God and Father be glory for ever and ever. Amen.*

I appreciate everything Believers in many different places have done for me; many times they helped me with my work on the farm.

The Sidama Association rarely gave me anything. I have never been forced to ask people for grain. People have never given us grain because they felt we didn't have enough to eat. I have worked hard and God has provided enough of everything for us.

Often I got home from preaching about 5 p.m. Then I would put on my work clothes and work on my farm until well after dark. Sometimes I used a small lamp. One night as I was working in the dark I almost got killed. I was mistaken for a porcupine! Late one evening one of my neighbours was walking along the track and he heard some rustling in the trees. In the darkness he saw a shape, lifted up his spear and approached ready to throw his spear into what he thought was a large porcupine. As he got closer he realized it was me. He was so embarrassed that he crept away without saying anything. Later he told me that he almost threw his spear into me. For the protection and provision that we have enjoyed we give all the credit to God.

Organization

An Association (*Mahibar*) is a cluster of congregations belonging to the same denomination which because of their geographical proximity, develop an administrative structure that contributes to their mutual strengthening. In both Walayta and Sidama we had two types of associations: the large one that met once a month and many smaller ones that also met once a month. The latter consisted of representatives from all the congregations in an area.

The large one was made up of representatives from the smaller associations rather than from individual congregations.

These monthly gatherings were something that began almost imperceptibly. They were in constant flux depending upon how congregations multiplied. Sometimes the restructuring was the result of groups of congregations demanding more independence. An association, whether large or small, plays a very important part in my understanding of what the Good News is all about. It is essential for both individuals and congregations.

Every new Believer was excited beyond words when he or she first attended an association meeting. It was like they said, "Wow! You mean there are hundreds and thousands of people who believe in Jesus?" It was always a time of tremendous encouragement to them.

Whenever I was working with a new group of Believers I would insist that some of them come to the association meeting. It immediately put their faith in a different perspective. Right from the beginning it gave them the message: you've become part of a new community; these are your new brothers and sisters. Associations also play an important part in the life of the congregation. I know from experience that a congregation that does not interact with other congregations quickly becomes introverted. Associations enable Believers to work and share together.

We began forming an association in northern Sidama in about 1951. When I began preaching in Arkay I think there were three other places where Walayta evangelists were preaching. In each of these places there were a few Believers. To begin with, the Walayta itinerant preacher was the leader of each of these new groups.

Each month a group from each of the three congregations would visit the other one. We were carrying on a tradition we brought from Walayta so the association began spontaneously. There was no one person who organized it and decided it was time to have a monthly get-together.

Being part of an association was as natural as having a Sunday service. So as soon as a few congregations began to form in northern Sidama we began to meet monthly. Nothing formal had to happen. All we had to do was agree that once a month we would meet to sing and pray, and to discuss common concerns. To begin with the itinerant preachers from each of the congregations would get together and discuss problems. The expatriate missionaries sometimes came as guests to the Association meetings but they were never an integral part of this administrative structure. It was all our own.

Later, after each congregation elected teaching elders, these elders would meet and talk together about mutual concerns. The association meetings had

four main purposes: food, fellowship, corporate planning and problem sharing.

During the overnight gathering (usually Saturday evening and Sunday morning) we usually ate four times: a snack in the early evening, supper at about ten, breakfast, and then another meal before the participants left to return home at about one in the afternoon.

When we began almost everyone walked, so the gathering began with foot-washing. The members of the host church washed and massaged the visitors' feet. A few well-to-do people owned mules, but most people walked.

At each association meeting we always scheduled two large fellowship meetings: late evening on Friday and mid-morning the following day. The latter often combined a fellowship time for the Believers and an evangelistic outreach. Because of the singing, unbelievers from the neighbourhood would gather to see what was happening and they would hear the Good News.

Associations also worked together in hiring itinerant preachers. The large association usually only hired preachers who worked in other areas; small associations hired itinerant preachers to work in local areas. All of the congregations contributed equally towards their salaries.

Local congregations also hired itinerant preachers, usually part-time, to preach in and around the community where the congregation met. Each level of administration was committed to hiring itinerant preachers. In the beginning at least, hiring itinerant preachers was our major financial focus as a community of Believers.

At the associations' meetings, elders from all of the congregations represented would get together in the evening and then again the following morning to share any problems they might be experiencing. It was also the time to handle personnel and ministry concerns as well as financial transactions that went beyond the administrative boundaries of local congregations.

The problem sharing and resolution was the time when we created our own pastoral theology. We tried to make all of our decisions based on the Bible and then apply its directives to the social milieu in northern Sidama.

The congregation in Arkay became part of such an association as soon as the first people believed. No matter how few we were initially, we got together to share a meal, pray and sing, and then discuss any concerns about which we needed input from others. There was no formal application or approval procedure.

As the Good News was preached and more and more people in northern Sidama believed in Jesus our work grew from a single congregation to

become part of a national denomination. Gradually four levels of fellowship and administration developed.

The first one was the local congregation. Right from the beginning it was an autonomous unit. But because the first Believers had been immediately introduced to the Association, local autonomy was rarely a divisive issue.

Each congregation was part of a small association to which it sent representatives each month. In some places these small associations were called middle-of-the-month associations, sometimes they were called District (*kifil*) Associations.

These small associations sent a number of delegates to the monthly business and fellowship meetings of the large association that usually gathered at the end of each month. As a large association we became affiliated with the Kale Heywet Church, which became a national denomination in the early 1970s.

Sorsa concludes his story with the words:

Today (2001) there are almost 400 functioning congregations of the Sidamo Kale Heywet Church (KHC) in northern Sidama. Not all of them are registered as fully recognized churches but almost 400 congregations meet every Sunday. And the KHC is just one of many denominations which has congregations there. There are scores, perhaps hundreds, of churches affiliated with other denominations.

Today there are not many areas in northern Sidama where evangelical churches have not been planted. There are some places in the Avelah district where there are not many churches, but evangelists are being sent there. Already lots of people in Avelah have believed.

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