

From the G.C. President

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O DATELINE ETHIOPIA AND ERITREA: Wednesday afternoon, 18 hours after I returned home from a two-week trip, Anita and I left for Africa. Our initial destination was Ethiopia, home of the Queen of Sheba of biblical fame (1 Kings 10: 1-13) and where Christians proudly trace their heritage to the Ethiopian eunuch whose baptism by Philip is recounted in Acts 8:27-39. This picturesque but arid country is bordered by the Red Sea on the east and, continuing clockwise, by Djibouti, Somalia and Kenya on the east and south, on the west by Sudan and the Sahara, and on the north by Eritrea. By its military victory in 1991 Eritrea not only concluded its 30-year war of independence from Ethiopia but also led to the collapse of 17 years of communist rule. Another interesting fact about Ethiopia is that it is one of the few countries in the world that did not change from the Julian to the Gregorian calendar so today's date in Ethiopia is February 11, 1989.

We arrived Thursday evening in Ethiopia's capital city, which was named Addis Ababa (meaning "New Flower" in Amharic) by Emperor Menelik II when he relocated the capital to this cool site in the highlands of Ethiopia just over 100 years ago. State President Negasso Gidada described his rich Protestant heritage during our Friday morning visit to the palace. But we were disappointed when flight problems canceled our Friday afternoon visit to Gimbie Adventist Hospital. Sabbath worship services with our believers in Addis Ababa provided an opportunity to consider spiritual issues which have contributed to the sad polarization which divides some of our members.

We stopped twice on Sunday on the way to Asmara, capital of Eritrea. The first stop was in Mekele, provincial capital of Tigray, the region enduring the heaviest fighting during the 17 years of war against the communist regime. It took us one-hour to drive 48 km (30 miles) over very rough and dusty roads to the village of Wukro to visit one of the two Adventist orphanages operated by the North Mission. Of the 330 orphans cared for in two facilities, 132 live at a new facility near Mekele, built and operated with the financial help of L'esperance Kinderhelf, an Adventist ministry in Germany. It was at Wukro Children's Village where I met Haile Mariam and his brother Solomon. Their story is typical of the 198 orphans who call this home. It was eight years ago, when they were about 1½ and 3 years old, that the local pastor discovered them clinging to the decomposing body of their mother. She had been killed three days before by a cluster bomb dropped on their village during an air raid which killed over 2,500 and left 115 orphans, many of whom are now living at this orphanage.

Continuing our journey we made a brief stop in nearby Axum (also spelled Aksum) reputed to have been the home of the Queen of Sheba who, according to Ethiopian tradition, bore a son named Menelik, who was fathered by King Solomon. One of the old churches in Axum is the Ethiopian Orthodox Church's most holy shrine. According to their tradition, the ark of the covenant was brought here for safe keeping at the time of the destruction of Jerusalem. One of the monks, who is never allowed to leave a small fenced area, is selected as guardian of the ark, a position he holds for life. He alone is permitted to see the ark and does so once a day.

Tired and dusty we finally landed in Asmara, Eritrea,

shortly before sunset. Like all visitors we were both impressed and surprised by the progress (given the few years since peace was realized), cleanliness and order which are so evident.

The first Seventh-day Adventist missionaries arrived from Scandinavia and Germany in 1907, when Eritrea was an Italian colony, and it was from Eritrea that missionaries first penetrated into Ethiopia in 1923. Most church properties were confiscated during the I and II World Wars. During these difficult years the handful of believers, scattered in their respective villages, met together once every three months and rotated the meeting place.

At the end of the war missionaries began to return. The first to come was Pastor V. Toppenberg, a godly man who spent 40 years of his life in Eastern and Northeastern Africa and, at great risk to his life, was the first to penetrate into Ethiopia in 1923. Returning to Eritrea in 1945, he reorganized the work, regained some confiscated properties and founded the primary school where all current church workers studied.

After a brief pause at the hotel, we went to our church where we met many of our 350 believers. After the worship service we laid the cornerstone for the new Better Living Center—which will be funded in part by the next thirteenth Sabbath offering. Then we snatched a few hours of rest.

Below us, on the way back to Addis Ababa early Monday, was Lake Tana, source of the Blue Nile. Its muddy waters meander through the desert until, at Khartoum, it joins the White Nile flowing north from Lake Victoria on its way to Egypt and the Mediterranean. Our approach to landing at Gonder took us over an ancient castle, site of a seventeenth century battle, which is significant to Seventh-day Adventists since the battle was to "resolve" whether to keep the seventh day Sabbath or Sunday holy. But more about this next week.

On landing in Addis Ababa, we checked into the hotel, and in a few minutes we were back at the airport to board the MAF (Mission Aviation Fellowship) aircraft chartered for the one-hour flight south to Awasa. A 45-minute drive brought us to Kuyera, site of Ethiopian Adventist College. Though time was short, we were able to meet with more than 950 secondary and college students as well as enjoy a brief reception with the faculty and staff before retracing our steps to Addis Ababa.

On Monday evening we enjoyed the fellowship of many pastors and other workers during the evening meal. After the meal, before getting some rest, duty called. Pastor L.D. Raelly (Eastern Africa Division president) and I addressed some administrative issues until about 2:30 a.m.

Though the night had been short, Tuesday morning both the alarm and telephone were unforgiving and we prepared to leave. Bidding our new friends farewell, we departed for South Africa and the next segment of this trip. It is during this flight that I am completing this edition of *From the G.C. President*, hoping to send it by E-mail upon arriving in Johannesburg.