

## The Long Journey From Vision to Practical Work:

### How Family Ministry Was Developed in the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus (EECMY) Starting in the Year 2000?

#### A story about waiting for the right time of God

##### *Northern start*

Anna-Kaarina and I were born in Finland, in Northern Europe. When we met each other during our University studies in Helsinki, one of the first things to make clear was: Do we share the call for Mission work? We did, so in 1974 (the year 1966 in the Ethiopian Calendar), at the age of 25, we arrived in Ethiopia. We were a young, small family with a daughter. Now it<sup>h</sup> is our 36 year of marriage and our 52<sup>nd</sup> year since we started serving in Ethiopia.

As time passed we were blessed with three more children in Ethiopia. All four of our children are now married and we have four grandchildren in our family.

##### *The young marriage*

We married when we were only 21-22 years old and spent the majority of our working years and our married life living in Africa. The first years in Ethiopia were not always sunny for us. Nevertheless, we felt that we had a happy, good marriage and family life. Then a friend of ours invited us for a Marriage course. Having lived 14 years in marriage we thought that we had no special reason to join such a course, but in the end we decided “why not join.”

##### *Marriage Course in 1985, an eye opening experience for us!*

The weeklong course opened our eyes. We saw, that we did not need to be satisfied with a “good” marriage only, since it could be improved! We learned that our marriage needed to be tended and nurtured. Since God has given us the great gift of marriage, we should care for this marvellous gift.

Very soon we also started to think that this eye-opening experience is something we would like to share with others. We attended the course while on a short furlough in Finland, planning to return to Africa for our service within the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus (EECMY).

*Is marriage teaching needed in our church?*

After the return to our place of service (Hossana, one of the Synods) we started asking our Ethiopian co-workers this question. Is there a need for marriage teaching in the area we are serving, or maybe in our own congregation? All the replies were more or less hesitant: "Well, yes, of course it could be ... but ..." We started thinking that this idea about marriage teaching was our own enthusiasm, but *not* a vision from God. So we decided to keep quiet, to wait and see God's plan.

Later, we were transferred to Addis Abeba for service in the Central Office of the Church. We served there from 1988 to 1993. Sister Anna-Kaarina started the EECMY AIDS Prevention and Control Program; Pastor Matti was the Theological Advisor of the Church. The issues related to marriage quite naturally came up in the AIDS Program, which at that time carried the name "Preventing AIDS etc through strengthening Christian family life."

We kept on wondering, whether God wanted us to do something together, as a couple, in the field of marriage teaching in our church. We got an appointment from Mr. Francis Stephanos, the EECMY President that time. We asked openly, whether he thought it possible or suitable, that we, foreign missionaries would start teaching on Christian marriage in this church. The President took time, considered our question and replied:

*Green light from the Church President*

"Well, obviously there are some negative points in your being foreigners. As foreigners-you can not know the culture as an Ethiopian would. But we should remember that there is no such a thing called "Ethiopian Culture" because there are a number of Ethiopian cultures. I must admit that I, as an Ethiopian, may know only my own original local culture, it is impossible for me to know all the dozens of Ethiopian cultures! You as foreigners are a stranger to all local cultures, and I am a stranger to all but one - my own local culture."

"But," the President went on saying, "quite obviously there are also some positive points in your being a foreigner. You are free of some taboos, which might bind me. As a foreigner you also may find an audience, which might not be ready to listen to me, an Ethiopian."

The Church President concluded: "So then, as the Gospel knows no boundaries, why should marriage teaching have such limitations? Go ahead, try, whether or not you find ways to teach on marriage - the need certainly is there!"

*Marriage Courses in 1988 - 1993 in different Church Units*

Under the umbrella of the AIDS Program we started a series of so-called "AIDS - Marriage Courses". We ran the courses as a team, the two of us, sometimes teaching together with Rev. Teshome Wege and Mrs. Berhane Jalata. We had courses in different parts of the Church: Dembi Dollo, Ijaji, Fiche, Ambo, Woliso, Hossana, Lideta in Addis Abeba, etc.

Everywhere we got the same kind of feed back: "This teaching is really needed. This is some thing we have been waiting for. Please arrange more teaching like this..." But our main duties were elsewhere, we could arrange only a very limited number of courses during that time.

In 1993, while preparing to leave Ethiopia and spend several years in Finland, we presented our written report on our Marriage teaching during the past five years. We appealed to the Church Officers: "Please appoint somebody to take responsibility on arranging the teaching in the field of Christian Marriage and Family Life!"

### *Receiving Training for Family Ministry in Finland.*

We stayed in Finland for more than six years, until the higher education of our younger sons was complete. While in Finland, we received training for Family Ministry. We especially focused our training in the field of Preventive or Supportive Family Life Education available through the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland. Courses included: “Special training for Family Ministry;” “Couple communication;” “Marriage enrichment;” “Expressing emotions;” “Sexuality in marriage;” and “Marriage Encounter;” etc.

It is well known that there are great marriage-related problems in Western countries. Thus, we thought that we could utilize that training regardless of whether the Lord guided us to stay in Finland, or opened the way back to Africa again. Sr. Anna-Kaarina even got a permanent job as a Family Ministry Secretary.

### *Work in Ethiopia?*

While in Finland, we kept asking the incoming missionaries from Ethiopia, whether they had heard about any ongoing, organized Marriage teaching within the EECMY. The replies were quite hesitant. When our younger sons were about to leave home for further studies, we sent a letter to EECMY leaders requesting information about whether Marriage teaching was being given or whether the church would possibly desire our input in that matter. The time passed. Since there was no reply we concluded once again, that this idea about marriage teaching was our own enthusiasm and perhaps *not* a vision from God. Yet, we decided to keep quiet and wait and see.

Then, to our astonishment, our Mission (the Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Mission, FELM) Counsellor brought us a ready made job description for Family Ministry from Ethiopia! We wondered, after all the hesitations, could it be, that this vision from God. We applied for leave of absence from our permanent jobs in the Church of Finland and returned to the FELM in August 1999, in order to leave for Ethiopia in September 1999.

But the visas were not granted. We were told: “There is a problem in getting work permits in Addis Abeba.” Our two congregations had already employed new people in our positions, so we served the Mission temporarily in Finland. We wondered, whether the inability to get visas was now the final stop for our enthusiasm, an enthusiasm ~~was~~ founded on the call from God?

The Mission started the process of sending us to Southern Africa, since the chance to enter Ethiopia seemed to be blocked. Should we go to Botswana, Namibia or even to Portuguese-speaking Angola?! That was a hard time. It really challenged our vision. But we decided to leave the decision to the Mission - or actually to God! - since we had left our Church jobs for two years.

Finally, we got permission from EECMY to enter Ethiopia with Business visas hoping that the work permits would come later, which is what eventually happened. So we arrived in Addis Abeba in January 2000.

### *The start of EECMY Family Life Education Program*

According to the original plan we were to work within the Gospel Ministry Department (GMD; the name was later on changed to be Department for Mission and Theology, DMT) of the EECMY Central Office in Addis Abeba. Quite soon, though, it became clear that there was no chance to get a Work Permit for work in Addis Abeba. Another solution was to be found. There were negotiations between the Church President, Rev. Yadesa Daba, the FELM Area Coordinator and the leaders of the Synod and Hossana Mekane Yesus Seminary. Then we gradually prepared an alternative plan with the GMD Director, Rev. Iteffa Gobena. We were to join the staff of Hos

sana Mekane Yesus Seminary and start the work based there. From the very beginning, however, it was made very clear, that this Program would serve the whole Mekane Yesus Church, and that the Program was based in Hossana only temporarily, until it would be possible to get the Work Permit for Addis Abeba. The Program Description of the “EECMY Christian Family-Life Education Program” (FLEP) was approved by the Seminary Board in June, 2000.

*What is “Family Life Education?” How to begin, who is to teach, how, where, whom ... ?*

There were plenty of open questions at the beginning of the program. However, we did receive very good help and support from Rev. Itessa and the Seminary staff. So, we simply started the program without knowing where it would lead us!

### *Basic Marriage Courses*

First, we decided to arrange a Basic Marriage Course (for couples only) in each and every Church Unit. There have been multiple aims for these courses:

1) To help the participants to find some useful improvements for their own marriage and family life, 2) Through that, to help them serve better in their respective duties in the church; 3) To encourage the participants to teach on marriage issues in their localities, 4) To find possible candidates for future Training of Trainers (TOT) courses for Family Ministry. In addition to these, quite obviously our aim has also been 5) To raise awareness for Family Ministry amongst Church Units’ leadership, pastors, evangelists etc.

Within five years we arranged a four-day Basic Marriage Course in all 20 Church Units. The acceptance everywhere has been overwhelmingly positive, open, and hearty. By 2005 there were close to 400 couples (i.e. about 800 persons) participating in these courses. Amongst them c 60% are pastors’ couples. One third of all the Synod presidents, several other members of the Synod Officers and most of the Gospel Ministry Directors have participated.

In many places we have been requested: “When do you come for the next time because there are more people who need this course!” Our reply has been strict: We do NOT come for the second round. Instead we’ll train other instructors for you! And really, now we have instructors in each and every Church Unit. Also, there have been Basic Courses for the EECMY Central Office staff. We were namely challenged by Central Office staff: “You have been teaching all over the Church Units, when will you teach us?” In response, a Basic Course for the top leaders of the Church was made part of the program. After that, finally, we can say that Family Ministry has gained its due place in the basic structure of the Church.

### *Teaching in the Theological Institutions and Bible Schools of EECMY*

The Church has four Theological institutions, namely in Addis Abeba, Hossana, Nekemte and Aira. For the past years we have been teaching in these seminaries in such a way that each and every student gets an intensive course in Family Ministry during the diploma or degree level studies. Thus, we have had a good opportunity to screen future church leaders in order to find new Family Ministry instructors. Family Life Education has also been included in the Curriculum of the Theological institutions of the Church.

There are more than 30 Bible Schools in the EECMY. Certainly there is a need to teach Family Ministry there, too. Family Life Education needs to be specifically included in the Curriculum of the Bible Schools. Then of course we need to train enough Bible School teachers to teach this subject.

*Pre-marital teaching!*

One of the really big challenges is how to arrange pre-marital teaching. There is a burning need for teaching the youth, but many questions exist. Questions like how to start, who is to teach, what methods, where, and to whom? How can we include Family life teaching in youth work activities? Could there be teaching in Junior Secondary and Secondary Schools, perhaps even in government run schools? What about materials for this?

*Training the Trainers*

The responsibility for giving basic teaching on Family Ministry has already been transferred to the local level instructors. By June 2006 there are about 270 people who have participated in the two weeks Training of Trainers' Courses. Reports on their activities have come from most Church Units.

*On activity of the Family Ministry trained instructors in Church Units*

The local instructors in the Units take care of basic level teaching. It is encouraging to see how they have taught many courses and a variety of different teachings.

The trained Family Ministry instructors have taught the following target groups:

- Pre-marital teaching for young people,
- Pre-marital teaching for engaged couples,
- Teaching in connection to Confirmation class,
- Marriage courses for couples,
- Women's courses and meetings,
- Teaching for Congregational and Parish leaders,
- Marriage teaching / sermon at a Wedding,
- Repeated Pre-Sunday-service teaching in local Congregations,
- Teaching Youth groups, Choir groups, Prayer groups, etc
- Teaching at a Bible School,
- Teaching the Bible School students with their wives,
- Marriage courses for Pastors, Evangelists etc with their wives,
- Teaching at Vocational school, at High School; Etc.

*Some quotations from letters of trained Family Ministry instructors:*

"We have started giving emphasis on Family Ministry in our congregation. It is amazing how many people are now recommending that we (the Evangelist and his wife) would concentrate more on this area. We are grateful that our congregation has accepted our suggestion to make Family ministry, which has been neglected and forgotten, as one area of our service."

"After we came back from TOT Course we tried much to get pastors, evangelists and church administrators to arrange this teaching for concerned church servants, and we succeeded. Now we are getting many reports that the teaching is helping the affected Christian families."

"We have lived in marriage for 27 years by now. We took part in the Basic Marriage Course some three years ago. Actually we consider our real married life to have started from that remarkable course. We praise the Lord for that - and also the people around us can witness that our life has been changed!"

“We have lived in marriage for more than 35 years. After all these years we first thought we wouldn't need to have ‘a Marriage Course’ at this stage. But now quite astonished we realize how many things we still have to learn. Marriage obviously is a life-long process of learning!”

### *Follow up and continuous training*

There are plans to expand the Training of Trainers' courses in order to have enough instructors in all the Church Units. This seems to be the only way to fulfil the tremendous challenge in strengthening the Family Ministry. The trained ones also need ongoing help, encouragement and further training for their service. Therefore TOT Refresher courses need to be arranged, too.

## **THE VISION OF THE EECMY FAMILY LIFE EDUCATION PROGRAM IS:**

- to support Church members to live in happy and healthy marriages and families;
- to encourage church workers who are happy in their marriages to spread the Good News through their example and teaching;
- to improve the status of girls and women through strengthening the Christian family model;
- to help in the frightening situation of the AIDS pandemic through stressing the significance of faithfulness in the life of couples.

## **WHAT IS “FAMILY MINISTRY”?**

In many African societies it is common to think that everybody gets married sooner or later. The idea of single adults is strange. This is why Family Ministry in this context is naturally thought to be related to marriage in one way or another. It is also good to remember that in-Africa ‘family’ normally means the extended family, which is much larger unit than the ‘nuclear family’ of western countries.

**Teaching on marriage and various family related issues needed for a large variety of target groups:**

- youth (most of whom will get married, the only question is when),
- engaged couples,
- newly married couples,
- couples of different ages,
- parents,
- grandparents (out of whom many might be widows).
- One additional target group **workers in the different fields of education, child raising, health etc**, in addition to the church workers.

### *Family Ministry*

“Family Life Education” includes many different features of Church work. It means education in the sense of teaching or instructing, but is also related to the field of Counseling, whether pre-marital or marriage and family counseling. The **“Family Ministry”** is an appropriate overall title for this work.

Christian Family Ministry is bringing hope to Africa which is suffering an AIDS pandemic.

Educational work always takes time, but it is worth doing. The churches could well share their experiences and put in practice each other's findings and working methods.

### *Aim, goal*

**The aim of the EECMY Family Life Education Program is to help church people live in happy marriages and families.** The happier their married lives are, the better service the church servants can give in their respective duties.

Finally, the goal of the Program is to have Christian Family Life Education as an essential part of ordinary teaching in all levels of Church work.

## **NEW STAFF FOR FAMILY LIFE EDUCATION PROGRAM**

As of September, 2004, the Family Life Education Program (FLEP) received remarkable encouragement. **Mrs. Aberash Tolossa and Rev. Geneti Wayessa** (who earlier served as Central Ethiopia Synod Evangelism Director) started their service in the newly named Department for Theology and Mission (DMT) as counterparts to the Advisors (Palmus). Ever since their appointment, they have been actively involved in the Family Ministry activities and planning.

## **FUTURE PROSPECTS OF THE CHURCH' FAMILY MINISTRY**

There is a great need to give Family ministry a strong focus in the work of the Church. When Christian family life is strengthened, the status of girls and women is also improving. As the AIDS pandemic is still worsening, the teaching on Christian family life and faithful partnership with one spouse only is an important part of fight against AIDS.

### *Continuous training*

- 1) The plan is **expand the Training of Trainers courses** in order to have enough instructors in all the Church Units. This seems to be the only way to fulfil the tremendous challenge in strengthening the Family Ministry.
- 2) Obviously there is also a need **Training of Trainers of Trainers!** The training structure should produce area or sector based trainers for TOT Courses. Gradually, there will be a need for TOT courses in each and every Synod or Work Area! In the long run the aim is to have Christian Family Life Education as an essential part of ordinary teaching in all levels of Church work.

### *Follow up*

- 3) Those who are already trained need ongoing help, encouragement, and further training for their service. Thus, **series of TOT Refresher courses** was started in 2004.

### *Material production*

- 4) **Material Production** has been under process for years. **The Trainer's Handbook** needs to be translated soon to Amharic and Oromo languages.
- 5) There is also a need **handouts for the course participants.**
- 6) We need to search for suitable Family Ministry textbooks for Theological Seminaries and prepare a **textbook type teaching material for Bible Schools.**

*Pre-marital teaching***7) One area of urgent need **Pre-marital Teaching for the Youth.****

In 2005 there was an expansion of the Family Life Education activities when a Missionary couple started work under the theological Seminary in Aira. They will serve by focusing especially on pre-marital teaching.

*Marriage Counselling***8) Marriage Counseling is an area of crying need. There is an obvious need **Counseling Center model in local Congregations.****

Furthermore, there is an urgent need **Training of Marriage & Family Counselors.**

## ABOUT THIS HANDBOOK FOR FAMILY MINISTRY

The “Strengthening the Family - A Trainer’s Handbook for Family Ministry” was finalized in 2005. This final version of the Handbook includes teaching aids for 30 lessons and 15 Bible Studies.

This book was prepared by us, two foreign missionaries, who have served in Africa about twenty years. The material has been developed based on input of more than 20 Basic Marriage Courses all over Ethiopia. The version ready at the time of each TOT Course during 2002-2005 has been given to the trainees for use and further comments. The newly amended or improved version has been given to the next TOT Course participants, etc.

Thus, we may say that this Handbook is not only prepared by the two foreign missionaries, but by about 120 Ethiopian trainees, who have used the material for their teaching work in different parts of the Church. We thank all of them!

*A written comment given by a Reader of the Handbook*

“I read through the Handbook for Family Ministry, which is prepared for the Christian Family Life Education Program. Before I started to read the book I thought it would be the European way of life and teaching. However, after I finished my reading I found that it is well conceptualized from Ethiopian Christian Family Life. I am saying that the teaching is more based on Biblical teachings. I will recommend this Handbook for those who have the vision for their Church People to live in happy marriages and families.”

*Mrs. Tseganesh Ayele*, Secretary for Women’s work and Family issues at the Evangelical Churches Fellowship of Ethiopia (ECFE)

*Thanks*

We are grateful *forall* those various people who have contributed to this Handbook, including the artist, Mr. Assefa Guta. At the final stage we received valuable comments in writing from Mrs. Tseganesh Ayele, Rev. Jalata Negeri and Mrs. Aberash Tolossa with her husband, Rev. Geneti Wayessa. Their hints for amendments or improvements have made this Handbook much better; more contextualized, in one word, more African! We also thank Rev. Iteffa Gobena, the EECMY President, and Rev. Alemu Shetta, The EECMY DMT Director, for their help and support. We thank Rev. Michael Weller for the English language checking of the entire text. Finally, we want to thank our Mission, the Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Mission (FELM) and especially the Area Co-ordinator for Ethiopia, Ms. Päivi Anttila. The FELM has financed the Family Life Education Program of the EECMY, and the printing of this Handbook.

*What about our future plans in the field of Family Ministry?*

Much of the work we have done in 2000-2005 can be and is being done better by the local, Ethiopian instructors in various areas. The Evangelical Church in Ethiopia has grown dramatically. When the EECMY was founded (1959) the membership figure was 20.000. The statistics of 2005 tell that now there are 4.3 million members! We are now asking the Church and the Mission, whether we would be further needed, or wanted, for Family Ministry service, and if we are, where, how, and for what kind of service?

In addition to the service in Ethiopia, we have been involved in the Marriage Courses for Missionaries during summer times in Finland for the last twelve years, starting 1995. The aim of those courses has been to support the missionary couples and families in their family-related issues.

Starting from 2002, we have also been involved in training missionaries for Family Ministry. During these years there have been a couple of 'Training of Trainers' (TOT) courses in Family Ministry for Missionaries coming from various countries, where Finnish Missions are working. There have been missionary participants from 17 countries: Botswana, Croatia, France, Ethiopia, Israel, Japan, Namibia, Nepal, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, Russia, Senegal, Taiwan, Tanzania, Thailand, Turkey, Venezuela, etc. There will be, God willing, similar courses in future, too.

Where does God want us to serve in future? We are very open concerning answers to this question and are praying for the Lord's guidance in this matter. Family Ministry certainly needs to be strengthened in various Churches, in different parts of the world. Please join us in prayer for the Family Ministry of the Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus, other Churches in Ethiopia, and the Church worldwide!

Let us join hands in helping church people to live in happy marriages and families.- The happier their married lives are, the better the service the Church servants can give in their respective duties. This will help to reach our final goal that His kingdom would come!

Gratefully submitted, during our furlough in Finland,  
in June 2006,

*Sr. Anna-Kaarina Palmu,  
Rev. Matti Palmu*