

Francis S. Ojwang, ed., *Forward in Faith, History of the Kenya Mennonite Church: A Seventy Year Journey, 1942-2012*. Nairobi, Kenya: Kenya Mennonite Church, 2015. Pp. vi+287. Softcover, \$10.95.

*Forward in Faith* is a detailed telling of the story of the Kenya Mennonite Church. Beginning in 1942, as a branch of the Tanganyika Mennonite Church (today, Tanzania), the KMC has had a life full of advances and retreats. The writers of this history do not spare the difficult passages, and their honesty makes the advances all the more compelling.

The KMC was born in revival. "It was in 1942 that the Holy Spirit fell upon the newly planted Mennonite Church at Shirati, Tanzania, across the border from south-western Kenya." (5) Some Kenyan youth were present and "walked across the Tanzania-Kenya border to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ in their communities at home." (5) This beginning links revival with the fact that this was not a missionary-planted church, as "The Kenyan Mennonite Church has always been a mostly Kenyan movement with minimal involvement of missionaries from other countries." (5)

The dual nature of the KMC (local and revival-born) marks the church and therefore also the telling of its history. The East African Revival, which began through God's work in the lives of Ugandan and Rwandan Christians, has shaped many of the churches of the region.<sup>1</sup> The way that the various churches of the KMC began reflects a deep dependence on the presence of God's Spirit in their founding.

At the same time, because this is a Kenyan story, the reader can get lost in the details of unfamiliar names and dates and places. I

have a background in the Anabaptist churches of southern Africa, so have some grasp of the East African story, but even so I had difficulty keeping the story straight. Although this is an unavoidable difficulty when people tell their own story, the writers could have provided more complete summaries in addition to the brief statements at the beginning and end of each chapter.

Telling the people's story has a further beneficial result. Because the authors do not avoid the hard parts of their story, but tell them openly, one can see the ways in which the KMC has been influenced by its context in Kenya. Conflict between the Luo and Kikuyu peoples have been much in the news recently, leading to Kenya's Supreme Court to take an unprecedented step and set aside the results of a national election.<sup>2</sup> When one discovers that the KMC is primarily a Luo church, with some participation from other ethnic groups within Kenya, dissent within the church is less surprising. At the same time, one discovers how the KMC has moved beyond such societal divisions to reconcile with disputing factions. The story is one that speaks hope to Kenya and to the rest of Africa as many countries deal with their own internal divisions.

At a more basic level, this book does the general reader a service by describing the Kenyan context in some detail in Section Two, "A Church Rooted in the Kenyan Context" (17-34). Modern anthropological studies sometimes discredit the idea of ethnicity, but ethnic identity remains basic to the many people groups of Kenya; this section gives a good clear exposition of what is involved in being Kenyan, including the specific ethnic background of the KMC.

The story also gives insight into one of Western missions' most difficult tasks. Organizations such as Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) and Eastern Mennonite Missions (EMM) worked carefully to avoid creating dependency by establishing Western-style institutions that the local church would later have to maintain. Nevertheless, the process of dealing with institutions remained and caused its own problems. Transfer of property in Nairobi from EMM to the KMC, for example, proved to be more difficult than the participants had expected (153ff). Such problems do not detract from the essential story. Rather, they give confidence that the progress made in the KMC to become a truly national church is real progress.

I appreciate the opportunity to read this story, and I commend the history to friends of the church in Africa. The book is most valuable for specialists in African church history and for libraries that include a good section on the church in Africa, but it is well worth reading for anyone who wants to understand the global

church better. The effort to understand the story of the KMC brings dividends to readers in North America also. Readers in the United States, for example, live in a church context that has become tribalized by the American political scene. The experience of the KMC can teach us also what it means to work towards the reconciliation of the world around us with the God who made us. Our thanks to Ojwang and the writers of *Forward in Faith* for sharing their story with us.

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### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> See Richard K. MacMaster, with Donald R. Jacobs. *A Gentle Wind of God: The Influence of the East Africa Revival*. Waterloo, ON: Herald, 2006 for the story of the Revival. Jacobs also describes the effect of the revival in his own life as a missionary in *What a Life: a memoir* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2012).
- <sup>2</sup> One can look up the news stories posted on the BBC website (bbc.com) for one perspective on the elections. The division between Kikuyu and Luo is one basic feature of the reports.