

# ***Lutheran Mission Matters***



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## *Encountering Mission*

# **Ethiopian Immigrant Children: What Church Fits Them?**

**Tesfai Z. Tesema**

**Abstract:** The alienation Pastor Tesfai's sons felt in the Ethiopian congregation he served drove Tesfai back to school. What kind of Christian ministry might reach second-generation immigrant children? This excerpt from his forthcoming book tells how his interviews with twenty-five young Ethiopians and Eritreans in America revealed youth who are proud to be ethnically Ethiopian and Eritrean but say they are American inside. A majority say the Ethiopian church of their parents doesn't fit them. Tesfai concludes the immigrant children need their own new kind of church plant; a multiethnic English-speaking church which has broad reach into the host society.

*This story starts with a conversation between my wife, Abby, and our eldest son, Abel. Abel, our first child, was born in Khartoum, Sudan, during our two-year flight from Ethiopia during the Ethiopian Civil War, via Saudi Arabi and the Sudan, to North America. Although we brought him to the United States as a child, Abel's Amharic language skills were limited, and he refused to use Amharic in public. Abby enrolled him and his younger brother Daniel in the Sunday School of an American church to supplement the spiritual education they were getting at the ethnic Ethiopian church I pastored in San Jose.*

“Are you ready for church?” Abby asked Abel that particular Sunday morning. “Which church?” Abel said. “Your church or my church?” Abby was horrified. “How can you say, ‘your church’? Your father is the pastor!” “So what?” Abel said. “I don't understand what my father preaches. How can it be my church?” That's when it hit us. We were building a congregation of Ethiopians in America and we were happy. Unfortunately, our kids were not.



*Rev. Dr. Tesfai Tesema pastors the Addis Kidan Ethiopian Church (Lutheran) in San Francisco, California. Tesfai and his wife escaped Ethiopia in the late 1970s during the war. This article is an edited excerpt from his forthcoming book (tentatively titled *For Such a Time*), which tells the story of the Tesema's thirty-year quest to build a relevant ministry for the children of Ethiopian immigrants to North America. [tesfaizt55@gmail.com](mailto:tesfaizt55@gmail.com)*

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During this period of discovery, I met Robert Newton, the pastor of a Lutheran church a few miles from ours in downtown San Jose. I shared our challenge with him. Dr. Newton is an educator. He had worked on the mission field in the Philippines for several years. “Your problem is cross-cultural,” he said. “Right now, the church you pastor is one culture—Ethiopian. But your children are more American than they are Ethiopian. Consider developing a ministry that reaches across the culture gap, across the generation divide.”

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With Dr. Newton’s encouragement, I enrolled in the Doctor of Missiology program at Concordia Theological Seminary in Ft. Wayne, Indiana, in 2003 to pursue that challenge. I spent three years at Concordia, researching the children of Ethiopian immigrants and writing my PhD thesis on them. This article chronicles that research, the results of which contain what I believe is a message that God’s Spirit has given to the pastors of the Ethiopian Church in diaspora across the US and to the perplexed parents of immigrant children. The message is this: Be hopeful! Our children are not victims of American racism, or a generation gap, or any other crippling social malady. The Lord intends that they bring the gospel of Jesus Christ to this country. They are equipped to do that because they are bicultural. The mission passion of the Global South, where the Church of Jesus Christ is growing rapidly, flows through their veins as they walk the streets of the North, where churches are dying and faith seems to be growing cold. Your children trade in the values of two cultures because, among the most successful immigrant children, they are truly bicultural. Their ability to live simultaneously with two identities is a mighty weapon in the arsenal of the Church of Jesus.

I developed a set of points to use in interviews with the immigrant Ethiopian second generation, in order to address my primary research questions: *What are the immigrant children, the 1.5 and 2.0 generations, really like? How can we build Christian ministries to reach and retain them?*

1. Describe your experience in America as the child of Ethiopian immigrants and how you identify yourself today.
2. Describe how the Host Society (meaning the American culture, in most places equal to White America) has shaped your identity.
3. Describe how your Ethnic Community (meaning the Ethiopian culture of your family, your church, and any friends) has shaped who you are today.

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4. Describe how your experience as a Christian or your childhood in a Christian family has shaped you.

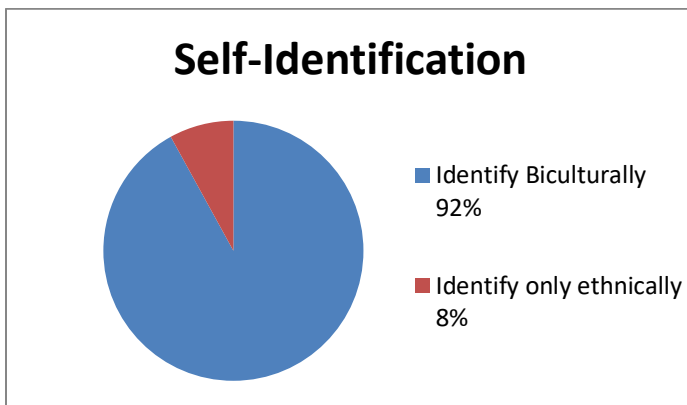
From my initial conversations, I developed additional questions to help my interviewees better characterize their self-identity.

- Describe who you are ethnically.
- Describe your relationship with the Ethiopian community.
- Describe your relationship with the host culture (American non-immigrant community).

I recruited twenty-five young Ethiopians, children of immigrant parents. Seven were born in the US, representing Generation 2.0; eighteen were born in Ethiopia, coming to America before age twelve, thus represent Generation 1.5. At the time of my interviews with them in 2008-09, fifteen were aged eighteen to twenty-four, ten were twenty-five to thirty-three.

## **Bicultural Identities and Challenges**

All twenty-five interviewees self-identified with pride as Ethiopians. They each described some piece of the culture that they loved. As they spoke about their parents and Ethiopian people, they expressed positive feelings overall. However, they also talked frankly about negative aspects of their ethnicity, culture, and the challenge of relating to their first-generation parents and the first-generation immigrant community. We could characterize their outlook as a “love and hate” relationship with their Ethiopian-ness.



One American-born young man stated, “I don’t feel comfortable in an all-Ethiopian setting.” He attended an American church and said many of his best friends were out-group people (people who are not Ethiopian) although some of his friends are second-generation children of recent immigrants, like himself. His lack of Amharic

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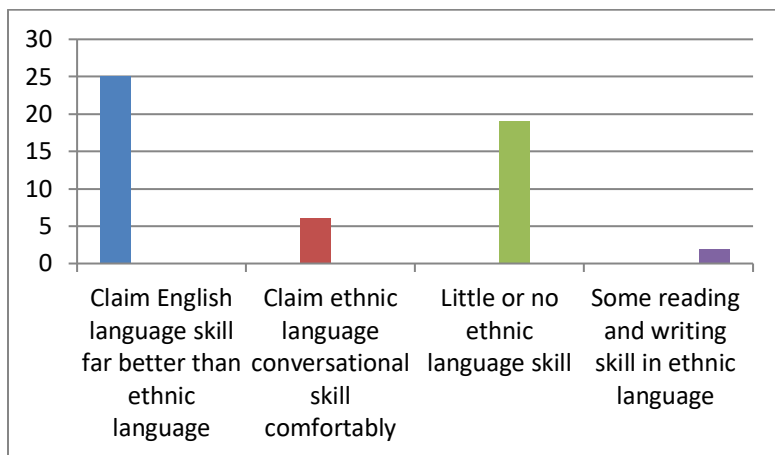
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language skills and cultural incompetence contributed to his sense of discomfort. He grew up in a city with a fair-sized Ethiopian community and an Ethiopian church as well. His brothers were both Gen 1.5, immigrating at age eleven and eight. Both brothers spoke only the Amharic on their arrival. Furthermore, his grandmother, who spoke only Amharic, practically raised him while his parents worked. Nevertheless, despite growing up with a first-generation extended family in a heavily Ethiopian home environment, this young man didn't speak Amharic and preferred to hang out in American settings, rather than Ethiopian settings.

More than a third of the twenty-five participants said they felt misunderstood or not fully accepted by their parents, the first-generation population. However, most asked me not to quote them on this. Did they not want to say negative things about their culture which might get back to their parents?

Although Gen 1.5 and Gen 2.0 youth self-identified as Ethiopians and appeared proud of their ethnicity, many said the Ethiopian community didn't fully embrace them. According to my readings of the social literature on the immigrant experience, feelings of non-acceptance stem from cultural difference and incompetence in the ethnic culture. The most critical cultural incompetence, according to my interviewees, was lack of skill in the ethnic language.

One interviewee stated, "I no longer speak the language fluently; the English language won out. . . . It has been very hard for me to maintain my Ethiopian-ness. I lost the language. It is very hard to maintain both; one almost always wins." This young man immigrated at age two and half. Although he spoke minimal Amharic as a toddler, his skill has decreased since then. Currently, the language he uses daily is English. Orozco and Orozco, in their book *Children of Immigration*, say, "In reality, very few people can be considered 'balanced' bilinguals. Most bilinguals are in fact dominant in one language."<sup>1</sup>



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Finally, interviewees said ethnic identity issues led to conflict in their families. Nineteen of the twenty-five participants described conflict at home as they grew up. They characterized their parents (Gen 1.0) as overly strict.

Conflicts surfaced around the issues of freedom, friendship, dating, cultural understanding, and so on. This may appear to be the natural conflict that exists between generations in any culture. However, the interviewees believed their parents were driven by fear of life in a strange new culture. These young people felt that Gen 1.0 immigrants not only saw themselves as outsiders, but to them, the host culture (American) people and their practices were unusual and mysterious. In response, they became afraid and overprotective, responses their children viewed as overly strict and controlling. When we consider how children are raised in the Ethiopian setting, this makes sense. Ethiopia is community-centric—relatives and neighbors, as well as parents, look after and correct children. Concerns about gangs and missing children are not common. Immigrant parents who hear about such issues in the US react with fear. On the other hand, their children, who have grown up in this culture, understand American society better and American culture does not intimidate them. Parents attribute the comfort level of their children to the naiveté of youth. This misunderstanding on both sides complicates home life for both generations.

My interview data shows that the Gen 1.5s and 2.0s also harbored negative feelings over the way America, the host culture, treated them. Nineteen out of twenty-five interviewees reported derogatory treatment and put-downs because of their ethnic identity. I conducted my interviews in 2008 and 2009, twenty-five years after the Ethiopian drought and famine of 1984–85. Many of the interviewees had grown up in the US, attending school here, and Ethiopia was prominent in the nightly news when they were in elementary or junior high.

One young woman told me her classmates would ask her, “How did you get so big? Who fed you? I heard everybody is dying over there.” A young man reported that schoolkids called him by the name of a TV character. “On the TV show *South Park* the character Starving Marvin is an Ethiopian; I have been called that a lot of times.”

## **Spiritual Identity of Immigrant Children**

Central to my research was better understanding the social and cultural awareness of Gen 1.5 and 2.0 Ethiopian children. I hoped to find clues that might lead me to develop a socially and culturally relevant ministry that could reach them with the Gospel. One of the important findings of my research was that twenty-four of the twenty-five participants said spirituality or religion was important to them.

Of the twenty-five interviewees, seventeen affiliated or identified as Protestant, six identified as Orthodox, one was Catholic, and one was a self-declared atheist. The Protestants divided further. Eight attended an Ethiopian Protestant church, while nine

said they attended American churches. Those who claimed Orthodox faith all belonged to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.

Of the eight interviewees who attended an Ethiopian Protestant church, seven said they took their faith and religious identity very seriously. Describing her religious faith and experience one young woman said, “I am 100 percent committed to my religion. I practice daily and weekly activities. I witness my faith and serve in the church. I spend six hours a week in church-related activities. Religion is important to me because it is a source of my happiness in all of life.” Still another said, “Religion gives me a strong foundation. . . . My identity is in Christ. . . . To me race is just about the color of one’s skin. It is not about identity. Identity is not about the way your parents raised you and what culture you have; your identity is now in Christ.”

Nine of the seventeen Protestants said they attended a host culture church (American). The religious commitment of this group varied sharply from that of the eight who attended an Ethiopian Protestant church. Of the nine who said they belonged to an American Protestant church, two were highly committed, four were semi-committed, and three were not committed.

The highly committed ethnic church Ethiopians and the highly committed American church Ethiopians appeared very similar in their inside-the-church activities and attendance level. However, on the topic of communicating one’s faith, a sharp difference emerged. When I asked members of the Ethiopian Protestant church about sharing their faith with unbelievers, they responded by talking about their activities within the church and de-emphasized reaching out to people who are not Christians. “I am a youth leader in my church,” one said. “I witness my faith and serve in the church with the youth group,” another one said. A third interviewee responded to the question of communicating the faith by saying, “Those of us that are here meet on Saturday and help the youth and the children on Sunday.”

On the other hand, members of American Protestant churches with the same degree of religious commitment said, “At my work I will make every effort to let my light shine. I welcome conversations about religion in the break rooms. Spreading the Gospel makes my day.” A second person said, “I . . . make an effort to reach out to non-believers with the intent to convert them.”

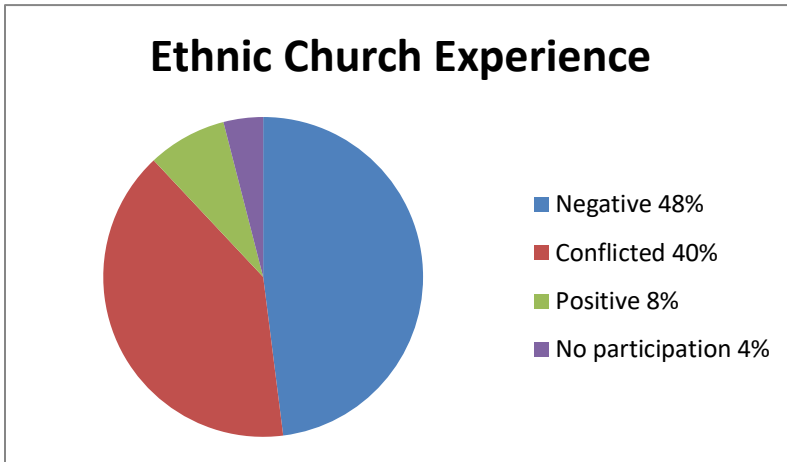
### ***How do research group participants describe their experience in the Ethiopian church in America?***

Interviewees viewed the spiritual ministry of the first-generation church as a mixed bag. Twelve expressed negative opinions of the ethnic church’s ministry to the Gen 1.5 and 2.0 immigrant Ethiopians; ten had mixed feelings about the church’s ministry. Only two expressed positive feelings, and these two were not committed to the church.

A young man who was highly committed in an American church stated, “I left the Ethiopian church because of cultural barriers. There was no benefit there for me, since I hardly speak the language. Many people of my generation feel the same way. Those who were born in Ethiopia and have Amharic language skills stayed. Most people who attend the Ethiopian church in America attend for cultural reasons.”

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One other young man who had better Ethiopian language and cultural abilities also explained his reasons for leaving. “I left the ethnic church where I used to go because my friends left. They went to American churches for better children’s ministry programs. Language and culture were also issues for me. It was difficult.”



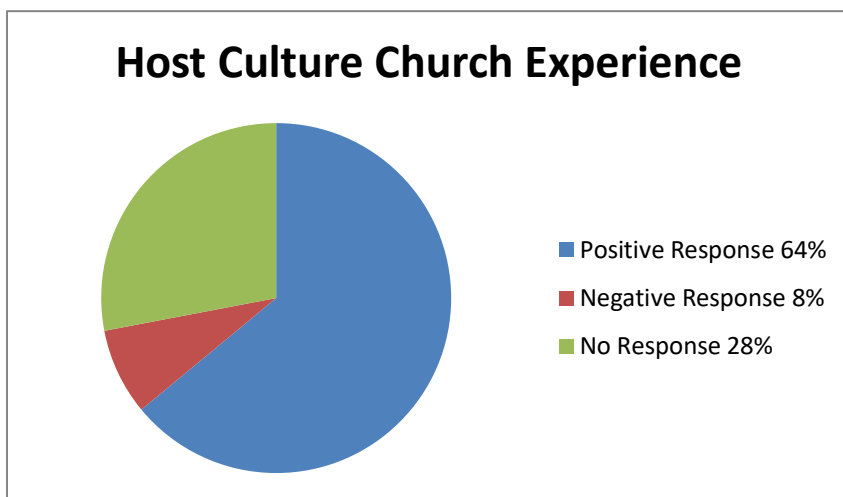
One young man offered his solution, “We need a church for us. . . . At my church, I would like to think there are no boundaries and everyone is welcome; but the truth is, it is for Ethiopians only. Even in the youth group where we do stuff in English we rarely see people of a different ethnicity or race.”

*A church for them! A church that is not limited to their own ethnicity!* These young people were articulating the solution they hoped for.



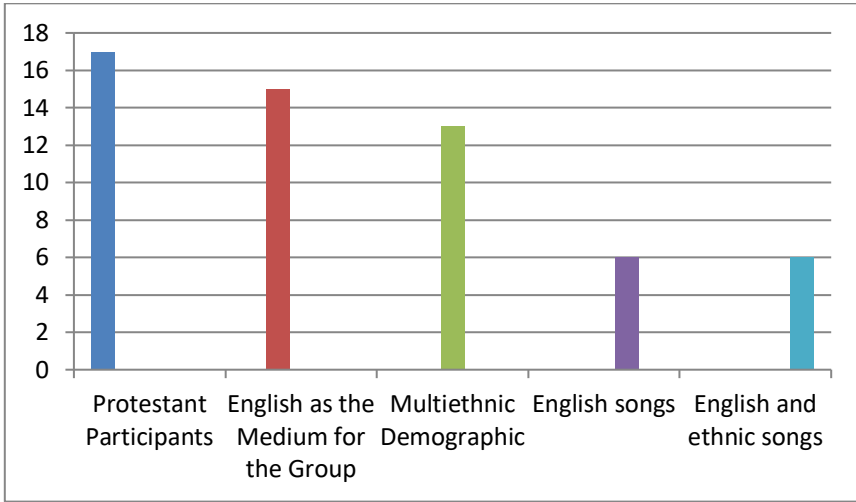
***How do research group participants describe their experience in American, non-ethnic churches?***

Many of the respondents held membership in an Ethiopian Protestant church but talked about the contribution of American churches to their spiritual development. They pointedly stated they did not rely on or even expect the Ethiopian church to meet their spiritual needs. They said this was especially true when it came to the teaching of God’s Word and resources for the church’s ministry to children and the youth group. One who served the youth group in the Ethiopian church stated, “American churches have contributed to my spiritual development and religious knowledge. Christian media, TV, radio, recorded materials and books have also helped. I have never depended on my ethnic church entirely for my spiritual growth.”



***What would a ministry that feels socially and culturally relevant look like, according to the research group participants?***

This was not an easy question for the participants to answer. Most of them, Protestant and Orthodox, had not seriously thought about it before I asked the question during our time together. But they made a brave stab at answering the question. Fifteen of the seventeen Protestants said such a ministry must use the English language as its medium. They gave responses like, “My choice is a multicultural church that uses English as its language medium.” Twelve of the fifteen stated the population or demographic of their ideal church should be multiethnic or multicultural.



A second-generation respondent said, “[The] 1.5 and 2.0 church must be one that reflects our assimilation.” A Gen 1.5 interviewee, who attended an Ethiopian church, described what this might look like.

I enjoy Amharic worship and preaching in the English language with an American approach. The church for the Gen 1.5 and 2.0 population has to have (1) Worship that mixes Amharic and English, (2) Preaching in English, (3) All communication within the church has to be in English, and (4) A mixture of ethnicities, not just Ethiopians. We are so hungry for that.

He seemed to be describing a church that started out with a core of Gen 1.5 and 2.0 Ethiopians and evolved into a multiethnic congregation that reached out to people of many ethnicities. This, he said, was “*what we are hungry for.*”

I believe my research calls for the launch of a full-fledged church that ministers to the immigrant children, now adults, with the potential of ministering to the immigrant children of Ethiopians, non-Ethiopians, and even to the American population of their generation. Unlike the Gen 1 Ethiopian church of their parents, this church’s ministry will connect with new generations, language-wise, culture-wise. Like the first-century church in Antioch, this church may introduce a powerful and promising revival to the American Christian landscape.

**Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> Carola Suárez-Orozco and Marcelo M. Suárez-Orozco, *Children of Immigration*, in The Developing Child series (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 137.