Biniam Asefaw had to flee his home in Eritrea to make a home in Las Vegas. His story of travail — and triumph — has turned him into a figure of inspiration

There are many churches in Las Vegas, but there are only two serving the valley's small community of Eritrean immigrants. And for the even smaller subset of evangelical Eritreans? Well, there's just one: the Bethel Church of Las Vegas. It's run out of an old high school on Sahara Avenue that's been converted into a social services campus by the Trinity Life Center.

"I am here for the Eritrean community first, just to share with them what God did in my life, how he saved me and protected me," says the church's pastor, Biniam Asefaw.

Whether delivering a sermon in front of his small but devoted congregation, or having a cup of coffee at a Starbucks down the street, Asefaw, 39, projects a gentle and good-natured optimism. Quick to laugh or smile, he has an easygoing demeanor that belies the incredible — and harrowing — journey that brought him from Eritrea to Las Vegas some six years ago.

It's a journey that begins with his religion. In Eritrea, the small country in the Horn of Africa that lies along the Red Sea, bordered by Sudan and Ethiopia, evangelicals have been persecuted for years. The crackdown on evangelicals in Eritrea, who make up but a small percentage of the country's population, is part of a broader pattern of governmental abuse. The government has also made it very difficult for its citizens to leave the country. A New York Times article, for instance, relates an anecdote about an Eritrean student receiving a $200,000 scholarship to attend college in the United States. The Eritrean government, however, not only refused to let him go, they drafted him into military service.

The result: a massive exodus of people out of the country. There are about 4,000 Eritreans in Las Vegas; added together with immigrants from neighboring Ethiopia (Eritrea was once part of Ethiopia), the number climbs to around 15,000.

Eritreans know many stories of hardship — family members in prison, or facing the threat of prison, or worse. Asefaw's journey to America is such a story of hardship, but it's more than that. It's a journey that not only transformed the man, but provided him the strength of character to inspire the people of the growing Las Vegas Eritrean community.

"He's our social and spiritual father," says Amanuel Tesfaye, an engineer and member of the Bethel Church congregation. "He's our teacher. He counsels us. He's been through a lot. It might be a personal problem or social problem or spiritual problem, he's the guy you'd go to. He's very important in our lives. From time to time, when he's preaching about a subject, sometimes he gives us a testament of his life and how he overcame persecution and how he forgives.

Pastor Randy Greer, who runs the Trinity Life Center, helped bring Asefaw to Las Vegas six years ago. In his first meeting he walked away thinking Asefaw was "the finest Christian man I've ever met in my life. He's a great human being. You sense something from the inside of him."

“I try my best to show them my heart is good for them,” says Asefaw. “Either they accept it or not.”

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Biniam Asefaw grew up in Asmara, the capital of Eritrea. Asmara was a longtime colonial arm of Italy, which settled the region in 1885. The city historically was known as Little Rome for its profusion of Italianate architecture and art-deco Italian movie palaces.

The Italians had used the country as a beachhead for its failed efforts to invade Ethiopia. After World War II, the British ran the territory — about the size of Ohio or Pennsylvania — until 1952, when the United Nations placed Eritrea into a federation with Ethiopia, a move Eritreans opposed. Eritreans fought for their independence from the 1960s to the 1980s. The country defeated Ethiopia in 1991 and was granted independence in 1993, but tensions between the two nations have continued to simmer.

Asefaw was reared as an Orthodox Christian and went to church a few times a year, but the experience was distant for him. When he was 14, a friend took him to an evangelical church. The singing — that rich, powerful, beautiful singing — gripped him.

“I didn’t quite understand what they were teaching, but when they were worshipping, I loved the song. I kept going.”

That was the moment he says he was born again. In 1995, after what he calls a “long year” of training, he became a full-time minister. His church assigned him to Keren, the country’s second largest city, about 90 kilometers northwest of Asmara. Christianity’s roots in the region date all the way back to the 4th century AD, and Ethiopia is thought by many to be the resting place of the Ark of the Covenant. This belief is central to Christian orthodoxy in the region.

Asefaw’s church began with 28 people. By 1999, it had grown to nearly 100. One of the new members of the church was a woman named Tsehaynesh, a young born-again Christian from Asmara who was fleeing persecution there. Her family wanted her to marry an Orthodox Christian, but she refused, and the evangelical church decided to hide her for three months in Keren. The two quickly fell in love.

But hostility toward evangelicals was widespread throughout the country, which is split roughly between Muslims and Christians. Orthodox Christians wouldn’t rent homes to evangelicals or Pentecostals, leaving churchgoers to find homes from Muslims. Asefaw thinks that evangelicalism was viewed as the religion of white men, a perversion imported from Germany or the United States. (The faith began in Great Britain in the 18th century.) For Christians, it was not their fathers’ religion, and they responded accordingly.

Despite being seen as an outsider, Asefaw tried to turn the other cheek.

“We loved them. We showed them kindness. If somebody is sick, we go to visit them. We tried to make peace with them. Some of them told us, ‘You are very nice people. You have just one problem. You follow the outside religion.’”

In Keren, there was growing unease about the evangelical churches. The government had been cracking down on Jehovah’s Witnesses for years — that faith’s refusal of military service made them an easy target. But evangelical and Pentecostal faiths were growing, and this worried both the government and the

Orthodox Church. Religious leaders of faiths outside the mainstream were harassed and arrested, sometimes tortured, sometimes disappeared.

In November 1999, one of the church leaders called to warn Asefaw about trouble brewing in Keren. He told Asefaw to be careful.

"I told him, 'I don't want to go from this city. If it's calm, bad or good, I'm here.'"

His steadfastness would cost him. The police came to the church a week later and arrested him and his congregation — with no official reason. They were detained at the local police station. Before long, the congregation was let go.

But Asefaw wasn't. Instead, police drove him to Asmara, where he was imprisoned someplace underground for 25 days. . From there, he was taken to a military prison at Ghela'elo, in the middle of the desert, near the Red Sea.

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Though a notorious military prison among Eritreans, Ghela'elo is not a traditional building with tall, thick walls. Asefaw describes it more as a giant, open-air courtyard, sparsely guarded. There was the desert on three sides and the Red Sea on the other. "There is no houses. There is nothing."

Inmates fashioned thatch-like roofs out of grass to provide shelter from the rain. I asked him what was to stop him from simply fleeing along the coast. "From that to Yemen is very long," he says with a laugh. "You couldn't swim. It's very tough. It's a big ocean."

There were around, he guesses, 5,000 military prisoners. He didn't know why he was there or how long he would be there. The men had no shoes and little food and water. Asefaw began to minister to the other prisoners, a risky proposition. Guards hog-tied prisoners (locals called this "the helicopter position") and beat them for hours. During a Bible study, Asefaw himself was beaten with a stick — and warned about what would happen to him if he continued: solitary confinement. Ghela'elo's version of solitary confinement is elementary but brutal. It is a hole in the ground, a small and narrow pit, into which prisoners are lowered. Temperatures there could reach up to 120 degrees.

It would not be the last time Asefaw leaned on his faith. He was afraid, but he says the more he prayed, the more his outlook on his predicament began to change. If God uses me to his will, he thought, I am ready to pay the price. No matter what happens to me I need to be faithful to what God calls me to.

He says his fear began to ebb, his strength to grow. All told, he was at Ghela'elo for six months, until he and dozens of other prisoners were shipped up the coast toward the border with Ethiopia, unwilling conscripts at the front line of an ongoing territory dispute between the two countries.

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Between 1998 and 2000, the two nations engaged in a bitter border war that eventually cost, by some estimates, at least 70,000 lives. Asefaw and his fellow prisoners were assigned to a bomb unit. Asefaw had, years earlier, completed compulsory military service, but he had no training for this, and he said so.

Over the next several weeks, he was given a crash course in bomb disposal work, all the while dreading the day when he and his fellow recruits would be sent into Ethiopia, ahead of Eritrean ground troops, to clear the battlefield.

He prayed: “You called me to preach the Gospel, to save people, not to kill people. I don’t want to die in this place. I don’t want to kill anybody. I don’t want to hurt anybody.”

But before he could be sent over the border, Ethiopian fighters broke through and claimed the area. Over the next several weeks, Asefaw and other would-be soldiers retreated from the advance of the Ethiopians. Eventually, he says, the battered Eritreans regrouped, and he was told by his superiors that he would undergo more specialized military training, as the Eritreans were not planning to surrender.

At the same time, he learned that the government was stepping up its crackdown on evangelicals, planning to close evangelical churches, capture and kill some of the leaders. Returning home to Keren, or Asmara, was out of the question. Staying on a collapsed frontline was also untenable.

So Asefaw escaped by foot to a town near the border with Sudan called Teseney. An evangelical woman hid him in her home for a week, before he joined a small group of travelers who walked for three days into Sudan. The trip was an anxious one, with the travelers walking at night. Asefaw didn’t know them, didn’t know whom he could trust. He thought maybe their guide would betray them at the border. But when they reached Sudan, his fears lifted.

Because so many Eritreans have left Eritrea, there are immigrant communities seemingly everywhere. In Kassala, another Eritrean woman harbored him for another week, and Asefaw met an Eritrean cab driver who smuggled him through to Khartoum, Sudan’s capital. (Usually an ID is needed to get into the capital from the border.)

Even in big, loud, formless Khartoum, Asefaw found his way. Unexpectedly, though, he fell in not with an Eritrean church but with an Ethiopian one. Though the services were in Amharic, the national language of Ethiopia, the church was open to all comers — and for all the enmity between Ethiopia and Eritrea over the years, outside the countries, expats from both nations seem to get along well.

“Most Eritreans were attracted to our church because we were non-denominational,” says its former pastor, Sewssew Berhane. “We treated them very well. We noticed they were a faithful, God-loving people.”

Berhane opened his doors to Asefaw. “He was loved by people in Eritrea. He had a lot of compassion, he was very humble. He had a lot of integrity.”

So much so that when Berhane left Sudan for the United States (he lives in Seattle now), he passed over more established pastors and selected Asefaw to take over his church. Not long thereafter, Tsehaynesh joined him. She and Asefaw’s sister had tried to find him at Ghela’elo, but he had already been transported to the front line. There was a period when she didn’t know where he was or what had happened to him. There were rumors he was in Australia or Canada; a passing missionary who had befriended Asefaw in Sudan found her in Keren, and told her where he was.

“I decided when he went to Sudan,” she says now, “I would follow him.”

"Oh my God," Asefaw says with a characteristically youthful laugh. "I appreciate that."

As a minister, Asefaw was not allowed to live with Tsehaynesh until the couple was married; so she lived with a friend of his for four months until they were married in February 2002.

Within months, though, they knew that they had to leave. Sudan was not safe. Police could come without warning and take their money, or worse. Asefaw had been thinking about going back home, but conditions in Eritrea were no better. Tsehaynesh's sister and her aunt lived in Italy — they had actually invited her to come live in Italy before she moved to Sudan to join Asefaw.

"I was scared first, but she decided. We have to do it."

"I pushed it on him," she says with a laugh.

They decided on Italy, where they could seek asylum.

Standing between the couple and Europe was the Sahara Desert.

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They left that July, five months after getting married. Tsehaynesh was already pregnant. They joined a group of other travelers who were fleeing Sudan through Egypt and into Libya. From there, they'd have to make their way through Libya to the coast, then secure transit to Italy.

They traveled in a convoy of three trucks. Ordinarily, the passage would take about six days. But the trucks were old and broke down a lot. What's more, the convoy took a circuitous route toward Libya, at one point passing through Egypt.

Each truck was crammed with a few dozen people riding in the back, holding onto gas tanks. Tsehaynesh rode up front.

After 14 days, two of the trucks broke down for good. The drivers said they had to take the third truck by themselves to Libya to send for help. Asefaw pleaded with them to take his wife with them.

"I tried to tell him, if I die here, OK. Take my wife. She's pregnant." The drivers refused. They left in the one working truck, leaving the travelers stranded, quite literally, in the middle of the desert. The caravan was stalled in sight of a distant peak called the Mountain of Death.

"That was the time our hope breaks," he says.

Asefaw's account of those days in the desert is surreal. One person had already died on the trip before the trucks broke down. It was a painful and discouraging moment for everyone — and one ridden with guilt, too, as they were unable to perform a proper funeral service. Asefaw doesn't remember how they dealt with the body.

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One of the travelers screamed and yelled and convulsed, leading them to believe she was possessed by a demon. Asefaw remembers that a dark voice inside her, which he believes was demonic, told them all, "This is my place. I reign in this place." He prayed for her, and he says he cast the demon out. Afterwards,

the woman seemed to return to normal, asking where she was.

One night a sandstorm nearly buried them. Tsehaynesh took the sight of a bird near her head as a sign from God they were going to live. But they didn't know. They waited several days. They prayed. They didn't talk much. No one did. They tried to conserve their energy under the withering Saharan sun.

They strung clothes over the truck trailers for shade. The silence was punctuated mostly by crying. Asefaw would overhear grim, practical conversations about what to do if someone died. If I die, Asefaw recalls hearing, take the money and give it to ...

Mostly it was quiet. It was cold at night, and they slept uneasily. During the long, hot days, they stayed huddled in the shade.

The food and water were running out. And so, incredibly, Asefaw was faced with one of those moments when propriety, dignity and the etiquette governing human interaction are stripped away and all that remains is the mandate to live.

The challenge was staying hydrated. He gave the rest of their water to his wife, and he drank both her urine and his. Another man on the convoy had also consumed his own urine to try to stay hydrated.

Tsehaynesh stayed strong. Asefaw was worried he was going to die and lose his wife in the desert. This possibility consumed his thoughts. But his wife was encouraging. "No matter, God is going to help us," she told him. "We're not going to die here."

She was right. Two days later, their smugglers came back with new trucks. Asefaw broke down in tears and gathered all the people and sang a song in the middle of the desert. It was 20 more hours to Libya; they pushed on to Koufra, a town in south-central Libya, well inside the border.

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When they reached the city, they were taken to an abandoned building with a large courtyard. They were there only a few days before police arrested the lot of them. The survivors of the trip were taken to a detention center in Koufra. The men were placed in one part of the compound, the women in the other.

Life in a Libyan prison came with the same uncertainty as in Ghela'elo. Sometimes guards gave them hope that they would be let go. Sometimes the guards told them they would be deported back to Eritrea. Sometimes they said nothing. There were no charges or judges or attorneys or timetables. There was no due process. There was nothing but the fact that they didn't know when, or if, they were getting out.

And yet even here there was a measure of hope. As Tsehaynesh neared the end of her pregnancy, guards placed her in her own room. They allowed Asefaw to leave the prison to find food or supplies for her. He quickly turned to the church community of other sub-Saharan Africans in town for help. Asefaw found help from a few new friends, a Nigerian man and a Sudanese woman. They helped them find food. When Tsehaynesh finally went into labor, she was transported to a hospital; the woman, a Muslim, helped her deliver her baby. Tsehaynesh gave birth to daughter Gloria, and they were released. Still, where do you go in a strange border town where you're illegal, have virtually no money, don't speak the language and are trying to care for your newborn daughter?

Another friend had an extra room. "If you have some money, that's good," he told Asefaw. "If you don't

have some money, that's OK." Asefaw paid him 30 dinar a month.

They moved into one room, with just a mattress. From there, they scraped money together until he could transport the family across Libya to the capital. They stayed in Tripoli for three months; Asefaw ministered to provide an income. They spent another three months in the port city of Zuwara. In 2003, the couple made their final illegal journey, crossing the Mediterranean in a "big old boat."

They landed in Lampedusa, a flyspeck island in the Mediterranean that was a common port of entry into Italy for those seeking asylum.

They were granted asylum by the Italian government five months after applying. With a little money from the government, the couple moved to Rome to stay with her aunt and sister. They lived in the Eternal City for a year before moving onto Milan, where Asefaw found work — not surprisingly — at an Eritrean church.

The time in Italy passed in a blur. His second daughter, Euodia, was born. Milan, that gray city, was fine enough — he recalls baptizing the wife of an Eritrean bank manager — but he had a sense that he could live there for 20 years and never really become Italian. At the same time, he knew he would never go to another country illegally again. I can survive in Italy, he told himself, even though it's not my destiny.

So he waited. And then the phone rang. It was an Eritrean woman from, of all places, Las Vegas. Her name was Lem Lem. She worked with the inner-city Trinity Life Center, off Sahara Avenue. A few years earlier she had heard about Asefaw from his days in Sudan, and she knew that Trinity's director, Pastor Randy Greer, was looking for an Eritrean pastor to minister to a growing Eritrean community in Las Vegas. She contacted an Eritrean pastor in Dallas to see whether he knew anyone; by chance, an Eritrean woman from Milan had recently moved to Dallas and mentioned Asefaw.

Asefaw says the phone call was a divine connection. He prayed over the prospect of coming to the United States, and eventually he and his wife and two kids arrived in Las Vegas in the summer of 2006.

Since then, he has been living the American dream. He and Tseyhaynesh have had two more children, Mattania and Sophania, the latter born at the end of last year. He pastors at the City Impact Center, Trinity's burgeoning campus of social service providers. He works as a janitor at the church.

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Still, they dream of Eritrea. There are still between 4,000 and 5,000 Christians in prison there. The government is increasingly cracking down on religion. Even Orthodox Christians are being persecuted by the government. Earlier this year, Ethiopian forces attacked military targets inside Eritrea, a move that has provoked very little international reaction, perhaps due to Eritrea's own repressive regime.

At the same time, in Libya, sub-Saharan Africans generally — the same kinds of folks who helped Asefaw navigate the streets of Koufra with a pregnant wife in prison — are being persecuted as Gaddafi sympathizers. In other words, had Asefaw made the same journey now, it's doubtful things would have turned out as they did.

The world Asefaw has traveled through is one filled with fear and violence and corruption. In the face of it, his story seems only an exception, not the rule, to the fates of many.

But Asefaw's life — what he calls his testimony — reflects the twin optimism of American immigrants and people of faith. His kids switch merrily from Tigrinya to English, from talk of book reports on the history of Eritrea to the naming of the capitals of the 50 states. Asefaw has found a nice home and has earned the respect of the tightly knit Eritrean community. He even has a spiffy iPhone.

He wears his faith proudly but lightly; it appears not in what he says but in the infectious smile, the easy laughter. For a man who's been through a version of hell, Asefaw seems remarkably poised.

"Sometimes in life you become discouraged, but whenever I get discouraged, I go back to that situation. What God did in my life. His mercy. His protection. When I think of that I get encouraged."

And he passes it on. This is what he tells his congregation: "I am a live example for you."