

A MODEL OF



Fanuel Amede serves as a deacon at an Ethiopian Orthodox Church

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photographed by
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Scan to listen to Fanuel
Amede's (10) story

At 3 a.m., Fanuel Amede (10) rises. He dons a netela, a white garment traditionally worn by Ethiopian Orthodox men, and says a prayer, thanking God for his role in his life. At 4:30 a.m., he and his family drive to the Debre Nazreth St Mary and St Gabriel Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church and Amede takes his place at the front, assuming his responsibilities as one of the church's deacons. Amede assists the priest in leading service, a six-and-a-half-hour long function in which participants stand to symbolize the struggles that God himself went through.

Amede became a deacon at the age of 10, assuming responsibilities of aiding the priest during service and helping around the church should needs arise. This decision was made after years of learning about the Orthodox faith and values through attendance at church every weekend.

"It was challenging at some points because I had to understand that it's not like a normal job, it's higher than that," Amede said. "Everything you do is worshiping God, and it's not a joke, not something you just do for fun."

Amede especially fostered his knowledge by learning about the religious significance of different holidays.

"As a kid, when the holidays came, it was more like, 'Okay there's people coming from out of state to celebrate this holiday with us,'" Amede said. "But, since I became a deacon, I partake in more stuff and I see how these other deacons were taught, and that helps me get motivated to learn more."

One of Amede's older cousins inspired him to become a deacon. Amede said he viewed his cousin as a brother because of the amount of time that they've spent together.

"Before I became a deacon, I would see him and I would think, 'Okay, I want to be that,'" Amede said.

Amede's high level of involvement comes from an admiration for his uncle, a priest. From a young age, his uncle held lessons for Amede and his cousins within his home, teaching them the official Ethiopian language, Amharic, as well as other biblical stories and faith-based concepts.

"I see him as an uncle and as a father, but I [also] see him as a church father [because of] the respect I have for him and how much he teaches me," Amede said. "Seeing everything he does motivates me."

Wongail Belete (11) is Amede's first cousin. Her father, the priest, taught the two of them together, strengthening each of their connections to the Orthodox religion and to each other. Because of the time they've spent together, Belete sees Amede as a brother rather than a cousin.

"I call his mom 'Mommy' because she's raised me like her daughter," Belete said.

Amede and Belete both sing for the church's choir, a co-educational group that meets every Sunday to practice. They perform at church functions, teaching the community aspects of biblical history. This knowledge has also helped Amede further a love for his faith and religion.

“There’s a certain song that talks about this character in the Bible where she asked God to open her heart and [listened] to the word of God,” Amede said. “When we sing that, it resonates with me.”

Belete said that she’s found community due to the choir.

“I feel like I am able to express myself way more, especially while singing, and it’s a way I communicate with what I believe in my faith,” Belete said. “It’s also really fun. I have a sisterhood with it and I make a lot of friends.”

As a deacon, Amede spends over 10 hours at church each week, a number that is often higher around the holidays. This sometimes makes it difficult for Amede to balance his responsibilities with that of a typical teenager’s.

“Once you get older, especially in high school, there’s a lot of pressure,” Amede said. “I’m always trying to find time to manage my life with God and everything. It’s not hard, but I would say it gets harder the older you get.”

While the responsibilities may sometimes be a lot to manage, Amede doesn’t complain, as his high level of church involvement is by choice. He takes on the responsibilities due to an internal desire to feel connected to God.

“At the end of day, I wouldn’t make that an excuse for myself,” Amede said. “I feel like there’s always time for God and, so, you can always find something to do.”

Amede has learned to navigate this balance largely due to his sister, with whom he shares a 7 year age gap. As the leader of her own religious choir, Amede’s sister sends him and his church weekly songs to practice and perform.

“She’s kind of like a role model for us,” Amede said. “She motivates me to push myself in the church, because I see her doing good things.”

One of the ways in which Amede resolves to further his commitment to God is by adhering to a fast during the holidays. However, Ethiopian fasts don’t only discourage food — they also warn against behaviors deemed to be sinful.

“I try to be less on social media when I’m fasting, especially during [the] Christmas fast and [the] Easter fast, because I’m like, ‘Okay, there’s better things for me to do. Instead of scrolling, I could be praying or doing something productive,’” Amede said. “I [also] try to cleanse my mouth by saying less cuss words and saying less things that I shouldn’t be saying.”

Beyond himself, Amede encourages Adam Esayas (12) and his other peers to adhere to periods of fasting.

“I get tempted to eat meat or dairy, but he gives me encouragement,” Esayas said. “One of the funny things he would say is, ‘If you fall on the sidewalk, you’re not just gonna stay there. You’re gonna get back up again.’ So it’s like, if you fail [the fast], you still can come back to it.”

Amede strives to serve as this role model to his peers because of the responsibility he assumes, both as a young deacon and as member of the Ethiopian Orthodox church.

“Our church fathers would always tell us, ‘What you do outside of church and stuff reflects onto our church as

a whole. You being kind to others, you showing them the right path, helps our church and that puts in a good word,’” Amede said.

This type of outreach has created a highly connected Ethiopian community at Ladue High School. Esayas found that this bond helps when following traditional values.

“I feel like if I went to a different school that didn’t have Ethiopians, I would break the fast, like, every day,” Esayas said. “Or, I would do this or that, because I don’t have anyone watching over me, which is helpful here, because I use them as a guide to not break anything.”

Amede said that going to school with Belete has strengthened their own bond, both as cousins and friends.

“The connection builds trust,” Belete said. “I trust him and he trusts me whenever it comes to advice and helping each other out with things. Even when it comes to [academic] clubs, we tell each other, ‘Oh my God, we should join this club together.’”

Due to Belete’s encouragement and personal involvement, Amede joined UNICEF, a club that raises money to provide resources for disadvantaged children throughout the world. Amede believes that the club is important to him because it follows his church’s value of helping others.

“Something that’s always been said in our religion and in our faith is ‘Give back to the people,’” Amede said. “This is my time to give back to people in need.”

One of the ways that Amede gives back is by teaching his peers to love God just as much as he does. At church, Amede teaches aspiring deacons stories and values of God.

“I feel like we learn what’s right and wrong together,” Amede said. “[With] me being older, I feel like I can be a role model for them and show them what they need to do.”

Among the group of aspiring deacons is the younger brother of Amede’s older cousin. This cousin was the one who inspired Amede to become a deacon in the first place.

“Seeing him study, it’s like a mini-me,” Amede said. “I used to be in his shoes, learning stuff about God and having to decide what I needed to do in church.”

Captions: Fanuel Amede (10) serves as a deacon at the Debre Nazreth St Mary and St Gabriel Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, an institution that he’s attended with his family since he was a child. Many of the church’s younger participants are also enrolled at Ladue High School with Amede. “We’re still friends, we’re still brothers and sisters, but it’s also [that] we revolve God around most of our conversations,” Amede said. (on pages 14-17)

The church features various religious symbols, especially in detailing on the walls and traditional garments worn by Ethiopian Orthodox priests. Wongail Belete’s (11) father is one of two priests in St. Louis church, and his involvement has helped Belete strengthen her own connection with God. “I’m much more educated on the topic of church, and that makes a lot easier for me to talk about it and not be afraid to do so,” Belete said. (on page 17) □



"I'll pray in the morning, at night and before every meal, and just thank God whenever I can."

Fanuel Amede (10)