Dateline: Namibia

Namibia Conference Heralds New Beginning For Lutheran Advocacy

The inter-Lutheran National Conference on Namibia, held at Gustavus Adolphus College from March 20-22, was the largest and most successful gathering on Namibia ever held in the United States. During those three days, over 500 concerned North Americans and nearly 100 Namibian students and church persons met to hear a distinguished group of speakers that included Bishop Kleopas Dumeni, leader of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Namibia, and Andimba Toivo ja Toivo, Secretary General of the Namibian liberation movement SWAPO. They were joined by bishops James Crumley, David Preus and Will Herzfeld, of the LCA, ALC and AELC respectively, in an unprecedented affirmation of the bonds of fellowship and solidarity between Lutherans in the United States and the oppressed and suffering Namibian people.

For the American participants, the conference provided a rare opportunity to learn about Namibia from Namibians themselves. Many of the conference's 23 different seminars were conducted by Namibians, covering topics that ranged from church-supported adult literacy programs inside the territory to the history of Namibia's struggle for independence. Other seminars, led by North American and European researchers, scholars, church leaders and activists, focused on subjects that included advocacy strategies, U.S. government policy toward southern Africa, and South African propaganda and disinformation.

The Minnesota conference also served to introduce many Lutherans to SWAPO, the political movement whose soldiers have fought South Africa's colonial army for over twenty years. The head of the SWAPO delegation, Andimba Toivo, is a robust and powerful man whose good humor and keen mind belie his 18 years in South African political prisons. He proved to be an eloquent and forthright representative of the political aspirations of his people, and a strong complement to the quiet faith and uncompromising witness of the other special guest, Bishop Kleopas Dumeni.

In an address to the full conference on Saturday night, the diminutive, silver-haired Christian leader made an impassioned appeal for greater advocacy efforts and humanitarian aid for his people and delivered an uncharacteristically blunt attack on the U.S. government's policy of linking Namibia's independence to the withdrawal of foreign soldiers from the neighboring country of Angola. Bishop Dumeni also reiterated the Namibian churches' call for full Western economic sanctions against Pretoria.

The conference was given added significance by the presence of the bishops of the three merging American churches. Their active participation in the conference bodes well for future solidarity endeavors by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

Also in attendance at the conference was the Rev. Tshenuweni Simon Farisani, the Black South African Lutheran pastor recently released from detention in his country. Dean Farisani thanked Lutherans in the United States for their efforts to secure his release, and told the gathering that a common struggle for justice binds Black South Africans to their Namibian brothers and sisters.

But in the view of the conference organizers, it was the strong grassroots participation by concerned Lutherans from across the country that made the meeting a success. Persons long active in local education, advocacy and fund-raising for Namibia, including Solveig Kjeseth of National Namibia Concerns, hope the conference will unlock the talents and commitment of Lutherans at every level of the new church. Through the active involvement of Lutherans in their congregations, synods, and regional centers for mission, Ms. Kjeseth hopes to make the independence of Namibia a key priority within the ELCA. In her view, the success of the National Namibia Conference, coming on the eve of a new era of Lutheran ministry in the United States, also signals the beginning of a new era in Lutheran advocacy for justice in Namibia.
To Be Our Own Masters

Excerpts from an address by Andimba Toivo ja Toivo, Secretary General of the South West Africa People's Organization (SWAPO) to the National Namibia Conference, March 20, 1987.

Thank you. I bring you warm and fraternal greetings from SWAPO's leadership and from the entire oppressed but struggling Namibian people. We are delighted to know that American Lutheran brothers and sisters have responded positively to the request of their fellow Namibian Lutherans to assist them in this crucial time in our struggle for independence and self-determination, which are the fundamental natural rights of all human beings. Our movement is composed of all the various elements of our society striving for liberty and freedom—Christian and non-believer alike. This will continue to exist after we have achieved our independence. As we are in the process of building a nation, we expect to have all kinds of beliefs in an independent Namibia, just as all other nations in the world do today.

Beginning of SWAPO

In 1957 I worked in Cape Town [South Africa] and I started organizing the Namibians who were working with me. Our aim was mainly to petition the United Nations to pressurize South Africa to do away with the contract labor system under which our people, particularly from the north, worked. It was an inhuman system and many Namibians were killed by their employers just like animals. We also demanded that the United Nations place South West Africa under the Trusteeship Council of the United Nations [instead of South Africa]. We formed what we called the Ovamboland People's Congress under which we had to petition.

At first we were under the impression that the Ovambos who used to work under contract were the only oppressed people in Namibia. Then the same year we came to realize that all the indigenous people were oppressed and there was a need for a national liberation organization. This political awareness led to the formation of the South West Africa People's Organization, SWAPO, on the 9th of April, 1960.

When SWAPO was formed we followed the philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi, which was nonviolence. And we hoped that the Western world would come to our assistance. To our dismay, the Western world turned its deaf ears on us. Also in 1960, the only two African countries that were members of the former League of Nations, Ethiopia and Liberia, took up the case of South West Africa at the International Court of Justice with a view that the court would give a decision to nullify South Africa's mandatory power [to rule the territory. In 1919 the League of Nations gave South Africa a legal mandate to administer South West Africa, the colonial name for Namibia, as a "sacred trust" of civilization].

The case dragged on until 1966. The decision was that Ethiopia and Liberia had no power to take South Africa to the International Court of Justice. This decision angered the Namibian people because everyone expected that the decision would be in favor of the indigenous people of South West Africa.

Why Armed Force?

We of SWAPO realized that there was no other alternative than to resort to an armed struggle. And we therefore embarked on armed struggle on the 26th of August, 1966. After that, a large number of our people were arrested and taken to Pretoria for trial—including myself. We were severely tortured, kept in solitary confinement for months. I was sentenced to 20 years and served 16 of these on Robben Island. In all, I spent 18 years of my life in South African jails. I was released on the first of March, 1984.

Now, there are some people we've met who ask us, "Why did you have to resort to an armed struggle?" And to those who ask such questions I want to answer that we have tried all peaceful means to achieve the independence of our country without bloodshed. We could no longer fold our arms while our people were murdered by the racist regime in South Africa. And that's why we have decided to take up arms and to fight. Some other countries in the world today had also to resort to an armed struggle to liberate themselves from their former colonial masters—including the United States.

Role of the Church

We appreciate the role played by our clergymen as far as the liberation struggle is concerned. They are oppressed and discriminated against as are all other Namibians. Therefore they could not be fence-sitters but had to involve themselves in the struggle. We are grateful for the role played by the Namibian churches, namely the Catholics, the Lutherans, the Anglicans, and the African Methodist Episcopal Church. These are the churches of the people. These are patriotic Namibians who are prepared to suffer and sacrifice with their fellow compatriots.

The Namibian people want their independence now—without further delay. At present, South African occupying forces number more than 100,000, plus fascist mercenaries and murder squads who are responsible for death and destruction in our country, operating under the cover of the dusk-to-dawn curfew, so-called security zones, and a total news and information blackout.

We in SWAPO together with all our fellow self-respecting and patriotic Namibians, are demanding genuine independence and to be our own masters in the land of our birth. We shall not leave a stone unturned to bring an end to the illegal occupation of our country by the apartheid minority regime of South Africa.

We want your support, dear American brothers and sisters.
A People in Chains — Namibians Under Apartheid

Excerpts from an address by Bishop Kleopas Dumeni, leader of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Namibia, to the National Namibia Conference, March 21, 1987.

I stand before you a bishop in chains—the chains of racism and oppression.

We have been in chains for more than 100 years. First the Germans came, killed our people and took away much of our land. Then, during World War I, the South Africans came and took away the rest. We were made a trust territory. We were to be protected as “a sacred trust of civilization.” But the administrator (of the trust) was the Union of South Africa, and they took away our mineral wealth and appropriated our people. Instead of a “sacred trust,” we became the forced laborers to the system they call apartheid.

Life Under Apartheid

Let me tell you what it means to be ruled by Pretoria. It means we are divided up according to what they call tribes and ethnic groups. They do not divide themselves up into Afrikaner, English, or other white tribes. But we are divided, with 94 percent of Namibia’s people broken up into “homeland” governments, with “Bantu” (inferior) education, Bantu health facilities, separate development.

We are slaves, they are the baas (masters). We do the work but the riches go into different pockets. The ratio of white to Black wages is 18 to 1. The government spends the equivalent of $700 per year on the education of each white child, and $100 on each Black child. The South Africans have taken 77 percent of the good land for the white farmers, while half of the population is confined to 5 percent of the viable farm land in the north. But this is not enough suffering for us.

To keep us in this prison, the South Africans use their army, their secret police. They kill, rape, torture, and imprison my people without trial. They call us communist terrorists. They kill the brave young people who are fighting for our freedom. They remain by force, by brutality, through their violence to my people.

SWAPO and America

Who are the freedom fighters? The members of SWAPO are the children of our mothers, our sisters and brothers. They are full members of our churches—baptized Christians . . . It is well known that SWAPO receives aid from the Eastern countries. It should also be known that SWAPO receives aid from many Western countries. SWAPO is the people of Namibia. Most of them are Christians. SWAPO has churches in their refugee camps . . . Many SWAPO freedom fighters have been baptized and confirmed in the military camps. Does this sound like communism to you?

We must, unfortunately, talk about the United States’ role in our continued occupation. (In 1978) the United States drew up a plan (for Namibian independence) now know as United Nations Security Council Resolution 435. SWAPO agreed to this plan—even South Africa agreed, but refused to implement it . . . In 1981 the Reagan administration told South Africa it did not have to implement the plan until Cuban troops left Angola—600 miles away. We as churches rejected this linkage of our independence with the internal affairs of a sovereign country.

Meanwhile, South African troops were occupying the southern part of Angola and supplying weapons and air cover to UNITA, the guerrilla movement in Angola. Last year, your government decided to assist UNITA directly. It should be clear to you that your government does not want us to have our independence. It has placed an irrelevant precondition in the way of Resolution 435, then it has provided arms to UNITA, which makes it impossible for even the irrelevant precondition to be fulfilled. This is clear to the Namibian people. The United States is supporting South African foreign policy.

Appeal for Solidarity

I am not a politician. I stand before you as a leader of the largest church in Namibia, the Lutheran church. But I come with the full support of the Anglican, Roman Catholic, and African Methodist Episcopal churches. We are more than 70 percent of Namibia’s people—active Christians who believe that human rights, freedom from unjust laws and police, and speaking out for the poor and oppressed is an integral part of God’s plan for humankind. When government destroys justice the church speaks out and will always speak out. If we do not, then we are unfaithful.

The churches in Namibia are united together in a call for peace, a just peace as written and approved by the United Nations in Security Council Resolution 435. We call upon you to shout to Washington, to your Senators, to your Congressmen, “Stop this aid to South Africa and UNITA! Remove this irrelevant linkage of Cubans in Angola! Stop vetoing the call for strong sanctions against South Africa!”

The work of peace, the work of justice, is honorable work. It is work favored by God our Creator. May your country return to its noble ideals by supporting our just independence. Pray with us, work with us. May God grant us peace. Thank you.
It wasn't all work at the conference. Here Namibian students perform at Saturday night's cultural event.

Resources on Namibia

The American Committee on Africa/Africa Fund
198 Broadway, Suite 401
New York, NY 10038
(212) 962-1210

The American Friends Service Committee
Southern Africa Education Program
1501 Cherry St.
Philadelphia, PA 19102
(215) 241-7169

Amnesty International
322 Eighth Avenue
New York, NY 10001
(212) 807-8400

California Newsreel (Films)
Southern Africa Resource Center
630 Natoma St.
San Francisco, CA 94103
(415) 621-6196

Dateline: Namibia
The Lutheran Church in America
DMNA/Interpretation
231 Madison Avenue
New York, NY 10016
(212) 696-6841

Episcopal Churchpeople for a Free Southern Africa
339 Lafayette St.
New York, NY 10012
(212) 477-0066

International Defense and Aid Fund for Southern Africa
P.O. Box 17
Cambridge, MA 02138
(617) 491-8343

Lutheran Human Relations Association of America
2703 N. Sherman Blvd.
Milwaukee, WI 53210
(414) 871-7300

Lutheran World Ministries
360 Park Avenue South
New York, NY 10010
(212) 532-6350

Namibia Concerns
Wartburg Seminary
333 Wartburg Place
Dubuque, IA 52001
(319) 589-0326

Namibia Information Service
P.O. Box 43234
Washington, D.C. 20010
(202) 462-8197

National Namibia Concerns
860 Emerson
Denver, CO 80218
(303) 830-2774

The South West Africa People's Organization (SWAPO)
801 Second Avenue, Suite 1401
New York, NY 10017
(212) 557-2450

TransAfrica/TransAfrica Forum
545 Eighth St. S.E.
Washington, D.C. 20003
(202) 547-2550

The United Nations Council for Namibia
1 UN Plaza
New York, NY 10017
(212) 754-5400

The United Nations Center Against Apartheid
1 UN Plaza
New York, NY 10017
(212) 754-6803

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