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The Transformation of the Lutheran Church in Namibia

Katherine Caufield Arnold
College of William and Mary

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THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE LUTHERAN CHURCH IN NAMIBIA: 
HOW THE CHURCH EVOLVED INTO A ‘VOICE FOR THE VOICELESS’

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the 
Requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts with Honors in 
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by

Katherine Caufield Arnold

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Robert Trent Vinson, Director
Ismail Abdalla
Brad Weiss

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Introduction

Although we kept the fire alive, I well remember somebody telling me once, “We have been waiting for the coming of our Lord. But He is not coming. So we will wait forever for the liberation of Namibia.” I told him, “For sure, the Lord will come, and Namibia will be free.”

-Pastor Zephania Kameeta, 1989

On June 30, 1971, risking persecution and death, the African leaders of the two largest Lutheran churches in Namibia\(^1\) issued a scathing “Open Letter” to the Prime Minister of South Africa, condemning both South Africa’s illegal occupation of Namibia and its implementation of a vicious apartheid system. It was the first time a church in Namibia had come out publicly against the South African government, and after the publication of the “Open Letter,” Anglican and Roman Catholic churches in Namibia reacted with solidarity. Given the Lutheran doctrine of peace, unity, and justice, the public denunciation of apartheid should not have come as a surprise. Unfortunately, Lutheran churches in Namibia had a long history of remaining silent despite serious threats to their congregants’ wellbeing. South Africa had occupied Namibia since 1915, and the previous German colonizers had perpetuated similarly brutal and racist policies. Though large Lutheran Missions preceded both German and South African rule, the church had never commented on the obvious problems of racism and violence from these colonizing powers. In fact, the Lutheran church and its missionaries had, for many years,

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\(^1\) Namibia derives its name from the Namib Desert, which encompasses much of the country; Namib is a Nama-Damara word meaning ‘enclosure’ or ‘shield.’ In 1968, the United Nations officially recognized the territory as ‘The Republic of Namibia,’ a name which the South African government refused to acknowledge until 1990. Prior to 1968, Namibia was officially known as ‘South West Africa;’ prior to 1915, it was known as ‘German South West Africa.’ For purposes of continuity and clarity, it will be uniformly referred to as ‘Namibia.’ SWAPO Department of Information and Publicity, *To be born a nation: the liberation struggle for Namibia* (London: SWAPO Department of Information and Publicity, 1981) 1.
reinforced racial hierarchies through their paternalistic attitudes and unequal employment practices.

The Open Letter of 1971, signed by the Evangelical Lutheran Ovambo-Kavango Church’s (ELCIN) Bishop Auala and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Namibia’s (ELCRN) Moderator Gowaseb, signified a major shift in the Namibian Lutheran Church’s attitude regarding apartheid and colonialism. No longer would African Lutheran congregations remain silent on these issues of gross injustice; the Open Letter began a chain reaction within Namibian churches and the international ecumenical community protesting apartheid and South African rule in Namibia.

The Lutheran Church’s sharp reversal in policy occurred due to a combination of several factors. First, the creation of independent African churches during the 1950s gave African Lutheran leaders the ability to influence church policy, and gave them a voice in the international community. Second, African leaders developed a liberation theology to replace the traditional Lutheran ‘two kingdoms’ doctrine, which forbade mixing politics with religion. Third, the international political situation catalyzed ELCRN and ELCIN’s reaction: the Open Letter specifically referenced the recent International Court of Justice ruling, which had officially declared South Africa’s continued occupation of Namibia illegal.²

Very little has been written about the church in Namibia, a fact that is surprising given that over 92% of Namibians declare themselves Christian and several historians

term Namibia “the most Christian of African countries.”³ The shallow pool of literature that does exist contains many lamentations on the lack of scholarly works available. As the Namibian historian Carl-J Hellberg testified in 1997, “the literature on Namibia is rather limited.”⁴ Meredith McKittrick similarly complained in 2002 that Namibian studies remained “a small and young field.”⁵ Literature pertaining specifically to religion in Namibia is even more inadequate. Shekutaamba Nambala declared his 1987 book, *History of the Church in Namibia*, “the first-ever history” of Namibian Christianity,⁶ and Peter Katjavivi wrote in *Church and Liberation in Namibia*: “there has been scant research on church and liberation in Namibia. Nor is there any up-to-date literature on the church in Namibia.”⁷ The huge gap in historical literature on Namibia needs to be closed quickly; the country has played an important role in both international politics and religion. As Africa’s last colony, Namibia’s independence movement was monitored closely within the United Nations and various international bodies, and its independence struggle garnered unprecedented international support from ecumenical bodies around the world.⁸ Its role in modern religion is one of great significance: Namibia has one of the

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⁸ Interview with ELCIN Namibian pastor.
highest percentages of practicing Christians in the world, and with more than 50% of its population practicing the Lutheran faith, Namibia is the most Lutheran country in Africa.\(^9\)

Namibia’s written historiography didn’t begin to develop until after the arrival of Christian missionaries during the late 19\(^{th}\) and early 20\(^{th}\) centuries, but these early historical accounts were tainted by racist and paternalistic attitudes. The most prolific of these amateur historians was Dr. Heinrich Vedder, a missionary with the Lutheran Rhenish Mission and an outspoken proponent of apartheid during the mid-1900s. Vedder was an enthusiastic researcher and writer of Namibian history, but his work clearly exhibited a pro-colonial attitude and included statements such as: “every European in an uncivilized country is a pioneer of civilization…. and is, moreover, the representative of a race, the superiority of which is undoubted.”\(^{10}\) Despite his patently offensive attitude and remarks, Vedder’s works remain extremely important to the field of Namibian history due to a lack of other written sources. Additionally, Vedder conducted hundreds of interviews and fastidiously recorded and examined the various power struggles and events that took place in Namibia. Dairies of missionaries such as Carl Hugo Hahn corroborate many of Vedder’s accounts and add to a shallow pool of written primary sources. Unfortunately, these diaries also mirror Vedder’s racist language and attitude. The modern historian Brigitte Lau has attempted to re-examine Vedder’s version of history and correct its many flaws through academic lectures and through her 1987 book,

\(^9\) Katjavivi, *Church and Liberation in Namibia*, xiv-xv.

Southern and Central Namibia in Jonker Afrikaner’s Time.\textsuperscript{11} She deserves credit for editing and publishing many of Heinrich Vedder and Carl Hugo Hahn’s writings.

Recently, several notable Namibian historians have begun to examine the significance of religion. Shekutaamba V. Nambala, a graduate of the Lutheran Theological College at Mapumulo, South Africa, collected and recorded data about each of Namibia’s Christian denominations and cataloged every split, break-off, and transformation. His works, History of the Church in Namibia and History of the Church in Namibia, 1805-1990: An Introduction (co-written with G.L. Buys), aim to record “most of the major dates, people, places and events” regarding the Church in Namibia.\textsuperscript{12}

Dr. Peter Katjavivi, the former South West Africa People’s Organization (SWAPO) Secretary for Legal and Economic Affairs, wrote extensively on colonization and resistance in Namibia. Katjavivi argued in History of Resistance in Namibia that SWAPO evolved from a growing sense of self-determination in Namibia, and the author touched briefly upon the involvement of church activism and leadership in SWAPO.\textsuperscript{13} In Katjavivi’s second book, Church and Liberation in Namibia, he expounded upon this idea and argued that although European Christian missionaries were used to reinforce colonial control and ideology in Namibia during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the churches gradually became important tools for liberation.\textsuperscript{14}

\textsuperscript{11} Brigitte Lau, Southern and Central Namibia in Jonker Afrikaner’s Time (Windhoek: Windhoek Archives Publication Series No. 8, 1987).


Katjavivi, the churches’ support became a major component in SWAPO and the Namibian independence movement.

Carl-J Hellberg made one of the greatest contributions to Namibian church history with his work, *Mission, colonialism, and liberation: the Lutheran Church in Namibia 1840-1966.* In it, Hellberg aimed to fill the void in historical literature on Namibia’s churches and also to give a background to his earlier work, *A Voice of the Voiceless: the involvement of the Lutheran World Federation in southern Africa 1947-1977.* His intent was to detail the early establishment of Lutheran missions in Namibia and their development into independent African churches. Hellberg, a Swede, served as a director in the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) and traveled to Namibia numerous times between 1966-1994. During this time, Hellberg became intensely interested in the relationship between the Lutheran churches and the liberation struggle. In *Mission, colonialism, and liberation,* Hellberg argued that the Finnish Lutheran Mission developed a stronger congregation in Namibia than did their German counterparts, the Rhenish Mission. The author attributes the Finnish Mission’s success to an emphasis on the education of black Church leaders and a willingness to grant Africans real responsibilities. Hellberg contended in his book that the divided political allegiances within the Rhenish Mission during World War I and World War II weakened their missionaries’ positions among African congregants. In contrast, the Finnish Mission remained largely aloof from politics and instead focused on the spiritual aspect of their ministry. Through theological education and African involvement, the Finnish

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missionaries built trust and slowly worked towards the establishment of an independent Church.

Hellberg’s narrative combined political and religious history and exhibited a distinctly anti-colonial bias. The author criticized the writings of ‘pro-colonization’ missionaries and chafed against the notion that ‘history always begins with the European colonizers.’ However, Hellberg made excellent use of sources from every perspective. His thorough list of references included the writings of German and Finnish missionaries, South African government documents, Namibian archival material, German-language sources, and LWF materials. Hellberg’s extremely comprehensive book provided a much-needed corrective to traditional missionary accounts of Namibian history. Unlike pro-colonial historians such as Dr. Heinrich Vedder, Hellberg gave the Africans agency: he refused to portray them as passive bystanders but rather gave them credit for the changes within the Lutheran Missions.

Each of these outstanding authors mentioned the Lutheran churches’ role within the Namibian independence movement, but none of them examined the reasons behind the dramatic reversal in church policy. Why was it that the churches, in a matter of years, went from being a bastion of support for the colonial government to a symbol of popular resistance? The sudden change took government officials completely by surprise; they had long counted on the Lutheran churches for support and compliance. When, in 1971, the International Court of Justice delivered a ruling declaring South Africa’s occupation of Namibia illegal, South African authorities assumed the Lutheran Churches would support the government. Officials handed out a questionnaire to Lutheran congregants, asking them to share their opinions on the South African government. Expecting a
typically supportive response, South African officials were shocked when church members overwhelmingly responded with opposition to the apartheid government.\textsuperscript{17}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{17} Katjivivi, \textit{A History of Resistance}, 66.}
Chapter 1

Background: The Establishment of Lutheran Missions in Namibia: 1842-1915

They converted us to Christianity but did not want to give us any education or to help us to advance. They only preached to us. The Herero did not learn anything from them except the word ‘God’.

-Herero Chief Frederick Maharero, 1947

The rise of Christianity in Namibia can be traced back to the most un-Christian of all acts: murder. During the 1790s, a small group of Oorlam Africans moved to what is now Calvinia, South Africa from Tulbagh; the group herded cattle and added to their livestock by periodically raiding other African communities. As Dutch settlers spread throughout the country, the Oorlams found it necessary to partner with a Dutch farmer by the name of Petrus Pienaar. In exchange for weapons and ammunition, the Oorlams agreed to lead raiding expeditions for Pienaar and to attend to his cattle. Finding his new employees’ African names too difficult to pronounce, Pienaar renamed each of them; the Oorlam’s young chief, /Hôa/-arab, thus became known as Jager Afrikaner. The Oorlams resented Petrus Pienaar’s condescending attitude and his cruelty;

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2 Tulbagh is located further north than Calvinia; both are located in western South Africa.


4 He succeeded Klaas Afrikaner as chief due to his status as the eldest son.

furthermore, they suspected him of abusing their daughters and wives when the men were away on expeditions. One night in 1796, Afrikaner received reports that Petrus Pienaar intended to send the Oorlams out on an expedition meant to end in an ambush. The next morning, when the farmer ordered Jager Afrikaner and his men to re-capture some cattle previously stolen by a neighboring group, the Oorlams patently refused,⁶

Pienaar, being enraged by their resisting his order, proceeded to flog Jager… who seized his gun, which he fired at his master, and a serious scuffle ensued, in which Jager and [his brother] killed not only Pienaar himself, but also his wife and child.⁷

Jager Afrikaner’s followers and fellow workers, including a large number of Nama people, rallied around the mutineer and joined him in his flight from the farm. The Cape police, upon discovering Afrikaner’s crime, set a bounty of £150 on his head and began to pursue him on charges of manslaughter.⁸ Afrikaner and his band of followers evaded capture by crossing the Orange River into what is today Warmbad, Namibia. With firearms and ammunition taken from Petrus Pienaar’s farm, the Oorlam-Nama commando group raided cattle and pillaged small trading posts; their surplus of weaponry made them a fearsome and powerful opponent. During this time, Afrikaner and his followers repeatedly fought with a Griqua group led by Berend Berend, whose pursuit of Jager stemmed from the hefty reward offered by the Cape government.

Due to his fugitive status, Afrikaner could never travel to the Cape for supplies. Instead, he paid messengers to procure needed materials for him. In 1811, Jager

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⁸ Heinrich Vedder, “The Nama,” 118.
Afrikaner hired Hans Drayer to buy a wagon from builders at the Cape. The Oorlam-Namas provided Hans with three spans of oxen: two for purchasing the wagon and one for hauling the wagon back to their kraal. Unfortunately, on his journey to the Cape, Drayer encountered a farmer to whom he owed a large amount of money. The Boer seized all the oxen and Drayer fled in fear to the nearby London Missionary Society (LMS) mission station. Upon hearing of Drayer’s failure to procure the wagon and his lack of repentance, Afrikaner became enraged. He sought out and killed Hans Drayer, whose friends then attacked the Oorlam-Namas in turn. Believing, due to a false report, that the missionaries were involved in the retaliatory assault, Jager Afrikaner “vowed vengeance upon the mission.”\textsuperscript{9} True to his word, Afrikaner and his followers burned the Warmbad LMS station to the ground.

When the Reverend John Campbell arrived in Namibia in 1812 and heard the many stories of terror relating to Jager Afrikaner, he sent a letter to the Oorlam-Nama chief “expressing regret that he should be the occasion of so much misery and oppression in that part of Africa,” and offering “to send a missionary to instruct him and his people, notwithstanding all he had done against the Missionary Institution at Warm Bath, if he expressed a desire to have one sent to him.”\textsuperscript{10} It took several years for the letter to reach Afrikaner and for his response to reach Reverend Campbell. In the intervening years, Afrikaner’s main rival, Berend, converted to Christianity and became increasingly powerful due to his improved access to gunpowder and lead through the missionaries. Hoping to collect on the Cape police’s reward for Afrikaner, Berend and his men

\textsuperscript{9} Moffat, 67.

\textsuperscript{10} Campbell, \textit{Life of Africaner}, 13.
continued to ambush the Oorlam-Namas; though the Griquas met with little success, their attacks made Afrikaner nervous enough to consider the protective advantages a missionary presence could offer. If Afrikaner converted to Christianity, Berend, as a fellow Christian, might receive pressure from the missionaries to reconsider betraying Afrikaner to the police.

In 1815, only four years after Afrikaner burnt down the LMS station in Warmbad, Reverend John Campbell finally received a response to his letter. With shock, Campbell saw that Afrikaner had requested a missionary presence “as soon as possible.”¹¹ The LMS quickly sent in Johann Leonhard Ebner, who baptized Jager Afrikaner and many of his followers in 1815; Jager changed his name to ‘Christian’ and publicly renounced his old habits of banditry.¹² According to Campbell, “when the Namaqua chief was converted, he sent a message to the Griqua chiefs, confessing the injuries he had done them, and soliciting them at the same time to unite with him in promoting universal peace.”¹³ After extensive communication between the two chiefs, Berend ceased his pursuit of Jager Afrikaner. In 1818, Missionary Ebner left Afrikaner’s community and was replaced by Robert Moffat. One year later, Jager Afrikaner accompanied Missionary Moffat on a visit to Cape Town, where they intended to receive official amnesty for Afrikaner’s murder of Petrus Pienaar. The new Cape governor, Lord Charles Somerset, wanted to secure good relations with the powerful inhabitants of the neighboring

¹¹ Campbell, Life of Africaner, 13.


territory; after hearing the missionary’s high praise of Afrikaner and interrogating the
Oorlam on his knowledge of the Bible, the governor promptly pardoned Afrikaner and
gave him “a present of an excellent wagon, which cost about eighty pound sterling.”

Intending to return with Afrikaner to Warmbad, Missionary Moffat reacted with surprise
when the LMS asked him to stay on in the Cape and attend to the larger Bechuana
mission. Moffat complied after receiving the consent of Afrikaner; despite promises to
the contrary, a replacement missionary never arrived in Warmbad.

Before Jager Afrikaner’s death in 1823, he designated his son, Jonker Afrikaner,
as his successor. As a young boy, Jonker had been shot in the arm and the appendage
retained a curved shape; the Herero knew him only as Kakuuoko Kamukurouje or “the
man with a broken arm.” Upon his father’s death, the young chief left the permanent
station in Warmbad with a large portion of the Oorlam-Nama group and roamed
throughout southern Namibia and parts of South Africa, raiding and “threatening the
indigenous people who lived on both sides of the Orange River.”

Unfortunately, as Brigitte Lau testified, “under what conditions Jonker Afrikaner… came to set himself up
as sovereign in central Namibia is largely unknown. Historical evidence is extremely

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Research Council, 1995), 1; Campbell, *Life of Africaner*, 16.

15 Moffat, 128.

16 Verwey, 3.

17 A. Kaputu, “The War Between the Nama and Herero,” interview by the Michael Scott Oral
Records Project (MSORP), Windhoek, October 1985, Tape 18, in *Warriors, Leaders, Sages, and Outcasts
in the Namibian Past*, ed. Annemarie Heywood, Brigitte Lau, Ralmund Ohly (Windhoek: MSORP, 1992),
2.

18 According to Thompson, the small number of Oorlam-Namas that didn’t follow Jonker moved
to the missionary stations in Namaqualand.

19 Brigitte Lau, *Southern and Central Namibia in Jonker Afrikaner’s Time* (Windhoek: Windhoek
Archives Publication Series No. 8, 1987), 28-29; Kaputu, “The War Between the Nama and Herero,” 2.
fragmented.” However, the historical record does show that Afrikaner and his commando group carried out cattle raids against African communities throughout Namibia, exchanging the stolen livestock with “unprincipled colonists for further supplies of arms and ammunition.”

During his wanderings, the young Afrikaner met Johann Heinrich Schmelen, a missionary of the London Missionary Society. As a calculating and intelligent leader, Jonker Afrikaner recognized that missionaries such as Schmelen represented massive opportunities for the communities in which they served. By having a missionary attached to an otherwise isolated population, Jonker Afrikaner knew he could expect increased availability of gunpowder and weaponry that would prove useful in his quest for dominance. When Afrikaner and his group of Oorlam-Namas finally settled down in central Namibia, close to present-day Windhoek, he immediately sent word to Schmelen that his people desired a resident missionary. Jonker Afrikaner’s request led directly to the establishment of the first permanent (Lutheran) mission in Namibia. The presence of European missionaries in rural communities throughout Namibia led to a demand from the white clergy for a ‘protective’ colonial presence. Ironically, it was Jonker Afrikaner’s request for missionaries that indirectly led to German, and later South African, colonial rule.

**Arrival of Lutheran Missionaries in Namibia**

20 Ibid, 28.
23 Ibid, 26.
Jonker Afrikaner was, by all accounts, a shrewd and powerful leader. He ruled over his people with a firm hand and squashed all opposition. During the 1820s, Afrikaner and his followers settled in Windhoek. They solidified Afrikaner’s rule in the area by forming alliances with local Nama groups and by defeating the rival Herero tribes. The historian Bridgette Lau wrote of Jonker Afrikaner, “his motto was ‘Africa to the Africans, but Namaland and Hereroland to us.’” The few Europeans who met Afrikaner referred to him as “the great chief of this part of the country” and the “Napoleon of the South.” From his base in Windhoek, Afrikaner led particularly brutal raids against the nearby Hereros.

While waiting to hear back from Schmelen about his requested missionaries, the Oorlam-Namas built their own church and Afrikaner himself conducted the Christian services. Schmelen, for his part, wrote to the Rhenish Missionary Society (a German Lutheran mission organization) and enthusiastically encouraged them to begin proselytizing among the Namas and Hereros in Namibia. The RMS held a meeting in March 1841, at which point they agreed to send missionaries to work with the Namas and to “look for an opportunity of establishing a mission amongst the Hereros,” whose large communities were located nearby. In 1842, in response to Afrikaner and Schmelen’s petitions, three Rhenish missionaries arrived in Windhoek: Carl Hugo Hahn, Heinrich

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24 Lau, *Namibia in Jonker Afrikaner’s Time*, 121.


28 Vedder, *South West Africa in Early Times*, 221.
Kleinschmidt, and Hans Christian Knudsen.\textsuperscript{29} These European missionaries initially focused their efforts on the Nama people, but quickly attempted to expand their ministry to the larger Herero territories nearby. To their surprise and displeasure, Jonker Afrikaner reacted harshly to all missionary efforts to work with the Herero: the Oorlam-Nama chief saw the Europeans as his personal political trophies. He didn’t want rival Hereros to have the same access to guns and ammunition, as it would take away his military advantage. Hoping to increase his own community’s status further, Afrikaner invited two more missionaries to Windhoek, this time from the Wesleyan denomination. The Lutheran Rhenish missionaries reacted angrily and competitively to the arrival of the Wesleyans, and patently refused to work with them. Missionary Carl Hugo Hahn accused the Wesleyans of asking Jonker Afrikaner to entirely remove the Rhenish Mission from Windhoek. In a reply to Hahn, the Wesleyans accused the Rhenish missionaries of being “unchristian” and argued that “this is a matter not to be disposed of by childish petulance.”\textsuperscript{30} After heated discussions and open hostility, the Rhenish missionaries left Windhoek in 1844. Jonker Afrikaner himself pointed out the hypocrisy of the missionaries: although both missions preached the Word of God, they refused to work together to proclaim the ‘Good News.’\textsuperscript{31}

\textsuperscript{29} Hellberg, \textit{Mission, Colonialism, and Liberation}, 32.


Afrikaner’s relationship with his various missionaries grew increasingly tense throughout the late 1840s as he began to recognize them as potential threats to his authority. He once claimed, “You have been bribed to tame us… You want to do with us what was done in Little Namaqualand – to take our land.”

He called the missionaries “blasphemous twisters of the gospel” and “preachers of lies.” By 1850, the relationship between Afrikaner and his remaining Wesleyan missionaries had deteriorated beyond repair, and they were forced to abandon Windhoek altogether.

**Establishment of Permanent Rhenish and Finnish Mission Stations**

After leaving Afrikaner’s Windhoek in 1844, the Rhenish missionaries established Namibia’s first *permanent* mission station among the nearby Herero community at Otjikango. Their attitude towards the Africans, especially after their negative experience with Jonker Afrikaner, developed into a clear pattern of paternalism and racism. Missionary Hahn stated in his diary that the Africans “can be kept in order only by fear” and that there “isn’t a single one worth trusting.” For the next several years, the Rhenish Mission in Namibia went through a difficult stage: caught in the midst of wars between the Namas and the Hereros, Rhenish missionaries had difficulty developing new congregations. Despite Carl Hahn’s insistence on expanding the Rhenish

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33 Ibid.

34 Nambala, 72.

Mission into the North, the Board of Missions in Germany saw little potential for growth in Namibia and refused to support Hahn’s endeavors.\footnote{Buys and Nambala, 26-27.}

Carl Hahn’s difficulties with the Board’s leadership grew considerably during the late 1860s. He wished to place a mission station among the northern Ndonga tribe, but the church officials in Germany refused to endorse his plans for an expanded ministry. An exasperated Hahn requested help from the newly formed Lutheran Finnish Missionary Society. In response to Hahn’s plea, eight Finnish missionaries traveled to Namibia in 1868. The men arrived in Otjimbingwe, where they trained with the Rhenish missionaries for a period of two years. In 1870, the Finns traveled to Ndonga and officially established their missionary presence in Namibia. The Finnish missionaries encountered significant difficulties spreading their influence beyond the Ondonga area; the chiefs had welcomed them with the expectation that they would function mainly as traders. It wasn’t until 1883 that the first congregation of the Finnish Mission Church was established and its members baptized.\footnote{Buys and Nambala, 26-27.} Slowly, the Finnish Mission became known for their attempts to involve the Africans in leadership positions. They translated the Bible into Ndonga, built schools, and established modern medical facilities. The first medical doctor ever to arrive in Namibia came at the behest of the Finnish missionaries in 1908.\footnote{Ibid, 35.} Despite these worthy accomplishments, the aspect of the Finnish Mission which most impressed African congregants was their lack of interest in a colonizing presence. Up in the northern-most areas of Namibia, the Finnish missionaries rarely had contact with colonial officials. The same could not be said, unfortunately, for the Rhenish

\footnote{Buys and Nambala, 26-27.}

\footnote{Buys and Nambala, 26-27.}

\footnote{Ibid, 35.}
Mission, whose missionaries played an active role in the establishment of colonial rule in Namibia.

In 1868, Rhenish Missionary Hahn received a letter from Jan Jonker Afrikaner (Jonker Afrikaner’s nephew) urging all Europeans to leave the country. As the new chief of the Oorlam-Namas, Jan Jonker planned to initiate war against the Hereros and didn’t want the missionaries standing in his way. Carl Hahn’s growing distrust and negative attitude towards the Africans manifested itself immediately, and he called together a group of eighty-seven European missionaries and traders to discuss Afrikaner’s letter. Together, they drafted a document demanding British “protection” in Namibia, and sent it to the British governor in Cape Town.\(^{39}\) According to the disappointed Heinrich Vedder, “the Cape Parliament did not seem very anxious to bring restless South West Africa under its rule.”\(^{40}\) After their request met with apathy on the part of the British, the Board of the Rhenish Mission in Germany began to aggressively lobby their government to colonize Namibia. The historian Lukas de Vries argued that the missionaries “strove zealously to promote German colonial government in South West Africa.”\(^{41}\) The Rhenish Mission eventually secured the interest of German officials and businessmen, and helped to “seal treaties between African leaders and German trade companies acting ‘in the service of the emperor.’”\(^{42}\) Gradual steps towards colonial domination began after the founding of the German Empire in 1871 and the appointment of Otto von Bismarck to the position of chancellor. From 1884-1885, Bismarck hosted the Berlin Conference,


\(^{40}\) Vedder, “The Nama,” 120.


\(^{42}\) Hellberg, *Mission, Colonialism, and Liberation*, 75.
where representatives of 14 European nations set guidelines for African colonization. Germany’s chancellor wanted to obtain an African colony on the coast of the continent, and Namibia met those specifications. In March of 1884, Bismarck granted Germans living in Namibia the right to colonize, “under the protection of the German flag, provided they sent no bills to the German government.” In 1885, the government became more actively involved; it sent naval units and a German state representative to help permanently administer the new territory.

**The Herero Uprising, 1904-1907**

The Germans immediately expropriated land and livestock that belonged to African communities; they stole horses in an attempt to prevent African attacks against German troops; and they tried to pit the Nama people against the Hereros. The Germans’ colonial tactics backfired, angering the Africans and bringing the rival Hereros and Namas closer together. The Hereros, the tribe from which the Rhenish Mission drew most of its congregants, became outspoken critics of German colonization. Samuel Maharero, a powerful Herero leader, fomented a plan of attack to rid Namibia of its new German occupiers. In January 1904, he wrote to the Nama leader, Hendrik Witbooi, as follows:

> All our patience with the Germans is of little avail, for each day they shoot someone dead for no reason at all. Hence I appeal to you, my brother, not to hold aloof from the uprising, but to make your voice heard so that all

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44 Ibid, 86.

Africa may take up arms against the Germans. Let us die fighting rather than die as a result of maltreatment.\textsuperscript{46}

Unfortunately, German colonial officials intercepted Maharero’s letter, and the Namas didn’t join the revolt until October 1904.\textsuperscript{47} Preparations for the rebellion continued, however, and the Hereros amassed weapons and recruits. The Rhenish missionaries, unaware of the impending attack, began to notice an increased number of Herero men at Okahandja. Upon questioning, however, Samuel Maharero and others in the congregation told the missionaries that the unfamiliar Africans had arrived to attend religious ceremonies. In reality, the men were soldiers-in-training.\textsuperscript{48}

The Hereros attacked Germany military forces in January 1904, taking the new colonizers completely by surprise. Maharero and his troops assailed military posts, destroyed railways, and seized German farms. The African forces killed over 100 Germans, but as per Maharero’s orders no women, children, or unarmed men were attacked.\textsuperscript{49} After six months of Herero success, the Germans brought in reinforcements from Europe and turned to more brutal tactics. On August 11, 1904, the Germans surrounded a Herero community at Hamakari and brutally slaughtered several thousand men, women, and children. Two months later, the Germans made their intentions even clearer: General Von Trotha announced, “I believe that the Herero must be destroyed as a


\textsuperscript{47} Colonial officials failed to inform the missionaries of the interception of Maharero’s letter; in fact, they were extremely suspicious of the relationship between the German missionaries and their Herero congregations. The German chancellor himself questioned the loyalty of the Rhenish Mission to their country of birth, a fact which caused the German missionaries to respond with denunciations of their Herero congregants; Hellberg, \textit{Mission, Colonialism, and Liberation}, 117-120.

\textsuperscript{48} Hellberg, \textit{Mission, Colonialism, and Liberation}, 109-110.

\textsuperscript{49} Katjavivi, \textit{A History of Resistance}, 8-9.
nation.” The Germans came close to accomplishing their goal; by 1905, 75-80% of the Herero population had been wiped out. Thousands of destitute Herero refugees flooded into present-day Botswana. The Germans expropriated the remaining Namibians’ land, forced them into manual labor, and instituted pass laws.

Though the war of resistance lasted only three years, it created a permanent rift between the Rhenish Mission and its African congregants. The German missionaries took the Hereros’ attacks personally; the missionaries delivered a sermon to all the baptized Herero lamenting the “rude shock” they had experienced “on account of the awful bloodshed.” The sermon further claimed, “you have raised the sword against the government which God has placed over you without considering that it is written: ‘Whoever takes the sword, shall also perish by the sword.’” Long after the final defeat of the Hereros in 1907, the memory of the Rhenish Mission’s allegiance to Germany lingered in the minds of their African congregants.

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Chapter 2

Africanization of the Lutheran Missions in Namibia: 1915-1970

*If we are slapped on the cheek whether by an individual or by the ruling class of our country, in turning the other cheek like Jesus did before Pilate, as Christians we at least have the right to ask, ‘Why are you slapping me?’*

- ELCIN text read in churches throughout Namibia

After 1915, black Namibians grew increasingly frustrated with the inflexibility of the Rhenish Mission: the German missionaries’ allegiance to colonial powers, their persistent paternalism, and their refusal to cede white control drove away African congregants by the thousands. The Finnish Missionary Society in northern Namibia, unlike the Rhenish Mission in southern and central Namibia, had little interest in colonial powers and enjoyed friendly relations with local chieftains. Both Missions, however, proved hesitant to relinquish full leadership of the churches to Africans. As Namibians fought for control of their own congregations, strong indigenous leaders rose to the forefront of the movement and called for self-determination.

World War I abruptly changed the political situation in Namibia. The Union of South Africa, fighting on behalf of England as part of the war against Germany, attacked Namibia in 1914 and easily overcame the small German forces stationed there. After only a few months of fighting, the Germans surrendered. The quick defeat of the Germans and the initially lenient attitude of the South African government made

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2 Ibid, 142.
Namibians hopeful that a new era of freedom had arrived. The 1919 Peace Treaty in Versailles granted South Africa a League of Nations mandate to administer the territory of South West Africa (Namibia). Unfortunately, the Africans’ hopes for freedom were dashed as it became clear that racial legislation was to be implemented. The government of South Africa began to put in place a system of laws, even harsher than those under the German occupation, which dictated black Namibians’ employment, housing, and social lives. In 1920, Africans’ lack of employment became a criminal offense and could result in forced labor under an employer of the government’s choosing; in 1922, the Native Reserves Commission allocated only 10% of Namibia’s land for Africans, despite the fact that they comprised 90% of the population; and in 1925 the government set up two official contract recruiting agencies to lure black Namibians into the deadly mines.\(^3\)

These types of laws deeply affected southern and central Namibia in the areas where the Rhenish Mission worked. Despite the clear racism and prejudice of the new regime, the Rhenish Mission remained silent.

After the sudden switch from German to South African colonial rule, the ethnically German Rhenish missionaries in Namibia experienced competing feelings of loyalty between the two nations. An increasing sense of German nationalism during the late 1920s and 1930s placed the missionaries’ allegiance firmly back with their country of birth. The Rhenish Mission began to embrace the growing racism and ‘national pride’ of Germany, deciding at a 1926 synod meeting to send out leaflets to recent German immigrants to Namibia stating: “Beware of the racial dishonour. You have Germanic blood in your veins. … Remember that you are Christian! Remember that you are white!

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Remember that you are German!”⁴ The Nazi Party began officially asserting themselves in Namibia in 1929; they developed a local leadership, held Party rallies in Windhoek and elsewhere, and demanded “that all German descendants should swear an oath of allegiance to Hitler and the fatherland."⁵ By 1934, South Africa was frantically attempting to stymie Nazi influence in the country. Despite a ban on pro-German political activity, the white synod of the Rhenish Mission openly distributed Nazi propaganda and welcomed Nazi Party speakers into their churches. The director of the Nazi Party in Namibia, Consul Von Oelhafen, even delivered a speech at the Rhenish Mission’s 1935 missionary conference in Windhoek.⁶

In contrast to the pro-German attitude of the Rhenish Mission, black Namibians overwhelmingly opposed Nazism; for many Africans, the memory of the Germans’ 1904 Herero massacre remained fresh in their minds.⁷ Approximately 7,000 black Namibians fought against Hitler in World War II (as compared to about 500 whites); in fact, “Namibia produced, on a per capita basis, more than twice as many recruits as South Africa and triple that from the Rhodesias.”⁸ When World War II broke out, the South

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⁵ Ibid.


⁷ According to Robert Gordon (see footnote below), some in the South African administration believed that a Herero social group, the Truppenspieler, was allied with the Nazis. This accusation was never proved and has been dismissed by historians as myth.

African government in Namibia rounded up approximately 1,220 German citizens and put them into internment camps; included in these numbers were many of the Rhenish Mission’s pastors and missionaries.\(^9\) During this time, black Namibian pastors fulfilled all the duties of the absent white missionaries and served their congregations loyally.\(^10\)

Despite the Africans’ clear competence at running their own churches during this time of upheaval, the Rhenish Mission refused to permit the ordination of African pastors and steadfastly forbid the formation of fully independent African churches. They contended that the Africans remained too spiritually deficient to be allowed independence from the guidance of missionaries.\(^11\) Instead, Heinrich Vedder, the leading missionary within the Rhenish Mission, quietly asked the white-dominated Dutch Reformed Church to take over the Mission’s Namibian congregations. Vedder failed to consult black church members on this move; instead, they found out through a South African newspaper article published in October of 1945.\(^12\)

**Nama Secession from the Rhenish Mission**

Vedder’s secretive attempts to merge with the Dutch Reformed Church had immediate consequences for the Rhenish Mission; the episode sparked the largest succession in Namibia’s church history. The Nama tribe in southern Namibia

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\(^9\) Despite Heinrich Vedder’s Nazi sympathies, he was widely respected by South African authorities for his scholarly works and was seen as the main intellectual authority on Namibian affairs. Jan-Bart Gewald, *Herero Heroes* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1999), 188n251; Gordon, 150.


vehemently protested the potential switch to an openly racist Reformed Church, and they were angered that the Rhenish Mission continued to insist upon white control. Namas, like other black Namibians, vehemently opposed the racial hierarchies within the Church. African pastors could not wear the official clergy robes, made of black cloth and white collars; they could not preach in the same pulpit as white pastors; and they could not bury black congregants in cemeteries that contained white bodies.  

In February of 1946, Nama leaders convened to discuss the newspaper article in which, among other things, Vedder had specifically referred to the Namas as a ‘heathen’ people. Nama leaders felt strongly that “the indigenous workers had been deceived and sold out like children by their parents.” At the end of the conference, they sent a petition to the German Board of Mission detailing their complaints and accusing the Rhenish Mission of promoting “the master-race mentality of the whites and contempt for the views of their parishes.”

The Rhenish Mission’s appointment of a missionary named W. Neumeister to a vacant post in a Nama congregation heightened Nama dissatisfaction even further. The Africans resented that yet another white man had filled the post; they had expected an indigenous leader to assume the position. The Namas immediately wrote to the Board of Missions requesting the withdrawal of Neumeister’s post. Upon the Mission’s refusal to grant their requests or consider their complaints, the Namas decided to take action. In November of 1946, over 4,500 Namas seceded from the Rhenish Mission. By January of

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13 Interview with ELCRN Namibian pastor, 2008.
14 Hellberg, Mission, Colonialism, and Liberation, 241.
15 Buys and Nambala, 179.
17 Buys and Nambala, 179
1947, the newly independent congregation had joined the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME), an American-based church emphasizing independence from the white man. The Namas’ split from Lutheran doctrine was thus completed.

**Herero Secession and the Oruuano Church**

The Herero people in central Namibia were the most vocal detractors of the Rhenish Mission and its white missionaries. The ideas of Marcus Garvey and his Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) strongly influenced the Herero people whose chief, Hosea Kutako, was a prominent member in Namibia. During the early 1920s, Hereros grew more outspoken in their desire for an “Africa for the Africans.” By 1922 the Hereros dominated Namibia’s UNIA chapters, and they began to speak of “a war against the whites.” Hereros built upon the ideas of the UNIA and used them to oppose white domination within the church; they resented demands for church contributions and began to examine the role that German missionaries had played in the Herero massacre. Due to the ideas of Marcus Garvey, “no longer were the

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18 Formed in 1787 in the USA as a reaction against racial prejudice, the AME first spread to Africa in 1891 (in Liberia). The AME moved into South Africa in 1896, but it wasn’t until the Nama split in 1947 that the AME was established in Namibia. Peter H. Katjavivi, *A History of Resistance in Namibia* (Paris: Unesco Press, 1988), 31.

19 Hellberg, *Mission, Colonialism, and Liberation*, 242


missionaries seen or accepted as the sole interpreters of and final authorities on the Christian faith.”

Serious conflict between the Herero people and the Rhenish Mission started after the Mission refused to support the Hereros’ request to allow their exiled leader, Samuel Maharero, back into Namibia. Maharero had led the 1904 uprising against Germany and had been banished to Botswana; the Herero people viewed him with respect and honored him as a hero. When Maharero passed away in exile in 1923, his body was transported back to his hometown of Okahandja for burial. The Hereros wanted to combine a Christian funeral with a traditional one and requested that the Rhenish missionaries conduct a formal Christian service, to be followed by a tribal burial ceremony. The local missionaries refused to conduct only the first half of the funeral, making it known that they disapproved of the Herero’s ‘pagan’ burial ritual. As the situation escalated, the Rhenish Mission board decided to send Heinrich Vedder to perform the first service.

Carl-J Hellberg has argued that Samuel Maharero’s funeral marked a turning point in Herero allegiance to the Rhenish Mission. He summarized the importance of the funeral’s events as follows:

1. They represented a form of rebirth for the Hereros’ tribal identity and thus resulted in a weakening of African universality which had been formerly proclaimed by Garveyanism.

2. They became an expression of power and renewed self-confidence and thus provided inspiration to strive for political freedom of one’s own particular tribe.

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24 Ibid, 280.
3 They represented an attempt to revive some of the tribe’s most important religious traditions in conjunction with retained Christian values, with the tribal leader as a collective leading figure.

4 All of the above culminated in a crisis in relations with the Rhenish Mission which clung tenaciously to its particular view of Christian Western civilization and to a pietistic interpretation of Christianity, which makes a distinction between worldly and spiritual rule, according to Romans 13:1.\(^\text{25}\)

The Herero took their culture and traditions very seriously, especially the ‘holy fire,’ which they believed allowed them to communicate with their ancestors. The funeral of Maharero greatly strengthened these traditions, and caused increased conflict with the German missionaries who viewed Herero rituals as pagan.\(^\text{26}\) Jan-Bart Gewald argued that “the funeral demonstrated to the Herero and the outside world that they were once again a self-aware self-regulating political entity…. It showed their growing independence from the Rhenish church.”\(^\text{27}\) Immediately afterwards, the Rhenish Mission experienced a sharp decrease in Herero church membership: in 1923 the number dropped from 1,200 to 240 in Okahandja and from 1,750 to 560 in Windhoek.\(^\text{28}\) Despite the growing rift between the Rhenish Mission and the Herero people after Maharero’s funeral, an official breakaway did not occur.

The Rhenish Mission’s re-alignment with Germany during the late 1920s and 1930s heightened the friction between the Mission and the Herero people. In 1929, Heinrich Vedder attended a 25\textsuperscript{th} anniversary celebration of the 1904 Herero defeat. In the

\(^{25}\) Hellberg, *Mission, Colonialism, and Liberation*, 188.

\(^{26}\) Interview with ELCRN Namibian pastor, 2008.

\(^{27}\) Gewald, *Herero Heroes*, 282.

\(^{28}\) Buys and Nambala, 177.
opening speech, he dedicated the festivities to “those Germans who fell in the Herero war.” The Germans had nearly exterminated the entire Herero race in the 1904 uprising; the fact that Heinrich Vedder, a leader within the Church and the officiator of Samuel Maharero’s funeral, celebrated the massacre incensed the Hereros.

The Rhenish Mission continued to work against the indigenous African population even after Germany’s defeat in World War II. As South Africa strengthened its occupation of Namibia, the Rhenish Mission officially pledged its allegiance to South Africa and apologized for its German affiliation during the war. The Rhenish Mission “declared its intention to loyally obey the South African authorities.” Black Namibians had hoped to gain independence from all colonial powers after World War II; South Africa’s continued occupation of Namibia and its position on race concerned African congregants. The Rhenish Mission’s enthusiastic show of loyalty despite South Africa’s apartheid policies dismayed African parishioners, particularly the Herero.

In 1950, the Herero chieftain, Hosea Kutako, met with leaders of the Rhenish Mission to address the growing discord between the Herero people and the missionaries. Like most black Namibians, the Hereros detested the racial discrimination evident within the Church. Kutako brought up for discussion the issues of wage inequality and property distribution, but Preses Diehl dismissed the issues and instead referred Kutako to the Church synod. The Rhenish Mission failed to seriously consider any of the Africans’ complaints. It became clear to Hosea Kutako and other Herero evangelicals that galvanizing change from within the Mission would be virtually impossible.

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29 Hellberg, Mission, Colonialism, and Liberation, 205.


31 Hellberg, Mission, Colonialism, and Liberation, 254-255.
For the Herero, the appointment of Heinrich Vedder to the South African Senate in 1950 and his subsequent speeches endorsing apartheid catalyzed the final split from the Rhenish Mission. After years of criticizing Africans for being overly political, Vedder himself had committed the greatest violation of the Lutheran ‘two kingdoms’ doctrine by serving as both a religious leader and a political official. Led by Reverend Leonard Ruzo, an ordained Herero pastor, the Hereros formed their own church in 1955. The resultant *Oorwano* Church based its theology on a combination of Lutheran doctrine and Herero cultural rituals and traditions. Hosea Kutako later testified that “the policy of apartheid was the main reason for the Oorwano breach with the mission.” He maintained, “it was a direct consequence of the authorities’ racialist policies.”

**Establishment of Independent African Lutheran Churches**

The remaining African members of the Lutheran churches in Namibia refused to splinter off; they felt strongly that Africans needed to work within the Missions to promote equality and demand sanctioned, independent Lutheran churches. By 1957, their goals had been realized in the form of two indigenous churches: the Evangelical Lutheran Church in South West Africa (ELCRN) in central and southern Namibia and the Evangelical Lutheran Ovambo-Kavango Church (ELCIN) in northern Namibia. While Namibian historians have named 1957 “The Year of the Churches” and consider 1957

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36 Buys and Nambala, 207.
the definitive moment when Africans achieved independence, both ELCRN and ELCIN postponed installing Africans to the highest leadership positions.

*The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Namibia (ELCRN)*

African members of the Rhenish Mission churches in Namibia experienced immense difficulties in forming their own independent Lutheran Church. The German missionaries were convinced that Africans could not handle the intellectual and spiritual difficulties of leadership. The Rhenish Mission only permitted the development of an independent African church after concerned international church bodies forced them to relent.

After the secession of the Namas in 1947, the Rhenish Mission Board in Germany became nervous that large numbers of Africans would follow the Namas’ lead and abandon the Church. The Board sent a direct order to the Namibian Rhenish Mission commanding them to establish plans for an independent, African-run church. The missionaries clearly expressed their resistance to the Board’s order at a conference held in Swakopmund in 1948, where Preses Diehl argued that “Namibian blacks lacked judgment in issues which involved ‘a wide discrimination of spiritual values.’”37 Dr. Vedder claimed that, due to the nature of their jobs, the missionaries were in a better position than the Board to judge the competency of Africans. At the end of the conference, the Rhenish Mission in Namibia sent the German Board a response detailing their opposition to the creation of an independent church. According to the missionaries, the Africans “were liable to nearly every kind of carnal weakness – including weakness

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of faith…. Besides, black Christians did not even know what a Church was.”

Despite their objections, the Rhenish missionaries agreed in 1949 to consider drafting a proposal for a new African Church as long as they could divide it into smaller regional or tribal churches. It became abundantly clear that the creation of a unified, independent black Church was not one of the Rhenish Mission’s priorities.

The Board of Missions in Germany persisted, and demanded that the Rhenish Mission present a completed proposal for a Church constitution upon the arrival of Gustav Menzel, the Mission Director, in Namibia. In 1950, the missionaries presented their proposal to Menzel and held a lengthy discussion about the pros and cons of apartheid. The missionaries, especially Heinrich Vedder, believed that apartheid could benefit both the Africans and the Church. Vedder stated,

“Our Government in South West Africa has been the depository of a fine heritage. From the very beginning the German Government carried out that which has unfortunately not yet been attained in South Africa – namely, apartheid.”

Most Rhenish missionaries practiced racial separation in their homes and in the pulpits of their churches; some even refused to allow blacks inside their homes to eat or socialize.

In 1952, the Rhenish Mission drafted a ‘federal Church’ constitution which provided for multiple congregations divided by population group. The document required approval by various church delegates, but black pastors refused to support the measure, demanding instead a single, united church. As a result, the Rhenish Mission

38 Hellberg, Mission, Colonialism, and Liberation, 250.
39 Buys and Nambala, 213.
41 Hellberg, Mission, colonialism, and liberation, 262.
rewrote the constitution. The new version, which allowed for a united church, received unanimous consent. On October 4, 1957, the first meeting of an autonomous, unified Evangelical Lutheran Church of South West Africa (ELCRN) took place. Despite the establishment of an indigenous church, white missionaries continued to run ELCRN. As late as 1962, Lutheran World Federation leaders considered the Rhenish Mission an apartheid enabler. The director of the Department of World Mission, A. Sovik, argued that the Rhenish Mission’s church philosophy was “basically apartheid and typical of the old mission attitude that the blacks are incapable of responsibility.”

The first president of ELCRN, HK Diehl, served for fifteen years; it was not until 1972 that the synod elected a “son from the soil,” Dr. JL de Vries, as President of ELCRN. However, by 1967 the Mission recognized the need for strong indigenous leadership and instituted a system whereby five black ‘Moderators’ rotated leadership of the church. It was one of these Moderators, Pastor P. Gowaseb, who co-signed the Open Letter in 1971 protesting South Africa’s illegal occupation of Namibia and its implementation of apartheid.

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42 Buys and Nambala, 164.
46 PJ Isaak, 22.
The establishment of the Evangelical Lutheran Ovambo-Kavango Church was less a split than a lengthy transition. From its conception, the Finnish Missionary Society (FMS) aimed to establish a ‘folkchurch’ in Namibia. The FMS was the dominant missionary force in northern Namibia, and it established churches throughout Ovamboland during the nineteenth century. The Finnish Mission was significantly more liberal than the Rhenish Mission and allowed its black members more independence and leadership opportunities.

Unlike the Rhenish Mission, the Finnish Mission had no colonial ties and enjoyed good relationships with local tribal chiefs.48 The Finns adhered to the ‘two kingdoms’ doctrine far more effectively than did the hypocritical Rhenish Missionaries, and they tried to abstain from all forms of politics. As a result, the FMS during twentieth century had nothing to distract their leaders from church duties. From their inception, the Finnish Mission displayed an intense interest in forming friendships with indigenous leaders and training black clergymen. Upon arrival from Finland, missionaries always visited the local chief to report on their trip and make conversation. The Finns consulted the local leadership at all times, particularly on issues of education and on the construction of hospitals, schools, and churches.49 They took great pains to make Christianity accessible to Africans by translating the Bible into written tribal languages and opening a training college in Oniipa. The Finnish Mission made education a top priority: they were the first organization to begin instructing and preparing African pastors for appointments to the


49 Ibid, 209.
ministry. The FMS established a theological seminary in Oniipa in 1922, where, on September 27, 1925, Finnish missionaries ordained the first seven indigenous pastors in the history of Namibia.50

After the ordination of the first pastors at Oniipa, the slow process towards the development of an independent church began. In 1925, the first ELCIN synod was held, which drew up a new church order stating, “The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Ovambo is the daughter of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Finland and has its own confession.”51 However, the declaration was only a small step towards independence; missionaries remained the only members allowed on the executive panel of the ELCIN Church. Initially, these missionaries refused to protest South African policies of apartheid because of their belief in the separation of church and state. However, as the government increasingly interfered in the Finnish Mission’s activities, church missionaries and their congregations began to resist. A 1937 report on mission activity claimed,

The Finnish mission in Ovamboland has been concerned over government regulations passed in 1935 affecting education. These prescribe that no school may be within five miles of another school, that school buildings must be of brick, that every teacher must have a teacher’s diploma, and that Afrikaans must be taught in every school. About three thousand children are affected, being in schools which do not conform to one or another of the regulations. Since the schools do not draw any government grant, the Finnish mission resents the application of the regulations.52

51 Buys and Nambala, 162.
The missionaries reacted similarly to South Africa’s attempts to restrict the promotion of black Namibian pastors, and resented the government’s repeated involvement in church matters. Accordingly, the South African government began to view the Finnish Mission with suspicion and considered it a disturbing element in Ovamboland.

Major Carl Hahn, the administrator in charge of the Ovambo reserve, especially criticized the Finnish Mission, viewing them as “a hindrance to the work of the administration in Ovamboland.” Hahn disliked the Mission’s schools and legal courts, claiming that the missionaries undermined the tribal chiefs. As a result, the South African government decreed in 1932 that all mission stations, schools, and churches were to be placed under government control. The Finnish Mission, like the Rhenish Mission, had a very strong belief in Luther’s ‘two kingdoms’ doctrine, which required the separation of the religious sphere from the political sphere. The Mission had always agreed to operate within the political structures of the areas it worked in; although they strained against the new governmental restrictions, the FMS quietly complied.

A turning point occurred in 1947 when twenty-two young Finnish missionaries arrived in Ovamboland to replace the Finns who had remained in the area throughout World War II. Fresh out of seminary, the new missionaries were more liberal and committed to developing a truly independent African church. At a 1954 synod meeting in Engela, leaders within the Evangelical Lutheran Ovambo-Kavango Church drew up a new constitution officially declaring ELCIN’s independence from the Finnish Missionary

53 Hellberg, Mission, Colonialism, and Liberation, 212.
54 Ibid; This declaration was a precursor to the Bantu Education Act of 1953.
They discussed at length whether the new leader of the church should be an African or a white missionary. Leonard Auala, the most influential African pastor within the Church, believed that, unfortunately,

> The government listens to missionaries but gives us no regard. That is why we were against the leadership being placed in our black hands. People with white skin disdain people of black skin, whether the latter be teacher or priest. No matter what you are – you will always be a black – a kaffir. We have observed this disdain and our inner being mourns over this but can do nothing to bring about a change.

Eventually, the leaders of ELCIN elected a Finnish missionary named Birger Eriksson to the post; they elected Auala as Church Secretary.

The next two years proved formative: in 1956, ELCIN created a separate constitution which excluded missionaries from membership, and in 1957 the Evangelical Lutheran Ovambo-Kavango Church officially registered with the South African government as a legal church body. G.L. Buys and S.V.V. Nambala have argued that “1957 can therefore be taken as the final conclusion of the road to independent leadership for ELOK (ELCIN).” However, the leader of the Church remained a white man; at this point, ELCIN was not yet a truly independent ‘African’ church. Birger Eriksson continued his role as church moderator until 1958, at which point he strongly urged the

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56 Buys and Nambala, 211.


58 Buys and Nambala, 212.

59 Ibid, 163.
synod to elect an African. Yet, for the second time, the Church elected a white missionary to lead ELCIN.  

The events of 1959 and 1960 in Namibia and South Africa forced church leaders to recognize racism as a serious issue both within their country and within their Church. In December of 1959, at Katutura’s Old Location, police shot and killed eleven Namibian protestors and wounded at least forty-four. Thousands fled the city and never returned. A similar event occurred in Sharpeville, South Africa, in March of 1960. A crowd of several thousand Africans surrounded a police station in peaceful protest of laws requiring them to carry passes. Without warning, the police opened fire and shot sixty-nine fleeing Africans in the back, killing them; more than four hundred were injured. The violent racism exhibited during these two events greatly impacted the churches in Namibia; when ELCIN’s synod convened in 1960, they finally elected Leonard Nangolo Auala as moderator of the Ovambo-Kavango Church.  

Pastor Auala was unquestionably the most qualified person, black or white, to lead the church in Ovamboland. He had trained in theology at the Okahandja seminary and had attended the All-Africa Lutheran Conference in 1955. In 1956, the prestigious Helsinki University in Finland invited Auala to attend their school of theology. The South African government refused to grant his travel, so Auala instead studied for a year.

60 Hellberg, Mission, Colonialism, and Liberation, 272.
63 Buys and Nambala, 212.
64 Ibid, 211.
at a South African institution, the Moravian Seminary in Port Elizabeth. Despite his inability to attend the Finnish seminary school, the Helsinki University awarded Auala an Honorary Doctorate in Theology in 1967. Auala corresponded regularly with numerous Namibian leaders, including the Ovambo resistance leader Toivo ya Toivo. The South African government began to notice Auala’s growing influence in Namibia, and his popularity and political potential frightened them. In 1959, the authorities tried to prevent the pastor from traveling to Finland to attend the Finnish Mission’s hundredth year anniversary celebrations. Prime Minister Hendrik Verwoerd allowed him to travel to the ceremony only after receiving “a written guarantee” from the archbishop of Finland “that Auala would ‘behave himself.’”

Namibians and the international Lutheran community respected Leonard Auala and his leadership within the Church immensely. As Festus Naholo, the Secretary of Economic Affairs in SWAPO testified, Leonard Auala “really was the father of the nation. His voice was accepted throughout the country and internationally. He was a man of peace, reconciliation and righteousness.” In 1963, the ELCIN synod elected Auala as their bishop, making him the first African bishop in Namibia’s history. After he took power, ELCIN churches ceased practicing any form of apartheid.

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68 Interview with ELCIN Namibian pastor, 2008.
Leonard Auala’s leadership was recognized outside of Namibia as well: in 1962, Auala had received visits from two very different international groups. The first, the UN Commission for South West Africa, sought Auala’s opinion of the South African government and its effect on Namibia and the Church. The second visit was from South Africa’s Odendaal Commission, which offered Auala “the post as leader of the Ovambo people, with generous terms of payment. Auala, was not, however, one to allow himself to be bought.”  

The South African government had burdened the Odendaal Commission with the mission of determining an effective way to implement apartheid in Namibia. The Commission’s recommendations formed the basis of the 1964 Odendaal Plan, which divided Namibia into twelve ‘homelands’ and gave the white minority two-thirds of the land. Government authorities forcibly removed nearly thirty percent of the black population from homes in the newly created “white” areas. The Plan gave the South African legislative body “power over such matters as education, public works, agriculture, and health.”

By the time the Odendaal Plan became law, Bishop Leonard Auala’s ELCIN congregation numbered 140,000 members. As the leader of the largest church in Namibia, Auala could not remain completely silent on racial issues. Although he carefully phrased his statements so as not to violate the ‘two kingdoms’ doctrine of the

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Lutheran church, Auala nonetheless quietly criticized the homelands policy through a statement to South African leaders. The government, however, continued to believe that it had the popular support of church members and counted the Lutheran churches among its allies. In 1971, immediately after the ruling of the International Court of Justice declaring South Africa’s occupation of Namibia illegal, South African authorities asked Bishop Auala to hand out a questionnaire asking congregants to share their opinions on apartheid. The South African government was shocked when church members overwhelmingly rejected white rule. As apartheid policies intensified, Bishop Auala found himself in a difficult position: the Lutheran church had a clear policy of abstention from politics, but, as a church leader, he also had a moral obligation to his congregation. With the 1971 Open Letter, Bishop Auala and ELCIN finally vocalized their opposition to South Africa and its ideology of apartheid.

The German Evangelical Lutheran Church in Namibia (GELC aka DELK)

In accordance with the South African system of apartheid, the Rhenish Mission had established separate churches for its white members, primarily German settlers. After the establishment of ELCRN in 1957, only three white churches expressed interest in joining the united African church; a majority opposed unification. Preferring racial separation, the white Lutherans decided to create a third independent Namibian Lutheran church. The German Evangelical Lutheran Church held its first independent synod meeting on May 30, 1960. Missionaries of the Rhenish Mission had previously served

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the white congregations; after the split, the GELC petitioned the Evangelical Church in Germany for German-trained pastors to minister their congregations. In 1963, the Lutheran World Federation admitted the GELC as an independent Namibian church.\textsuperscript{74}

The German Evangelical Lutheran Church retained a racist attitude towards its fellow Lutherans in the independent African churches. In 1971, the GELC refused to endorse ELCIN and ELCRN’s “Open Letter”\textsuperscript{75} and as a result grew increasingly alienated from the international Lutheran community.

The Africanization of the Lutheran churches in Namibia gave black Namibians the ability to voice opinions to an international community of believers. The development of indigenous leadership led to the rethinking of Luther’s ‘two kingdoms’ doctrine and resulted in a theology of liberation. The 1971 Open Letter and the shift in the Lutheran Church’s stance on apartheid were direct results of the formation of independent African churches.

\textsuperscript{74} Buys and Nambala, 165.

\textsuperscript{75} PJ Isaak, 33.
Chapter 3
The Open Letter and its Implications

_The government maintains that by the race policy it implements in our country, it promotes and preserves the life and the freedom of the population. But in fact the non-white population is continuously being slighted and intimidated in their daily lives. Our people are not free and by the way they are treated, they do not feel safe._

-Open Letter from ELCRN and ELCIN to South African Prime Minister Vorster

Celebration broke out all over Namibia on June 21, 1971, when the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in The Hague ruled that South Africa’s presence in Namibia constituted an illegal act. Their Advisory Opinion instructed all members of the United Nations “to recognize the illegality of South Africa’s presence in Namibia and the invalidity of its acts on behalf of or concerning Namibia.”

Nowhere was the excitement greater than 250 kilometers from Windhoek, at the Paulinum Theological Seminary in Otjimbingwe. The seminary’s students were clustered around their only radio, listening intently to the International Court of Justice proceedings broadcast. As Drs. Ngeno Nakamhela, a former student at Paulinum, recalled:

> It was announced over the radio that the court had ruled that South Africa was illegally occupying Namibia and from now on the people of Namibia were being given the mandate to determine their own future. Oh, the shouts were heard all over Paulinum! And one of the students started to

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2 See Appendix A for a full version of the Open Letter

sing the song of Martin Luther King of the United States, ‘We shall overcome!’

The students spontaneously gathered in the seminary chapel and marched towards the home of the town’s local South African commissioner. Along the way, the children of the African students and their European lecturers joined the procession: “Whether they understood or not, they were caught in the spirit.” A large crowd gathered around the colonial official’s house to demonstrate their resistance to the government; the group then peacefully dispersed as quickly as it had come. All of the students returned to their chapel to urgently debate over their next step. According to one participant:

The students worked hard to formulate something which should give a shape to their future thinking. We did not have the spirit to sit in the classes. The students wanted the churches to respond and there was a lot of discussion about how to communicate the spirit to our leaders… The idea was conveyed to the leadership and they were challenged to do something and to announce it publicly. And this very soon led to the Open Letter.

In the small library of the Paulinum, seminary students came together and drafted a strongly worded letter to the South African Prime Minister Vorster, an act which forever transformed the Lutheran church in Namibia. This document, once sent to the Church Boards of ELCIN and ELCRN, became the primary basis for the Open Letter of 1971. For over a week the Church Boards agonized over the wording and implications of the letter, refusing to discuss the document with their congregations because of its sensitive

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5 Ibid, 9.

6 Ibid, 10.

They created an additional pastoral letter, to be read simultaneously in every ELCRN and ELCIN congregation throughout Namibia, which explained the churches’ response to the World Court decision and their position towards South Africa’s apartheid regime. A powerful and moving document, the epistle referenced with regret the previously unbroken silence of the Lutheran church. Leaders of ELCIN and ELCRN wrote in the congregational letter, “We feel that if we, as the Church remain silent any longer, we will become liable for the life and future of our country and its people.”

Almost immediately, the Anglican and Catholic churches in Namibia endorsed the Lutheran churches’ stand.

The Open Letter signified a seismic shift in church policy, and marked the replacement of the “Two Kingdoms” doctrine with a new theology of liberation. Comfortable with the Lutheran churches’ silence, the government received a nasty shock when it realized that the two largest churches in Namibia, ELCRN and ELCIN, had morphed into outspoken critics of the apartheid regime seemingly overnight. The letter, addressed to South Africa’s Prime Minister Vorster, stated unequivocally the opposition of ELCIN and ELCRN to South Africa’s occupation of Namibia and its racist policies. The letter outlined five specific ways in which South Africa’s government consistently

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8 Interview with ELCIN Namibian pastor, 2008.

9 For the full text of the letter to the congregations, see Appendix B.


violated the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UNO), and concluded with this firm statement:

The Church Boards’ urgent wish is that... your government will seek a peaceful solution to the problems of our land and will see to it that Human Rights be put into operation and that South West Africa may become a self-sufficient and independent state.12

These bold statements alarmed the National Party government in South Africa, and they hurried to contain the damage. Prime Minister John Vorster, after years of refusing requests from Bishop Auala to discuss the policy of separate development, immediately requested a meeting with the two Lutheran church heads.13 During the meeting, however, Auala remained firm in his opposition to apartheid and South African rule in Namibia. Lutheran churches in Namibia began to openly support the liberation parties, which gave courage to those wanting to resist and increased the number of anti-apartheid activities. Furthermore, the letter created an awareness within the international Lutheran community of Namibia’s plight and catalyzed an outpouring of support from Lutheran churches around the world.

**Theological Implications of the Open Letter**

The Namibian Lutheran churches’ declaration of liberty mirrored the changing theological attitudes within the international Lutheran community. Prior to the 1970s, most churches had adhered to the theology of Martin Luther’s ‘two kingdoms doctrine,’ which held that two separate spheres existed: one for the spiritual, and the other for the

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12 “Open Letter to His Honour the Prime Minister of South Africa.”

political.\textsuperscript{14} Missionaries, in particular, adopted this philosophy and incorporated it into their ideas of colonialism. In their minds, the ‘two kingdoms doctrine’ did not prevent missionaries from requesting a colonial presence in Namibia, but it surely prohibited the Africans from revolting against an unjust government. Missionaries felt that African Lutherans should abstain from politics and focus solely on the spiritual realm.\textsuperscript{15} These antiquated notions began to change less than a year before the issuing of the Open Letter, which served to further solidify the emerging liberation theology in Namibia.

The Lutheran World Federation (LWF), established in 1948 at the end of World War II, began as an international body dominated primarily by Westerners. German and Finnish missionaries represented Namibia; African pastors received little attention. However, Leonard Auala became a member of the LWF Executive Committee in 1963 and his influence in the organization slowly grew.\textsuperscript{16} Under the guidance of Bishop Auala, Sam Nujoma (leader of SWAPO), and other African representatives, the Lutheran World Federation adopted a breakthrough resolution on racism in 1970 at their Fifth Assembly in Evian, France. The “Statement on Racial Issues and Minority Problems,” ruled as follows:

Racial tensions throughout the world have created problems of such magnitude as to demand the attention of the whole Christian community. We regret and condemn all forms of racism and racial discrimination and hereby recommend that the LWF and its member churches utilize their

\textsuperscript{14} Martin Luther, “Secular Authority: To What Extent it Should be Obeyed, 1523,” ed. John Dillenberger, \textit{Martin Luther, Selections From His Writings} (New York: Doubleday, 1961).


resources and energies in the development of programs which will help to eliminate all forms of discrimination both in church and society.\(^{17}\)

The 1970 Evian resolution was a turning point for the international Lutheran community, and it offered the Namibian churches support in resisting apartheid. However, the real effect of Evian’s declarations remained limited, and it wasn’t until after the publication of the Open Letter that the old theology in Namibia began to break down. As Dr. J.L. de Vries, a Paulinum lecturer and President of ELCRN beginning in 1972, stated:

> Now the basis was laid for a revision of the theology of the Church. The Open Letter was a guideline I had to follow when I took over the leadership of the Church in 1972… I knew, now it was our church, our theology that was now to be shaped. The first step was to move away from the mission’s theology we had inherited.\(^{18}\)

After the Open Letter, de Vries and other Paulinum Seminary lecturers began instructing their students on the art of political preaching, highlighting themes of liberation throughout the Old and New Testament. Zephania Kameeta, a young theology student who had helped write the Open Letter, became particularly well known for his skillful adaptation of psalms in liberation literature. Collections of his liberation prayers, *The Sun is Rising: Meditations and Prayers from Namibia*\(^{19}\) and *Why, O Lord? Psalms and Sermons from Namibia*\(^{20}\), can still be found in Lutheran churches throughout America.

\(^{17}\) Minutes of the Fifth Assembly, Evian, 1970, LWF Archives, Geneva.


Political Implications of the Open Letter

Many anti-apartheid activists in South Africa immediately recognized the magnitude of the Lutherans’ 1971 declaration. *The Black Sash*, an anti-apartheid organization based in Johannesburg that published a monthly magazine, devoted half of its September issue to describing the Open Letter and its significance in Namibia. After reproducing in full the Open Letter and the letter to the congregations, the magazine included an article describing the incredible importance of the Lutherans’ declarations:

[The South African government] had become used to such statements from SWAPO and SWANU, the two best-known political parties struggling for South West African independence, and in their uniformed and off-hand way, had learned to shrug off such “indictments” as “distortion or exaggeration”. The disturbing factor in this case was that the action had come from, as the ‘Windhoek Advertiser’ termed them, “widely respected men… not given to political activism.” It was this departure that gave their action the greater impact, for in the past years of South West Africa’s political history the Lutheran Churches had remained for the most part disturbingly quiet when issues seriously affecting their 295,000 members had arisen, and many foreign political observers had written off the churches as a means of change in the Territory. The Administration was not slow to recognize the seriousness of the statements.  

The South African government, upon receiving a copy of the Open Letter, reacted with disbelief and indignation. Prime Minister Vorster maintained a well-known position towards the church in regards to politics. In a 1968 speech in South Africa, Vorster had raged against religious involvement in the government: “I want to say to these people, to these bishops and ministers of religion. Your job is to teach religion, to teach the word of Christ. Your job is not to turn your pulpits into political platforms.”

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22 Prime Minister Vorster, “South Africa and the Churches: Pulpits Must Not be Political Plateforms,” Natal Nationalist rally, Durban City Hall, September 23, 1968, quoted in *Southern Africa: A*
publication of the Open Letter and the ensuing popular reaction, Vorster gave a radio address stating that his government would “unshakably continue” with its apartheid policies in Namibia. The government then attempted to persuade Lutheran church leaders to readjust their stance on apartheid, and requested a meeting with Bishop Auala and other members of the Church Councils. When the dialogue took place on August 18, Auala refused to apologize for the Churches’ actions and elucidated the Church position towards the South African government. Although he spoke respectfully, calling the Prime Minister ‘Honourable’ and thanking him for the discussion opportunity, Auala remained immovable, stating:

We know that the church is the conscience of the people and must also be the conscience of the authorities… The truth pointed out by the churches in their open letter may no longer be concealed today. Otherwise we become guilty before the Lord God. We hopefully looked forward to this meeting and are very grateful for it. For the open letter is our cry of need.

Faced with the African Lutheran churches’ resolute opposition to apartheid rule, the South African government implemented its final tactic: violence.

On May 11, 1973, the ELCIN church printing press in Oniipa burned to the ground due to a planted bomb. Hundreds of copies of Bibles and school textbooks were destroyed. Bishop Auala held the South African authorities responsible, and believed the act to be retaliation for a recent publication that denounced the government’s fake

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24 Ibid.
Bantustan elections. Refusing to back down, church members rebuilt the printing press and rededicated it in 1975. The printing press was bombed two more times, and after each attack ELCIN church members rebuilt it. Persecution of church leaders increased significantly: South African soldiers detained and beat outspoken pastors, the government refused to issue visas to foreign church observers, and the movement of in-country church personnel was restricted. Prominent Lutheran pastors experienced increased intimidation from the South African police: Bishop Auala received death threats and was arrested, although the government allowed his release under pressure from Finland.

Emboldened church leaders led the legal opposition against South Africa’s wider campaign of brutality and violence towards the Namibian people, many of whom happened to be members of African Lutheran churches. Bishop Auala and Dr. JL de Vries started publicly campaigning for the cessation of public floggings and systematic torture. In April of 1973, the two church leaders met with Vorster and gave him a list of 37 names: these people, they informed the prime minister, wanted to testify in court that they had experienced severe torture at the hands of South African agents. Vorster responded that any torture could be blamed on rogue policemen during isolated incidents.


29 Interview with ELCIN pastor, 2008.
According to Heinz Hunke, a minister expelled from Namibia in 1978 and the co-author of *Torture: A Cancer in Our Society*, “Bishop Auala asked the very obvious question: if these were isolated irregularities, why were there special chambers with special equipment for torture sessions in Oshakati?” Vorster promised to investigate, and five months later, all 37 allegations were “proven” false. The churches, however, refused to allow the matter to drop so easily. Bishop Auala and Anglican Bishop Wood brought one of the victim’s cases to the Windhoek Supreme Court in November 1973. Two years later, after several losses and appeals, the Appellative Division court ruled that tribal authorities were no longer permitted to flog peaceful citizens on account of their political sympathies. Despite the new law, members and supporters of Namibia’s liberation party, the South West Africa People’s Organization (SWAPO), continued to experience persecution. According to Hunke, “procuring legal assistance became a very important aspect of the Churches’ activity.” The churches disseminated information on legal procedure to the wider population: in a 1977 document, *Statement on Torture,* church leaders advised victims to immediately see a medical doctor, take photographs of their injuries, consult a lawyer, and call the magistrate. The government, of course, immediately banned the brochure.

The Open Letter also contributed to an increased political consciousness within the Namibian population. Due to the letter’s numerous references to the Universal


31 Ibid.

32 Ibid, 98.

Declaration of Human Rights, the churches translated and distributed copies of the document throughout every congregation, reaching over 60% of the population. As study groups formed to analyze the Open Letter and its implications, the Human Rights document received intense scrutiny.\textsuperscript{34} The churches also began to closely align themselves with the South West Africa People’s Organization (SWAPO), the main liberation party in Namibia. Although the churches had associated with SWAPO prior to 1971, ecumenical leaders had remained cautious about identifying with the political party too closely. Of particular concern had been SWAPO’s decision to launch an armed struggle against the South African government. Many pastors wanted to remain detached from the violent aspect of the liberation struggle. However, after 1971 and the obvious resistance of the South African government to both the ICJ decision and attempted Church negotiations, the Lutheran church and its members could no longer deny that violence was necessary. As Peter Katjavivi, a prominent SWAPO member and Namibian historian, argued: “Faced with the injustice of South African rule and the thwarted attempts to bring about peaceful change, most Namibians, church members or not, have come to accept the practical inevitability of an armed struggle.”\textsuperscript{35}

As SWAPO and the Lutheran churches’ first joint move, they publicly endorsed the worker’s strikes of December 1971-January 1972. Contract workers led and organized a strike of 6,000 men in Katutura (a township outside of Windhoek). The strike spread to Walvis Bay and to the diamond and copper mines, and at its peak involved between 13,000 and 20,000 workers.\textsuperscript{36} The South African government grossly

\textsuperscript{34} Hunke, 92.

\textsuperscript{35} Katjavivi, \textit{Church and Liberation in Namibia}, 12.

\textsuperscript{36} Katjavivi, \textit{History of Resistance}, 68.
miscalculated their relationship with Bishop Auala and asked him to attend a meeting between the workers and government representatives in order to ‘calm’ the crowd. When Auala mounted the stage, after hearing the complaints of the workers, he stated: “then you have no choice but to go on strike.” While some inside the government accused the churches of planning the strike, Bishop Auala denied the allegations. When asked, he stated straightforwardly: “This is not true. We supported it, but we did not start it.”

The Church, however, openly prayed for SWAPO and those workers leading the resistance movement. The churches’ alliance with SWAPO grew even tighter after the UN General Assembly declared, in December 1973, that “the South West Africa People’s Organization is the authentic representative of the Namibian people.” In Namibia, it was widely said that “the ‘people’ are SWAPO and the ‘people’ are the church.”

The politicization of the Lutheran churches grew further as ecumenical bodies within Namibia began to form. In 1972, ELCRN and ELCIN joined together, forming a Lutheran body known as the United Evangelical Lutheran Church of South West Africa (UELCSWA or VELKSWA). After the Anglican and Catholic endorsements of the Lutherans’ Open Letter, inter-denominational cooperation increased. In 1974, the UELCSWA joined with the Roman Catholics, Anglicans, and Congregational Churches

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37 Hunke, 93.

38 Auala, The Ovambo: Our Problems and Hopes, 18.

39 Interview with ELCIN pastor, 2008.


to form the Christian Centre in Windhoek. Together they worked to further the cause of human rights in Namibia. On June 18, 1976, the Christian Centre wrote a public letter to Dr. Henry Kissinger, the Secretary of State in the U.S.A. The ecumenical body decried the “discriminatory political policies which have been so callously implemented” by South Africa and “the ever-increasing rule of terror which has been inflicted on the people (especially by way of arbitrary arrest, indefinite detention and brutal torture.)”

International advocacy from the Namibian churches increased with the creation, in 1978, of the ecumenical community known as the Council of Churches in Namibia (CCN).\textsuperscript{43} The CCN consisted of six individual churches: the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Namibia (ELCIN), the Evangelical Lutheran Ovambokavango Church (ELCRN), the German Evangelical Lutheran Church (GELC)\textsuperscript{44}, the Anglican Church in Namibia, and the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AMEC). The Roman Catholic Church in Windhoek and the Evangelical Reformed Church in Africa received observer status.\textsuperscript{45} These bodies became powerhouses in Namibian liberation politics, and worked with SWAPO to petition the South African government and international organizations for Namibia’s freedom. The CCN lobbied the United Nations, the Western Contact Group (made up of representatives from the USA, France, Britain, Canada, and West Germany), and ecumenical bodies throughout the world. A delegation from the Council

\textsuperscript{42} “Open Letter to Dr. Henry Kissinger, Secretary of State, United States of America,” Windhoek, June 18, 1976, reprinted in Peter Katjavivi, Per Frostin, and Kaire Mbuende, eds., \textit{Church and Liberation in Namibia} (London: Pluto Press, 1989), 139-142.

\textsuperscript{43} Katjavivi, \textit{Church and Liberation in Namibia}, 37-38.

\textsuperscript{44} The majority-white GELC dissociated itself from every public statement made by the CCN and strongly opposed the inclusion of SWAPO members in the Council.

\textsuperscript{45} Hunke, 106-112.
of Churches personally visited political bodies in ten world capitals, asking for their assistance in liberating Namibia.⁴⁶

**Role of International Lutheran Community**

The particularly strong international support garnered from Lutheran congregations became extremely important to the Namibian liberation effort: their interest in Namibia opened up networks of communication and brought in much-needed financial resources. Few people outside of Africa had heard of Namibia prior to 1971: despite boasting a population in which 92% of people declared themselves Christian and over 60% specifically identified as Lutherans, Namibia remained a relatively unknown country.⁴⁷ The main method of communication with the wider world was through state-controlled radio, and few Namibians had ever traveled outside of the country.⁴⁸ With the help of individual Lutheran congregations and the international Lutheran World Federation, Namibia’s plight became known to ordinary people and Namibians’ voices began to be heard.

After the Lutheran World Federation distributed copies of the Open Letter to its member churches and publicized the plight of black Namibians, Lutheran congregations and seminaries around the globe started sponsoring Namibian students to travel and study at Western institutions. In 1971, the Wartburg Seminary in Dubuque, Iowa began

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⁴⁸ *That South West Africa May Become a Self-Sufficient and Independent State, 7.*
offering scholarships to young Namibian pastors. The seminary enrolled them in graduate courses and found them housing. These Namibian visitors joined American Lutheran congregations and began to share their stories. For the first time, Americans heard firsthand the brutality inflicted upon black Namibians by the South African apartheid regime. The Wartburg Seminary’s first Namibian student, Abisai Shejavali, told American congregants about his father, a retired Lutheran pastor: “South African soldiers came and brutally beat him and raped and blinded his wife.” Other Namibians recounted stories of brutal public floggings and cruel South African police. Similar personal connections formed between members of the Evangelical Church in Germany and the Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Church, both of which invited young Namibian students to study abroad and receive the education denied to them by South Africa’s apartheid system.

International communication networks broadened further as Namibian students and pastors volunteered to speak in public about the events occurring at home. As one Namibian recounted,

We would accept invitations to speak at any little groups. Mainly it was women’s church groups that Selma and I would speak to…. Wartburg for the next 30 years always had Namibian pastors there, so with each succeeding year there was greater impact. Emma Mujoro was a Namibian pastor and she and I traveled hundreds and hundreds of miles on the back roads of Wisconsin and Iowa, talking about the situation in Namibia.

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50 Ibid.


52 Solveig and Peter Kjeseth, 177.
When the seminary students returned home to Namibia after years of living abroad, they stayed in contact with their foreign host families, friends, and Lutheran congregations. Through letters, photos, and the occasional international phone call, news regarding the deteriorating situation in Namibia spread. The Wartburg Theological Seminary alone organized over 10,000 American Lutherans to lobby for Namibian independence from South Africa. Their mailing list contained over 11,000 addresses and represented individuals in every state.53

Lutherans around the world knew about the plight of black Namibians and took serious measures to end South Africa’s brutal occupation. In Germany during the 1980s, Lutheran parishioners marched on the South African embassy demanding the independence of Namibia,54 and hundreds of Finnish Lutherans protested after South African authorities briefly arrested Leonard Auala.55 They pushed for divestment from South Africa, both within their churches and within the government. In America during the 1984 and 1988 presidential primaries in Iowa, members of the Lutheran network succeeded in discussing Namibia with the candidates. Namibia quickly became the Lutheran community’s most visible cause: “even many Reagan Republicans were persuaded to support SWAPO, telling their representatives that the SWAPO guerrillas, far from being “communist terrorists,” were “good Lutherans.”56 As one pastor wrote,

It was very much a really grassroots movement. Just about everybody in the network had a passion for Namibia because it had become real for

53 Solveig and Peter Kjeseth, 177.
54 Interview with ELCRN pastor, 2008.
55 Interview with ELCIN pastor, 2008.
them; it was real people that they had gotten to know. It was the Shejavilis and the !Noabebos and the Mujoros and the Nambalas and the Uahengos and the Shivutes. It became so much more than an abstract political issue.57

As ordinary Lutheran citizens around the world became more informed and involved in the struggle for Namibia, so too did international Lutheran organizations. The Open Letter secured Auala’s role as speaker for the Namibia’s large Lutheran congregations, and with his encouragement the LWF deepened their ties with Namibian churches and clarified their opposition to South Africa’s brutality.

In its official declarations, the Lutheran World Federation remained adamant that apartheid constituted a special problem for the churches. Their strongest declaration came in 1977, when the LWF declared apartheid a status confessionis: “This means that, on the basis of faith and in order to manifest the unity of the church, churches would publicly and unequivocally reject the existing apartheid system.”58 Again, in 1982, the LWF issued an official call to its member congregations, urging individuals to contact their government representatives and express concern over the issue of South African occupation in Namibia.59 The LWF sent another resolution to all of its member churches in 1985, asking them to divest from any South African companies or funds. The international organization additionally called for “education within our constituencies about the situation in South Africa and Namibia, and about racism in our own

57 Solveig and Peter Kjeseth, 178.


59 Executive Committee Meeting Minutes, 1982, Vancouver, Canada, Lutheran World Federation Archives, Geneva, Switzerland.
They encouraged the maintenance of strong communication networks, calling on member churches “to continue visitation, cooperation, and close contacts with the Lutheran churches in South Africa and Namibia.” In response, Evangelical Lutheran churches around the world established their own Namibia Concerns Committees.

Politically, the LWF maintained a strong relationship with the United Nations. From 1972-1973, the General Secretary of the LWF, André Appel, repeatedly traveled to the UN headquarters in New York to met with the UN Council for Namibia. Due to the Lutherans’ unparalleled access to the people of Namibia, the Council requested that the LWF help keep them informed regarding the political situation in Namibia, and asked for advice regarding possible actions. They requested that the LWF brief ambassadors on Namibian affairs. Additionally, the Council specifically mentioned the enormous impact made by the Open Letter within the UN: “it had done more good than a thousand communiqués issued in New York.”

Throughout Namibia’s struggle for independence, the Lutheran World Federation provided tremendous legal assistance to the victims of South African brutality. In response to the 1975 arrest of six SWAPO officials, the LWF hired an accomplished American lawyer to defend the prisoners. Legal fees of over $120,000 accrued during the course of the trial, but the Lutheran World Federation paid the fees with money collected

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60 Executive Committee Meeting Minutes, 1985, Geneva, Switzerland, Lutheran World Federation Archives, Geneva, Switzerland.

61 Ibid.

62 Solveig and Peter Kjeseth, 177.

from their international congregations. Additionally, the LWF paid for two international legal observers to periodically monitor the trial.\textsuperscript{64} In 1977, the LWF sent another observer to attend the trial of four Namibians (three Lutheran, one Roman Catholic) in Bloemfontein.\textsuperscript{65}

During the 1970s and 1980s, the Lutheran World Federation financially sponsored the international travel of Namibian pastors. The LWF paid for flights to Western countries and assisted in the difficult process of obtaining a passport from the South African government. These pastors visited churches all over the United States and Europe, preaching about God, Namibia, and the realities of apartheid. As the influential Pastor Zephania Kameeta proclaimed at one such visit,

\begin{quote}
The way of life in South Africa and Namibia, based on the policy of apartheid, is directly opposed to the good news that God through Christ has removed the walls of separation between himself and human persons…. The differences of nationalities, languages and cultures, which are gifts of God to enrich humanity, are used by the apartheid regime as bricks to build walls of division between races and people…. all Christians must stand together in breaking down divisive ethnic barriers to promote the unity of the oppressed in Southern Africa.\textsuperscript{66}
\end{quote}

In the process of these international pastoral visits, contacts were created and international communication networks strengthened.\textsuperscript{67} When it became more difficult for Namibians to obtain passports and to travel abroad, European and American delegates

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{64} Hunke, 99.
\item \textsuperscript{65} Executive Committee Meeting Minutes, February 20-25, 1977, Divonne, France, Lutheran World Federation Archives, Geneva, Switzerland.
\item \textsuperscript{66} Kameeta, \textit{Why, O Lord?}, 61.
\item \textsuperscript{67} LWF Executive Committee Meeting Minutes, July 21-27, 1974, U.S.A, \textit{LWF and Southern Africa}, 15.
\end{itemize}
from the LWF arrived in Namibia to monitor the situation and maintain networks of communication and friendship.\textsuperscript{68}

With ideological and monetary support from Lutheran churches and individuals, the Lutheran World Federation created programs to assist thousands of Namibian refugees. They established refugee camps in bordering countries, and focused their efforts on Botswana because of the large number of orphaned Namibian children flooding into the country. With generous donations from international congregations, the Lutheran World Federation bought over 100 large tents, 5,000 woolen blankets, and hundreds of boxes of warm clothing for the young refugees. The LWF requested that Lutheran schools throughout Africa volunteer to place refugee students in their educational institutions: churches in Liberia, Tanzania, and Nigeria responded to the call.\textsuperscript{69} Heinz Hunke reported in 1980, “The LWF has given its fullest attention to the aid of refugees. Information trips, consultations, and substantial financial aid have been made possible.”\textsuperscript{70} The Lutheran World Federation had quickly evolved into one of Namibia’s greatest benefactors.

The clarity of purpose and the bravery evident in the Open Letter of 1971 inspired thousands inside and outside of Namibia to contribute to the fight for liberation. Be it politicians in the UN, middle-aged Lutherans in Iowa, LWF Executive Committee

\textsuperscript{68} LWF Executive Committee Meeting Minutes, August 17-23, 1975, Holland, \textit{LWF and Southern Africa}, 51.


\textsuperscript{70} Hunke, 101.
members, or non-political Namibian churchgoers, they were all inspired by the Open Letter to join in Namibia’s war of independence.
Conclusion

Let us not forget our Lord
who is holding the whole world in his hands,
the God of Namibia!
He has come to the help of those
who cried for freedom.
The liberation of which we hoped
and dreamed has become a reality through Jesus Christ, his Son.
Together with him we will break the chains of slavery
and break down the walls of separation.

In a nation where over 90% of the population faithfuly attends church at least once a week, the role of religion in politics cannot be discounted. The evolution of the Lutheran Church in Namibia greatly impacted the political situation in the country, first by encouraging colonization and later by attacking it. Lutherans inside and outside of Namibia provided much-needed support and a sense of legitimacy in the war of Namibian independence.

The Open Letter signaled the final shift in the Lutheran Church’s mindset in Namibia. This document showed Namibian congregations and the world that the large Lutheran churches would no longer remain silent and complacent, but would finally stand up to the South African apartheid government. Churches had remained one of the government’s last reliable pillars of support in Namibia; when the two largest Christian bodies publicly declared their opposition to apartheid in 1971, the South African government had nothing left to lean on. Inspired by the Open Letter and its bold declaration of opposition to apartheid, the Lutheran World Federation became deeply invested in Namibia and its independence struggle. Through publicity, monetary support,

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and legal assistance, the LWF developed into one of Namibia’s greatest international allies. After the Open Letter and its impressive impact, individual Lutheran congregations around the world learned of Namibia’s plight and became thoroughly invested in the cause of Namibian independence.

While the Open Letter signaled the final transformation of the Lutheran Church in Namibia, change first began during the Africanization of the churches. African leaders like Leonard Auala and J.L. de Vries led the way in forming independent Lutheran churches guided by ‘sons of the soil.’ It is certain that the Open Letter could not have come from a traditional missionary church. In fact, the small German Evangelical Lutheran Church, which retained white German missionaries for its majority-white congregations, opposed the Open Letter and issued a statement condemning its political nature.² For its racist attitude and refusal to condemn apartheid, the Lutheran World Federation withdrew the GELC’s membership in 1984.³

Eventually, Namibians received the liberation for which they had worked so hard. The South African government finally agreed, in 1988, to implement UN Resolution 435, which called for “the withdrawal of South Africa’s illegal administration from Namibia and the transfer of power to the people.”⁴ However, South Africa’s cooperation hinged upon the withdrawal of Cuban forces from Angola. To South Africa’s surprise, both

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³ Minutes of the Seventh Assembly, 1985, Budapest, LWF Archives, Geneva, Switzerland, 16.
Cuba and Angola agreed to this condition in December 1988. For over a year and a half, South Africa stalled, establishing a secret police force, Koevoet, in an attempt to dismantle the peace process. Despite South African violence and lack of cooperation, the United Nations set the date for the popular election as November 11, 1989. The Council of Churches in Namibia was asked to partner with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in order to repatriate Namibian refugees and disseminate information about elections. The Lutheran World Federation served on an assisting ecumenical observer team. SWAPO easily won the elections, which the UN deemed free and fair, but remained just shy of the two-thirds majority. A new Constitution was adopted on February 9, 1990. On March 21, 1990, Namibia officially declared its independence from South Africa, and SWAPO took on its new role in governing the country. Sam Nujoma, the long-time leader of SWAPO, served as President from 1990 through 2005.

Today, the Lutheran churches in Namibia see themselves as the conscience of a government struggling with the lasting effects of apartheid. Corruption, wealth inequality, and misplaced loyalty are all problems in present-day Namibian politics, but in the words of one ELCIN pastor: “the Church remembers, it is not sleeping, and it will point to both wrongdoing and rightdoing in the government.”

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6 “UNTAG Background.”

7 Executive Committee Meeting Minutes, July-August 1989, Geneva, Lutheran World Federation Archives, Geneva, Switzerland.

8 “UNTAG Background.”

9 Interview with ELCIN pastor, 2008.
Lutheran World Federation 31/71

OPEN LETTER TO HIS HONOUR THE PRIME MINISTER OF SOUTH AFRICA

THE CHURCH BOARDS:

Evangelical Lutheran Ovambo Church
P.B. 3013, Otjiwarongo, Ovamboland

Evangelical Lutheran Church in SWA
(Rhenish Mission Church)
P.O. Box 5069, Windhoek

His Honour,
The Prime Minister,
Mr. B.J. Vorster,
PRETORIA.

His Honour,

After the decision of the World Court at the Hague was made known on 21st June, 1971, several leaders and officials of our Lutheran Churches were individually approached by representatives of the authorities with a view to making known their views. This indicates to us that public institutions are interested in hearing the opinions of the Churches in this connection. Therefore we would like to make use of the opportunity of informing your Honour of the opinion of the Church Boards of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in SWA and the Evangelical Lutheran Ovambo Church which represents the majority of the indigenous population of South West Africa.

We believe that South Africa in its attempts to develop South West Africa has failed to take cognizance of Human Rights as declared by U.N.O. in the year 1948 with respect to the non-white population. Allow us to put forward the following examples in this connection:

(1) The government maintains that by the race policy it implements in our country, it promotes and preserves the life and freedom of the population. But in fact the non-white population is continuously being slighted and intimidated in their daily lives. Our people are not free and by the way they are treated they do not feel safe. In this regard we wish to refer to Section 3 of Human Rights.

(2) We cannot do otherwise than regard South West Africa, with all its racial groups, as a unit. By the Group Areas Legislation the people are denied the right of free movement and accommodation within the borders of the country. This cannot be reconciled with Section 13 of the Human Rights.

(3) People are not free to express or publish their thoughts or opinions openly. Many experience humiliating espionage and intimidation which has as its goal that a public and accepted opinion must be expressed, but not one held at heart and of which they are convinced. How can sections 18 and 19 of the Human Rights be realized under such circumstances?

(MORE)
Lutheran World Federation 31/71

(4) The implementation of the policy of the government makes it impossible for the political parties of the indigenous people to work together in a really responsible and democratic manner to build the future of the whole of South West Africa. We believe that it is important in this connection that the use of voting rights should also be allowed to the non-white population. (Section 20 and 21 of the Human Rights)

(5) Through the application of Job Reservation the right to a free choice of profession is hindered and this causes low remuneration and unemployment. There can be no doubt that the contract system breaks up a healthy life because the prohibition of a person from living where he works, hinders the cohabitation of families. This conflicts with sections 23 and 25 of the Human Rights.

The Church Boards' urgent wish is that in terms of the declarations of the World Court and in cooperation with U.N.O. of which South Africa is a member, your government will seek a peaceful solution to the problems of our land and will see to it that Human Rights be put into operation and that South West Africa may become a self-sufficient and independent State.

With high Esteem,

Bishop Dr. L. Ausala
Chairman of the Church Board of the Ew. Luth. Ovambokavango Church

Moderator Pastor P. Goasheh
Chairman of the Church Board of the Ew. Luth. Church in S.W.A. (Sherinsh Mission Church)

Windhoek, 30th June, 1971.
Appendix B

Lutheran World Federation 31/71

EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN OVAMBOKAVANGO CHURCH

EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH IN S.W. AFRICA (RHENISH MISSION CHURCH)

THE CHURCH BOARDS

To the Congregations and Members of the
Evangelical Lutheran Ovambokavango Church and
The Evangelical Lutheran Church in S.W.A. (Rhenish Mission Church)

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Jesus Christ,

We greet you with the words of Jesus: "Peace be with you" (John 20:19). On the 30 June, 1971, we gathered together as the Church Boards of our two Lutheran Churches because we felt that we must direct words of leadership and guidance to our congregations in this hour of need.

We are concerned about the future of this country and about the future of the various peoples who live here. We not only feel this concern today but because of the judgment of the World Court given on the 21st June, 1971, we can no longer remain silent. We feel that if we, as the Church remain silent any longer, we will become liable for the life and future of our country and its people.

The judgment of the World Court was the answer to the prayer of many of our people, because this judgment involves the hope of freedom and recognition of personal worth. We believe that our people would not have taken themselves to other bodies and also not to the U.N.O. if the Government of South Africa had not withheld from them the basic rights of man.

The mandate which was given to South Africa included the obligation to create conditions of peace and freedom and to guarantee such conditions for all the inhabitants of South West Africa.

True peace does not allow people to hate each other. But we observe that our people are caught up with fear and that the hate between people is increasing, especially between white and non-white. In our opinion this fatal development is caused and upheld by the policy of apartheid. We believe that a false impression arises when it is stated that peace reigns in our country. The peace is maintained by forceful measures.

To the freedom of the people belongs also the freedom of the spread of the gospel. We are concerned that Christians of various population groups are hindered by numerous laws and regulations from freely gathering together for the word of God.

As a result of the application of the Group Areas Laws the activities of the Church are severely restricted and the unity of the various races of the Church curtailed. Individual Ministers of the Gospel and Christians are filled with fear and distrusted. They are also sometimes hindered in their evangelizing by the refusal of permits.

(MORE)
The true development of the inhabitants of South West Africa on a Christian basis ought to lead to unity and fraternity between the races. We are convinced that this must be the lasting goal for further and future development. The Government, by the application of the Homelands Policy, constitutes to the creation and continuation forever of the divisions between the races. It is stated that this policy is intended to lead the races to self-government and independence. But our small race groups cannot really be aided by separation. They will be isolated and denied the chance to take a proper part in the development of the country.

We want to also inform the members of our congregations that we are determined to inform the Government of this state of affairs and of our conviction of what changes must occur. We appeal to you to maintain the peace and with a peaceful disposition to continue seeking our brothers in all racial groups. We want to advise you also to build bridges and not to break down contact.

Dear Congregations, we as your Church Boards do not intend sowing seeds of animosity, discord and strife. Our purpose is to stand for the truth and for a better future for our people and races, even when it involves suffering for us.

May the Lord be with you in His Mercy and give you guidance through His Spirit. Let us continue praying for all authorities (1 Tim. 2:1-2), so that they may be prepared to alter the grievous circumstances and to take cognizance of the true interests of this country and its people.

On behalf of the two Church Boards

signed:  
Dr. Leonard Ausala  
Chairman of the Church Board  
of the Ev. Luth. Ovambokavango Church

signed:  
Paulus Gwaseb  
Chairman of the Church Board  
of the Ev. Luth. Church in S.W.A.  
(Shenish Mission Church)

Windhoek, 30th June, 1971.
DIALOGUE WITH THE PRIME MINISTER

In response to the open letter the Prime Minister met with church leaders in Windhoek. What follows is Bishop Aula's inaugural address at the interview with the Prime Minister on August 18th, 1971:

The Honourable, the Prime Minister, and all the eminent officials of the South African Government.

It is an honour and a privilege for me and my brethren from the Church Councils to stand before you today in the dialogue which has been granted and arranged by the Hon. The Prime Minister. I have been asked to state our case with this introduction and to explain what we have to discuss during our negotiations today.

As leaders of our two Lutheran Churches in South West Africa we wrote an open letter to the Hon. the Prime Minister. We did so because we as leaders bear a responsibility towards the members of our congregations, but also towards the authorities. The Lord appointed us as pastors. The pastoral office is also a watchman's office as we read in Ezekiel 3: 17-21: 'Son of man, I have made thee a watchman unto the house of Israel: therefore hear the word at my mouth and give them warning from me.'

After the verdict of the World Court and the reply to it by the Hon. the Prime Minister were made known to us, we were asked: What is the opinion of the churches on these matters? We aired our opinion in the letter to the Hon. the Prime Minister. But our people in the congregations also had many questions in connection with the verdict of the World Court and the reply to it by the Hon. the Prime Minister. We felt, therefore, that we should also address a pastoral message to them. The main points in both letters are the same, only with the difference of what we expect from our people and the things we expect from our Government.

What we ask of the South African Government is to grant human rights fully also to the indigenous population. In this way a relationship between the Whites and the non-Whites can develop which is based on the equal dignity of all men. Our people are suffering because they are denied human rights.
We remember the attempts of the Government to develop our country. Much money was spent on schools and hospitals and better external facilities. We recognised this with appreciation. But the policy of apartheid which separates people from each other and treats us non-Whites in an inferior manner in everyday life through many laws precludes joy at the plans for development. Here a change has to come otherwise the future of our country and its people will be dark.

We are subjects of the Government, but Baasskap forces us to be the subjects of every White man. We are forced to call every White man 'baas.' Many local people are reviled or assaulted because they have called the White man not 'baas' but 'mister.' Even though the White man is not my employer I must call him 'baas' otherwise things go awry.

There is much to be said about the conduct of the police. They are abusing their powers. Innocent people among us have been beaten and tortured. They have been given electrical shocks and intimidated. Guns were pointed at them and they were threatened with death. These things have been going on arbitrarily. According to the Bible only the wrongdoer should fear the sword of authority (Romans 13: 1; 1 Peter 2: 14). But today all of us fear the police. They do not treat us as human beings but as an evil.

We are recognised as people in our own right and now and then well treated as human beings by a mere handful of Whites. But when they do this they are contravening the policy of the Government. They can be prosecuted. But for us it is a cooling drop of water in our burning thirst for human rights. How long still must Whites break the law if they treat non-Whites as human beings?

At this point let me refer to the fact that we do not have the right to move around freely within South West Africa. The indigenous person feels homeless because of the pass laws which hamper even church attendance. He does not have the right granted every White man. Ovamboland and other homelands have many sights worth seeing. The Whites may enjoy them as tourists. But our Churches were not allowed to establish a retreat in Swakopmund where our pastors could go for a holiday to have a good rest from their work.

Families Broken

Our indigenous population may only enjoy its rights in the homelands.
In the homelands we can experience our human rights, but not in Tsumeb or Otjiwarongo or in Windhoek. According to policy all must go to the homelands. Only the non-White contract labourer may later leave the homeland for a longer period because the Whites need him. The contract system is today already a great evil which shatters many families and brings great misery to families. According to policy, the system is being developed still further. In the year 1967 already I approached the Government and asked for the contract system to be changed. I saw the erstwhile Commissioner General at Ondangwa and Oshakati. I visited the Chief Commissioner of Bantu Affairs in Windhoek. All they said was: It is impossible to bring about a change.

After that I took the matter to Pretoria and told of all the problems which we experience in the congregations, in the marriages of the men who are away practically all their lives. I was told that the matter was enjoying attention. But now the contract system is developing so that it is assuming even greater proportions through the homelands policy. It is not the will of the Lord that husband and wife and families should be thus torn apart, frequently to live in sin and adultery. This way of life breaks up many marriages and will eventually have a disruptive effect upon the whole of society. This development is supported by the policy.

The policy of apartheid is constantly being criticised overseas as well as locally. All the criticisms of the apartheid policy will never be stopped if the Government continues to whitewash apartheid, but only through discussions like this, so that real changes can take place. We must know that the church is the conscience of the people and must also be the conscience of the authorities. This is the injunction which the Church received from its master Jesus Christ. We must perform the pastoral and the watchman’s office. The truth pointed out by the churches in their open letter may no longer be concealed today. Otherwise we become guilty before the Lord God. We hopefully looked forward to this meeting and are very grateful for it. For the open letter is our cry of need.

When our people listened to your words after the announcement of the verdict of the World Court, when you said on the radio that South Africa would unshakably continue with South West as before then our people understood that you intended consolidating the present conditions and all the bad treatment flowing from it for ever.
Apartheid the Mother

Apartheid is the mother of all the problems in the relationship between the indigenous and the white people. Perhaps the supporters of apartheid thought that the indigenous people would thereby respect the Whites. But we see the problems growing larger. We are regarded as inferior so that bitter hatred arises in the hearts of those who are despised and humiliated. Through this hatred some of our people have already tried to pay the Whites back with acts of revenge.

The development of South West Africa needs both hands, the white hand and the black hand. But we find that it is expected of the black hand to make its contribution with closed eyes and a shut up mouth.

Before the Odendaal Plan was formulated I was also questioned by the commission in the year 1963. In the year 1964, when the Hon. Mr. de Wet Nel proclaimed the Odendaal Plan in Ovamboland I warned at a big meeting against moving people to the homelands against their will. After that we submitted two further joint memoranda to the Government of South Africa, one in 1964 and one in 1967, on account of the homelands and the removals of people. In our letter we said that our nations are too small for each of them to be truly independent. We are being set apart in remote parts of South West Africa. This will later on make us even more dependent upon the Whites who keep the greatest powers in their own hands. This will not lead to peaceful relationships in the future. We therefore said that South West Africa must remain a unit in which everyone contributes an equal share and receives equal treatment. We know and believe that the unity of Whites is not disrupted by their variety of descent. The Whites of various nations respect each other, and all move freely in the whole country of South West Africa. No distinctions are drawn between them. Why does the homelands policy make of us strangers in our own country in which we were born and grew up?

Christian Unity

The indigenous people were antagonistic towards each other when they still belonged to heathendom. But praise the Lord, the gospel of peace has brought us together (Gal. 3: 27-28; Ephes. 2: 13-18): 'There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female; for ye are all one in Jesus Christ.' The unity in our churches is based on a Christian foundation. So also the unity of the peoples of South West Africa can only be based
on a Christian foundation. We experience the unity even though we are members of various races.

The better relationship between the groups and the mutual respect for each other as human beings are not brought about by the separation and setting-apart in homelands, but by mutually respecting each other in a Christian spirit in society. The development of the whole country will be speeded up if all of us, Whites as well as the indigenous peoples, stand next to each other hand in hand for the same purpose.

But if we are divided, not only will the development be hampered, but we shall also become estranged from each other. Especially also when the Government sows doubt and suspicion among the indigenous people and thus tries to break down the unity which was established by the gospel.

Our country South West Africa with its many districts is only one. It is not a South West Africa with many isolated little countries. We therefore asked the Government to plan and to help that this course towards the unity and independence of the country should be adopted; that the Government should prepare for the purpose that the whole country can be independent, to stand on its own feet with the support of South Africa.

I finally wish to express my gratitude that you were so patient in listening to me and I humbly ask that you, the Hon. the Prime Minister, go in upon the matters raised in our open letter during the discussions, and that you find solutions according to your wisdom.
Figure 3

Namibia: the thirteen new regions, indicating the differences from the former Bantustan boundaries.
Bibliography

**PRIMARY SOURCES**


‘That South West Africa May Become a Self-Sufficient and Independent State’:


SECONDARY SOURCES


