

## Report on the Visit to Wuppertal on 23 February 2019

*(A separate report without pictures is available)*

Bishops Brian Abrahams (Moravian Church, Western Cape), Horst Müller (President of LUCSA), Gilbert Filter (Chair of PETER, LUCSA)

### 1 Background

On Sunday afternoon, 30 December 2018, a fire started at the Wuppertal Mission Station. Wind, palm trees and reed-roofs combined resulted in an incredibly fast spreading fire. Within 2 hours 53 homes, community centre, school hostel, parsonage and shops were destroyed.

As if by miracle half the village was spared when the fire was contained halfway down the lanes of houses. It also stopped short of the church and post office on the other end.



*Ruins of the hostel. In the background the palm trees that helped spreading the flames like burning torches*

### 2 Purpose of the visit

The Moravian Church of SA is a member of the Lutheran Communion in Southern Africa (LUCSA) and of the Lutheran World Federation. (LWF)

Bishops Müller and Filter from LUCSA, accompanied by Bishop Brian Abrahams, visited Wuppertal in order to get first hand information from and interaction with Church leadership and the local community. We were guided there by Mr Wilfred Solomon-Johannes, Chairman Wuppertal Fire Disaster Management Team.



*Just a small portion of the large donation of goods received so far*



*Volunteers preparing food donations for distribution*

The fire catastrophe received broad attention across all media in South Africa. Substantial help came in from all over the country, mostly in the form of clothing and food, and also monetary donations. (The arrival of beds donated for the hostel children was greeted with jubilation!)



*The arrival of new hostel beds caused much jubilation*

Politicians and local government also gave it much attention, resulting in promises of substantial help with the re-building. In order for this to happen some legal restrictions will have to be lifted so that the authorities will be able to build on private land.

The normal flow of events however is that this help gradually decreases, and with a next catastrophe elsewhere, the community is then forgotten.

The re-building of so much infrastructure takes time, and by the time the shells are complete and the furnishing needs to be done, help is forgotten and the real struggle begins.

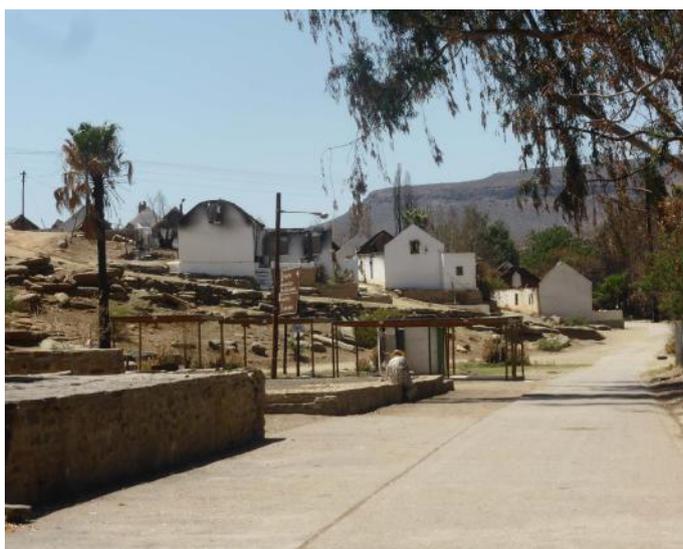
In the case of Wupperthal, the local community and the MCSA Congregation are virtually identical. "Religious needs" of such a community are not covered by general appeals for help and incoming donations. This invites the Lutheran Communion to consider a different and special approach towards support.

Furthermore, a disaster of this nature and scope normally also brings with it indirect damage and costs and other long term effects that need support over an extended period of time.

With this visit we wish to prepare for this long term view by asking: What help will be needed 6, 12, 18 and 24 months down the line? How can LUCSA member churches and the LWF member churches become involved? What are the "gaps" in support, that need attention, especially in view of the religious community? How can these gaps be addressed?

### 3 Observations during the visit

3.1 Much cleaning and tidying has happened during the first 50 days. No rubble was lying around, and buildings that could be cleared, have been cleared and rubble removed. Due to asbestos pollution danger, that was only realised during the early cleanup phase, access to most buildings is now restricted and all work halted, until the asbestos can be safely removed and properly disposed of. For this to happen substantial funds R1.3 Million) have to be raised. This results in frustration amongst the community, since they want to continue with the house-internal cleaning, demolition and rebuilding.



*Only the burnt ruins and scorched plants tell of the inferno that happened 50 days earlier. The roads are neat, the rubble cleared.*



*Wilfred Solomon-Johannes, Chairman Wupperthal Fire Disaster Management Team in the Church that was spared*

3.2 Wupperthal Fire Disaster Management Team has been established to lead and manage the re-building process and various persons have specific tasks. Whatever can be done, is being done.

3.3 Government is actively involved in establishing a temporal hostel for the 150+ hostel learners, with a long term solution in mind. Beds have been donated, and the unutilised former Rooibos sheds are being transformed into dormitories. The aim is to have these ready within the next two weeks, since the current emergency accommodation is extremely basic - mainly two classrooms that were emptied, with mattresses on the floor.

3.4 The pre-school/creche has been destroyed. Stellenbosch University is assisting with providing new structures. This is receiving urgent attention.

3.5 Brass music is part of the heart beat of the community. A substantial number of brass instruments were destroyed in the fire. A Western Cape brass ensemble has made it it's task to replace the brass instruments that were destroyed in the fire. A concert was planned for this afternoon (23 Feb) during which they are going to hand over the instruments. A Tuba however, as most expensive brass instrument, is still to be found or fund raised.

3.6 A huge amount of donations in kind, especially clothing, and to a lesser degree utensils, was received, delivered to Wupperthal, sorted and distributed. There is an over-abundance of clothing, so that clothes donations are no longer needed. Utensils will be needed once the homes have been re-built.

3.7 Large amounts of food and general groceries are being received. With the destruction of all shops, the whole community is in need of this. A storage space has been assigned, where volunteers sort the food, and where the community can then collect what is needed.

3.8 Farmers close by and businesses in the towns close by have made available cool rooms for perishables, which are then ferried to Wupperthal on an almost daily basis.

3.9 Some Farmers have also made storage space available for donations so that they can be pre-sorted before being taken to Wupperthal.



*One of the 53 destroyed homes, this being one of the oldest. Re-building can only start once all asbestos, added later, has been removed safely*

3.10 A donor, Dr Anton Rupert has earmarked some projects that his foundation will adopt and restore. These are mainly historical buildings such as the Leipold House and Community centre.

3.11 The MCSA properties were insured, so that the re-building should be covered to a large extent.

3.12 None of the 53 home owners who lost everything, were insured. They will need assistance not only for re-building, but also refurbishing



*All shops were destroyed in the fire*

3.13 Long term considerations/disaster implications: Once the victims of the fire have re-built and refurbished their homes, it might very well be that those whose homes were not destroyed, will be envious of the victims and their new and “modern” homes. Good counselling and guidance will be needed!

3.14 The shops that were destroyed (Bakery, Butchery, General Dealer, Rooibos products store) are needed for the community. For the store owners it is a financial loss. For the community however these are vital to their existence, since the next shopping opportunity is more than an hours drive on poor roads from there.



*On the left the remains of the manse, creche and church office, on the right the church, which remained untouched. In the middle the post office of which the verandah burnt down, but the rest of the building was spared*

3.15 The church building was spared. This should become the centre of the rebuilding of Wupperthal. The spiritual accompaniment is crucial. A crisis like this can result in much infighting and envy. Some years earlier a Rooibos project, donated to the community by the Department of Agriculture failed because of such infighting.

For the rebuilding process this close knit community needs to regroup around its faith, its Lord. The Moravian Church in its infancy, was faced by a crisis of infighting and envy, and took the pledge to follow Jesus Christ as Lord and Chief Elder. This pledge can now also guide the Wupperthal through its rebuilding!

#### **4 Tasks that arise from observations**

4.1 Asbestos removal needs R 1,3m, the money not being available. How can that be raised?

4.2 A clear, and short (as little red tape as possible) channel of communication should be established to ensure:

- That the right assistance is received at the right time (Furnishing should only arrive once the homes are complete, since there is no storage space available)
- There is as little delay as possible
- There is no duplication (eg: 53 Stoves are needed, but not 150)
- That “private help” does not cause envy and infighting amongst the community.



*Where the fire stopped. On the left the ruins of 53 homes. On the right 65 homes that were spared and where the victims were taken up and stay until temporary accommodation (tents) is erected.*

4.3 Expert advice on site is needed (such as a civil engineer knowledgeable on clay brick construction) to advise on which parts need to be demolished, and which parts can be re-used and how to go about it. The workforce of capable builders can be sourced within the community, but this particular expertise is needed. (The historical buildings are clay bricks with reed roofs, and the aim is to keep as much as possible of the original walls)

## 5 Possible actions:

- 5.1 Inform LUCSA and LWF through this report
- 5.2 Raise funds for Asbestos removal (German state?)
- 5.3 Source expertise (civil engineer)
- 5.4 Establish a network of partnership, such as one congregation within LUCSA / LWF to partner with one household in Wupperthal
- 5.5 Find ways so that help “has a face” - in stead of anonymous donations, partnerships can result in global fellowship and companionship.



*Catastrophe, Problem and Promise captured in this picture: Catastrophe - destroyed home, scorched garden, burnt vines. Problem - Asbestos roof on side attachments. Promise - Amos 9 - rebuilding the ruins, harvesting from the vine and the garden!*

## Conclusion:

The watchword of Saturday 23 February, the day of the visit, from Amos 9, especially vers 14, spoke to us all. “They will rebuild the ruined cities and live in them. They will plant vineyards and drink their wine; they will make gardens and eat their fruit.”

Looking at the burnt homes and the burnt vines on the verandas it became a deep, meaningful promise of the Lord indeed! May the community experience this word becoming reality!

Report by Horst Müller,  
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