

## Lutherans in Namibia:

# A call for freedom

**An American church leader reports his findings after visiting a country enslaved by South Africa**

BY PAUL C. EMPIE

**H**ow would you like to stand out in the sun on a warm Sunday during a service which began at 10 in the morning and ended at five in the afternoon, with a 45 minute break for snacks?

That's what 2,000 Namibian Lutherans did at Oshakati in Ovamboland last August. I participated in this festival occasion which included the installation of Pastor Kleopas Dumeni as the assistant to Bishop Leonard Auala and the ordination of a candidate for the ministry.

When I asked my host if the service wasn't a little long, the bishop replied, "Many of these people have walked four hours to get here. They expect a lot for eight hours of walking. They have looked forward to this for months and will remember it all their lives."

I must say that my wife and I will never forget it! We had been asked by the USA National Committee of the Lutheran World Federation to pay a fraternal visit to the Lutheran churches in Namibia (former South-West Africa) and this certainly was the high point of the trip.

We had been driven nearly 500 miles north over the only black-top road to Ovamboland from Windhoek, the capital of the country nestling in a ring of hills 5,300 feet above sea level. A little more than half-way there, where the road skirts the largest wild animal reserve in Namibia, a high wire fence barred our way until our permits had been scrutinized.

It had been many months since we first applied to the South African government for these permits, and as far as I know we were virtually the first persons from church organizations — or others for that matter — to be given entry in over a year. The road ended at Ondangwa, just beyond Oniipa which is the headquarters of the Church of Finland mission.

From there on, apart from a few gravel roads, there are mainly tracks or paths through the sandy terrain with

kraals (clusters of farmers' huts) scattered mile after mile. It was over such paths that many at the service had trudged on that Sunday morning.

They didn't seem to mind it. We shall long remember the vibrant singing, but even more the joy and faith which radiated from that throng of people. Virtually all of the Ovamboland pastors of the 240,000 member Ovambo-Kavango church took part. Several choirs presented heart-lifting music. Greetings were brought by Anglican, Roman Catholic and other representatives.

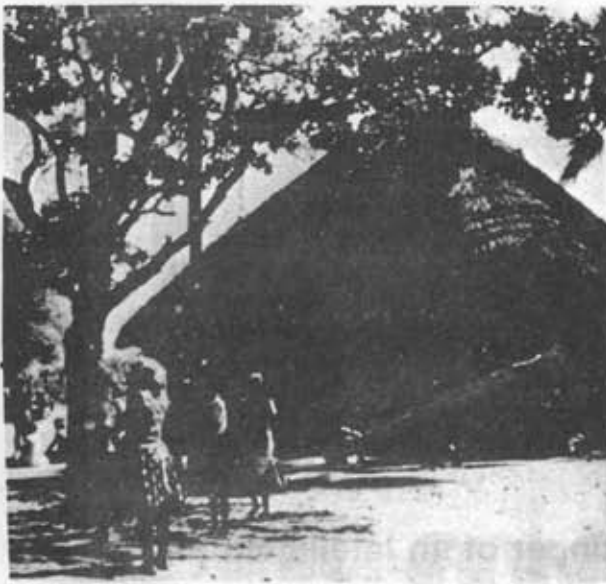
When I spoke, I reminded them of their important functions in Christ's body as outlined in I Corinthians 12, thanking them for their staunch witness under great difficulties — a witness which strengthens and inspires the whole church. Greeting them as one of the larger member churches among the 91 in the Lutheran World Federation, I assured them of the continuing love, concern, prayers and assistance from Christians throughout the world. When I asked whether I should convey their greetings and affection to fellow-Christians outside of their beleaguered land, they responded with a ringing affirmative.

**A**fterwards Auala told me that there had been three warnings that a bomb would be set off during the service. The authorities had urged him to cancel the event. Nice of him not to worry me in advance!

Some surmised that the authorities would have been just as happy if I had not spoken even though they had given us the rare permit to enter this restricted area for this very purpose.

The Ovambos are the largest tribe in Namibia and give the most support and leadership to the South-West Africa People's Organization (SWAPO) which is leading the fight for liberation of the country from the domination of South Africa. (The Court of International Justice and the United Nations have both declared that South Africa has violated its mandate to administer South-West Africa "for the welfare of its inhabitants." They have labeled its con-





*This church hospital combines a simple modern clinic with a traditional native hut*



*The author, left, poses with Mrs. Auala, Mrs. Empie and Bishop Auala*



*At Pastor Kleopas Dumeni's installation Bishop Auala wears the traditional formal hat which is the mark of a Finnish bishop, a reminder of his church's relationship to Finnish missionaries*

tinuing control of that country illegal. The U.N. has established a council for Namibia to guide it to self-government, but the South African authorities deny this body entry or opportunity to function.)

Since virtually all Ovambos are Lutherans, it is understandable that the representative of the South African government, Commissioner J. de Wet, in a strange twist of Biblical interpretation, greeted the throng at Oshakati by saying that like Samuel who advised the king, the church should cooperate with the government!

The lack of such cooperation has brought grim results. The treasurer of the church was not at the service. I was to meet him three months later at the United Nations in New York where he had been brought together with other Namibians who had been cruelly flogged by the authorities. Why were they punished? They opposed *apartheid* (segregation of races with blacks deprived of basic human rights). They protested the division of their country into tribal "homelands," with the white inhabitants (18 percent of the population) getting virtually all of the good and valuable areas. And they worked for the freedom of their nation.

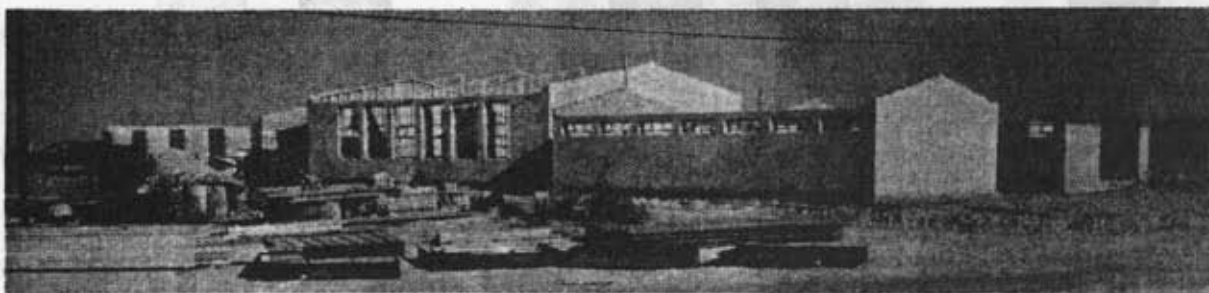
During the last year, about 2,000 refugees, including most of those who had been flogged, fled across the Angola border which is only 50 miles north of the heart of

Ovamboland and separated by a four-strand wire fence. From there they worked their way into Zambia where a center has been established for their care and for the interim schooling of students. Bishop Auala visited them en route to Finland in October, and the Department of World Service of the LWF together with other agencies gives them assistance.

Over 80 percent of the population consists of black tribes which have occupied the land for generations. The bishop's father and grandfather used to get crude copper ore from the Tsumeb mines which have since been incorporated into the "white" areas and are now operated by American firms.

I visited the compound at Tsumeb where 4,000 men from Ovamboland live in barracks, separated from their families for a minimum of six months with virtually nothing to do between working on their shifts. The social and moral consequences are obvious.

Their average wage is \$45 per month plus accommodation on double-decker bunks (twelve men in a room). They also get two meals a day (bread and coffee before work, corn meal and stew or their equivalent after work, probably as good a diet as at home). They seldom spend a weekend with their families since the bus fare costs a week's wages.



*Replacing a facility destroyed by a bomb, the new printing plant for the church nears completion*

Several hundred workers came to an evangelistic service conducted by my Finnish missionary guide and some black evangelists. Here again, they sang out their hearts in welcome.

Their loneliness aroused this flashback for me: a night 25 years ago at Gravesend, England, where 200 Baltic refugees working apart from their families still remaining in the displaced persons camps in Germany broke into tears as I played a familiar hymn on a battered piano in an assembly hall.

One of the men at Tsumeb showed me a mimeographed bulletin with Auala's picture on the front. There the bishop had written that an American visitor would be visiting Ovamboland soon. As I left, several shouted at me. "They are saying, 'Greet Ovamboland for us'," said my guide.

Why do miners work voluntarily under such conditions? Because their families are so poor. Ovamboland is over 3,000 feet high and quite dry. Normal rainfall is about 3½ inches a year. A layer of clay under the omnipresent sand prevents seepage and enables water holes to retain a water supply of sorts during the dry season. Brush and high grass extend in every direction; crops are meager and goats and cattle scrawny.

**T**here are diamonds as well as valuable mineral ores in Namibia. Can you blame people on a marginal standard of living with poor educational and health facilities for resenting the fact that little by little their country's wealth is being drained out from under their feet for the gain of others while they themselves get virtually none of it? U.S. citizens celebrating their bicentennial should be the first to sympathize with that problem!

The price of patriotism is high. It hurts especially that about 10 percent of the secondary school students are among the refugees. There are only several hundred such students in the whole of Ovamboland, the brightest young minds they have.

When I visited one of the two schools established years ago by the Finnish mission — the government has only recently initiated two or three additional institutions — I noted that we were really neighbors; that while one hundred years ago it took the original Finnish missionaries months to come from Finland by ship and oxcart, Mrs. Empie and I had flown from New York to Namibia in less than two days. Cheers broke out from every side. The bishop whispered to me, "They are cheering because you said 'Namibia', for which you can be flogged!"

If you ever need medical care in a hurry, thank God that you are not in Ovamboland. The church has three hos-

**'The hunger of an intelligent and gifted people for full human development is a major motivation of their burning desire to determine their own destiny'**

pitals which are a mixture of simple modern clinics and traditional native huts. I was told that qualified doctors get around to each only about once a month. When I asked the head nurse what she did between doctor's visits, she replied, "If we can't tell what is wrong, we treat a patient for everything we can think of until the doctor gets here."

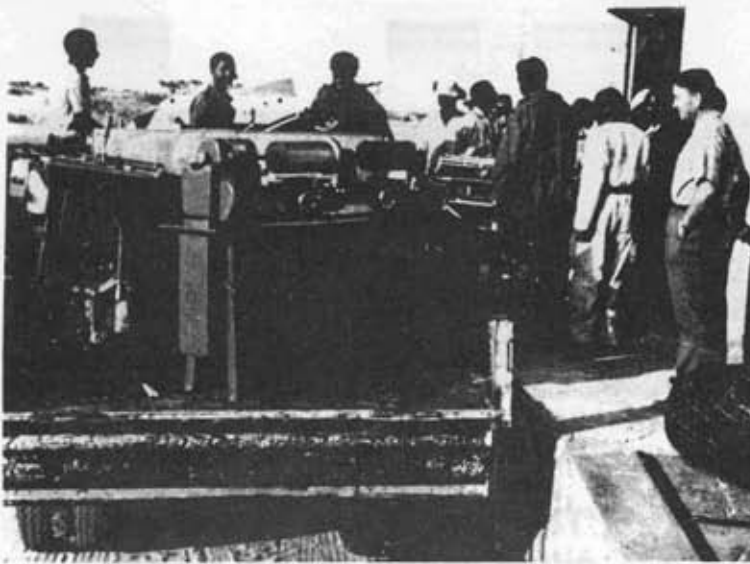
At each place the staff members were assembled to meet us, singing their welcome as usual. I was asked to speak each time and answer questions. How eager they were to learn about things going on in other parts of the world.

It's not a simple matter. Apart from government bulletins or occasional copies of papers published by the white colony, the church paper was their primary source of information. Over a year ago the church's fine printing plant at Oniipa was mysteriously blown up in the middle of the night. Apparently this medium had to be silenced. The loss was staggering. All building materials and equipment had to be trucked from Windhoek nearly 500 miles away and initially came mostly from other countries. The replacement cost will be approximately \$1 million.

Churches all around the world rallied to help rebuild it and the new plant is about half finished. The morning we arrived, the business manager of the mission told us that a truckload of new printing equipment had just come from Johannesburg 1,700 miles away, and that since our funds (Lutheran World Action) had helped to pay for it, I must take a picture. The new press is guarded day and night.

The hunger of an intelligent and gifted people for unity which will help provide full human development is a major motivation of their burning desire to determine their own destiny. Later on, when visiting the 120,000 member church founded by the German Rhenish Mission Society with its headquarters at Windhoek, this fact was brought home in an indelible fashion. In an interview with Billy Marais, in effect the white governor of Namibia, I was assured that neither the United Nations nor the South Af-





Empie watches as a truckload of new printing equipment is unloaded after shipment from Johannesburg 1,700 miles away

rican government would decide the country's future, but only the inhabitants themselves.

But then he repeated the usual South African line that the several black tribes have deep-rooted hostilities and are best served by being separated into national "homelands," thus being kept from each other's throats. Special permits for leaving and entering these mini-nations must be secured even by their tribal members. Each homeland is encouraged to have its own flag and national anthem! Although Marais didn't say so, it is also a convenient way of numbing the growing sense of national unity among the black majority.

The governing authority given the leaders in each homeland is limited with the white government keeping the power to veto while reserving for itself all major decisions. Funds doled out for educational, economic and social development are a pittance of the national income derived from mineral resources.

The two black Lutheran churches are federated and comprise about half of the Namibian population. Wisely they have a joint seminary at Otjimbingwe. The area has now been declared "white" and the government wants the seminary moved. Further, they told the Lutheran leaders that a joint seminary is contrary to policy. There should be one for each homeland in line with keeping tribal peace!

While it is true that there are some vestiges of tribal tensions, Bishop Auala reminds the authorities that there are seven tribes in his church. They worship and work together in Jesus Christ. But one isn't allowed to divert a divide-and-conquer policy with such things as plain facts!

I can't speak too highly in praise of the work of the Finnish mission, which began work more than a century ago at the invitation of the Rhenish Society. Rarely have I seen people as able and dedicated. Some of the staff have been expelled for encouraging the people in their aspirations, but most hang on under great pressures.

We stayed with Olle Eriksson (the business manager) and his delightful wife and three children, since our permit specified that "lodging by whites or coloureds with natives is not permitted." Living quarters are simple. Scarce water comes from cisterns which catch the rain or from wells. There is little plumbing — the two-holers behind the house

reminded me of my boyhood in the country, though they were clean and even attractive.

A standard building for each Finn is the "sauna." We took turns with the family for our Saturday night steam bath which gets one marvelously clean without using much water. No lake to jump into afterwards, however! (When Bishop Auala was in Minnesota he was asked what he would like for a gift. "One of your lakes," he replied.)

What a remarkable person the bishop is! He knows and speaks to everyone, from simple farmers in the scattered kraals to bellboys and maids in the hotels to men working by the roadside. In his person he symbolizes the strength of the church in Ovamboland which is virtually the only social structure which can and does speak up for and work for the total personal development of the people.

One wonders at his vitality when he is so close to the time of retirement. Even more one marvels at his temperament: simultaneously genial, humorous, firm, patient, understanding, dauntless and farsighted. Working his way up from humble circumstances in a land where being black is an almost unsurmountable barrier to getting ahead, he shepherds his flock and yet finds time to travel the world to plead their cause. Speaking five languages may not be so unusual, but attainment of that stature testifies to the miraculous power of the Holy Spirit.

When the bishop took us through his home, we peeked into the bedroom. Over each of the twin beds was a cross. He jokingly remarked that we could tell his bed, for the bishop's cross was larger than his wife's. I responded that I had noticed something more significant: on the bedside table of his wife, a Bible; on his, an alarm clock! Don't press this symbol too far, but it says something. Earlier when I had commented that he had us going somewhere every minute, he grinned and said, "You worked me hard in the USA and now I'm working you!"

**W**hat can we do for such wonderful fellow-Christians in partial response to their matchless witness to Christ in that one Body which knits us together? Well, we can pray for them and help meet specific needs through the Lutheran World Federation. But even more we can exert ourselves in urging our government to do everything in its power to support the cause of freedom and autonomy for Namibia.

These people must be granted full human rights (they can't vote, move freely, secure jobs retained for whites, form unions, receive full protection of the law, etc.) so that they can run their own affairs and undertake proper social responsibilities. The Lutheran Council in the USA recently addressed an open letter to the President of the United States, commending certain things which our government has done in this direction and urging the implementation of additional steps. I concur. The circulation and endorsement of this letter should be a high priority in our concern for our fellow Lutherans in Ovamboland.

Recently, Sean MacBride, commissioner of the United Nations Council for Namibia, has said that, because of political developments in Angola and Mozambique as well as the pressure of world opinion, freedom for Namibia may well be nearer than one had dared to hope even a year ago. While we pray that he may be right, let's keep up the help and the pressure!