

I am in Cape Town, South Africa for the next two weeks interviewing pastors and leaders who opened their church doors and church halls to house and feed fleeing refugees.

The decision to house these refugees was born out of their annual Synod meeting. The Cape Town region of the Church learned of xenophobic attacks and the opening salvos of violence that was happening in the streets as they were going about their regularly scheduled agenda.

From the floor of the meeting, a motion was made, seconded, and passed by consensus to “provide a place for safety and refuge” for those facing xenophobic attacks. With a sense of true compassion, church leader after church leader got up before the floor and stressed their support for this action. Then, as the session drew to a close, they marched in solidarity on the South African Parliament offices to show their support for those suffering.

All too quickly, the consequences of their actions became apparent. What they thought might be a few days turned into months. What they thought they could do alone, they quickly learned they could not do. What they thought would result in strong lasting support from the church members stressed their own member’s resources as the leaders came back to them again and again asking for more help, more clothes, more blankets, and more requests to bring in just one more meal.

In short, the leaders of the church were led by the spirit to act, but failed to have listened to earlier calls to be prepared. Even as most of the refugees are out of their churches, they still struggle to find meaning to the administrative backlash that caught them, as one pastor said yesterday, “with their pants down”.

We are about finding and developing disaster response tools (including providing them with draft disaster response plans) to allow them to be better prepared in the future. Yes, there will be future disasters in this area. Floods are common, flash fires rip through “informal settlements” where thousands of

individuals and families are clustered together living with the simplest of necessities.

There are no shortages of disasters for the church to address. Our goal is to be there with them as they learn from this experience, provide a listening avenue for some to “just vent”, and to show the people within their congregations and the community that the church is more than just words.

In complete fairness to the church leaders – they did what they could, and would make the same decision again.

And, they may need to. Xenophobia or the fear of foreigners taking what little resources are available – stretching a social safety net – that does not exist, and the daily reality that violence could only be a day away has moved many of the church leaders to a renewed commitment to be prepared.

There are stories – too many to share in this brief update where church leaders took the time to help write CVs or Resumes for the refugees. There was a person that bought a refugee a car and tools. The refugee was a mechanic and he needed both. A member found the personal resources to make this happen. There was a pastor who loaded his vehicle

with those seeking medical care and raced off to a medical clinic. There were children born while being housed in the church halls. And, there were deaths that sadly would have happened even if they were not at the church.

There were also stories of refugees who came together, elected leaders amongst themselves, and left the church looking better than they found it. And, while this was a rarity, it happened enough for the church to see the good within even the most desperate.



Within one of the camps refugees have made a gravel stone mural that translates “Jesus is my life, Africa is my Home”. Helping refugees to find that home is a challenge that we all hope to find together

While it might not make front page or mission news, our assistance in providing the tools logistical resources to guild our fellow Methodists in South Africa is a significant step in our preparing them to better serve their community and express “in action”, their faith.