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Wilgespruit Fellowship Centre: Part of Our Struggle for Freedom¹

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Introduction

Wilgespruit Fellowship Centre (WFC) was established in 1949 by a group of six men, made up of educationalists and Christian Ministers, known as the 'Wilgespruit Brotherhood' (SACC 1973:86). The Centre was intended to provide a place where different racial groups and denominations could freely meet in South Africa, as such a place did not exist on a permanent basis (Mabille 1998:7). The WFC aimed in the main to promote ecumenicalism—a belief in the spiritual unity that opposed the Nationalist belief in racial segregation and the idea that only the Afrikaners had inherited the kingdom of God (Ibid:7). Secondly, the WFC espoused 'multiracialism'—the free encounter of different racial groups and denominations, where people could begin to see each other's humanity. Through promoting ecumenicalism and multiracialism the Centre played a role in the liberation of South Africa. However, these objectives were set against a backdrop of racial segregation that was institutionalised in the constitution, in the South African parliament, in political practice, and in the minds of the ruling minority (Human Rights Commission 1989). This made it difficult for WFC to operate as a multiracial and ecumenical centre.

Wilgespruit's role in South Africa's freedom struggle

In order to fulfil its aims of operating as an ecumenical and multiracial organisation, Dale White, the warden at WFC, developed a number of programmes to help Christians who were struggling and to alert people and churches to them so that WFC could go out to people in need, and deal with racial segregation (Foster 1972). These programmes included the Youth

Ecumenical Services (YES), which focused on black youth; the Urban Industrial Mission (UIM), which was established in 1966, at the request of the South African Council of Churches (SACC) to focus on achieving the greater involvement of all people in issues relating to community and industry despite the disparities created by racial discrimination;² and the Domestic Workers Project (DWP), which was launched in 1970 to focus on assisting domestic workers by teaching them to read and write. In addition to the above programmes, WFC also made available its multiracial conference facilities to organisations, such as the University Christian Movement (UCM), the South African Students' Organisation (SASO), and the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS), who each in their own way opposed apartheid.

WFC also provided all these organisations with T-group training through its Personal Relations Organisational and Development (PROD) programmes, which led to its near closure. The churches established PROD in 1967 for secular purposes. During this year WFC began focusing on developing the needs of student leadership following requests from university student organisations, such as NUSAS and the UCM, for leadership and organisational training. In 1969 PROD courses became part of the many projects offered at WFC.

PROD aimed at enabling persons and organisations to take control of their own direction and decisions.³ It sought to enable individuals to gain a greater understanding of their human nature and live fuller lives, so that people would not be constantly bound by fear of themselves or others.⁴ This was necessary as racial segregation in South Africa was hegemonic. PROD also planned to break down artificial barriers between races and religions that had developed in the country.

According to Horst Kleinschmidt, who was on the NUSAS Executive from 1968 to 1969 and Vice-President during 1970, NUSAS's need for T-group training was spurred by several factors. These included the precarious situation in which NUSAS found itself in the late 1960s. Further, the resistance to apartheid had been dealt a heavy blow, which meant that those at university did not get to meet the previous generation of anti-apartheid activists.⁵ Coupled with this, there was the breakaway of South African Students' Organisation (SASO) and the emergence of the Black Consciousness Movement, which aimed at 'consciousness-raising' of the individual rather than 'mobilisation' and political party adherence.⁶ This initiative in part reflected trends in the US in the late 1960s.⁷ All these factors combined made the work that Wilgespruit was offering in T-group training ideal, because whites in NUSAS felt the need to undo their own inherent racist beliefs, which they felt T-Groups could assist

in.⁸ Moreover, Wilgespruit Fellowship Centre was one of the few places in South Africa at that time ‘where people could meet on a non-racial basis’.⁹

At Wilgespruit PROD courses generally lasted a week. Participants would spend time in a small room with two staff members and 10–12 strangers, who were heterogeneous in job roles, age, sex, and background. There was no leader to tell them what to do, neither was there any particular structure to the group. Participants were left to decide the course of events and create their own social groups, although they were given some theoretical framework from which to work during the sessions.¹⁰ These courses provided many anti-apartheid activists with a way of seeing the humanity in people of different racial groups. It was a powerful experience precisely because a person’s habitual way of relating to people and perceiving people was challenged.¹¹ Generally when people encounter each other they adopt a mask and move away when things get uncomfortable.¹² One could not do so in a T-group session. People were forced to confront their own responses to others and deal with them.¹³ Moreover, according to Angela Cobbett, who was a member of the Black Sash, PROD courses revealed new dimensions in the self and others.¹⁴

PROD also played a role in the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) and the formation of SASO. These courses gave Steve Bantu Biko the inspiration to form an organisation like SASO. He was led to question his position as a black person in South African society and to examine ‘who defines your identity’. During PROD courses he realised that ‘people tell me who I am, who I can marry, who I can mix with, where I can live, what my education level has to be and here we are as black people accepting this, I think we need to redefine our own identities’.¹⁵

The PROD programme came under attack from the media, which was linked to the apartheid government, when in July 1970, *Die Afrikaner*, which was owned by Albert Hertzog, a vindictive racist, ran a series of articles about the WFC. In these articles WFC was accused of being a ‘*linkse broeines*’ (a leftist hotbed) and the central point of the liberal onslaught against South Africa by psychological means. It also accused WFC of being involved in brainwashing techniques, which were being used for the furtherance of a liberal worldview.

Then, in 1971, the *Vaderland* and *Hoofstad* published a condensed version of the original series from the *Afrikaner*. In the *Vaderland*’s¹⁶ condensed version it was argued that the main opposition to the government in South Africa had united in developing a plan to bring about a socialist revolution, by using sensitivity training which was being transmitted through PROD.¹⁷ In addition, it alleged that PROD was responsible for the break up of marriages among those attending T-group training.

SACC responds to WFC

Following these reports, WFC was attacked by the South African Council of Churches (SACC). Consternation over WFC's radical programmes was expressed at its annual conference in 1969. The SACC sent a committee to investigate the happenings at Wilgespruit. Then in 1970 the SACC held an evaluation consultation in which all churches related to Wilgespruit participated. As a result of this consultation, Wilgespruit increased the representation of the churches and donor members on its management committee and gave the SACC automatic representation on its executive committees (SACC 1973).

In 1971, during a weekend of evaluation by several of the trustees following further reports in *Die Vaderland* that WFC was responsible for marriage break-ups, the SACC again reviewed its position on Wilgespruit and expressed concern over the direction Wilgespruit was taking. It also expressed a vote of no confidence in the management of Wilgespruit and suggested that Wilgespruit put its house in order, after which the SACC would reassess its vote of no confidence.¹⁸

In 1973, the SACC was forced to respond to the WFC after it was investigated by government, through the Schlebusch Commission. The Schlebusch Commission was appointed by the Nationalist government on 4 July 1972, to investigate the UCM, NUSAS, the South African Institute of Race Relations (SAIRR), and the Christian Institute (CI)—all regarded in government circles as potentially subversive left-wing organisations. The commission was made up of six National Party (NP) (MPs) and four United Party (UP) MPs. The government decided to investigate WFC following the completion of the Schlebusch Commission's inquiry into NUSAS in February 1973, during which certain of those questioned gave evidence that they had received T-group training at Wilgespruit. The Schlebusch Commission viewed this training as becoming of the political indoctrination that took place at NUSAS seminars. When NUSAS members told the Schlebusch Commission that they had received T-group training from Wilgespruit, the government suspected it had found the source of left-wing propaganda. Moreover, Wilgespruit was a member of the SAIRR and of the CI, personnel of whom were giving leadership training to the UCM, 'so they said uh ha, we've got the nub of who they are; the great spies'.¹⁹ The government was also unhappy with the fact that WFC assisted SASO in the establishment of the Black People's Convention (BPC) and gave training to a number of black trade unionist leaders in the 1970s, such as Drake Koka²⁰ of the Black Allied Workers' Union (BAWU), which was formed by the BPC. Further, WFC in collaboration

with the BAWU also founded the Black Youth Workers' Council in 1973 to discuss the rights of workers.²¹

As a result of the Schlebusch inquiry, the WFC was required to supply documents showing details of all courses, conferences, seminars, or similar meetings that took place at or outside of Wilgespruit, and in which members of staff were involved from 1969–1972. It was also asked to supply the names of all persons who attended or took part in these activities. The Commission also requested the submission of documents which would provide evidence of the ownership of the farm on which WFC was located. The annual financial statements for the years 1969–1971 of the owners of the property and those who occupied it were also requested. All these documents were subsequently supplied to the Schlebusch Commission, but out of 151 events involving 7,244 participants, from January 1969 to October 1972, of which details were given to the Schlebusch Commission, it decided to focus its inquiry on two activities held by the Centre.²²

Of the two, one of these was the UCM sexual liturgy, which was held from the 10–16 July 1970 at the WFC's Chapel. The sexual liturgy or 'Encounter 70' was held at the request of the churches, who were concerned about sexual immorality among the youth who were sleeping with each other and maybe even across the colour line.²³ The liturgy attempted to 'use all the symbols in the bible, or what the bible says about sex, so that people would know if I'm a Christian this is what is being said about sexual behaviour'.²⁴ The liturgy was made up of three parts, two of which were designed by Basil Moore and Colin Collins (who were both associated with UCM) and known as the 'virgins liturgy', and the other was left open to the participants to decide on. A hundred and twenty people attended the liturgy, including observers from Malawi, Great Britain, Finland, and West Germany, and for the first two days two staff members of Wilgespruit were present and a number of voluntary consultants.

The other event discussed in the Schlebusch Commission Report was the T-Group, which was held by PROD in June 1972 at the Centre. It was one of 38 PROD activities held from January 1969 to October 1972, involving 30 of the 790 participants of PROD activities. One of the 30 people who took part gave evidence on that particular session.²⁵ Several Wilgespruit employees were subpoenaed to testify at the Schlebusch Commission, which was held behind closed doors (Thomas 1979).

In the Schlebusch Commission's *Third Interim Report*, which was tabled in Parliament on 24 April 1973—and widely publicised in the April 1973 issues of the *Rand Daily Mail*, *The Star*, *The Sunday Express*, *Sunday Times*, *The Sunday*

Tribune, *The Natal Mercury*, *The Argus*, *Die Vaderland*, and *Rapport*—Wilgespruit Fellowship Centre, was accused of:

- Brainwashing several young South Africans, by subjecting participants ‘unknowingly to psychological and quasi psychological processes’;
- Luring these young South Africans to the Centre by claiming to be linked to the church ‘in a Christian ecumenical way’;
- Allowing persons to run T–group training programmes who did not have sufficient skills to operate such courses;
- Causing two mental breakdowns during its sensitivity courses;
- Overloading the daily timetables of those attending T–group training in an attempt to exhaust participants mentally and physically;
- Allowing people like Eoin O’ Leary, who made use of excessively foul language during T–group sessions and was a heavy smoker and drunkard, to run PROD courses;
- Deriving most of its income from overseas donors;
- Attempting to bring about social and political change within South Africa.
- Having politically active employees, like Maphiri Masekela, in other organisations like SASO, in which she made use of hate speech against whites;
- Hosting religious services such as Encounter 70, which was conducted by the UCM from 10–16 July 1970 and PROD courses, in which crude sexuality and eroticism were mixed with blasphemy; and
- Allowing uninhibited behaviour, such as smoking dagga whilst PROD courses were being held.

The Interim Report exonerated the SACC from any involvement or knowledge about the happenings of Wilgespruit. The Prime Minister of South Africa responded to the Report by declaring WFC a ‘den of iniquity’ which he ordered the SACC to clean up within three weeks, or government would do so itself. This attack by the apartheid government on WFC was a defining moment in South African history. It showed to what extent the apartheid government was prepared to go to preserve ‘a life-style for the whole country which it regard(ed) as essential to maintaining a certain kind of political order’ (Holiday 1973). It also demonstrated the extent to which the apartheid government was prepared to go to maintain apartheid. It would do anything to stamp out all opposition and the ‘seeds’ of resistance, as they saw it,²⁶ even if it meant accusing a particular organisation of sexual indecency.

Further, the attack led to an outcry within certain circles who felt the government was taking the role of a peeping Tom, since the Commission was expected to investigate state security but by its investigation into WFC it

was looking into public morals. The events that were taking place at WFC as stated in the *Third Interim Report* also had another side to them. They caused outrage among certain strata of society, who saw the activities of the Centre as an indication of the demise of social morals and the rise of permissiveness within society.

Church and state relationship redefined

The attack by government on WFC in 1973 also initiated a new round in the relationship between the church and the state, raising issues about what form this relationship should take. It caused the SACC to confront the state instead of supporting it, because the issue of Wilgespruit was broader than a single investigation into a Christian centre. The whole event 'epitomised the struggle in South Africa between two radically different world views. Clerics, parliamentarians and others rushed into a fray, and the salvos and rhetoric reverberated across the political and ideological battle lines' (Thomas 1979: 84).

The SACC was forced to confront the state because it was the trustee of the Wilgespruit property and, therefore, it was ultimately responsible for the events that took place there. Further, the ecumenical web had become so closely woven by then that it was inconceivable that an attack on the Centre should not involve the SACC.²⁷ The SACC responded to the Report and government's demand that the SACC clean up the 'den of iniquity', by declaring its full support for the Centre. It also found government's request to clean up the Centre in three weeks impossible in such a short space of time. As a result, it sent representatives²⁸ to ask the government for more time to discuss the Wilgespruit affair. The government agreed to give the SACC more time provided that the SACC could show that it was serious about doing something about the PROD programme, such as firing and publicly disgracing the Director of PROD, Eoin O'Leary.²⁹ On 30 April 1973 the Wilgespruit Management Committee together with the SACC met to discuss these issues.

At that meeting certain of those present from Wilgespruit, told the SACC that Eoin O'Leary had done nothing wrong.³⁰ Further, they noted that if the SACC, as a representative of the church, fired him it would find itself in great trouble in the future. Once it had given in to the government, a precedent would be set. As a result, the next time the government targeted someone it would be impossible for the SACC to resist.³¹ After several hours of discussion the SACC and Wilgespruit decided to suspend the PROD programme, rather than fire O'Leary, set up its own commission of inquiry, and to wait for the government's response. A few days later the government gave the SACC more time to deal with the Centre and approved the idea that WFC and the SACC

set up its own commission to investigate the validity of the accusations made in the Schlebusch Commission's report on Wilgespruit.

Six representatives from WFC and six from the SACC were appointed to the committee,³² and J.R. Dendy-Young;³³ a former Chief Justice of Botswana, became its chairman.

The Joint/Dendy Young Commission as it was called aimed at:

- Looking at Wilgespruit's continuing relationship with the church;
- Investigating the correctness of certain allegations made by the Schlebusch Commission's Third Interim Report;
- Investigating all aspects of PROD; and
- Making suitable recommendations to the SACC's Executive Committee and WFC's management committee.

The Joint/Dendy Young Commission cleared Wilgespruit of most of the allegations laid against it by the Schlebusch Commission such as the claim that PROD programmes were politically subversive, that brainwashing of participants took place, and that WFC was unchristian.

The Joint Commission also questioned the validity and accuracy of some of the information given to the committee by witnesses and put the blame for Encounter 70 solely on the UCM, whilst suggesting that Wilgespruit only provided the facilities for it to take place. To rectify the situation at Wilgespruit the Joint Commission recommended that Eoin O'Leary cut back on his drinking habits, whilst conducting PROD sessions, and that an administrator be appointed as soon as possible. The Commission also recommended that a summit meeting be held in November 1973 to discuss ways of increasing the churches' involvement in Wilgespruit, that Wilgespruit's management committee consider lifting the suspension on PROD as soon as possible, that sensitivity training be restricted to Christian education and social service groups, and an association be set up to make sure that sensitivity-trainers were adequately trained to conduct PROD courses and that a code of ethics should be drafted. Further recommendations involved the management structure at Wilgespruit and its constitution and relationship with the SACC.

One unintended consequence of the Joint Committee was that it brought to the surface the internal difficulties of operating a multiracial ecumenical centre. This was explicitly demonstrated by the refusal of black staff at WFC to testify at the Joint Committee hearings. It was also displayed by black staff declaring that the white staff were incapable of 'divorcing themselves from a way of life they have known since birth'. Black staff at the Centre declared, in a *Drum* magazine article, that the multiracial dream at Wilgespruit had failed.³⁴

Fear of closure and further events

As a result of the above events, WFC ended 1973 with a feeling of uncertainty about its future. In order to deal with this uncertainty it agreed to pay all employees three months salary if they were dismissed, banned or arbitrary action was taken against them.³⁵ Despite the fear of imminent closure hanging over the heads of WFC staff and the management committee, WFC had to go on and deal with one of the most destructive attacks yet on its multiracial and ecumenical nature—that of its black staff.

WFC made an effort to deal with the *Drum* Report, to which the black staff had contributed, by discussing it at the executive committee meeting on 5 November 1973. At this meeting the white/black tensions were carefully assessed and a request was made to the black staff responsible for the *Drum* Report to elucidate a memorandum which they had presented to the executive, management and staff on this issue. This was done at a management committee meeting held on 13 November 1973, at which the black staff involved in supplying information to *Drum*, tabled and read out a memorandum with six recommendations on the issue. Also, Dale White (who by that time had become the Director of WFC) and Tish White (who was responsible for the day-to-day running of the centre) made clear their response to the *Drum* article.

In order to rectify the situation between white and black staff, the black staff suggested that blacks find their way to a 'Black establishment and Black destiny' and 'that black programmes be transferred to a centre of their own', where they would be managed by a black committee, for which WFC would administer the funds, until blacks were in a position to do so themselves.³⁶

At this same meeting Rakgobane Mohlathe and Maphiri Masekela were asked to meet with Dale White and R. Falkenberg and any other members available, to spell out the implications of their recommendations. It was also decided that since the WFC 'was a multiracial venture for the mutual benefit of all groups involved'; black staff should work within the framework currently established; 'and expressed the expectation that publicity would be activated to show WFC's multiracial character is still both valuable and viable'.³⁷

In 1974, in response to the *Drum* article and recommendations made by the black staff in their memorandum, the WFC's management committee decided to increase the number of blacks on this committee, 'so that they could advise the black programmes on the relevance of their activities to the total community needs' and be given the ability to make suggestions to the management committee.³⁸ Moreover, as requested by the black staff after several consultations, some misunderstandings were ironed out and it was acknowledged that the difficulties between blacks and whites were a crucial problem in South Africa and would have to be constantly monitored.

WFC holds a summit meeting

On 26 November 1973, in response to the suggestions made by the Joint Committee, a summit meeting was held at Wilgespruit. Representatives from the churches, SACC's executive and WFC's management committee were present. This meeting concurred with much of the suggestions of the Joint Committee Report. For example, it suggested that WFC continue its educational programme to the Church and that The Association for Consultants and Trainers (FACT) be established to accredit persons involved in experience-based education. It also suggested that the constitution be changed to allow for the SACC to appoint a representative to serve directly on the management committee of Wilgespruit, and that the church should be given more participation and involvement in the affairs of the centre.

To bring about these changes, which required the constitution to be changed and areas of responsibility to be clarified and located, a sub-committee was appointed. The committee had representatives from the churches, the SACC (the trustees), and WFC management committee.³⁹ But despite these recommendations at the summit meeting, which seemed to give Wilgespruit the opportunity to act unhindered, WFC was not able to recover its former vitality.

Wilgespruit winds down

On 30 November 1973 Eoin O'Leary resigned from WFC and stopped participating in the Centre's activities. A few months later he was deported to Ireland. According to Horst Kleinschmidt, the departure and deportation of O'Leary led to the WFC losing some of its energy as 'he was more political—with some links to the past political struggle', whereas the others at Wilgespruit 'were more "liberal" and contented themselves with the overall broad influence that the centre made on our society in general'.⁴⁰

The Domestic Workers' Project was transferred to the SACC in 1974, and in March 1974 Youth Ecumenical Services (YES) was unbundled by Michael Maasdorp, the Chairman of WFC at that time. It became independent and was run by Rakgobane Mothlathe. PROD, which was reinstated on 6 August 1973, was left to gradually wind down. By August 1974, due to the unbundling of WFC, the staff was cut to five permanent and four part-time members.⁴¹ Then, in October 1974, the SACC made clear to WFC that the Industrial Mission Programme needed to be separated from the Centre and that UIM was to take on its own identity. The winding down of several of WFC's programmes and its paralysis from 1973–1975 led to a decline in the numbers using the centre. Fears of imminent closure of the centre persisted.

In April 1975, in response to this fear, the executive committee considered selling the property, or building up a residential community with or without the conference facilities; developing the centre to meet the needs of an expanded UIM, or working with adolescent drop outs and runaways.⁴² Wilgespruit decided to undertake the latter two initiatives.

WFC rejuvenates itself

In 1976, in response to the request made by the SACC in 1974, that WFC separate the Industrial Mission Programme from the centre and that UIM take on its own identity, UIM began to operate as AIM, promoting the Urban Industrial Mission in the South African context. It aimed at teaching people to love each other and use things, rather than love things and use people.⁴³ AIM's focus was on industry, and it looked at the quality of work and the plight of people at work. It also looked at how work could be a fulfilment, as a 'co-creation with God, that whatever people did in industry, could actually be perceived and viewed as an extension of God at work.'⁴⁴

The Agency aimed at exploring two of the most important aspects of industrialised South Africa: migrant workers and how the 'Industrial system affects race relations, attitudes and behaviour between workers of different racial groups, and what the role' of the churches should be in this respect.⁴⁵ It also hoped to provide advice for church and industry on how to establish contact between them.

In an effort to deal with migrant workers, in 1976, AIM ran a project for 23 theological students, in which they were involved in researching various aspects of the migrant labour system. Some were employed on the mines, which resulted in the publication of *Another Blanket* (1977) and *South Africa Today: A Good Host Country for Migrant Workers*, whilst others were responsible for investigating recruiting methods and the situation of migrant families. Moronthsi Matsobane, who was a field officer in this programme, felt these programmes were vital for the Theology Students, as it would ensure that their sermons were relevant to those they preached to:

their sermons could relate to the experiences of those people, they need to go through that experience themselves, then they can talk from experience and not talk from second hand experience, from reading and that thing. You need to go through a journey... So as at Wilgespruit we needed to live the experience of those people, to begin to understand what really happens there. We had to be those people to understand them. We had to understand how different it is to leave your own family, to go to a foreign country that you do not know, to go through that period of you being taken before you really get accepted and what it was like to be underground. That you had to

go through a period where thirty, forty, a hundred men are put, stripped naked and put in one room and a person goes and looks at their private parts like that, who claims to be a doctor and declares them medically fit.⁴⁶

Another Blanket were a seminal piece of work in which the plight and culture of Basotho migrants were highlighted. Several of the suggestions on how to improve the miners' lives were adopted by some mining houses.⁴⁷

In fulfilling its second main focus, AIM established the race relations project to investigate and research race relations so that Christians could be provided with new and practical methods in industry, and begin the process of change necessary for growth of all groups in South Africa.⁴⁸ In May 1977 AIM was commissioned by five local congregations in Soweto and later by the SACC Division of Mission Evangelism to investigate the growing unemployment among blacks, as no factual information on the causes and number of those unemployed was available. In response to this request, AIM conducted a survey on unemployment. Consultations with experts in economics and with the churches were held and questionnaires were disseminated to black unemployed people in Johannesburg, Durban, Pietermaritzburg. It was extended to the rural areas of the Northern Transvaal and KwaZulu in Natal.

From this research it was found that unemployment affected all age groups, both men and women, urban and rural people and that the cause for unemployment was structural.⁴⁹ The findings of this research were published in *Unemployment: A Black Picture* (June 1978). In response to these findings a decision was taken to launch a nationwide church programme on unemployment, involving education, remedial and training activities, and closer collaboration between groups and churches and further discussions on how to deal with unemployment. In fulfilment of this decision, the WFC focused on educating the unemployed, in areas like Soweto and establishing rural co-operatives, because in many of the questionnaires filled out people responded by saying that they would like to be involved in self help projects, rather than receiving gifts of food and soap.⁵⁰

AIM also hosted workshops, attempted to provide skills for self employment through its candle making project (Ukukhanya), the Ukukhanya Soweto Style furniture project, the SHADE co-operative, and by offering career guidance workshops for school leavers, in collaboration with St Paul's Church, Jabavu, Soweto. It also intended to assist black school leavers who were racially discriminated against in the workplace after leaving school. Former teachers who had resigned from Bantu Education, such as Griffiths Zabala, headed several of these self-employment schemes. In addition, AIM began training black trade unionists for the day when black trade unions would be

legalised (Dugard and Dean 1981). When the first legal strike by black workers, in South Africa, broke out at Armourplate Safety Glass, Wilgespruit donated money to them through the Urban Training project.⁵¹

A new constitution and the establishment of Self-Help Associates for Development Economics (SHADE)

By 1978, after spending five years reviewing the constitution, it was finally changed. A notable alteration in the new constitution was the removal of the term ecumenical from many of the aims and objectives. Ostensibly, this step suggested that the WFC was moving away from its initial objective of being an ecumenical centre. Since churches were given more representation in the new constitution this was not the case.

The new constitution brought a new surge of optimism into WFC, which was further encouraged by the increase in the numbers visiting the centre after 1977. This new optimism saw AIM develop new programmes, such as SHADE, which forged close links with the Coady International Institute of St Francis Xavier University, Antigonish, Nova Scotia. The Coady International Institution agreed to provide a five-year educational programmes in co-operative methods and self-help projects with the aim of building up students to enable local personnel to take over the complete management of self-help projects.⁵²

SHADE also focused on dealing with the desperate situation of women in rural areas, who were left to fend for themselves while their husbands went to work in the urban areas. It worked together with Catholic missions which had set up self-help groups and communities, 'who were making crafts and things that they could sell to generate an income'.⁵³ It aimed at teaching these women how to sell and market their crafts, and, later on, it developed into teaching business skills. Under its auspices it also established the Bags and Belts project, Thwasana Co-operative Farm project, the St Mary's Hospital Credit Union and Vegetable Garden.

Conclusion

WFC provided an alternative way of living in a society in which segregation and racial discrimination were rife in every aspect of life. 'It was a real kind of contradiction to the government's way of doing things and nothing they did actually made it go away'.⁵⁴ It gave people an opportunity to live in an institution which was working for change, an institution where blacks, whites, Indians, and coloureds could work and meet together, even though there were disparities that existed between them.⁵⁵ It gave people who were prepared to

be part of WFC an opportunity to explore other levels of their lives and relationships.

According to Sarah Weber it provided a place:

where people could encounter each other as human beings and get a sense of each other's humanity and it was something that began to create a value system, that people were able to test. I think there were a lot of people, you know, who came to Wilgespruit with an intellectual kind of rational conviction, about things being wrong and needed to do something else because they were morally wrong, but I think what Wilgespruit provided for people was the experience to go with the rational connection, that there was another possibility, that it actually was possible to make different choices and to found them incredibly rewarding and it was an opportunity to really encounter each others' humanity across the black/white divide and I really do think that it was the crucible, that was the container, that was the vessel, where the real contribution actually was made...⁵⁶

And further,

[I]t was a pre-cursor to a multi-racial society that whites needed to confront their history and personal feelings. WFC did this well. The road to Golgotha was the journey that was opened – often also to older people. As a means to struggle for freedom, this goal was rather too limited for many of us after a while. Also in the end WFC did not “make” many activist leaders. Rather it produced, what I would like to believe, a number of good people who had a better grasp of the history of colonialism and apartheid and what it had done to the majority of the population’.⁵⁷

Through its PROD programmes it helped people to come to terms with their identity. PROD courses also provided ‘deeper and more profound ways towards self-awareness. Some of this inevitably challenged social custom. So it was also a discovery into sexuality, discovery for gay people, many other taboos in our up-bringing were challenged’.⁵⁸ Even though WFC provided an alternative to what apartheid advocated it was by no means perfect. There were tensions across the colour line, and between staff, the management and the executive committee. The self-help schemes provided by AIM did not always work, because not all people wanted to be self-employed. Some wanted a job where someone else would run the organisation and pay out an income, rather than being an owner of a particular venture.⁵⁹ WFC, was also viewed by some like Horst Kleinschmidt as ‘a cul-de-sac for anyone to stay there. Some made it their ‘religion’ and in a way it provided security, because it stopped you from getting into the real opposition to apartheid with personal consequences far more severe than Schlebusch’.⁶⁰

This chapter has charted a critical period in the existence of WFC during the 1960s and 1970s. It has shown the external and internal difficulties faced by organisations attempting to defy the state by offering an alternative to apartheid. But despite these difficulties, unlike many liberal interracial organisations like the Liberal Party, it was able to survive, because it organised its programmes around the needs of society, changed its identity and reinvented itself. Part of this research has shown how impossible and impractical it was for the church to remain independent from the state during the apartheid period. Another dimension was to show the role that WFC played in opposition politics, especially the student left in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In so doing, I have shown how the WFC played a part, which has seldom been explored, in the demise of apartheid.

Notes

1. This chapter is based on my Honours dissertation presented to the University of the Witwatersrand in 2002.
2. WFC Annual Report, UIM 1973, p. 1.
3. WFC Annual Report, PROD Programmes, 1973, p.1.
4. Letter to the Commission of Inquiry, WFC, Roodepoort Transvaal from Paul Sammerfeld, 8 June 1973.
5. Interview with Horst Kleinschmidt via e-mail, 25 November 2001.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. 'The Training Group as a place of learning', Document 18.16 submitted to the Dendy Young Committee, 1973.
11. Interview with Sarah Webster, 17 September 2001, at Grassroots Village Walk. Sarah was one of the participants in the June 1972 T-Group.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. *Sunday Express*, 29 April 1973 p.2.
15. Interview with Tish White, 20 November 2001, at Wilgespruit Fellowship Centre.
16. *Die Vaderland* was a loyal National Party mouthpiece.
17. *Die Vaderland*, 'Baasplan onthul vir sosiale revolusie in S.A.', 18 November 1971.
18. Letter to Dale White from John Rees, 23 March 1971.
19. Interview with Tish White, 20 November 2001.
20. Drake Koka also worked for WFC in 1972 and was appointed the Interim General-Secretary of BPC.
21. WFC Annual Report for the year 1973, YES.
22. 'Wilgespruit Fellowship Centre Draft', The Commission of Enquiry into four organisations, *Third Interim Report* (Schlebusch Commission), p.3.
23. Tish White, 20 November 2001.

24. Ibid.
25. *Sunday Times*, 29 April 1973, op. cit.
26. Interview with Horst Kleinschmidt, op cit.
- 27 Ibid. p.84
28. The representatives were John Rees (the General Secretary of the SACC at that time), Rev August W. Habelgaarn (the President of the SACC in 1973) and Archbishop of Cape Town, Robert Selby-Taylor.
29. Interview with Tish White, op cit.
30. Ibid.
31. Ibid.
32. One of those selected to be on the Committee from Wilgespruit was the Rev Dale White, but after some Committee members expressed their concern about the Director of Wilgespruit being on the Committee he was asked to quit, which he subsequently did. 'Director quits investigation', *The Star*, 8 June 1973.
33. Finding an independent judge to sit on the Joint Committee proved to be an absolute nightmare for the SACC and Wilgespruit. However, the day before the Commission was due to start and all hope seemed to be lost, Dendy Young agreed to sit on the Committee. Interview with Tish White, op. cit.
34. 'Wilgespruit: A Multi-race dream fails' (1973) *Drum*, November, p. 20.
35. WFC: Executive Committee Meeting. Prod Programmes and Recommendations, 5 November 1973.
36. Ibid. p.2.
37. Minutes of the Wilgespruit Management Committee, held at Pharmacy House at 5.30 pm on 13 November 1973.
38. WFC: Annual Report for the year 1973. Annual Meeting of members, Chairman's Report, 22 June 1974. (Theo Derkx, December 1973), p.1.
39. The Sub-committee consisted of three representatives: the Rev. Joseph Wing, for the churches, the Rev Michael Maasdorp, representing WFC, and John Rees, representing the SACC. The representation of John Rees on the sub-committee for the SACC, had to be changed in 1977 because of his resignation.
40. Interview with Horst Kleinschmidt, op. cit.
41. Minutes of WFC Management Committee, held at Diakonia House at 5.30 pm on 26 August 1974.
42. Minutes of a meeting of the Executive Committee held at Diakonia House, Jorison Street, Braamfontein, at 5.30 pm, 14 April 1975 and Gilbert, W. 1975, op cit.
43. Maasdorp, M. 'Chairman's Report in Annual Report', June 1974 to June 1975', WFC.
44. Interview with Morontshi Dan Matsobane, 34 Hamilton Street, Arcadia, Pretoria (Pensions), 12 December 2001.
45. White, D. WFC Executive Committee Meetings, Minutes. 1975/76, March 1976.
46. Moronthsi Matsobane, op cit.
47. WFC: Annual Report for 1976: Chairman's Report (Canon Michael Carmichael) p.2.
48. WFC: Report to Management Committee on AIM: Progress Report for 1975 and continuation in 1976.

49. White, D. Report Evaluation and Forward Plans 1976-1979. AIM, September 1979, p.5.
50. Ibid. p.5
51. Letter to the Secretary of WFC from J. L. Nthebe, Secretary of Glass and Allied Workers Union of South Africa, 14 March 1977.
52. WFC. Annual Meeting of Members, Chairman's (Canon M. Carmichael) Report for 1978, 31 December 1978.
53. Interview with Sarah Webster, op cit.
54. Ibid.
55. Interview with Lindy Myeza , Methodist Church, Cape Town, December 2001.
56. Interview with Sarah Webster, op cit.
57. Interview with Horst Kleinschmidt, op cit.
58. Interview with Horst Kleinschmidt, op cit.
59. Interview with Tish White, 20 November 2001, op cit.
60. Interview with Horst Kleinschmidt, op cit.

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