



For Immediate Release

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Relief efforts begin in the wake of Tongan Cyclone

Tongan communities in the Ha'apai islands are coming to terms with the damage to their homes, churches and livelihoods after Tropical Cyclone Ian swept through the archipelago last Saturday 11 January, leaving devastation in its wake.

The areas worst affected by the category 5 storm were in the northern part of the Ha'apai group of islands, where more than half of the 1,130 buildings affected by the storm were completely destroyed.

Where last week the island was covered with tropical forest and food crops – coconut palms, banana and breadfruit trees, yam, tapioca and sweet potato – these food crops have now been flattened. Fishing boats have also been destroyed, resulting in the main food sources for the people of Ha'apai being severely restricted. A lack of boats also means people affected on the outer Ha'apai islands have limited transport to obtain urgent assistance.

Members of our partner church, The Free Wesleyan Church Tonga, are significantly represented among those affected. Yet despite the significant damage, many church members are in good spirits.

“Despite the effect of the cyclone in all aspect of life, people are still in good spirit,” said Rev. Dr Tevita Havea, General Secretary of the FWCT. “The Ha'apai people are so used to these natural tragedies that they could look above the devastations and loss to have a smile about life in the midst of difficulties. A laugh does not mean that their pain has disappeared; it means that people still some element of happiness in the midst of chaos.”

Church communities in Tonga's main island Tongatapu have rallied to support people in Ha'apai, donating essential goods and food. These were packed into containers overnight by members of The Free Wesleyan Church Tonga and are being taken to Ha'apai today (Friday) to be distributed to those most affected.

Dr Havea, who has visited communities affected by the cyclone, has expressed appreciation for expressions of concern and prayer for the people of Ha'apai.

“I have relayed your prayers and concerns to our people at Ha'apai. They are appreciative of your concerns and willingness to partner with them during this time of need. As ever, we are thankful to UnitingWorld for your continuing to support us on the good days and the bad days. Mālō'aupito.”

Support for relief and rehabilitation efforts needed

The impact of Cyclone Ian will be felt for a long time as clean-up operations and the process of rebuilding and re-establishing lives begins.

While the immediate needs of food and clothing are being met within the country through the generosity of unaffected communities and extended family, the rebuilding of infrastructure and re-establishing of livelihoods and local food supplies will require significant funding.

UnitingWorld has launched an appeal to support the Free Wesleyan Church as they organise relief efforts, rebuild and support affected communities. Your support for this vital work is greatly appreciated. Please visit www.unitingworld.org.au/cyclone-ian-tonga/ or call us on 1800 998 122 to donate.

UnitingWorld is available for further comment. Please contact Marnie Frost, External Relations Manager on +61 2 8267 4277 or Marnief@UnitingWorld.org.au