

Prof. Gunther Hermann Wittenberg

Professor Gunther Hermann Wittenberg was born on the 5th April 1935 and he died on the 29th March 2014.

Living with Christian integrity during this momentous time period required a remarkable person. Gunther Wittenberg was such a person.

Shaped by his Christian faith, Gunther Wittenberg was adept at ‘reading the signs of the times’, recognising what God was doing within a particular context. Within the South African context, the primary context within which he worked, Gunther forged and founded many projects, as contributions to ‘God’s project’ of liberation and life for all.

Born to missionary parents in what was then Tanganyika, Gunther grew up within the postcolonial struggles of Southern Africa. He was to make these struggles his own, identifying with and working with those on the margins.

Gunther’s many contributions to the struggle for liberation in South Africa were all shaped by his deep commitment to prophetic Christianity. From his undergraduate studies in Pietermaritzburg, to his postgraduate studies in Germany, to his first parish ministry in Belville in the Cape, to his involvement in the Christian Institute, and the Pietermaritzburg Agency for Community Social Action (Pacsa), prophetic Christianity provided the parameters for what he did and how he did it.

Because Gunther recognised the ambiguous role of Christianity in apartheid South Africa, he was committed to forms of theological education that would nurture what the *Kairos Document* (1985) referred to as ‘prophetic’ forms of Christianity. He set about this project, what was to become the central project of his life, with careful consideration and planning. He spent three years preparing himself in Germany, and then returned to what was then the University of Natal in Pietermaritzburg in 1973, with a vision to establish the first theological education programme in prophetic contextual theology at a South African university.

Slowly, under his leadership, what was to become the School of Theology (now part of the School of Religion, Philosophy, and Classics) emerged in 1985, a nationally and internationally recognised pioneer in the area of prophetic contextual theology. And some years later, Gunther’s vision for a truly ecumenical theological education project was realised when the Pietermaritzburg Cluster of Theological Education was established in 1990, bringing together the many theological seminaries in the area, including the newly formed Lutheran Theological Institute, another project to which he gave so much of himself.

But Gunther was not content with a form of theological education that remained restricted to educated elites. And so while working within the University he began work on a related community engagement project, one that would forge an interface between socially engaged biblical and theological scholars and ordinary Christians in poor and marginalised

communities. Having visited the base-community projects of Brasil in the mid-1980s, Gunther established a South African equivalent, the Institute for the Study of the Bible (what is now the Ujamaa Centre for Community Development and Research), in 1989. The Ujamaa Centre worked (and continues to work) with local communities, using scholarly biblical and theological resources for social transformation. The Ujamaa Centre remains an internationally recognised model of university-based community development and research.

Scholarship was central to Gunther Wittenberg's vocation. Recognising that the Bible was a significant but ambivalent text in our South African (and African) context, Gunther sought to harness the considerable resources of academic biblical scholarship to show how the Bible could be a potential resource for liberation rather than a source of oppression. Indeed, his great gift was to make biblical scholarship accessible to ordinary readers of the Bible. In taking up this task he combined careful and responsible biblical scholarship with a socially engaged and accountable immersion in context, becoming one of the pioneers of 'contextual biblical hermeneutics'.

Believing, theologically, that the incarnate God has identified with the poor and marginalised, he too took up 'an option for the poor', aligning himself with the struggles of millions of South Africans against the forces of apartheid and death. But he did not stop or even pause with the advent of our political liberation, imagining that his work was done; instead he offered his biblical scholarship in the service of building our new nation and in resisting the forces that still persist in bringing death rather than life, engaging with the struggle for economic justice, the HIV and AIDS pandemic, and, most recently, the threat to the environment.

He was nationally and internationally recognised as one of South Africa's leading biblical scholars, as familiar with the scholarship of Europe and the USA as he was with the contextual contours of South African life. He was a regular participant in the scholarly societies of his discipline, particularly the Old Testament Society of South Africa. He published regularly and widely, constructing a substantive and coherent body of work over more than thirty years. As an Emeritus Professor and Honorary Research Associate of the University of KwaZulu-Natal, he was still publishing academic work in the final years of his life.

Gunther Wittenberg mentored many, (and I am fortunate to have been among them), nurturing another generation of socially engaged scholars who continue to walk and work in the trajectory he charted. Everything he did he did with a gentleness of spirit, serving others with care and a deep commitment to justice. He died surrounded by his family, his wife and constant comrade, Monika, his children, Martin, Inge, Gertrud, and Reinhild, and many grandchildren. He died, like the biblical Job, 'old and full of days'. We mourn his passing, and we celebrate his life. Hamba kahle, baba.