

## **Tribute to Prof Gunther H. Wittenberg**

**5 April 1935 – 29 March 2014**

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Gunther Hermann Wittenberg was born to missionary parents on 5 April 1935 near Lake Victoria, Tanzania. Gunther met his wife, Monika Teichler, in Germany. They married in 1961 and had four children: Martin, Inge, Gertrud and Reinhild. He first enrolled for a B.A. in Pietermaritzburg before moving to Germany to study theology in Bethel, Heidelberg, Tübingen and Kiel. Gunther was ordained a Lutheran pastor in 1963. He died at home on 29 March 2014 of the cancer of the pancreas.

His activities as a lecturer/scholar, family man, activist, and unifier should be understood within the context of his commitment to his call and ordination as a pastor. Gunther's dream and vision of an inclusive community would not have been realised without the support of a true friend, a committed comrade in her own right, a dedicated mother of his children and a loving spouse: Monika Wittenberg.

Gunther was an excellent lecturer, patient with all his students and understood the significance of providing detailed feedback as a way of providing life-long learning to his students.

In his writings, displaying a high intellectual ability, Gunther Wittenberg employed a sociological approach to reading biblical texts. Amongst others, he addressed issues of poverty, justice, abuse of power, suffering, prophecy and protest, and recently ecology. His interest in gardening and ecology can be traced back to his earlier writings such as *Job the Farmer: the Judean am-haretz and the Wisdom Movement*.<sup>2</sup>

Gunther visualised an inclusive community which transcends all cultural, racial, gender and economic barriers. His vision may be traced as far back as 1963 when he was a full-time pastor in Bellville, Cape Town in South Africa. Although he poured his energy into the mainly German parish work, and built up a brass band, he also initiated Afrikaans services and tried to build

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<sup>1</sup> I acknowledge the contributions by Gertrud Tonsing, Prof. Gunther Wittenberg's daughter, through a eulogy she read out at her father's memorial. I also acknowledge Rev. Solomuzi Mabuza's contribution in raising a few points on the life of Prof. Gunther Wittenberg.

<sup>2</sup> Wittenberg, Gunter H. "Job the farmer: the Judean am-haretz and the wisdom movement." *Old Testament Essays* 4 (1991): 151-170.

partnerships with the other Lutherans — something not supported or understood by everyone at that time.

He endeavoured to create an inclusive theological training for the racially divided Lutheran community. His concern was that the Lutheran churches in South Africa and Namibia were divided along racial lines. He became very instrumental in ensuring that a joint Lutheran Theological Training project was initiated with students from these churches where they could attend classes together, share accommodation, and worship together. This project developed into an ecumenical B. Th. programme with the support of the Lutheran World Federation at the University of Natal, in Pietermaritzburg. It was officially launched in 1985 with Gunther Wittenberg as its first Head of Department. With the ecumenical B. Th. programme established, he then set out to foster cooperation with the other seminaries in the Pietermaritzburg area, founding the Cluster of Theological Institutions in 1990.

Gunther encouraged, as part of the actualisation of the priesthood of all believers, the reading of the Bible by both the trained readers and the laity through Bible studies. He established the Institute for the Study of the Bible, later renamed Ujamaa, which fostered an interface between academic biblical studies and grass-roots community Bible study.

He challenged the apartheid policy in a quiet and persuasive manner. He supported the KAIROS document and experienced alienation from many white Lutheran congregations and some harassment from the security police.

After undergoing a cardiac triple by-pass operation in 1994, he retired from the University and established the Kenosis community in Bishopstowe, Pietermaritzburg — a project which serves orphaned children facing numerous life challenges due to the HIV/AIDS crisis. In 2005 he and his wife retired to the Lutheran Gardens in Pietermaritzburg where he continued his research, this time on ecology. Several of his articles on ecology were published in accredited journals, which have generated a lot of interest and debate on this subject.

Gunther Wittenberg was a courageous prophet who did not only challenge the apartheid system through his writings, but also through his actions and projects/programmes which he initiated. He was a true leader who was not only visionary in promoting an inclusive community but also knew when to pass on the leadership baton to the younger generation. In his views he was ahead of his time, which was often a lonely place to be.

We will remember him as a man of integrity, high intellectual ability, humility and an unshakeable faith.