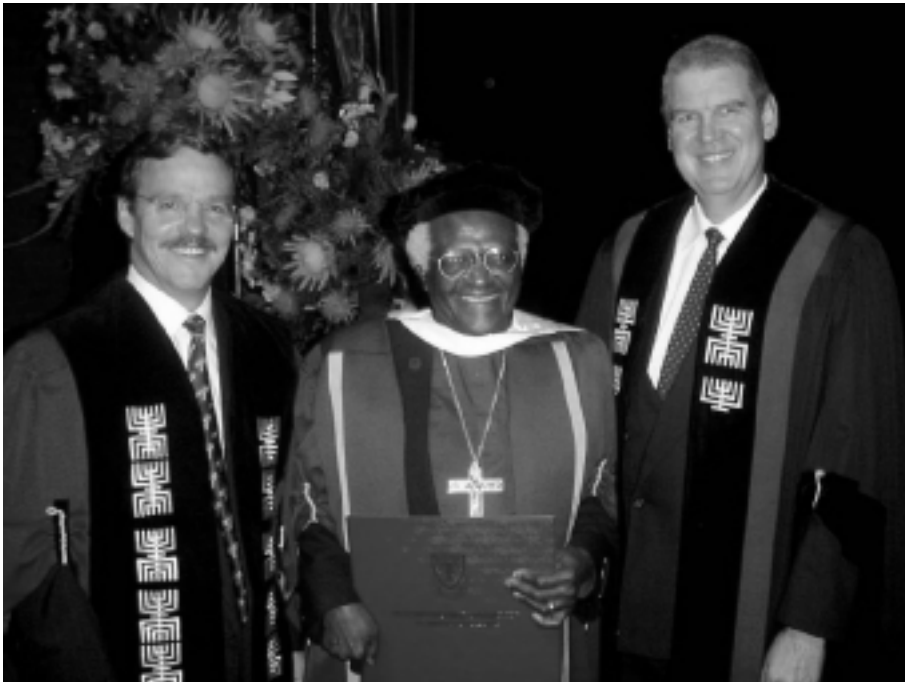




Keynote address

A tribute to a man who served his country and humanity¹



Background

The last time – as far as I could establish – that Archbishop Tutu visited the PUK was when I was SRC president and the “Politiese Raad” invited him to speak to the students – in 1977 or 1978. This was at a time when the PUK’s students (including myself) were on the forefront of very critical thinking by the Afrikaans universities about issues such as the *Mixed Marriages Act* and section 16 of the *Immorality Act*. We were, to put it mildly, a bit controversial. When I met Bishop Tutu (as he was then) on the steps of the Studentesentrum and introduced myself, he looked at me intensively and said in his characteristic voice: “Young man, you have been saying some strange things lately.”

¹ Message on the occasion of the presentation of an honorary doctorate to Archbishop Desmond Tutu on 27 November 2002.

An unpopular speech that was right ...

On that day, as some of us recall, bishop Tutu's message was not well received by the majority of the audience. Most of the audience did not understand the urgency of the fight against apartheid and did not agree with the fact that the bishop saw sanctions as a peaceful way of helping to dismantle the system. I often wondered what he thought when he left Potchefstroom that day ... anger, despair, hope?

Looking back Archbishop, we have to say that you were, on the whole, right and we were wrong ... we owe you an apology, and as a university our council and senate made that apology to the South African people in 1994. And in a sense, we are rectifying that mistake by giving you this doctorate today ... But this doctorate is much more than "making up for the past". It is a pledge about the future. Something more about this later.

"The voice of Potchefstroom"

Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education is a proud institution that was founded 133 years ago in the Eastern Cape as a college for the training of ministers of religion and teachers. It moved to Potchefstroom in the beginning of the twentieth century and gained independence as a fully fledged university in 1951. As such, the University is over 50 years old.

In the late 1950s and seventies this university was known for its critical approach to the then government's policies. During a visit to Potchefstroom in 1977, the then Prime Minister, John Vorster, asked in a speech why the voice of Potchefstroom had gone silent. Of course, he meant the voice of support to apartheid ... because another voice was then being heard: a critical voice, based on the Christian principles of justice and human dignity, a voice that questioned the basic tenets of apartheid and its associated policy of Christian national education.

This voice was heard through lecturers like Johan van der Vyver, Hennie Coetzee, Poen Coetzee, Lourens du Plessis, Elaine Botha, Johan Snyman, Bennie van der Walt, Pontifex Venter and many others. This was the voice that I heard and eventually participated in when I was a student leader in the seventies. It led me and others to participate in the Koinonia Declaration, the publication of *Woord en Daad*, the formation of the first non-racial political organization for students (Polstu) and internal intellectual resistance to apartheid in Afrikaans circles.

That voice became slightly subdued in the 80s, but re-emerged in the 90s and eventually led the Council and Senate of the PUK to state:

As University the Council and Senate accepted and implemented policy that deeply affected both fellow South African and fellow Christians. The University must therefore openly admit that on these points, the Christian principles for which the University stands were not consistently realized. This admission must be regarded as a confession and a testimony of deeply felt remorse over the way in which the brokenness manifested itself in this University as a social institution, and also over the injustice thus done to fellow South Africans.

And in June 1994 the Council confirmed the Senate decision and expressly committed the PU to the future by stating:

... that the University entered the new political era in a spirit of purposefulness and enthusiasm, and as a Christian university it wishes to be involved in the society within which it functions by fulfilling its vocation... It is the intention of the University to serve the country and its people as an educational institution that is responsive to the demands of the times.

Today the voice of Potchefstroom is a more mature one, a voice that had learnt from its mistakes of the past. It is still critical – as an academic voice should be. But it is, as the Council decision of 1994 stated, a voice wanting to serve the country and its people ... And in that sense the awarding of this honorary doctorate today to Archbishop Desmond Tutu is a pledge and investment in the future.

A pledge and an investment in the future

Earlier this year, the staff, the on-campus students and the Council accepted a vision for the next five years. This vision implies that our university is a place

- where quality teaching and research as well as the implementation of expertise are the core business and where internationally acknowledged quality benchmarks are applied;
- that is characterized by a commitment to community development;
- that is entrepreneurially oriented and excels in service delivery;
- that reaches out from its Christian foundation to the full spectrum of South Africans.

We pledge ourselves to be such a university: one that you, Archbishop Tutu, could be proud of, now being an alumnus of the PUK.

As a university, we also stand on the threshold of great changes: we are about to be part of the restructuring of the higher education sector, and together with the University of North West, we have committed ourselves

to form a new higher education institution. This institution will be a wholly South African institution, with a value system based on the Constitution of our country. It will, as the PUK's present vision states, be an institution of quality, serving the country and all its people.

The challenge facing us (and the UNW) is to establish the new institution in such a way that it maintains the best of the present institutions, and become even better. This we propose to do in the best spirit of the typical South African balance between unity and diversity. Within the essential unity of the new institution, there has to be room for the South African nation that comprises a rich diversity. This will be reflected in the programmes the new institution will offer, the way in which the different university and technikon campuses will be managed, the brand names that should be retained and the varied campus life of the new institution. This is necessary, because we are aware that if you stamp out the diversity, you will lose the unity. As Potchefstroom University, we pledge ourselves to be part of the unity. We are committed to a new voice to emerge, and to the voice of Potchefstroom to remain strong within the ensemble of the new institution.

This award is therefore also an investment into the future of the new institution; it will reflect the diversity that was also part of your life Archbishop, but it will be one in its striving for unity, quality and justice. It is a symbolic investment into a future institution that you, Archbishop, would also be proud to be an alumnus of.

Conclusion

Today is a festive and historic occasion. It is symbolic and it is future orientated. The PUK has paid tribute to a man who has given his life in service to the country and humanity. As a university, we cannot do less.

Dr. Theuns Eloff

Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education