

Stellenbosch University pays tribute to the late Dr Desmond Tutu

“He was a figure of great moral authority, and also someone who had boundless empathy with all people. He freely gave of his time and energy to improve the lives of others,” Stellenbosch University (SU) Rector and Vice-Chancellor Prof Wim de Villiers said in reaction to the news that Archbishop Emeritus Dr Desmond Tutu (90) had passed away on 26 December 2021.

Dr Tutu received an honorary doctorate from Stellenbosch University in 2002 in recognition of his role “as a leader in the struggle for justice and reconciliation in South Africa”. He was also the patron of the Desmond Tutu TB Centre (DTTC) in Stellenbosch University’s Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences at Tygerberg, Cape Town.

Born in Klerksdorp on 7 October 1931, Dr Tutu became an international icon of justice in the 1980s for his strong stance against apartheid. He was the first black bishop of the Anglican Church of Southern Africa, went on to become Archbishop of Cape Town, and also served as general secretary of the South African Council of Churches (SACC) and as chairperson of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). He was honoured the world over with many awards, including the Nobel Peace Prize in 1984.

Tireless TB campaigner

Dr Tutu was a strong supporter of the fight against tuberculosis (TB), having spent two years in hospital after contracting the disease as a 15-year-old. He lent his name to Stellenbosch University’s TB Centre, a leading research unit in the University’s Department of Paediatrics and Child Health, after it was founded in 2003.

The [Desmond Tutu TB Centre](#) has since received international recognition for its ground-breaking research on childhood TB, which includes some of the world’s most advanced research on multidrug-resistant TB in children, including the first ever trials of new treatments for TB in children.

Founding DTTC Director Prof Nulda Beyers said everyone at the Centre was “hugely grateful to the Arch for his involvement and support, and for being a wonderful role model”. Her successor and current director, Prof Anneke Hesseling, said “his is a living legacy which inspires us on a daily basis”.

‘He lit up the class’

In 2013, Dr Tutu asked if he could experience what it would be like to study medicine. He said his time in hospital as a child inspired him to become a doctor, but life took him in another direction. Dr Tutu quietly became just another member of the class in Stellenbosch University’s [Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences](#) for a few months. He attended lectures with students, learning how to recognise symptoms of childhood diseases.

Lecturer Dr Marlene Morkel said she was very impressed with her new student. “He was very good at listening to the chest and picking up abnormal signs on the simulation doll. He had a natural ability. For a first-timer, he was fantastic. He was also enthusiastic and asked good questions.”

Annika Roux, a fifth-year medical student at the time, said it was wonderful to meet Dr Tutu. “He lit up the class when he started laughing and asking questions. It was so nice to see him show support. It raised awareness of our tiny patients.”

At the end of his course, Dr Tutu was made an “honorary MD” and presented with a stethoscope with his name engraved on it. It was sponsored by the Tygerberg Children’s Hospital Trust, which raises much-needed funds for the hospital, where 16 000 babies and children are admitted every year.

Fearless

The late President Nelson Mandela once described Dr Tutu as “sometimes strident, often tender, never afraid, and seldom without humour”. And when Dr Tutu received a special award from the

Mo Ibrahim Foundation in 2012 for being an “outstanding African civil society champion”, the then Stellenbosch University Rector and Vice-Chancellor Prof Russel Botman said the fact that he always fearlessly took a stand for truth and justice, regardless of political correctness, made him a leader worth emulating.

In December 2011, Dr Tutu received a Lifetime Achievement Award from [Stellenbosch University's Africa Centre for HIV/Aids Management](#) for “working ceaseless to ease the burden of everyone infected and affected by HIV and Aids”. The award was presented to him by Botman at a gala concert in Cape Town in commemoration of World Aids Day.

When Botman passed away in 2014, Dr Tutu prayed with bereaved relatives and close friends at the family home before the official funeral service. He described Botman as a “precocious and courageous young church leader who emerged in the cauldron of the 1980s people’s struggle against apartheid to put the feet of older church leaders to the fire”.

In a speech at Stellenbosch University on 25 March 2015, Dr Tutu said the toll of TB on so many South Africans was disgraceful. “We can’t accept this. TB is a treatable disease. We need a new set of tools to diagnose and treat the disease. TB needs to be our next liberation struggle, next to the fight against poverty.”

Legacy

Dr Tutu was closely linked to Stellenbosch University’s [Beyers Naudé Centre for Public Theology](#). He delivered the opening address when the Centre was launched in 2002, and subsequently participated in many of its conferences and seminars, including a symbolic re-enactment in 2014 of the TRC faith community hearings. He was also a speaker at the International Calvin Conference in 2009, hosted by Stellenbosch University’s Faculty of Theology to mark its 150th year of existence.

“He stood for truth, freedom and high moral values, but did so with humility. We need to keep his legacy alive by researching and discussing his contribution for the benefit of future generations,” Prof Christo Thesnaar of Stellenbosch University’s Faculty of Theology said.

Next generation

Postgraduate theology student Marius Louw met Dr Tutu when the Archbishop hosted a group of Maties at his Eucharist table in St. George’s Cathedral in Cape Town in 2013. He wrote about his encounter in a contribution to the book *Discourse Café*, published by Stellenbosch University’s [Frederik Van Zyl Slabbert Institute for Student Leadership Development](#) in 2015.

“Just before we left, one of the students asked him if she could have a hug. He stood up and hugged all of us. It seemed as if he was content in the knowledge that he had done as much as he could in his life. I will go so far as to say that there seemed to be a sense of liberation for him in knowing that a next generation will take up his banner,” Louw writes.

Dr Leslie van Rooi, former head of the FVZS Institute at Stellenbosch University, says “The ideals of Desmond Tutu are the inspiration of a new generation of leaders who believe in the possibilities of our country and its people. His authenticity, passion, faith and solid beliefs enable others to see more, do more and go beyond the here and now. Nobody can forget that or extinguish it.”

Power of mediation

Dr Tutu at one point attended a workshop with children from disadvantaged communities where they learnt peer mediation skills. This was in his capacity as the patron of the [Africa Centre for Dispute Settlement](#) (ACDS) at the University of Stellenbosch Business School (USB).

“He knew that the ability to help people see eye to eye and to fairly and effectively manage differences was an essential skills set for the future of the country,” ACDS Head Prof Brian Ganson said.

“He was living proof of the power of mediation to transform people, relationships and systems. But in the transition to democracy in South Africa, and in his subsequent work on the national and international stage, he eschewed any approach to conflict resolution that focused on ‘compromise’. Rather, he was stubborn on core principles while engaging even the most difficult counterparts as fellow human beings. He showed a whole generation that to reach sustainable solutions, we must be advocates for both justice and reconciliation.”

“He will be sorely missed, but we are grateful for his legacy,” Prof Wim de Villiers said.

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- CAPTION: The late Dr Desmond Tutu, photographed in 2018. Picture: Stefan Els, Stellenbosch University
- Links to a selection of VIDEOS about Dr Desmond Tutu on SU’s news platforms can be found below.
 - [#WorldTBDay 2015](#) (2015/03/23)
 - [Speech at the launch of "The Humanist Imperative in South Africa"](#) (2011/08/11)
 - [Kick TB with Desmond Tutu](#) (2011/01/26)
 - [Desmond Tutu Book reading](#) (2010/08/20)

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