

# Historical and Theological Reflections of Honorary PhD Degrees Conferred to African Township Pentecostal Leaders in South Africa

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## Abstract

It is a usual trend among South African Universities autumn graduation to include a component of conferring honorary doctoral degrees to distinguished academics, alumni, and members of civil society. This article focuses on the trend in 2024 because the usual trend also occurred during a national outcry about a foreign institution, Trinity International Bible University, a non-Council on Higher Education accredited institution, conferred a doctoral degree to one of South Africa's distinguished actors, Sello Maake-kaNgcube. The institution has been conferring such degrees to Pentecostal pastors and members as well as other civil society leaders, between 2010 and 2024. This article argues that the actions of Trinity International Bible University should be considered in view of the legacy of apartheid, Bantu Education and the desire to achieve social status through ecclesial and academic titles among African Pentecostal leaders. Using an interplay of South African politics and education historical analysis, and a Pentecostal history analysis the article reflects on the phenomenon of conferring honorary doctoral degree to African Pentecostal leaders in South Africa.

**Keywords:** Pentecostal-Charismatic, Doctoral Degree (HC), Theological Training, Ethics, and Honour

## INTRODUCTION

South African universities follow a global trend of conferring honorary doctoral degrees to academics who have distinguished themselves in their field of study. In addition, universities do the same for deserving individuals who have made significant contributions to their communities. However, Africans were deliberately excluded in the list of recipients. The trend began to change after the 1994 democratic dispensation when the ANC government embarked to transform the apartheid-based education system that promoted superiority and inferiority among different nations and introduced an equal education system for all its citizens.

At that time two new regulatory bodies were established regulate and transform education. First is Umalusi responsible for grade one to twelve education. Second is South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) responsible for checking the quality of foreign qualifications of institutions of higher learning. Third is Council on Higher Education (CHE) responsible regulating and transforming higher education learning. The CHE was authorised to regulate the provision of higher education and the awarding of relevant qualification according to the National Qualification Framework (NQF) (level six to ten), that is diploma or higher certificate NQF level six, bachelor degree, NQF level seven, honours degree NQF level eight, master degree, NQF level nine and doctoral degrees, NQF level ten. In addition, only public universities are permitted to confer honorary doctoral degrees. All private and foreign institutions that wish to offer higher education have to apply to be registered with the Council on Higher Education and be listed in the register of the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET).

At a lower qualification level, the Association of Christian Religious Practitioners (ACRP) was established to address theological training of unprivileged pastors who cannot meet CHE standards. The ACRP developed the NQF level 3 and 5 curriculums as a religious occupation within the Quality Control for Trades and Occupation (QCTO) framework. Other institutions are currently working with the ACRP and the QCTO to focus on delivering NQF Levels 3 and 5 theological education training.

Alongside these developments, in the mid -2000s, as the new government was introducing transformation primary,

secondary and institutions of higher learning, some foreign theological institutions also began to introduce its curricula to the citizens of the new nation. Among them were Pentecostal training institutions that claimed to be internationally recognised and offering quality education. They also began to confer honorary doctoral degrees to various South Africans. One of such institution is Trinity International Bible University. All Unregistered institutions are classified as bogus. Trinity International Bible University is one of them.

Focusing on Pentecostal leaders' conferees, the article uses an interplay of South Africa politics and education history (Msila 2007; Seawright 2017) and Pentecostal history (Anderson 2004, 2005; Kgatle 2022; Mzondi 2019), to provides a response to the practice of conferring honorary doctoral degrees among African Pentecostal leaders in South Africa in the past fourteen years (2010-2024).

The article responds by focusing on theological training among Pentecostals, the legacy of apartheid and Bantu Education, respect and honour, the contribution of African Pentecostals in Pentecostal research, Trinity International Bible University, Pentecostal leaders and ethical practice, and conclude with presenting a Christo-Petrine-Pauline leadership attitude.

## **THEOLOGICAL TRAINING AMONG PENTECOSTALS**

Nel (2016a) provides discourses covering over a hundred years of the Pentecostal Movement and theological training (see also Asamoah-Gyadu 2015). These details help to understand the historical relationship between Pentecostals (with the later Charismatic movement implied) and the academy. The Pentecostal movement began in the United States of America, consisting of illiterate people and artisans, and became a grassroots movement (Hunter 2013: 2-3). The movement emphasised baptism in the Holy Spirit with the evidence of speaking in other tongues (Friesen 2009:43) as essential components to reach others with the message of the gospel in the anticipation of the imminent parousia (Chandomba 2007, pp. 15–17); embraced the common priesthood of all believers (Stronstad 1999, pp. 114–116); and practised oral theology (Asamoah-Gyadu 2015: 75–77). The delay of the parousia and the subsequent growth in church membership forced Pentecostals to embrace evangelical teachings and rejected the historical criticism approach of the Bible (Kärkkäinen 1998, p. 80; Patte 1976, p. 7). Henceforth, the Pentecostal's view of the theological training tended to be based on the teachings that rejected the liberal interpretation of the Scriptures (Asumang-Gyadu 2017, p. 5; Hayford 2006, p. 16).

The Apostolic Faith Mission is the first to establish a Pentecostal college in South Africa, the Auckland Park Theological Seminary (ATS). Below is how it describes its 2004 Master's and Doctor's graduation experience (ATS, n.d.):

The first candidates for a master's and a doctor's degree supervised by ATS received their degrees. It was the first time in South Africa that postgraduate dissertations or theses were prepared under the supervision of a Pentecostal academic institution. It had truly been a "long walk to freedom" since the days when the Pentecostal Church in South Africa was viewed as a sect, ministering only to disadvantaged and marginalised communities.

Their graduates further studies in various South African institution of higher learning. Consequently, Pentecostal academics and practitioners are poised to contextualise their training within their praxis, after qualifying from South African institutions (cf Nel 2020, p. 3). Public universities adhere to cessationism (MacArthur 2013:252–261) while Pentecostal and Charismatics adhere to continualism (Macchia 2015, p. 9). This sharp contrast creates the marginalisation Nel (2016b, p. 6) paints as follows:

Although most academic institutions are not hostile anymore to Pentecostals, it is also true that few Pentecostals are invited to participate in broader academic discussions or projects. And Pentecostals also find it awkward and uncomfortable to associate with institutions that question or contradict the Pentecostal worldview and spirituality.

To resolve impasse, other churches opt to train their members through non-CHE accredited institutions in the United States of America and the Caribbean Islands. These developments show a gap in providing a relevant Pentecostal-Charismatic theological training. To this end, Mzondi (2009), Masenya and Masenya (2018), Resane (2020), Nel (2020) and Kgatle (2020, 2021), have contributed to ongoing suggestion for implement such training. Resane (2005, p. 6) argues that "Pastoral training should never separate the academic from the practical, the head from the hands and leave the heart to the peripheral lifestyle." Hence, Mzondi (2009) proposes a "Two souls" leadership approach that creates a

balanced combination of Ubuntu, Western and New Testament values to train African leaders. Masenya and Masenya (2018) suggest a curriculum that empowers leader to address socio-economic issues. Resane (2020, p. 5) also argues that theological training should “be critical and constructive, interpretive and expressive. “Such curriculum should entail three aspects, namely, ministry composition, spiritual/personal formation, and academic organisation” (Resane 2020, p. 6). He further posits that “It is critical to balance knowledge with practice, otherwise what is transmitted is no more education but some form of fallacy” (Resane 2020, p.6). Such praxis plays a significant role in grounding theological training in African Pentecostal contexts as noticed in Edward Letwaba’s Patmos Bible School model for training leaders (Kgatle 2021, pp. 89–92). Edward Letwaba established the first African-initiated Pentecostal Bible School in South Africa (Kgatle 2021, p. 87). Such approach will assist to address the non-Pentecostal relevant curricula offered by many South African universities (Kgatle 2018). Nel’s (2023, p. 3) argument that African Pentecostalism has embraced an African worldview since its inception leads to considering the efforts of Mashau and Kgatle (2019) to develop an Ubuntu theology that addresses erroneous Pentecostal praxis in South Africa.

## **LEGACY OF APARTHEID AND BANTU EDUCATION**

The Bantu Education Act of 1953, extended to cover universities in 1959, meant to provide inferior primary and secondary education that would make Africans perpetual servants by providing skewed resources for different sections of the community according to skin colour (Khumalo 2022). It was grounded on the apartheid political system of the National Party to institute legal segregation of different nations in South Africa (Mhlauli, Salani and Mokotedi 2015, p. 205).

Proponents of apartheid promoted the belief, based on Calvinism, that the Afrikaner is divinely predestined to rule Africans (Welty 2005, p. 26). Hence, the then minister of education Native Affairs, Hendrick Verwoerd, argued that:

There is no place for him [the black child] in the European [white South African] community above the level of certain form of labour.....Until now he has been subject to a school system which drew him away from his own community and misled him by showing him the green pastures of European society in which he is not allowed to graze (Verwood cited in Troup, 1976, p.22)

The effects of Bantu Education were Africans were conditioned and trained to be inferior from primary to university level. They were not supposed to be treated the same as their masters. Consequently, Africans were destined to occupy the lowest position in South African social hierarchy. Pentecostal churches, Apostolic Faith Mission, Full Gospel and AOG, quietly applied Bantu Education Act in their Bible Colleges. Their Pastors were trained at different Bible Colleges and assigned to different nations as the apartheid system dictated. This practice continued until the dawn of the democratic dispensation when the apartheid government and its laws was overthrown after the first democratic elections held in 1994.

## **RESPECT AND HONOUR**

Humans like to be respected and honoured. Different nations have different practices to respect and honour their elders and leaders. Ordinary people are taught and expected to always respect their leaders in public and private meetings and occasions. Children are also taught to respect and honour parents. Wives are taught and expected to respect and honour their husbands. Church members are also taught and expected to respect and honour their spiritual leaders.

Ubuntu and respect in the community and South African churches

In African communities, social status and class permeates the culture of respect and honour. The elderly are not called by their names, but *bab’* uNdingilizi. Usually, the wife and the community will usually use name of the first born child instead of calling him by name. He is called *ubaba* kaMzamo. Similarly, the wife is *umama* kaMzamo. To show respect, a clan name is used to call a person, a surname is also used for the same reason. This practice has permeated South African churches, including Pentecostal churches, as the clergy is usually called *ubab’* umfundisi (isiZulu) or *ntate moruti* (Sesotho) and the wife is called *umam’* umfundisi (isiZulu) or *mamoruti* (Sesotho). However, Charismatic church members follow an American practice of using Pastor before the name of the clergy. Hence, they call them Pastor X.

## **A Classical Pentecostal’s Influence and Other Civil Society Members**

Frank Chikane, a Pentecostal pastor and anti-apartheid clergy, is the only South African, African Classical Pentecostal

conferred a doctoral degree, DTh (*honoris causa* in 1989 from Rijkuniversiteit, Groningen, Netherlands,) for his role in the liberation struggle and global justice efforts (SA history online 2020, Parliament of South Africa 2019). He was further honoured for role in the liberation struggle and the ANC government and being a servant leader (NMU 2019). The Nelson Mandela University conferred him a Doctor of Philosophy (*honoris causa*) in 2019. He has also received a leadership award from the UNISA Graduate School of Business Leadership for the above-mentioned contributions (Bizcommunity 2012).

It is public knowledge and sad that a foreign institution of higher learning was the first to confer him a doctoral degree for his role in the nation, not because he was Pentecostal but because of his role and contribution in the liberation struggle and quest for global peace and justice. This trend of foreign institutions honouring the contribution of African leaders for their role in society is noticeable after the first democratic elections held on 27th April 1994. These elections ushered a democratic government that inherited higher education systems based on apartheid laws.

The founder of the new nation and government, Nelson Mandela, was also first honoured by foreign institutions in 1985 (Wikipedia). If South Africa public universities did not recognise African leaders for their role in the society, that is liberation from political oppression, what more about Pentecostal leaders' role and contribution to their religious role in the society? The tendency stage was to for public universities to deliberately ignore the contributions of the former oppressed and marginalised Africans. The new democratic government was set to address this trend and introduce a new inclusive practice, after reshaping and structuring of all the apartheid-based universities Thobejane (2013, p. 2) mentions were intended to entrench the master-slave and superior-inferior social hierarchy. The role of the former oppressed and marginalised Africans and others section of the nation were only recognised after his move. There was a drastic shift from being research populations to being research contributors as new restructured universities began to recognise their contribution in the society during and prior to the period of apartheid. Hence, the conferring of a masters degree (*honoris causa*) to Hamilton Maki, the self-taught surgeon (Independent 2005); and similar doctoral degrees to kings in the fight against colonialism and apartheid, and the current ZCC dove section, bishop Engenas Lekganyane, for his role in religion (Mogakane 2023), and Ester Mahlangu for her role in art (UJ 2028; Unisa 2024).

During and after this above-mentioned restructuring phase and over time, between 2014 and 2024, Trinity International Bible University, a non-Council on Higher Education accredited institution, and others noticed this gap and later offered to honour Pentecostal pastors and members of civil society for their role in the society. It associated with Pentecostal formations like SAUCIC and others to reach out to Pentecostal leaders and members and members of civil society identified for their role in the society. Many influential Pentecostal leaders and members were later conferred doctoral degree (*honoris causa*). Renowned persons like Sello Maake-kaNcube, an actor (Keteyi 2024), and Zwelinzima Vavi, a trade unionist (Mashele and Sifile 2024) also benefited.

## **PENTECOSTAL LEADERS' CONTRIBUTION TO PENTECOSTALISM RESEARCH**

African Pentecostal leaders who emerged during the 1970s and 1980s, were either leading new or had established more independent Pentecostal assemblies prior the 1994 democratic elections. Some were data collection assistants when Allen Anderson was researching Pentecostalism in Soshanguve and elsewhere (Anderson 1992). That is what they cherish, even today. Some are and continue to be research populations for various MTh and PhD theology students at different universities. Pentecostal studies in these universities continues to thrive because of their ministries or assemblies' practices. Various academics and theologians make a lot of money and gain academic accolades because of their ministries and assemblies. Universities gain large sums of money from the Department of Higher Education based on articles in Pentecostal studies that focuses on their ministries and assemblies, as per the vision of the National Development Plan to contribute in the 'knowledge economy' by producing PhD graduates who are "drivers of new knowledge production" (NDP 2002, p.267). Yet, these institutions deliberately, ignore their religious contributions and are academically happy to treat them as the former apartheid universities did: subject of study, not contributors to knowledge. It is a sad reality. The tendency not to honour Pentecostal leaders stem from apartheid practices in higher education that marginalised Africans and their initiatives in spreading Christianity in the country and Southern Africa. Pentecostals leaders and African Indigenous Church leaders do not feature in their annual practice of conferring doctoral degrees.

When Trinity International Bible University and others provide a service that recognises them, they, the Department of Higher Educational, the media and the society quickly condemn them. Perhaps we should ask an ethical question.

How much do academics and theologians who research Pentecostalism earn and how much does a university generate from such studies. The answer is: they all make a lot of money (CHE 2022b, p. 20). Currently, some universities are restructuring and developing curricula to attract Pentecostal church leaders and members because they recognise the global shift in Christianity. The faculty of theology of one university runs a programme for township Pentecostal and Charismatic pastors. The question is, do they do it for the sake of controlling and monopolising knowledge or to acknowledge the contribution of the leaders and members in these churches and empower them?

Regarding the latter question, two notable developments occurred in 2023 related to the contribution of Pentecostal leaders in the society. The faculty of theology at the University of Pretoria held a public lecture in 2023 to honour the work of Nicholas Bhengu, the founder and leader of Back to God (UP 2023). This is a step in the right direction. The University of South Africa followed by conferring a honorary doctoral degree to the leader of the dove section of the Zion Christian Church, Engenas Lekganyane, a leader of Pentecostal type church (Anderson 1996, pp. 171–185; 2002, p. 104), at its 2023 graduation (Mogakane 2023).

The author does not argue that every African Pentecostal leader warrants to be conferred an honorary doctoral degree in theology. Academically, it is disturbing to witness the awarding of honorary doctoral degrees at a seemingly easy standard by Trinity International Bible University. Many African Pentecostal leaders are recipients of its honorary doctoral degrees. This then brings us to critiquing Trinity International Bible University and Pentecostal leaders who are the recipients of honorary doctoral degrees.

### **TRINITY INTERNATIONAL BIBLE UNIVERSITY, PENTECOSTAL LEADERS AND ETHICAL PRACTICE**

Trinity International Bible University offers a life time opportunity to appropriate academic title for the Pentecostal leaders who emerged in the 1970s and 1980s (Anderson 2005, pp. 66-92; Mzondi 2019, pp. 88-90). Most of these leaders are over fifty years old. It is bound to operate legally, otherwise, the CHE has rightfully classified it as bogus along with all its qualifications (CHE). Similarly, Trinity International Bible University should also recognise the sovereignty of the country and observe the laws and regulations regarding higher education. International recognition does not amount to automatic accreditation in South Africa. Effectively, Trinity International Bible University is breaking South Africa's law by offering theological training and qualifications including awarding honorary doctoral degrees.

It is improper for Pentecostal leaders to gain social and academic religious status without considering the validity of an institution conferring the degree. Vigilance warrants them that they exercise great caution since the institution is foreign. Pleading ignorance of CHE's laws and regulations on higher education accreditation is no excuse for anyone who wish to be conferred a legitimate honorary doctoral degree. However, it seems that the opposite is true as social status and religious recognition is gained by paying a prescribed fee to International Bible University. The institution does not shy away from even conferring honorary professorship to some of these leaders. Such practice does not contribute to the vision of National Development Plan to produce PhD graduates who are drivers in knowledge production (NDP 2012, p. 267). Additionally, they do not meet the graduate attributes of anyone who attain the title of Doctor (CHE 2013 [2018]).

Regrettably, the awarding of honorary doctorates has contributed to a disturbing proliferation of Pentecostal leaders who do not contribute the production of knowledge in Pentecostal studies. It is commendable that not all African leaders from Pentecostal and Charismatic churches supported the idea of honorary doctorates and pay the prescribed fee to an unaccredited foreign institutions<sup>1</sup>. They obtained proper doctoral degrees in theology from South African public universities and their stance is in line the National Development Plan. Some contributes to Pentecostal studies. They refute the perception that Pentecostal leaders will anything to be conferred an honorary degree from a foreign unaccredited institution.

As discussed above, a Christian leader is called *ubab' umfundisi* or *ntate moruti umam' umfundisi* or *mamoruti*. It thus

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1. Examples are: Agrippa Khathide [University of Pretoria], Ezekiel Mathole [University of Pretoria], Kelebogile Resane [Free State University], Daniel Lephoko [University of Pretoria], Modisa Mzondi [University of Johannesburg], Jonas Khauoe [University of Pretoria], Lufuluvhi Mudumeli [University of South Africa], Victor Molobi [University of South Africa], Steve Motshetshane [University of Kwazulu-Natal], John Maloma, [North West University of Technikon], David Mulutsi [North West University], Mangaliso Matshobane [University of Pretoria], Caswell Ntseno University of South Africa], Solomon Kgatle [University of Pretoria], Trevor Ntlhola [University of Pretoria], Patson Mutuku [University of Pretoria].

makes natural for the recipients of this honorary doctoral degrees from foreign unaccredited institutions to be respected and honoured. Hence some usually demand and instruct their church members to be addressed “Dr.” or “Prof.”. This is a common practice among Independent Pentecostal and Charismatic churches and forums/organisations. A practice accompanied using clergy vestments (Mzondi 2024) and listing the title before their surnames or after their ecclesial titles. It is not surprising to find the following plethora of ecclesial titles (Mzondi 2019) and academic titles listed together among such leaders.

Chief Archbishop Prof. Mmm	Archbishop Prof. Dr. Mmm
Archbishop Dr. Mmm	Bishop Dr.Mmm
Chief Apostle Prof. Dr. Mmm	Apostle Prof. Dr. Mmm
Chief Prophet Prof. Dr. Mmm	Prophet Prof. Dr. Mmm
Prophet Dr. Mmm	Dr. Mmm

The use of ecclesial titles flow from the influence of associating with African Pentecostal churches in the United States of America and the Caribbean (Mzondi 2024) and is also associating with New Apostolic Reformation Movement that promotes the restoration of the offices of the five-fold ministries especially, the apostles and prophets (Wagner 2006). This raises the question: Does the quest to acquire academic and ecclesial titles resonate with Christ’s, Peter’s and Paul’s teachings on the attitude of a leader?

### **EMBRACING A CHRISTO-PETRINE-PAULIN ATTITUDE**

Jesus Christ taught his disciples and crowds about the leadership attitude they should display, a teaching contrary to practice of the Jewish religious leaders. He rebuked the religious leaders for their practice of seeking honour and respect in the public square and in the synagogue (Mark 11:38–39; Matt 23:6–7); taught the disciples no to seek respect and honour (Luk 14:8–11), pointed them to him, who came to serve and not to be served (Matt 20:24–28). Christ deliberately opted to use the word servant to communicate the role and function of slave, δοῦλος (doulos).

His disciple, Peter, later first called himself an apostle (I Pet 1:1) and a fellow elder (I Pet 5:1); later again he called and considered himself an apostle and servant of Christ (II Pet 1:1), in his two letters to the dispersed believers; taught the leaders among believers to perceive themselves as shepherd, who are willing to care for the believers not those who lord over the believers; as they will account to the Chief shepherd, Jesus Christ (I Pe 5:2–4). Jesus Christ first called the original twelve disciples, apostles, ἀπόστολος (Apostolos) in Greek (Mark 3:13–19; Luke 6:12–16); so, he was indeed an apostle as he was one of them. This was a functional word not a religious title. Peter echoed the attitude Jesus taught them about seeking honour and respect by calling himself a servant and fellow elder in his letters. The Greek equivalent of servant is δοῦλος (doulos), communicating a role and function of a slave, during their period.

Paul, a later follower of Jesus Christ, called himself an abnormal apostle (I Cor 15:7–9) as a way of describing his relationship with Jesus Christ and the original apostles. Just like Peter, he also called and considered himself an apostle and servant of Jesus Christ (Rom 1:1, Tit 1:1). Paul’s use of apostle resonates with Peter’s; no religious title is intended.

In his letter to the believers in Corinth, Paul does not communicate leadership titles, but ministry functions (I Cor 12:27–31) similarly in his letter to the believers in Ephesus (Eph 4:7–13). The emphasis is on the Holy Spirit’s gifts and the intention to benefit the church in I Corinth and how Jesus gifted the leaders to assist the believers to grow in the faith in Ephesians.

Finally, some African Pentecostal leaders do display a servant attitude (Mzondi 2021, pp. 92–93; Kgatle 2018, pp. 12–13) similar to a Christo-Petrine-Pauline attitude. This attitude opposes the cultural and religious practices of elevating the religious leader like secular leaders. It also challenges African cultural tendencies to seek respect and honour by promoting the desire for African Pentecostal and Charismatic church leaders to seek the lowest position and status, δοῦλος (doulos).

### **CONCLUSION**

South African public institutions of higher learning have conferred many PhDs (hc) between 2010 and 2024. Conferring honorary doctoral degrees to deserving individuals rests on the recognised contribution to the society for members of the society. A foreign, unregistered institution, has also been conferring such degrees to African Pentecostal leaders

and members of the society, in the same period. Much to the outcry of the Minister of Higher Education and the public. However, the article argues that the actions of this institution should be viewed in light of the legacy of apartheid and Bantu Education as well as the desire for Africans to command respect and honour. Apartheid and Bantu Education denied African quality education, and many of the African Pentecostal leaders are products of the system of Bantu Education. They are (a) subjects and participants of many academic masters and doctoral qualification in Pentecostal studies in the country; and (b) respected religious leaders among their church members. But public universities have not acknowledged their contribution in Pentecostal studies, except last year (2023) when the faculty of theology of the University of Pretoria and the college of Human Sciences of the University of South Africa acknowledged two national leaders, one is the founder of an Independent African Pentecostal church and the other the founder and one of the two sections of an African Pentecostal type church.

This tendency to ignore the contribution of African Pentecostal leaders in the religious space in South Africa stem from apartheid and the foreign institution stepped in to close the gap. Hence, African Pentecostal leaders are ready to be conferees of their honorary doctoral degrees. However, the article critiqued the institution for being unethical by disregarding the country's regulation on higher education. It also critiqued the conferees for disregarding the same regulation and not contributing to the goals of the National Development Plan; and placing honour and respect above displaying a Christlike attitude to be served, also noticed in his disciple, the Apostle Peter and the Apostle Paul.

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