

Obituaries

Victor Bredenkamp (1928–2011)

WITH the passing on 3 February 2011 of Professor Vic Bredenkamp at the age of 82 after a long illness, KwaZulu-Natal, academia, the Methodist Church, the wider community and of course his family and friends lost a man of multiple goodnesses. This tribute, by one who benefited greatly from his generosity of spirit and action, academically and personally, takes as its point of departure the beginning of our long relationship.

Early one evening in mid-1976 the telephone rang in a suburban home in the former Salisbury, Rhodesia. The caller introduced himself as Professor Victor Bredenkamp, Head of the Department of Divinity on the Pietermaritzburg campus of the then University of Natal. He offered me a six-month appointment in his department, adding that if I accepted the offer, I would be able to apply for the permanent position at senior lecturer level if I so wished.



Vic Bredenkamp

Hugely relieved, I accepted. I had just resigned my much-loved post as lecturer in comparative religion at the former University of Rhodesia. I had done so on grounds of conscience about military service for what I judged an unjust cause – the perpetuation of

racial discrimination and serious unfairness to foreigners like me. Shortly before handing in my resignation I had received call-up papers to report for initial military training and duty as part of the desperate and doomed attempt of the Ian Smith government to hang on to power. It had begun to summon foreign residents like me, who enjoyed neither the vote nor security of residence, to the cause.

My choices were stark: accept military service, refuse and face imprisonment, or leave the country. As a foreign national who could be deported at short notice, as had already happened to two of my liberal campus colleagues, and as a liberal who sided with the liberation struggle of the country's majority, my conscience revolted at the thought of carrying arms for what I saw as an unjust cause. Prison for refusing was not an option either, which left only one course of action: leaving the country even if I had no job waiting for me. My relief at Vic Bredenkamp's telephoned job offer was, accordingly, immense. But it was only the start of over 30 years contact with a remarkable leader, colleague and friend.

For those not familiar with the main details of his life, here they are. He was born in 1928 in Benoni. After high school he worked for three years in the public health department of the local municipality. Then he felt himself called to the Methodist ministry. Growing up in a Christian home during the Second World War, he said he felt called to "a ministry of reconciliation, to challenge people to be more understanding and tolerant of the aspirations of other races and cultures".

Studies in theology at Rhodes University followed with a BA in 1951.

After a number of church and mission positions he proceeded to an honours degree in theology at Mansfield College, Oxford, in 1955, obtaining the MA there in 1959.

Vic Bredenkamp married Marie Lemmer in 1953 shortly after being ordained in the Methodist Church. In 1956 after his Oxford studies he was posted to the Methodist churches in Victoria Road and Prestbury, Pietermaritzburg, and in 1957 moved on to serve the Kloof and Pinetown congregations. He was also made chaplain of Kearsney College. He later joined the Board of Governors of Kearsney and Epworth School, which he served for many years, including 12 years as chairperson.

He began his appointment as a lecturer in the former Department of Divinity at the Pietermaritzburg campus of the then University of Natal in 1961. In 1965 he was selected from a highly competitive international field to be South Africa's first religion fellow at Princeton University, where he obtained an additional masters degree and then a doctorate in philosophy, before returning to the Department of Divinity in Pietermaritzburg. In 1976 he became the third Professor and Head of the Department of Divinity, retiring at the end of 1990, when he was made an Emeritus Professor of the University.

During this time the department developed an interest in the major world religions and in 1983 it was renamed the Department of Religious Studies. The launching of a theological studies programme occurred during his headship. In 1988 this development led to the creation of a separate Department of Theological Studies. This later became the School of Religion and Theology.

He served two terms as Dean of the Faculty of Arts starting in 1982, was a member of the university senate for 15 years and chairperson of the Ceremonials Committee for nearly a decade, being responsible for the design of the annual graduation ceremonies.

After his retirement from the university in 1990 he and his wife directed a Rotary adult literacy project in Kwa-Zulu-Natal. This work saw them both recognised with awards from Rotary International, Bredenkamp receiving Rotary International's highest honour, the Service Above Self Award. Professor Bredenkamp also served on the advisory board of Grey's Hospital and was a member of the Grey's Hospital ethics committee. He also served on the Pietermaritzburg and District Council for the Care of the Aged (Padca) committee.

He leaves his wife, two daughters, Renée and Ingrid, a son, Andre, and two grandchildren, Nathan and Liam.

What these details do not sufficiently show is Professor Bredenkamp's great generosity of spirit and action. To these I now turn, citing five examples.

Firstly, he was as fine a human being as you could wish to know: kind, courteous, honest to a fault and deeply loyal. In the 35 years I knew him, I never once heard an angry or unkind word from him to anybody. There were some significant differences of belief and policy in his department at the former University of Natal, but these never moved him to resentment or hard words.

Here is one example of his openness and respect for others. In the 1970s and early 1980s, the University's graduation ceremonies began with Christian prayers and scripture readings. These were conducted by Vic Bredenkamp

as Professor of Divinity. Some of his colleagues, myself included, believed that this practice was out of keeping with the character of a university open to people of various faiths and philosophies, and we called for it to end. It was followed initially by readings from the sacred texts of various faiths, but fairly soon this was also dropped. Vic Bredenkamp's reaction was entirely accepting and gracious.

Secondly, he was a great enabler of the careers of his younger colleagues at the local campus, mine certainly included, always warmly appreciative of such successes as we achieved and unfailingly respectful of differences of belief among us. It was he who in 1976 invited the celebrated British philosopher of religion John Hick to be a visiting scholar in his department in 1980, and although the invitation preceded Hick's highly controversial part in the publication of *The Myth of God Incarnate* in 1977, in which a group of radical, leading Christian thinkers in Britain advanced the view that Christ was metaphorically rather than literally God incarnate, he nonetheless never expressed the slightest regret at having Hick in his department, nor wavered from his usual friendly courtesy towards his guest. The same courtesy was evident during the later visit of the leading Jewish historian of religion, Zwi Werblowsky, from the Hebrew University in Jerusalem.

The third example of Vic Bredenkamp's generosity of spirit and action was as an academic leader who made servant leadership a living example both as head of department and faculty dean. Here are three examples. In his inaugural lecture as Professor of Divinity he introduced the phenomenological

method of studying religions and set out his interpretation of it. But when his younger colleagues, especially Patrick Maxwell, developed a different version of it, he welcomed their contribution and its implementation in departmental courses. Next, year after year he gave himself a heavier lecture load than the rest of us in the department, even when he was serving as Dean of Arts, so freeing us to get on with our research and produce publications.

Perhaps most revealing is my third example of his servant leadership. Professor Bredenkamp was not, initially anyway, a believer in the training of candidates for the ministry in his department with its students and staff from various faiths and indeed none. But when others among his colleagues, again including me, supported such a development as a distinct stream alongside the existing one, he readily accepted. He was on sabbatical at a Canadian university at the time, so we consulted him by telephone one evening from the office of the campus head, Professor Denys Schreiner. Well I remember him asking me where I stood and giving the go-ahead when I said I supported the development. That was, of course, before the country became a constitutionally secular state.

The fourth goodness that so struck me was his community service, including dedicated service to his church in various ways, which continued throughout his life, and in which he put his Christian faith into yet more forms of practice. As already mentioned, for many years he served two leading independent schools, Kearsney and Epworth, as chair of their governing bodies and in chaplaincy work, besides his long service to Rotary, where he

rose to a very senior position. Neither his retirement from academic life nor the serious illness that soon thereafter befell him ended this record of service, for he proceeded in retirement to be very actively involved, with his wife Marie, in adult literacy work, and in the other ways that were mentioned above.

In this capacity Vic and Marie Bredenkamp for some 15 years devoted thousands of hours – on average, four to five hours every day – to the battle against illiteracy in KZN and beyond. They organised literacy and numeracy classes in towns, villages, rural outposts, schools, colleges, in informal settlements and in prisons throughout the province. In November 2003 more than 600 prisoners in KwaZulu-Natal wrote Abet (Adult Basic Education and Training) examinations, having been assisted by the Bredenkamps through Rotary International. They visited the prisons regularly and donated many refurbished computers to the inmates so that in addition to literacy and numeracy they could acquire computer literacy as well.

I have kept the fifth goodness for last. In my first year at the local campus Vic Bredenkamp organised a public lecture course on Ethical Enigmas, and invited me and others to take part in it. That, and his lectures on social ethics issues of central importance, above all in connection with bio-medical issues like abortion, stirred and helped channel an existing passion for applied ethics in me that remains the driving force of my own work. Accordingly, I have no doubt that ethical commitment of the highest order was not just central to him as a person but as an academic, more so even than his field of Old Testament Studies.

With the publication of his short and lucid book *What and Why? Answers to 101 Questions on the Bible and Religion* by the Methodist Publishing House a week before his death, his wisdom, knowledge and generosity have found an additional way to enrich others.

Recalling his decision to offer himself for the ministry as a young man just after the Second World War, Vic Bredekamp said that the impact of that ghastly world conflict contributed in part to his decision to enter the ministry. He felt the call “to engage in a ministry of reconciliation, to challenge people

to be more understanding and tolerant of the aspirations of other races and cultures, to be more forgiving, less self-centred and more willing to share life’s blessings and benefits. In short, to look beyond themselves and to consider the aspirations and ambitions of others.”

Beyond doubt he lived out this vision and the values of his faith in the lecture room, in chaplaincy, in community service and now also in print in ways that are exemplary indeed.

MARTIN PROZESKY

