

Obituaries

Herby Sylvister Govinden (1928–2013)

HERBY Sylvister Govinden was born on 25 May 1928 in Pietermaritzburg. He was baptised at St Paul's Mission Church on 24 June 1928 by the Revd J.M. Sundrum. Herby attended St Paul's Mission School and later Woodlands High School. He completed his science degree, with majors in chemistry (with distinction) and physics at Fort Hare. After a spell of teaching, he proceeded to Rhodes University, where he completed his honours and doctorate in chemistry (He was the first Indian in South Africa to complete a doctorate in chemistry). He returned to Fort Hare in July 1959 to lecture in chemistry. In 1964 he was awarded a post-doctoral fellowship and spent a year at the National Research Centre in Ottawa, Canada.

In 1965 he was appointed to lecture at Salisbury Island, which later became the University of Durban-Westville (UDW), where he also served as Dean of the Faculty of Science during 1989 and 1990. He was appointed the first



Herby Govinden

president of the Convocation of UDW, and served in a leadership role on the Staff Association for many years.

In the life of the Anglican Church, Herby served as superintendent of the Sunday School, as lay minister, and as choir master at St Aidan's Parish. He was on the Board of St Aidan's Hospital and of the Durban Child Welfare Society. Herby participated in Diocesan

and Provincial Synods; was a member of the Diocesan Board of Trustees; and represented the Anglican Church in South Africa as a lay delegate at the 4th Assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC) held in 1968 in Uppsala, Sweden. This was at a time when the South African regime did not take kindly to the anti-apartheid stance of the WCC. In October 1988, he went to Lusaka as part of a South African delegation to meet the ANC in exile. He met Thabo Mbeki and was embraced by Chris Hani, his former Fort Hare student. The delegation included members of the Transvaal Indian Congress (TIC) and Natal Indian Congress (NIC), together with 52 members of the Indian community, and held discussions with the ANC on a post-apartheid South Africa.

Alongside his academic career, Herby was long associated with music and with drama. He was a church organist and choir member for many years. He composed a musical setting for the 1989 Anglican Prayer Book eucharistic liturgy and observed that it was “one of those quiet highpoints in his life”. With Melvin Peters and Rufus Daniel, he wrote lyrics and composed music for “Five Barley Loaves”, based on the Biblical event. He also composed the music for the Durban musicals “It’s a Colourful World” (written by Guru Pillay, and directed by Benjy Francis and Maynard Peters), “Saras” (directed by Guru Pillay), and incidental music for a few plays at the Department of Speech and Drama at the former UDW.

Bishop Michael Nuttall, former Bishop of Natal, paid this tribute: “Professor Herby Govinden carried his many achievements, academic and other – those ‘quiet highpoints in his life’ – with an unassuming modesty and an inward sense of pleasure and gratitude. At the heart of this was his deep and lively Christian faith, enlivened by a passion for things musical and artistic, together with his love of science. To many he seemed to be at his happiest seated at the church organ, playing among other things his own composition for the liturgy of the regular Sunday Sung Eucharist. That, and his devotion to his wife Betty and their two daughters, Marylla and Delphine, and the wider family, held him enthralled. Herby Govinden was a very rounded person in his interests and involvements and a very lovable human being.”

On his retirement Herby completed a Masters dissertation at UDW on the history of St Aidan’s Mission, which he submitted in 2004. This is an invaluable record of the history of St Aidan’s Mission, where the founder, Dr Lancelot Parker Booth, and Mahatma Gandhi worked together in the city of Durban among the indigent during the early years of the 20th century. In 2008 Bishop Rubin Phillip conferred on Herby the Order of the Holy Nativity, an Award for Distinguished Lay Service in the Anglican Diocese of Natal.

Herby Govinden leaves his wife Betty, two daughters and four grandchildren.

(From the leaflet containing the details of Herby Govinden’s Requiem Eucharist and tributes paid.)