

CITATION FOR BASIL MOORE

Honorary graduand, Rhodes University, 8 April 2011

By Professor Paul Maylam

Back in the early 1960s, when the apartheid system was at its height, there was across most white university campuses a general mood of acquiescence towards this nasty racial order. This was true of the Student Christian Association, purportedly a national body representing Christian students, but in practice a racially segregated organisation. So in 1967 a small group of theologians got together to form the UCM – the University Christian Movement – a body that was non-racial, ecumenical, and firmly anti-apartheid. The driving-force behind the creation of the UCM was Basil Moore, together with Colin Collins, the national Catholic student chaplain. The founding conference of the UCM was held here in Grahamstown in 1967, and Basil Moore was elected its first president.

The UCM grew rapidly – 3000 members and 30 branches on different campuses within two years, with black students making up a significant majority of members. It organised interracial work camps and group discussions; promoted black theology; prioritised the pursuit of social justice; and practised a free, unconventional style of worship.

Its 1968 conference in Stutterheim was attended by such figures as Steve Biko, Desmond Tutu, Barney Pityana, and Simon Gqubule who is the president of Rhodes Convocation, and is seated here on stage ...to the left of the Chancellor. It was also the Reverend Gqubule who ordained Basil Moore almost fifty years ago – the first time a white Methodist minister had been ordained by a black minister in South Africa.

At this Stutterheim conference it was decided to establish a black caucus, out of which would emerge SASO – the South

African Students' Organisation – the first major black consciousness organisation to be established – the body that brought Steve Biko to the forefront of the black consciousness movement.

Basil Moore's involvement in the UCM earned him admiration, but also brought him hardship. First, at the hands of this university – he had had a long association with Rhodes, initially as an apolitical B.Sc. student in the early 1950s. He had intended to become an agricultural scientist, and taught science for two years at Cambridge High School in East London. But following an intense religious experience, he decided to prepare for the Methodist ministry. So it was back to Rhodes in the early 1960s: studying divinity; now politicised, serving as SRC president; and being elected to the presidency of the liberal National Union of South African Students – NUSAS – a position he was unable to take up owing to church commitments. One fellow student at the time remembers Basil as being “deeply passionate about everything he did, whether it be intellectual, political, religious or personal”.

A third stint at Rhodes began in 1965 – registering for a PhD, while also serving as the Methodist chaplain and taking up a contract lectureship in the Divinity Department. Then came his UCM involvement and an unseemly response from the university authorities. In 1968 a selection committee recommended that Basil be appointed to a lectureship in systematic theology. Twice the university senate endorsed the recommendation, but twice the conservative university council overturned it, clearly on political grounds – decisions which provoked protest on campus and a student sit-in in the council chamber – and decisions which have since become a source of embarrassment to our institution. I have been asked, on behalf of the university, to formally apologise to you for the way you were treated here in 1969.

There was also harassment from the apartheid state. In 1967 Basil attended a UCM conference in the US, unaware that one of his two colleagues accompanying him was an under-cover security policeman. Persecution soon followed: his passport seized; in 1972 placed under a banning order, amounting to partial house arrest. Then the last straw – finding the family's pet kitten impaled on their front gate.

This meant leaving the country, with his family, on a one-way exit permit in 1972 – and exile, first in London, serving as General Secretary of the British Student Christian Movement for two years. Then in Australia, taking up a post as lecturer in religious studies at what would become the University of South Australia in Adelaide, all the while sustaining his activism, making South Australia an anti-apartheid zone, and adhering to the academic boycott of South Africa.

At the University of South Australia Basil has distinguished himself as an educator – perhaps his main achievement being to develop the field of religion education, as opposed to religious education. Whereas the latter provides instruction in a specific faith, religion education strives to develop in learners the knowledge, values and skills necessary for diverse religions to coexist in a multi-faith society – it is about the social benefits derived from learning about religion and religious diversity.

Having developed this approach in Australia over several years, Basil made return visits to South Africa in the early 1990s, introducing his work on religion education to many South African educators – so much so that it came to be incorporated into the Department of Education's revised national curriculum some years ago.

Renewed contact with South Africa continued in 1996 when Basil was seconded by the University of South Australia to the University of Fort Hare, tasked with setting up a distance education project to upgrade the qualifications of Eastern Cape

teachers. Health problems prevented him seeing this through, necessitating retirement and a return to Australia.

It might be thought that the award of this honorary doctorate is just an act of repentance on the part of Rhodes University for its earlier mistreatment of Basil Moore. There is much more to it than this. He is honoured today as an outstanding university educator – remembered by former students from his Rhodes days as a brilliant teacher “with an exciting, radical vision of the Christian faith”; who kindled a “passion for ethics”, for whom a deep antipathy to racism has been crucial to his educational practice. Honoured, too, for his “passion for social justice” – a passion that long ago influenced and rubbed off on renowned figures like Steve Biko and Beyers Naude. And honoured for the way he himself combatted apartheid “with exceptional moral commitment and courage”.

Mr Chancellor, I have the honour to request you to confer on Basil Moore the degree of Doctor of Laws, *honoris causa*.