

Public Lecture in Honour of Professor Barney Pityana

Improving Quality of Life for All — Unlocking the Potential of Every Person through Equity and Opportunity

East London Health Resource Centre, 9 July 2026

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Greetings and Protocol

Ndivumeleni ndicangcathe emanyathelweni abo sele bawenze wangumsebenzi wabo ukwazisa ubukho nokubulisa iindwalutho ezilapha, nam ndizeka emzekweni! Mandishwankathele ngokukhahlela koMkhulu ndithi Ah Vul'ulwandle!

From Scruple to Peace

When I was first approached to take part in this celebration honouring Professor Pityana, an event convened under the auspices of the National Lotteries Commission, I must confess that my conscience stirred, if only for a moment. A bishop standing on a platform associated with the Lottery – would this not look like an endorsement of gambling?

This was chased away by two memories. The first was of the many raffles we run in our own parishes: tickets sold after Mass, prizes drawn at the annual fête, all in the service of repairing a roof or running a soup kitchen to feed the hungry. We have never thought of these as gambling; we have thought of them as neighbours pooling small chances for the common good.

The second memory was even more concrete regarding the National Lottery. In the Diocese of Mthatha, where I served before moving to Cape Town, our Catholic Development Centre – a place that trained young people in skills and supported development projects in some of the poorest wards of the Eastern Cape – had at various points been a direct beneficiary of Lotto funding.

Once those two memories surfaced, my conscience found peace. I understood that this is not an occasion built on chance for chance's sake, but an occasion built on chance redirected: resources gathered widely and returned narrowly to the very people and causes that need them most.

And so, I stand here this afternoon with an easy conscience and even a measure of gratitude, because, as my memory helps me to understand, Lotto is about the use of public mechanisms to support the common good.

That question of how resources are gathered and used is at the heart of our theme this afternoon: improving quality of life for all and unlocking the potential of every person through equity and opportunity. It is also at the heart of the life of the man we honour, Professor Barney Nyameko Pityana, to whom I now turn to explore his relevance to our challenges today.

Four Strands of a Single Life

To speak of Professor Barney Pityana is to speak of a life woven from four strong strands.

The first strand is Black Consciousness. As a founding member of the South African Students' Organisation and an important figure in the Black Consciousness Movement alongside Steve Biko, he helped articulate a response to a very particular kind of violence: the violence that tells a people, again and again, that they are inferior. Black Consciousness answered not only with political resistance but also with a spiritual and intellectual reawakening. It said: before a people can be free in law, they must first begin to see themselves as free in mind and in soul.

In his own reflection on that movement, Pityana described Black Consciousness as an intellectual search for truth and a challenge to the false claims that kept Black people unfree. It is an insistence that the oppressed must free themselves to rebel against oppression and free their own thinking enough to imagine another possibility.

Oppression, he reminded us, works not only through laws and guns but also through ideas that enter the mind and make injustice seem natural. Liberation must therefore be both external and internal: it must remove unjust structures and restore self-belief.

The second strand is faith and priesthood. His move into priestly and theological work did not take him away from the struggle for dignity; it simply carried that struggle into another mode and language. In his life and work as a priest and theologian, the central conviction remained the same: faith cannot be faithful if it is detached from the suffering of the oppressed. Christianity does not permit us to look away from injustice. It calls us to stand with those who bear the weight of oppression, because the God we worship first revealed himself among the oppressed and set out to liberate them.

The third strand is university leadership. During his time at UNISA, open and distance learning was not treated as a second-rate form of education but as a serious means of widening access for those excluded by apartheid, poverty, geography, and social history. That is a concrete form of equity. It affirms that a domestic worker's child in a rural village, a working adult in a township, and a person whose life cannot fit a traditional campus schedule – all deserve a real chance to learn. Opportunity must be designed, not merely hoped for.

The fourth strand is public service and development work, including his involvement in the Lottery space. Here the question is: what happens after we have good ideas and just laws? How are resources gathered, distributed, and used so that communities actually benefit? In this strand, Pityana's life highlights the importance of practical elements such as systems, organisations, and funding that can create more opportunities for people in their everyday lives.

These four strands – Black Consciousness, priesthood, university leadership, and development work – are not separate stories. They are four verses of the same song, harmonising in a single life. Today I want to suggest that they also serve as a lens through which we can read our present situation in South Africa and, by applying them, find solutions to current challenges.

If we are honest, our country is facing not only a crisis in economics and politics, but also a crisis of consciousness, faith, moral courage, education, development, and solidarity. In each of these areas, Pityana's life has something to say to us.

South Africa Today: Dependency and the Loss of Agency

Let me begin with the first strand: Black Consciousness, which speaks directly to a problem we increasingly see – dependency and the loss of agency.

We know the material realities of our country. Unemployment remains painfully high. Poverty persists. Many families survive on social grants, without which hunger and desperation would be far worse. Grants are necessary. They are a lifeline, and it is good that we have them. But when they are not seen as a means towards self-reliance, they can become a hindrance to self-development and the realisation of potential.

At a development gathering organised by the RUCC church in Mthatha about three or four years ago, Professor Bonang Mohale, Vice-Chancellor of the University of the Free State, shared a sobering story in his speech. He spoke of young people who, when offered a job, turned it down rather than risk losing a R350 government grant. This attitude does not characterise every young person; many are desperate for any opportunity and would grab it with both hands when it arrives. However, this incident points to a worrying tendency that is present and growing.

Why is it worrying? Not because we wish to condemn those young people, but because it reveals something about our state of mind. It shows that, in some corners of our society, dependence has begun to feel safer than effort. A grant, meant to be a bridge, is becoming a destination. A grant was never meant to compete with a wage; it was meant to carry a person until a wage was possible.

When it starts to compete instead, security is mistaken for passivity, and we have allowed dependency to be mistaken for safety. In that way, people begin to see themselves as objects of delivery rather than agents of their own development, waiting to receive rather than being supported and encouraged to build – and that is tragic.

I want to raise a second, related pattern, and I ask you to hear it in the spirit in which I intend it, not as blame but as an honest question we owe ourselves. In many of our townships and villages today, it is often foreign nationals who have opened spaza shops, run small trading stalls, and built modest enterprises from nothing, often working longer hours and accepting lower returns than many local residents are willing to accept.

This has, in some places, curdled into resentment and even violence against the very people demonstrating the enterprise we say we want to see. But underneath the resentment lies a question we cannot keep dodging: why is it so often the outsider, rather than the local resident, who is willing to start small, to reinvest slowly, and to wait years rather than months for a return?

Development projects in our communities repeatedly stall not for lack of opportunity but for lack of patience, a hunger for quick money when slow, faithful building is what is actually required. If we are serious about unlocking potential through equity and opportunity, we must

be honest that opportunity has, in places, been standing in plain sight, and that it is patience and attitude, not the presence of the foreigner, that has stood between our people and it.

Black Consciousness emerged as a protest against precisely this kind of internal defeat. It called on Black South Africans to reject internalised inferiority and to reclaim a sense of self-worth and responsibility. It said: you are not simply what the system tells you are. You are capable. You are called to stand up. You are to see yourself as an agent, not merely as a victim.

Today, we no longer live under apartheid law. But if we are not careful, we may live in apartheid's lingering shadow in our minds: the belief that our fate is always in someone else's hands, that our role is to receive, not to act.

To honour Pityana's first strand is to say: we cannot settle for a culture in which, whenever a door opens, we prefer to remain seated. We must teach our children and remind ourselves that, while the state, business, and the Church have duties, we, too, as individuals and as a community, have duties to our own potential.

We cannot build a just society if citizens are convinced that they are permanently powerless and merely objects of delivery to those who believe they are in charge. A society should not rejoice simply because more people receive grants; it should rejoice instead when more people are enabled to earn their living and to stand in dignity through their own labour.

So the first strand of Professor Pityana's Black Consciousness calls us today to a change of mind: away from dependence as a way of life and back towards responsibility, initiative, and dignity.

Churches, Quietism, and the Prophetic Call

The second strand of Pityana's life is his priesthood and theology. That strand encourages us to lean even more deeply into something that has become one of our country's great hopes: its prophetic character.

At my installation address in Cape Town, I said that one reason not to despair is that South Africa is, in a real sense, a prophetic country. In the early years of democracy, many of us came to trust those in authority and assumed that government would be the primary guardian of justice. That assumption proved wrong as we saw the state looted and turned into a feeding trough for the greedy, the unscrupulous, and rogue business interests that exploited weak institutions, leading to what became known as "state capture". Over roughly the past six years, since the Covid period, we have seen a renewed prophetic voice emerging from many sectors: civic organisations, journalists, judges, trade unions, analysts, business leaders, and ordinary citizens.

Thus, the prophetic spirit is not confined to the churches. Some of those who have spoken most courageously do not stand in pulpits or wear collars. They have acted because they knew that prophetic action is not merely a religious matter; it is any courageous speaking of the truth for the sake of justice. Many have paid a high price, including the ultimate price, for refusing to look away while resources meant for the common good were looted.

We see this prophetic pressure most clearly today in processes such as the Madlanga Commission, where those who have for years plundered this country's resources with impunity are now visibly unsettled. That accountability is not accidental; it is the fruit of years of whistleblowing, investigative journalism, public protest, and moral insistence that theft from the poor will not be protected forever.

At the same time, as the country's prophetic voice has grown louder, some of us are still in a faith that comforts individuals and avoids naming the systems and practices that dehumanise the poor. Some of us, ministers and churches, have remained chaplains and beneficiaries of the status quo rather than prophets of change.

Beyond the pulpit, many of our young people are being shaped by a materialistic, pleasure-seeking culture that prioritises partying and grooving from weekend to weekend rather than engaging with the hard questions of justice and dignity. They live as if the struggles that secured their freedom no longer demand their attention or courage.

It is precisely here that Pityana's priestly and theological strand is a gift. His theology has never separated faith from justice. This strand encourages us to build on and intensify what is already underway, to join our voices to the prophetic chorus rather than remain on the sidelines. His life shows that when churches, academics and civil society speak out clearly against corruption and wrongdoing, they lend weight and depth to the wider national conscience.

Pityana's priesthood and theological acumen encourage perseverance on a prophetic path already underway: to speak even more clearly, to support those who risk everything for truth, and to resist the temptation to retreat into comfortable silence when courage is needed. This second strand of Pityana invites churches and citizens alike to see prophetic courage not as exceptional but as a normal part of public faithfulness.

If we take that strand seriously, our churches, together with citizens and institutions across every sector, must once again be places where the poor are not only comforted but defended, the rich are challenged to share, migrants are not scapegoated but welcomed, and we stand shoulder to shoulder with all who undertake the hard, dangerous work of speaking truth to power.

Education from the Ground Up: Foundations and Potential

The third strand in Pityana's life is his leadership in higher education. But I want to use that strand today to turn our attention slightly lower down the ladder: to basic education, beginning with early childhood learning.

Education is the greatest equaliser among people. It is the one instrument capable of reaching into a household with no capital, no land, and no connections, and planting the seeds of a different future. Pityana showed us that a university can be an instrument for widening access to education. Under his leadership, open and distance learning at UNISA was used to reach those who could not access traditional campuses. That was an important step.

Universities, however, work with what schools send them. If the foundations are weak, even the best university in the world cannot easily repair the damage.

In her report on the 2025 Matric results, the Minister of Basic Education is upbeat about the clear achievement, emphasising resilience, equity gains, and the credibility of the examination system, without flagging retention or Mathematics performance as concerns. However, the report's details show that learner retention remains a serious challenge, particularly in the later years of secondary school.

According to the report, nationally, only 49% of Grade 10 learners in 2023 progressed to Grade 12 in 2025, and around a third of young people still do not successfully complete 12 years of education. At the same time, too few learners take Mathematics – national participation stood at just 34.1% – and the proportion achieving 30% or more in Mathematics fell from 69.1% in 2024 to 64.0% in 2025, even as the overall matric pass rate rose from 87.26% to 87.98%. Taken together, this suggests the system's central challenge is not only at the top, in Grade 12, but also begins much earlier, in the system's foundations.

That is why I want to suggest that, while Pityana's third strand shines at university, our duty today is to pay particular attention to the earliest stages of learning: early childhood centres, the foundation phase, and the lower grades of primary and high school.

It is there that potential must first be recognised. It is there that language, numeracy, curiosity, and confidence are formed or damaged. It is there that children either discover that learning is a joyful, shared adventure or that school is a place of fear and humiliation. By the time we reach matric, much has already been decided in the child's heart.

Too often, we funnel everyone into a single bottleneck: the National Senior Certificate. We push all children into a narrow academic stream, regardless of their gifts, and then we measure success almost entirely by how many “pass” Grade 12. We celebrate that, even when some have been coached through the exams by rote learning and memorisation – what has been cynically called “the art of reproducing answers without understanding.”

This sets young people up for failure at university, where learning cannot be reduced to memorising notes. In higher education, no lecturer can carry a student over the line by spoon-feeding. Personal effort becomes unavoidable. When a child has been trained for twelve years mainly to repeat rather than to think, the shock of this transition is severe.

So, what does Pityana's third strand tell us? It reminds us that widening access is not only about opening the university gates. It is about strengthening the path to those gates. It is about building strong foundations in reading, writing, and thinking, so that when a young person receives an opportunity, they are ready to seize it.

As a Church leader, I cannot speak prophetically to others without also asking what the Church is doing. Before I criticise government or business, I must examine my own house. The age of the missionaries who could build and fund a school largely from overseas mission societies has, in truth, passed us by. The Church in South Africa today should continue its involvement in education mainly through partnerships among churches, with the government and with business and by making better use of the infrastructure we already have.

This is where I believe we can still do more, even without the resources missionaries once commanded. We may not be able to build many new schools on our own, but we do have

parish halls and church buildings in almost every community. We can use these spaces for early childhood development, after-school support, and literacy programmes.

This does not mean the Church taking over the state's responsibilities. It means partnership – one in which government does not frustrate the Church by insisting on doing everything alone when it manifestly cannot, and in which the Church does not insist on acting alone when collaboration could better serve children.

So, I want to use the third strand of Pityana's life in education to call us to focus on basic education: to identify potential early, to build strong foundations, to avoid forcing every child through the same narrow academic bottleneck, and to insist on quality matric, not just any matric. A certificate earned through genuine understanding is a key. A certificate produced by mere memorisation is a fragile comfort that may shatter at the first demand of university or the workplace.

If we honour him in this way, we honour not only his work at university but also the entire educational journey of our children.

Development, Lotto, and Fr Bernard Huss

The fourth strand concerns development and public service work, including Pityana's involvement in the lottery sector. Here, the question **is simple yet demanding: what do we do with the resources we have?**

We live in a country marked by both real wealth and real poverty. In my installation address as Archbishop of Cape Town, I said: "We see obscene wealth among a few in a sea of poverty, wealth that does little or nothing to lift others out of dehumanising conditions."

I was speaking to big business and billionaires, inviting them to move beyond token gestures towards real sharing. But I also went on to say that uplifting others is not only the task of the very rich. No one can point to billionaires and excuse themselves. At different levels, all of us have something to offer and can do something. The question is whether what we have is proportionate to what we give, or whether we are offering mere tokens to soothe our conscience without making any difference to the life of a person who needs assistance to develop their resources.

As individuals and as families, we must broaden our concern beyond our immediate circles, where we feel obliged to care only for our family members. This is especially true in education, which remains the greatest equaliser. If Raymond Zondo had not received support from someone outside his family, he might have remained simply Mr Zondo; however, thanks to the kindness of an unrelated benefactor, he reached the heights of constitutional service as Chief Justice.

As with education, I must also ask what the Church is doing before I speak to others. The Church has not been absent from development. In the past, missionaries such as Father Bernard Huss at Mariannhill combined faith, education, agriculture, and co-operative economics to help African communities move from dependence to self-reliance, guided by the simple motto: "better homes, better fields, better hearts."

Fr Huss arrived at Mariannhill in 1895, aged nineteen. He became fluent in isiZulu, isiXhosa and seSotho, founded the Catholic African Union in 1926, and wrote “People's Banks”, a book on the value of co-operative credit for African communities, an idea decades ahead of the microfinance movements we take for granted today.

The Lottery system, at its best, exemplifies how public resources can support development. It collects funds from many small contributions and allocates them to projects that, if well-chosen and well monitored, can change lives.

Pityana's development strand, and examples such as Fr Huss, remind us that justice is not only about sermons and slogans. It is about budgets, grants, bursaries, housing projects, training programmes, and the concrete mechanisms through which we channel resources into people's lives. It also reminds us that development is not charity. It is about enabling people to stand on their own feet and move from dependence to independence.

That is why, when we think about grants, we must see them as a starting point, not an end point. We must ask: what pathways are we creating from support to self-sufficiency? How are we using public funds to build capacity, not merely to prevent collapse? How are we ensuring that the Lotto money, corporate social investment, the Church's land and buildings, and foundations and trusts are all used to open doors rather than to decorate reports with accounts of charitable activities?

In other words, the fourth strand of Pityana's life calls us to take development seriously as a form of justice. It says that if we want to improve quality of life for all, we cannot be content with a few showcase projects. We must commit to a pattern of investment that steadily builds our people's capabilities, as we saw in the legacy of missionaries like Fr Huss and in the work of centres such as the Catholic Development Centre in Mthatha.

Bringing the Strands Together

Let me now bring these strands together.

The Black Consciousness strand tells us that we must break the mentality of dependence and internalised inferiority. It challenges young people and all of us to see ourselves as agents, not as permanent recipients. It speaks directly to the temptation to settle for grants when work opportunities are available, and to the temptation to resent the immigrant entrepreneur rather than learn from their patience. I am saying this not to condemn, but to call us to higher ground.

The priesthood and theological strand calls all of us – churches, citizens and institutions – out of quietism. It reminds us that we are called to be prophetic: to speak out against corruption, obscene wealth, crime, xenophobia and the erosion of ubuntu, *singathuli izinto zisonakala*.

The education strand, inspired by his university leadership, calls us today to focus on basic education: to strengthen early childhood learning, to build firm foundations in literacy and numeracy, to identify different kinds of potential early, to avoid bottlenecking everyone into a narrow matric path, and to insist on quality matric rather than rote “route learning” that collapses at university.

The development and Lottery strands insist that justice must be funded, organised, and implemented. They call on us to turn resources into opportunity, to see development as integral to equity, and to use tools such as the Lotto, church land, and community structures responsibly to support those who would otherwise be left behind – carrying forward, in our modest way, what Fr Huss began a century ago. Taken together, these strands convey a powerful message for South Africa today. They say that to honour Professor Barney Pityana rightly, we must let his life question our present.

Are we willing to move from dependence to agency? Are our churches willing to move from quietism to prophetic courage? Are we willing to invest seriously in basic education, from the crèche to the classroom, to ensure every child has a solid foundation? Are our development institutions ready to move from rhetoric to real opportunity?

These are not questions for government alone. They are questions for all of us. God is still raising prophets – in civic organisations, unions, the media, business, churches, and among ordinary citizens. Our task is not to remain silent while things fall apart, but to play our part in holding them together and rebuilding what is broken.

Conclusion: Honouring a Life by Imitating It

Let me conclude by returning to the man we honour.

Professor Pityana's life has united protest and institution-building, conscience and scholarship, freedom and discipline. He has shown that dignity must sometimes be asserted before it is recognised, and that institutions must likewise be reshaped so that dignity becomes durable and ordinary. He has moved between Black Consciousness and priesthood, and between university and development, without losing sight of the human being at the centre. Honouring him today is not only about applauding him. It is about letting his four strands challenge our four crises.

Let us then commit ourselves: to a change of mind, so that fewer of our people live in quiet dependence when they could stand; to prophetic courage, so that churches, citizens, institutions and leaders across every sector refuse to be silent while human dignity is trampled; to strong foundations in basic education, so that our children gain not only certificates but real capabilities from the earliest years; and to just development, so that resources in this country are used to widen opportunity, not merely to enrich a few.

If we do that, this lecture, this celebration, and this gathering under the auspices of the Lottery will not be mere ceremony. They will be a step towards the very aim of our theme: improving quality of life for all and unlocking the potential of every person through equity and opportunity.

May God grant us the courage to take that step.

I thank you.