



ETHICAL LEADERSHIP IN SOUTH AFRICA - THE ROLE ACADEMIC INSTITUTIONS PLAY

Dr. Saleem Badat, Vice-Chancellor of Rhodes University

“Leaders never forget or look away or ‘get used to’ our social structures and relations, which underpin the coexistence of the unbridled accumulation of wealth and desperate and grinding poverty; great privileges for a small minority of rich and huge deprivation for a large majority of poor; unbound economic and social opportunities for some and the denial of such opportunities for many others. Hunger and disease, poverty and unemployment continue to blight our democracy. Millions are mired in desperate daily routines of survival while alongside, crass materialism, corruption, tenderpreneurship and unbridled accumulation run rampant.”

Over two decades into its democracy, South Africa continues to be one of the most unequal societies in the world in terms of wealth, income, opportunities and living conditions. A new partnership between the Allan Gray Orbis Foundation and Rhodes University intends to help address the cause of ethical leadership in South Africa and the rest of Africa.

Badat believes that it is the responsibility of universities to ensure that graduates leave not only with knowledge and professional expertise and skills, but also as enlightened, ethical, critical and compassionate citizens who are equipped to deal with issues of race, gender, culture and identity. Given the pressing challenges of poverty and unemployment, hunger and disease, social equity and justice, he says people have a task to cultivate, grow and institutionalize ethical, responsible and accountable leadership across society. He says a lack of leadership and poor public services undermine the dignity of the poor, retard the educational development of millions of children and youth, thwart the realization of constitutional goals, and violate human and social rights.

Badat believes that without integrity, there can be no principled conduct; no prospect of winning trust and inspiring and uniting people around a vision; no effective communication, no ethical and responsible leadership.

The task of the Allan Gray Centre for Leadership Ethics is to understand what constitutes ethical and responsible leadership, to promote such leadership in diverse contexts, and to educate towards such leadership.

“Leadership is pioneering in thought and action, being willing to take action to address the challenges we see around us, and using wisdom to change society for the better wherever we find ourselves. Of course, leaders need committed but critical supporters, who also act as agents of change, strong institutions and a strong civil society. Leadership, then, becomes everyone’s task and responsibility. This is the real meaning of the slogan ‘power to the people’. If not this, we will continue to suffocate under the yoke of the big men brand of leadership, with all its problems.”

In 2006 when he assumed the mantle of Vice Chancellor at Rhodes University, Dr Badat startled a jaded South Africa by rejecting his large salary and donating a large portion of it and many of his perks to the establishment of a scholarship fund named after his mentor Jakes Gerwel. The fund benefits disadvantaged students who would otherwise not have been able to afford a university education. Badat’s passion for community engagement started with his involvement in the anti-apartheid struggle.

Badat believes Rhodes should be an institution that produces graduates that are concerned about people, social equity and justice. Rhodes has become a university steeped in the idea of community engagement through which students don’t just acquire compassion and creativity but also knowledge, competencies and expertise not available in any lecture hall or laboratory.

The university is also forging long-term relationships with rural schools in the region, hoping to identify and cultivate talent early on. “This must not be a democracy that benefits only the rich. We need to give ordinary people an opportunity to share in our democracy and have their children come to university too,” and this is where the Jakes Gerwel Bursary Fund comes into play.