

**NICHOLAS BHEKINKOSI HEPWORTH**  
**BHENGU'S LASTING LEGACY:**  
A study of the life and work of one of Africa's greatest  
pioneers

By

**Daniel Simon Billy Lephoko**

Submitted in accordance with the requirements for the degree of

**PHILOSOPHIAE DOCTOR**

In the Faculty of Theology  
Department of Science of Religion and Missiology  
University of Pretoria

**SUPERVISOR: PROFESSOR P G J MEIRING**

APRIL 2010



---

## DECLARATION

I Daniel Simon Billy Lephoko, do hereby declare that the publication submitted for the doctoral degree has not previously been submitted to this university or any other tertiary institution for such a doctoral degree.

I further declare that the publication is my own work and that I be recognised as the copyright holder of the thesis.

**Signature:**

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'D S B Lephoko', written over a horizontal line.

**28 April 2010**

**D S B Lephoko**

## DEDICATION

The study is dedicated to:

- Firstly and foremost to my wife Aggie and our children, especially my son Kenneth Winston Sikhumbuzo who, in spite of me being unable to spend quality time with him during my studies, still loves me.
- Waxy, Mvusi, and Dawn, Bhengu and Mylet's children, who generously agreed to be interviewed and provided three family photo albums for the research.
- Aaron Musa Shongwe and his wife Linda (my spiritual children) for transporting me to Durban (3 times), Swaziland (once), Entumeni (once) to conduct interviews in their car without charge; I thank you son and Makoti for your generosity.
- The Mothers' Movement, the women who annually generate millions of Rand to fund the Back to God Crusade for the realization of Bhengu's vision to preach the gospel from Cape to Cairo.
- Researchers and church leaders interested in effective strategies used by Bhengu in the development of an organization that continues to grow and still touches many lives, twenty five years after his death.
- Mrs D D Gumede widow of Alfred Gumede a friend, colleague and one of Bhengu's early associates who joined the Emmanuel Mission and Assemblies of God with Bhengu. The study is also dedicated to their children.
- The children of Gideon and Virginia Buthelezi, one of Bhengu's early associates. Buthelezi was the first person to support Bhengu financially when Bhengu set out to Port Elizabeth in 1945. It is also dedicated to their children especially to Bongani and Thelma who agreed to be interviewed and provided correspondence between Bhengu and their father dating back to 1938.
- Professor Sibusiso Bhengu, son of Jeconia Bhengu's elder brother for agreeing to be interviewed on two separate occasions.
- Geoffrey Bhengu, son of Jeconia Bhengu's elder brother for providing the Bhengu family tree.
- The extended Bhengu clan, the Lutheran Church and the people of Entumeni for giving us a son in the person of Nicholas Bhekinkosi Hepworth Bhengu.

I would like to acknowledge the many people who contributed towards the completion of this project. In doing so I recognise that it is impossible to mention everyone by name.

My promoter Professor P G J Meiring for his encouragement when because my ripe age I was tempted to drop the project. I also thank him for valuable advice.

The Back to God Executive and the Assemblies of God General Executives for granting me permission to interview members of the church.

Members of the Assemblies of God who agreed to be interviewed.

My late, friend John Bond who in December 2006 made available twelve valuable files of key documents and correspondence between him and Bhengu over the many years they worked together including correspondence between the Executive of the Assemblies of God, USA Assemblies of God and Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada Foreign Mission Departments.

The University of Pretoria through the Faculty of Theology for granting me a study bursary to conduct the study.

Ms Duxie Nkosi my Deputy and Mary Njuguna (VSO) volunteer for supervising Children On the Move during the last three months of my studies.

My Secretary and Professional Assistant, Johanna Mbatha and Nonhlanhla Mhlongo for assisting Mbatha in typing the thesis. Khothatso my granddaughter for also assisting.

Miss Sannie Meiring for her dedicated and enduring spirit in editing the script under severe time constraint. May God richly bless her with more strength to assisting others who may call at her door for help.

Miss Anouk Berger, from our partner VSO (Voluntary Services Overseas) for arranging the Bibliography.

Evangelist Vuyo Dineka for encouraging me to finish the thesis.

**NICHOLAS BHEKINKOSI HEPWORTH BHENGU'S LASTING  
LEGACY:  
A study of the life and work of one of Africa's greatest  
pioneers**

A number of articles in books and newspapers have been written on the life and work of Nicholas Bhengu, in the past four decades. However, to date no focused academic research had been devoted to his life, his mission, his message and his influence in South Africa as well as beyond the borders of South Africa.

The different chapters in the thesis focus on Bhengu's life, his call to ministry and the role he played in South Africa, in rest of Africa, and beyond the borders of our continent. Although Bhengu did not overtly address political issues by supporting either the liberation movements nor the Nationalist Government, the impact of his work was felt by both to the extent that liberation movements such as ANC criticised him for not lending his public support to the struggle they waged against apartheid. On the other hand, the South African government also tried to co-opt him as an ally of their socio-political ideology. The government disappointed by Bhengu's lack of support for its political programme, became suspicious of his intentions and set the Special Branch of the South African Police to monitor his movements, teaching and preaching.

Bhengu ministered during a tumultuous period in the history of South Africa which called for people as well as the faith communities to take sides for or against the system of apartheid. Bhengu's teaching and preaching had a great impact on the social and political psyche of the people in South Africa. Through his Back to God Crusade he, with great effectiveness, called people to return to God. Thousands devoted their lives to God. Wherever Bhengu conducted his crusades, crime went down significantly, with criminals turning in their weapons of trade and returning stolen goods to the police. He also performed spectacular healings and miracles.

Apart from his evangelistic campaigns, Bhengu planted churches, established a formidable women's ministry that to this day continues to raise millions of Rand to fund the Back to God Crusade. The Youth Ministry provides bursaries for young people to study in any field of their choice. Bhengu's goal for providing these bursaries was to empower a new generation to contribute to the development of their country. He also established self-governing, self-supporting



and self-propagating churches, at a time when Black Churches were dependent on handouts from missionary sending agencies.

The study finally evaluates the contribution and lasting legacy of Bhengu: his example, his missionary endeavours, his preaching and church planting efforts, his socio-political involvement, and his leadership. The strategies that he employed to building a cohesive and successful movement – the Back to God/Assemblies of God Movement – receive special attention. The impact of the movement is still felt in South Africa and the neighbouring countries, Swaziland, Namibia, Lesotho, Botswana, Mozambique and Zimbabwe, twenty five years after his death. There is every reason to consider Nicholas Bhengu to be the Billy Graham of Africa.

## KEY TERMS

Africa

Apartheid

Assemblies of God

Back to God/Assemblies of God Movement

Church Planting

Church Struggle

Communism

Crusades

Ecumenism

Evangelism

Maxism

Mission

Missionaries

Reconstruction and Development

South Africa

Theology

DECLARATION.....	i
DEDICATION .....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	iii
SUMMARY .....	iv
KEY TERMS .....	vi
TABLE OF CONTENTS .....	vii
<b>CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1. RELEVANCE OF STUDY .....	1
1.2. RESEARCH GOAL .....	2
1.3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY .....	2
1.4. PARTICIPANT OBSERVER .....	3
1.5. DEFINITION OF TERMS .....	4
1.5.1. Baptism of the Holy Spirit .....	5
1.5.2. Contextualisation .....	5
1.5.3. Culture .....	5
1.5.4. Diakonia .....	6
1.5.5. Ethics .....	6
1.5.6. Evangelism .....	6
1.5.7. Key Leadership Factor .....	6
1.5.8. King and Church .....	7
1.5.9. Kerygma .....	7
1.5.10. Koinonia .....	7
1.5.11. Mission .....	7
1.5.12. Pentecostal Mission .....	8
1.5.13. Spiritual Leadership .....	8
1.5.14. Theology .....	8
1.5.15. The Church .....	8
1.6. STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS .....	9
<b>CHAPTER 2: SOUTH AFRICA, 1948 – 1985. THE CONTEXT OF BHENGU’S LIFE AND WORK .....</b>	<b>12</b>
2.1. INTRODUCTION: TURBULENT TIMES FOR SOUTH AFRICA .....	12



2.2. THE BIRTH OF TWO POLITICAL FORCES: THE AFRICAN NATIONAL CONGRESS AND THE NATIONAL PARTY .....	12
2.2.1. The Founding of the African National Congress (1912) .....	12
2.2.2. The Founding of the National Party (1914).....	14
2.3. THE NATIONAL PARTY ASSUMES POWER (1948) .....	15
2.4. SOCIO-ECONOMIC CIRCUMSTANCES: POVERTY AND DISRUPTION OF FAMILY LIFE..	19
2.5. REACTION AGAINST APARTHEID .....	20
2.5.1. Growing opposition.....	20
2.5.2. Sharpville .....	20
2.5.3. Rivonia Treason Trial .....	21
2.5.3.1. The State Case .....	22
2.5.3.2. Mandela's Defence .....	22
2.5.4. Soweto – 1976 Student Riots .....	23
2.6. MARXISM AND COMMUNISM .....	24
2.7. THE STATE BECOMES MORE REPRESSIVE .....	26
2.8. POLITICAL RE-ENGINEERING .....	26
2.9. THE CHURCHES AND APARTHEID .....	27
2.9.1. A challenge to the Christians: the role of the churches in times of violence .....	27
2.9.2. The attitude on race of the early settlers .....	28
2.9.3. The church's response to apartheid .....	30
2.9.3.1. Churches divided on apartheid .....	30
2.9.3.2. The Afrikaans Churches .....	32
2.9.3.3. The DRC defends apartheid on theological grounds .....	33
2.9.3.4. The English Mainline Churches .....	34
2.9.3.5. Pentecostal and Charismatic churches .....	35
2.9.4. Church initiatives to address apartheid .....	38
2.9.4.1. The Cottesloe Consultation, 1961 .....	38
2.9.4.2. The Durban Congress on Mission and Evangelism, 1973 .....	39
2.9.4.3. The South African Christian Leadership Assembly (SACLA) 1979 .....	40
2.9.4.4. The National Initiative for Reconciliation, 1985 .....	41
2.9.4.5. The Kairos Document, 1985 .....	42
2.10. NICHOLAS BHENGU'S EFFORTS TO STEER THE ASSEMBLIES OF GOD AWAY FROM APARTHEID .....	44
<b>CHAPTER 3: THE MAN NICHOLAS BHENGU .....</b>	<b>47</b>
3.1. INTRODUCTION .....	47

3.2. BHENGU'S ROOTS AND PLACE OF BIRTH – THE ENTUMENI LUTHERAN MISSION STATION .....	48
3.2.1. Bhengu's Family Tree .....	49
3.2.2. Christian Family Background .....	51
3.2.3. The Missionary Founder of Entumeni (Gleaned from my visit to the Lutheran Museum on 17 January 2009) .....	52
3.3. BHENGU'S EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND .....	54
3.3.1. Bhengu's theological training .....	55
3.4. BHENGU SEEKS EMPLOYMENT .....	56
3.5. BHENGU'S CONVERSION .....	56
3.6. THE LUTHERAN CHURCH REJECTS BHENGU'S NEW FOUND FAITH .....	57
3.7. BHENGU'S FIRST ASSOCIATES.....	58
3.7.1. Job Y Chiliza – The Man who Discipled Bhengu .....	59
3.7.2. Alfred Lawrence Gumede .....	60
3.7.3. Gideon Buthelezi .....	62
3.8. BHENGU MARRIES MYLET NDLELA .....	63
3.8.1. Bhengu and Mylet's Children .....	64
3.8.2. Bhengu's Second Marriage to Nokwethemba Mthethwa .....	65
3.8.3. Relationships in the family .....	66
3.8.4. Money Management in the home and church .....	66
3.9. MYLET'S FUNERAL .....	67
3.9.1. A Valediction to a departed friend – Mylet Bhengu .....	67
3.9.2. Interpreting the Statements in the Valediction .....	69
3.10. BHENGU'S HOME GOING, GROOTE SCHUUR.....	72
3.10.1. A Sad Good - bye .....	72
3.10.2. Bhengu's Funeral Arrangement .....	72
3.10.3. An analysis of Bhengu's funeral instructions .....	74
<b>CHAPTER 4: BHENGU'S MESSAGE – HIS PREACHING AND THEOLOGY</b>	
<b>BEHIND HIS PREACHING .....</b>	<b>77</b>
4.1. INTRODUCTION .....	77
4.2. BHENGU'S VISION AND CALL TO MINISTRY .....	78
4.2.1. Bhengu's call to Ministry .....	78
4.2.2. An analysis of Bhengu's vision and call to ministry .....	79
4.2.2.1. Authorisation by the Lord to serve him .....	79
4.2.2.2. Nationalities of people in the vision .....	79



4.2.2.3. The cry of their hearts .....	80
4.2.2.4. The Lord showed me “an open Bible” .....	80
4.2.2.5. The Lord’s command “I wish you to do this” .....	80
4.2.3. Biblical Motifs: Bhengu’s call compared to the call of Moses and that of the Apostle Paul .....	81
4.2.3.1. Moses’ call to deliver the children of Israel from bondage in Egypt .....	82
4.2.3.2. The call of Paul .....	82
4.3. BHENGU’S THEOLOGICAL ROOTS AND TRAINING FOR MINISTRY .....	84
4.3.1. The influence of Lutheran Theology on Bhengu .....	84
4.3.2. The influence of Evangelical Theology on Bhengu .....	86
4.3.3. The influence of Pentecostalism on Bhengu .....	86
4.4. BAPTISM IN THE HOLY SPIRIT .....	87
4.4.1. The Evangelical view on Spirit Baptism .....	88
4.4.2. Torrey breaks ranks with Evangelicals on the issue of Spirit Baptism .....	89
4.4.3. The Pentecostal view on Spirit Baptism .....	91
4.4.3.1. Agreement among Pentecostals .....	92
4.4.3.2. Gee on Spirit Baptism .....	93
4.4.3.3. Du Plessis on Spirit Baptism .....	95
4.5. BHENGU’S DECLARATION OF FAITH .....	95
4.6. BHENGU IS BAPTIZED IN THE HOLY SPIRIT .....	98
4.7. BHENGU’S TEACHING AND PREACHING .....	102
4.7.1. Centrality of the cross in Bhengu’s preaching .....	103
4.7.2. Perfectionism .....	105
4.7.3. Bhengu on healing .....	106
4.7.4. War on sin and crime .....	106
4.7.5. Bhengu on superstitions .....	107
4.7.6. Bhengu understood the psychological and emotional make – up of his audience .....	108
4.7.7. Bhengu was a great story teller .....	109
4.8. BHENGU PREACHED AND TAUGHT UNDER THE ANOINTING OF THE HOLY SPIRIT ....	109
<b>CHAPTER 5: BHENGU THE EVANGELIST AND CHURCH PLANTER .....</b>	<b>113</b>
5.1. INTRODUCTION: BHENGU’S UNDERSTANDING OF MISSION AND EVANGELISM.....	113
5.1.1. Missio Dei and Missio ecclesia .....	113
5.1.2. Biblical Missionary task .....	114
5.1.3. Bhengu the Missionary .....	115
5.2. BHENGU THE EVANGELIST .....	119

5.2.1. Bhengu preaches for the Church of the Nazarene in Swaziland .....	120
5.2.2. Bhengu preaches for the Pentecostal Holiness Church in Phokeng Rustenburg .....	121
5.2.3. Bhengu preaches on the Mines – East Rand .....	122
5.2.4. Bhengu goes to Port Elizabeth .....	122
5.2.4.1. Bhengu expands crusade to Korsten .....	123
5.2.5. A Macedonian call for Bhengu to go to East London .....	124
5.3. BHENGU, THE CHURCH PLANTER: HOW BHENGU ESTABLISHED THE BACK TO GOD CRUSADE .....	125
5.3.1. Bhengu organizes and sets objectives for the Back to God Crusade .....	127
5.3.2. Constitution of the Back to God Crusade .....	127
5.3.3. Regional Teams and Team Leaders .....	129
5.3.4. Bhengu sets qualifications for Evangelists.....	132
5.4. WOMEN FUND BACK TO GOD CRUSADE .....	134
5.4.1. The Back to God Crusade Annual Financial Audit presented at Mothers' Easter Conventions .....	137
5.4.2. White Assemblies partner with Bhengu in spreading the gospel through financial giving .....	137
5.4.3. Bhengu reports to donors .....	142
5.4.3.1. Bhengu reports from Port Elizabeth 1948 .....	144
5.4.3.2. The Eshowe report 23 November 1969 .....	146
5.4.3.3. The Msinga report August 1970.....	147
5.4.3.4. The Lesotho report .....	148
5.4.3.5. Mylet Report to donors .....	149
5.5. PASSION AND COMPASSION IN BHENGU'S MESSAGE .....	149
5.6. THE IMPACT OF BHENGU'S MESSAGE .....	151
5.6.1. Changed lives .....	151
5.6.2. Bhengu's Healings and Miracles Ministry .....	153
5.6.2.1. How Bhengu's healings and miracles ministry started .....	153
5.6.2.2. The healing of a woman with hunch back in Duncan Village East London – 1951	154
5.6.2.3. The healing of a man brought in a wheelbarrow in Nelspruit – 1956 .....	154
5.6.2.4. Healing of a crippled man in Nigeria .....	155
5.6.2.5. The dramatic – healing of a demon possessed girl .....	156
5.7. CHURCHES FOR AFRICA .....	158
5.7.1. What is the church? .....	158
5.7.2. How Bhengu became a church planter .....	161
5.7.3. Bhengu's Strategy to build churches .....	162



5.7.4. Bhengu's first Church: Swaziland .....	163
5.7.5. Bhengu builds a big church in Duncan Village 1957 .....	163
5.7.6. Bhengu builds a bigger Church in Mdantsane 1984 .....	164
5.8. BHENGU AND THE ASSEMBLIES OF GOD .....	165
5.8.1. Assemblies of God historical and structural formation .....	165
5.8.2. Missionaries decide to form a South African Assemblies of God .....	166
5.9. EVALUATING BHENGU'S CONTRIBUTION .....	168
5.9.1. Hesselgrave's 'Pauline' cycle of church planting .....	168
5.9.2. Bhengu against the grid of "The Seven I's" .....	171
5.9.3. The 'three selves' .....	173
5.9.3.1. Self Governing churches (Church Government) .....	174
5.9.3.2. Self supporting churches .....	181
5.9.3.3. Self propagating churches .....	182
5.10. BHENGU AND EXPATRIATE MISSIONARIES .....	183
5.10.1. American Missionaries leave the Assemblies of God - 1964 .....	185
5.10.2. Elim Pentecostal Church missionaries leave the Assemblies of God - 1977 .....	186
5.10.3. Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada missionaries, as well as some white and black churches leave the Assemblies of God - 1981.....	190
5.10.4. The Coastal Assemblies leave the Assemblies of God - 1981 .....	190
5.11. BHENGU'S LEADERSHIP STYLE .....	191
5.11.1. Leadership theories.....	191
5.11.1.1. Blanchard's leadership theories .....	191
5.11.1.2. Avery's leadership theories .....	192
5.11.1.3 Bhengu's leadership style .....	192
5.11.1.4. Bhengu's leadership qualifications .....	193
5.12. THE BACK TO GOD TEACHING TEAM .....	196
<b>CHAPTER 6: BHENGU'S PROPHETIC ROLE: HIS SOCIO-ECONOMIC POLITICAL STANCE AND PEOPLE DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES .....</b>	<b>199</b>
6.1. INTRODUCTION: THE SOCIO-POLITICAL SITUATION .....	199
6.2. THE PERENNIAL DEBATE: SPIRITUAL GOSPEL VERSUS SOCIAL GOSPEL .....	201
6.3. BHENGU AND POLITICS .....	206
6.3.1. Bhengu criticised for his non party political stance .....	208
6.3.1.1. Bhengu criticised by Chief Albert Luthuli – former President of the ANC and Nobel Prize winner .....	209
6.3.1.2. Bhengu criticised by Professor Sibusiso Bhengu (his nephew) .....	209

6.3.1.3. Bhengu criticised by Lawrence Tutu (his church member) .....	210
6.4. BHENGU'S SOCIO POLITICAL ACTIVITIES ON CHANGES IN SOUTH AFRICA .....	213
6.4.1. <i>Daily Dispatch 1966</i> : Not enough changes in South Africa .....	213
6.4.2. <i>Daily Dispatch 1966</i> : Bhengu on race .....	214
6.4.3. <i>Daily Dispatch 1966</i> : Bhengu on separate development .....	214
6.4.4. <i>Daily Dispatch 1966</i> : Bhengu on white responsibility .....	215
6.4.5. Bhengu's message to political leaders .....	217
6.4.5.1. Bhengu preaches to the ANC .....	217
6.4.5.2. Bhengu preaches to King Sobhuza II of Swaziland .....	218
6.5. BHENGU A PERCEIVED AS A THREAT BOTH TO THE STATE AND TO BLACK REDICALS	218
6.6. BHENGU'S SOCIO-ECONOMIC RECONSTRUCTION AND DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY....	219
6.6.1. Bhengu and Socialism .....	219
6.6.2. Bhengu develops future leaders through education .....	221
6.6.3. Bhengu trains women in self – reliance .....	221
6.6.4. Bhengu develops church leaders .....	223
<b>CHAPTER 7: BHENGU AS AN ECUMENICAL FIGURE: RELATIONSHIP WITH OTHER CHURCH DENOMINATIONS .....</b>	<b>227</b>
7.1. INTRODUCTION .....	227
7.2. ECUMENISM: A WORLD WIDE PHENOMENON .....	227
7.3. THEOLOGICAL DIFFERENCES IN ECUMENISM .....	230
7.4. BHENGU STRADDLED THE PROTESTANT, EVANGELICAL AND PENTECOSTAL DIVIDE..	232
7.5. BHENGU SUPPORTED ECUMENICAL INITIATIVES .....	232
7.5.1. Africa Enterprise .....	233
7.5.2. Campus Crusade for Christ SA .....	234
7.5.3. Africa Co-operative Action Trust – Food Faith and Work for Africa .....	235
7.6. FEDERAL THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY OF SOUTH AFRICA .....	235
7.7. BHENGU'S FAREWELL MESSAGE: A CALL FOR UNITY .....	235
7.8. A CALL FOR PRAYER FOR AFRICA AND ITS LEADERS .....	236
7.9. TO THE VERY END, AN ECUMENIST WITH AN EVANGELICAL HEART .....	236
<b>CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSION – BHENGU'S LASTING LEGACY .....</b>	<b>243</b>
8.1. HYPOTHESIS REVISITED .....	243
8.2. BHENGU, CALLED AS A WITNESS IN A TURBULENT TIME .....	243
8.3. THE MAN, NICHOLAS BHENGU .....	245
8.4. BHENGU, THE PREACHER .....	246



8.5. BHENGU, THE EVANGELIST – THE “BILLY GRAHAM OF AFRICA” .....	246
8.6. BHENGU, THE STRATEGIST .....	249
8.7. BHENGU, THE PROPHET .....	251
8.8. BHENGU, THE ECUMENIST .....	253
8.9. BHENGU, THE LEADER .....	254
8.10. BHENGU, A SERVANT LEADER .....	257
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	260
ANNOTATED PHOTOCOPIES OF PRIMARY SOURCES .....	270
PERSONAL INTERVIEWS RECORDED ON CASSETTE TAPES .....	274
TELEPHONIC INTERVIEWS .....	278
WRITTEN SUBMISSIONS .....	279
BHENGU’S TAPED SERMONS .....	280
GLOSSARY .....	281
APPENDIXES .....	283