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Family and friends, members of this community, thank you for gathering as we honour and celebrate the life of William Arthur Bennett—our Oupa Bill.

We come together with full hearts, holding grief in one hand and gratitude in the other.
Both are right.
Both are honest.
Both are worthy of a man who lived ninety purposeful years among us.

William was born in Cape Town on 28 November 1935, and he slipped away peacefully in Somerset West on 3 February 2026.
Ninety years.
A span long enough to see cities change and grandchildren grow tall, and yet to those who loved him, not nearly long enough.

He was a scholarship student who fell in love with learning early, not as a ladder to climb, but as a door to open—for himself, and later, for countless others.
He became a history teacher, and then a headmaster, and with each new responsibility he did what he always did: he leaned towards people.
He listened, he lifted, he led quietly.
He championed literacy programmes long before it became fashionable to talk about early reading.
He knew that a child who can read holds a key that can open more than books—it can open a life.

He mentored young teachers with a generosity that changed careers and, through them, changed classrooms.
He never saw teaching as a solo performance.
It was a choir, he said, in which every voice mattered, provided we all kept to time and listened to one another.

After years of service, he retired to Somerset West, and—true to form—did not retire from purpose.
He tutored students who needed a steady hand and a steady timetable.
He joined the community choir and brought his love of classical music and hymnody into rooms where voices warmed and worries receded.
On a Thursday evening, you could find him, score in hand, head slightly inclined, catching the cue, holding the bass line as if he were laying a foundation for the rest of us to build upon.

He married Helen sixty-two years ago.
Sixty-two years of shared weather—sun and rain, ordinary Tuesdays and golden anniversaries.
Together they raised three children: Mark, Susan, and Claire.
Seven grandchildren have sat at his feet and learned his stories, and one great-grandchild has felt the gentleness of those hands that could both carve a Sunday roast and pat a small shoulder with steady reassurance.

His character was stitched together with dignity and compassion, disciplined but never severe, and always that dry, well-timed humour.
He could take the sting out of a tense meeting with one raised eyebrow and a sentence that landed softly but decisively.
Those who worked with him will remember how he began staff briefings on the dot—never a minute late—and ended them before the tea got cold.
He used punctuality not as a whip but as a courtesy: I value your time; please value one another’s.

Outside the classroom and the office, he walked the mountain paths of his youth—Table Mountain, Platteklip and beyond—finding in the fynbos an old companionship.
He kept a small notebook for birds, not to boast of sightings, but to remember them: a sunbird’s flash at Newlands Forest, the whip of a wind through a sugarbird’s tail.
He played chess with a patient ruthlessness, always teaching, even in victory.

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More than once he sacrificed a queen to teach a lesson about impatience—and then offered tea, as if to say the real game was the conversation between moves.

Rotary saw his steady hand in service projects—quiet fundraisers, careful budgets, and the unglamorous tasks that keep big-hearted ideas alive.
In our church he was both voice and presence.
He sang, yes, but he also welcomed.
Many here will remember that he never forgot a name.
If you visited twice, he remembered you on the third time before you reached your pew.
He didn’t use names to display knowledge; he used them to build belonging.

We will miss his wise counsel.
The way he listened without rushing to fill the silence.
The way he would pause—just long enough to make us think—and then ask the question that helped us find our own answer.
We will miss his gentle leadership, the kind that shows what a steady spine looks like without needing to raise its voice.
We will miss how he remembered birthdays, exam dates, and the name of the new baby you thought he’d never heard about.

Allow me, as both minister and family friend, to share a personal memory that I know many of you will recognise in your own variations.
Sunday lunches at the Bennetts’.
The table was full, the plates were generous, and William—apron loosely knotted—would stand to carve the roast.
He carved with an economy that a surgeon might envy, and as the rhythm of the knife found its measure, he would begin a story.
Not a performance, never that.
A recollection from his school days—a mischief averted by kindness, a lesson learned the long way round, a colleague whose courage he admired.
And at the end, just when you thought he had finished, he’d set down the knife, lift a corner of his mouth, and let a final detail sparkle through—the twinkle in

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his eye turning the story into wisdom.
That twinkle was his punctuation: gentle, precise, and always on time.

What held him steady were values he did not parade but practised.
Service before self.
Humility in the midst of achievement.
Punctuality as respect.
And the spirit of Ubuntu—“I am because we are.”
For William, Ubuntu was not a phrase on a poster.
It was why he learned the names of new families at church.
It was why he wrote notes to former pupils who had stumbled and offered them another way forward.
It was why he could disagree without diminishing.
He believed that our flourishing is braided—that we rise or fall together.

Helen, you shared with him a life of deep companionship.
Your partnership taught your children what constancy looks like in daily clothes.
To Mark, Susan, and Claire—your father’s care for his pupils began with his care for you.
To the grandchildren and great-grandchild—he delighted in the ordinary details of your days, and if he sometimes asked for a proper handshake, it was only to remind you that you belong in any room you enter.

Those of us who stood beside him in church or sat across from him at committee tables will remember his standard of excellence and his delight in small things done well.
A correctly tied choir folder.
Minutes distributed before sunset.
A thank you note that arrived so promptly you wondered if he had written it before the meeting ended.

He was not sentimental about legacy; he was practical about it.
He laid it down one lesson at a time, one kindness at a time, one faithful morning after another.

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And yet, today, it is right to say that his legacy is large.
It is in the literacy programmes that still open doors.
It is in the young teachers he mentored who now steady others.
It is in the choir harmonies that hold because he helped the basses trust their note.
It is in family traditions that will continue, with someone else now carving the roast, and someone—perhaps you—adding a story and a twinkle of your own.

Grief, when it is honest, gives thanks even as it aches.
So, we give thanks for ninety years of William’s life.
We give thanks for a marriage of sixty-two years.
We give thanks for three children, seven grandchildren, and one great-grandchild who carry forward his steadiness and his song.
We give thanks for the communities he loved—schools, Rotary, this church, choirs, mountain paths—and for the countless lives he strengthened simply by showing up, on time, with a listening ear.

To the Bennett family, on whose behalf I speak today, your invitation is simple and beautiful.
In a few moments we will hold a time of silence—so that each of us can name our gratitude privately, and entrust our sorrow gently.
After that silence, we will sing together the hymn he loved so well, Guide Me, O Thou Great Redeemer.
There is a memory book at the entrance; please add your stories, your small details, your notes of thanks.
They will be treasured.

As we prepare ourselves for that, let us remember how William would have wanted us to step back into the world after today.
Not with grand declarations, but with faithful habits.
Be on time.
Learn someone’s name and say it kindly.
Offer your seat before you are asked.
Read to a child, even when you are tired.

Sing at least one hymn with your whole voice.
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And when the moment allows, add a touch of dry humour that softens edges and makes space for understanding.

Oupa Bill has run his race, not hurriedly, not lazily, but with a steady stride and eyes lifted.
He has handed us the baton of service, humility, punctuality, and Ubuntu.
We honour him best by taking it up.

May the God of all comfort hold Helen and the family close.
May the peace William practised become the peace we embody.
And may the memory of William Arthur Bennett be a blessing—today, and for the years to come.

Thank you.

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