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## South African Day of Courageous Conversation: An inter-faith initiative

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Anglican Archbishop of Cape Town

*Bishops court, 8 October 2015*

*Representatives of the faith communities here present,  
Leaders of the mining sector, representing both workers and management,  
Representatives of government, who were invited here,  
Members of civil society,  
Members of the Steering Committee:*

Thank you all for being here today. I want to thank particularly those involved in the mining sector for coming, and for allowing yourselves to be vulnerable in taking [these conversations](#) forward. Why do I say that, and why are we calling this a day of courageous conversation? As many of you know, this is the South African step along a road which began at the Vatican two years ago, when the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace hosted a Day of Reflection in September 2013. It continued with an Ecumenical Day of Reflection at Lambeth Palace in London, hosted by the Archbishop of Canterbury and the President of the British Methodist Conference, and more recently another Day of Reflection at the Vatican, which I was privileged to join.

Those global-level meetings recognised that the dialogue they began needs to take place at local level, within countries where mining is part of the economic and social fabric of society. Here in South Africa, we have expanded the conversation to include what I call an inter-faith slant, reflecting the make-up of our particular society. And the fact that this conversation takes place within the context of South African society in 2015 also explains why it takes courage to join it. For, as I said a few days ago, when we marched to Parliament and the Presidency in a rally against corruption, too many of us have been intimidated into silence by our current rulers. Leaders who showed such courage in what I called the old struggle, the struggle against apartheid, now punish those who would speak out against their mismanagement of our country.

Why am I, Thabo, involved in this initiative? Let me share with you an anecdote. My father, as a self-supporting church minister, had to find his own ways of taking care of his family. His way of doing it was to go every month to a factory shop in Johannesburg, a shop called Kitty Kit Hawkers' Factory Supplies, and to buy beautiful clothing on

credit. Then, starting around the 15th of every month, he and a friend would drive west of Johannesburg through Carletonville, Fochville, Potchefstroom, Stilfontein, Orkney and Klerksdorp, stopping at each mine, dropping off stock and collecting deposits, ending up at Lichtenburg. Every month, as they arrived at each mine and opened their boot, the miners knew, “Makgoba and Dichabe are here.” Then they would turn around and travel back to Johannesburg after pay day to collect their money. But my father didn't complete his last trip – he fell ill, he came home to Soweto and he died in his bed. As the elder son, I was given the book in which his customers were recorded, so I set off to collect what he was owed, and I have never forgotten how touched the miners were when they heard of his death, and their absolute honesty in settling up their debts with me. They wanted me to continue the business, which of course I didn't – but I did go back to the industry later after earning my degree, and worked as a psychologist for TEBA at the Rand Mutual Mine Hospital in Eloff Street Extension, where I was looking after miners who had suffered spinal cord injuries.

So I come to this meeting knowing that the church has been to some degree involved in ministry to the mining industry. And we have ecumenical bodies such as the National Religious Association for Social Development, represented here, and the South African Council of Churches, that has done urban and industrial mission. But one of our objectives today is to acknowledge our shortcomings and our failures, and I want to say that the churches have failed the mining industry, both workers and managers. We have failed to take into account how risky mining is economically, one year a market-based success riding high on commodity prices, the next a business in quicksand. We have failed to understand the aspirations of people who want to earn R12,500 a month for working in conditions of extreme heat on stopes lying kilometres down in the earth. We have failed to understand the constraints on managers facing the relentless pressure of meeting shareholders' expectations for better results every quarter, and who have to deal with resistance to social reforms from engineers and line managers responsible for the safe conduct of highly sophisticated and technically complex mining operations.

There are times in our lives when we have to recognise that our past is what it is, and we cannot change it. However, as I have said previously to some of you, we can change the story we tell ourselves about it, and by doing that, we can change the future. I want the process we enter today to be one of lamentation, in the sense that the Book of Lamentations in the Old Testament of the Christian bible describes it. Generally held to have been written after the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians, the book expresses what it means to experience suffering, but it goes further than that. In the words of one of my favourite theologians, Denise Ackermann, formerly of the universities of the Western Cape and of Stellenbosch: *Lamenting* “...is a refusal to settle for the way things are. It is reminding God that the human situation is not as it should be and that God as the partner in the covenant must act.” Lamentation is not navel gazing; it is not only exposing your vulnerability, but exposing it as a tool for leadership,

because you can't say let us move forward together without acknowledging the failures of the past.

Today's process does not involve me prescribing what should be discussed. Each of you must bring your own unique concerns and contributions to this conversation, and what is of overriding importance is that each one of us tries to put ourselves in the shoes of those with whom we are in dialogue. We need to be able to contribute here from the perspective of someone on the other side of an issue. But in the spirit of being just one participant among you, let me bring you my concerns, without suggesting they are any more valid or important than each of yours.

Firstly, I come here today suggesting that we might best be placed to think about how we could work together on mine health and safety issues. There may well be other areas that we could partner on, but this might be the one tangible area we need to reflect on. You in the mining houses have mastered this area and you have reduced fatalities, but we in the churches have the injured in our communities, as well as those who contract HIV and Aids or TB while working on the mines. Churches pour a lot of energy, time and money in this area. Your experience in mine health and safety will find fertile hearts in the churches.

Secondly, perhaps we should look at our records, as the mining industry and our response as the faith community, on environmental degradation. I have just returned from the Diocese of Matlosane, which encompasses the area around Klerksdorp, and while I was there, the bishop of that diocese took me around, showing me where the environment is being rehabilitated. Looking at those long pipes carrying slush across virgin land, I had to wonder: how safe and secure is that process? What are the risks of spillage, which apart from polluting the earth, could introduce dangerous levels of pollution to the Vaal River catchment area. I know that this is something the mines give a lot of attention to; but we in the church have been remiss in not getting ourselves involved in the process. As a result we are not in a position to make any responsible judgement about whether the mines are truly meeting their responsibilities. Also on the environment, our church has recently decided to consider disinvesting from the fossil fuel industry, so we would urge the industry to explore to its maximum potential the possibility of solar and other renewable energy.

Thirdly, let me raise the issue of social cohesion. There has been renewed attention in recent days, notably after Thomas Piketty's Mandela lecture, to the enormous disparities in wealth not only in our society but across the globe. The difference between our situation in South Africa and that in more economically developed countries is that, like no other issue we face, this one has the potential to blow our country apart. There is an urgent need for all of us – whether different companies in the industry or different groups in the faith community – to stop working in silos in the contexts within which we operate. Within the industry, mining companies need to join as a collective and raise

the bar, especially in the areas of housing, health, schools and poverty alleviation. We acknowledge gratefully that millions have already been poured into these areas by yourselves, and there are complexities to deal with, but might it not work to pour resources into a common fund dedicated for your collective action?

I have gone over my prescribed time, so let me make two further suggestions very briefly.

Addressing labour: Labour, is it not time that we rethink the “class warfare” approach developed in the conditions of 19th century Europe, and look at “co-determination” models of working jointly with management? This does not mean that unions lose their right to bargain, but it can involve, for example, the separate representation of workers on management or supervisory boards of companies, such as is practised in a number of European countries.

And addressing management here, is it not time to look at the huge disparity between executive pay and that of workers? I know that the amount of money that limiting executive pay would release for an average worker is negligible, but didn't Nelson Mandela demonstrate to us the enormous power of symbolic action? And in case you think these are the ramblings of an idealistic archbishop, let me quote a man who spent a decade at the centre of the American financial system: William McDonough, formerly president of the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, and a deputy to Fed chairman Alan Greenspan in the 1990s. He has quoted Matthew's Gospel on loving our neighbour in suggesting, that there ought to be, and I quote him, “economic and moral limitations on the gaps created by the market-driven reward system”. Speaking in 2002 at Trinity Church Wall Street in New York, he said of the disparity between executive pay and that of the average American worker that “it is hard to find somebody more convinced than I of the superiority of the American economic system, but I can find nothing in economic theory that justifies this development.” (<http://www.ny.frb.org/newsevents/speeches/2002/mcd020911.html>)

To end these introductory words, my prayer for today is that each of you here will feel that this is a safe space, one in which you can speak your mind honestly, one in which we will listen to and really hear one another, instead of speaking past each other. Instead of focusing on micro, mine-specific issues, let's look at macro, global issues, pursuing the common good as opposed to narrow self-interest.

I also pray that these conversations won't just be a talk-shop; that we will take tangible, implementable decisions to act; not only that, but that we will expand such conversations not only in the mining sector but for all wealth creators in our economy. Again as I have said before in similar settings, it's time for us to turn to each other, not on each other. What is important is not where we start, but where we finish.

So welcome to Bishops court, home and office to bishops and archbishops of Cape Town since 1848, a home where President Mandela spent his first night after being released from prison, and addressed the nation and the world from the very lawn on which you are seated. As some of you will know, this property was once an estate owned by Jan van Riebeeck, the Dutch settler who came here in the 17<sup>th</sup> century to establish a refreshment station for passing ships. Scattered on the hill behind us are the remains of a hedge of wild almond trees which the Dutch East India Company planted to keep the likes of me out of their settlement. As late as 1986, when Desmond Tutu came to live here, he had to do so in defiance of the Group Areas Act. So the very place in which we meet is a testimony that transformation can happen after years of oppression.

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