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UNIVERSITY EMBARKS ON A PATH OF *courageous conversations*

In accordance with the new direction that the institution has embarked upon (see article on the preceding pages), Stellenbosch University recently initiated a series of what the Rector, Prof Russel Botman, has coined “courageous conversations” to act as an instrument for meaningful change in the institutional culture of the University. This initiative will also act as a possible catalyst to spurn new thinking, incisive discussions and leadership on current socio-political issues in a way that will add value to the national debate and discourse on current affairs.

At an institutional level these conversations aim to create safe spaces for students and staff to engage on matters of common concern and to constructively work toward creating a home for all, says Prof Magda Fourie, Vice-Rector: Teaching, who shares stewardship for the implementation of the programme across all levels at the University with Prof Julian Smith, Vice-Rector: Community Interaction and Staff.

“The goals of this initiative are to introduce

platforms where individuals are able to voice, discuss and debate concerns and challenges at the University; to facilitate open and honest discussion in secure environments that are conducive to effective communication; to document the results of these sessions with a view to inform policy, curriculum decisions and procedural reviews; and to bring about culture renewal and constructive change in the institution,” says Prof Botman.

The series of conversations for staff members will be coordinated and implemented by the Director: Diversity and Equity, Dr Jerome van Wyk. Dr Van Wyk will, together with the management from the academic and support services environments, decide on appropriate ways on which courageous discussions among staff members on all levels can be established.

In view of the present internal debate on institutional culture, it was decided that dialogue would commence with discussions about race, gender and substance abuse.

The Student Dean, Mr Llewellyn MacMaster, will drive discussion sessions among students and will involve all relevant environments on the merits of the topic of discussion on hand. Conversations between staff and students will be coordinated via the offices of the Student Dean and the Director: Diversity and Equity.

“Individuals will require safe surroundings in order to discuss issues that might set them ill at

ease and that may evoke emotional upsurges. It is, however, a process that must be engaged effectively in order to beget the structural and behavioural changes that will feed into SU’s transformation processes in order to realise the objectives of the Pedagogy of Hope and attaining Vision 2012,” says Dr Jerome van Wyk.

Outside the ambit of University matters, the programme of courageous conversations also entails a series of high-level discussions among experts and leaders on pertinent issues of the day. These will be presented under the banner of the Stellenbosch Seboka. Seboka is a Sotho word denoting a gathering of people (leaders) coming together for a common cause.

The recently held Stellenbosch Seboka on Higher Education and Ethical Leadership is the first in this series of leadership discussions.

Another tier of the courageous conversations initiative is a focus on current affairs that aims to contribute new thinking and perspectives to the national debate or discourse. A one day conference themed “The doors of learning and culture shall be opened” - Perspectives on changing institutional culture”, held on 30 May, spearheaded this programme. [m](#)

ON THE PHOTO ABOVE: Dr Betty Siegel, Emeritus President and Distinguished Chair of Leadership, Ethics and Character at the Kennesaw State University and the Anglican Archbishop Emeritus of Cape Town, Desmond Tutu, who was a speaker at the Stellenbosch Seboka on Higher Education and Ethical Leadership.