

Dear Fellow Dialoguers!

We are excited to welcome you to the second cohort of Stellenbosch-MSU Virtual Student Conversations, one of the components of the Ubuntu Dialogues project. The conversations comprise four sessions scheduled for the following Thursdays in October: October 8, 15, 22, and 29. Each session will focus on key themes that address ongoing racial injustices and tensions in the US, South Africa, and the global community. These themes are:

- "Black Lives Matter" (October 8)
- "Statues & Symbols" (October 15)
- "Gender-based Violence" (October 22)
- "COVID-19 Pandemic" (October 29)

To have an idea of who will be sharing the conversational space with you, we have attached Participant Information Sheets with a brief description of each of the participants to this email. We encourage you to look through the list and familiarize yourselves with your co-dialoguers.

In this email, we will also introduce you to the facilitators, share some thoughts about the process of convening the dialogues, propose some values that may guide the conversations, and indicate how we expect the dialogues to unfold.

Philip Effiong and Lireko Qhobela will be the facilitators on the Michigan State University and Stellenbosch University sides, respectively. The Ubuntu Dialogues Project Managers, Upenyu Majee (Michigan State University) and Mosa Phadi (Stellenbosch University), will also be present during our virtual conversations and will remain key participants and contributors to the entire process. We are all committed to creating a common space despite the technological and geographical divide. To make this feasible, we have divided the task of facilitation: Philip will facilitate the first and the third dialogues while Lireko will facilitate the second and the last dialogues of the series. We see our facilitators' role as silent holders of the space, rather than direct participants in the dialogue. This is your space, and your chance to talk to each other!

Short readings and videos will be recommended before each dialogue and will be made available to you no later than the Monday before each Thursday session. This material is not meant to direct or be at the centre of the dialogue but is expected to supplement your thought processes as they relate to your lived realities and understanding of Ubuntu. Essentially, it is your ideas and experiences that we hope would shape and give meaning to the dialogues.

We want to propose the following guiding values for the conversation. It would be great if you want to comment, add, or make other suggestions that would help to create a respectful space, but where it would still be possible to raise and respond to difficult and even contentious ideas that could shift and challenge the ideas that we hold before and after the conversation starts.

- *Words matter.* Words help us to reach across the mystery of each other. We encourage participants to be mindful of how the words we use shape how we understand ourselves, how we interpret the world, and how we treat others.
- *Hospitality.* Hospitality is the bridge with which we intentionally create an inviting trustworthy conversational space. It is an invitation to co-create and shape the atmosphere for discovering new social realities and forge relationships between unlikely combinations of people.

- *Humility.* Humility is the companion to curiosity, surprise, and delight. It is not about getting small, but rather about encouraging ourselves and others to be big. It is not about debasing oneself but about approaching everything and everyone with a readiness to be surprised and delighted.
- *Patience.* Patience is not to be mistaken for meekness or ineffectuality. It is a commitment to move through the world as it is, not as we wish it to be. Human transformation takes time – longer than we want it to – but it is what is necessary for social transformation.
- *Generous listening.* Listening is more than being quiet while others have their say. It is about presence as much as receiving; it is about connection more than observing. Real listening is powered by curiosity. It involves vulnerability – a willingness to be surprised, to let go of assumptions and take in ambiguity. It is never in 'gotcha' mode. The generous listener wants to understand the humanity behind the words of the other and patiently summons one's own best self and one's own most generous words and questions.
- *Adventurous civility.* The adventure of civility for our time cannot be a mere matter of politeness or niceness. Adventurous civility honours the difficulty of what we face and the complexity of what it means to be human. It does not celebrate diversity by putting it up on a pedestal and ignoring its messiness and its depth. Civility is about creating new possibilities for living forward while being different and even continuing to hold profound disagreement. (From the Civil Conversations Project (<https://onbeing.org/civil-conversations-project/better-conversations-guide/>)).

We also want to encourage you to keep the following questions in the back of your head during the conversation:

1. What do I take from this?
2. What challenges me?
3. What feels relevant / helpful / revealing of where we are as participants in this conversation?

You could make notes during the conversation or just simply keep things in mind. We will come back to these questions at the end of the conversation.

The attached document, *What is dialogue?* contains some important guidelines that will further help to create what we hope will be a constructive and productive learning space for all of us. The following quote from this document is particularly pertinent to the kind of discussions that we anticipate:

"Dialogue is a process of genuine interaction through which human beings listen to each other deeply enough to be changed by what they learn."

We look forward to a time, in the near future, when we will eventually meet one another face to face! Do let us know if you have any questions in the meantime.

On behalf of the facilitator team,
Lireko Qhobela and Philip Effiong