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BRIEF REPORT FROM THE SECRETARIES OF THE SJTI ANNUAL CONFERENCE: 24th – 25th April 2025 FIRST DAY

0 All protocol observed, I respectfully present to you a brief summary of our conference proceedings.

The 2025 SJTI annual conference, themed "**Walking Together**," resonated with the spirit of the Synod on Synodality. On the first day, participants benefited from seven insightful presentations, preceded by a message from Conference Coordinator Rev. Fr. Dr. Wilbert Gobbo. Dr. Gobbo began by quoting an African proverb: 'If you want to walk fast, walk alone; but if you want to walk far, walk with others.' He emphasized that walking together is God's initiative, for God reveals himself to us and wants to walk with every human person. He distinguished between "vertical walk", that is, walking with God, and "horizontal walk", which is walking with others, particularly the least, the last and the lost. Dr. Gobbo highlighted the theme's inclusivity, urging all to walk together in the global village. He concluded by warmly thanking speakers and participants.

1 The first keynote address, "**Walking Together: Synodality as a New Way of Being Church**," was delivered by Archbishop Dabula Mpako of the Archdiocese of Pretoria on behalf of SACBC. Archbishop Mpako noted that Pope Francis' Synod on Synodality has firmly set the Church on a path to rediscover its synodal nature. He described synodality as a shift from a pyramidal to a communal understanding of the Church. The Archbishop highlighted that the Church of the Second Millennium was highly pyramidal, centered on the clergy's power and emphasized the laity's obedience. Consequently, it led to clericalism, resistance to modernism, emphasis on Tradition, centralization of power, and limited ecumenism. In contrast, the Church of the Third Millennium, as envisioned by the Second Vatican Council and the Synod on Synodality, is a synodal Church. It recognizes the common and equal dignity derived from baptism. Therefore, the Synodal Church is characterized by communion, co-responsibility, participation, inclusivity, conversion, listening, discernment, encounter and dialogue, and acceptance of vulnerability and incompleteness. Archbishop Mpako concluded that conversion and metanoia are essential paths to becoming a synodal Church.

2 The second presentation reflected on “**Jesus Christ as a Factor of Inclusion or Exclusion in Early Christianity**” and was delivered by Rev. Fr. Professor Paul Decock. He began by stating that the context within which the Church is called to function and serve is marked by a tension between inclusivity and exclusivity with regard to God’s salvific plan. He said that God’s promises of salvation are not restricted to those who physically belong to the Ancestor Abraham but to all who, like Abraham, believe in a higher Ancestor, Christ, the radical source of all life and all creation. He underlined how the promises are made not to all the physical descendants of Abraham, but only to ONE, identified by Apostle Paul as Jesus Christ.

While Abraham's covenant initially implied exclusion, Christ's message offers salvation without distinction (Gal 3:28). Thus, belief in Christ becomes a criterion for inclusion or exclusion (John 8:39; 14:6). The Bible suggests that God's design is to bring all to union with Him (1 Timothy 2:4; 1 Cor 15:27-28). Paul's writings (Rom 9-11) reflect a conviction that inclusivity will ultimately prevail (Rom 11:11-12), emphasizing God's wisdom and ability to restore all. The concept of restoration (Acts 3:19-21) raises questions about salvation for those who have died in sin. Some perspectives suggest that God's mercy extends beyond final judgment. The Second Vatican Council's *Gaudium et Spes* affirms God's will for all people of good will, emphasizing the Holy Spirit's role in offering union with God to everyone, including non-Christians. Similarly, Philo of Alexandria, a contemporary of Paul and a Jew, acknowledges that God will ultimately reach out to all people, including the Jews. Philo posits that the *Logos* is present in all people, as without the *Logos*, we would not even exist. Professor Decock concluded his reflection with a fundamental question: Will God be a stronger seducer than Satan to save all people?

3 The third presentation was offered by Rev. Fr. Sebastian Rossouw and centered on “**Walking Together: A Cognitive Linguistic Analysis of Genesis 22:1-19.**” In this presentation, Fr. Rossouw explored the profound narrative of Abraham and Isaac, known as the Binding of Isaac. Through cognitive linguistics, he examined how the Hebrew term "הלך" (halakh) - "to walk" - illuminates the complex interplay of faith, obedience, and relational dynamics in this pivotal biblical story. He remarked that Genesis 22 is characterized by metaphorical and symbolic language. Abraham and Isaac’s journey is not just a physical movement. Rather, it is a profound metaphor for the journey of faith and obedience, and each of Abraham’s steps symbolizes a commitment to divine will. Therefore, in Fr. Rossouw’s perspective, walking together implies faith and relationship.

Fr. Rossouw concluded by contextualizing his presentation in contemporary South Africa, stressing that we can cultivate deeper empathy and understanding across divides. Just as Abraham and Isaac walked together toward Moriah, we are called to walk alongside one another, acknowledging our differences while striving for the common good. This journey toward mutual understanding forms the foundation for building a more equitable and compassionate society.

4 The fourth presentation was “**Walking Together of *Ekklesia* Communities in and Towards the Kingdom of God: Challenges and Opportunities**”, delivered by Rev. Fr. Dr. Gobbo.

Applying the “See – Judge – Act” method, Dr. Gobbo emphasized the importance of unity in diversity of ecclesial communities. He clarified three key concepts of his presentation, namely *ekklesia*, the Kingdom of God, and synodality. He noted various origins of *ecclesia*, stressing Vatican II’s understanding of the Trinitarian origin of the Church. Furthermore, he explored different stages of ecclesial communities from Jesus to the current state of the Church in Africa through the Constantine era and the Kingdom of Kongo. Dr. Gobbo noted the diversity of ecclesial communities, posing the question: How can all these different ecclesial communities walk together?

On the one hand, he highlighted various challenges and obstacles from walking together, including exclusion, inferiority and superiority complex, origin, orientation, ideological differences, the sacrament of the Eucharist, the understanding of marriage, different formation of ecclesial leaders, economic challenges, corruption, nepotism abuse and moral decadence, tribalism, Church-State relationships, racial segregation, and xenophobia. On the other hand, Dr. Gobbo underlined the opportunities favorable for all various African ecclesial communities to walk together, such as the African youth’s spirit of mingling with others, the African religiosity, and *ubuntu*.

To walk together, Dr. Gobbo suggested focusing on unity, humility, and conversion. He emphasized the Triune God as the icon of the ecclesial community, concluding that walking together presupposes living together and loving together.

5 The fifth presentation was “**Understanding the Prevalence, Causes, and Effects of Alcohol Abuse Among Candidates for Priesthood in the Catholic Church in the 21st Century**”, given by Rev. Fr. Joseph Phiri.

Drawing on psychological, theological, and sociological frameworks, Fr. Phiri’s presentation analysed data from global seminary contexts, highlighting regional disparities, underlying causes such as psychological stress, isolation, and institutional silence, and the subsequent

impacts on formation, ministry readiness, and spiritual integrity. He began by quoting Pope Benedict XVI, stating that ‘We must never forget that the seminarian is a man in the making – not a saint in perfection.’

Looking at the current situation, Fr. Phiri noted that research shows significant rates of alcohol misuse among candidates for the priesthood. Regional studies suggest that alcohol abuse among seminarians’ mirrors or exceeds the general youth male population in some contexts. He underlined that the causes of alcohol abuse in seminary life are enormous and complex, including psychological and emotional stress, inadequate coping mechanisms, peer influence, institutional culture, and spiritual factors.

Regarding the effects of alcohol abuse on seminary formation and future ministry, Fr. Phiri highlighted short and long-term effects, such as physical illnesses, personal injuries and death, impaired driving, blackouts, unintended and unprotected sexual activity, suicide, rape, poor spiritual life, depression, isolation, lack of trust, public scandal, and expulsion to name but a few. To solve the issue of alcohol abuse in seminaries, Fr. Phiri stressed prevention approaches, institutional reforms, and support structures. He concluded that acknowledging and addressing this issue is not a sign of weakness but of pastoral wisdom. To seek help, one needs to accept that one has a problem. Otherwise, you can help someone who does not want help.

6 The sixth presentation was given by Professor Philipp Denis and devoted to **“The South African Lutheran Churches’ Search for Unity”**. Professor Denis explored the theme of walking together in the context of Lutheran churches. He noted that despite shared doctrine, Lutheran churches have faced divisions, particularly along liberal and orthodox lines. Unlike Catholic and Reformed churches, Lutherans lack a clear ecclesiology due to Martin Luther's focus on grace and salvation rather than church structure.

Historically, Professor Denis remarked that missionary societies worked independently, establishing separate churches with little coordination. This led to fragmentation along racial and ethnic lines, exacerbated by apartheid policies. However, unity efforts began in 1912 with joint pastor training, and in the late 1960s, Lutherans produced ministerial materials together and transitioned from ethnic to geographical regions.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (ELCSA) was formed in 1975. The Lutheran World Federation (LWF) assemblies have also prompted unity efforts, as Lutherans feared expulsion due to racial divisions. Despite challenges such as financial issues, disparity in numbers between churches, and lack of institutional unity, collaboration and unity efforts continue. Professor Denis concluded his presentation with a positive view that the South

African Lutheran Churches' journey toward unity demonstrates a cooperative spirit, highlighting the connection between racial issues and unity.

7 The seventh presentation, **“A Critical Contextual Reflection of Bonhoeffer’s Radical Theological Stance”**, was delivered by Dr. Stephen Phiri. In his presentation, Dr. Phiri explored Dietrich Bonhoeffer's transformation into a radical theologian, questioning what drove him to plot against Hitler. He noted that Bonhoeffer's exposure to liberal theology and inspiration from Catholicism influenced his views. In 1930s Germany, the church was state-supported, but Hitler's rise to power led to ideological conflicts. Most churches aligned with Nazi ideology, while others, like the Confessing Church, to which Bonhoeffer belonged, opposed Hitler. Bonhoeffer's radical stance led him to develop the theory of divine mandates, where Church and State are separate institutions with distinct functions. He advocated for church-state separation while recognizing their distinct roles, equating the Church and the state as divine institutions that should not interfere with each other's functions. Dr. Phiri concluded that Bonhoeffer's radical stance to eliminate Hitler was driven by opposition to Nazi ideology.

The first day of the conference closed with a prayer by Rev. Fr. Dr. Gobbo.

SECOND DAY

0 The second and final day of the conference was opened by Br Tendai Gandanzara CMM, first moderator of the day. Before introducing the first speaker, Dr. Tendai Gandanzara invited Fr. Sebastian Rossouw to open the conference with a prayer, beginning with a moment of silence in loving memory of the late Pope Francis.

1 The day properly began with Rev. Sr. Dr. Macdelyn Mosalagae’s heart-moving talk: **“Unprejudiced Walk: How Synodal is the Church in Botswana in the Plight of Faithful with Disabilities?”** She shared from a research project on how the Church has responded with synodality to people with disabilities. The title was inspired by post-Vatican II’s encyclicals, particularly Pope Paul VI’s emphasis on the synodal nature of the Church, providing an essential context for Pope Francis’ Synod on Synodality. It was also inspired by the exodus experience of the people of Israel. Dr. Macdelyn Mosalagae recognized that both Pope Paul VI and Pope Francis advocated for a synodal Church. However, she commended Pope Francis’ synodal emphasis on listening, internal and external dialogue, pacification, and creativity of the Church.

She employed a life narrative and autobiographical approach from congregants with disabilities, and her study highlighted that there remains cases where the faithful with disabilities face prejudice, social stigma and ecclesial exclusion from fellow pilgrims. She underscored a lament from these faithful for a structural change for accommodation and comfort, and a plea for inclusion. Emphasizing that we cannot claim to walk together while leaving others to crawl behind, Dr. Macdelyn Mosalagae concluded that a true synodal Church is conscious of who is forgotten and moves to empower them.

2 The second presentation was delivered by Rev. Fr. Mberikwazvo Chitambo and was titled “The Absurd Condition of the African: Walking Towards a Renewed Sense of Hope.”

Describing the condition of Africans and the state of some African countries as miserable, war-torn, and filled with sickness and poverty, Fr Chitambo posited that Africans should not wallow in that absurd and captive state but should be moved to action and solidarity in such struggles. He remarked that priests and lay people have a shallow understanding of synodality and the Jubilee Year of Hope, and that these may be abstract to our needs and situations altogether. He argued that hope should not be seen as a virtue or something to be achieved after life, but should carry the human capacity of pursuing the good at present. Similarly, in the light of Albert Camus’ philosophy, he argued for Africans to create space to reclaim better conditions for themselves and that institutions like the Church should all the more lead the people in renewing hope for better quality of life among the people and the continent.

3 The third presentation was a “Critical Evaluation of Walking Together: The African Union’s Recommendations to the G20 for Sustainable Development in Africa”, given by Rev. Ntokozo Happiness Ngcongco. In her talk, Rev. Ntokozo first presented the global situation of the world, including climate change, geopolitical instability, economic inequality, and the intensive international debt of African countries. She then advocated for a more inclusive approach in projects for a global effect. Furthermore, she gave a positive and negative evaluation of UA propositions to the upcoming G20 in South Africa. Positively, she recognized in this the idea of fostering the living conditions in Africa, collaboration, unity, solidarity, and shared responsibility. She noted that there is a pressing need for investment in infrastructure, education, health, and mutual support for equitable growth and inclusive motivated solutions. She stressed that the principle of *ubuntu* plays and should play an important role in this process. The negative aspect portrays the lack of engagement at the academic level, lack of historical

background at the diplomatic level and the unbalance between local needs and international demands.

4 The fourth presentation was titled **“There Are Too Many Rivers to Cross: Let Us Walk Together”** and was delivered by Dr. Leslie S. Nthoi.

Dr. Leslie postulated that there are too many rivers to walk, but the biggest river to cross is that of coloniality. Therefore, drawing his inspiration from James Ngugi Wa Thiong’o, he emphasized that we should decolonize the mind in order to decolonize the theology. He stressed that synodality in Africa should take in account or incorporate African cosmogony and cosmology. Based on the reading of the experience of Isaiah with his encounter with the angel of the Lord, he viewed in the Malak-angel, the ancestral spirit that is able to respond to the material and immediate needs of people. Dr. Leslie concluded by demanding that ancestral spirits should be likened to the Holy Spirit.

5 The fifth talk was an improvised yet striking and enriching sharing of Mr. Josphat (alias Joshua) Mwangangi’s personal life experience of addiction to alcohol. While he was initially drinking for fun, Mr. Mwangangi testified, he became hooked. Consequently, for about fifteen years, Mr. Joshua’s life and health deteriorated dramatically. However, through the missionaries known as *Fazenda da Esperança* – translated as Farm of Hope, Mr. Mwangangi’s life was touched by divine grace and changed from worse to better after one year of recovery process. Since then, Mr. Mwangangi has devoted his life to Christ, becoming a missionary ambassador of hope.

6 The sixth talk was titled **“Walking together Catholics and other believers in the Changing Socio-Political situation in South Africa”** and was presented by Rev. Fr. Dr. Chris Grzelak.

The topic portrayed what is known as dialog *ad extra*, focusing on four areas: faith, action, life and love. Dr. Chris Grzelak asserted that dialogue has been possible in the past thanks to the common objective: liberation. He noted that a unique benefit of walking together is mutual interfaith collaboration on economic, political and social situations.

However, in the democratic period, dialogue seems to have been impossible due to factors like mutual prejudices and the absence of the representatives of other religions at the national level. He highlighted that while dialogue between Catholics and Muslims is promising, formal dialogue with the Jews, Hindus and Buddhists is still limited in the context of South Africa.

7 The seventh presentation focused on **“Understanding the Mind’s ‘Dumpsites’ and its Largescale Effect on Communal Life and the Environment”** and was delivered by Dr. Barnabas Simatende.

Dr. Simatende defined the concept of "mind's dumpsites" as the practice of "brain dumping" or brain clearing, which is a technique for clearing the mind by writing down thoughts, worries, or ideas without filtering or organizing them.

He said that while brain dumping can momentarily help relieve stress and gain clarity by freeing up mental space and allowing for self-reflection, its external application can negatively impact communal life and the environment at large, including anxiety, stress, addiction, lack of empathy, decline in community wellbeing, lack of responsibility and apathy towards environmental issues. Consequently, Dr. Simatende urged the participants to cultivate mental hygiene by practicing mindfulness, fostering empathy and compassion, and promoting sustainable practices. He concluded that the journey towards a healthier walking together can only be possible through improved awareness of the external effects of our unconscious mental activities and addressing mental dumpsites.

8 The eighth and last presentation had a thought-provoking title: **“‘Ask the Animals, and They Will Teach You’ (Job 12:7): Biomimicry and Walking Together with Nature to Solve Human Problems”**, delivered by Rev. Fr. Dr. Neil Mitchell. Remarking that we co-exist with millions of other species on Earth, Dr. Mitchell asked: Do we walk together with them? Do we blot other species out of our consciousness as if they don’t exist? Do we participate in their destruction? Dr. Mitchell’s revolutionary presentation can possibly be summed up in the following statement: We don’t always have to care and improve the Earth, but we rather humble ourselves and let God’s Earth care for us.

It is important to note that, in addition to the speakers’ presentations, the conference atmosphere was spiced by interesting questions from participants. However, these questions and their respective responses are not included in this summary owing to the brevity of this report.

Once again, all protocol observed, thank you all for your attentive ears.

Secretaries

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