Dear family, friends, colleagues,

At whatever funeral, there are not really the right words. Everything that could or should be said has probably already often been said, and proved insufficient. It is probably one of our human deficits. Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards, as Kierkegaard knew. Saying goodbye, therefore, is not something that can be rehearsed or learned.

Except from farewells, however, learning and practicing what you learned, was exactly what characterized Stephen. He never got tired of learning, studying, acting upon it, and passing it on to new generations. It was his ruling passion. It made him a renowned, internationally acknowledged scholar. It made him a prolific researcher and writer. It makes that he’ll be very much missed in the arena of scholars on African history, politics and societies. He wasn’t done yet; there was so much more on his wish-list, and there were so many plans still to become concrete.

The Vrije Universiteit and more specifically our Faculty of Social Sciences, was very honored that Stephen was willing to become one of the Desmond Tutu Professors at our university, now some seven years ago. The Desmond Tutu Programme is part of our university’s South Africa Programme, entitled South-Africa-Vrije Universiteit-Strategic Alliances (SAVUSA). The Programme aims to contribute to building a new generation of well-qualified South African academics in various disciplines, through guiding PhD projects, jointly supervised by both Dutch and South African professors.

Like no-one else Stephen understood the enormous symbolic significance of having especially Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu as the name giver to this programme. Desmond Tutu’s role in the anti-apartheid struggle, his historic role in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission after Nelson Mandela became South Africa’s first democratically elected black president in 1994 and his continued commitment and outspokenness on political and social injustices around the world, may serve as an example and inspiration for what our university and academic work probably ultimately try to achieve, a better and more just world. This objective is built, as Desmond Tutu wrote in the foreword to Stephen’s 2010 book Season of rains, on an ‘unwavering hope in the future’. It is a hope despite humanity’s dark sides and shadows of which particularly Stephen was very aware and on which he published widely, including on the ANC and on networks of organized crime across the African continent. That is probably why our hopes for a better future need to be ‘unwavering’.

What I try to say is that Stephen was a scholar who spoke out on issues, on injustice, even if these were somewhat sensitive to particular groups or individuals in society in South Africa or even in The Netherlands, if he felt that his empirical findings urged him to do so. In this sense, we feel that Stephen truly operated in the spirit of emeritus Archbishop Tutu. And we are proud of him for that reason.

Stephen started working in our faculty as a professor by joining the department of Culture, Organization and Management, but during the latter years, he was connected to the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology, as an endowed part-time professor. Only a month ago I had my last conversation with him, on one of his PhD candidates. A bit earlier, we had a chat on all the projects he was supervising. We talked about their states of affairs, the time schedules, the themes – and on when and how the completion of these projects was to come about. Inconceivable and bewildering how such talks, that we both engaged in happily, enthused and full of trust about the future, get interrupted and shattered so suddenly and unpredictably. We can prepare for what we expect to come, for what we
expect to achieve, for what we hope or fear will happen. But we cannot prepare for when our lives to live it, on too short notice, get snatched away from us.

It pictures Stephen that, once he was aware of his time running out, did everything in his power to make sure that pending issues and projects would be taken care of. From my perspective, allow me to say that our Department will do everything possible to assure that for his projects - not in the least PhD projects - that are pending, arrangements will be made. It is one tiny way in which we might honor him.

Let me, finally, say that during the time I had the privilege to know and work with Stephen (and this was confirmed during all conversations I had with colleagues during the last days), I got to know him not only as an extremely competent, dedicated scholar, but also as an amiable, cordial and modest colleague. An acquaintance once told me: the problem with people that are really, really good at their work is that they are nearly always conceited jerks. I will not enter the matter, but I can say that it did not go for Stephen. And although often underrated as a quality for a scholar, it makes a world of difference. Stephen, both scientifically and socially, made that difference. Rest in peace!