
Solidarity and Strength of Catholic Sisters:
A Case Study of the Association of Sisterhoods of Kenya
Sister Agnes Wamuyu Ngure
General Secretary of the Association of Sisterhoods of Kenya, Nairobi

Abstract
The primary purpose of this chapter is to present the most successful story of the solidarity and strength of the Association of Sisterhoods of Kenya (AOSK), a conference of women religious in East Africa. Special attention will be given to the activities and achievements of AOSK in order to illustrate its historical development over a span of fifty years. The impact of Kenya’s political independence and the Second Vatican Council on religious congregations is discussed, as is the underlying motivation for inter-congregational formation centers and the several interventions AOSK has undertaken to assist, form and educate pastoral agents.

Because little has been published on AOSK, most of the content of this chapter is drawn from AOSK archives; collected and documented data is used to highlight the activities, achievements and the challenges of conferences of major superiors. It is hoped that this narrative will illustrate the life and activities of AOSK and the irreplaceable role played by these conferences of religious women in the support not just of sisters but of the Church in all its dimensions. While so doing, this chapter will underline the values of solidarity and prophetic witness, which is a voice of courage.

Keywords: AOSK, Kenya, Catholic sisters, religious life

Introduction
The Association of Sisterhoods of Kenya (AOSK) is an organization of major superiors of over 150 Catholic congregations of women religious representing over 5,000 sisters, of whom over 3,000 are in the Archdiocese of Nairobi. It is the duty of the major superiors to preserve and coordinate Catholic sisters’ pastoral ministries, as well as their social service initiatives and interventions at all levels of society, particularly those for the disadvantaged in Kenya and beyond (AOSK, 2008).

AOSK is an ecclesial organization officially recognized by the Vatican’s Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life. As a Church organization, AOSK works in collaboration with the bishops of the Catholic Church and does not involve itself in any activity or partnership that is contrary to the teachings of the Catholic Church. However, as active citizens, the sisters collaborate with the United Nations and the Kenyan government on social and development priorities and projects as much as possible (AOSK, 2008).

The role of women, notes Bellagamba (1992), must be kept in mind when we discuss ministries in the church. At present all ordained ministers are male, and most official ministries are led by men, and yet, it should be emphasized, the bulk of the work continues to be done by women (Bellagamba, 1992). So often, it takes only one woman to make a difference. If you empower that woman, a sister, with information and training, she can lift up the entire Church
and contribute to the success of her ministry.

Women tend towards solidarity, and theirs is a solidarity that helps one to truly see and find value in the other, and that prompts each person to give the best of herself, which leads to a heightened goodness. Diversity becomes richness. A wealth of many cultures, spiritualities, and charisms, together with an added commitment driven by a common vision and mission, have greatly contributed to making AOSK a leading light and a prophetic witness in the field of evangelization.

Under the leadership of serious consecrated women from different congregations and backgrounds who are driven by a common vision and mission, AOSK has become a symbol of hope, as the following narrative will clearly demonstrate.

The Times and Opportunities of AOSK’s Foundation Years

The Association of Sisterhoods of Kenya was founded in 1962 on the eve of two historical events, namely Kenya’s political independence and the Second Vatican Council. The 1960s were not simple years; these were years of great insurgence in Africa. Seventeen new nations were born in Africa between January and December 1960. Africa, as a whole, had undergone great political change, and this also affected the Church.

Understanding the circumstances, the times, and the situations in which AOSK was founded tells us something about its identity and about the opportunities which roused that founding spirit. The founding dates of AOSK, like those of any other organization, are very important. Tracing AOSK’s historical roots helps us to understand its identity, why it exists, why things are the way they are, and where the future lies.

The Impact of Second Vatican Council on Religious Congregations

AOSK was an anchorage and compass for many religious congregations during the years of rapid changes after Vatican Council II, which called for a new understanding of consecrated life in the Church that would acknowledge and better respond to changing times. The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), in its search for a new way of being for the Church, had initiated a period of great transformation in an already rapidly-developing world. In the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, Gaudium et Spes, Pope Paul VI brought great change in the overall understanding of the Church’s presence in the world. Pope Paul VI states:

To carry out such a task, the Church has always had the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel. Thus, in language intelligible to each generation, she can respond to the perennial questions which men ask about this present life and the life to come, and about the relationship of the one to the other. We must therefore recognize and understand the world in which we live, its explanations, its longings, and its often dramatic characteristics. (Gaudium et Spes, 4)

Religious life had to go through renewal; that is, it had to return to the sources of all Christian life and to the original founding spirit of the institutes, adapting them for the present day (Paul VI, Perfectae Caritatis, 2). There was no alternative but to go back to their founders, study their founding charism, revise their constitutions, revisit their governing structures, re-discern their apostolic presences and choices, study their intellectual formation, and even change their religious habit. Those women religious who lived in cloisters opened their doors for open interactions and reached outside the monastery walls. Names changed, and sisters were no longer separated from the world but instead became involved with the people of God. The outcome of such a great and abrupt change is usually confusion, disillusion and disappointment. There was a great exodus of women from religious congregations. Arbuckle (1996) describes the post-Vatican II era as turmoil, and segments of women religious orders in particular were among
those most affected by Vatican II. Azevedo (1995) refers to the Vatican Council as an evolution, and emphasizes that religious women experienced the most profound changes in concept, focus, expression and operation. This evolution was part of the dynamic transformational process, which recognized the danger of going back to the past and blocking the present and the future. In order to seek support to continue the mission of the congregations, leaders of religious orders and members fostered a spirit of solidarity.

Years earlier, in a 1951 extraordinary meeting of superiors general who had their motherhouses in Rome, Pope Pius XII had encouraged religious congregations to form national councils of religious. The formation of national councils of religious congregations was again given a new impetus towards the end of the Vatican Council, when a dialogue between the Council Fathers and what was then the Sacred Congregation for Religious (SCR) had stressed the need for an international forum for women religious as they began the process of renewal. In this way, the congregations would be renewed not only from within, but also in relation to their mode of being in mission, keeping to the Gospel and their original charisms, and bearing in mind that “our life must be consecrated to the good of the whole Church” (Lumen Gentium, 44).

In this state of rapid change and search for meaning, the Church called on women religious not only to form conferences for mutual support but also to encourage more effective cooperation with the Church. Indeed, forums for women religious such as AOSK could perform many functions:

These can contribute very much to achieve the purpose of each institute; to encourage more effective cooperation for the welfare of the Church; to ensure a more just distribution of ministers of the Gospel in a given area; and finally to conduct affairs of interest to all religious. Suitable coordination and cooperation with episcopal conferences should be established with regard to the exercise of the apostolate. (Perfectae Caritatis, 23)

In his book Consecrated Life in Bantu Africa, Kiaziku (2007) notes that the missionary congregations had to change their understanding of being missionaries. A new era had dawned for the Church. A new understanding of mission and of being a missionary was unfolding. The local Church took a central role in evangelization. The missionaries were to be in mission not because they were sent but because they had been invited by the local Church. Missionaries were at the service of the local Church. There was no difference between the local Church and the Church which sent the missionary.

It is important to stress that the Church was adapting to the new understanding of its existence and purpose in modern society—and so were the religious congregations. Hence solidarity in purpose and mission was of great importance, as congregations tried to study their identities within the Church and in the mission lands. The founding of AOSK was a gift of God’s providence which coincided with this most providential moment in the history of the Church.

Having explored the implications of the Second Vatican Council on the Church and its religious congregations, it is useful to next examine the implications of Kenya’s political independence on the Church and its religious congregations in Kenya.

Implications of Political Independence for Religious Congregations

AOSK was God’s providential gift to religious women in pre- and post-independence Kenya. Whatever affects the world affects the Church in all its expressions. AOSK would prove to be no exception, and its members sought mutual support. The church was largely expatriate, it was wealthy, and it had strong political backing. There was an interesting relationship between the missionaries and the colonialists, one in which mission and colonization were intertwined.

As much as mission and colonization are two distinct issues, they were nevertheless seen as inseparable twins in the mindset of the Kenyan people (Baur, 1994). To conflate the two may seem unfair, but the fact is that missionaries were White and colonial masters were White, and both had mutual gain. While the missionaries were guaranteed protection and financial support, the colonial government benefited from the missionaries’ commitment to education and health services for both the Whites and the locals—and all parties involved would have gone without these benefits otherwise.

The political independence itself was a signal to a missionary Church that was too “colonial” in terms of personnel and financial sustainability (Baur, 1994). Baur highlights the development of the Church in Africa “from missionary dependence to African selfhood”. The juridical autonomy of the local Church was being established hand in hand with the indigenization, or “Kenyanisation”, of the highest positions of leadership. The Catholic Church, like many other churches, sought to have indigenous leadership, and it is important to note that because of the distinctive character of its approach to hierarchy, the Catholic Church would apply for religious congregations for both men and women, who are part and parcel of the church.

Baur expounds further on ‘the end of the missionary era from mission territories to local churches’ and observes that the largest change took place in the years 1968-1973, so that at the 1974 Synod of Bishops on Evangelization in the Modern World, half of the 256 dioceses of Africa were represented by local bishops. In the case of sisters, the African ratio was 50% or more, although the qualified personnel in schools and hospitals remained mostly expatriate.

The colony came to an end when Kenya attained its independence in 1963. Before the colonial era, Kenya was divided along ethnic lines and ruled by ethnic leaders. These were years of great political upheavals. The myths that had held Kenya and the world at large together were being questioned as modernity took many by surprise. Many African nations were becoming autonomous. Kenya and many other countries of Africa sought self-government and freedom from colonial government. Mzee Jomo Kenyatta was elected as the first African president of Kenya with a new constitution under one government.

Many congregations, be they of religious men or religious women, were of missionary origin; a few were locally founded but still under the leadership and mentorship of their founding missionary congregations. The continuous flow of missionaries had assured the Church qualified personnel and guaranteed the sustainability of institutions. With the passing of time, these congregations have been localized, but remain closely linked to their missionary origins (Baur, 1994). To this day, just as the Catholic Church is both local and universal in character, so too are the missionary congregations.

It is important also to note that Roman Catholic missionary outreach was performed by a number of different orders of sisters. According to AOSK data, the first to arrive on the scene were the Daughters of St. Vincent, in 1903. By 1918, the Sisters of Mary Immaculate were founded as an African congregation, and Sister Giulia Wambui was elected the first African Mother Superior in 1946. The Franciscan Sisters of St. Mary were part of the Mill Hill congregation, and started working in western Kenya in 1902 (AOSK, 2012).

Between 1962 and 1972, the few local major superiors started to realize that there was too much dependence on expatriate leadership, and so faced the challenge of indigenizing AOSK leadership. The greatest challenge to AOSK was how to unite and support religious women in an
independent Kenya, amidst changing economic and political forces in a time of great transition. Another challenge for AOSK was how to help local religious congregations to run Church institutions, schools, hospitals, and formation centers; the local religious congregations were few in number, and were not prepared in management, as previously all management functions had been performed by expatriate missionaries. There was real concern for human and material resources, because religious women were leaving their congregations to join the world as a result of the new understanding and changes brought by the Second Vatican Council.

Since then, there has been a growing increase in locally-founded congregations of sisters, who have been a major force in the new face of the Church and its related social services, as there were and are normally more nuns than there are priests. And as the missionary tide gradually changes direction, the locally-founded congregations in Africa, and congregations of religious women in particular, are opening communities outside Africa.

AOSK, like a mother, took courage and embraced its reality, and with the support of a few missionary congregations stepped in to offer mutual help to local religious congregations.

**Religious and Civil Identity and Recognition for AOSK**

It is essential for any organization to develop a constitution that governs it. While this may be a legal and canonical requirement, it can also answer several questions that determine an organization’s identity, vision and mission. A constitution tells the story of why the institution exists, and distinguishes it from its peers. AOSK had grown, and needed to be registered under Kenya’s “Societies Act” of 1968. For this purpose, a constitution or set of statutes had to be submitted to the Office of the Attorney General. It was also obligatory to send the statutes to the Holy See for its approval (AOSK, 2008).

By God’s providence, Father Killian Flynn from the Order of the Friars Minor Capuchin arrived in Kenya from Zambia to be the first Secretary General of the recently-formed Association of Member Episcopal Conferences in Eastern Africa (AMECEA). AOSK took this providential opportunity to request his support. Flynn had been very much involved in the drawing up of a constitution for AMECEA, and he willingly accepted the task of helping to compile statutes for AOSK (AOSK, 2009).

Two delegates were sent to Northern Rhodesia—now known as Zambia—to consult with members of an existing association of sisterhoods and to learn more about their activities. The delegates were Mother Gertrude of the Precious Blood Sisters and Mother Regis of the Franciscan Missionaries for Africa (AOSK, 2009).

As soon as the writing of the statutes was completed, AOSK was registered as a legitimate society in Kenya. The statutes were then presented to the Apostolic Delegate, Monsignor Guido Del Mestri, who forwarded them to Rome for approval in 1969. In 1974, AOSK was registered as an incorporated, non-profit making body.

The ecclesial and civil recognition of AOSK was a great breakthrough, as there now existed a representative body with rights and responsibilities. Today, AOSK has an official voice, space for expression, and a binding constitution, and can contract, sue and be sued. Religious congregations are not obliged to be members, but are encouraged to join. Each member is autonomous.

**United We Stand as a Sign of God’s Presence**

AOSK had a vision and a mission to bring together congregations of women religious. The Church has never ceased its call for missionaries to unite their efforts for the mission. It was clear from the outset that AOSK was a network whose strength and mission lay in the invitation of Jesus that they may be one (John 17:21). “United we stand” became the motto of the Association. At the
celebration of the Golden Jubilee in 2012, this motto was expanded to “united we stand as a sign of God’s presence”; thus, AOSK became a mission and a prophetic sign to a world that is divided. Through mutual collaboration, partnership and networking, each religious congregation is helped to achieve its mission and to extend its outreach. This unity is lived in the Church, with the Church, and for the Church as a sign of the kingdom of God among his people, true signs of Christ in the world.

In his Post-Synod Exhortation on Consecrated Life, *Vita Consecrata*, Pope John Paul II called on the religious to feel with the Church—“sentire cum ecclesia”—and stressed that “[t]he life of communion in fact ‘becomes a sign for all the world and a compelling force that leads people to faith in Christ ... In this way communion leads to mission, and itself becomes mission’; indeed, ‘communion begets communion: in essence it is a communion that is missionary’” (John Paul II, Vita Consecrata, 46).

The call for unity against a background in which missionary presence and activities were divided into zones was indeed a prophetic call. Some areas were predominantly Catholic and others Protestant, depending on who landed in the region first. For the Catholics, missionary activities were organized into large districts determined by the Holy See. This later became a source of contention as missionary groups increased in number and local churches grew. Pope Pius XI concluded *Rerum Ecclesiae* by giving what he termed the most important recommendation of all. He insisted that missionaries “do not possess the mission fields by a peculiar and perpetual right, but that they hold them solely at the discretion and pleasure of the Holy See which has both the duty and the right to see to it that these missions are well and adequately taken care of” (Pius XI, *Rerum Ecclesiae*, 32). He encouraged collaboration in ministry. It would take decades for these boundaries to be broken down in order to allow greater collaboration among different missionary societies.

The strength of the Association of Sisterhoods of Kenya is in the unity of mission, which is expressed through collaboration. This great network of organizations, which until recently maintained strict boundaries between individual congregations’ initiatives and kept the management of small education, healthcare and social service projects compartmentalized, has opened up not only to share its wealth but to learn from others.

The commitment to deeper and wider collaboration among the members is now part of current strategic thinking and planning. Missionary congregations now realize that combining efforts will help strengthen the services offered, and make them more visible and better able to attract new partners to work with in solving global social issues that impact Kenya and other places in Africa. Coming together as members of a united group improves and promotes spiritual and apostolic effectiveness, and addresses issues of concern within the member congregations, the Church and country.

Guided by the Gospel and the teachings of the Catholic Church, AOSK became a telling sign of God’s tangible presence, closeness and warmth to those most in need in our society. Religious women are mothers to the desperate and destitute, a companion to all people of goodwill and a beacon of hope. This unity is itself witness. It is a sign of communion. It is an apostolate and a mission. It is prophetic if directed to the person of Christ. As a united body rooted in its identity as women publicly consecrated to God, AOSK is a powerful message in the globalized world of today. Together the member congregations support each other for spiritual, moral and ministerial assistance and to overcome challenges, all the while striving for authentic and prophetic witness to Gospel values. Solidarity is an apostolic mission for the transformation of the Church and society.
SOLIDARITY AND STRENGTH OF CATHOLIC SISTERS

in Kenya and beyond. It is good to recall that ‘the synod for consecrated life evoked a widespread reaction because it ignored the fact that the primary task of consecrated life is to be prophetic, that is to challenge the Church and society to be true to kingdom values’

(AOSK, Celebrating our Unity, 2014)

Thus, AOSK exists to equip religious women with skills for ministry and leadership through programs, workshops and seminars that encourage partnership of service between men and women within the Church; it also exists to provide a unified voice to religious women in responding to issues related to justice, peace and the integrity of creation. As a network, AOSK seeks to promote the spiritual welfare and development of religious women in Kenya; to foster communication and cooperation among member institutes through meetings and programs, with due regard for their autonomy and different charisms; and to promote collaboration among religious women as they work in collaboration with the Kenya Conference of Catholic Bishops to respond to the needs of the people of Kenya. (SECRETARIAT, 2008)

Underlying Motivations for Inter-congregational Formation

Pooling resources together, the member congregations were able to introduce inter-congregational programs relevant to the needs of the consecrated women in Africa. Inter-congregational formation programs were a tangible sign of solidarity and strength in these challenging years.

In this way, AOSK could support the few young African leaders as they led their congregations and responded to the great need for the formation of future leaders. Determining how they could help local religious congregations to run Church institutions, schools, hospitals, and other ministries became a pastoral challenge, as there were few African sisters trained in the areas of management and leadership.

In the immediate years following political independence, vocations in Kenya continued to gradually increase, with local congregations registering the highest numbers. Meanwhile, the bishops were encouraging missionary congregations to receive new vocations. Such measured growth was a grace that brought with it new challenges to formation, including how to identify genuine vocations and how to sustain them.

The challenges facing religious women in Kenya gave rise to formation programs targeting candidates and young religious. How could this be done, given the levels of education that existed at the time? Indeed, theology was an as-yet-unknown field of specialization for African religious women. The training of catechists became a priority, many of whom were already teaching catechesis in parishes with the basic knowledge they had received in formation.

AOSK not only came together for the initial development but also assisted in the education of formation directors and pastoral agents necessitated by the immediate social situations and pedagogical needs of the African people. This collaboration provided a forum that still exists to date. Joint programs not only reduce formation costs but also allow programs to hire the best available professionals from various disciplines, thus safeguarding the integrity of the Church’s teachings.

Formation is the key responsibility of congregational leadership. The Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life dedicates a whole document to ‘Inter-institute Collaboration for Formation’ (1998). This was a confirmation of the already-existing inter-institutional program that had operated in Kenya since the early 1970s. The Church, aware of the significance of religious formation and the need to offer complete and solid formation, advised institutes of consecrated life to come together in collaboration on issues of
formation, and offered guidelines for doing so.

Religious sisters in different sectors across the world, and in AOSK in particular, played an important role in facilitating positive change in society, the congregation and the Church. Sisters are effective in the field of evangelization and prophetic Christian witness, even in the remotest and most challenging environments in Kenya. They have given much to the ministry but often lack renewal and skills to deal with new challenges which they encounter in their ministry as well as in daily living. It is observed that in spite of all the contributions they have made, little or no attention is given to sisters in terms of training to motivate them and to improve the quality of their services.

Sisters have worked tirelessly and given so much to build the kingdom of God and to promote societal transformation. Some of the sisters encounter stressful situations and difficulties in doing their work, others find themselves in difficult relationships with employers and employees, and others still face their own personal struggles. These hardships lead to serious crises which can involve somatic sicknesses and depression and sometimes even culminate in abandonment of religious life. The current situation prompted a request to AOSK for the initiation of a project which will address sisters’ needs and at the same time assist the sisters in forming social support/supervision groups based on their ministries. Specifically, many of the problems that sisters encounter when addressing new challenges in ministry and in human development are largely attributable to a lack of awareness and training.

Here data from direct observation is supported by the results of a survey that was administered to the sisters, in which respondents stated that many sisters, even those engaged in the same ministry and in the same unit, do not know what others are doing. It was also established that a majority of the sisters lacked the skills and formation needed to cope with new challenges in the society; this could lead to stress and discouragement, and eventually may lead to sisters giving up their calling.

Besides the more traditional forms of service in the fields of education and health, increasing numbers of sisters are involved with social and pastoral work, caring for the most deprived, street children, refugees, AIDS patients and their families, and in many different ways helping and working with women and youth. Consider the recent remarks of Pope Francis:

What would be the Church without sisters if there are no sisters in hospitals, schools, in justice and peace initiatives and in the pastoral field among the families in the remotest areas of our country? At the nexus of every life, sisters are actively present. Presence that is a witness to God’s care and concern for those who suffer. ‘I have seen… heard the cry of my people so I have come to rescue them’ (Ex 3:7-8). In union with God, ‘we hear a plea’. (Pope Francis 2013, 187)

In order to address the new ministerial challenges facing sisters in Kenya today, there is a great need to enhance the capabilities of these sisters. This need for capacity building for the sisters is based on the 2013 survey conducted by the AOSK Secretariat to identify the educational gaps of the sisters. From the congregations who responded to the survey the following were the responses in response to a survey of 150 congregations of active Sisters in Kenya. The survey sought to find out the number of sisters working in different ministries. The questionnaire was sent to all congregations and about 80 responded. The survey revealed that of the respondents, 45% were working in day care/nursery schools, 25% were working in primary schools as teachers and managers, 15% were working in secondary schools, 8% were working in colleges and technical training institutes, 3% were working in universities and 4% were based in isolated apostolate.
It is worth noting that in this survey, the largest number of respondents (45%) indicated that they work in day care and nursery schools, and that the percentages decrease drastically in institutions of higher learning. This is an indicator of the prevalent vocational and professional training of Catholic nuns. Few have had the educational opportunities that would allow them to compete in the career world, make a large salary or earn higher education credentials. Sisters share the fate of so many women in Africa. In those cases where sisters do receive training, they rarely get the opportunity to upgrade their skills. This makes it difficult for the sisters to address the new challenges they encounter in ministry due to a lack of adequate updated information. While responding to the needs of religious women for solid holistic formation and education at all levels, AOSK has with time developed programs that guarantee as much as possible that sisters become more relevant in the society and are a true prophetic voice. Sisters must be equipped with all professional requirements for the services they offer. Providing skills to the members has always been at the heart of the Association of Sisterhoods of Kenya, from its inception to date. To accomplish this, two centers of formation were opened: Tumaini, and Chemchemi ya Uzima. The latter will now be examined in greater detail.

**Chemchemi ya Uzima Institute of Formation**

For Africa and beyond, Chemchemi ya Uzima Institute of Formation is a “spring of life”, which is in fact what the name Chemchemi ya Uzima means. Through this institute AOSK has greatly improved the quality of life for many religious women, their communities and their apostolates.

A nonprofit institute with a rich legacy of over ten year of service, Chemchemi ya Uzima attracts students and lecturers from all over the continent and beyond. It is multicultural and multi-congregational in nature, which provides not only a unique space for exposure and a growing appreciation of unity in diversity, but also a unique opportunity for prophetic witness. Since its foundation, the institute seeks to respond to the needs of religious women for solid holistic formation and education at all levels for authentic witness, providing catechesis training and developing Christian leadership skills among youth and women.

In time, the Institute of Catechetical and Pastoral Ministry advanced to offer certificates, diplomas and now a degree program through the Catholic University of Eastern Africa. A nine-month formation program for formators was created, and a psycho-spiritual renewal program, the sabbatical program inspired by the St Anselm Sabbatical Program in Kent, Great Britain, also gained shape.

A close analysis on the number of students enrolled each year for the three programs indicates that 450 students participated in various programs at the center between 2006 and 2012, with the St. Anselm Sabbatical Program recording the highest numbers, followed by ongoing formation for formators (AOSK, Annual Report, 2013). Intake is limited and is based on the availability of space and personnel. The training of catechists is less competitive, and this is worrying. AOSK, aware that catechists are the teachers of faith, has begun a degree program in theology with a specialization in pastoral ministry in order to qualify catechists as teachers who can teach religion in schools while serving in parishes. This would guarantee not only credentials but the possibility of earning a living.

Other statistics gathered at Chemchemi ya Uzima indicate that of the 450 students registered between 2006 and 2013, 67% were Kenyans and 33% were from other countries and mainly from Africa. Among non-Kenyans, Tanzania, Malawi, Nigeria and Uganda registered the highest numbers annually (AOSK, Annual Report, 2013).

**Congregational Sustainability**
Congregational sustainability has multiple facets, but formation of members is indispensable to the sustainability of an institution and to subsequent formation for leadership teams. AOSK invests in leadership training with the conviction that a congregation is defined mostly by its leadership.

A case study done by Wakahi and Salvaterra (2012) on “Sustainable Leadership: Lessons and Implications of a Leadership Development Program for Women Religious in Africa” made the following observations:

Findings revealed that leadership development promoted sustainable leadership initiatives, dissemination of skills through mentoring and promulgation of development projects. The study concludes that leadership development is a viable strategy in encouraging women in Eastern Africa to develop relevant leadership competencies. (p. 162)

Among the many milestones in the capacity-building interventions is the leadership and facilitation of the General Chapters. Canon Law 578 and 631.1 clearly indicate that the function of a General Chapter in the life of a congregation is “to protect the patrimony of the institute…and to foster appropriate renewal in accord with the patrimony. It also elects the supreme Moderator, deals with matters of great importance, and issues norms which all are bound to obey.” The General Chapter has supreme authority over the life of the religious congregation.

Glóir, an agency sponsored by the Mercy Sisters and Holy Union Sisters and devoted to providing education and training in Leadership and group work, who collaborated with AOSK has developed a training guide, “General Chapters: A Guide for Facilitators, Planners and Participants” and is now locally available. AOSK has a team of Kenyan sisters who carry on the program.

The training team for leadership has on various occasions expressed their satisfaction with the outcomes of leadership workshops. AOSK utilizes a “train the trainer” strategy, in which those who are trained in turn train others and so form new leaders. The trainees in this program mentor others sisters, and have become effective ministers of change in their own communities and in the society they serve.

Voices of Encouragement from Participants of Various Leadership Programs

- Since the leadership workshop, I have become humble and respectful of other people’s opinions. I have been able to accommodate other people’s ideas regardless of their diversity. Today they have been able to accommodate each other positively in their sharing of ideas and [there has been] active listening and positive participation contrary to their behaviour and character before. Previously, it was [as if it were] one person’s responsibility to sell the idea and implement it…I have become more effective in the coordination of the AOSK District unit and meetings are always lively, [I] am more creative and confident while listening and collecting feedback from the members.

- I was privileged to attend the general chapter facilitation just before our Chapter. I was already introduced to the dynamics of the Chapter [and] its objectives and found myself contributing more even to others who had been on other general chapters. I was more responsible and resourceful. I had a hint of the canonical requirements of the same…As a superior, my approach to the community sessions and guidance of the junior sisters in my community has greatly changed. I have developed skills on both facilitation and collecting of feedback positively… [I] am glad to articulate and confirm that there exist a relation between my faith and how I lead. My image of God not only influences my perception of events, but also my leadership styles. I can now see my sisters and the
people I serve with another eye and heart…I had a problem on how to facilitate meetings. I no longer do it alone but involve my sisters which has become not only enjoyable but richer and more dynamic… I save lots of energy, am less anxious and actually enjoy it. I have been involved in presentations and workshops, and have been imparting training. I polished up my communication skills and this has helped me to help me stand up and put forward my views in front of a group of people. I like it.

- This is the best gift I received…I am very confident and assertive in whatever I do. I have been able to help my communities to explore and [understand] their problems, educating them, giving them confidence and being able to solve their problems. The training section on community conflicts and seeking resolution was great. We have been sending our community leaders to this workshop as part of their formation…As a head teacher I have become more efficient in my leadership styles, more creative…
- As a formatter I have gained further skills in facilitation in the formation program. I used to be the only source of information and knowledge and now my novices have become participants, thanks into the formation program.

If sisters are well prepared, they can perform better in their ministries and with less stress. Leadership teams need more training working as teams and building networks. Sisters also need to be aware of a sustainability plan. A fully developed curriculum/trainer’s guide is now available and ready for future training sessions, thanks to the Glór team.

**Catholic Sisters Working for Justice**

Where do religious women stand in relationship to the issues of justice and peace? Religious women are citizens of this present life, despite the fact that they are called and set apart, and their lives are a sign of the life to come—the eschatological dimension of the consecrated life. Working for justice is a mission of solidarity with the victims of unjust structures.

It is not enough to offer bread to the hungry. AOSK has learnt to ask why there is no bread. The AOSK Justice and Peace Office, which has been in existence since 1989, has been in the forefront in matters of justice and peace issues. It continues to advocate for good governance and human rights, acting as a neutral partner where all social and development issues within its coverage area are addressed without fear or favor.

Through its Justice and Peace Commission, AOSK responds to social and political challenges while upholding human dignity, proclaiming human rights, and providing basic legal and civil education through AOSK networks. The role of the AOSK Justice and Peace Commission is to respond to the demands of justice and charity, addressing social injustices and other situations while guided by the social teachings of the Catholic Church. It aims at educating people and encouraging them to take responsible actions while fostering progress in needy locations and nurturing social justice.

The main objective of this commission is to challenge and change unjust practices, systems and structures, especially those related to women, the marginalization of the poor and the destruction of the environment, by upholding human rights and freedoms and by encouraging the personal and social responsibility of all. It seeks to enhance citizens’ participation in governance processes aimed at promoting human rights accountability and responsiveness of state and non-state actors; advocates to promote recognition of women’s dignity and rights and the development of their capacity to engage in decision-making processes and activities as equal partners with men; and cultivates to promote the understanding and care of the environment and the need to respect, conserve and share our basic resource as a direct intervention against climate change.
SOLIDARITY AND STRENGTH OF CATHOLIC SISTERS

change and movement towards inter-ethnic and inter-community peaceful living.

It is worth noting that in celebrating the Decade of the African Woman and Women’s History Month, the Bureau of African Affairs and the Secretary’s Office of Global Women’s Issues held a panel discussion in 2011 titled “Women Taking Charge in Africa: Women’s Roles in Brokering Peace, Overcoming Injustices, and as Drivers of Development and Economic Growth”. Such a discussion also underlines the fact that religious women are taking the lead in Kenya for justice and peace, and their voices need to be heard.

Solidarity Beyond the Kenyan Borders

A network must grow and reach out, generating life among its neighbors. Thanks to the historical stability and geographical position of the country, AOSK has contributed significantly in the formation and development of the regional conferences, and has been enriched by the encounter.

AOSK has also been very active in the study conferences organized for the Association of Consecrated Women from Eastern and Central Africa (ACWECA; known before 2002 as the Sisterhoods of Eastern Africa, or SEASC). These study conferences gather together representatives from the sisterhoods of all the AMECEA countries once every two or three years to study important issues and to share mutual concerns. Five of the ten study conferences were held in Kenya.

A great historical milestone is that AOSK has helped with the organization of a Meeting of the UISG (International Union of Superiors General (UISG), which met in Nairobi in November 2002, as well as a first Continental Conference for Religious, which met in Nairobi in July 2003, bringing together religious men and women from the entire continent of Africa. The theme of the assembly, “Women Disciples Together Bringing to Birth a Culture of Peace,” spread a call to solidarity throughout the religious orders of Kenya. Their declaration was “the dream of one woman alone might remain utopian; the dream of many women together becomes prophecy; the dream shared within and among constellations becomes a reality” (UISG, 2002).

Other international forums in which AOSK has participated include the Eucharistic Congress and the UN Decade for Women Conference, both held in Nairobi in 1985, and more recently two synods: the Synod for Africa in 1994, and the Synod on Consecrated Life in 1995.

I dream of a time when there will be an increased mutual exchange between religious congregations in Africa and those in Europe; where religious life will be a source of inspiration for establishing concrete international relations given our multicultural and multiracial structures; where the exchange of personnel will favor growth and rejuvenation, attracting many young people to religious life.

Sisters need partners who share a common vision with us, partners who have the technical knowhow and organizational capacities the sisters may lack. Reaching out to the corporate world, individuals and foundations while preserving our vision, mission and, above all, our charisms, is not a choice. Sisters must pull their efforts together in the various related fields of ministry.

Challenges and Opportunities

Living the vision is not an easy adventure in the ever-changing context of contemporary Kenyan society. “What would the Church be like without sisters?”, Pope Francis once asked. Yet this honor is embedded, as St. Paul would explain, in earthen vessels (Cf.2 Corinthians 4:7).

It is obvious that, as Fiand notes in her book Living the Vision, we live today in a globally interconnected world in which biological, psychological, social and environmental phenomena are all interdependent. (Fiand, 1990). That Catholic sisters live and serve in the
globalized world of today is not a question but a reality. We are in the world, for the world and yet with an eschatological mission, pointing to a reality beyond this present life.

We need to hold firmly to Pope Francis’ pastoral advice for the missionary disciple amid crises of communal commitment: we must adapt an approach of a missionary disciple, nourished by the light and strength of the Holy Spirit, with an “ever watchful scrutiny of the signs of the times” in order to “distinguish clearly what might be a fruit of the kingdom from what runs counter to God’s plan”, and we must apply critical thinking in all our undertakings. (Francis, 2013). Sustainability is a thorny issue for many congregations, and at times balancing ministry, economic profit and offering services to the poorest becomes a challenge. Maintaining balance in order to effectively serve the poor while living a life that is simple and comfortable is not easy in a culture that is materialistic and where consumerism is becoming a norm.

Religious women cannot afford to remain alienated from this age of technological explosion. Computer literacy and social media-related training for religious women are a help and not a hindrance to a well-lived spiritual life and apostolic witness. There is a great wealth of information available through the internet for both personal formation and career development. Additionally, media must be viewed as a great opportunity and a rich field for evangelization.

Religious women are a powerhouse that can bring change; they have an untapped potential that needs liberation to make a greater impact on society. Sisters need formation for the mission and professional preparation in today’s world, which requires credentials. Institutional sustainability and financial security are central concerns. They need to develop skills in entrepreneurship for economic empowerment and governance to sustain their apostolate. Their services are trusted, and their commitment to bringing relief to those suffering—in spite of limited resources—has no parallel.

I dream of a time when all congregations will come together in advocacy and influence the policymakers in areas of health, education, pastoral care, justice and peace, and media and communication. I dream of a time when all religious women will be the voice of the voiceless by virtue of their presence at the nexus of all human events. Networking still remains a unique opportunity and strength for the consecrated women in Kenya and in the world. Jesus’ call for unity is still valid, “that all may know that you sent me” (Cf. John 17:21).

I dream of a time when the religious women will make their presence felt in all issues regarding women and children, and be present in all national and international gatherings. I dream of a time when governments will recognize the work and service done by sisters and come to their aid.

Nevertheless, hours spent in prayer are a must, a part and parcel of our mission. A deep relationship with God through his world and Eucharistic Celebration, and a community life well lived are both necessary for inner life, without which life is empty and has nothing to offer and one risks losing prophetic witness. So we encourage each other to deepen our roots in our consecration and faith through formation. Pastoral agents too need psychosocial and psychospiritual support, like all care givers. Like all human beings, if adequate support is not available sisters can become disillusioned, depressed, and experience burnout, and so need care. Hence a need to create spaces and centers where sisters can find help. They need retreats, rest, and upgrading.

Conclusion

Sisters have made a remarkable contribution to the Catholic Church and to society in all fields, including education, health, and community development projects. AOSK, guided by the social teachings of the Church, has a long history of a vibrant Justice and Peace Commission,
which serves as a concrete means of evangelization. Yet most of the sisters’ work is done silently, and they do not seek attention for their many services to rich and poor alike. This chapter has tried to expose the sacred story of the Association of Sisterhoods of Kenya.

Solidarity is the strength to which AOSK members can testify boldly. Our joy is in what we have been able to do together; we celebrate what we have become in the last fifty years, and we look forward to greater collaboration and networking for the glory of God.

Appreciations

Partners are God-given. Sisters need partners who share their vision, partners who have more technical knowhow and organizational capacities. AOSK has earned great esteem and appreciates all those who have contributed and will contribute to creating structures where sisters can learn skills for the mission.

The African Sisters Education Collaborative (ASEC), which administers the Sisters Leadership Development Initiative (SLDI) and Higher Education for Sisters in Africa (HESA), has done AOSK honor in its mission to equip sisters with knowledge and skills, as has the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation’s Conrad N. Hilton Fund for Sisters, which funds ASEC’s initiatives. I dedicate this chapter to the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, ASEC, and AOSK for being supportive in my work as General Secretary. I thank my colleagues in the team at Catholic University of Eastern Africa (CUEA) who are involved in this publication, Voices of Courage. I appreciate Br. David P. Mahoney, Executive Secretary of Religious Superiors Conference of Kenya, and Professor Peter Gichure of CUEA for editing and proofreading my chapter. Thanks to you, this story is now available to the global public.

References

SOLIDARITY AND STRENGTH OF CATHOLIC SISTERS


