

CONTRIBUTIONS OF CATHOLIC SISTERS IN AFRICA AS VIRTUOUS LEADERS

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Africa is a vast continent, containing diverse countries of varying cultures, needs, and individuals. Countries in sub-Saharan Africa face challenges including war, terrorism, refugees, starvation, unemployment, lack of clean water, and a high prevalence of HIV/AIDS and malaria (Cook, Arieff, Blanchard, Williams, & Husted, 2017). Social science research over the last few decades has provided compelling evidence for the positive correlation between education attainment and health and well-being. Mirowsky and Ross (2005) summarizes the impact of education as follows, “education gives people the resources to control and shape their own lives in a way that protects and fosters health” (p. 212).

Some researchers argue that wealth level is the primary mediator of health and well-being; however, recent research in sub-Saharan African populations suggests that education itself

(independent of wealth) may be an important mediator of health (Mondon & Smits, 2013). Widespread lack of educational access in the region is significant and education is vital to reducing many of the continent’s current challenges, such as, poverty (Awan, Malik, Sarwar, & Waqas, 2011). One of the primary challenges faced in sub-Saharan Africa is access to quality education (Cook et al., 2017).

Education is typically associated with learning in a school setting; however, education can and often does span across a multitude of settings outside of the traditional instructor-pupil construct. Examples of nontraditional education may include: informal community education classes, formal and informal social exchange and mentorship between individuals, and everyday life experiences, all of which provide rich educational opportunities (Van Noy, James, & Bedley, 2016). Regardless of

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location, education is a learning experience that fosters the accumulation and application of knowledge, and holds the power for monumental positive change in people's lives by way of increasing personal agency (Mirowsky & Ross, 2005).

Many individuals in sub-Saharan Africa are not afforded the same educational opportunities; many factors contribute to this unfortunate reality and chief among them is limited access, funding and availability of education (UNESCO, 2018). Many sub-Saharan African countries chronically suffer from somewhat unstable economies and experience political conflicts and droughts which can substantially worsen the educational crisis (Habitat for Humanity, 2018). Leadership plays an important role in the development of a region/ country including—social welfare, cultural emancipation, economic prosperity, and political stability (Kabashiki, 2014). According to a study conducted by Kabashiki, effective leadership in sub-Saharan Africa is at an extreme low. The study found tension between political leadership and religious and social leadership, and indicated a harmonious relation between religious and social leadership. The aforementioned study made a strong case for Africa requiring a new type of ethical and moral leader (Kabashiki, 2014).

This paper provides an overview of virtue development in the training of Catholic Sisters in Africa and showcases how virtue attainment positions them to be exceptional leaders that promote advances in the state of education in Africa. Additionally, the authors briefly discuss the role of the African Sisters Education Collaborative (ASEC), an international non-profit organization, in the strengthening of this population's leadership abilities. Three success stories are presented here which demonstrate how the education-related work of Catholic Sisters in Africa across traditional and nontraditional settings, is catalyzing positive change in communities and contributing to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Africa.

CATHOLIC SISTERS IN AFRICA

The Catholic Sisters in Africa work closely with disadvantaged and marginalized groups facing societal challenges that exist in Africa. They are an integral part of the community as they address the gaps and meet the needs that are not being addressed by other leaders (Wakahiu, Gichure, & Njageh, 2015). Before delving into the various leadership styles adapted by Catholic Sisters, a discussion of their commitment to virtues and process of formation is warranted.

Virtues

Commitment to each of the virtues of the Catholic Church is central to the life of sisters as the final vows they make require them to bind themselves to the Catholic Church, as well as to their distinct religious order, or congregation (Catholic Online, 2018). Catholic Sisters exemplify the cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, temperance (self-control) and fortitude (courage) and the theological virtues of poverty, chastity and obedience (Catholic Church, 1993). Havard (2007) provides a holistic definition of the virtues, stating that they are “qualities of the mind, the will, and the heart that instill strength of character and stability of personality ... that are acquired through repetition” (p. xvi).

Catholic Sisters' devotion to the cardinal virtues is evident in their ministries and specific religious orders. Sisters make vows unique to their religious orders which are determined by their orders' purpose. In turn, the order's purpose informs the types of ministries members of the order carry out. An example of this is seen among the Sisters of Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary (Hamilton, 2016), who dedicate themselves to the provision of education.

Commitment to the cardinal virtues of prudence and justice, in particular, is evident among sisters dedicated to education as they employ reason, strive to achieve the “true good” and respect the rights of all individuals

(Catholic Church, 1993). The virtue of fortitude is also apparent across the varied ministries and orders of Sisters, whose work is often dedicated to the service of marginalized populations. Catholic Sisters in Africa often persevere through difficult, even hazardous, circumstances (e.g., many Sisters are carrying out their ministries in war-torn South Sudan). The virtue of temperance is also evident as Sisters prioritize the needs of others above their own. Their commitment to the theological virtues of poverty, chastity and obedience serves as the foundation that allows Catholic Sisters in Africa to devote themselves entirely to the Catholic Church and the ministries they carry out, and requires that they conduct themselves as virtuous leaders of the communities they serve (Catholic Church, 1993). With consideration to the assertion of Johnson and Hackman (2018) that “virtues are more ‘caught than taught,’” (p. 378) it is reasonable to presume that Sisters who work as educators have an immense impact on their students, and in turn their communities, as both teachers and leaders who serve as exemplars of virtuous character.

Process of Formation

Evans (2016) explains that the process by which Catholic Sisters commit themselves to the Catholic Church and the order they choose is called formation. The process of formation consists of four stages: candidacy or postulancy, novitiate, temporary vows and perpetual vows, and may continue over a 10-year or longer period. Prior to formally entering the religious community, a woman is considered a candidate or postulant while she gets to know the community members. This stage of candidacy/postulancy may take anywhere from 6 months to several years, toward the end of which the woman will live within the community. Following candidacy/postulancy, a woman enters the novitiate stage, where she is considered a “novice” and referred to as a Sister. The canonical novitiate is a 1-year period devoted to prayer, exploring the meaning of

vows, experiencing religious life and gaining an understanding of the charism, or “unique spirit/character” of the community. When the stage of candidacy/postulancy concludes, novices profess temporary vows (also known as first vows), which are canonically binding for a given length of time, typically lasting for a period between 1 and 3 years. During this period, Sisters engage themselves in the community and ministry. Perpetual vows (also called final vows), are professed 3 to 9 years after temporary vows are professed, depending on the customs of the individual community (Evans, 2016). In addition to prioritization of virtue development and inner growth, the framework of formation prepares Women Religious to be leaders in their ministries. Fiedler (2014) describes this quality as selfless service to others.

Leadership

There are several theories of leadership, however, this paper will focus on two: virtuous and servant leadership, as exemplified by Catholic Sisters. Sisters serve their communities and act as effective leaders in the fields of healthcare, social work and education. Catholic Sisters serving in various fields in Africa employ the theories of leadership described below to varying extents. Servant leadership has also informed the design and implementation of leadership programs developed by ASEC which provide Catholic Sisters with training that enhances their practical skill sets and ability to serve as mentors (Wakahiu & Salvaterra, 2012).

Virtuous Leadership. According to Wang and Hackett (2016), virtues regarding leadership behaviors have primarily been centered within ethics literature, specifically under the umbrella of virtue ethics. The constructs of virtues and ethics have only recently been interwoven within leadership research (Wang & Hackett, 2016). Some of the research surrounding virtuous leadership encompasses aspects such as justice, honesty, and morality (Pearce, Waldman, & Csikszentmihalyi, 2006;

Kilburg, 2012). Brown and Treviño (2006) and Yukl (2010) also state that ethical leadership encompasses much of the same, while Kanungo and Mendonca (1998) make the distinction that it also involves abstaining from vices.

Havard (2007) proposes that commitment to virtue development is a requirement of authentic leadership as virtuous living promotes trust from others and increases one's capacity to act. These nuances suggest that virtuous and ethical leadership are similar and that virtuous leadership includes a sense of justice, honesty, and morality that is not tempted by corruption.

Servant Leadership. Greenleaf (1970) coined the terms “servant leader” and “servant leadership,” describing a servant leader as an individual with a natural or innate motivation to serve the needs of others first, followed by a choice to lead them. The “desire to serve” was identified as an essential characteristic of a servant leader (Keith, 2018) in addition to attributes which allow one to listen and understand, withdraw and reorient themselves, practice acceptance and provide empathy, use foresight, awareness and perception, persuasion, and are able to conceptualize, self-heal and build communities (Greenleaf, 1970).

The processes of formation and virtue development of sisters support the enhancement of effective leadership skills which are utilized in service to the community. Catholic Sisters are prime examples of servant leaders, displaying all of the characteristics described by Greenleaf (1970). These qualities make it possible for Sisters to develop trusting relationships with those they serve and deeply impact social change.

ASEC

Catholic Sisters' commitment to virtue development and service is innate to their calling, which has translated into Sisters serving virtuously across many domains, often despite their lack of access to professional development and

training. Several organizations have become aware of the knowledge and skill gaps that African Sisters face and have begun to invest in this population's education (Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, 2018). Access to education and training is essential for this group as it provides tools that allow them to work more effectively and create meaningful systemic change in the communities they serve. The ASEC offers unique programs for sisters throughout 10 countries in sub-Saharan Africa, for example: the Sisters Leadership Development Initiative (SLDI) program and the Higher Education for Sisters in Africa (HESA) program. SLDI, a nontraditional program, aims to enhance self-confidence, practical skills, mentorship and collaborative abilities, and empowers sisters as leaders and agents of change (ASEC, 2018b). In partnership with 23 colleges and universities, the HESA program facilitates access to higher education (diplomas, undergraduate and graduate level degrees) in various disciplines including: education, leadership, nursing, finances, and technology for sisters (ASEC, 2018c).

ASEC utilizes a grassroots approach to human development by providing Catholic Sisters with training and education necessary to maximize their impact on social change. ASEC's programs offer sisters throughout Africa the opportunity to develop their leadership skills, bridging the gap between their high motivation for social change (grounded in their commitment to living the virtues) and their ability to catalyze and sustain it.

SDGS

With their innate commitment to service, their virtues, and the support offered by ASEC, Sisters engage in projects that endeavor to improve the well-being of individuals within their communities. Many of those projects contribute to the SDGs developed by the United Nations to end global poverty and fight injustices by 2030 (United Nations, 2018b). A complete list of SDGs can be found in Figure 1.



Source: United Nations (2018a).

FIGURE 1
Sustainable Development Goals.

According to a recent ASEC evaluation report (2018a), Catholic Sisters in Africa who graduated from the SLDI training program are contributing to many of the SDGs. Utilizing the grant-writing and fundraising skills learned through SLDI, Sisters initiate and sustain human and social development projects. Of these funded projects, 92% (N = 313) are contributing to more than one SDG. The most common SDGs addressed by these African sisters' projects are "quality education" (56.9%), "good health and well-being" (42.5%), "no poverty" (41.2%), "gender equality" (29.7%), "zero hunger" (29.7%), "clean water and sanitation" (20.8%), "good jobs and economic growth" (20.1%), "peace and justice" (16.3%), "reduced inequalities" (14.4%), and "responsible consumption" (8.6%). Additionally, a few Sisters have also reported working on SDGs for partnerships, climate action, clean energy, life on land & below water and industry, innovation & infrastructure (ASEC, 2018a).

The success stories presented below provide examples of Sisters working to provide education to others, in both formal and informal settings, which bring these abstract concepts to life and showcase the powerful

leadership potential of Catholic Sisters in Africa. These success stories demonstrate how Catholic Sisters in Africa are working as virtuous leaders and contributing to the SDGs, and highlight the immense impact their work has on individuals and communities they serve.

SUCCESS STORIES

Providing Safety and Shelter to "Street Boys" Through Medical Care, Agriculture, and Education

The first case for discussion involves Sr. Felistas Jematia Chesire, a graduate of ASEC's SLDI program (finance track), and the HESA program from which she earned a bachelor's of commerce (accounting) degree from the Catholic University of Eastern Africa. She is presently pursuing her masters of finance at the Catholic University of Eastern Africa through HESA. With the skills she obtained through her education with ASEC, and application of her virtuous and servant leadership style, Sr. Felistas is able to work as the Financial Administrator of the Kwetu

Home for Street Boys and serve in this capacity for other congregational projects as well. The Kwetu home provides shelter to boys who formerly resided in slums throughout Kenya, including Nairobi, Mukuru, Kibera, Githurai, and Ruai. Throughout her responsibilities described below, she demonstrates qualities of virtuous leadership including valuing justice, honesty, morality, and she is trusted by others, and has an increased capacity for action (ASEC, 2018a).

One of her responsibilities as Financial Administrator is to mobilize local resources in the form of donations. Though the donations have been helpful, the Kwetu Home is primarily sustained through income generated by three on-site businesses overseen by Sr. Felistas. These businesses include a dispensary, an agricultural project, and a school. The dispensary is a successful income-generating business and has gained a reputation as one of the best medical treatment centers in the area in the span of only 2 years. The dispensary employs a physician and chemist and serves an average of 530 patients per month. Due to its success, Sr. Felistas and other African Sisters in her ministry plan to expand the program. The agricultural project serves as additional source of income for the Kwetu Home and provides sustenance in the forms of generated income and food. The congregation employs five full-time employees, and three to four daily workers, which has helped to reduce unemployment in the surrounding areas and contributes to the local economy. Additionally, some of the boys residing at the Kwetu Home also work on the farm and learn related skills as a means of empowerment. The compound is also sustained by the income from a school, currently serving 246 students, which was founded in 2014. Due to the success of the school, a computer lab was added and plans to construct an additional wing for the housing of students is underway which will aid in the reduction of attrition rates. These advances provide formal, quality education opportunities to the surrounding community and showcase Sr. Felistas' ability to utilize virtuous

leadership skills in her management and provision of informal education as a means to produce positive outcomes within the compound, the individuals who reside there, and in the surrounding community.

Sr. Felistas noted that the skills she gained through SLDI provided her with the necessary tools to sustain these projects. She also noted that her decision to operate each of the businesses as distinct financial entities was rooted in the knowledge she acquired through her bachelor's degree in Commerce. The division among businesses has allowed her to evaluate the successes and challenges of each business individually, thus maximizing their effectiveness. Sr. Felistas noted that she "didn't even value [her]self" prior to pursuing higher education and now identifies as someone who is "calm, competent, and able to do something" (ASEC, 2018a, p. 39). Sr. Felistas' education provided her with increased self-confidence and the practical skills to live out her commitment to the virtues. This success story evidences Sr. Felistas' prudent management of finances and the establishment of this unique microsystem ("the compound") within her community, which address the need for increased availability of education, healthcare, housing, and access to healthy food.

The various ministries on the compound impact many SDGs including: quality education, no hunger, good health, reduced inequalities, and no poverty. The success story described above demonstrates how education can lead to a ripple effect, where education and any other support service have positive effects not only on the individuals' lives, but on the lives of others within the community and surrounding area. Through her commitment to virtuous leadership, Sr. Felistas educates others in traditional and nontraditional ways, and works to meet holistic needs including employment, access to healthy food, and access to quality healthcare of her community. She attempts to create justice by sheltering and providing education for those who may not otherwise have them, and is inspired to act and continue programs that may help her continue

in the opportunity to help these boys. Sr. Felistas is an exemplary leader, and demonstrates qualities of both a virtuous and servant leader in her commitment to virtues discussed throughout this article, and in her inspiration to others to achieve positive and moral outcomes, and growing as a leader in the process.

Efforts of a Catholic Sister to Influence Positive Change in Her Community: Offering a Second Chance to Prison Inmates in Cameroon

Victim Offender Prison Care Support (VOPS) is a Catholic social organization in Cameroon, whose mission is to reconcile and bring closure to all those affected by crime including victims, offenders and the community (VOPS, 2018a). VOPS offers services to assist digitalizing the prison registry, educate various stakeholders on the respect and rights of inmates, and train stakeholders (penitentiary staff, judicial staff and pastoral workers) about their role in inmate rehabilitation. VOPS also organizes an annual training for the community on restorative justice in order to seek alternatives to manage crime (VOPS, 2018b).

Utilizing a holistic approach with a focus on supporting the successful reintegration of inmates into society, VOPS offers a variety of services for inmates, including: education (classes to obtain lower secondary certificate and English literacy), free legal assistance, bio-psycho-social-spiritual services (healthcare, counseling and psychological, supplementary food, spiritual guidance, moral assistance), and vocational training such as bread making, craftworks, and agriculture work (Ngwemetoh, 2018).

Sister (Sr.) Gwendoline Bisijang, a member of the congregation, The Sisters of St. Therese, and alumna of the SLDI program (finance track), works as a coordinator for the Victim Offender Prison Care Support organization. In order to meet the diverse needs of inmates, Sr. Gwendoline has successfully written and acquired grants and donations approximating \$429,550 with the monies received stratified

as follows: healthcare and medications (\$27,064), legal assistance and documentation of inmates across four individual prisons (\$246,172), and vocational training and empowerment (\$156,319) (ASEC, 2018a). Sr. Gwendoline cites the finance training and grant-writing skills she received through the SLDI program at ASEC as a prominent contributor in her ability to raise funds which have allowed her to effectively meet the needs of inmates (Ngwemetoh, 2018).

Rooted in the commitment of virtuous living that is required to be a professed member of the religious in the Catholic Church, Sr. Gwendoline contributes greatly to the fields of education and human development. Through the informal and formal training/education of currently and formerly incarcerated individuals, Sr. Gwendoline is addressing the educational challenges faced in Cameroon. The prison population is especially vulnerable, as it becomes exponentially more difficult for those with a record of incarceration to receive an education and obtain employment (Looney & Turner, 2018). In addition to her ministry helping to meet severely lacking educational needs, she also collaborates with multiple entities (e.g., the government) to coordinate the provision of the essential services that VOPS provides; the end result of which includes community crime reduction, increased community health, the possibility of upward social mobility and holistic health for marginalized individuals.

Sr. Gwendoline dutifully attends to the many needs of thousands of inmates and former inmates despite her initial intentions of serving in a healthcare setting (Ngwemetoh, 2018). Her commitment to fulfilling this role to the best of her ability is a testament to her fortitude and keen sense that justice, a key aspect of virtuous leadership identified by Pearce et al. (2006) and Kilburg (2012), requires the provision of a second chance. Sr. Gwendoline is quoted stating “I wish to dedicate my life to working for justice and helping young people make good use of opportunities around them” (ASEC, 2018a, p. 53). With lim-

ited professional training, she effectively manages a team of 50 employees to provide this much needed service to the community as well as neighboring areas (ASEC, 2018a). Working collaboratively with the Church and the government, Sr. Gwendoline employs a holistic approach to crime reduction and community betterment through her work with prisoners and prison staff.

Quality Education and Empowerment of Young Girls in Northern Uganda

Uganda is making efforts to improve the accessibility and quality of education among girls, which can be seen through the increased female literacy rate from 45% in 1991 to 68% in 2014 (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2017). However, there are many factors that prevent girls from accessing and/or completing their education—family economic status and traditional gender roles being identified as the key barriers (Naamara, Nabasumba, & Nabadda, 2017). Due to limited finances, families prefer their girls to work and generate income instead of sending them to school (Faughnan, 2016). Many girls drop out schools due to early marriage in exchange for a ‘bride price’ and due to pregnancy (Faughnan, 2016). Girls are traditionally brought up to do most of the household chores, and care for the sick and young ones (Naamara et al., 2017; Faughnan, 2016). Such gender roles leave the girls with little or no time to finish homework and/or attend schools, eventually leading to them dropping out (Faughnan, 2016).

One Catholic Sister, Sr. Petronilla Kyomugisha, member of the Mary Mother of the Church congregation, has made it her mission to provide quality and holistic education to young girls in Northern Uganda. She completed administration training under the SLDI program and graduated with a bachelor's degree in education through HESA program organized by ASEC. She works as a head teacher of the Asili Girls Vocational Senior Secondary School, founded by the Mary Mother of the Church congregation. The

school provides courses on the subjects of art and design, English literature, guidance and counseling. The students are also provided access to demonstration gardens where they gain experience farming various crops such as maize, sweet potato, cabbage, and eggplant. By promoting academic excellence and providing vocational training, the school empowers girls to become agents of transformative change in their society (Kyomugisha, 2018).

Sr. Petronilla works continuously to better shape and improve the services and programs offered at the school. Utilizing the knowledge, experience, and administration and leadership skills she acquired through ASEC, Sr. Petronilla has increased enrollment by 36 students. She is also aiming to add more areas of study, including domestic science, technical drawing, tailoring and computer science (Kyomugisha, 2018). Sr. Petronilla demonstrates the qualities of both a virtuous and servant leader in her work, through which she has provided opportunities for holistic education that empower women to lead positive and effective change in their communities. Through the provision of formal and informal education, this Catholic Sister is making waves in the direction of positive and sustainable change in her community.

SUMMARY

Catholic Sisters in Africa act as virtuous leaders in their ministries and communities as they employ the basic tenets of the virtues as delineated by the Catholic Church (1993) both personally and as professionals. Across human development fields, there is a consensus that education is a mediator of health and well-being. This consensus has prompted a global response to the need for increased educational access in Africa. While the support provided by foreign organizations is valuable, Catholic Sisters in Africa are motivated advocates fighting social injustice and addressing challenges through education from within their communities. The success stories cited above demonstrate the substantial impact of educa-

tion and highlight the enormous influence of Catholic Sisters as educators and facilitators of change.

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