

## In Uganda, sisters see education as key to empowerment

Jamie Manson | Dec. 22, 2011 Grace on the Margins

*Part two of a series. [Read the first installment here.](#)[1]*

In 2002, when Sisters of Mercy Margaret Farley and Eileen Hogan were assisting in the planning the first All Africa Conference: Sister to Sister (AACSS) program in Nairobi, Kenya, they could not have foreseen that, a decade later, they would be as active as ever in 13 countries throughout the continent.

Hogan, who co-directs AACSS from a small rented office in the Fordham section of the Bronx, still keeps a large map of the continent posted above her computer to help maintain her geographical bearings.

"We thought we were just going to do three conferences, but we're still there," Hogan said.

Back then, they couldn't anticipate that they would plan much more than a series of conferences. They were developing a catalyst that would release the power and determination of African women religious. It is a power that has perhaps been felt most deeply in Uganda.

Upon their return from Nairobi in 2002, sisters from Uganda quickly put into practice the ideas and procedures they learned at the conference.

"As part of their action, the sisters decided that they would visit every convent in the country," Farley said. "They sent teams of two sisters to interview women in each congregation."



The process was arduous, particularly given the hardship of traveling the country. The teams were forced to avoid northern Uganda because of civil war. It took a year to collect the data.

"But the results," Hogan said, "certainly made all that effort worthwhile."

The sisters were most interested in learning about these communities' most pressing needs. In each congregation, they heard a similar refrain.

"Women religious from cities, towns, villages and from 'beyond the beyond' urged that all efforts be focused upon enabling sisters to more effectively deal with the suffering caused by HIV and AIDS. They especially

wanted to address the issues that surrounded the pandemic's rapid and terrifying spread," Hogan said.

For all of the good news about those in treatment for HIV/AIDS in the United States, in Africa, the disease remains a frightening plague that destroys young men and women, orphans children and overwhelms families.

According to the 2010 UN Report on Global AIDS, an estimated 33.5 million adults and children are HIV-infected. Of that population, 22.5 million live in sub-Saharan Africa. In Uganda, 1.2 million are reportedly fighting the disease.

After listening carefully to all of the women religious they met, the Ugandan sisters organized their own AACSS conference in their home country. At the conclusion, the participants determined that what was most needed was education.

They envisioned a counseling program where women religious could be trained in areas such as psychology, sexuality, HIV/AIDS and therapeutic practices.

Through a collaborative process that called upon each sister to offer her unique talent, the women developed the Counseling Training Program for Sisters (CTPS).

Farley and Hogan worked tirelessly to raise the funds to make this vision a reality.

"The goal was to have 20 sisters per year join the program over three years in order to have 60 trained counselors with bachelor's degrees," Hogan said.

They reached out to Ugandan Sr. Cecilia Nibyobyonka Akiiki, who holds master's degrees in science and counseling, to direct the program. After meeting Sr. Cecilia in person, Hogan realized they had been actually classmates at St. Joseph's College in West Hartford, Conn., decades earlier.

The sisters arranged to have the program housed under the auspices of Kisubi Brothers University College in Entebbe, Uganda, a constitutive college of Uganda Martyrs University in Nkozi, Uganda.

Their contact at Kisubi was Br. Francis Blouin, a member of the Brothers of Christian Instruction, and former president of Walsh University in Ohio. Now 84, Blouin has a legacy of working with the poor, both in his home state of Maine and throughout Uganda.

Sr. Cecilia and Br. Francis carefully select the faculty who teach the sisters and often teach courses themselves.

"Francis and Cecilia are an extraordinary model of a collaborative, gentle friendship between a man and a woman religious. This example alone is instructive and inspirational for the sisters," Hogan said.

In addition to the bachelor's degree program, CTPS also offers a two-year diploma for sisters who need additional preparation before pursuing an undergraduate degree. So far, 68 sisters have received diplomas in counseling and 14 have earned bachelor's degrees in counseling psychology. Remarkably, six of these sisters have gone on to pursue master's degrees.

Visiting with the students over the past three years has allowed Hogan and Farley to watch the transformative power of education over the sisters.

"Just the way they stand, the way they hold their heads high -- they embody empowerment," Hogan said.

The Ugandan sisters' transformative power continues to flourish. A graduate of CTPS, who came to the program from the war-torn city of Lira, requested assistance from AACSS in constructing a simple building to house a

counseling center. The building helped address the problems of rain and mosquitoes that compromised their ability to serve this region, where the people suffer the scars of war, rape and poverty.

In addition to the counseling program, a new education initiative was also developed this year. In July, 29 women religious from five African countries were part of the inaugural class of the Transformative Spiritual Leadership and Faith Development Program.

This five-month course, sponsored by AACSS and initiated by Sr. Cecilia and Br. Francis, is offered in the Ugandan city of Jinja, about 50 miles from the capital city of Kampala. Like all programs sustained by AACSS, this newest venture responds to the needs articulated by African sisters.

The focus of the program, which is also open to religious brothers, is to update the theological and scriptural knowledge of students and to offer an opportunity for in-depth reflection on faith, theological, religious and human issues.

Participants take classes on topics as varied as "Understanding Scripture Revelation," "Human Sexuality and Integration," "Substance Abuse and Addictions" and "Consecrated Life, Vows, and Freedom in the African context."

By deepening their appreciation of formation work and cultivating their administrative abilities, the program develops new leaders for growing congregations of brothers and sisters throughout Africa.

As one might imagine, the AACSS sponsored programs are enormously popular with African religious. For Farley and Hogan, there lies the greatest challenge.

"We are seeing a significant increase in applicants," Hogan said. "Unfortunately, we cannot cover all of their scholarships at this point. So we have been forced to take fewer students."

A lack of funding seems to be the biggest obstacle to battling many of the causes and effects of the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

"With the development of anti-retroviral drugs, many assume that the tragic story of AIDS in Africa is slowly resolving itself," Farley said. "The number of people living with HIV has leveled off and there are some stories about people being restored to health through these drugs."



The money for the medication is totally dependent on Western nations.

With the global community pulling back on spending, there aren't as many drugs available.

"The real tragedy," Farley said, "is that we're at a point where we could stop this pandemic, but we can't if there isn't support to do it. People become complacent and the funding dries up."

"So, there is some good news. But it's not nearly good enough."

If there is a community that hasn't become mired in complacency, it is women religious in both the United States and Africa. Farley and Hogan recently returned from a two-week trip to Uganda, South Africa and Zimbabwe.

While in Uganda, Farley offered a seminar at the Transformation program in Jinja. Of all of the ethical and theological topics that Farley's expertise allows her to teach, she is most frequently asked address one particular question: "Where is God in the HIV/AIDS pandemic?" ([More on Farley's insights into this question can be found here.](#) [2])

While Farley was teaching, Hogan traveled more than 70 miles to Entebbe, where she attended the graduation of the sisters receiving degrees and diplomas from CTPS.

"The day began with the heavy beat of monsoon rain," she said.

But Hogan learned yet another lesson in Ugandan culture that day.

"The Cardinal celebrating the graduation Mass told us that, in Uganda, rain is a sign of blessing," she said, still glowing from the joy of her memories. "Five hours of monsoon torrential rain dampened no one's spirits. The dancers brought electrifying enthusiasm, the band didn't miss a beat and the smiles on the graduates' faces lit up the overcast skies."

If the ceremony hadn't already convinced Hogan of the raining blessings of past 10 years, the words of one particular graduate certainly did:

"May God shower blessings on the Sisters of Mercy and all who struggle to see that we get our school fees," the graduate said. "Can there be a greater reward than being a part of such lives? Sisters who are blessed and generously sharing their blessings between continents, countries and cultures: sister to sister."

[Jamie L. Manson received her Master of Divinity degree from Yale Divinity School, where she studied Catholic theology and sexual ethics. Her columns for *NCR* earned her a first prize Catholic Press Association award for Best Column/Regular Commentary in 2010.]

**Editor's note:** We can send you an email alert every time Jamie Manson's column, "Grace on the Margins," is posted to NCRonline.org. Go to this page and follow directions: [Email alert sign-up](#) [3]. If you already receive email alerts from us, click on the "update my profile" button to add "Grace on the Margins" to your list.

---

**Source URL (retrieved on 07/21/2017 - 23:43):** <https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/grace-margins/uganda-sisters-see-education-key-empowerment>

**Links:**

[1] <http://ncronline.org/node/28064/>

[2] <http://www.docstoc.com/docs/82874050/lecture-and-the-response---CATHOLICS-FOR-AIDS-PREVENTION--SUPPORT->

[3] <http://ncronline.org/email-alert-signup>