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African sisters launch eight nation strategic plan

by Thomas C. Fox



Sister Margaret Aringo (NCR photos/Tom Fox)

NAIROBI, KENYA -- Raised in a Catholic family, at the age of nine a Kenyan girl encountered a Franciscan sister. Before long she had decided she wanted to model her life after that woman. Decades later, that young girl has grown up. She entered the Franciscans and now goes by the name Franciscan Sister of St. Joseph Margaret Aringo.

Not only is she a Franciscan, but she is also the head of her congregation. Beyond that she is the chairperson of an organization of African sisters that spans eight eastern and central African nations called the Association of Consecrated Women in Eastern and Central Africa, or ACWECA in short.

The leadership of ACWECA, representing more than 20,000 sisters, gathered Jan. 28 on the campus of The Catholic University of Eastern Africa on the outskirts of this city. Their mission was to launch the organization's first strategic plan in its 37-year history, an important milestone and one that indicates the growing strength and self-confidence of the women religious, or sisters, here as they are called locally.

The plan, two years in the making, covers five years of action programs, and is focused on fostering leadership skills, communication techniques and a continued centering on human rights and social justice

issues.



To get the full measure of the significance of the undertaking, one might

recall that international cooperation is not the norm in Africa as is the case in many other developing nations. Additionally, indifferent European settlers who frequently overlooked key ethnic considerations carved up the boundaries of most African nations, making nation building all the more challenging. This is a region where tribalism -- there are 42 distinct tribes in Kenya alone -- continues to be one's most defining identity marker.

Add to these challenges the fact that the sisters here often minister to the most abandoned in the most rural areas with the most modest of resources in perilous political, social and economic circumstances.

Without fanfare, then, these sisters are emerging as examples of effective and uncharacteristic generosity to the wider society.

This makes ACWECA, in particular, all the more important. Deciding on a five-year course to harness resources and set common priorities are major accomplishments even before the first steps are ever taken.



Sitting at one of dozens of small tables on a field outside the campus auditorium where the official ceremony was held, sipping a fruit drink and resting from a three-hour "launching" ceremony, Aringo seemed able to relax a bit.

The featured guest at the ceremony had been the apostolic nuncio to Kenya, Archbishop Alain Paul Lebeaupin, who celebrated a mass filled with joyful African music and dance. Lebeaupin told the gathering of some 200 clergy, religious and lay people that he had met with the pope only two days earlier and the pope had given the gathered his blessing. He encouraged the women and cautioned them to work in concert with their bishops.

A half hour earlier, however, it was Aringo who seemed to stir the audience the most when she delivered

one of a half dozen speeches. As she sat back before an outdoor lunch was served a number of sisters came up to her and thanked her for her remarks.

"The question that rings in my mind," Aringo had said, is "Where would the church be today in the 21st century without Sisters?"

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Explaining parts of the strategic plan that would eventually be

officially launched with a proclamation utterance by Leaping, Aringo spoke warmly about the work of the women religious in Africa. She reminded her audience that sisters had played major roles in pastoral, merciful and charitable services to humanity and had built bridges from "injustices, violence and wars to justice, peace and reconciliation."

She added that sisters in Africa promote integrated education and provide preventive and curative health. "They serve in very difficult and challenging areas in the region," she said.

She then repeated her initial question: "Therefore again I ask, "Imagine, a church without Sisters? How would it look like?"

Milling around following the ceremony waiting for food, several sisters quipped that some of the attending clergy had half jokingly cautioned the women "not to get too far out in front of leadership of the church."

It appears the clergy here recognize -- and some fear -- that the sisters in Africa, obedient to the last, are meanwhile not waiting to be told what to do. They are reacting to immediate pressing social and religious needs.

No one should doubt it is deep faith that carries Aringo forward. She wrote in a foreword to a strategic plan booklet distributed for the event that it is ACWECA's "collective responsibility to ensure that the love of Christ is fulfilled through the services" offered in the new plan.

Religious life in African requires attending to survival needs before all else. And this means the religious leadership must focus on formation and simple administrative concerns. Part of the plan calls for the

building of a center so the women can simply gather to facilitate their work. It also calls for special assistance to the church in Southern Sudan, the youngest African nation. It calls for cooperation with other associations within the church, episcopal and otherwise. The thrust of the plan is outwards, calling on the women to respond, as able, to the challenges against human dignity and injustices. It emphasizes the need for reconciliation and calls on the sisters to be guided by the social teachings of the church.

Even as the luncheon was ending, eight women religious leaders, heads of the associations of sisters in their own nations, were planning the next steps. The work would continue through the weekend. Then they were to return home and begin yet another phase, spreading the word of the plan and focusing on its implementation.

ACWECA represents sisters in Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Malawi, Southern Sudan, Northern Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia.

And, yes, that woman who first inspired Aringo is still alive after ten decades and still takes care of most of her personal needs. These are strong women.

[Tom Fox is *NCR* publisher and is traveling in Africa.]

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