Religious Life for Women in East and Central Africa: a sustainable future

A summary report of the research project ‘Religious Life for women in East and Central Africa: a sustainable future’ by Dr. Catherine Sexton and Dr. Maria Calderón Muñoz.

The full report is available on durham.ac.uk/religiouslife or https://bit.ly/3byvxt3
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A collaborative research project jointly undertaken by Durham University’s Centre for Catholic Studies and the Margaret Beaufort Institute of Theology and generously funded by The Conrad N. Hilton Foundation.
Process and collaboration

This project is the second piece of research on apostolic religious life for women conducted by this team and funded by the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation’s Catholic Sisters’ Initiative. The initial research focussed on vitality in female religious life in UK and Ireland. In 2015 the CSI staff invited the team to extend their work to congregations in East and Central Africa.

The project was led by a core research team of two researchers, with assistance from a wider team of five Project Support Assistants. The PSAs were sisters based in each of the participating countries. In addition, a theological commentators’ group, provided further insight into the findings and the final report. The first year of the initiative involved a feasibility study and consultation with leading international and regional voices in the field of women’s religious life, and with representatives of congregations in East and Central Africa. This culminated in a meeting held in Kasisi, Zambia in 2016. The consultation process identified three key areas of concern for women religious: formation, sustainability and the role of sisters in the Church across Africa. After further consideration this coalesced into the following overarching research question:

In your opinion what is the essence of religious life for women where you live? We want to know what makes your way of life unique and different. Please give us five phrases or sentences as examples of what you mean.

The project took place in three stages:

In Stage one all the participating sisters were contacted by email and Whatsapp and asked:

What is the essence of women’s Religious Life in Africa today and into the future? What are the key challenges that hinder this essence? What are the ways of ensuring the understanding and living of it, and communicating this to sisters in formation?

The aim of the project was to give sisters the opportunity to reflect individually on their religious lives, and to take part in conversations about that life. They reflected on their vocation, as lived in their own immediate context, and discussed its purpose and meaning for them. Out of this they began to articulate a theology of their apostolic life.

When all the responses from each congregation had been collected, they were analysed by the research team and grouped according to themes. A word cloud showing the frequency of occurrence of individual words in the grouped responses was also produced and served as a visual aid for Stage two discussion groups. A short thematic report and the word cloud were sent to each of the participating congregations.

The findings of Stage one were used to create a thematic coding structure to inform the analysis of Stage two. This stage explored the sisters’ initial responses in more depth and addressed the second and third parts of the research question. Representative members of 50 congregations participated and held 56 discussion groups across the five countries. The discussions were recorded and sent to in-country transcribers to be written up. The transcripts were then analysed by the core research team, in discussion with the PSAs.

Between 2016 and 2019 nearly... 650 sisters from five countries: Kenya; Malawi; Tanzania; Uganda and Zambia, participated in the research, which voiced an emerging theology of apostolic religious life for women in the region and explored its sustainability.
At Stage three the findings of the workshops were considered by the theological commentators’ group which was composed of ten sisters with backgrounds in either canon law or theology, representing the five project countries, and two Kiltegan fathers. This took place over two days at a symposium in Nairobi. The purpose of this stage was to draw out common theological points, themes and movements, and to identify a theology of apostolic religious life in the sisters’ own voices. These were then fed back to the participant congregations in a series of two-day workshops in each of the five countries. In keeping with the participatory and dialogical nature of the project, these sessions allowed sisters to reflect and comment on the research findings and to help shape the outcomes. As a result of this process a detailed project report has been produced by research team.
Summary report

This is a summary of the key findings in that report: it lets the voices of the sisters speak and highlights their vision. As this is a process of on-going discernment by the sisters themselves, the report provides no answers but only poses questions, amplifying those articulated by the participants themselves, for future deliberation and action. The report is intended to provide an analysis which will help the sisters ensure that they and others benefit from the fruits of their lifelong commitment to transformation in, with, and for, Christ.
Key themes

The findings of the research are presented within the thematic groupings identified through the sisters’ discussions in the Stage two workshops. In this feedback their own voices are used to describe their reflections and theology.

Relationship with God, Prayer, Following of Christ

These three linked themes emphasize the centrality of God as the principle and foundation of the sisters’ lives.

Relationship with God is what gives meaning to the religious life. Religious life is understood as a gift from God:

*Centrality in God is a key factor, for us a... [like] a tree that ... has deep roots. This tree ... is able to blossom and give first fruits - best leaves, bestfirewood and shade, and so as we centre ourselves in God we are able to truly witness and we are able also to serve God better in our apostolate.*

And the apostolic life is a way of following Christ:

*... we understand the evangelical counsels lived by Christ himself and we follow his steps as we imitate him in his love and compassion.*

This life is not possible without prayer.

*... the call to prayer is the call to religious life ... and we are called ... each day of our life to be women of prayer:*

Prayer is both communal, with the community in chapel, and personal. It changes and transforms the pray-er. Prayer also reveals and confirms for sisters their ongoing vocation and response to God. It is a means of incarnation:

*Without prayer, we won’t be able to search for such sanctity that is stated in the Vatican Council II that everyone is called to holiness. If we are called to holiness, then we should look for such holiness through prayer and our union with our God (23)*

But the double vocation to prayer and to apostolic work can create tensions. Many sisters speak of the challenge of reconciling the conflicting demands of attendance at community prayer and full engagement in demanding apostolates. For many sisters, prayer and apostolates are viewed as two distinct and separate elements of religious life:

*If we want to make community life which is applicable to our religious life, we need to balance these two activities. And how do we balance them?*

The balance can be difficult. Some sisters recognise that a different approach is called for; an approach which integrates prayer into the apostolate, and which views the apostolate as prayer. It is particularly important for active religious to be able to be united with God in prayer throughout the day and in the midst of their ministries, rather than seeing themselves as having to choose one or the other:

*Prayer and work go together; they are not in different departments; my prayer life takes me to my work, [and] my work I offer to God:*

**Fruitful apostolate is prayer...** One of the key questions to come out of the project asks how an ongoing theology of the apostolic life can explore new forms and ways of prayer which may aid this integration. Can congregations and communities make more time and resources available to sisters to study and explore forms of prayer which may help them move towards this synthesis?
Community life

Community life was the most commonly occurring theme identified in the research. It is a very strong and defining element of religious life for the participants. It is central to sisters’ self-understanding and identity as religious, and prominent in their theology of religious vocation. Community life in this context is understood as a common life lived together in one house of the congregation, in physical togetherness, where worship and meals along with most tasks and activities are done together. It is drawn not only from the model of traditional conventual life but also a culture and context-specific ideal of the extended family. Sisters identified the community as the essence of their life. It nourishes and empowers them:

*Without community I am nobody; I can’t live without community. It is a sign for me for joy and celebration where I share my life, ideas and visions.*

Some also see it as a place of protection for themselves and living of their religious life according to vows: it is a place of physical and spiritual safety.

*Community life is characterised by a strong sense of communion, with explicit experiences of mutuality and reconciliation. This is implicitly underpinned by a Trinitarian theology and the mutual giving and receiving of self and gifts:* 

*I think the community life for me reflects...the Trinitarian relationship - the way we share our giftedness, our gifts and talents in complementarity. This way we build unity. Unity in diversity.*

We live community as a state of encounter; it is where we embrace each other in our brokenness. It is where we accept each other as we are because we are called to complement each other.

Community life is also understood to be about sharing: a being with and a being for each other, for the sake of the Kingdom. Only a few sisters, however, take this further and express an experience of mutuality between their community and apostolic life. Mutuality goes further than communion; it expresses the idea that, while sisters gain nourishment from the community to enable their apostolate, this very apostolic work can also bring something sustaining back to the community. This idea is important for developing a theology of the apostolate:

*I am missioned each day to go out, to reach out in the name of my community, and I come back to the community bringing...the needs of the people have met or the joys of the people have met...and then I think we get that mutual nourishing.*

For many, the community is looked to as a central source of nourishment and the place to which sisters return for refreshment and recharging. An emerging apostolic theology suggests, however, that nourishment may also be found elsewhere: particularly in their mission and apostolic work. Thus, sisters can complete the circle: by developing an understanding of the apostolate as a significant source of encounter with God, love, and a renewing energy, they can bring replenishment back to the community from the apostolic work as well as draw from it.
The community is a place of journeying towards holiness. The apostolic exhortation *Gaudete et Exsultate* (2018 n.6) reminds us that not only is the call to holiness universal, but that the journey to holiness is a communal exercise: God’s salvation is offered to all His people, and the longing for and seeking of holiness must be done together. Thus, sisters recognise that:

*It is in the community that we gain our holiness because in it we meet people of different types, so we get [the] chance to keep growing, we gain spiritual growth and even purify ourselves through our communities.*

Community life constitutes a main form of witness: sisters leave their natural families, and live together; as unmarried women, as a community living in faith and love in Christ. This is a central message about the place and action of God’s love in their lives, and in the world, that they wish to communicate to others.

Community life, inevitably, also brings challenges. While many sisters expressed an ideal of community life, others recognised that the actual day-to-day reality does not always conform to this ideal. When sisters struggle to live in harmony and communion with each other there is a fear that this will undermine their consecration, vows and evangelising.

Another challenge identified by the report is that many of the participant congregations are attempting to reconcile a semi-monastic way of life, which would have been prevalent at the time of founding of the diocesan and indigenous congregations but may no longer be appropriate today, with active and demanding apostolates. The attempt to combine these can create huge pressures on sisters.

While the community is a central and defining feature of the sisters’ lives it is not their congregational charism but is, rather, a means of living that charism. The primacy of community of and for itself, and its relatedness to the sisters’ apostolic charisms, raises a number of questions for future consideration: Is community-living in apostolic communities ever an end in itself, or is it only the means through which the wider apostolate and mission of the Church is achieved? Should community life be evangelised by the apostolic charism of each congregation?

An initial question on which to base future consideration may be: to what extent is a model of community life, which is conventual and lived under-one-roof, still sustainable, or suitable to the demands of contemporary apostolic religious life for women in East and Central Africa?

One possible response would call for a deeper examination of this form of life to discern a more appropriate expression of the charism for this time and these circumstances. An alternative response may find that a form of religious life for women, based on a reading of the signs of the times is evolving which has adapted to the socio-cultural context where extended families, community and even tribe are still the predominant forms of living. If this is the case the question may be asked; how can the apostolates be integrated into this life to ensure its future sustainability?

The report does not offer answers to these questions but suggests the need for a fuller discussion of the role community life can play in the evolving future of apostolic religious life for women in this region of Africa.
The sisters’ experience of being called and sent by God is incarnated through the particular apostolates of their own congregation and community. They are sent out to bring life to the people as disciples and followers of Christ. They have a commitment to a holistic theology of evangelisation, which meets both physical and spiritual needs:

... we understand the evangelical counsels lived by Christ himself and we follow his steps as we imitate him in his love and compassion:

... we are helping in feeding the hungry and educating the children who are coming from poor families. And in doing so, we bring the light to the world because the work which we do, it brings joy in the hearts of the people and the people ... come closer to God because they see the goodness of God through the work the sisters do.

The apostolates, the services they provide, are seen by sisters as their main form of evangelisation. The sisters’ wider sense of mission is rooted in faith and the following of Christ. In responding to the religious call, they are but instruments of God’s love. They recognise that it is not their mission alone but that they are part of the larger, universal, mission of the Church:

It’s not my mission; it is God’s mission entrusted to me at this time.

Each congregation lives its particular mission according to its founding charism. The mission incarnates the charism. Congregational charisms are considered below.

Sisters also witness by their moral and ethical behaviour, and by their detachment from, and indifference to, power and politics which they hope will be a model for wider society. This bearing witness through the consecrated life is another other way sisters evangelise. By simply living their lives in faithfulness, through their formal apostolates, they are witnesses to God’s love, signs of eschatological hope. This is a broader meaning of being ‘apostolic’: whereby the religious understand that they are modelling gospel imperatives through their actual presence. Although this is rarely articulated by the sisters in terms of being an eschatological sign it is clear that this is what, in essence, they are:
The majority of the congregations work with the poorest and most vulnerable people and support them with immediate physical help. We have seen that sisters are explicit about living in a state of mutual encounter and communion with their sisters in community but they less often articulate this sense of communion either with those whom they serve, or with the local Church and society more widely. This suggests that further investigation of mutuality in mission may be helpful in developing a theology of mission. Is the communication always one way in the sisters’ relationship with the poor? Are they only givers or do they, in fact, also receive from those they serve?

Drawing on the teaching of the pastoral constitution on the Church in the modern world, *Gaudium et Spes* (1965), the report also highlights the sisters’ role as partners and collaborators in their mission and asks: How far can their apostolate be developed in partnership with the poorest of the poor, by working within and alongside them? Can their service be extended to provide a preferential option for the poor through empowering and bringing about permanent change?
Charism

Charism is complex, multi-faceted and relates to all aspects of religious life. Sisters’ understanding of their congregational charism formed an important part of the Stage two discussion groups and the report found some confusion. While some sisters recognise the way in which their congregational charism shapes the religious life, many others struggle with the concept. It is not uncommon to confuse charism with the congregation’s apostolate or even with its spirituality. ‘Mission statements’ or mottos may also be mistaken for the charism. In the course of discussions, a powerful image was presented of a basket of fruit, with the basket as the charism; the fruit as the apostolic works and the spirituality as the way the basket is carried.

There is a recognition of the importance of a return to the individual congregations’ sources, and an awareness that the charism is itself a source of regeneration and discernment. Charism should be organic and open to evolving; sisters express an openness to embrace renewal, and recognise that their charism provides them with a central and unifying focus, both to their ministry and to their religious life more broadly:

Our charism strengthens us; it strengthens our lives and gives us a central focus as a community and as a congregation at large.

The charism can function as a road map and a resource, with which to discern whether they are on the right track in terms of ministry, as they discern their response to their reading of the signs of the times:

These services with the poor…fighting against the trafficking of women and other …justice and peace issues… will not pay us but these are in line with our charism. And therefore, they are a challenge to us and a call.

It is a gift from the Holy Spirit to their founders and passed down to them, which they, in turn, must pass on and share with others. This can happen in two ways: firstly, for many sisters the main reason for sharing the charism is to attract new vocations and ensure the continuation of the congregation. Second, for a smaller number of sisters, it is the sharing of the charism with lay people which can foster a broader and deeper understanding of religious life in Church and society. This sharing can act as a form of evangelisation as the charism is recognised as a gift to the world:

It’s beautiful; it’s a gift given to the church… to continue the work of Christ! Therefore, it should continue, it should not end with me! I feel it is our joy to pass it on and also our responsibility; responsibility to Christ, responsibility to the Church that this charism will be passed on and continue in the Church so that the service which this congregation is offering can continue in the Church.

Sisters are aware of the misunderstandings and difficulties concerning the issue of charism. It is important for the development and enrichment of religious life that this examination of congregational charisms continues. One question to aid further consideration may be: how do sisters wish to be seen, spoken of and understood in the local Church?
Sisters and their role in the Church

In Stage 2 of the project the sisters discussed where they fit within the Church and what they were able to offer it. The overwhelming response was:

“We fit everywhere.”
Sisters identify themselves as participating in the life of the local Church in a number of ways; through evangelisation, through their apostolic activity, as caregivers and often, simply by being present and offering hope and solace to those in need. Sisters actively participate in the parish celebrations, pilgrimages, activities and strategic planning. They are clear about the ecclesial nature of their vocation and see themselves as necessary to the very existence and smooth running of the local parish: their place is at the heart of the Church and their religious lives can have no meaning outside the church. Yet, at the same time, some uncertainty is expressed. Sisters experience ambiguity about where they sit within the local Church structure and this can be beneficial:

*We are co-partners, or ... co-workers. We are not in the hierarchy; we are among the faithful. ... we really work as a team in the local church.*

But it can also create tensions. Much of this tension centres round the role of consecrated women in the church. It is reflected in relationships with both the laity and the clergy. For some, sisters are seen as having no other function than to pray. While the report cites many comments, which show that sisters feel appreciated by the people for their presence and their services, it also recognises that their contribution or their intrinsic value is not always acknowledged. This comes, not least, from an uneasy relationship between many clergy and sisters, and the research material reveals an awareness that not all clergy understand or appreciate the sisters’ involvement and role in the church. Many religious sisters, thus, struggle to see where they fit in the hierarchical Church and how their gifts can be used to the full. Their experience as religious women reflects the patriarchal attitudes in their own societies, where women are still marginalised and undermined.

*When we reflect on our African traditions and customs, in which the masculine dominates, [we can see this] even in the Church ... a woman has no value ... She has to listen, to be obedient and follow the instructions only. Because of that, even we, the sisters, feel weak, valueless...*

The report notes that many services provided by sisters in the parish are not supported, either financially or with the provision of working conditions commensurate with their contribution, or on a par with that of other, lay, people ministering in the parish.

Another important issue arising from the project is the experience of reciprocity and mutuality in the sisters’ relations with their parishes. Sisters frequently describe their relationship with the local Church as a one-way movement; they are the helpers; the laity are there to be helped. Sisters give knowledge, love and guidance but they don’t often record receiving anything back. Where they work hand in hand with others and participate themselves as parishioners, they see their role as the leaven in the yeast: to strengthen, enable, support, teach and accompany rather than as parishioners in communion with fellow parishioners. Some do recognise a more reciprocal role:

*...we find ... that not only those whom we serve ... are being nourished or are being enriched, we are also enriched by them. As we continue serving the people and the church, also there are things that we learn from them; maybe through their suffering, how they carry their struggles in their life, their difficult life.*

A question identified from the workshop feedback and raised by the research team for future consideration is whether this reciprocity can be taken further: do sisters always need to be the ‘other’ in the parish context? Can they be receivers as well as givers? Do power dynamics and conflict within church communities inhibit this understanding?

One sister suggests a way forward in identifying with and articulating the needs of the voiceless in the institutional church:

*The role of religious people is to be a voice in the hierarchal Church because there is a multitude of people whose voice is left out and those are the people that have the message but ... are we facilitating their being heard, can we risk to be the voice of the voiceless of the population of the Church?*
Identity

The way sisters view themselves, and perceive themselves as viewed by others, is key to their formulation of the essence of the religious life and understanding of what makes it unique and different. Generally, sisters believe they are valued in society, trusted and thought of as inherently good. However, they also feel under the scrutiny of others who have unreasonable expectations of them as ‘religious virtuosi’ (after Weber, 1958). Another challenging misperception is that people often believe them to be rich, and to able to help the poor in ways they cannot. This can create pressures on individual sisters who may come to feel failure at not fulfilling these expectations.

Many people consider us to be perfect always as religious, perfect in this, perfect in that since in most cases we are examples to them ... when they see any mistake done ... they become discouraged ... we are their role models. So, it remains a challenge to live an exemplary life which is sometimes difficult since we are human.

In their identity as religious, and as women, the sisters experience complex self-perceptions. As religious, they stress their self-giving and their total availability to all in the way they live and the choices they make, with their lives wholly dedicated to God.
They can feel constrained by what is expected of women in these societies, in terms of behaviour and traditional roles. Local cultural and gender norms make religious life difficult for many lay people to understand and accept. Adult women living together in community, not getting married, remaining chaste and not having children is counter-cultural and can be seen as deviant. This brings both challenge but also the opportunity to witness.

Let's look at the challenge in living the vows. Our vows are not understandable in African culture; that is, the religious life does not exist in the tradition and culture of Africans. And the community does not understand us who have volunteered to dedicate ourselves to live this life... they are surprised to see an African girl [not] married or bearing children. They pose questions most of the times and think that we are not perfect. Now, the challenge we have is to explain and still teach them about the meaning of the vows and what religious life requires. Slowly some begin to understand ...and they pray for us.

As women, sisters define themselves as mothers – mothers to all. Family life is central to African culture, and motherhood is seen as a gift to all women - and that includes sisters. Their model is the ideal motherhood of the Virgin Mary:

As religious women in the Church we are called to imitate Mother Mary and, in the imitation, we become that mother and we serve the church. So, we have a big role in the Church and our role is to become a mother, to be like our mother Mary and to offer what we have...we offer our whole life as our mother Mary offered herself to God.

As women, too, sisters can bring special gifts to the Church:

As women we have the feminine gifts which the Church cannot do without... The Lord in His wisdom has not given anyone all the gifts. So, we have the feminine gifts ...and they are all needed. I can’t imagine the Church without women, impossible!
Sustainability

Sustainability can be viewed from a number of different perspectives. The sisters discussed the sustainability of their lives in relationship to the poverty in their surrounding environment and their own vowed poverty, and of replenishment through vocations.
Poverty in the surrounding environment

Financial sustainability is recognised by all sisters as one of the major challenges to religious life. The majority recognise that both internal and external poverty significantly affect them and their apostolates. This is summed up in one comment:

*When we think of sustainability today and we think of our mission, it has a different connotation altogether. Initially, when we had our missionary sisters coming [from outside Africa] ... they had sources of income. Today we have to think and plan for ourselves; how are we going to live? How are we going even to care for ourselves in old age? So, we’ve to have a double mount to it. First of all, sustaining our institutions, sustaining ourselves in order for us to sustain the mission of God because if we are hungry, if we are naked [we] will not go anywhere.*

Congregations’ incomes are received from a variety of sources: from donors, international congregations abroad, NGOs and sisters’ earnings. But they are not always sufficient. In some cases, sisters have had to withdraw from parish ministries where there has been an inability, or unwillingness, to remunerate them appropriately. Sometimes lack of resources can affect the delivery of their mission: when a congregation does not have enough funds to cover their needs and those of the people around them, apostolates have to be stopped or reduced.

The financial needs of the congregations have to be viewed within the context of the needs of the communities with which they work. While struggling themselves, the sisters are always aware that there are even poorer people around them both as neighbours and as those they serve through ministries. They believe they have a sense of responsibility towards the people who depend on them, and they feel that they need to respond to their needs not only with prayers and their presence but also with material things. The local people believe the sisters have unlimited resources. Some perceive them as rich, and this can create considerable tensions. Sisters say that it is not fair for them to cover their own basic needs and tell the poor around them: ‘continue praying and God loves you and all the beautiful consoling words on a hungry stomach’. Sisters are very aware that there are too many in need and that they cannot possibly help them all. In their work with the poor many sisters see empowerment as the greatest gift they can give. This is understood as teaching the skills needed for better jobs, as facilitating access to resources such as clean water or even as teaching women to be better wives and mothers.

*We have sisters who are well skilled and prepared and they are able to look around and see maybe from this it is possible to get water...so that we are empowering these people ... to raise up to a certain level and that will help them to be with dignity which is also very important for us.*

A future theology of the apostolate may wish to consider ways of taking empowerment further by questioning unfair aspects of the *status quo* or by advocating for greater self-sufficiency, choice and agency in society.
Living vowed poverty

The demands of the modern world also affect the sisters’ lives. Sisters have voluntarily renounced worldly possessions and control of their personal finances, but this is by no means an easy thing to do. As material objects become more necessary for daily life, demands for phones, cars, or shoes, for example, cannot always be met by the congregations. Sometimes it is difficult to separate real ‘needs’ from their ‘wants’ or ‘desires’. An excessive desire for material objects is generally acknowledged to be a threat to the religious way of life, especially in light of the vow of poverty, which is a defining element of the sisters’ lives.

The vow of poverty can be understood in a more positive light and form part of the religious witness:

The vow of poverty is an element that we have chosen freely - to live it as Jesus Christ lived it because we are following Christ of the gospel.

Detachment from the material world enables sisters to dedicate themselves to serve others. Without the burden of material belongings, they are free to go where they are needed. This availability and the freedom to move are characteristics of apostolic religious life and demonstrate the sisters’ readiness to serve those in need. In fact, the vow of poverty is recognised in itself as an enabler for sisters as they try to live religious life more authentically.

Recruitment of new members

In tandem with financial security the other most essential factor for future sustainability for the congregations is recruitment of new members. The attracting of new vocations is more than just a means of sharing faith and love for the religious life; it is an absolute necessity if the congregations and their apostolic work are to continue. Vocations are perceived to be falling across the region as elsewhere in the world and much concern is expressed about this. Several causes are identified for the decline which include the arrival of new ideas and values from western countries and the decrease in family sizes due to greater access to birth control. The growth of materialism among younger people and a decline in Catholic observance within the home are also seen as contributory factors. Lack of both human and material resources in the communities can affect the provision of suitable formation programmes.

New recruits, when they do arrive, bring challenges to communities; they come with different values and motivations from those of previous generations. Attachment to social media, individualism, careerism and a lack of education are particular concerns expressed by sisters about the new recruits they are receiving, and it is recognised that modes of formation have to adapt to meet these developments. Initial formation is crucial for the sustainability of religious life. It ensures that new candidates are helped to make an informed decision as to whether they are in the right place and prepares them for their future commitment.
Sisters recognise that recruitment is key to the future flourishing of their communities, and that new formation strategies must be developed in order to facilitate this. Two parallel priorities for initial formation have been identified. Firstly, the cultivation of a deeper understanding of formation as a common goal and responsibility for all the community, not just those with specific formation roles, and, secondly, the need to identify and provide appropriate training for potential formators.

In order to develop and implement formation strategies the report asks: Can ways be found to change perceptions of the role of the formator, and to adapt traditional formation methods to meet the needs of recruits today? Is there scope for collaboration between congregations in this field?

Sustainability of the spiritual life and the integrity of congregations

Sustainability of religious life cannot be seen only in terms of finance and numbers, or what we might term the ‘wineskins.’ We need also to consider the wine. The continuing spiritual integrity and flourishing of each congregation, lived in the light of its patrimony and apostolic charism, is equally important. In their apostolate sisters are called to incarnate the Gospel message through their congregational charism and the witness of their continuing conversion. Impediments to this continued flourishing were identified by sisters as ‘distractions’, which divert their attention away from their core purpose and mission, and also their own inner voices, self-criticism and doubts about how they live their vocation, which can undermine their religious lives. Distractions can come in the form of new information technologies and the growing influence of social media, materialism and the accumulation of personal property. Individualism, the call of family bonds, the prioritising of apostolic duties over prayer, and community relations are also identified as potential stumbling blocks. These issues are common concerns for all, and sisters recognise that they can be best combatted by renewed awareness of, and recommitment to, the special vocation they live:

*This calls us to be more cautious... to be in the world but not to be part of the world and to help those who are in the world to be more religious or to come back to Christ and to be followers of Christ in our own world.*

Throughout this project sisters have asked themselves how they can live their religious lives in greater faithfulness to their charism, and to their lifelong commitment to the following of Christ. In the course of the three years they have, through their discussions, identified strengths and weakness, opportunities and challenges in their lives. This process has produced not instant solutions but further questions which have been offered in this summary for ongoing reflection. It is intended that these questions will direct future discernment and actions and contribute to the continued sustainability and flowering of women’s’ religious life in East and Central Africa.

*This calls us to be more cautious... to be in the world but not to be part of the world and to help those who are in the world to be more religious or to come back to Christ and to be followers of Christ in our own world.*